

# 'The desert begins to blossom': Oxfordshire and Primitive Methodism, 1824–1860

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## SUMMARY

*This is a study in the local history of religion, specifically of the interactions between that distinctive and radical manifestation of dissent, Primitive Methodism and the people and communities of Oxfordshire. The missionaries of Primitive Methodism first arrived in Oxfordshire in 1824, intent on saving the souls, refreshing the spirit, and transforming the lives of the people of the county. By the time their church was subsumed back into a nationally reunited Methodist church in 1932, the Primitive Methodists had at some stage established meeting houses or chapels in over 70 places in Oxfordshire. Elsewhere, although without an independent building, the movement had played an important part in the lives of individuals, households and groups, and made a marked impression on others in the community. The timing, degree and nature of these interactions varied considerably between places, and the reasons for this are explored in terms of social and economic change, personal religious impulses, and particular local circumstances. The article begins by offering contrasting case studies of the movement in different 'host environments' within the county. Secondly, an overall chronology of the successes, failures and eventual organisation of Primitive Methodism in Oxfordshire is established and discussed. Finally the part Primitive Methodism had come to play in the county by the mid-century is assessed from a variety of perspectives, including numbers, location, settlement type, social class of adherents, chapel building and degree of opposition. Discussion is related to the suggestions of earlier historians that the development of Primitive Methodism during this period encompassed early and rapid growth as a conversionist sect, followed by a phase of consolidation and revival in second and subsequent generations, before moving towards placid denominationalism.*

This is a study in the local history of religion, specifically of the interactions between that distinctive and radical manifestation of dissent, Primitive Methodism, and the people and communities of Oxfordshire. The missionaries of Primitive Methodism first arrived in Oxfordshire in 1824, intent on saving the souls, refreshing the spirit, and transforming the lives of the people of the county. In 1932 Primitive Methodism was subsumed into a nationally reunited Methodist Church. In the intervening years local Primitive Methodists at some stage established meeting houses or chapels in over 70 places in Oxfordshire. These architecturally modest buildings are important evidence of the impact of this new form of religion. Their creation represented an enormous challenge and local effort for a movement associated overwhelmingly with working-class membership and limited material means. However buildings are only part of the story, and indeed never figured in some places where Primitive Methodism nevertheless played an important part in the lives of individuals, households and groups and made a marked impression on their neighbours. This was a movement whose whole purpose was to bring its message of ruin, repentance, salvation and subsequent holy living to people, where ever they were, regardless of class or status, and through the language and imagery of their own kind, lay men and women who were the missionaries and preachers. It was therefore a movement which overrode the boundaries of the established religious landscape. Meetings were in the open air, in cottages, houses or barns, perhaps eventually in chapels. In some places followers travelled to neighbouring settlements to worship, or continued with their house churches. This diverse, locally rooted and supported, and sometimes diffuse presence reflects the particular nature of Primitive Methodism and was certainly to be found in Oxfordshire.

David Hempton has recently written of Methodism that it 'forged a symbiotic relationship with its host environments. The closer the environmental fit between species and habitat, the faster and more sustained was the growth.'<sup>1</sup> Thus Methodism 'changed and was changed by contexts'. Hempton joins with earlier historians of Methodism in the 18th and 19th centuries in seeing social, economic and demographic change as one explanation for Methodism, its appeal and development. The modern historian of early Primitive Methodism, Julia Stewart Werner, equally sees the sect as emerging at a time when there was 'an optimum climate for religious awakenings'.<sup>2</sup> In the countryside Primitive Methodism found a strong response in a period of radical change and became 'the vehicle by which its converts made the transition to a different mode of life'. It served 'as a bridge between eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century ways of living'.<sup>3</sup> Hempton also understands Methodism as an important cause of change, as well as its product; and he therefore places processes of change, alongside internal and personal religious impulses, and the effects of local circumstances, as the major determinants of the successes and failures of Methodism and the experiences of its adherents.<sup>4</sup> This cultural and environmental approach clearly puts local studies centre stage,<sup>5</sup> and Hempton moves between broad analysis and local evidence drawn from both sides of the Atlantic.

On a more modest canvas this study sets out to describe and explain the development and impact of Primitive Methodism in Oxfordshire. It begins by offering some contrasting case studies of the movement in different 'host environments' within the county. Secondly an overall chronology and geography of Primitive Methodist missions, conversions, rejections and eventual organisation in Oxfordshire is established and discussed. Finally the part Primitive Methodism had come to play in Oxfordshire during the first half century of the movement is assessed. This introductory study coincides with the bicentenary of the first camp meeting in 1807, out of which Primitive Methodism was to grow and become a national and distinctive religious phenomenon, revealing much of the people and the places in which it is found. The hope is that this article will contribute to the overall historical picture of Primitive Methodism, whilst also helping to capture the Oxfordshire evidence, and perhaps encourage other historians of the county to pursue in-depth studies of this aspect of the religious history in particular localities, using some of the wealth of sources it has only been possible to touch on in this account.

## CASE STUDIES

At Dorchester on 18 September 1839 a Primitive Methodist chapel was opened, but only after considerable, sometimes violent opposition, as contemporary denominational accounts show<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> D. Hempton, *Methodism. Empire of the spirit* (Yale, 2005), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Stewart Werner, *The Primitive Methodist connexion. Its background and early history* (Wisconsin, 1984), xi.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Hempton, *op.cit.*, 22, 30-1, 80.

<sup>5</sup> A number of important earlier local studies of Primitive Methodism by modern historians include R.W. Ambler, *Ranters, revivalists and reformers: Primitive Methodism and rural society. South Lincolnshire 1817-1875* (Hull, 1989); R. Moore, *Pit-men, preachers and politics. The effects of Methodism in a Durham mining community* (Cambridge, 1974); J. Obelkevich, *Religion and rural society. South Linsey 1825-1875* (Oxford 1976); N. Scotland, *Methodism and the revolt of the field* (Gloucester, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> J. Petty, *History of the Primitive Methodist Connexion* (1864), 330.

The missionaries ... for some time ... were stoned both as they entered and left the village on Sabbath mornings. On one occasion Mrs Wheeldon was hit on the eye with a stone...and another member ... had two of his teeth knocked out with a stone. A number of young persons of the baser sort were encouraged in their savage treatment of preachers by some of the higher classes ... A pious and humane gentleman wished to persuade them to discontinue their visits, saying the ruffians would no more mind killing one of them than killing a dog. But the heroic missionaries were not to be easily persuaded to do this ... And deliverance came at length ... Several of the gentlemen who had been abettors in the persecution were suddenly arrested by affliction and in a few days were called to their Maker. This event produced a deep and solemn impression ... and the persecutors soon after ceased to stone the preachers. When the dreadful storm of persecution was passed over the good seed which had been sown sprang up, and the society flourished. Several of the persecutors were subdued by the power of divine grace, and were made new creatures in Christ Jesus among others the constable, who had frequently been employed by the gentlemen to drive the preachers from the village, and who was a great drunkard, was converted to the Lord and became a new man. A cottage was obtained for preaching during the winter, and this becoming too small, efforts were made to secure a new chapel.

Here, as elsewhere in Oxfordshire, Primitive Methodism often came into a hostile environment, and was itself seen as a threat. It was in conflict with established authority which, as with the gentlemen of Dorchester's use of the constable, did not hesitate to use its levers of official power to try and prevent the new religion taking root. In some places, as we shall see, other threats of loss of employment and housing were made. The new religion was also in conflict with the existing patterns of many working-class lives. To be a Primitive Methodist was to live a life of discipline in striving for continued grace. This could mean a significant reform of manners. For example, temperance was early espoused as part of the cause, hence the added satisfaction on this front in winning over the Dorchester constable. Primitive Methodism has sometimes been interpreted as a counter culture, with its lack of deference and its own disciplines;<sup>7</sup> if this was so, it countered in several directions, 'a response and alternative not only to the new social order, but also to the older village culture and to the Established Church'.<sup>8</sup>

Despite their difficulties, indeed glorying in their travails, seven local labourers bought a plot of land 36 feet by 22 feet at Bridge End for £5 in 1839<sup>9</sup>. They built the mud-walled chapel and school themselves, labouring before and after their own work. The chapel was vested in seven trustees, six from Dorchester and one from Drayton St Leonard; this arrangement was extended in 1851, with only one of the original trustees continuing. He illustrates the modest circumstances of most Primitive Methodist chapel trustees; William Brown, 49, a groom, born at Hagbourne in Berkshire, lived at Bridge End with his wife Ann, 48, and four sons and two daughters, all born in Dorchester. The children's ages ranged from 22 to six, and two were working as agricultural labourers.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Hempton op.cit., 30-1; also D. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in modern Britain. A history from the 1730s to the 1980s* (1989), 110-11, 115-16, 132; A. Howkins, 'Politics or quietism: the social history of nonconformity' in N. Virgoe and T. Williamson, *Religious dissent in East Anglia* (Norwich, 1993), 73-91; K. D. M. Snell and P. S. Ell, *Rival Jerusalems. The geography of Victorian religion* (Cambridge, 2000), 130, 143.

<sup>8</sup> Obelkevich, op.cit., 257-8.

<sup>9</sup> Dorchester Museum, Conveyances and Trust documents relating to the Primitive Methodist chapel.

<sup>10</sup> 1851 census enumerator's returns for Dorchester.

The religious census of 1851 records the Primitive Methodist chapel at Dorchester, and places it in the wider local context.<sup>11</sup> It had 150 sittings, 132 of them free, and an evening service on Sunday attended by 80 people. No mention is made of a Sunday school. The return is signed G. Wallis, Minister of Wallingford, showing Primitive Methodism, (for all its dependence on local energies and resources), had developed a wider, formal organisation of societies organised in circuits (see p 98). Within Dorchester the chapel now joined the parish church (the former Abbey), the Roman Catholic church, opened in 1848, and the Baptist chapel opened in 1837. Primitive Methodism proves to be part of a wider upsurge of religious revival and reform in the village in the late 1830s and 1840s. Before this religious life in Dorchester was quiescent. Until 1838 the Anglican incumbent was an absentee and pluralist, and both the abbey building and its pastoral life decayed. Constitutionally, the parish was, until 1837, part of an unreformed and archaic Peculiar jurisdiction which set it outside the mainstream of Church of England organisation. Neither was old dissent strong; evidence is restricted to the registration for meetings of a labourer's house in 1796 and Robert Cox's house (probably Baptist) in 1820.<sup>12</sup> Small numbers of Roman Catholics had continued worship since the Reformation, sustained largely by a leading local farming family, the Daveys, in whose house mass was said.

Only after 1837 did things change, and then on all fronts. The Church of England began locally to reflect its wider reform and revival, with clergy present, more services held, building restoration, school and social provision. The Baptist cause revived and a chapel was built. The Roman Catholics, since 1829 legally recognised, built their own church within sight of the Abbey, whilst just down the road the Primitive Methodists were also building. As the case of Dorchester shows, Primitive Methodism, coming to Oxfordshire mainly in the 1830s, was part of a wider spiritual and institutional growth in religion, within which it seems to have appealed to a particularly non-deferential, energetic and self-reliant group of followers. The timing of this religious growth is interesting for it followed on a period of local and more general confrontations, notably the Swing Riots of 1830, the Otmoor and Benson enclosure disturbances, and the introduction after 1834 of the New Poor Law and its workhouses.<sup>13</sup> Dorchester itself was also suffering the decline of the London road coaching trade, and its population size was static, in short it was a community under some stress. Parliamentary and municipal reform and equal rights for religious dissenters were controversial parts of the wider, contemporary climate. These circumstances may well account for a sense of need and receptiveness to religion in general, and Primitive Methodism in particular. Some historians have further interpreted these trends as a manifestation of despair at the decline of traditional rural culture and the harsh conditions produced by economic and demographic change in the countryside, changes and losses which the militancy of 1830 could not stem. In these circumstances to turn to religion was to turn away from political activism to a different, but encompassing, involving and hopeful world. The consequent historical debate remains a contentious one. Did becoming active religious nonconformists lead individuals and groups to a different way of life and consciousness, subjecting them to 'the forces of internal modernization and respectability',<sup>14</sup> or did Primitive Methodism offer a way of keeping independence and self-determination alive in a changing context, or simply of coping in hard times?

<sup>11</sup> K. Tiller (ed.), *Church and chapel in Oxfordshire 1851*, (Oxfordshire Record Society, vol 55, 1987), 32.

<sup>12</sup> *VCH Oxon.* vii, 63.

<sup>13</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm and G. Rudé, *Captain Swing* (1969); K. Tiller, 'Rural resistance: custom, community and conflict in south Oxfordshire, 1800-1914', in O. Ashton et al. (eds.), *The duty of discontent* (1995), 97-121.

<sup>14</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé, *op.cit.*, 251.

In Dorchester the mid-century proved a high water mark of religious activity and of religious pluralism. Anglicanism, especially with the 29-year incumbency of William Macfarlane from 1856, became increasingly proactive and well-resourced, led by a High Churchman convinced that he could and should realise the Tractarian ideal of a parish bringing all parishioners within the control and protection of a clerically-led and unified community.<sup>15</sup> In 1866 Macfarlane felt able to tell the Bishop of Oxford that 'dissent is very much on the decrease'.<sup>16</sup> The Primitive Methodist chapel was still in use at this time but, by the early 1880s had disappeared from records.<sup>17</sup> So, too, had the Baptist chapel, whilst Roman Catholic numbers were diminished.<sup>18</sup> The zeal and relative wealth of the Church of England locally, combined with Dorchester's declining economy and the onset of a more general and deep agricultural recession by the late 1870s, had been too much for the Primitive Methodists. In 1881 their chapel was sold back to the Cherrills from whom the site had been bought in 1839. Its trustees were a wheelwright from Crowmarsh Gifford and a bootmaker from Long Wittenham, indicating how the congregation was having to look outside for support.<sup>19</sup> In 1888 the property was sold again, to General William Booth of the Salvation Army, who took out a mortgage of £50 for the purpose. This link, from Primitive Methodism to Salvation Army, is one found elsewhere in Oxfordshire, where the one seemed a natural successor or ally of the other as a new cycle of revival aimed at the poor and working class reached Oxfordshire. Thus, at Northmoor in 1882 it was said that most of the parishioners were either Primitive Methodists or Salvationists.<sup>20</sup> In Dorchester there is no record of a Salvationist citadel being established and, by 1897, Booth was seeking to sell the property, willing to accept £12 10s. It was Nathaniel Poyntz, High Church vicar of Dorchester from 1886 to 1920, who investigated buying the former chapel (although in the end he was dissatisfied with the reliability of the title). Poyntz pursued a policy of buying out possible rivals, and went on, in 1908, to acquire the 'cottage chapel and garden' of the Baptists, subject to a covenant forbidding its use for religious services 'by Nonconformists of any sect or denomination'.<sup>21</sup>

Primitive Methodism in Dorchester illustrates much about the movement in Oxfordshire and about its relationship with national, local and personal factors. It is also true that it survived there for only about 40 years. This vulnerability and discontinuity is a general feature of the movement in the county. Of 42 Primitive Methodist places of worship in 1851 in Oxfordshire 17 had disappeared by 1883. However, by that date there were 46 chapels of which 23 were new since 1851. By 1915 there were 44 chapels, seven of them new since 1883.<sup>22</sup> Thus the presence of Primitive Methodism was continuous and on a similar scale throughout the period, but the local experience within that could vary considerably. Only 19 places with a continuous Primitive Methodist place of worship between 1851 and 1915 have been traced (Banbury, Black Bourton, Chinnor, Clanfield, Epwell, Ewelme, Filkins, Hook Norton, Hornton, Langford, Milton-under-Wychwood, Mollington, Moreton, Murcott, New Yatt, Northmoor, Oxford, Shenington and Witney). Brief case studies from

<sup>15</sup> K. Tiller (ed.), *Dorchester Abbey. Church and people 636-2005* (Stonesfield, 2005), 72-6.

<sup>16</sup> Oxfordshire Archives (OA), MS Oxf. Dioc. c332.

<sup>17</sup> *VCH Oxon.* vii, 63.

<sup>18</sup> Tiller (2005), 75.

<sup>19</sup> Dorchester Museum, loc.cit.

<sup>20</sup> *VCH Oxon.* xiii, 170; *Oxford Times*, 26 August 1882.

<sup>21</sup> Dorchester Museum, loc.cit.; Conveyance and abstracts of title of Dorchester Baptist chapel. (I owe this reference to Professor Malcolm Airs).

<sup>22</sup> Tiller (1987); Kelly's Directories to Oxfordshire 1883, 1915.

amongst them and from other parts of the county reveal contrasts with Dorchester, and offer further clues to the local, county and wider patterns of experience.

Moreton, a hamlet of about 30 dwellings in Thame parish, was the subject of missions from Wallingford and then as part of Thame mission station, established in 1837 and covering Thame, Moreton, Oakley, Brill, Crendon, Sydenham, Chilton and Kingsey. There was notable, and what proved to be lasting, success at Moreton. A respectable local farmer, Mr Joseph Way, gave the use of one of his barns. 'A blessed work of grace broke out in the village, and a striking change for the better took place in the intelligence and morals of the inhabitants.' Way subsequently gave land for the building of a chapel (Plate VIII), which opened in 1839, the same year as Dorchester.<sup>23</sup> The seven original trustees were six labourers and a farmer, four from Moreton and three from Drayton (Bucks).<sup>24</sup> By 1850 the chapel was running a Sunday school with, in 1851, 45 to 50 pupils, alongside an evening congregation of 60.<sup>25</sup> In 1869 the chapel was replaced by a larger building. It continued its activities, finally closing in 1970, when its members transferred to Thame Methodist church.<sup>26</sup>

Several things distinguish the Moreton and Dorchester chapels. At Moreton the help of an influential farmer was key, although the trustees and members were mainly labourers. The chapel took root in a place with no Anglican church, and in a separate sub-settlement of a large parish. There had been earlier hints and possible continuities of dissenting presence; Joseph Mott's house was registered for worship in 1820, whilst in 1851 Isaac Mott, chairmaker of Moreton, and chapel manager, signed the return for the religious census.<sup>27</sup> The chapel remained the only place of worship in Moreton, maturing and growing to include Sunday school and Band of Hope meetings in its activities. Its adherents were overwhelmingly working-class. Its physical position speaks of its role in the community, on a corner plot fronting the village street and cut out of the land fronting the large farmhouse set back beyond. This, rather than the Primitive Methodism of nearby Thame, was to prove the stronger and lasting presence. Such patterns, of strength in the countryside and relative weakness in the town, are typical of Oxfordshire Primitive Methodism. In Thame 'chapel' was already strong when the missionaries arrived, with Baptists, Congregationalists and Wesleyans all well-established. Moreover they worked together in alliance to combat Church interests, jointly supporting a British school (founded 1835), and temperance festivals (1841-1898).<sup>28</sup> There was no vacuum here into which Primitive Methodism might move, except perhaps in ministering to the very poorest. In Wallingford the Primitive Methodists preached to the workhouse inmates.<sup>29</sup> In Thame in 1848, ten years after the chapel at Moreton was opened, a room was found for preaching and called the New Jerusalem Primitive Methodist Chapel. Its leader and steward, a local grocer, James Phillip described it, 'Entirely poor people that attend. It is in the lowest part of the town. Not room sufficient for a school but it as been a blessing to the neighbourhood. Less fitting and quarling since the room has beign opened.' On 30 March 1851, 30 people attended in the morning, and

<sup>23</sup> J. Petty, *History of the Primitive Methodist Connexion from its origin to the conference of 1860* (1880 edn), 327-9.

<sup>24</sup> *VCH Oxon.* vii, 214

<sup>25</sup> OA NM3/15/A3/1; Tiller (1987), 69.

<sup>26</sup> OA catalogue to the records of the Thame and Watlington Methodist circuit (NM 3).

<sup>27</sup> OA, MS Oxf. Dioc. c 644 ff 219-20; Tiller (1987), 69.

<sup>28</sup> *VCH Oxon.* vii, 212.

<sup>29</sup> Petty, *op.cit.*, 327.

100 in the evening.<sup>30</sup> There was eventually a Primitive Methodist chapel in Thame in 1864, but it did not survive to the end of the century.<sup>31</sup>

Another pattern of experience comes to light at Hook Norton in north-west Oxfordshire. This was a classic open village<sup>32</sup> of the kind widely observed to be receptive ground for dissent.<sup>33</sup> It had diverse land ownership, large numbers of crafts and tradesmen, and its population had grown by 50% to 1,525 between 1801 and 1841, the years preceding the arrival of Primitive Methodism. Dissent was indeed strong in Hook Norton. In 1851 more people attended its various chapels than went to the parish church.<sup>34</sup> In 1875 the Rector reported to the Bishop that at least half the population were habitually absent from church.<sup>35</sup> Hook Norton fostered religious diversity and Nonconformity, but in this scheme of things Primitive Methodism was a somewhat impoverished latecomer. The Baptists, with their history traced back to 1644, their chapel, graveyard, school and endowments, and their influential membership gathered from the village and surrounding areas, led the way, followed by a strong Wesleyan presence and a fading Quaker one.

Primitive Methodism found it hard to get a foothold in such an environment. An authentic voice of the struggle survives in Elah Phipps' verse 'Description of a Revival of Religion in Hook-Norton Oxfordshire by a Labourer', printed c.1845 (Fig. 1).<sup>36</sup> At this time Phipps was in his late 30s. In 1841 he lived in the village with his brother and sister-in-law Zimry and Keturah Phipps; he died in 1851, aged 45. Some of the family appear to have been Baptists. Amongst his 16 stanzas he wrote

Some souls in Hook-norton have lately been bless'd,  
By the truths of the gospel being plainly address'd;  
In one thousand eight hundred and forty and five,  
The work of the Lord did begin to revive.

It was under the elms, near the Red Lion Inn,  
Where the Primitive Methodists first did begin:  
There they talked to the people they sung and they prayed,  
Till more and more sinners were greatly afraid.

And they cried to the Lord for his pardon and grace,  
And they met again and again at that place,  
How many can sing that the young and the old,  
Are blessed with Salvation in Jesus's fold.

<sup>30</sup> Tiller (1987), 103.

<sup>31</sup> *VCH Oxon.* vii 212.

<sup>32</sup> K. Tiller, 'Hook Norton, Oxfordshire: an open village', in J. Thirsk (ed.), *Rural England* (OUP, 2002), 277-89.

<sup>33</sup> Alan Everitt was one of the first to postulate that dissent flourished most in certain kinds of landscape and settlement, and local economic and social circumstances. See 'Nonconformity in country parishes' in J. Thirsk (ed.), *Land, church and people* (Reading, 1970); *The pattern of rural dissent: the nineteenth century* (Leicester, 1972). See also Tiller (1987) Introduction; K. Snell and P. Ell, *Rival Jerusalems. The geography of Victorian religion* (Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>34</sup> Tiller (1987), 51-2.

<sup>35</sup> OA, MS Oxf. Dioc. c 341.

<sup>36</sup> Hook Norton Local History Centre. See also P. Ashridge, *Village chapels* (Kershaw Press, Hook Norton, 2004), 59.

And soon to a Cottage a few were invited  
 In brotherly fellowship they were united;  
 And still in that Cottage they pray and they sing,  
 In the presence of Jesus, their saviour and King.

And now there have forty or more joined the band,  
 Who say they are walking to Canaan's fair land,  
 Where they hope soon in glory to sing and rejoice,  
 That ever they heard a poor Primitive's voice.

On 18 March 1846 a missionary meeting was planned, but they were not able to get a chapel for the occasion ('Well, Jesus himself was allowed but a stable'). However a barn was lent so, 'The servants were treated as well as their Master.'

Thus the use of a chapel to them was denied  
 But the mansions of Glory are opened quite wide;  
 No party spirit will ever be known,  
 When *all* true believers encompass one throne.

Perhaps the Hook Norton Primitive Methodists had encountered 'party spirit', but the loan of a barn suggests the sort of sympathetic support, usually from other Dissenters, which was found elsewhere in the county. The barn probably came from William Minchin, a local farmer and Quaker; he was reported in 1863 as providing his barn, 'always ... so cordially lent', for the Primitives' annual tea party.<sup>37</sup>

The occupational make-up of the local congregation is further confirmed by the baptismal registers of the Witney and Faringdon Primitive Methodist circuit. These give the occupation of fathers from Hook Norton in the case of 37 baptisms between 1847 and 1860. Of these occupations two were chimney sweep, one a dealer and 34 simply designated 'labourer'. Fourteen of the 16 families represented were labouring.<sup>38</sup> This proletarian make-up must explain why the Hook Norton congregation never attained its own purpose-built chapel. In 1851 it worshipped in an old school room, with an evening congregation of 100 compared to the best-attended services of the Anglicans with 277, the Baptists with 120, the Wesleyans with 160, and the Quakers with 11.<sup>39</sup> Formal Primitive Methodist membership in 1860-65 was 16 to 23 (this does not include adherents not in full membership, but attending sometimes), but in the 1870s sank as low as four. In 1881 the society leased the former Quaker Meeting House (continuing there for at least 17 years), and in 1882 had eight members.<sup>40</sup> Existence was tenuous but tenacious, as the Hook Norton society's survival up to the 1932 union demonstrates. The open village environment of Hook Norton certainly fostered nonconformity (later it was to add Strict Baptist and Salvation Army, and in the 1930s Roman Catholicism), but the particular fortunes of Primitive Methodism within the community have to be read not, as at Dorchester, in relation to resurgent Anglicanism, or, as at Moreton, in the context of the absence of other denominations, but rather in terms of the

<sup>37</sup> Ashridge op.cit., 60.

<sup>38</sup> OA NM2, Transcript of baptism registers of Witney and Faringdon Primitive Methodist circuit, 1843-1873.

<sup>39</sup> Tiller (1987), 51-2.

<sup>40</sup> Ashridge, op.cit., 60; OA,BMM/vi/60; NMI/A/F2/1.

**A DESCRIPTION**  
OF A  
**REVIVAL OF RELIGION IN HOOK-NORTON,**  
**OXFORDSHIRE.**  
**BY A LABOURER.**

While some men are writing of stars in the sky,  
And others the being of God do deny,  
It shall be my endeavour, (tho' not with much tact,)  
To record on this paper a well received fact.

Some souls in Hook-norton have lately been bless'd,  
By the truths of the gospel being plainly address'd;  
In one thousand eight hundred and forty and five,  
The work of the Lord did begin to revive.

He sent out his Servants to preach in the street,

And soon to a Cottage a few were invited,  
In Brotherly fellowship they were united  
And still in that Cottage they pray and they sing,  
In the presence of Jesus, their Saviour and King.

And now there have forty or more joined the band,  
Who say they are walking to Canaan's fair land,  
Where they hope soon in glory to sing and rejoice,  
That ever they heard a poor Primitive's voice.

On the eleventh of March, Eighteen—fortysix,  
The day for their Missionary meeting they fix;

Fig. 1. Part of a verse description by a local labourer, Elah Phipps, of the Primitive Methodist revival at Hook Norton, c. 1845. The congregation could never afford their own chapel, relying on borrowed or rented premises. (From a copy in Hook Norton Local History Centre)



Fig. 2. A panoramic view of Hornton, an agricultural and quarrying village in the ironstone uplands of north Oxfordshire. It proved fruitful ground for Primitive Methodism. In this early 20th-century photograph the chapel stands immediately to the left of the parish church tower. Copyright (c) Oxfordshire County Council Photographic Archive.

existing strengths of other dissenters and the consequences of an almost exclusively labouring local recruitment base. These factors seemed to have ensured that they never moved beyond the open-air and temporary settings of the early movement to the permanence and independence of their own buildings.

That it was possible for a more robust and mature form of Primitive Methodism to emerge where other churches were at work is borne out in another open village of the north Oxfordshire ironstone uplands, Hornton, also one of the 19 most persistent Primitive societies in the county (Fig. 2). The village had large numbers of farmers (21 in 1851), was an important stone quarrying centre (19 stone-masons and 5 quarrymen in 1851), and supported a range of crafts and trades.<sup>41</sup> It had Anglicans, Quakers and Methodists in 1835, when the Primitive Methodist missionaries reached this remote village. By 1836 a meeting house was registered, in 1839 the society joined the Banbury Primitive circuit, and in 1842 a chapel was built. In 1851 the evening congregation was 140, and there were 20 Sunday scholars. In 1853 five Hornton men were lay preachers. In 1884 a large, new stone chapel (Fig. 3) was built in a central position on the main road, complete with gabled front with rose widow, and traceried side windows. Over its entrance is carved, 'How amiable are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts'. The original chapel became a schoolroom. Hornton chapel

<sup>41</sup> *VCH Oxon.* ix, 137.



Fig. 3. Hornton Primitive Methodist chapel in the early 20th century. The large Gothic building of 1884 dominates the village street and its somewhat tumbledown cottages. It replaced a meeting house of 1839 and a simple, earlier chapel and is a rare phenomenon for Oxfordshire, of a Primitive Methodist congregation able to build and sustain the big, architecturally grand chapel style typical of late Victorian Nonconformity elsewhere. Copyright (c) Oxfordshire County Council Photographic Archive.

remains open today. This very different development, into mature, self-confident, late Victorian Nonconformity, was rooted in the diverse and relatively wealthy support on which Primitive Methodism was able to draw in Hornton. The 39 feet by 24 feet site of the first chapel was part of an orchard bought for that purpose by a 26 year-old local stone-cutter. The chapel and land were subsequently bought for £145 (borrowed at 4% interest) and vested in 13 trustees, nine from Hornton, three from Ratley and one from Arlescote (both Warwks). Their occupations were seven labourers, two stone-cutters, a shoemaker, tailor, blacksmith and bricklayer. The trustees of the 1884 chapel were four labourers, a farmer, grocer, draper, two bakers, blacksmith, two carpenters, bootmaker, and stonemason.<sup>42</sup> From the outset Primitive Methodism in Hornton could command a wider range of support than Hook Norton, notably from crafts and tradesmen. The stone industry saved the village economy, and the Primitives within it, from dependence on increasingly low-waged agricultural workers. By 1884 the chapel was supported by an increased range of tradesmen in particular and played a central role in village society. The symbiotic relationships between chapel and community proposed by Hempton do indeed seem to be borne out by the greatly varying experiences of these Oxfordshire Primitive Methodist societies.

<sup>42</sup> Ashridge, *op.cit.*, 61-2.

## CONVERSIONS AND REJECTIONS: THE COUNTY EXPERIENCE

The original heartlands of Primitive Methodism lay far from Oxfordshire. The movement began with the first camp meeting to be held in England, at Mow Cop in the upland borders of Staffordshire in 1807. Camp meetings were open-air gatherings for preaching and prayer, usually lasting all day. They originated in the revivalism of America, and were adopted by the English founders of what was to become Primitive Methodism, Hugh Bourne (1772-1852), a carpenter, and William Clowes (1780-1851), a potter, both from Staffordshire. These were working men, already Methodists, wishing to bring the salvation and better lives which they themselves had found through their faith to as many of their fellows, men, women and children, as possible. The message was one which John Wesley, who had begun his own itinerant outdoor preaching almost 70 years before, would readily have recognised – the need for individuals to turn to God, recognising their sin, repenting of it, finding salvation, and going on to sustain holy living as church members and in day-to-day-life. This could be achieved without formal liturgy or the intervention of ordained clergy. This clearly put Primitive Methodism in opposition to Anglicanism and made it a striking alternative to the unreformed and, in many areas, still quiescent Establishment. For all its echoes of the origins of Methodism, the new movement also proved unacceptable to the solid, centralised and controlled respectability of Wesleyan Methodism as it had become by 1807. The following year Bourne was expelled. Tellingly camp meetings were the immediate cause of schism. The Wesleyans, distancing themselves from any taint of sedition, regarded such gatherings as improper and dangerous.<sup>43</sup> In 1811, adopting the title Primitive Methodists, the rejected group formed their own national connexion. They also became colloquially known as Ranters, the name of a radical religious group in mid-17th-century England, whose free thinking and behaviour and wild preaching had roused suspicion and anxiety as did their early 19th-century ‘successors’.

In its earliest years Primitive Methodism recruited particularly strongly amongst the miners and pottery workers of Staffordshire, the farm workers of East Anglia, and the fishermen of the east coast. This is reflected in the earliest circuits, based on Tunstall (Staffs), Derby, Loughborough and Hull, where the first national conference met in 1819. Primitive Methodism first came to Oxfordshire when missionaries were sent from Leicester in 1824 to Witney.<sup>44</sup> The west Oxfordshire market town, with its growing and mechanising blanket industry, was already a centre of Dissent. Methodism had some adherents in the town as early as 1747, and Wesley first preached there in 1764. He found a large congregation and supporters including Ann Bolton, daughter of a local baker and Independent, who became his lifelong correspondent.<sup>45</sup> Witney’s first Methodist meeting house was built in 1769 and its congregation came to include leading local manufacturers and tradesmen. Witney became a Methodist circuit in 1803. The religious temper of the town was revealed when, in July 1783, a great thunderstorm struck, wakening people and causing men, women and children to flock in fear out of their houses, where they ‘kneeled down together in the streets. With the flames [of the lightning] the grace of God came down.’ When Wesley came to Witney a few days later he found ‘the spirit of seriousness, with that of grace and supplication, continued’, spurred by this judgemental experience. Crowds flocked to hear Wesley, and when he preached at Wood Green on the “Son of man coming in his Glory” he saw that ‘the word fell heavy upon them, and many of their hearts were as melting wax.’<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Werner, *op. cit.*, chapter 1.

<sup>44</sup> Petty, *op. cit.*, 229.

<sup>45</sup> *VCH Oxon.* xiv, 151.

<sup>46</sup> *Wesley in west Oxfordshire* (Witney, 1988), quoting Wesley’s journal 16 July 1783.

Thus, when William Allcock arrived in Witney in July 1824 as the first Primitive Methodist missionary to the county, he found a town with some history of evangelical revival and diverse established Nonconformist groups. He 'fixed his standard' there, but it was in the neighbouring villages that 'he found great numbers of the inhabitants living in darkness, sin and misery. Many of them had not heard a sermon for twenty, and some thirty years.' This was the desert which Allcock soon claimed was blossoming 'as the rose.'<sup>47</sup> The characteristic activities of early Primitive Methodism, outdoor preaching and house prayer meetings, were soon underway. Then, on Christmas Day 'a very powerful love feast, when many were earnestly seeking salvation' was held. The love feast was an occasion for evangelism, especially popular amongst Primitive Methodists.<sup>48</sup> It remained a feature of their worship into the 20th century, long after such gatherings had fallen victim to notions of respectability within Wesleyanism. Love-feasts were in effect an alternative to celebration of the Lord's Supper; there were hymns and prayers, distribution of bread or cake and water from a two-handled mug passed around the congregation, an address and testimonies of personal spiritual experience from amongst the hearers.

By the end of 1824 two travelling preachers, 135 members and 'ten local preachers and exhorters' were said to be based on Witney.<sup>49</sup> In May 1835 came the first Oxfordshire camp meeting, described in typically graphic and triumphant language by the missionaries

On Sunday morning we held a fellowship meeting at five o'clock. At eight we formed a procession, and advanced towards the camp-ground, about a mile and a half distant. The town was moved, and hundreds followed us. The enemy stirred up many of his subjects to oppose us. Shortly forty horns were blowing ... the noise was alarming. We entered a large moor, where thousands were assembled. We had two wagons for two preaching stands; but our enemy soon turned one ... upside down ... The Lord was with us, and a glorious work broke out. Fifteen or sixteen were crying for mercy at one time, and many were saved.<sup>50</sup>

This approach, and mixture of success and violent rebuff was to be typical of the Oxfordshire story. Even in Witney, a relative stronghold of Dissent, the new, strident form of proselytising provoked hostile reactions as well as anxiety, curiosity and some enthusiastic adherents. Nothing daunted, the Witney Primitive Methodists set out on 23 May 1825 to 'storm the city', walking to Oxford and preaching 'against the walls of the city prison.' They were pelted with eggs for their pains. The assault came from the 'gownsmen', townsmen took offence, and a bout of Oxford's own brand of internecine, town-gown violence ensued, with the Witney preachers rescued and sheltered by a pious local family, thought to be Baptists.<sup>51</sup> Primitive Methodism was thus rebuffed from the city, as it was to be again in 1835. Although made the centre of a circuit in 1845, the cause was never strong in the city.<sup>52</sup>

The first encounters of 1824-5 encapsulate some central features of the future relationship between Oxfordshire and Primitive Methodism. Localities differed greatly in their receptiveness, varying from rapid responsiveness to outright rejection. In the former case, permanent organisation quickly followed; Witney was made a circuit in 1826.

<sup>47</sup> Letter quoted in *Primitive Methodist Magazine* 27 December 1824; Petty, op.cit., 229.

<sup>48</sup> M.R.Watts, *The Dissenters* Vol II (Cambridge, 1995),189.

<sup>49</sup> Petty, op.cit., 229.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-1.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 231-2.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 449; *VCH Oxon.* iv, 421.

Elsewhere the response fell short of rejection but was uncertain with local support and resources insufficient for a self-sustaining local society. Such places were candidates for repeated future missioning. The loud and challenging tone of the Primitives' activities, involving large outdoor gatherings led by working men and unordained preachers, could easily be identified by some with potential disorder and dangerous independence at a time of political and industrial activism. Equally, other local Nonconformists – Baptists, Independents and Wesleyans – although typically of different social background and relatively established status, saw common cause with the embattled newcomers and sprang to their support, as in the Oxford fracas. Thus the Primitive Methodists, for all their raw distinctiveness, were part of a wider Nonconformist community from the outset.

This was clear when, in 1828-9, a fresh campaign was begun, from the recently established stronghold of Shefford (Berks) into the Vale of the White Horse. One of the missionaries, Thomas Russell, found himself interrogated by a local Anglican clergyman as to his knowledge of Latin, Greek and Hebrew. In fact Hugh Bourne, the Primitives' founder, enjoined their preachers to read and study and he had himself studied Greek, Hebrew, Latin and French. The Connexion published much material and guidance for their preachers.<sup>53</sup> However, Russell chose to reply that what he knew was that sinners must repent and be converted, to which the response was "That is enthusiasm; you are a fanatic". Russell was imprisoned at Wantage and taken to Abingdon house of correction. Local Independent, Baptist and Wesleyan ministers all pleaded his case. A lawyer was obtained from the Religious Protection Society in London, and Russell was released after a month.<sup>54</sup> Such events not only illustrate a clash of old and new ideas and institutions but remind us that the period of Primitive Methodism's campaigns to establish itself in Oxfordshire coincided with battles and subsequent legislation for equal rights for Dissenters, Catholic Emancipation, reform of the parliamentary and municipal franchises, rural hardship and unrest, the Swing riots, opposition to enclosure, and the introduction of the New Poor Law. These were unsettled times, and Primitive Methodism was part of the mood, the alignments and the activities of those times. How far there were direct links between the emergent new religion and its adherents and other strands of radical activity is hard to determine. For example, of 22 places in Oxfordshire where Swing activity was recorded in 1830-31<sup>55</sup> only four (Banbury, (Middle) Barton, Ewelme and Wootton) were to have Primitive Methodist societies, suggesting an inverse rather than positive relationship between the two.

The initial burst of activity based on Witney was part of a period of rapid growth which left Primitive Methodism nationally over-stretched and in some organisational crisis, which probably is one of the reasons why it was not until the mid-1830s that further sustained attempts at the conversion of the rest of the county were made. These campaigns were part of what the historian of Primitive Methodism, H.B. Kendall was to call 'multiplication by division'.<sup>56</sup> From the early heartland of Tunstall in Staffordshire, missionaries had been targeted on the Severn valley, establishing missions (embryonic circuits of groups of hearers and members) as they went. The Primitive Methodists adopted the Wesleyan pattern for their subsequent organisation into classes, societies, circuits and districts. The grass-roots unit of involvement was the class, into which each local society was divided. Membership of the class was to be renewed by a minister quarterly. The local societies were in turn arranged into circuits, which were the basis of a plan of services in each

<sup>53</sup> E. Dorothy Graham, 'Bourne College: a Primitive Methodist educational venture', in A.P.F. Sell (ed), *Protestant Nonconformists and the West Midlands of England* (Keele, 1996), 135-6.

<sup>54</sup> Petty, *op.cit.*, 274-5.

<sup>55</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé, Appendix 3.

<sup>56</sup> H. B. Kendall, *History of the Primitive Methodist Connexion* (n.d.1901), 50-6.

chapel or meeting place, with a full-time preacher or lay preacher allocated to lead them (see Fig. 4). Circuits were managed through quarterly meetings, with representatives of the constituent societies. As the cause put down roots, so missionaries were sent on into further areas. By 1828 Somerset, Devon and Cornwall had been covered, and attention turned east. From 1828 to 1843 Wessex and the Thames basin, through Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Surrey were a major focus for action.

Brinkworth, a large village some six miles west of Swindon, became a key stepping stone in the process of evangelisation. It was to the Brinkworth District that the Primitive Methodist circuits of Oxfordshire were to belong and from Brinkworth that missionaries reached the Berkshire village of Shefford in 1830. Remarkably by 1833 Shefford was the station for 13 travelling preachers. One of them Russell, whose imprisonment we have already noted, went to Wallingford, and from there, in 1833, crossed the Thames into the south Oxfordshire villages.<sup>57</sup> The familiar cycle began; a Christmas love feast at Wallingford (which by then had a chapel) took place in 1834. Of 30 penitents 16 or 18 'found the Lord.' In February 1835 came 'another powerful love feast at Ewelme ... when numbers of mourners were comforted with the blessings of salvation.'<sup>58</sup> Ewelme was to be one of the most persistent Primitive Methodist societies in Oxfordshire, surviving to 1932.

The cause at Wallingford had clearly stabilised by the time John Ride, a travelling preacher, went there on 1 December 1836

Walked sixteen miles to Wallingford, and attended their branch quarterly-meeting. Here they have great peace in their borders. We had a missionary meeting at night in the chapel. The speaking was free, the feeling gracious, and the collections liberal.<sup>59</sup>

Those essential features of successful, 19th-century Nonconformity – freedom, grace and giving – were all in place, and in 1837 Wallingford became a circuit.

Elsewhere the reception was rougher. At Toot Baldon 'a son of Belial threw a large stone with such violence at a female preacher as to knock her to the ground.' The man who allowed his house to be used for meetings was threatened with notice to quit and 'several of the farmers ... ceased to employ him in his trade of harness maker.'<sup>60</sup> So the Primitive Methodists returned to the open air, until in 1839, a small chapel could be opened, just as was happening at Dorchester and Moreton in the same year. Female preachers had been banned by the Wesleyans in 1803 but remained a feature of Primitive Methodism, albeit in declining numbers, the last retiring in 1862.<sup>61</sup> As we shall see, women were a major part of local congregations. When missionaries were appointed for the next part of the Oxfordshire campaign, the Thame mission, they were William Peacefull and Miss Woolford. The work of this phase has already been discussed in the case study of Moreton and Thame.

In some areas of Oxfordshire outright hostility continued to win the day. Such was the case at Bicester, which missionaries visited for 11 successive Sundays in 1843. Finally in July, an attempt to preach in the market place at six on Sunday evening was met with rotten eggs, mud, stones, dirty water and blows.<sup>62</sup> Local magistrates enquired of the Secretary of State if open-air meetings could be legally prevented because of the disturbances they were causing.

<sup>57</sup> Petty, *op.cit.* 285.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>59</sup> Journal of John Ride, published in *Primitive Methodist Magazine* (1837), 263-6.

<sup>60</sup> Petty, *op.cit.*, 330-1.

<sup>61</sup> Watts, *op.cit.*, 611.

<sup>62</sup> Petty, *op.cit.*, 446.

They had form in this respect, having in 1840 sentenced Isaac Hedges 'for blocking up a public foot-path' whilst preaching to five people in front of the blacksmith's shop at Ambrosden.<sup>63</sup> Hedges refused to pay the 15s. fine, and was sentenced to 21 days hard labour. The magistrates were a clergyman and a surgeon. The Primitive Methodists, with characteristic certainty about divine intent, noted that several of their Bicester persecutors died within months of the 1843 rebuff.<sup>64</sup> However, a Primitive Methodist society was never formed in the town and it and surrounding areas of east and central Oxfordshire remained arid ground for the cause.

Other streams of mission were more successful. An insight into them comes from the journal of William Peacefull, whom we have already encountered on the Thame mission of 1837. Primitive Methodist preachers were required to present a journal to the quarterly meetings of their current circuit and that of Peacefull, kept whilst working on the Faringdon branch of the Shefford circuit in 1835-6, is reprinted in the national *Primitive Methodist Magazine* for 1837. On Sunday 16 August 1837 he comments

Travelled thirteen miles, visited eight families, preached at Shrivenham at nine, Bourton half-past ten, and Bishopstone at five o'clock, and spoke at a missionary meeting. This has been a very hard day's work. But the Lord has helped me through.

The role of a Primitive Methodist preacher was indeed formidably demanding, with camp meetings, open-air preaching, leading class and prayer meetings, love feasts, and family visiting. The expectation, not always met, was of five pastoral visits a day to members in their homes, except on Sundays.<sup>65</sup> The work, as local societies became established, had to be done in the context of assertive local lay democracies, lay preachers, chapel stewards, trustees, and (at circuit level) quarterly meetings. In addition the national Conference, dominated by laymen, was in this period issuing strict regulations on the duties, dress and appropriate conduct of preachers. Ministerial status and power was always notably less than amongst other Nonconformist denominations, including the Wesleyans. Paid preachers were subject to constant moves, as graphically illustrated by the career of Joseph Preston, a travelling preacher whose stations between 1824 and 1855 included Pontypool, Redruth, and Salisbury, as well as Brinkworth.<sup>66</sup> Stipends were small (the lowest of all Nonconformist denominations) and could be irregular, depending on the finances of local societies. In 1824 the maximum quarterly salary was £4 10s. plus expenses for a single man, £2 2s. for females, and £9 2s. plus allowances for children for married men. By 1851 married men were receiving around £11 1s.<sup>67</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising that over 40% of Primitive Methodist ministers beginning between 1831 and 1871 did not last beyond the four-year probationary period. Ill-health and death, moral or other perceived inadequacies, surviving on meagre pay, and the demands on them and their families of itinerancy, all took their toll

This makes the commitment and achievements of the travelling preachers in Oxfordshire all the more impressive, given the volume and the intensity of the work, as Peacefull's testimony, here describing a house meeting at Frilford in 1835, shows

<sup>63</sup> *VCH Oxon.* vi, 51.

<sup>64</sup> Petty, *op.cit.*, 446-7.

<sup>65</sup> K. D. Brown, *A social history of the nonconformist ministry in England and Wales 1800-1930* (Oxford, 1988), 40.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 152

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-9; Graham, *op.cit.*, 139.

I preached at Frilford in the evening, the house was well filled with people. I had more than common liberty in speaking. Two women began to cry for mercy. I made a ring, and they came forward to be prayed for; and while we were praying and wrestling for them, the Lord laid hold on two men, and they cried till they alarmed the village. Then the man's daughter of the house fell to the floor crying for deliverance. Another woman with whom I was conversing about her soul, saw this last fall, and seemed to be affrighted, and tried to make her escape; but when she came to the door, the divine power laid hold on her and down she came. The meeting was then what spectators called confusion; I told them it was good confusion that brought souls to God.

Once souls had been saved the next stage was the establishment of local societies and their constituent classes. Surviving records show how, for all its fervour and spontaneity, Primitive Methodism was by the late 1830s, an increasingly organized and documented movement. Printed Society Report Books, in the form ordained by the 1836 Conference, record the progress of newly evangelised communities in Oxfordshire. The books were to be completed annually by the travelling preachers, with the names of each class member, and their status—approved, on trial, doubtful, left or fallen. Quarterly membership tickets were to be renewed by the travelling preacher. The 1841 entries<sup>68</sup> show the progress in the five years since Peacefull's labours. Some places retained house churches. At Frilford ten met in the house of Richard Foster, two of whom were local preachers, two 'on trial', and five women. Elsewhere chapels existed, although not necessarily with larger numbers; six attended at one of the two Abingdon meetings, and 13 at Blewbury chapel.

The Society Report Books also confirm the progress of Primitive Methodism in west Oxfordshire, where it had first become established with the Witney circuit in 1826. Here too the pace of activity picked up in the mid-1830s. Significant effort was directed to other areas; in March 1835 the Witney circuit sent Joseph Preston, whose heroic itinerancy we have already encountered, as a missionary into Banburyshire, that region of north Oxfordshire, south Warwickshire and adjoining Northamptonshire whose hub was the market, transport and administrative centre of Banbury. As in the Witney and Thame areas, much of the mission was to villages and crossing county boundaries – Claydon, Great Bourton, Mollington, Lower Middleton, Farthinghoe, Farnborough, Thenford and Culworth, with links to an existing mission at Chacombe.<sup>69</sup> A modest meeting room was found in Banbury itself. During the late 1830s and 1840s north Oxfordshire emerged as an area with numbers of persistent village societies, amongst them as we have seen, Hornton and Hook Norton. By contrast Witney's other effort at colonisation, in Oxford, suffered a further rebuff in 1835.

Back in rural west Oxfordshire, a cluster of strong village societies which were to play a major part in their communities was growing up. At Black Bourton, for example, Primitive Methodism remained for years a house church. The Society Reports show that this was not for lack of support.<sup>70</sup> In 1847 there were 28 members, meeting in the house of John Maizey, a gardener and carrier. Their make-up says much about Primitive Methodist membership. Sixteen were approved, nine on trial and three doubtful. A majority, 15, were female. Most, 17, lived in Black Bourton. They included household groups, like Maizey, then aged 66, his wife and servant/labourer (33 and unmarried). There were agricultural workers and their wives, aged from their late 20s to 50s, and a number of unmarried children of agricultural labourers in their late teens and early 20s.<sup>71</sup> Several were neighbours in the village. The

<sup>68</sup> OA NM2/D/A2/1.

<sup>69</sup> Petty, *op.cit.*, 319.

<sup>70</sup> OA, NM2/D/A2/1.

<sup>71</sup> 1851 census enumerator's returns for Black Bourton; Post Office Directory of Berks and Oxon 1847.

group could neither readily afford to build a chapel, nor find land for one. The key figure was John Maizey. Here was no grand external patron, but his relative financial independence and local status, wedded to his personal religious convictions made him central. Maizey was born in nearby Alvescot in 1781. His characteristically couched obituary appears in the *Primitive Methodist Magazine* for 1852

Unhappily he grew up to be a drunkard. While still young he went to live in Burford, with a family who were members of the Society of Friends. His master had cause to reprove him for his conduct. He left his position because of this and enlisted as a soldier, but he never forgot his reproof.

On discharge from the army in 1814 he returned to Oxfordshire, settling down and marrying in 1822. When Primitive Methodism first came to Black Bourton he became a member and later a local preacher, providing a meeting room. Maizey signed the 1851 religious census return, reporting an afternoon congregation of 100, with 22 Sunday scholars attending in the morning. The cause continued after his death and finally, in 1862, a chapel was built (Plate IX).

Similar stories are found elsewhere in west Oxfordshire which became one of the strongholds of the movement<sup>72</sup>, but gains could not always be guaranteed. At Northmoor, some five miles SE of Witney, a meeting in the house of Ephraim Dix was registered as early as 1821, and became part of the Faringdon Primitive Methodist mission in 1826, when it had 14 members. By 1835 there were 26 members and perhaps a sort of religious equilibrium. In 1834 Anglican records had noted that many Ranters also attended church, even taking the sacrament. However, in 1841, a hostile farmer bought the Primitives' meeting place and evicted them. Some members were dismissed and evicted from their cottages. A temporary building for worship was found, and by 1843 a brick chapel erected to the north of the village. Local Baptists, notably the Giles family of Standlake, helped in this, and all the preachers at the opening service of the new chapel were Baptists.<sup>73</sup> At the 1851 census the evening congregation was 150, with 19 Sunday scholars in the morning. This outstripped the largest congregation at the parish church – 55, with 30 Sunday scholars.<sup>74</sup>

The character of what Primitive Methodism was offering in Oxfordshire by the mid-century is well conveyed by a surviving preaching plan of 1847 for the Oxford Circuit (Fig. 4).<sup>75</sup> This schedules the services and meetings to be held at 14 meeting places during the first four months of the year, with a list, sternly headed "Be troubled ye careless ones", of the local preachers, including those under trial, exhorters, and prayer leaders (who could not take biblical texts) who would lead them. There were Sunday and weekday services and meetings, and in addition revival meetings with three or four preachers, missionary and tea meetings, and special events, such as anniversaries and love feasts. The sacrament was occasionally offered, usually once in this four-month period. Funds were frequently collected, for chapels, gas and quarterly dues. There was an Oxford Primitive Methodist Benefit Society for the relief of the poor. All was carefully regulated by the Quarterly and Circuit Committees, the divulging of whose business meant expulsion from membership for ever. This was a wide-ranging and highly organised body to which to belong.

<sup>72</sup> See D. Wise, *Early Methodism in and around Burford* (Tolsey Papers 4, Burford, 1986); J. Fay and R. Martin (eds.), *The Jubilee Boy. The life and recollections of George Swinford of Filkins* (Filkins, 1987), 51.

<sup>73</sup> *VCH Oxon.* xiii, 170; *Primitive Methodist Magazine* (1853), 618.

<sup>74</sup> Tiller (1987), 73-4.

<sup>75</sup> Copy in OA, MSS DD Methodist c18.

# PRIMITIVE METHODIST PREACHERS' PLAN, OXFORD CIRCUIT, 1847.

"Arise, O God, plead thine own cause; remember how the foolish man reproaches thee daily." Ps. lxxiv, 22.

Places and time of Meeting.	JAN.		FEBRUARY				MARCH				APRIL			PREACHERS' Names and Residences.
	24	31	7	14	21	28	7	14	21	28	4	11	18	
1 Oxford 10½ ... Ditto 2½ Class 3½ ... Ditto 6 ... Thursday ...	6	25	1	15	28	1	2	24	10	16	18	4	4	<p style="text-align: center;">"Be troubled ye careless ones."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">—o—</p> 1 G. Lee 1 2 J. Symonds 1 3 C. Lee 1 4 W. Dingle 1 5 W. H. Baker & R. Dingle 1 6 C. Harper 1 7 R. Mobey 2 8 Rogers and Peesley 2 9 W. Whiting & W. Peesley 2 10 J. Cross 1 11 W. Badger 4 12 J. Stanford 10 13 Cox and Collotson 5 14 M. Parker and E. T. 8 15 C. Taphouse 1 16 S. Taphouse 1 18 C. Elford 1 19 20 T. Edginton 1 21 J. and F. Harris 1 22 W. Moore and Turner 10 23 H. Day 1 24 Weston and Carter 6 25 W. Haines 2 26 Collett and Cooper 4 27 D. Sharpe 1 28 G. Knapp and Turner 1 29 H. King 1 30 1
2 Stanton 2 & 6 ... Tuesday ...	1F	6	10	14	15	29	2MS	21	30C	17	28	32	24CC	
3 Beckley 6 ... Wednesday ...	18	27	1F	6	10	5C	8	30	23	1s	25	28	15	
4 Murcott 2 & 6 ... Tuesday ...	14	11	2MS	36	13	22	33	1c	25	14	5F	11	18CC	
5 Islip 2 & 6 ... Wednesday ...	10	15	27	2c	21	25	28MS	5	22	6	2F	13	JH	
6 Baldon 2 & 5½ ... Friday ...	28	23	21	34	1MS	32	27	6	2c	18	15	10	27CC	
7 Yarnton 6 ... Friday ...	13	34	30	29	37	2c	JH	15	28	34	23	37	1F	
8 Boarstall 6 ... Friday ...	8	2c	34	25	33	26	31	14	18	32	22	25	2F	
9 L. London 2 & 6 ... Thursday ...	22	2cF	31	26	14	31	25	33	8	38	30	29	2F33	
10 Ambrosden 6 ... Wednesday ...	36	26	38	22	11c	14	37	26	38	13	11	1F	36	
11 Noke 6 ... Monday ...	21	29F	8	23	30	18	13	2c	5	21	29	6	8	
12 Bladon 11 ... Friday ...	32	21	18	5	27	2c	JH	15	28	34	23	37	1F	
13 Marston 6 ... Tuesday ...	30	5	32	18	28	1c	23	10	29	27	3F	21	23	
14 St. Clement's, Monday ...	2	1	1	2	2	1T	6	2	2	1	1	2	2	
														31 Holder and Bishop 2 32 J. Pouting 1 33 W. Parker 8 EXHORTER. 34 Williams 1 PRAYER LEADERS. 35 Whittley 36 J. B. and T. D. 5 37 J. P. 5 38 G. and V. Reynolds

REVIVAL MEETINGS.—Oxford, January 24th, Nos. 2, 4, 5, 6, 20 and 24 and February 14th, Nos. 1, 3, 8, 10 and 16.—Stanton, January 24th, Nos. 1, 3, 15, 20 and 33.—Boarstall, January 31st, Nos. 2, 14, 31 and 33.—Murcott, February 7th, Nos. 2, 11, 26 and 37.—Islip, February 14th, Nos. 2, 13, 21 and 32.—Baldon, February 21st, Nos. 1, 3, 5 and 29.—Marston, February 28th, Nos. 1, 3 and 30.—Noke, March 14th, Nos. 2, 13 and 32.—

MISSIONARY SERMONS will be preached Murcott, February 7th, and Stanton, March 7th, by Nos. 2.—Baldon, February 21st, by Nos. 1 & 3.—Islip, March 7th, by Nos. 28 and Oxford, March 7th, by Mr. WALLIS, from Banbury.—MISSIONARY MEETINGS will be held Islip, Monday, March 8th.—Murcott, Tuesday, March 9th.—Stanton, Wednesday, March 10th.—Oxford, Thursday, March 11th.—Baldon, Friday, March 12th, Nos. 1, 2 & Mr. WALLIS, will address the Meetings.

TEA MEETINGS Islip, January 25th, Tickets, 8d. each.—Oxford, on Good Friday, April 2nd, Tickets, 9d. each.—Beckley, Easter Monday, April 5th, Tickets, 6d. each, Tea at 5 o'clock, P. M.—No Tea Meeting to be held without the sanction of the Quarter-day or Circuit Committee, next Quarter-day. Oxford, March 22nd, one o'clock, P. M. The Circuit & Sub-Missionary Committee, Nos. 4, 5, 6, 7, 13, 18, 21, 23, 28, 29, 32, & J. Harris, Beckley, to meet at Oxford the 1st Thursday in every Month.—Mr. W. H. Baker, Circuit Steward.—N. B. If any person shall divulge any thing out of Quarterly or Circuit Committee Meetings, they shall forfeit their seat in such Meetings for ever.

CIRCUIT RULES.—No person is allowed to preach amongst us who is not authorized by the Quarterly Meeting or Circuit Committee.—The Connexional Rule is, that every Local Preacher shall meet in Society & pay their Class, or their name cannot continue on the Plan.—Prayer Leaders on this Plan are allowed to exhort, but not to take texts.—No charge can be received, either in a Committee or Quarterly Meeting except the person charged be present, or has been seen & spoken to privately and fully upon the charge, by the person who brings it.—It is affectionately requested that each of the Preachers will attend their own appointments; and in case of sickness or any unavoidable hindrance, themselves provide a supply, & for every wilful neglect, if a satisfactory reason is not sent to Quarter Day, their names will be sent to Conference.—The Oxford Primitive Methodist Benefit Society is open for the reception of Members and Relief of the Sick, the 1st Monday in every month, at Mr. C. Taphouse's Oxford.—The Missionary Notices will be read throughout the Circuit by the Travelling Preachers.—J. Symonds Sub-Missionary Secretary, and G. Lee Treasurer.—

References. S. Sacrament. L. Lovefeast. T. Tickets. C. Quarterly Collection. G. Gas Collection. CC. Chapel Fund Collection. A. Anniversary. AD. Sunday School Address. MS. Missionary Sermons.

Come ye Preachers, Leaders, Members, All unite, with heart and hand; Let us live and work for Jesus, Till we gain the promis'd land. CHORUS. Glory, glory, hallelujah, We are servants of the Lord, And if we but work for Jesus, We shall have our bless'd reward. Preachers, preach a present Saviour, Preach salvation full and free; All mankind may share his favor, Now and in eternity.	Leaders, work, and work abundant, Give advice, and live it too, Never from your classes absent, Here's important work to do. Members, you must not be lazy, You are in the Harvest Field, Flesh and Satan cry be easy, But you need not to them yield. Jesus says, "go work" for sinners, If we strive in unity, We shall soon increase in Members, A Revival there will be.	Come then Brethren, come then Sisters, Love, and live in unity, Think, and speak, and act like Jesus. Labor for Eternity. Our reward is now in Heaven, Where we hope ere long to go, Then to us it will be given, Jesus Christ hath told us so. Hallelujah, we love Jesus, What a mercy 'tis that we Can believe, and feel him precious, And may soon his Glory see.
Glory, &c.	Glory, &c.	Glory, &c.

[H. Alden, Printer, Oxford.]

Fig. 4. Preaching plan of Oxford Primitive Methodist circuit, January to April 1847, showing the highly organised pattern of weekly worship and lay preaching, as well as revival and missionary activity, tea meetings and a benefit society. (Copy in Oxfordshire Archives, MSS. DD Methodist c 18)

## COMPOSITION

By 1851, when the religious census offers a unique snapshot of church and chapel in Oxfordshire, Primitive Methodism had gone through its initial stages of mission, touching all areas of the county. Circuits were in place based on Witney (1826), Banbury (after 1836), Faringdon (1836), Wallingford (1837), and Oxford (1845). Travelling preachers were stationed at Witney (2), Banbury (2), Chinnor (1), Faringdon (2), Wallingford (2) and Oxford (1).<sup>76</sup> A clear pattern had emerged of strengths, failures and developing organisation and culture. Of 235 settlements in the county with places of worship 132 had some form of Nonconformity, whilst 103 were solely Anglican. Oxfordshire had 240 chapels or meeting houses and 257 Church of England churches. Wesleyan Methodism was the strongest Nonconformist denomination, present in 73 places. Primitive Methodism, 25 years after its first Oxfordshire missions, had 42 congregations, already on a par with the Independents and Congregationalists (43) and Baptists (40).

Primitive Methodism in Oxfordshire was an overwhelmingly rural movement; only eight of 42 places of worship were in towns (Banbury, Oxford, Watlington, Witney and Thame). The remaining 34 were in villages or hamlets, of which 11 were in sub-settlements of parishes and major villages, as for example at Filkins in Broadwell, New Yatt in Hailey, Milton in Adderbury, Murcott in Charlton-on-Otmoor, Shorthampton in Chilson, Taston in Spelsbury and Moreton in Thame. The total attendances<sup>77</sup> at all Primitive Methodist meetings were some 3,500 of which only 24% was in towns.

It has been said of Primitive Methodism that it followed Wesleyanism, 'clinging to its skirts' and appearing where it did.<sup>78</sup> The Oxfordshire experience does not bear this out. Of 73 places with Wesleyan chapels only ten also had a Primitive Methodist meeting in 1851 and four of these were in towns, which generally sustained the greatest religious variety. This means that in 29 of its 39 places Primitive Methodism had reached where the Wesleyans had not, and that there was a good deal of difference between the locations of their meetings. The overall distributions of Wesleyan and Primitive Methodists in 1851 (Figs. 5 and 6) suggest other major differences. The Wesleyans had brought Nonconformity to those areas of Oxfordshire previously resistant, notably the centre and north-east of the county. They were the only denomination to do so. However, they were weaker in areas where old Dissent remained particularly strong, that is the Baptists in the west, and the Independents and Congregationalists in the Chilterns and Henley area. The distribution of Primitive Methodism, by contrast, reverts to an historical pattern, unable to get a footing in the hostile centre and east, including Bicester, or in the south-east, but strongest in the areas which had long proved most susceptible to Dissent, in the north-west, around Witney and the south-west, and in a band between Dorchester and Ewelme across to Thame.

The 1851 returns also show how far Primitive Methodism had attained two of the measures of mature Nonconformity, its own, purpose-built chapels, and Sunday schools. With its strongly working-class following Sunday schools had a particularly practical as well as spiritual importance. They were certainly a priority in the eyes of the 1837 Conference:<sup>79</sup> 'Wherever there is a place to teach in, and people to teach, as well as children to be taught, it is to be considered that there is a providential opening for a Sunday school'. Bible

<sup>76</sup> *Primitive Methodist Magazine* (1850).

<sup>77</sup> Based on the average attendance where returned, or if not given the highest attendance on census Sunday.

<sup>78</sup> H. B. Kendall, *Origin and History of the Primitive Methodist Church*, vol 1 (n.d., c. 1905), 117, discussed in Snell and Ell, *op.cit.*, 141.

<sup>79</sup> *Primitive Methodist Magazine* (1837), 22-3.

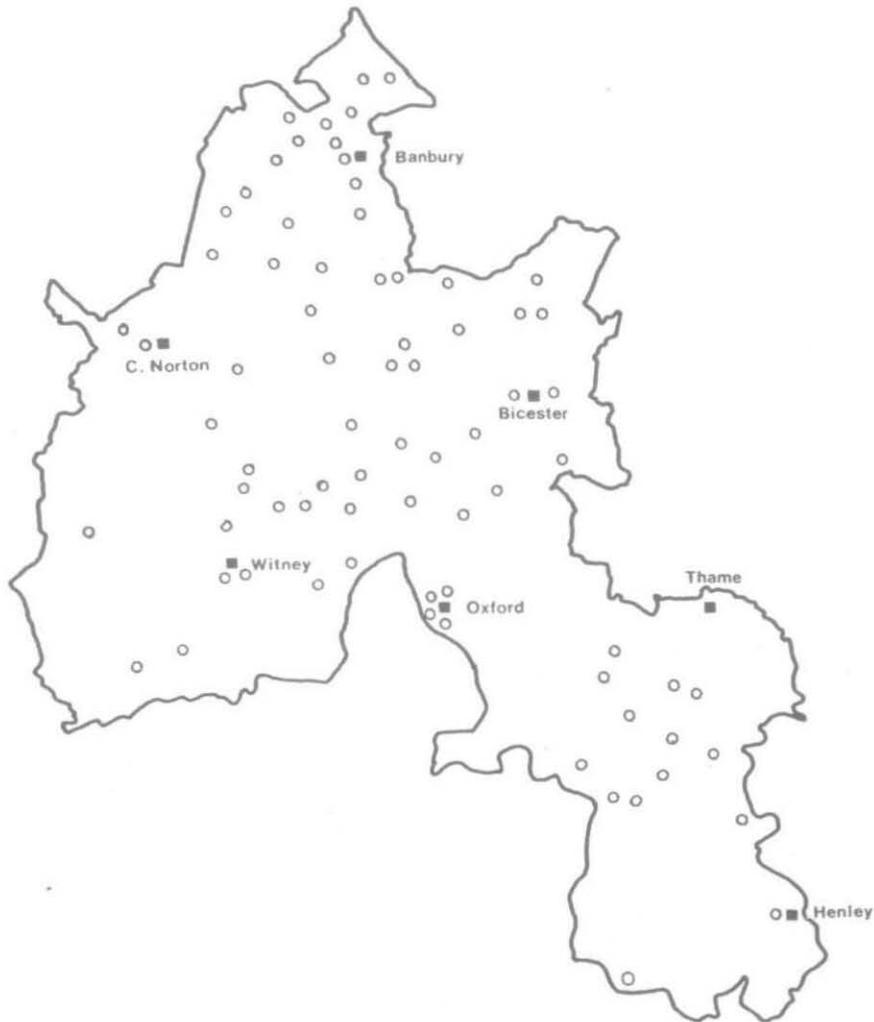


Fig. 5. Wesleyan Methodist Meeting Houses in 1851.

teachers, testament teachers, easy book or spelling teachers, and alphabet teachers were all to be encouraged, for 'A person who can read but a little may be of much service in teaching the alphabet or easy book classes'. In 1851 nine of the 42 chapels had Sunday schools – Banbury, Chinnor, Epwell, Hornton, Milton (Adderbury), Murcott, Northmoor, Oxford and Moreton. Numbers of scholars varied from 100 to three, totalling around 350. As to chapels, some census responses are ambiguous, but it seems that some 12 of the 42 meeting places were still in parts of houses or cottages or in rented premises. Of the chapels, where dates are given, seven were erected between 1834 and 1839, 18 in the 1840s, and one in 1850-1. Although more builds and rebuilds were to come, the 1840s were the high watermark of Primitive Methodist chapel building in Oxfordshire.

The religious census gives totals of attendance for places of worship, but offers no information on individual worshippers. The most extensive such information is probably to be found in the surviving baptismal registers of the Primitive Methodist circuits covering



Fig. 6. Primitive Methodist Meeting Houses in 1851.

Oxfordshire.<sup>80</sup> In the context of this study these registers have been used to provide large-scale data regarding the occupations of Primitive Methodist fathers and to analyse these data to indicate social class. The method used is that of Clive Field in his study of the social structure of English Methodism<sup>81</sup>, which is in turn derived from a modified version of the

<sup>80</sup> OA, NM2. Transcripts of the Primitive Methodist baptism registers for Witney and Faringdon circuit, 1843-1873; Oxford circuit, 1839-1928; Welton circuit (including north Oxfordshire), 1822-1873.

<sup>81</sup> C.D.Field, 'The social structure of English Methodism: eighteenth-twentieth centuries', in *British Journal of Sociology*, vol.28 no.2 (1977), 199-225. See also K. D. Brown, *op cit*, who uses the same classification. However M. Watts, *op.cit.*, criticises the 5-fold classification as too broad brush. Field's scheme has been used here, to allow comparison between Oxfordshire data and earlier work, and because of the relatively limited number of occupations named in the original sources from Oxfordshire.

Registrar General's 1951 schema and an exhaustive related list of specific occupations.<sup>82</sup> The components of the five classes are:

- I. Major employers, merchants, bankers, property owners, professional people
- II. Intermediate non-manual workers including minor employers, retailers, local government officers, teachers, and, prior to the 1930s, clerks, commercial travellers and insurance agents
- III. Routine non-manual occupations, artisan crafts, skilled manual tasks, chiefly in construction and manufacture
- IV. Semi-skilled employees mainly in transport, agriculture, mining, wood, textiles, domestic and municipal service
- V. Labourers and other unskilled persons

TABLE 1 OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE OF PRIMITIVE METHODISM IN OXFORDSHIRE  
(based on father's occupations recorded in baptismal registers).

A) Occupations of Primitive Methodists in West Oxfordshire 1843-1873.  
(Witney and Faringdon circuit)

date	number	Social Classification %			
		I	II	III	IV-V
1843-49	66	-	4.5	19.7	75.8
1850-59	226	-	5.8	14.6	79.7
1860-73	565	-	4.1	18.1	77.9

B) Occupations of Primitive Methodists in North Oxfordshire 1842-1910.  
(Welton Circuit)

date	number	Social Classification %			
		I	II	III	IV-V
1842-49	40	0	7.5	30	62.5
1850-59	175	1.1	4	25.7	69.1
1870-79	222	0	5.4	28.4	66.2
1900-10	120	0	6.7	37.5	55.8

C) Occupations of Primitive Methodists in Oxford 1841-1940.  
(Oxford circuit)

date	number	Social Classification %			
		I	II	III	IV-V
1841-60	141	2	13	34	51
1861-80	280	0	15	31	54
1881-1900	127	0	17	28	55
1901-20	134	0	20	31	49
1921-40	86	1	16	49	34

<sup>82</sup> Field, *op. cit.*, 201-2; W. A. Armstrong, 'The use of information about occupation', in E.A. Wrigley (ed.), *Nineteenth-century society. Essays in the use of quantitative methods for the study of social data* (Cambridge, 1972), 191-310.

Table 1 reproduces the results of Field's analysis of Oxford circuit registers, expressed in 20-year periods, and sets them alongside data from the west Oxfordshire (for the whole period available) and north Oxfordshire (selected decades).

In each case classes IV and V have been combined because the registers consistently use an undifferentiated designation of labourer. In all cases the majority of Oxfordshire Primitive Methodists are labourers, with the sole exception of Oxford by the early 20th century, and particularly after the First World War. The degree of dominance of labourers in west Oxfordshire is very striking, over three-quarters, and is also high in north Oxfordshire, at some two-thirds. Only into the 20th century does the balance shift in the north, when the artisans and craft trades of group III increase to over a third. Certainly there is an important representation of skilled workers, but hardly enough to justify Bebbington's statement that Primitive Methodists 'were much more likely to be semi-skilled or craftsmen than labourers'<sup>83</sup> Counter to his conclusions, the Primitive Methodists of Oxfordshire were overwhelmingly drawn from the poor and the labourers. Certainly where the skilled (III) are found they often had a disproportionate role in the fortunes of the local congregation, and even more so if any members were drawn from class II. The number of these, including farmers, to be found in the registers is tiny.

## CONCLUSIONS

Between 1824 and 1860 Primitive Methodism in Oxfordshire had grown from itinerant missionising, met with a mixture of violence, suspicion, curiosity and fervent welcome, to be a significant part of the county's religious and social life. It had a similar number of congregations to the Baptists, and to the Independents and Congregationalists, and it was the chosen form of Methodism in many communities where no Wesleyan society was to be found. It offered an array of spiritual experiences, opportunities for participation in preaching, worship, local management and organisation, social and some educational and welfare provision. It continued to offer a distinctive experience, albeit it one reflecting its growing size, and developing organisation and priorities.

Yet the picture was not one of easy stability and certainty. Although the 1840s had seen a flurry of chapel-building, bringing its attendant debts, local causes continued to come and go. As we have seen, 17 of the places of worship recorded in the 1851 census were not found in 1883, but 23 new causes were. Finance remained a major limitation for chapels still typically dependent on the support of labouring families in a low wage, predominantly agricultural county. Members and adherents now had to be won and held to the cause in the second and subsequent generations since the heady days of the first missions. Travelling preachers continued their heroic itinerancies, visiting members, providing preaching and prayers, and collecting funds. So, on 17 January 1858, George Morgan was to be found at a 'Prayer meeting at Faringdon. Took breakfast with Bro. Reason. Whent to Clanfield (4 miles). Preacht there from Ephesians 6.v.18. Took dinner with Bro. Merrick. Whent to Black Bourton. Preacht there from 2 of Cor.v.9 15. Walkt to Clanfield. To tea with Bro. Yeatman. Preacht at Clanfield at night from Acts.17.v.30.31'.<sup>84</sup> This 28-year old was an Oxfordshire man, born in 1830 at Sandford St Martin. At the age of 11 he had seen the Primitives from Witney singing through the streets, urging people to turn to God, but the local landlord had threatened to turn out the first man to join them and had done so. A local chapel was eventually built in 1854, tucked away in the nearby hamlet of Ledwell; as for George Morgan

<sup>83</sup> Bebbington, *op.cit.*, 111.

<sup>84</sup> Wise, *op. cit.*, 18-19.

he had become a local and then a travelling preacher for whom no journey to preach or visit was too long, whatever the weather.

So evangelising, and more particularly revival, spiritual and material sustenance of individuals, families and local societies, organisation and discipline were the order of the day. External hostility had by no means disappeared. George Morgan had rotten eggs thrown at him. Local members were also targets. In 1850 it was reported<sup>85</sup> from the Wallingford circuit that 'warm opposition' had been met when Park Corner, in the remote Chiltern parish of Swyncombe, was remissioned. Primitive Methodist members were told that education in the Church school must be denied to parents associated with the mission. The clergyman's wife upbraided a woman Primitive Methodist for committing 'the dreadful crime' of having her child baptised by an unordained preacher 'where its sins might have been taken away by a properly ordained minister'. If the child died it could not have Christian burial. It was also recorded that 'the lady would ... do all she could to have our friend turned out of her house'.

It is rare to find expressions of Anglican understanding of what they were up against in the Ranters, as they commonly called the Primitives. One such case is the vicar of Alvescot in west Oxfordshire who, in 1854, reflected that 'The doctrine of the dissenting preacher is more palatable and the style more intelligible to the poor than that of the Church of England minister. Plain popular lectures [on] various subjects on winters evenings and not in the church might ... be made the instruments of good'.<sup>86</sup> He noted an influx of strangers to the Ranters' chapel on a Sunday. Other of his brethren also found the Primitive Methodists hard to pin down, moving as they did across parish boundaries for regular chapel worship, other meetings and special events like love feasts and anniversaries. Identification was also hard because some attended church on occasion. At Heyford Warren, near Deddington the Ranters were simply 'a nuisance, and a disturbance to the Parish', whilst at Westcote Barton local chapels drew from surrounding parishes and 'keep our poor disaffected'.<sup>87</sup> There was a clear sense of the Ranters in the 1850s still actively moving into different villages, presenting a challenge to authority, and offering a message heard almost exclusively by the poor.

In some places Primitive Methodism had attained the marks of successful 19th-century Nonconformity, as we have seen in the freedom, grace and giving attained in Wallingford as early as 1836. However, this remained far from the case in many other communities in the county. James Obelkevich, in his influential study of religion and rural society based on Lincolnshire in this same period, discerns clear patterns in the development of Primitive Methodism. First there was a time of heroic expansion (1820-40), when Primitive Methodism had all the characteristics of a 'conversionist sect' with its missionary evangelism, strong lay activity, and spontaneity of worship. It appealed above all to the poor, mostly labourers, and unlike other dissenting groups had few recruits from across the wider social spectrum. After 1840 and up to 1860 Obelkevich found a time of consolidation and revivalism, with energies directed mostly at reviving local causes, and concentrating on the building and activities of the chapel and on taking the mission into the families and households of members. This was in part a consequence of a movement by then working internally to ensure that its message, and support, was passed on to succeeding generations of followers. Obelkevich concludes that by 1860 Primitive Methodism was on the point of beginning a third phase of slackening energies, introversion and denominationalisation, a time

<sup>85</sup> *Primitive Methodist Magazine* (1850), 500.

<sup>86</sup> *Bishop Wilberforce's visitation returns for the archdeaconry of Oxford 1854*, ed. E. P. Baker (Oxfordshire Record Society, vol.35, 1954), 6.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

that would take it away from the crowded and excited meetings of its early days to a quieter, less public and less emotional existence, part of a world no longer marked by disruptive change and pressing uncertainty but by relative stability and peaceful co-existence as an accepted member of a pluralist range of differing Christian denominations.

The history of Oxfordshire Primitive Methodism includes much of the heroic expansion of the first phase found in other areas. This meant that within 25 years of the first missions it was on a par with the leading churches of old dissent in the county when it came to numbers of congregations. But those congregations were of a very different kind, and the consequence for the Primitive Methodists was a continuing instability and struggle. Register evidence suggests that the Oxfordshire Primitive Methodists included particularly high proportions of the labouring classes, even in a movement notable for this. They combined poverty and assertiveness. This was reflected both in the strong hostility of the host environments they encountered in some areas of the county, and in the financial limitations which affected their fortunes in many localities. To become established they needed space, physical and emotional, and material means. Thus it was not enough to have the opportunities for dissent and diversity offered by an open village environment, as at Hook Norton, unless it was matched by the financial support and status of some of the craftsmen, retailers or farmers of the community. Opportunities in towns were similarly constrained. It also helped if other religious 'providers' were weak locally. Sub-settlements, without Anglican churches and often without other dissent, provided productive settings, as at Moreton where added factors were the support of a local farmer and that additional followers could be drawn from other settlements. In Oxfordshire elements of heroism and conflict persist throughout the period to 1860, alongside a distinctive and active presence established in perhaps a quarter of the county's parishes. Primitive Methodist growth in so short a time is remarkable, but it was clearly a minority movement. Where it took root depended closely on the local environment, as well as factors of wider change and personal spiritual experience. The strength lent by the shared collective experience of being a Primitive Methodist was considerable, and communities in which the movement became established were in their turn significantly influenced by the presence of this alternative culture. When in 1862 the delegates and hearers of the Brinkworth District were photographed at their meeting in Banbury they presented a solid phalanx of serious-faced and darkly-suited males.<sup>88</sup> That they had left behind experiences of conversion, revival, spontaneity and hostility to embark on a new phase of slackening energies and stable introversion is not, however, apparent from the position of Primitive Methodism in Oxfordshire by 1860. As Alun Howkins has discovered in Norfolk, there were 'two separate chronologies with Primitive Methodism, one a central one of a chapel moving along the line of respectability towards becoming another denomination; the other a local one, lagging behind still in its heroic phase, still one of the 'churches of the disinherited'.<sup>89</sup> Disruptive change was not only to prove a feature of the past. How local Primitive Methodism was to respond to the challenges of agricultural trades unionism and the onset of agricultural depression in the 1870s is a subject for further study.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Mark Smith and the Acting Editor for their helpful comments on a draft of this article.

<sup>88</sup> OA, NM2/F/SP/1. Photograph unfortunately not suitable for reproduction.

<sup>89</sup> A. Howkins, *Poor labouring men. Rural radicalism in Norfolk 1870-1923* (1985), 48.

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Plate VII. Churchyard yew, South Moreton, Berks. Photograph by John Blair. [Secker p. 46]



Plate VIII. Moreton, near Thame. The chapel was one of several built in Oxfordshire in 1839, at the start of a period of rapid expansion for Primitive Methodism in the county. The building was extended in 1869 and fronts the village street on a prominent corner site given by Joseph Way, whose farm can be glimpsed beyond the chapel. It was the only place of worship in Moreton. (Photo by author). [Tiller p. 90]  
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Plate IX. Black Bourton. West Oxfordshire was one of the strongest areas for Primitive Methodism in the county. This chapel was built in 1862, for £183-10-91/2d. For many years previously meetings were in a room provided by John Maizey, a local carrier and gardener. (Photo by author). [Tiller p. 102]



Plate X. Standlake Primitive Methodist chapel, built on the site of a former meeting house in 1866. A simple inexpensive brick preaching box, filling its small site, said to have 150 sittings, and typical of the modest buildings produced by Oxfordshire Primitive Methodism. Many were never enlarged or elaborated. Other congregations continued to worship in houses, barns or in the open air. (Photo by author). [Tiller p. 107]

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