

# **THE WESTCOUNTRY PREACHERS**

**A new history of the  
Bible Christian Church**

**(1815 - 1907)**

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Michael Wickes was able to complete the editing of the first five chapters of this book prior to his death in 2004. His wife, Rosie, has tried to be faithful to Michael's wishes in preparing this book once again for publication. Rosie Wickes is enormously grateful to Roger Thorne, JP and David Shorney who so generously assisted in editing this edition.

*The Westcountry Preachers* is not only a valuable source of historical information but it also tells a fascinating and largely forgotten story of a group of people whose lives and zeal made a lasting impact upon the south-west of England.

This book is dedicated to Michael's parents  
**Peter and Hilda Wickes**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

A history of the rise and development of the Bible Christians, a Methodist denomination that flourished within Devon and Cornwall after 1815, should be of interest to most local and church historians, as well as to genealogists trying to trace families of Westcountry descent. The Bible Christians played an important role in the social and political development of the South West during the Victorian era, but too many histories of Devon and Cornwall have almost completely ignored their presence. Many contemporary inhabitants of the South West have never heard of the Bible Christians, despite the fact that Bible Christian chapels still form part of the local rural landscape. Several books have been written about the Bible Christians in the past, but almost all of them were published before 1950. It is to be hoped that “The Westcountry Preachers” will help to fill this vacuum. This book should also be a source of inspiration to Christians from all denominations still living within Devon and Cornwall. It shows how a revival swept through the Southwest of England in the nineteenth century.

I have to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to many people, both living and dead, who have influenced the writing of this book. The names of the authors of past Bible Christian histories are listed in the bibliography, and my thanks are given to them all. I am especially grateful to Roger Thorne for his past help in the editing of the text of this book.

Michael Wickes MA

## Chapter One

### THE EMERGENCE OF WILLIAM O'BRYAN

The date was October 9<sup>th</sup> 1815. The battle of Waterloo had been fought and won in June that year, and the long war with France was over at last. The summer had drawn to a close, the harvest was gathered in, and autumn was at hand. England lay at peace. The farmhouse at Lake in the parish of Shebbear, North Devon, was filled with people. Kitchen and parlour were packed tight with an eager throng of both old and young, listening to the words of a Cornish preacher. The Devonshire farmers and their wives were attentive as William Bryant, later to be known as O'Bryan, hammered home the message of a full and free salvation, available here and now because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ. They had listened to similar challenging words inside their local Anglican church which their curate, Daniel Evans, had preached from his pulpit. Evans had spoken of the necessity for the New Birth, without which salvation was impossible. His sermons had found fertile soil, no doubt reinforced by the movement of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of his congregation.

Shebbear and the surrounding parishes had been largely unaffected by the coming of the Wesleyan brand of Methodism before 1815, and the words of William Bryant (who was himself from a Wesleyan background) made a deep impression on his listeners. So it was that Lake farmhouse, on this October day in 1815, was packed with people who had generally until recent months preserved a loyalty to their local Anglican church. As Bryant concluded his message, part of his audience remained behind and urged him to form a religious society at Shebbear. Twenty-two people gave in their names, and the Bible Christian denomination was born.

William Bryant, the founder of this new movement, was born at Gunwen Farm in the Cornish parish of Luxulyan on February 6<sup>th</sup> 1778. Luxulyan is a village situated about five miles north of St Austell, and its green farmland contrasts strangely with the white China-clay tips sited a couple of miles to the west. These clay workings were first exploited during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, but tin-mining had been known in the Luxulyan area since time immemorial. William's parents, William and Thomasine Bryant, were Wesleyan Methodists who still attended the Anglican church in Luxulyan village, and so their son was baptised in this building on April 24<sup>th</sup> 1778. William Bryant senior had himself been baptised at Luxulyan church on April 14<sup>th</sup> 1733, the second son of John and Jane Bryant. John "Brian" had married Jane Udy at Luxulyan on June 21<sup>st</sup> 1730. William Bryant developed an interest in his family history later in life and he became convinced that his ancestors had migrated to Cornwall from Ireland, where they had been known as O'Bryan. He later wrote that "the tradition handed down in our family is that three brothers called O'Bryan came over from Ireland to England with Oliver Cromwell, one a general officer, the other two captains from the neighbourhood of Cork...the tradition is that two of the brothers came down into Cornwall. One went to Boconnoc, with Lord Mohun, from whom our family is descended; and that the other brother went on to Camborne, in which church the family arms were placed, a sheaf of wheat with a golden band.... Some years ago, being in the house of one of my cousins in the parish of Boconnoc, Thomas Bryant...he remarked that he had heard his father say that the O was lost." (1)

It is not the purpose of this book to dispute the truth of this claim, except to say that genealogical research is strewn with these old family legends, many of which bear little relation to the truth. The surname Bryant and its variants are quite common in Cornwall. However, William Bryant the preacher will henceforth be known by his more popular name of O'Bryan.

William's grandparents, John and Jane Bryant, were people from a comfortable strata of eighteenth century

society. William later wrote about his grandfather, "He had a farm of his own on lives, but his chief business was in tinning. Venturing as the tanners call it in stream tin works. He owned shares in three districts of tin bounds. Tin bounds are certain tracts of land, within limits of banks cast up at the four corners.... I have heard that he had two tin works which he superintended himself.... His wife was Jane Udy, sister of William Udy of Corgee, Luxulyan, by whom he had thirteen children." (1)

The baptisms of twelve children of John and Jane Bryant are shown in the Luxulyan church registers between 1731 and 1753. Their second child, William baptised in 1733, also became prosperous. O'Bryan wrote about him, "My father was sent to school, but being of a very active disposition did not like so much confinement, and preferred staying at home to work with his father and a company of men and boys...he set to work with his father's tanners and continued to follow that business for many years. When only 18 years old he was sent for to superintend or to be 'Captain of a Stream Work' near Penzance.... He also went into Devonshire following the same business. By having shares in valuable works, skilful management, careful and discreet use of money, he purchased several farms within three adjoining parishes; Luxulyan, Lanivet and Lanlivery." (1)

William Bryant senior married Thomasine Lawry at the Anglican church at Sheviock, about 25 miles east of Luxulyan, on October 19<sup>th</sup> 1772. They were both described in the register as sojourners from Luxulyan, and William was also designated as a tinner. O'Bryan wrote about his mother, "My mother's maiden name was Thomasine Lawry, daughter of John and Mary Lawry, born at Lockengate, Luxulyan, March 1738. Her mother's name was Mary Grose, daughter of John Grose, who lived in his own freehold estate called Ennis, Luxulyan. He belonged to the Society of Friends, and on the farm enclosed a burying place for the Society of Friends. I count my religious genealogy up from my mother to her grandfather Grose, the Quaker." (1)

This Quaker reference is interesting, since the Society of Friends was to become one of three religious strands that influenced the young Bible Christian church, the other two being Anglicanism and Wesleyan Methodism. O'Bryan and most of his followers felt unable to accept Quaker doctrine, but admired the Puritanical emphasis on clothes and manners advocated by the Quakers.

O'Bryan inherited his Anglicanism from his boyhood upbringing. His father took him to Luxulyan church on most Sundays, even after his conversion to Methodism, and they sat in the family pew which belonged to one of their farms. The Bryants also rented accommodation at their home to two Anglican curates surnamed Neal and Pickering. William O'Bryan became a churchwarden for a year, after his father's death. This close link between Anglicanism and Wesleyan Methodism was prevalent during the eighteenth century. John Wesley himself remained an Anglican priest until his death in 1791, and he encouraged his followers to attend their local parish church as well as their own Methodist chapel. Several Bible Christians continued to attend their Anglican church for several years after 1815. The Anglican incumbent of Bridgerule in North Devon noted approvingly in 1821, "we have a few Methodists or Bryonians (followers of a Mr Bryan) who occasionally meet in some cottage, which is often changed, whether licensed or not I cannot say. They all attend the church as the House of God and some of them more regularly than those who have no such meeting." (2)

William O'Bryan's mother, Thomasine, became a Wesleyan Methodist around 1757, apparently following the example of her two sisters, "who heard the Methodists and joined Society" (1) in the wake of John Wesley's visit to Luxulyan in August 1755. Thomasine became the housekeeper to Alexander Truscott, a Methodist shopkeeper from Bodmin, until his death, at which point she moved in with William Bryant, again as a housekeeper. She persuaded William to become a Methodist before she married him in 1772. The baptisms of their four children were recorded in the Anglican baptism registers from Luxulyan. Their daughter Jane was baptised on April 24<sup>th</sup> 1774, followed by a son called William, who was baptised on November 21<sup>st</sup> 1775. This little boy died of smallpox during January 1778. Their second son was baptised as William on April 24<sup>th</sup> 1778, and this was the child who became the founder of the Bible Christians. A younger child called Mary was baptised on April 14<sup>th</sup> 1782.

William O'Bryan later wrote that his father rented out his farms while he concentrated upon his tinning business. The family themselves lived in a rented farm called Gunwen, situated north of Luxulyan village.

This farm was ideally sited within a mile or so of the moorland where William's father ran his tin works. O'Bryan wrote, "by the side of one of the highways that bounded the farm lived two Methodists. The wife kept a day school. Here my elder sister and I were sent to learn to read of our horn book, when very young, when I was about three or four years old."<sup>(1)</sup> William O'Bryan attended two other local schools before joining a school at Fowey run by a John Jefferson. He apparently valued his education and he developed interests in painting, engraving and reading. He also spent a year learning the drapery business in St Austell, before he returned home to take over his father's work.

William Bryant senior died on March 27<sup>th</sup> 1796, aged 63 years, and he was buried in Luxulyan churchyard on March 29<sup>th</sup> 1796. His gravestone can still be seen at Luxulyan, alongside the memorial to his first son who had died in 1778. His will, undated, was proved during July 1796, and is now deposited in the Archdeaconry of Cornwall collection at the Cornwall Record Office at Truro. It is interesting to see that William senior signed his name with a mark, which appears to confirm his lack of schooling. After first bequeathing his soul to Almighty God, William provided for his wife Thomasine with an annual legacy of £12 together with their best bed and other household goods. He left parcels of land to his daughters, Jane and Mary Bryant, and he gave his son William the farm at Tredenick. He concluded with the words, "all the rest residue and remainder of goods, chattels, estates, tin works, tin pounds and effects whatsoever and wheresoever found" were to be left in trust for his three children. His wife Thomasine, his brother Joseph Bryant and Henry Udy of Luxulyan were to act as trustees. This appearance of William's brother Joseph is interesting. Joseph was baptised at Luxulyan parish church in 1750, and he was buried there during January 1811. Joseph himself left a will in which he mentioned his own children, Joseph, John, William, Elizabeth and Mary.

The other male trustee, called Henry Udy, who had appeared in William Bryant's will in 1796, was presumably connected to the family through William O'Bryan's grandmother. It was Henry Udy who attended the church court at Bodmin when this will was proved in July 1796. The value of the testator's goods was estimated at £1200 by the church court, a considerable sum for the late eighteenth century.

William Bryant's wife Thomasine did not die until April 16<sup>th</sup> 1821, when she had reached the impressive age of 84 years. She fully supported her son William in his evangelistic work, and she eventually (in 1817) went to live with O'Bryan's family at Kilkhampton in north-east Cornwall. One mark of O'Bryan's devotion to her was seen in March 1818, when he heard that she was ill. He concluded his preaching at St Neot (just south of Bodmin Moor) late at night, and he walked the approximately 40 miles back to Kilkhampton in order to see her. Thomasine died during 1821 while resident in O'Bryan's home, then situated near Launceston. She was buried at Ennis, the former Quaker graveyard within Luxulyan parish, where the Bible Christians had built a chapel.

William O'Bryan owed his earliest Christian teaching to his mother, Thomasine. He later wrote that she took him to one side, when he was young, to explain to him his need for salvation. She also taught him to pray privately at least three times a day. William believed that he finally found salvation when he was aged eleven, when he attended services led by Stephen Kessell, a Wesleyan Methodist local preacher. William started attending Methodist class meetings from this point onwards. At about this time, his father twice took him to hear John Wesley preach at St Austell, during the latter's tours throughout Cornwall between 1785 and 1789. According to some sources, John Wesley prayed over William O'Bryan with the prophetic words, "may he be a blessing to hundreds and thousands". William always maintained a great reverence for John Wesley, and he is known to have visited the great man's grave during a later visit to London.

William O'Bryan's next call to a deeper Christian commitment came in 1795, when he was still only 17 years old. He apparently spent some time alone in his room during this period, meditating on the theme, "Christ my prophet to instruct me, my priest to atone for me, and my king to reign over me." He began to take part in outreach work and invited his friends and neighbours to attend Methodist meetings. At this date, Wesleyan Methodism maintained only a slender hold on the inhabitants of Luxulyan parish, with about nine members recorded at Gunwen and a few more at Bokiddick. It was around this date (circa 1796) that William himself gave the land and built the Wesleyan chapel at Gunwen that is still in existence.

Great Britain became involved in the long wars with France in 1793, which were later known as the

Napoleonic Wars. The country was never subjected to a French invasion, of course, but the inhabitants of south-west England suffered considerably from rising food prices as well as from the depression in some local industries, such as the cloth trade. Many farmers and mine-owners, such as the Bryants, benefited considerably from rising prices for their products, but they must have been aware of the suffering among the labouring poor.

William O'Bryan encountered his next Christian milestone in 1801, after a neighbouring farmer had convinced him of the effectiveness of his outreach work among the local community. He later wrote about a vision he received at this time, of "the Lord revealing Himself as a sin-pardoning God. I then saw and felt as I had never had before. I had a view of the world lying in the arms of the wicked one, and on the verge of ruin; and Jesus at the same time able, ready and willing to save all that would come unto Him". (1) William recommenced his outreach ministry on the following Sunday, and he was almost immediately blessed with success. About 70 people within the Luxulyan area had become converted to a new life in Jesus Christ by the end of the year 1801.

William O'Bryan first met Catherine Cowlin, a girl from Perranzabuloe (a north coast parish about 20 miles west of Luxulyan), during this period in his life. Catherine was born at Perranzabuloe on May 29<sup>th</sup> 1781. She joined the local Wesleyan Methodists despite stiff parental opposition. Her devotion to her faith led her, later in life, to become a Bible Christian preacher and to write several hymns. She was married to "William Briant of Luxulyan" at Perranzabuloe church on July 9<sup>th</sup> 1803, according to the Anglican registers. Their first child, Ebenezer William, was born on December 18<sup>th</sup> 1804, and he was baptised at the Gunwen Methodist chapel on January 30<sup>th</sup> 1806. The baptism registers from this chapel, which was incorporated within the Bodmin Wesleyan circuit, had only commenced in 1804. Four other children belonging to William and Catherine O'Bryan were eventually baptised at Gunwen. Their daughter Mary (who later married Samuel Thorne) was born on April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1807 and baptised on May 17<sup>th</sup>. Their daughter Tamson was baptised on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1809, following her birth on February 19<sup>th</sup>. Their son Edin Ebenezer was born on February 25<sup>th</sup> 1811 and was baptised on May 19<sup>th</sup> 1814. Another daughter, called Catherine Cowlin, was baptised on the same day in 1814, having been born on May 27<sup>th</sup> 1813.

Two later children were baptised after William and Catherine O'Bryan had left the Wesleyan Methodists in order to found the Bible Christian denomination. The registers of the Bible Christian circuit centred upon Shebbear in Devon refer to the baptism of a daughter called Serena, born on June 16<sup>th</sup> 1819 and baptised at Baddash near Launceston on August 25<sup>th</sup> 1819. A son called Ebenezer was born on March 19<sup>th</sup> 1825. His elder brother had died in childhood, but this Ebenezer died in North America during 1863, according to the journals of his sister Mary.

William O'Bryan felt an increasing conviction to enter a full-time evangelical preaching ministry, as the months passed. The climax came in November 1808, when both William and his eldest son, Ebenezer, were struck down with what was termed "spotted fever". Ebenezer died of the disease on November 28<sup>th</sup> 1808, and his slate memorial stone can still be seen at Gunwen chapel. William apparently promised the Lord at this point that "if He would raise me up, then would I go". (1) He made a full recovery, and he set out to fulfil his vow. During July 1809 he stood in for the itinerant preacher called Joseph Womersley, while the latter was away attending the Wesleyan conference in Yorkshire. William's labours during this period met with a considerable success, culminating in the formation of a new Methodist society at Newquay and the establishment of regular preaching places at St Mawgan in Meneage, St Mabyn, St Neot and St Eval. He apparently concentrated upon visiting Cornish villages where Methodism had not previously gained a foothold, and he was able to succeed where others had failed. In 1810, William attended the Wesleyan district meeting and applied to become a full-time itinerant preacher. He was rejected, his family commitments being held up as the main argument against him. He was told to return home and to resume his former role as a part-time local preacher. This he felt unable to do, and he began to compile his own plan of preaching engagements. The affair reached a climax when William attended the Wesleyan quarterly meeting and proposed that the itineracy should only be supported by voluntary giving and not by the set weekly payments expected of every member. He was strongly opposed by the itinerant preachers and by some of the local preachers. In November 1810, one of the itinerant preachers visited Gunwen chapel to exclude William formally from membership of his Wesleyan Methodist society. It would appear harsh that this decision was put into effect inside the very chapel built by William O'Bryan

and on land donated by him.

Some other members of the Wesleyan Methodist society at Gunwen followed William O'Bryan into the wilderness, and they were formed into classes that met at William's home and elsewhere. Gunwen chapel was left, however, in the hands of the Wesleyans, to whom it still belonged until this denomination was united with the other Methodist churches during the twentieth century. William also surrendered to the Wesleyans the Methodist society that he had formed at Newquay. Instead, he concentrated upon outreach meetings within the Luxulyan area. He was still involved at this date with the business that he had inherited from his father, and the pressures of his Christian work induced him to seek helpers. His wife Catherine commenced her own preaching ministry in this way, so becoming (according to some people) the first Bible Christian female preacher. William was familiar with the Biblical arguments against women taking an active role in Christian work, but he also believed that he could not oppose what God was plainly prepared to bless.

William O'Bryan finally made the decision to devote himself to his evangelical ministry on a full-time basis during early 1814. He gave up his mining business in Luxulyan, and his wife helped to make ends meet by opening a shop at St Blazey, near St Austell. It is interesting that the year 1814 witnessed an outbreak of Christian revival within Cornwall, with which William was involved. His daughter Mary later wrote that her father was called to Redruth during this period, to help the Wesleyan Methodists in that part of west Cornwall. Apparently, William returned from Redruth with a renewed desire to evangelise in "dark and destitute parts of the country as Providence might open the way." (3)

William O'Bryan was able to establish a temporary truce with the Wesleyans during 1814, due to the endeavours of the new superintendent minister of the St Austell circuit, James Odgers. William's independent Methodist societies were incorporated within two Wesleyan circuits, leaving him free to seek an evangelical ministry elsewhere.

So it was that in January 1815, William O'Bryan commenced a tour of the Wesleyan societies in the Stratton mission based in north-east Cornwall and a few parishes in west Devon. He assisted William Sutcliffe, the mission's Wesleyan itinerant, who was over-stretched and in dire need of help. During this period William O'Bryan was even able to preach at Dartmoor Prison, which was still functioning in its initial role as a prisoner-of-war camp. Dartmoor Prison had first been opened in 1806, but the last French prisoners were sent home during 1814. War with the United States of America in 1812, however, led to the incarceration of about 1700 Americans in this prison, who were not released until February 1816. It was therefore to these American prisoners that William was permitted to direct his evangelical message during early 1815.

William O'Bryan first learnt of the existence during early 1815 of a group of rural parishes near Shebbear in north-west Devon that had not yet received any Methodist preaching. William O'Bryan returned to Devon in May 1815. Among the places visited were Milton Damerel, Sheepwash, Bradford and Cookbury. He apparently avoided visiting Shebbear at this point after hearing reports of the lively Christian ministry exercised by the Anglican curate, Daniel Evans. His plan to evangelise in this area met opposition from the Wesleyan itinerant preacher based at Stratton but William returned to Cornwall in mid 1815 in order to raise money to support his Devon campaign. At the same time, the Wesleyan superintendent minister at St Austell withdrew William's recently regained Wesleyan membership on the grounds that William had not attended his class at St Blazey for the previous three weeks.

Motivated by his 'imperious duty' William O'Bryan set out once again for North Devon on 15<sup>th</sup> July. His labours met with such success on the way that he did not arrive at Milton Damerel until 7<sup>th</sup> August. He preached his way through the parishes of Cookbury, Bradford, Sheepwash, Northlew, Milton Damerel, Holsworthy and Pyworthy. On Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> August both William O'Bryan and Mrs O'Bryan spoke on Warbstow Burrow to a large number of people. They were, however, compelled to return home, which they reached on 23<sup>rd</sup> August.

William O'Bryan returned to Devon in October 1815. By this time his activities were being strongly opposed by the itinerant Wesleyan preacher at Stratton, George Banwell. William did retain a few

supporters within the Stratton mission, however, notably Richard Spettigue, who served as the circuit steward. After an attempt at reconciliation, Spettigue and others declared their support for William O'Bryan and separated themselves from the Wesleyans. William in the meantime continued his roving ministry by visiting the Cornish parish of Week St Mary on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1815. The infuriated George Banwell followed in his wake and, finding that the society at Week St Mary supported William, tore up their membership roll.

It is possible that William O'Bryan's final separation from the Wesleyan Methodists was partly caused by his strong personality creating resentment among the itinerant Wesleyan preachers. It was, after all, William's autocratic behaviour that ensured his later separation from his own Bible Christian denomination. George Banwell, who had so strongly opposed William in 1815, eventually met with a degree of success in his own ministry, and he succeeded in building up the Wesleyan membership within the Stratton district from 214 people in 1815 to 480 by 1817. However, William's strength of character was perhaps necessary for someone acting in such a pioneering ministry. He certainly compensated for his failings by his dedication to his work. James Thorne later wrote about him, "the difference between Mr Bryant and the Methodists was made known to me, but I always thought Mr Bryant to be a man of God, and this sufficed for me. I went on a tour with Mr Bryant through his circuit, and observing his behaviour I was more and more convinced that his cause was of God." (4)

Some historians have argued that the foundation of the Bible Christian denomination can be dated to October 1<sup>st</sup> 1815, when George Banwell tore up the membership roll of the Wesleyan society at Week St Mary in Cornwall. However, more recently, the day of October 9<sup>th</sup> 1815 when William O'Bryan preached at Lake farm in Shebbear, is seen as being the birthday of the Bible Christians. This is partly because of the later prominence within this denomination of James Thorne and his brother Samuel. James Thorne had first met William O'Bryan at Cookbury, near Shebbear, before William's final separation from the Wesleyans. He met him again on October 5<sup>th</sup> 1815, when William was revisiting Cookbury. James Thorne invited William to preach at his father's farmhouse at Lake, near Shebbear village. William preached at Langtree, north of Shebbear, on October 8<sup>th</sup>, before he returned to Lake with James Thorne and his older brother John. On the following day, October 9<sup>th</sup>, William preached at the meeting described at the beginning of this chapter. He afterwards formed the society that was seen in the future as being the first within the Bible Christian denomination.

(1): *William O'Bryan, Founder of the Bible Christians*, S.L.Thorne, 1878.

(2): *The Diocese of Exeter in 1821*, Michael Cook (editor), DCRS publication, 1960, page 33.

(3): *Bible Christian Magazine*, August 1904.

(4): *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, page 20.

## Chapter Two

### **THE THORNE FAMILY OF SHEBBEAR**

William O'Bryan was the Cornish preacher who founded the Bible Christian denomination in October 1815, but his place as the leader of this church was eventually taken by James Thorne, the son of John and Mary Thorne of Lake Farm in the north Devon parish of Shebbear. John Thorne, James' father, was born in 1762, and he was baptised on May 12<sup>th</sup> 1762 at Langtree parish church, the son of John and Agnes Thorne. John senior died soon after the birth of his son, and John junior was raised by his mother, Agnes Thorne, who was herself buried at Shebbear parish church in 1806. We know that John Thorne junior had moved to Shebbear by 1789, because "John Thorn of Shebbear" was married to Mary Ley at the nearby church of Bradford on July 15<sup>th</sup> of that year. Mary was the daughter of Samuel and Mary Ley of Rightadown Farm within Bradford parish, and she was baptised at the local church on October 17<sup>th</sup> 1760.

John and Mary Thorne made their first home within Shebbear parish at North Furze Farm. Four of their children were baptised at Shebbear parish church, Mary on November 5<sup>th</sup> 1790, John on March 14<sup>th</sup> 1793, James on November 17<sup>th</sup> 1795, and Susanna on January 21<sup>st</sup> 1801. Their youngest son, Samuel, was born at Shebbear on June 9<sup>th</sup> 1798, but there is no record of his baptism at Shebbear church.

James Thorne was himself born at North Furze Farm within Shebbear parish on September 21<sup>st</sup> 1795. He was brought up on his father's farm, and he attended a school at Langtree in company with his brothers. His family moved to Lake Farm, just east of Shebbear village, during 1809 or 1810. James later referred to his father, John Thorne, with the words, "he conducted his business with so much punctuality and exactness, that he obtained the character of an honest upright man all through the long period of his life." (1) John Thorne was apparently an enterprising and inventive farmer, allegedly being the first man in the parish to use wheeled carriages for agricultural work. Wheeled vehicles were little used in rural North Devon until the nineteenth century, because the narrow and muddy farm lanes made all but the use of pack-horses impracticable.

John Thorne played a full part in the affairs of the parish of Shebbear. He was overseer of the poor in 1811, in which role he helped to administer parish relief for local paupers. Also in 1811, he took on a poor child called Mary Huxtable, to work on his farm as a parish apprentice. It is interesting to see that Samuel Thorne, John's youngest son, undertook the same responsibility for a parish apprentice at Shebbear in 1840, when Isaac Smale came to work with him.

John and Mary Thorne both appeared at Lake Farm at the time of the 1841 census, the first English census to name individuals. Their youngest daughter, Susanna, was still living with them at this date, as an unmarried woman of about 40 years in age.

John Thorne gave his full support to the ministry of William O'Bryan. He donated the land for Lake chapel, built in 1817, although he did not withdraw his attendance at the parish church until this same year, after the departure of Daniel Evans as curate at Shebbear. John Thorne was known in the locality for his kindness and honesty, and he made a practice of visiting the sick. He also devoted much time to private devotions inside Lake chapel, "where he poured out his soul in fervent prayer for himself and others, and for the revival of the work of God." (2) He died on December 10<sup>th</sup> 1842, and his passing was recorded by his daughter-in-law Mary in her journals. Mary Thorne wrote, "my husband's dear old father, John Thorne, was taken ill of typhus fever and died. Mrs Thorne survived him about seven weeks and departed very calmly. It may be truly said of them both that they fell asleep in Jesus." (3) John and Mary were both

buried in the chapel graveyard at Lake. A copy of John's will, written on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1842, can still be seen in the Estate Duty collection at the Devon Record Office. He left "my freehold estate of Lake except the premises commonly called Prospect Place and all the Plantations adjoining growing on and being part of a field commonly called Calves Close and another field commonly called Clover Close" to his wife Mary, to be succeeded by his eldest son John after her death. John senior also left £50 to his eldest daughter Mary, who had married William Pett at Shebbear church on November 17<sup>th</sup> 1814. He left his household furniture (after his wife's death) to his youngest daughter Susanna, and his "goods and credits" to his youngest son Samuel. His middle son, who was styled in the will as "James Thorne minister Bideford", was only left with five shillings.

John Thorne's wife, Mary, also played a pivotal role in the early development of the Bible Christian denomination. Her father, Samuel Ley, had apparently maintained an interest in Methodism long before the arrival of William O'Bryan to north-west Devon, having travelled as far as Tavistock to hear the preaching of Wesleyan ministers. Mary no doubt inherited some of her religious zeal from him. Like Thomasine Bryant, Mary's Christian instruction of her children was to bear much fruit in future years. Mary became an enthusiastic supporter of the Bible Christians in her later life, and once she made a preaching tour that lasted for several weeks. She described this episode in a letter written to her son James in June 1820. She reported how a stone was thrown at her and cut her cheek while she was preaching in the open air at Black Torrington, only a few miles from Shebbear.(4) She died on January 27<sup>th</sup> 1843.

John Thorne junior, John and Mary's eldest son, has not enjoyed the fame of his younger brothers, James and Samuel. He obviously held strong Christian inclinations at an early age since he accompanied his brother James to hear William O'Bryan preach at Cookbury on August 17<sup>th</sup> 1815. He also joined the first Bible Christian society at Lake in company with his parents, brothers and sisters. James Thorne often referred to his brother John in his journals, and the two of them obviously maintained a close relationship. John quite often left his farmwork at Lake in order to meet James with a spare horse, to facilitate James' travels around Devon and Cornwall.

John Thorne married Frances daughter of John and Ann Adams at Morwenstow in north-east Cornwall on April 12<sup>th</sup> 1825. Six of their children were baptised at Lake Chapel, Mary Ann Adams who was born on February 8<sup>th</sup> 1826, Fanny born February 17<sup>th</sup> 1829, Eliza born January 25<sup>th</sup> 1831, John born August 17<sup>th</sup> 1832, Susan born June 10<sup>th</sup> 1834 and Elizabeth Adams born July 16<sup>th</sup> 1837. John became treasurer of the Bible Christian Missionary Society during the early 1820s, and generally played a quiet and modest role in the affairs of the infant denomination.

Mary Thorne, his sister-in-law, recorded in her journals that John left Shebbear with his family during 1838 to take on a tenant farm at Broadwoodwidge in west Devon. She also stated that "while residing at Broadwoodwidge, chiefly through Mr John Thorne, a chapel was built and a Society formed there". (5) Another child was born to John and Frances during their time at Broadwoodwidge. The baptisms registers of Launceston Bible Christian circuit refer to the baptism on August 27<sup>th</sup> 1843 of "Samuel son of John and Frances Thorne of Broadwoodwidge, yeoman".

John Thorne was left with the ownership of Lake Farm after his mother's death in 1843, but he never returned to live at Shebbear. Mary Thorne recorded in her journals on March 18<sup>th</sup> 1845 that "my husband's brother John is preparing to go to America". (5) John Thorne and his family sailed to Canada on April 11<sup>th</sup> 1845, where he continued to fully support Bible Christian missionary work. He died at Bowmanville in Canada on March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1861, followed by his wife Frances on August 19<sup>th</sup> 1863.

More will be written about Samuel, the youngest son of John and Mary Thorne, at a later stage in this book, but a brief reference can be made to him here. He became a Bible Christian minister for a few years, but his chief claim to fame was his establishment in 1823 of a printing business at Stoke Damerel in Plymouth, which was later transferred to Shebbear. He became responsible for the production of hymnbooks, circuit plans, Bible Christian magazines and some of the early histories of the denomination.

The Anglican registers from Stoke Damerel record that on November 28<sup>th</sup> 1825 "Samuel Thorne printer" married "Mary O'Bryan of Rame, Cornwall, spinster". This Mary was, of course, the eldest daughter of

William O'Bryan, herself well known by this date as a Bible Christian preacher. William O'Bryan signed his name in the register as a witness to the marriage. Perhaps it should be added here that, until 1837, all Nonconformists (except Quakers and Jews) had to be married inside Anglican churches.

Samuel and Mary Thorne produced two children during their sojourn at Plymouth. A son John was born on October 15<sup>th</sup> 1826 while a daughter Mary Ley was born on June 14<sup>th</sup> 1828. The baptisms of both children appeared within the registers of the Bible Christian Devonport circuit. This couple then had another seven children who were baptised at Lake chapel in Shebbear, Samuel Ley born March 24<sup>th</sup> 1830, James born February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1832, Thomazine born December 4<sup>th</sup> 1833, Ebenezer born December 23<sup>rd</sup> 1835, Susanna baptised December 24<sup>th</sup> 1837, Serena baptised November 27<sup>th</sup> 1842 and Paul baptised November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1846. They also had another two children, William born 1840 and Eden Angelina born 1849, who were recorded in the 1851 census but who were not baptised within the Shebbear circuit. Their eldest son John died in 1847, but their second son, Samuel Ley Thorne, became a notable Bible Christian minister.

Samuel Thorne took over the running of Lake Farm after the departure of his elder brother John to Broadwoodwider. The extent of Lake Farm was given in the Shebbear Tithes Apportionment dated July 11<sup>th</sup> 1846, a copy of which is deposited in the Devon Record Office. Samuel Thorne was recorded in this document as the freeholder of the two properties called Lake (about 72 acres) and Prospect (about 2 acres). He was also listed as the tenant of another 19 acres of arable known as "Part of Churchland". Prospect consisted of a house and yard, a garden, meadow and two plantations of firtrees. The house had originally been built by Samuel Thorne as a base for his printing business, and it was here that he and his wife Mary founded a school that later became Shebbear College. The development of this school will be discussed in a later chapter.

Lake Farm was itself recorded in the Shebbear Tithes Apportionment of 1846 with sixteen arable fields, an orchard, a garden, a meadow and a plantation of firtrees. Lake chapel also appeared as part of this property. The two fields that were specifically mentioned in the will of John Thorne senior in 1842 (Clover Close and Calves Close) were described in 1846 as two arable fields on Lake Farm.

James Thorne, the second son of John and Mary Thorne, was married at Shoreditch on September 15<sup>th</sup> 1823 to Catherine Reed, during his preaching tour of Kent at that date. Catherine was the daughter of William and Catherine Reed of Holwell Farm in the parish of Buckland Brewer, north of Shebbear. Holwell Farm, like Lake, became another bastion in the early history of the Bible Christians. Catherine's brother, William Reed, became an outstanding Bible Christian preacher, while Catherine herself served in the same capacity until her marriage to James Thorne. James referred to his marriage during 1823 in his journals, when he wrote that "I could not but reflect on the providence of God which has brought us together. For years I have waited on the Lord about this union, and He has so brought it about that every circumstance has proved favourable". (6)

The first child of James and Catherine Thorne, called James, was born in Kent on December 16<sup>th</sup> 1824. Another five children were baptised within the Shebbear circuit in Devon (Catherine born October 28<sup>th</sup> 1826 and baptised at Holwell, Mary born June 20<sup>th</sup> 1829 and baptised at Langtree, Susanna born February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1832 and baptised at Langtree, William Reed born January 8<sup>th</sup> 1835 and baptised at Langtree, and John who was baptised at Langtree on May 6<sup>th</sup> 1838).

James Thorne's spiritual heart-searching apparently commenced long before William O'Bryan had appeared in the neighbourhood. He was confirmed into the Anglican faith at Great Torrington church on August 10<sup>th</sup> 1812. In his memoirs it is recorded how he 'received the hand of the Bishop...but did not receive the Holy Ghost'. (7) His response was, "Oh! No, this institution, be it ever so Apostolic, took no effect on me whatever" (7).

The next step in James' spiritual journey came after the appointment of Daniel Evans at Shebbear church during early 1813. A curate served this church during this period because the absentee vicar was resident at Helston in Cornwall. Like the rest of his family, James was fascinated by Evans' fervent Calvinistic preaching. Daniel Evans was a clergyman from an Evangelical background, in sympathy with the Methodist revival that had swept through England during the previous century. He was also a friend of the

renowned Cradock Glascott, the Anglican incumbent at the nearby parish of Hatherleigh. Glascott had once been a Countess of Huntingdon preacher and a Calvinistic Methodist. His father had been a friend of John Wesley. Glascott served as vicar of Hatherleigh between 1781 and his death in 1831. A monument to his memory can still be seen on the south wall of Hatherleigh church.

The preaching of Daniel Evans helped to awaken the Thorne family and other members of his congregation to their need for a personal salvation. It was also when he invited Cradock Glascott to conduct a service at Shebbear that Mary Thorne, the mother to James, was finally able to “believe with her heart unto righteousness” and to find her “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”.(8) It was this discovery that led her to stand up in church one Sunday and to declare to the congregation that “the blessed Spirit of the Lord hath convinced me what a hell-deserving sinner I have been. The Lord hath forgiven all my sins, and the blessed Spirit hath given me the witness of it. The blessed Spirit is ready to witness the same blessing to all present if they will but seek it”.(8)

James Thorne, in company with other Bible Christians and Wesleyan Methodists, was later to reject the Calvinistic theology advocated by Daniel Evans. Indeed, William O’Bryan pointedly referred to his denomination as the “Arminian Bible Christians” because of his dislike of Calvinism. He believed that Jesus Christ was willing to save anyone who came to Him in simple faith, as opposed to the Calvinist line that salvation was restricted to the predestined elect. The Thornes and others, however, maintained a debt of gratitude to Daniel Evans for his role in the formation of the young Bible Christian church. Daniel Evans attended the second meeting of the first Bible Christian society at Lake, and he was so impressed with the words of William O’Bryan that he described himself as a John the Baptist figure who had prepared the way for a greater worker in the harvest field.

An unorthodox curate such as Daniel Evans, who did not enjoy the independence of a vicar or rector, was not likely to escape the attentions of the Bishop of Exeter for very long. The episcopal axe fell during 1817, when Daniel Evans was obliged to answer charges of preaching in private houses, of using Wesleyan hymns inside church and of listening to Methodist sermons. The bishop withdrew Evans’ license to preach in the Exeter diocese, and the latter was obliged to leave Shebbear. James Thorne referred in his journals on August 13<sup>th</sup> 1817 to the departure of Daniel Evans. He wrote “this morning I took my leave of Mr Evans, who is going to be removed from Shebbear for preaching the Gospel. O what a cruel thing...Mr Evans and I had a dispute on Calvinism, but it was in love, and we parted friends”.(9) Daniel Evans moved to Sherborne in Dorset, where he served as curate until 1821. He eventually became rector of East Lydford in Somerset, before moving to Cornwall where he became vicar of St Keverne. He died on April 5<sup>th</sup> 1854 and lies buried at Talland in Cornwall.

The Christian development of James Thorne continued before the arrival of William O’Bryan at Shebbear. He joined the church choir and taught in the Sunday school, but he was unable to find the peace with God that he craved. It was in this state of personal anguish that he accompanied his brother John to listen to O’Bryan’s preaching at Cookbury on August 17<sup>th</sup> 1815. James later wrote, “Mr Bryant’s text was the barren fig-tree. I thought that was my character. I could not weep though I desired to do so”.(10)

It was O’Bryan’s preaching after the Cookbury visit that enabled James Thorne to finally find his peace with his Creator. James joined the first Bible Christian society at Shebbear on October 9<sup>th</sup>. He reported after the second meeting of this society a fortnight later that “I was so filled with love that I had a longing desire to run to the ends of the earth”.(10) Some time later he wrote, “my love for souls daily increased, and at the same time I cared not for anything in this world. I saw its vanity, and all my desire was to get holiness myself and promote it among others...I thought more and more about speaking to the people and that nothing was worth living for that did not tend to promote the cause of God”.(11)

James Thorne believed that he had a strong call to follow William O’Bryan into a full-time ministry. He preached his first sermon at Lake on Christmas Day in 1815. He prepared for this experience by spending the whole of the preceding night in prayer. His text was, “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” James was overcome by a sense of failure after he had finished his sermon, and felt that he had no proper calling to the ministry. However, William O’Bryan thought otherwise. James attended the first quarterly meeting of the new denomination at Holsworthy on January

1<sup>st</sup> 1816, and his name was put on the preaching plan. He began leading several meetings each week, and studied the Bible. He commenced a full-time preaching ministry on March 15<sup>th</sup> 1816. So it was that James Thorne became, with William O'Bryan, a leading figure in the Bible Christian revival that broke out in Devon and Cornwall during 1816.

- (1): *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, page 4.
- (2): *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, page 6.
- (3): *The Maiden Preacher*, S.L. Thorne 1889, page 125.
- (4): *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, page 11.
- (5): *The Maiden Preacher*, S.L. Thorne 1889, page 126.
- (6): *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, page 190.
- (7): *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, page 17
- (8) *The Bible Christians, Their Origins and History*,  
F.W. Bourne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1905, page 12.
- (9): *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, page 71.
- (10): *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, page 19.
- (11): *James Thorne*, F.W. Bourne 1895, page 29.

## Chapter Three

### THE YEARS OF REVIVAL

The Christian concept of revival can be portrayed as an out-pouring of the Holy Spirit upon a specific area. This phenomenon has been witnessed several times during recent centuries in different parts of the world. At the centre of every revival exists a group of strongly dedicated Christians, who are so surrendered to the will of God that they are prepared to obey every divine instruction. Revival always commences in the hearts of such dedicated Christians, as emphasised by Edwin Orr in his hymn:

“O Holy Ghost, revival comes from thee;  
Send a revival - start the work in me.”

Yonggi Cho, a Christian pastor in South Korea, has stressed four conditions seen in most revivals. They are the importance of prayer, a sense of humbleness among the Christian leaders, unlimited faith, and the full utilisation of women in Christian ministry. These four principals were certainly evident in the Bible Christian revival that swept through Devon and Cornwall during the period between 1816 and 1826. This revival was probably concluded after 1826 as a result of the crisis that affected the Bible Christian leadership, the crisis that eventually resulted in the departure of William O’ Bryan.

Any reader of the journals of James Thorne will be impressed by the complete dedication of the small band of Christians that gathered around William O’ Bryan during the winter of 1815 and 1816. The spiritual development of James Thorne has already been mentioned, but this small movement also depended upon the support of a larger group of lay people. The Reeds of Holwell Farm in the parish of Buckland Brewer, the Rattenburys of Milton Mill in the parish of Milton Damerel, the Cottles of West Youlstone in the parish of Bradworthy and the Courtices of Winslade Farm in the parish of East Putford were among the yeomen families that surrendered their time and money to support the infant cause. Hatton Rattenbury was appointed on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1816 as one of the first two circuit stewards, in partnership with Richard Spettigue, who was mentioned earlier. Several of the sons and daughters of these families became the first itinerant preachers, while others acted on a part-time basis. The support of these yeomen families for the early Bible Christian church was crucial during a period when the use of a local and respected name could open doors that otherwise would have remained firmly closed. Some writers have referred to the Bible Christians as the denomination of the rural labourers in south-west England, but the movement was led from its earliest years by a body of dedicated yeomen farmers.

William O’ Bryan’s young church was originally known as the Bryanites or by other variations of O’ Bryan’s surname. William himself, however, preferred the title “Arminian Bible Christians”, which was eventually shortened to “Bible Christians”. Apparently, William O’ Bryan was first informed that his followers were known as the Bible Christians, presumably as a term of disparagement, in August 1816. Mary Thorne wrote in her journals during 1862, “Mr Hodge of St Austell spoke of our people calling themselves Bible Christians. I was led to say something of the early days of our connexion, of the scarcity of literature besides the Bible - of their arguing from that book, being thence called ‘Bible men’ or ‘Bible people’ and finally ‘Bible Christians’.”(1)

The Bible Christians were organised on the model of the Wesleyan Methodists. They accepted virtually all of the doctrines first propounded by John Wesley, and they incorporated into their organisation most Methodist institutions such as class meetings, membership tickets, societies, circuits, quarterly meetings, and an itinerant ministry of full-time preachers who met every year at an annual conference. James Thorne

wrote in July 1857, in a report that appeared in the “North Devon Journal”, that in “matters of doctrine there is no distinction between Bible Christians and the old body” of Wesleyan Methodists. The Bible Christians liked to emphasise, in contrast to other movements that had seceded from the parent body during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that they had recruited their earliest members from among nominal Anglicans and not from former Wesleyans. This was probably true in the case of Devon, but several Cornish Wesleyans joined the Bible Christians during the first few years after 1815.

James Thorne stated in his journals that the Bible Christian revival broke out during October 1816. He was probably familiar with the concept of Christian revival because of his knowledge of the Methodist revival in west Cornwall during 1814. He wrote in his journals on August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1817 that he had “read extracts from Mr Truscott’s letters on the Revival at Redruth from the Methodist Magazine for 1814”.(2) He later referred to the period in North Devon during October 1816 when “a very gracious revival followed, insomuch that from place to place, night after night, persons were found crying aloud for mercy, and many were added to the churches. It was no uncommon thing for persons to be converted the first time they attended the meetings”.(3)

The full flavour of this Bible Christian revival can only really be savoured by quoting complete sections from the journals of James Thorne, as follows:

Nov 3<sup>rd</sup> 1816: I have had a good week. Monday at Bradworthy the people were crying for mercy. Tuesday at Hutsford one found peace. Wednesday at Crinham all were stirred up; some future day it will spring forth. Thursday at Milford we had a good meeting; in the evening at Tossbury the fire broke out. Some found that Jesus hath died that we might live. Friday at Ford the Lord was present; one who I was informed came in to gaze felt the power of the Lord; she cried aloud for mercy and found it. Saturday at Clovelly it seemed as though the people had been stones. A good order is kept, but what is this without feeling? This morning at Bucks there was a shaking; many wet eyes. I exhorted them not to spend their Sabbath at their fishing concerns. Oh when shall Sabbath breaking come to an end for ever! At Putford there was a shaking among dry bones; many were crying for pardon, and some had it revealed unto them....” (4)

“Dec 25<sup>th</sup>: At Milton Mill I felt the Lord present as I entered the room, but could scarcely speak, I was so hoarse. I prayed; we had a shout; a friend or two prayed, and I spoke from “Wherefore He is able to save to the uttermost” etc. I had not spoken long before I was hindered by the cries of the people. After a while we dismissed the congregation and began the lovefeast. I spoke of the goodness of God to me, and another began, but was stopped by the cries of the people. We were almost weary, many having stayed up most of the night before. I had but two hours’ sleep myself. We dismissed the people about three in the morning, and continued to pray with the distressed. About five, having refreshed ourselves, I was going to rest. One was there who had been in great agonies, but was worn down with much crying and struggling. I thought we would pray, but the temptation many times presented itself that we had been praying all night, and I had to be the next day at Bradford at two in the afternoon. At last I overcame, we prayed, and the penitent found peace with three more. I went to bed about seven...”. (5)

James Thorne believed that this revival reached its climax at the fifth quarterly meeting that gathered at Alsworthy near Bradworthy on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1817. He wrote that in the evening “a lovefeast was commenced; but only a few had related their Christian experience before persons were in distress in every part of the large crowded barn; and James Thorne, Edmund Warne, Harry Major, William Mason, Elizabeth Dart and others, besides Mr O’ Bryan, were praying and conversing with the penitents for many hours. Scores of people were on their knees at a time, so that the preachers and praying friends had enough to do to instruct and pray with them.” (6) The meeting did not finally end until the afternoon of the next day, by which point “about fifty persons had found peace with God”.(6)

James Thorne later compared this Bible Christian revival with the movement of the Holy Spirit that swept through England during the early itinerancy of John Wesley. He wrote on January 29<sup>th</sup> 1819 that “reading Mr Wesley’s Journals was a blessing to me. I clearly see in reading of the work recorded in Journal 3<sup>rd</sup>, for 1739, that the same Spirit has been poured out on our neighbourhood for the last three years”.(7)

There were many signs of revival that can be noted in the movement that progressed through Devon and

Cornwall between 1816 and 1826. One sign was the overwhelming desire for holiness (usually called sanctification by the Bible Christians) among committed members as well as the search for salvation among non-Christians. This was a common trend in the Bible Christian revival, since James Thorne referred almost as much to his Christian friends seeking sanctification as to the unregenerate finding salvation. Another sign of revival was the presence of Pentecostal power, with conversions. Even people beyond earshot of the preachers sometimes discovered in themselves a desire to make their peace with God. An impromptu revivalist meeting that broke out on the open roads at Langdon one night was heard by people in the surrounding villages and many turned out to take part. One farmer heard the noise about a mile away and apparently experienced conversion without ever joining the distant meeting.

Probably the best example of this spontaneous desire for salvation was that of Johanna Brooks, an Anglican churchgoer from Morwenstow in north-east Cornwall. Her discovery, during the winter of 1815-16, of an assurance of her salvation led her, like Mary Thorne at Shebbear, to stand up in church one Sunday to witness to the change in her life. She was obliged to leave the building but persisted in encouraging Christian growth among her friends and neighbours. Eventually William O'Bryan heard of her story and visited her at Morwenstow on February 7<sup>th</sup> 1816. This led to Johanna Brooks becoming a female preacher for the Bible Christians within her home area.

The presence of the Lord was apparently so evident in the Bible Christian revival that individuals and sometimes whole congregations found themselves behaving in an abnormal manner. People sometimes fell on the floor unconscious or collapsed in tears as the Gospel was being proclaimed. The preaching of John Wesley and George Whitefield had sometimes coincided with these phenomena during the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was very similar, perhaps, to events that have occurred during Pentecostal and Charismatic worship during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This cannot be explained away as mass hysteria, since this behaviour sometimes gripped the most ardent critics of these outbursts. James Thorne recorded in his journals on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1823 a reference to Timothy Burt, a Quaker, "who had been wishing to know how and why our people make such a noise, while I was giving out the second hymn lifted up his hands, cried out lustily, and fell to the floor. I was rejoiced to see my Quaker friend going through the experience."(8) Timothy Burt later served as a Bible Christian preacher on the Scilly Isles and in other parts of Cornwall.

The growth of the Bible Christian movement amid the excitement of this revival aroused fears among employers and those responsible for law and order. James Thorne and other preachers were constantly bothered by parish officials asking to see their licences to preach. James Thorne, who was thoroughly acquainted with his position in the eyes of the law, usually refused to show his licence except to a magistrate. William O'Bryan and James Thorne both obtained their licences on March 11<sup>th</sup> 1817, when they took an oath of allegiance before John Inglett Fortescue JP.

Parish officials sometimes tried to deter the paupers in their area from attending Bible Christian meetings by withholding poor relief. One old woman from Beaford in North Devon, named Mary Lock, was threatened with this punishment but, helped by donations from her Christian friends, she attended the Quarter Sessions at Exeter to plead her case. The magistrates took her side and ordered the Beaford authorities to pay all arrears and to raise her weekly benefits from 1/3d to two shillings!

The worst persecution was probably the physical threats and attacks made against Bible Christian preachers by local mobs. Herds of farm animals, whether bullocks or pigs, were sometimes driven into the crowd attending an open-air preaching meeting. Rotten eggs and other missiles were occasionally thrown. James Thorne recorded in his journals on Easter Day 1817 that, "at noon I intended preaching at Langtree, but after I had done praying they began throwing stones, clods, dirt and eggs at a great rate, and to halloo at me, so that I could not proceed....I found they could not strike me, though many stones and eggs passed within a few inches of me."(9) Threats were occasionally made against the lives of the preachers. James Thorne recorded passing through Holsworthy on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1817 where "I was hooted after by a great number of people...amongst other cries I heard, 'Bring here thy brother Bryan, and we'll hang him up here'."(10)

Occasionally, some of the persecutors came to see the error of their ways and joined the ranks of those seeking conversion. One classic example was that of Mr Lee of Shebbear who attended a Bible Christian meeting in order to gather evidence for an indictment against the Bible Christians to be presented to

Quarter Sessions. While at the meeting, “he was seized with deep convictions of sin, and in bitter distress of soul declared he could find nothing to present to the Sessions.”(11)

Yonggi Cho, the South Korean revivalist mentioned before, referred to the proper utilisation of women as being one aspect of revival. This was certainly the case with the Bible Christian movement. Despite initial misgivings, William O’Bryan and James Thorne soon realised that several of their younger female converts had a strong call to follow them into the itinerant ministry. Usually designated as ‘helpers’, these women sometimes became pioneers opening up new circuits on the Isle of Wight, the Channel Islands, and the Scilly Isles and in Northumberland and London. Their preaching was often anointed with success, since some of their listeners, who had been attracted by the novelty of female preachers, became convicted by their message. The first of these women itinerants was Elizabeth Dart, a former Wesleyan from Poundstock in Cornwall. She eventually married John Hicks Eynon, a minister who established a pioneer work in Canada. Apparently many of her generation believed her to be the finest Bible Christian missionary ever sent to Canada. Other early female itinerants were Mary Ann Werrey, Mary Toms and Mary O’Bryan, the daughter of William O’Bryan. Mary Ann Werrey was the pioneer to the Scilly Isles, the Channel Islands and Northumberland.

The attitude of James Thorne towards his female colleagues can be discerned from his journals. On October 5<sup>th</sup> 1817 he wrote, “Sister Ashman spoke at Lake from ‘Acquaint thyself now with Him, and be at peace.’ A very good discourse; I query whether these men who speak against women preaching could exceed it.”(12)

Female preachers were very much an integral part of the early revival years in the history of the Bible Christian church. Later they were dropped but re-appeared towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the early women itinerants eventually married their male colleagues, this being a policy encouraged by Conference. Few came forward to take their place and so their numbers soon dwindled. In 1826 there were 27 female itinerants, but by 1834 only 8 remained. Many modern readers may wonder at the significance of the use of these female preachers, but the sheer novelty of their appearance should be remembered when contrasted against the attitudes of the age which confined most women to their homes or to the most menial of agricultural or industrial employment.

The greatest sign of revival, however, must be seen in the rapid growth of the Bible Christian church. Membership figures show a constant rise during this whole period, from the few score recorded in the autumn of 1815 to the 237 members numbered at the first quarterly meeting on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1816. Of these, 25 were from Week St Mary, 38 from Hex and Langdon, 46 from Poundstock, 6 from Marhamchurch, 18 from Bridgerule, 12 from Pyworthy, 8 from Holsworthy, 28 from Milton Damerel, 16 from Bradford, 10 from Shurnick and 30 from Shebbear. These numbers had increased to 412 members by April 5<sup>th</sup> 1816, and then to 496 by July 1<sup>st</sup> 1816. This figure had reached 567 by October 17<sup>th</sup> 1816, followed by a rapid rise to 920 members by January 1<sup>st</sup> 1817.

This last expansion occurred during the outbreak of the revival as noted by James Thorne in his journals. The membership totals continued to rise during successive years as the movement spread to other parts of the South West and then eastwards into Somerset and beyond during and after 1820. There were 5,050 members by 1823, and the first peak was reached in 1828 when 7,845 members were recorded. Thereafter the movement registered its first decline in membership as it passed through the agonising separation crisis that will be the subject of a later chapter. Eventually, the membership figures again began to increase until, by the date of the 1907 union, they amounted to a total of 32,202 people.

Much of this early expansion occurred within Cornwall, where membership figures were boosted by the amalgamation during 1817 between John Boyle’s Connection and the Bible Christians. John Boyle was a Wesleyan itinerant who resigned from the ministry in 1802 to settle near Truro. He conducted preaching campaigns in the Truro area and several societies were formed. Boyle retired in 1817 and his followers amalgamated themselves with the Bible Christians. Before this union, the Bible Christians had generally confined themselves to north-west Devon and east Cornwall, but they now gained a valuable foothold in west Cornwall. A new circuit was opened at Truro in addition to the two circuits formed at Shebbear and Kilkhampton and the mission at St Neot earlier in 1817. A membership of 223 was given for the Truro

circuit in December 1817, as compared with 224 at St Neot. 520 at Kilkhampton and 555 at Shebbear.

It should be stressed that these membership figures do not reflect the actual size of the Bible Christian movement, since church members usually formed a minority of the numbers that regularly attended Bible Christian worship. Many of the participants only became members after a lengthy trial period, while some people probably never sought membership. Rev Thomas Shaw, in his useful booklet on the 1851 Ecclesiastical Census (13), has shown that Methodist membership at this date needs to be multiplied by about three in order to gain a true figure of regular worshippers.

Finally, the ultimate test of revival must be that the movement born out of revival does survive for more than just a few years. James Thorne recorded in July 1819 a prediction made by one Wesleyan preacher, “that within three months they would see an alteration. And within twelve months O’ Bryan’s cause would surely fall.” (14) The Bible Christian church was, of course, to survive as a separate denomination until 1907, so it certainly did stand the test of time.

- (1) : *The Maiden Preacher* S.L. Thorne, p. 145.
- (2) : *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p. 70.
- (3) : *A Jubilee Memorial of Incidents in the Rise and Progress of the Bible Christian Connexion*, James Thorne, 1866.
- (4) : *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p.31.
- (5) : *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p. 37.
- (6) : *The Bible Christians: Their Origin and History*, Bible Christian Book Room, F W Bourne, 1905, p.42.
- (7) : *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p 110.
- (8) : *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p 179.
- (9) : *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p. 57.
- (10) : *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p. 57.
- (11) : *The Bible Christians, Their Origin and History*, Bible Christian Book Room, F W Bourne, 1905, p. 56.
- (12) : *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p. 74.
- (13) : *The Pastoral Crook*, Rev Thomas Shaw, Cornish Meth Hist Ass Occasional Publication No 16.
- (14) *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p. 121.

## Chapter 4

### **BIBLE CHRISTIAN EXPANSION**

The expansion of the Bible Christian movement after 1815 was accompanied by the development of an itinerant ministry, men and women who offered themselves for a life of considerable hardship in order to proclaim the Gospel. The first two itinerant preachers were William O'Bryan and James Thorne, as has already been noted. They were soon joined by other pioneers such as William Mason of Cookbury in North Devon, a converted wrestler. There was also William Reed who was born at Holwell Farm, Buckland Brewer, in 1800 and who became famous for his preaching. Other early ministers were Andrew Cory, Harry Major, Richard Sedwell, William Courtice, Edmund Warne, John Parkyn, William Lyle and Francis Metherall. James Thorne recorded in his journals a meeting with William O'Bryan on February 17<sup>th</sup> 1817 when "we agreed that four should travel in the Circuit, and one in each Mission." (1) He also recorded the Quarterly Meeting on October 6<sup>th</sup> 1817 when "it was agreed to divide the circuit, Brother Warne and myself for Shebbear; Brothers Parkyn and Major for Kilkhampton; Brother Lyle for Truro; and Brother W. Mason for St Neot Mission".(2)

The first annual conference was held at William O'Bryan's house at Baddash near Launceston in 1819. At that time there were sixteen male and fourteen female itinerants. William O'Bryan was recognised as the General Superintendent of the church, James Thorne was admitted into full connexion while the other itinerants remained on their three-year probationary periods. Twelve circuits had also been established by this date. These early itinerants certainly had few financial inducements to encourage them in their work. Their arduous and occasionally dangerous labours were remunerated by a wage of less than ten shillings a week. This was only a little more than farm labourers in the North Devon area who received about seven shillings a week. They had to travel long distances, often on foot, and preach sermons when they arrived at their destinations. They often slept in different beds each night and ate whatever food they were offered by their hosts.

However, the Bible Christian denomination steadily expanded during the revival years between 1816 and 1826. At first it was confined to the original home circuit which was divided into the Shebbear and Kilkhampton circuits during 1817. James Thorne was sent to St Neot in south-east Cornwall in January 1817, where he established a society of eleven members. From St Neot, the work spread throughout nearby parishes, until, during 1818, preaching was established in the Camelford area north of Bodmin Moor, originally known as the Michaelstow Circuit. The Truro circuit in west Cornwall was formed during 1817, as has already been stated. One moment of personal triumph was realised by William O'Bryan during March 1819 when he returned to preach in his parish of birth at Luxulyan. He later recorded, "I have witnessed many outpourings of the Spirit, but this was the most wonderful I ever witnessed." (3)

Bible Christian pioneers were preaching their way through west Devon during the same period. William Mason established regular preaching in the Hatherleigh area during 1817, and around Tavistock during 1818. From there, preachers ventured down to Buckfastleigh, south of Dartmoor, and eventually to the Chagford area to the east of Dartmoor. One of the earliest Devon circuits was soon established at Buckfastleigh. William O'Bryan first visited Plymouth Dock (Devonport) during late 1818, and James Thorne and John Parkyn were sent to this city during 1819. James Thorne preached on April 8<sup>th</sup> 1819 "at the ground on which the chapel is erecting to many hundreds of people".(4) Devonport became a separate circuit and a Bible Christian stronghold during future years.

A work was opened in the Ashreigney area about 10 miles east of Shebbear during 1818, which became the

basis for the Ringsash Circuit. ("Ringsash" being the vernacular form of Ashreigney). The message was first carried to Ashreigney by Grace Winson, a young woman who had come under Bible Christian preaching during a visit to Little Torrington. James Thorne visited her father's house near Ringsash on March 31<sup>st</sup> 1818 and preached there in the evening. A society of nine members was formed at Ringsash on April 9<sup>th</sup>. The work had expanded to such a degree by 1819 that it was divided off from the Shebbear Circuit to form a separate circuit.

William O'Bryan established preaching at Exeter during 1819, but the work met with little success until 1821 when a room was opened. On June 8<sup>th</sup> 1818 James Thorne visited Tiverton, where he attended a service at the Wesleyan chapel. He praised the standard of the preaching, calling it "good doctrine", but recorded that "many of the old members say that Methodists are quite different from what they used to be. O Lord help them to return to their primitive simplicity." (5) The Bible Christians eventually established themselves in Tiverton, two preachers being stationed there by 1822.

The Bible Christian ministry would have soon floundered under a huge burden of preaching engagements had there not existed the supportive body of unpaid part-time local preachers. One of these, Billy Bray, became famous through the book written about him after his death, "The Kings Son" written by F. W. Bourne. Bray was a miner from Twelveheads, near Truro in Cornwall, who was converted at the nearby Hicks Mill chapel in November 1823. The book made Billy Bray a household name throughout Cornwall because of his witty sayings, his humour and his simple faith. His whole personality can be summarised in one of his sayings, "If they were to put me into a barrel, I would shout 'Glory!' out of the bung-hole." (6) Billy Bray was responsible for the building of three small chapels within the mining area west of Truro, and he played a significant role in the Cornish Temperance Movement during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. This posthumous biography became a Victorian bestseller, about a thousand copies a month being sold for some thirty years after its publication in 1877. It was translated into several different languages, including Japanese, and has generally influenced the spiritual development of many thousands of people throughout the world.

The need for settled places of worship was soon felt by the early Bible Christians. Their chapels became very important to them as symbols of spiritual independence that distinguished them from both the local Anglicans and the Wesleyans. The first chapel built by the Bible Christians was erected at Lake, Shebbear during 1817. James Thorne first mentioned the plans to build this chapel in his journals during July 1817, and he himself chose the spot on August 7<sup>th</sup>. Some of these chapels, like the first Wesleyan meeting houses, were seen by some as places for fellowship outside the hours of church services, but they eventually became the sole places of worship for virtually all Bible Christians. Communion was celebrated by Bible Christian ministers from an early date. James Thorne "celebrated the death of Christ in the sacrament" as early as May 31<sup>st</sup> 1818, according to his journals. (7)

Children were being baptised, both in the chapels and at their homes, from as early as 1817. The earliest baptisms recorded in the first Shebbear circuit register occurred during 1818. This register, which ends in 1837, is now deposited at the Public Record Office in London. Other pre-1837 baptism registers from the Ringsash, Buckfastleigh and Devonport circuits in Devon can also be seen at the Public Record Office. Early baptism registers from the Breage, St Ervan, Falmouth, Kilkhampton, Luxulyan, Penzance, Michaelstow, St Neot, the Scillies, Truro and Canworthy Water circuits in Cornwall are also kept in London. No pre-1837 Bible Christian burial registers are available in London, because most early Bible Christians were buried in Anglican graveyards. However, one early burial register from Lake chapel is still preserved at the Methodist manse at Shebbear. The first burial shown in this register occurred on December 11<sup>th</sup> 1821, when Humphrey Horn of Shebbear was buried at the age of 46 years. So many ministers and other famous Bible Christians lie buried at Lake that this chapel eventually became known as the "Westminster Abbey" of the Bible Christian denomination.

A picture of the spread of the Bible Christian movement can be taken from the Anglican Visitation Returns of 1821.(8) These visitations contain the answers to several questions sent to the Bishop of Exeter by Anglican incumbents throughout the Exeter diocese, which at this date embraced virtually all of Devon and Cornwall. One of these questions answered by the incumbents was, "Have you any Papists or dissenters? If the latter, of what kind or denomination? What teachers of each are there resident in your Parish, or

occasionally visiting it? Are they licensed? What places have they of public meeting, licensed or otherwise?"

The Anglican rectors, vicars and curates of Devon and Cornwall made different attempts at answering these questions, but only ten incumbents from Devon made any reference to the Bryanites or Bible Christians, while thirty incumbents from Cornwall referred to them. This does indeed reflect the rapid spread of the Bible Christian movement throughout the length of Cornwall, while in Devon it was still mainly confined to the north-west and central areas. However, this variation may also be explained by the fact that Methodism had been long established in Cornwall while it was only a fringe movement in Devon until the emergence of the Bible Christians. Anglican incumbents in Cornwall might have been more aware of the different shades of Methodism, whereas many Devon rectors and vicars referred to Wesleyans and Bible Christians under the general name of Methodists. Incumbents at Clawton, Parkham and Welcombe were probably only aware of Bible Christians in their parishes at this date despite the fact that they referred to them as Methodists.

Some of the Bryanite references in these Visitation Returns reflect the animosity felt by several Anglican clerics towards the Bible Christians. The Rector of Langtree, a parish adjoining Shebbear, referred to "three Farmers who preach to dissenting Congregations in three Farm Houses....They are Disciples of a Man named Bryant, violent Enthusiasts, but what their Tenets are it is impossible to say." The Rector of Warkleigh, near South Molton, stated that the Bible Christians in his parish "refuse to shew their License and were rather abusive when it was demanded by my Churchwarden." The incumbent at Kilkhampton in north-east Cornwall referred to Bible Christians within his parish as being "very fanatical and they consist almost without exception of the lowest classes of society." The incumbent at St Tudy near Bodmin wrote that "I cannot say in what particulars the Bryanites differ from the Wesleyans, excepting their teachers are not paid and that they resemble the early Methodists in the noise of their exclamations and in their convulsions". The incumbent at St Veep in south-east Cornwall referred to the Bible Christians "who seem to have increased much of late in Cornwall...they accompany their services with violent gestures, and convulsive sighs and groans." (8)

However, not all of the Anglican incumbents who referred to the Bible Christians were antagonistic towards them. Many of them seemed to be indifferent while a few even expressed approval. The incumbents at Bridgerule and Pyworthy in west Devon and at Lanreath and St Eval in Cornwall reported that Bryanites in their parishes still attended church on Sundays.(8)

It is interesting to see that Cradock Glascott, the strongly evangelical Vicar of Hatherleigh, answered the Bishop's question with the terse statement, "there are no Papists or Dissenters in my parish". James Thorne recorded, in his journals, several visits to Hatherleigh. He certainly approved of Cradock Glascott since he wrote on March 30<sup>th</sup> 1817, "I afterwards came to Hatherleigh with Emmanuel Tucker, a youth lately, and I trust truly, converted. We went to church and heard a good lecture from the Rev C. Glascott".(9) It is possible that in parishes such as Hatherleigh the Bible Christians either made few converts or encouraged their followers to attend their local Anglican church. James Thorne may have disliked the Calvinism preached by Cradock Glascott, but he recognised his gift of winning souls for Jesus Christ.

The 1851 ecclesiastical census shows that 'dissenters' had certainly established themselves at Hatherleigh soon after the death of Cradock Glascott in August 1831. The Baptist chapel there was opened in 1833, while the entry for the Bible Christian chapel was signed by no less a person than Emmanuel Tucker of South Street in Hatherleigh, presumably the same person as the young man who accompanied James Thorne to the village in 1817.

Bible Christian preachers soon ventured into Somerset from their foothold in the Ringsash Circuit. Mary Mason visited Dulverton in south-west Somerset during February 1821 and preached throughout that area, the success of which resulted in the establishment of the Kingsbrompton Mission Station (Kingsbrompton being the vernacular form of Brompton Regis). William Mason was appointed to this station during 1822, and he extended the work from there (during 1823) up to Bristol and into Gloucestershire and Monmouthshire. The two mission stations of Bristol and Somerton were formed as a result of his labours. Elizabeth Courtice, another female itinerant, was sent to the Axbridge area in north-west Somerset during

1821, and her work eventually led to the creation of the Weare Circuit. This circuit contained a membership of 212 people by 1826.

The origins of the Crewkerne Mission in south Somerset date back to 1821, and by 1822 four societies had been formed near Taunton. James Way, the future pioneer to Australia, worked in the Weare Circuit and Crewkerne Mission during 1826. He described his work at Crewkerne in the following words: “The station embraced a portion of three counties, Devonshire, Somersetshire and Dorsetshire. The people were not only in spiritual darkness but in the depths of poverty. I endured more privation there than I had ever done before...some people say we black-coated gentlemen are after the money and seek an easy life; but I should like some of these talkers to come shoulder to shoulder with us in the work, and be paid on the same scale. During this year, my stipend, not including board and lodging, which we had without cost, was only £8.” (10)

Most of these Bible Christian pioneers only ventured into a new area when asked to do so by converts who had come under their ministry in the established areas. It was in this way that the Bible Christians first went to Kent in February 1820. Earlier missionary work had proceeded as a logical expansion from nearby circuits, but the move into Kent took the Westcountry preachers a great distance from their home area. William Clark, a Wesleyan from Brompton in Kent had been told about the Bible Christians by a stonemason, called John Hocking, who had formerly lived at Plymouth Dock (the original name of Devonport, now part of Plymouth). Clark wrote a letter to William O’ Bryan in November 1819, desiring that two preachers be sent to Kent. James Thorne recorded in his journals on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1820 that “while Brother O’ Bryan was praying that God would direct who should go to Kent I felt something like fire in my bones....Brother W. Lyle sent word that if we did not consent to his going, still he must go”.(11)

So it was that James Thorne and William Lyle boarded the Exeter stage-coach for London in the evening of February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1820 to ride “through a very cold night to Honiton; from thence on to Salisbury and London, where we arrived about nine o’clock at night on Wednesday.” (12) The courageous pair sat on the outside of the coach in order to save money, “the snow lying on the ground great part of the way.” (12) From London, they travelled the next day on to Brompton in Kent, arriving at William Clark’s house in the evening. James Thorne appears to have been discouraged by their reception since he records the words, “there does not seem to be much opening yet.” (12)

However, Kent soon became an important area for the Bible Christians and even produced, in the shape of Frederick William Bourne, who was born at Woodchurch in 1830, the most notable leader of the denomination after William O’ Bryan and James Thorne. The work was at first confined to the northern coastal areas of Kent, at Chatham, Brompton, Sheerness, Faversham and Canterbury. The Kent Mission, as it was called, was divided into two stations during 1822, one centred at Chatham and the other at Sheerness. The first Bible Christian chapel in Kent was opened at Sheerness on May 27<sup>th</sup> 1821, closely followed on June 17<sup>th</sup> by a chapel in the village of Hartlip near Sittingbourne. The Bible Christians found generous patrons at Hartlip in the Drawbridge family, as James Thorne explained in his journals. Both William O’ Bryan and James Thorne presided at this chapel opening, and “our friend Drawbridge and family attended. He has been very kind, as he has built the chapel solely at his own expense. There is a very neatly stained window in the west end with his crest, and the inscription ‘Dieu mon et Roi les loix’.” (13) The Bible Christian church, with its working-class base, was usually very short of funds, and patrons like the Drawbridges must have been exceptional.

Signs of revival did not immediately appear during James Thorne’s ministry in Kent, but by early 1821 the evidence was unmistakable. James visited Sheerness during February and recorded one meeting, during which “a man fell on the floor; presently another, standing on one of the seats, fell down; and very soon another fell just like a tree. I went and prayed by him and he professed to find peace.” (14) It is heartening to read that revival broke out among the Wesleyans at Brompton at the same time. James Thorne recorded, “I find that prejudice against us is on a rapid decline. I find some of the Methodists scarcely know what to make of it. They say that there never was such a meeting in Brompton Chapel since it was built which, I suppose, is more than thirty years. I am sure we have done no harm to the Methodists in Kent.” (15)

The work in Kent continued to prosper despite some minor disputes. James Thorne recorded on February

27<sup>th</sup> 1825, “Five years ago this day was the first Sabbath I spent in Kent. There are now in this District nearly 1,000 members, and many regularly attend the ministry of the word. Nearly 60 local preachers have been raised up, one of whom, Br James Brooks, is now an itinerant on trial.” (16).

The Bible Christians also established their cause in London during 1821, as an off-shoot from their ministry in Kent. Catherine Reed was the pioneer here, closely followed by her future husband, James Thorne, and then later by Henry Freeman. The last-named preacher opened a society at Hoxton during 1822. Mary O’Bryan’s first appointment as a female preacher (when she was only sixteen!) was in London, which she visited in company with her father during 1823. She received support in her outdoor preaching from some unlikely quarters, including (according to her journals) from a Roman Catholic gentleman. Providence Chapel was opened in London during 1823, and towards the end of the year the membership had increased to 232 people. The first chapel actually built by the Bible Christians in London on Old Street Road in Shoreditch, opened on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1826.

The work was carried down to Brighton during 1824 by Henry Freeman. He was joined by Ann Mason, who caused a stir in the local press. The ‘Brighton Herald’ reported, “A female has, within this last fortnight, been preaching in a room in North Steyne Row and also in some of our public streets. She is a young woman and report says delivers discourses with animation. She speaks fluently and in tolerably correct language. The doctrine she advances comes nearer to that of the Wesleyan Methodists than that of any other religious denomination.” (17)

The Bible Christians were also able to establish themselves in several other south coast towns, such as Portsmouth and Chichester, during this period. Portsmouth, however, was an off-shoot from the earlier work on the Isle of Wight. The Bible Christians apparently had an affinity for islands, establishing strong causes on the Scilly Isles, the Channel Islands and also on the Isle of Wight. Mary Toms was the pioneer to the Isle of Wight, arriving there during 1823, while Mary Ann Werrey became the pioneer to Guernsey, also arriving there during 1823 and visiting Jersey later in the same year.

- (1) : *Memoir of James Thorne* , J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p. 48.
- (2) : *Memoir of James Thorne* , J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p, 74.
- (3) : *The Bible Christians : Their Origin and History*, F.W. Bourne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1905, p. 70.
- (4) : *Memoir of James Thorne* , J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p.115.
- (5) : *Memoir of James Thorne* , J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p.98.
- (6) : *The Kings’ Son*, F.W. Bourne, 1890 ed, p.47.
- (7) : *Memoir of James Thorne* , J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p, 96.
- (8) : *The Diocese of Exeter in 1821*, M Cook (DRCS Pub).
- (9) : *Memoir of James Thorne* , J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p. 56.
- (10) : *The Bible Christians : Their Origin and History*, F.W. Bourne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1905 p, 176.
- (11) : *Memoir of James Thorne* , J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p. 132.
- (12) : *Memoir of James Thorne* , J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p. 134.
- (13) : *Memoir of James Thorne* , J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p 163.
- (14) : *Memoir of James Thorne* , J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p. 157.
- (15) : *Memoir of James Thorne* , J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p. 160.
- (16) : *Memoir of James Thorne* , J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p. 201.
- (17) : *The Bible Christians : Their Origin and History*, F.W. Bourne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1905, p 161.

## Chapter 5

### THE SEPARATION CRISIS

The Bible Christians had established themselves firmly within Devon and Cornwall by 1826, and had also spread to some extent within Somerset. There may have been attempts in Dorset particularly from the Crewkerne circuit, but the first circuit was not opened in Dorset until 1858. They had likewise established footholds within Kent, the Isle of Wight and the Channel Isles. Circuits or mission stations existed at London, Portsmouth, Brighton, Southampton, and Bristol, and also within Gloucestershire, Monmouthshire, the Forest of Dean and Northumberland. The Bible Christians established their presence within Surrey (the Farnham Mission) and Huntingdonshire (the Yaxley Mission) within the next few years, and in South Wales and the North of England later in the century. However, no major successes were achieved within the British Isles after the separation crisis that struck the Bible Christian ministry after 1826. This lack of growth was the result of several different factors.

The first factor inhibiting further expansion was increasing competition from other Methodist denominations. The Primitive Methodists were probably the greatest obstacle to the Bible Christians' hopes of expansion because they were so similar to the Bible Christians in their origins and evangelical aims. The Primitive Methodists were another off-shoot from Wesleyan Methodism, founded by Hugh Bourne and William Clowes between 1808 and 1811. Their stronghold lay within the northern, midland and eastern counties of England, from where they moved south towards London and eventually even to the South West. James Thorne referred to "the Primitive Methodists, vulgarly called Ranters", when working in Kent during 1820. They were penetrating into London and Kent at much the same time as the Bible Christians, and there was initially some co-operation between the two bodies. William O'Bryan exchanged letters with Hugh Bourne, but the two movements eventually went their separate ways.

The Bible Christians must have felt some resentment when the Primitive Methodists established a mission at Redruth in Cornwall in 1825, and later at St Austell, Liskeard, St Ives and Penzance. The 1851 Ecclesiastical Census referred to 6,114 Primitive Methodist worshippers within Cornwall but none within Devon, as compared with 21,661 Bible Christian worshippers within Cornwall and 13,576 within Devon at the same date. Primitive Methodist baptism registers dating from before 1837 still survive from the St Austell, St Ives and Redruth circuits. The Primitive Methodists had also established a foothold at Bideford and Barnstaple in North Devon by 1836. A short Primitive Methodist baptism register from these two towns is now deposited in the North Devon Record Office at Barnstaple.

The Bible Christians also faced some competition within the South West from the Methodist New Connexion. This latter body was another secession from Wesleyan Methodism, first founded in 1797. They had appeared at Truro by 1834 but they remained small and insignificant until William Booth, then a New Connexion minister and later the founder of the Salvation Army, conducted a mission at Truro in 1857. The New Connexion could muster only 754 worshippers around Truro at the time of the 1851 Ecclesiastical Census. They amalgamated with the Teetotal Wesleyans in 1860 and established a second circuit at St Ives. Negotiations concerning union between the New Connexion and the Bible Christians were opened during the 1860s but it was not until 1907 that this union finally occurred.

Another Methodist movement that later appeared in the South West was the Wesleyan Methodist Association. This denomination produced 10,929 worshippers within Cornwall and 723 within Devon for the enumerators of the 1851 Ecclesiastical Census. These people had initially seceded from Wesleyan Methodism during the 1830s. By 1837, three Wesleyan Association circuits had been formed at Camelford, Helston and Liskeard in Cornwall. The Wesleyan Reformers emerged after a later secession from Wesleyan Methodism in 1849. They were able to muster 701 worshippers within Cornwall and 1,187 within Devon at the time of the Ecclesiastical Census of 1851.

The Methodist body most mentioned in the journals of the early Bible Christians was, of course, the parent Wesleyan church. Cornwall had been a Wesleyan stronghold since the frequent visits made by John Wesley during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the mining areas west of Truro. The Wesleyans were initially weak in north-east Cornwall and in north and west Devon, but they began to penetrate into these rural areas very soon after the Bible Christians had established themselves. The Wesleyans remained by far the largest Methodist body within the South West by the date of the 1851 Ecclesiastical Census, when they mustered 73,351 worshippers within Cornwall and 34,181 within Devon.

The Church of England still attracted the loyalties of a large number of Devonians in 1851, as is made clear by the Ecclesiastical Census. Some 28% of the total Devon population (157,828 churchgoers) attended their local Anglican church on that Census Sunday in 1851, as compared with only about 13% (47,555 churchgoers) of the Cornish population. Indeed, Anglicanism in Cornwall had been replaced by Methodism as the dominant Christian movement. Methodist worshippers in Cornwall outnumbered Anglican church attenders by some two and a half times in 1851.

The Ecclesiastical Census also demonstrates that the older Nonconformist churches retained a certain popularity within the South West, particularly in Devon. The Independents, Baptists and Unitarians mustered 48,803 worshippers within Devon at this date and 10,599 within Cornwall. The largest single Nonconformist church after the Independents and Baptists was the Plymouth Brethren with 2,709 worshippers in Devon and 267 in Cornwall. This movement had been founded in Plymouth in 1830. There were also 721 worshippers at the three Cornish churches remaining in Lady Huntingdon's Connection, a branch of Calvinistic Methodism that had emerged during the previous century. The Quakers had shrunk to a low point by 1851, numbering only 245 worshippers in Devon and 389 in Cornwall. The Roman Catholics still maintained a presence in the two counties, mustering 1,433 worshippers in Devon and 759 in Cornwall. However, the most surprising statistic that can be deduced from the Ecclesiastical Census is that some 52% of the total population of Devon and Cornwall (478,044 people altogether) was not in church or chapel on that Census Sunday. This large body of non-worshippers was presumably the fallow field that was attracting the attentions of an evangelical church such as the Bible Christians.

The Bible Christians therefore faced a considerable degree of competition, particularly from other Methodist churches, in their endeavours to expand their work. People with an inclination to join a Christian church had a wide range of choice between the different denominations. The Bible Christians represented a favourable choice when unblemished by internal dissension, but the loss of their initial fervour and primitive innocence after 1826 did blunt their effectiveness as an evangelical movement.

This internal dissension first appeared within the Bible Christian ministry as early as 1824, according to F.W. Bourne. He wrote that it was at this point that "a subtle and mysterious power of evil was surely at work in the young Church, which prevented the golden beam of its morning and the large promise of its early springtide from fulfilling themselves in noontide splendour and autumn bountifulness". (1) . One sign of this growing dissension was possibly the separation of Henry Freeman and Ann Mason, two notable pioneers, who left the Bible Christians during 1824 because of their desire to become Quakers. They were married later in the year and spent some time working as missionaries in Ireland, before Ann returned to die and be buried at Sutcombe in North Devon in 1826.

A deed for enrolling chapels was accepted by the Bible Christian conference in 1825, which permitted "William O'Bryan during his natural life and whomsoever he shall appoint ...to have and enjoy the said premises." (2) A sense of dissatisfaction began to appear among O'Bryan's fellow preachers as the full effect of this deed became obvious. O'Bryan had long been recognised by his followers as the

‘Superintendent’ of the church, a father figure to the younger people who threw themselves so wholeheartedly into the preaching ministry. He apparently envisaged his leadership role as similar to John Wesley’s authoritarian rule over the early Methodist church. However, O’Bryan lacked much of Wesley’s tact, humour and charismatic qualities or, in general, the Apostolic gifts that enabled the latter to maintain his position for so many years.

The Chapel Deed affair was resurrected during the 1826 Conference, but O’Bryan refused to concede his supreme authority or his belief that his single vote could successfully oppose the united view of the other ministers. James Thorne recorded in his journals that “we had many painful discussions about the Chapel Fund, the Book affairs, the right of representatives to vote, the power of stationing preachers etc”(3) during his attendance at this conference.

The ministers returned to the offensive when they submitted a memorandum to the 1827 Conference to lay out their demands. It was suggested that the conference was to have the supreme authority but that “Mr O’Bryan be the President, if in attendance”. O’Bryan could also “be allowed to choose on what circuit he wishes to be stationed.” (4) It is interesting to note that James Thorne’s journals ended on July 4<sup>th</sup> 1827, only some three weeks before this conference commenced. One wonders whether he had lost heart for keeping a record of the denomination’s progress when all around seemed to be strife and turmoil. He and his brother, Samuel had attempted many times, during private discussions with O’Bryan, to persuade him to change his views. Mary Thorne, Samuel’s wife and O’Bryan’s daughter, was caught in the middle. Her son, Samuel Ley Thorne, later wrote that “when the painful separation occurred between her father and the preachers, she and her father and James and Samuel Thorne, were in one room; one side was her father, the other her husband and his brother, the chief actors in the affair. She said not a word, but arose, placed her arm around the neck of her father, tenderly kissed him, and walked out of the room.” (5) Samuel Thorne wrote on October 15<sup>th</sup> 1826, “Many unpleasant things have transpired between Mr O’Bryan and me, and between him and the preachers. I and others have been much grieved.” (6)

The 1827 Conference at Stoke Damerel (Plymouth) was the last occasion that William O’Bryan presided over the assembly. The 1828 Conference met at Shebbear, and William Mason was chosen President with James Thorne as Secretary. It was decided at this conference to drop the word ‘Arminian’ from the title of the church. Henceforth, the denomination was simply known as the ‘Bible Christians.’ Charges against James Thorne were brought by O’Bryan, while Edward Hocken submitted accusations against O’Bryan. Some of the allegations made against O’Bryan were accepted by the conference, and the ministers parted in a spirit of conflict. This conference also registered the first decline in Bible Christian membership, from 8,054 people in 1827, to 7,845 people in 1828.

William O’Bryan published a pamphlet, complaining about the ill-treatment given to him, before the 1829 Conference assembled at Shebbear. Andrew Cory was appointed President on this occasion, with James Thorne being reappointed as Secretary. O’Bryan again tried to reassert his authority but, seeing he had little support, he stood up and said, “I adjourn this Conference to Liskeard next Monday,” (7) He withdrew from the meeting and, in effect, from his Bible Christian membership.

The immediate result of the separation was the collapse of the Bible Christian mission to Northumberland. Mary Ann Werrey had first travelled north to Blyth during 1823 and had battled against many obstacles, including her own bad health, until joined by William Mason during 1824. John Parkyn and William Patterson were the preachers working in the Northumberland Mission during 1829, and they both declared for O’Bryan. They surrendered their mission to the Primitive Methodists and travelled down to Cornwall to join O’Bryan. A body of several hundred former Bible Christians gathered around O’Bryan, mainly in the Kilkhampton and Breage areas, and became known as the ‘Arminian Bible Christians’. These loyalists maintained an independent existence for some six years, despite O’Bryan’s absence in America for half of that period. Eventually, 545 out of the remaining 700 members were reunited with the Bible Christians in 1835.

The Conference in 1830 reassembled at Shebbear, and Harry Major was elected President, with James Thorne as Secretary. The conference again had to report a decline of membership in almost every Bible Christian circuit and mission station, a reduction from 7,599 members in 1829 down to 6,297 in 1830. The

number of itinerant ministers had also declined from 89 in 1827 to 70 in 1830. However, the numbers began to increase after this date, in both the ministry and the membership. There was a feeling that the dissensions of the previous years were behind them. The address to the societies stated that “we can but rejoice at the pleasing change from contention and dispute to harmony and concord.” (8)

James Thorne must be given some of the credit for the fact that the Bible Christian movement did not suffer any greater losses or even collapse altogether. F.W. Bourne declared that “it was owing to James Thorne’s skilful leadership at this crisis, to his cool head and warm heart, to his great sagacity and unfailing patience, and above all to his invincible faith and undaunted courage, that greater mischief did not result.”(9) James Thorne was to act as the virtually undisputed leader of the Bible Christians from 1829 until his death in 1872. He was Superintendent of the Shebbear circuit between 1827 and 1829, and fulfilled the same office in the Kilkhampton circuit in 1830 and 1831. He became President of Conference on five occasions in 1831, 1835, 1842, 1857 and 1865. He served as editor of the ‘Bible Christian Magazine’ until 1866, after William O’Bryan’s resignation of that office in 1828. He spent much time between 1831 and 1844 travelling throughout southern England to visit the different Bible Christian societies. He eventually settled at Shebbear in 1844 and confined himself to more localised work. In the ‘Dictionary of National Biography’ he is described as having for forty years “virtually undisputed authority over the connexion”.

However, it is the opinion of the author that the Bible Christians never completely recovered from the separation crisis of 1827 to 1829. The movement lost something of its evangelical thrust, its early fervour and energy. James Thorne later wrote (in 1866) that “it may be doubted whether the almost seraphic enjoyments for which many of the earlier converts were so remarkable, have yet been fully regained.”(10) The observant eye of Mary Thorne noticed a change in ministerial attitudes at the 1835 conference. She wrote that “I was grieved to see some of the preachers and representatives leave the room when prayer was proposed, and walk about smoking their pipes” (11) Some Bible Christians retained the old spirit. Mary Thorne recorded talking to Mrs Eynon (formerly the itinerant preacher Elizabeth Dart) on November 12<sup>th</sup> 1848. She wrote that “she still retains a seasoning of the holy Christian devotedness that used to be so much the subject of pursuit and conversation among us as a Christian church.” (12)

Samuel Ley Thorne stated, in his biography of William O’Bryan, that by 1829 “the connexion then occupied substantially the same ground at home, except the northern district, which it has since cultivated.” (13) The years of revival that saw the Bible Christian movement spreading to different parts of the British Isles had come to an end. Henceforward, there would be localised revivals and the work would expand within the established areas, but the days of successful outreach beyond the known territories were ended. Fervent young preachers now had to fully exercise their vocation by taking ship to the colonies or by serving as missionaries in China. The Bible Christian church within England gradually became the body that was known in the late Victorian era as rather introspective and generally content to leave the pioneering work to other Christian movements.

William O’Bryan never resumed any significant role within the movement which, under God, he had founded. He sailed with most of his family (apart from his daughter Mary Thorne) from Liverpool to New York on September 4<sup>th</sup> 1831. His daughters, Eden and Thomazine, had sailed earlier during 1830. Mary Thorne recorded the painful departure of her family in her journals. She wrote: “January 1831, my father and sister Catherine fetched me in a jaunting car lent by a friend Eddy, a Quaker.... We had severe snow from Launceston to Liskeard, where we arrived at 11pm. Over Caradon Down we could scarcely ascertain the road for the snow. I think my dear father must have been much fatigued, having walked nearly all the way. I tarried about ten days with my dear mother.” (14) This was the last time that Mary saw her mother, since Catherine O’Bryan never returned to England.

Upon their arrival in New York, the O’Bryans travelled to Boston and then to Bethany “where two of our daughters (presumably Eden and Thomazine) kept school for females”. (15) William O’Bryan lived as a peripatetic preacher in the locality of New York, and also travelled through several American states and parts of Canada. An interesting insight into his activities is given in a letter written by his wife, Catherine, to her daughter, Mary Thorne, on March 1<sup>st</sup> 1843. This letter still survives in the archives of Shebbear College, North Devon. Catherine O’Bryan (she signed herself as Mrs Catherine Bryant) devoted most of the letter to family matters, but she did refer to “your father who is but seldom home. Last Xmas he was

sent after by a Methodist minister, requesting him to come and help him. He had two chapels to attend to, and wished your father would come and take one. It was 4 or 5 miles out of New York.”

William O’Bryan crossed the Atlantic thirteen times altogether. His daughter, Mary Thorne, recorded several of his visits in her journals, the first time being the summer of 1834. O’Bryan apparently preached at Sheepwash near Shebbear on October 5<sup>th</sup> in company with Mary. The majority of his English followers were reunited with the Bible Christians during 1835, and it is possible that O’Bryan encouraged this development during his 1834 visit. Certainly, his wife Catherine gave no evidence of any ill feelings towards the Thorne family in her letter to her daughter, Mary, in March 1843. She wrote that her daughter Thomasine “joins me in sincere love to your beloved husband (Samuel Thorne) as well as yourself, to dear Susan Thorne (Samuel’s younger sister) and to each of your dear children”. Catherine also referred to the death of John Thorne, the father of James and Samuel, who had died at Shebbear in December 1842. She wrote, “I think it must be very encouraging to dear Mrs Thorne to see her beloved companion...go home safe and the certainty of her joining him again, so soon, to part no more, must overcome all feelings of grief or sorrow.... I do wish her a sun shine passage through the dark vale of death, and a triumphant landing in Glory”. Catherine had obviously not been informed, in March 1843, of the death of John Thorne’s widow, Mary, during January 1843.

William O’Bryan died in America on January 8<sup>th</sup> 1868, preceded by his wife Catherine on May 27<sup>th</sup> 1860. His funeral address included this passage, “He was, as a Christian and a preacher, earnest; a plain man, dressing much like the Quakers or Friends of old, plain in dress, plain in speech.... He lived to be nearly 90 years old, so that his piety was tried by family affliction, tried by loss of property, tried by persecution and mobs, tried by a separation from his friends at the disruption in 1829.... January 8<sup>th</sup> 1868, he got up, but soon retired to bed. He asked his daughter Serena to read to him the prayer of Ezra, the prayer of Hezekiah, the prayer of Daniel, and the 40<sup>th</sup> Psalm, ‘I waited patiently for the Lord’ etc. Then observing ‘That will do, shut the book’, he fell asleep in Jesus.”

William O’Bryan was buried within the Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York. A visitor to the grave during 1891 made the following observations, “the grave is, as the man was, simplicity itself; it is a mound covered with well-trimmed green turf within an enclosure with other similar graves of members of his family, all having plain upright headstones...the inscription reads ‘William Bryant, son of William, and Thomasine Lawry. Born Feb 6<sup>th</sup> 1778. Of Gunwen, Luxillian, Cornwall, England. Died Jan 8<sup>th</sup> 1868’.” (16)

- (1) : *The Bible Christians : Their Origin and History*, F.W. Bourne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1905, p. 172
- (2) : *The Bible Christians : Their Origin and History* F.W. Bourne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1905, p.173
- (3) : *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p.209.
- (4) : *The Bible Christians : Their Origin and History*, F.W. Bourne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1905, p. 182.
- (5) : *The Maiden Preacher*, S.L. Thorne, 1889, p.98.
- (6) : *Samuel Thorne, Printer*, S.L. Thorne, 1874, p 125.
- (7) : *The Bible Christians : Their Origin and History* F.W. Bourne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1905, p. 191.
- (8) : *The Bible Christians : Their Origin and History* F.W. Bourne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1905, p. 199.
- (9) : *The Bible Christians : Their Origin and History* F.W. Bourne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1905, p. 194.
- (10) : *A Jubilee Memorial of Incidents in the Rise and Progress of the Bible Christian Connexion*, 1866
- (11) : *The Maiden Preacher*, S.L. Thorne, 1889, p. 117

- (12) : *The Maiden Preacher*, S.L. Thorne, 1889 p.128.
- (13) : *William O'Bryan, Founder of the Bible Christians*, S.L. Thorne, 1878, p.122.
- (14) : *The Maiden Preacher*, S.L. Thorne, 1889, p. 98.
- (15) : *William O'Bryan, Founder of the Bible Christians*, S.L. Thorne, 1878, p. 124
- (16) : *Bible Christian Magazine*, August 1904.

## Chapter 6

### THE BIBLE CHRISTIANS OVERSEAS

The Bible Christian church in England was, by 1831, just recovering from the separation crisis described in the last chapter, when it became involved in its first overseas ventures. South-west England was strongly affected during the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a considerable migration of a large section of its population to the industrial areas elsewhere within the British Isles. Large numbers of Westcountry people also emigrated overseas to settle in the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. This depopulation generally occurred in the rural areas where the Bible Christians mustered most support. This was primarily the result of the decline of agriculture which had slumped at the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

Statistics give a clear picture of the sharp expansion of the national emigration rate after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. The numbers of British emigrants increased from 1,889 people in 1815 to a total of 277,134 people by 1852. About 371,000 people left Devon between 1851 and 1901, 126,000 of whom emigrated overseas. Cornwall suffered from mass emigration after 1830 as tin mining passed through a depression. Many miners emigrated to South Australia and to the USA and Canada. It is estimated that South Australia received about 13,000 Cornish emigrants during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Somerset also suffered badly from the emigration of its rural population during and after the 1830s.

Large numbers of Bible Christian members emigrated abroad; men such as John Thorne of Shebbear who sailed to Canada in 1845. Even John's brother, Samuel, was contemplating emigrating to America during 1835, according to the journals of his wife, Mary. Bible Christian membership figures in England were constantly being affected by both deaths and the high number of emigrants. The emigration rate among the membership was recorded by the Bible Christians after 1831, as shown by the following table. These statistics are taken from "A Jubilee Memorial of Incidents in the Rise and Progress of the Bible Christian Connexion" published in 1866.

Date	Membership	Emigrants
1832	6,548	73
1833	6,958	25
1834	7,530	41
1835	8,025	20
1836	10,793	38
1837	9,773	26
1838	9,839	18
1839	10,609	28
1840	10,978	42
1841	11,811	87
1842	13,365	166
1843	13,598	113
1844	13,793	69
1845	13,389	80
1846	13,217	82
1847	12,760	131
1848	13,771	140
1849	14,206	154
1850	15,267	158
1851	15,455	170
1852	16,184	156

1853	16,105	204
1854	15,612	244
1855	15,255	167
1856	17,158	93
1857	17,536	291
1858	19,068	101
1859	21,234	57
1860	22,394	234
1861	22,535	249
1862	24,188	330
1863	24,802	516
1864	25,089	507
1865	25,097	852

The emigration rate rose even higher towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially as the mining industry in Cornwall moved into a sharp decline. It is estimated that the Bible Christians in England lost about 50,000 members between 1881 and 1900 due to deaths, emigrations and removals. The emigrants abroad usually joined other churches until the Bible Christians in England started to send out ministers. These ministerial pioneers were expected both to care for their former members and to evangelise among the unconverted.

North Devon established close links with Prince Edward Island off the coast of Canada during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Prince Edward Island is now the smallest Canadian province, being a long thin island scarcely a hundred miles in length. The first European settlers were French colonists who arrived after 1720. It became a British colony in 1769, and a province within the Dominion of Canada in 1873. People from North Devon played an important role in the colonisation of the island after 1818. The population rose from about 6,000 people in 1801 to 110,000 by 1881. Some of the immigrants from North Devon, such as James Yeo, established ship building industries on Prince Edward Island, making good use of the plentiful supply of timber. These ships were then usually sailed back to Appledore in North Devon to be completed. Some 55 ships were built in this way between 1843 and 1855.

It is scarcely surprising that one of the two Bible Christian overseas missionaries, appointed during 1831, settled on Prince Edward Island. Francis Metherall sailed with his wife and two children on April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1832, and soon made contact with Bible Christians already living on the island. He had formed his first society of twelve members by June 29<sup>th</sup> 1832. Philip James was sent to join him during 1833, and he sailed on the brig “Sappho” out of Appledore. The “Sappho” must have been the ship of that name launched by William Ellis on Prince Edward Island in 1829. Francis Metherall wrote a letter back to England on November 27<sup>th</sup> 1845, in which he declared, “Sometimes the roads are in such a state that a man could not travel at all without the assistance of a horse. I travelled on foot the first three winters that I was on this Mission; but I found it very great slavery. I have often suffered much, and one time was likely to lose my life in a storm.”(1)

The first Bible Christian chapel, a small log building, was soon opened, and by 1836 there were 106 Bible Christian members on the island. Progress at first was slow, but by 1842 there were reports of revival coming from the island, with about 120 conversions occurring within a short space of time. Thereafter, the membership slowly grew in size, from the 307 members recorded in 1850 to 499 by 1860. Francis Metherall was replaced during 1856 by Cephas Barker, another prominent minister sent out from England. Cephas Barker worked on the island until 1865, supervising the erection of churches at the main urban centre of Charlottetown and elsewhere. In 1865, the Prince Edward Island District, with a membership of 566 people, was amalgamated with the Bible Christian church in Canada. The union also led to the separate Canadian Conference of Bible Christians taking over the financial responsibility for the work on Prince Edward Island.

The Bible Christian membership within Ontario, Canada, expanded at a greater rate than that seen on Prince Edward Island. John Glass was the Bible Christian pioneer sent to Canada in 1831 but he quickly resigned from his post. John Hicks Eynon was appointed in his place and set sail from Liverpool in late

1832. However, the ship ran into difficulties and Eynon was forced to return to England for the winter. This delay resulted in the marriage between Eynon and the outstanding female preacher, Elizabeth Dart. The couple sailed from Padstow, Cornwall, in May 1833 to land in Quebec, from where they moved to Cobourg in Ontario, about 70 miles east of Toronto. The Eynons formed their first Canadian society at Cobourg, and this town became the cradle of the Bible Christian mission to Canada and the centre of a circuit measuring nearly two hundred miles in extent! Difficulties caused by the immensity of the circuit and the wildness of the country were great. The landscape, now rich farmland, was then a vast forest. Eynon had to contend with snow storms and nights in the woods threatened by prowling bears.

Some 88 people joined the church during the first year, and another minister, John Kemeys, was sent in 1834 to help in the work. The membership had expanded to 318 people by 1840, and then to 1,207 people by 1850. Fourteen missionaries were working within Canada by this latter date, with another two men based within Ohio and Wisconsin in the USA. By 1847, some twenty-four places of worship had been opened by the Bible Christians within Canada.

Revival was sweeping through some of the Canadian meetings by 1840. John Kemeys recorded one service when “after preaching, while counselling those in distress, I was suddenly stopped by the descent of a heavenly influence, which struck several to the ground. The whole congregation was moved; some wept, some shouted, and others lay on the floor as though insensible.” (2)

In 1854, the English Bible Christians rather reluctantly conceded the right of their Canadian brethren to hold a separate annual conference. The first Canadian conference met at Columbus in 1855, when 21 ministers and about 2,200 members were recorded. Finally, the Canadian Bible Christians agreed to a union, in 1884, with the other larger Methodist churches within Canada. The English Bible Christians had to accept the loss of a large section of their church. The Bible Christian contribution to the Methodist Church of Canada, Newfoundland and Bermuda in 1884 amounted to 79 ministers, 7,398 members, and 281 chapels. These figures did, of course, include people and chapels on Prince Edward Island. In 1925, the Methodist Church of Canada, Newfoundland and Bermuda united with the Presbyterian Church of Canada and the Congregational churches to form the United Church of Canada.

The Bible Christian contribution towards the growth of Methodism in the USA was relatively insignificant. William O’ Bryan worked as an itinerant preacher around New York after 1831, but he cannot be included as a Bible Christian missionary by this date. Appeals from Bible Christian emigrants living in the USA led to two ministers, George Rippin and William Hooper, being sent to Cleveland in Ohio and Yorkville in Wisconsin during 1846. These two ministers were replaced, during 1850, by John Chapple and Joseph Hoidge. The Bible Christian mission to the USA was controlled by the Canadian Conference after 1855.

As elsewhere, the Bible Christian outreach to Australia followed in the wake of Bible Christian members who had emigrated there at an earlier date. The first Methodist missionary to Australia was the Wesleyan, Samuel Leigh, who arrived in New South Wales in 1815. The Bible Christians, however, concentrated upon missionary work in the colony of South Australia, with smaller missions later established in Victoria and Queensland. They were the fourth Methodist church to arrive in South Australia, being preceded by the Wesleyans (in 1836), the New Connexion (in 1840) and the Primitive Methodists (by 1841). The New Connexion cause always remained a small size until the remaining members (less than a hundred) united with the Bible Christians in 1888. The Wesleyans became the largest movement (as in England) but the Bible Christians eventually took second place, outnumbering the Primitive Methodists. The latter was, of course, a much larger church than the Bible Christians back in England. South Australian census returns showed that about 23% of the population referred to themselves as Methodists between 1870 and 1900. The 1891 census numbered 49,159 Wesleyans, 15,762 Bible Christians, and 11,654 Primitive Methodists, totalling 76,575 Methodists out of a population of 320,431 people.(3)

The relative predominance of the Bible Christian cause in South Australia must be partly due to the large number of emigrants from south-west England who settled there. Many Cornish miners, in particular, were attracted by the copper mines that opened around Burra in 1845. The population of the Burra area had expanded to about 5,000 people by 1850. The first Bible Christian chapel was founded at Burra in 1849 by James Blatchford, a local preacher from the Launceston area in east Cornwall. This little church at

Burra still stands to this day. Other Bible Christians had arrived in the colony at an earlier date but they generally joined other Methodist churches. Examples of these earlier emigrants were George Cole and his son, George William, who had emigrated from Chichester, Sussex, in 1839. The Coles joined the Wesleyans when they first arrived in South Australia, but later rejoined the Bible Christians.

The first two Bible Christian ministers to be sent out to South Australia were James Way, as superintendent, and James Rowe. They sailed from Plymouth on August 14<sup>th</sup> 1850, and arrived at Adelaide in late November. James Way was a remarkable man, born at Morchard Bishop in mid Devon in 1804. He entered the Bible Christian ministry in 1826 and served on circuits in Somerset, Kent and Brighton. He was elected President of the English Conference in 1847. He remained in South Australia until his death in 1884, during which time the Bible Christian membership in the colony grew from 47 to 2,638 people. He also had a remarkable son, called Samuel, who was educated at Shebbear College in England before he joined his parents in South Australia in 1853. Samuel Way studied law and was admitted to practise at the Supreme Court in Adelaide in 1861. He became Attorney-General in 1875, and Chief Justice of South Australia in 1876. In 1890, he was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of the state, and became, in 1897 the first Australian representative on the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. He was made a baronet in 1899, a remarkable achievement for a man from such humble origins. He remained a Bible Christian all his life, arranging the ministerial jubilee for his father in 1876. He visited England in 1891 and purchased the freehold of Lake Farm in Shebbear and conveyed it to Shebbear College as an endowment. He died in South Australia on January 8<sup>th</sup> 1916.

Initially, James Way established his base at Bowden near Adelaide, while James Rowe worked at Burra. The Bible Christian cause expanded rapidly during the first few years, and by 1856 fourteen ministers had been sent out from England. Six circuits were established within South Australia, while three ministers worked in the new mission within the colony of Victoria. Probably the most effective of the new ministers was Samuel Keen, who arrived in South Australia during 1853. The membership of his circuit rose from four to 319 in five years!

Another well-known minister in South Australia was John Thorne, the youngest son of James Thorne, leader of the English Bible Christians. John Thorne arrived in South Australia in 1873, and worked principally in the north of the colony. He was President of the South Australian conference in 1887 and 1899. It was his task, during his last presidency, to sign the deed of union that amalgamated the South Australian Bible Christians with the other Methodist churches in the colony. Serena Thorne, daughter of Samuel and Mary Thorne (and thus granddaughter of William O'Bryan), also served within South Australia, after a period within Queensland. She became the foremost female preacher in South Australia before her death, as the wife of Octavius Lake, in 1902.

The work was initially disrupted by the Victoria gold-rush after 1853, particularly when many copper miners left Burra as a result of gold fever. James Way suffered great difficulties during this period, since a new chapel, just opened at Bowden, had not been paid for when the gold-rush commenced. He also endured a prolonged bout of illness for several months. In general, the Primitive Methodist cause declined considerably during the gold-rush, but the Bible Christians' membership figures soon recovered. This was partly because the Bible Christians were moving out into the new agricultural areas within South Australia. Their church growth in some areas such as Clarendon and Yankalilla even outstripped that of the Wesleyans. In general, the Bible Christians became very much a rural church in South Australia, as in England, while the Wesleyans remained strongest in the expanding city of Adelaide. The Bible Christians in South Australia held their first separate conference in 1877.

A curious phenomenon developed within the Yorke Peninsula in South Australia during the 1860s. The copper mines in this area attracted large numbers of Cornish miners, both from the Burra area and from Cornwall itself. This region later became known as "Australia's Little Cornwall" because of the Cornishness of its population and culture. About 20,000 people had settled there by the 1880s, probably making it the largest Cornish community outside the British Isles. Many aspects of Cornish culture remained strong within "Little Cornwall", including dialect and religion. According to the 1891 census, about 80% of this community professed themselves to be Methodists. The Wesleyans and Primitive Methodists became very strong in this area, followed closely by the Bible Christians. The community

finally collapsed with the closure of the mines in 1923.

William Hocken, a Cornishman born at Boscastle in 1809, became the first Bible Christian minister to establish a ministry within the neighbouring colony of Victoria. He laboured in the vicinity of Melbourne between 1855 and 1860. Some nine chapels had been opened within Victoria by 1860, and in that year the Bible Christian mission in this colony became separate from the work in South Australia. James Rowe was appointed as the first superintendent in Victoria, and the first separate Bible Christian conference was held at Melbourne in 1887. By 1899, there were 32 Bible Christian ministers, 120 chapels and 2,793 members within Victoria. As in South Australia, the Bible Christians concentrated upon extending their work within both the mining communities and the rural areas.

The Bible Christian mission to Queensland, as compared with the work in South Australia, was a relative failure. Serena Thorne was the first Bible Christian to preach within Queensland; she worked in Brisbane during 1865. Two ministers named William Woolcock and George Netherway sailed for Queensland on March 1<sup>st</sup> 1866. However, Netherway was soon transferred to Victoria, leaving Woolcock in Queensland. There were only 21 members at Brisbane by 1868, and the cause continued to stagnate. The Queensland mission was finally closed in 1892. William Thorne, a son of Samuel and Mary Thorne and a Queensland Bible Christian, became Mayor of Brisbane before he died there in 1915.

Methodist union came to the South Australian churches in 1900 and to the Victoria churches in 1902. F.W. Bourne estimated that Methodist union in the whole of Australia led to the transfer of between 15,000 to 16,000 Bible Christian members. (4) Arnold D. Hunt himself estimates that about 6,000 adult members and about 15,000 children were transferred from the Bible Christian churches in South Australia and Victoria. The Australian Methodist Church became a part of the Uniting Church in Australia during 1977.

In some respects, the Bible Christian cause in New Zealand predated that established in South Australia in 1850. Henry Gilbert, a Bible Christian local preacher, emigrated to New Zealand in 1841 and formed a society of 15 people and had built a chapel by early 1843. However, he and his society decided to unite with the Primitive Methodists in 1844. The first Bible Christian minister was not sent out to New Zealand until 1877. This was William Henry Keast, who died there in 1880. Some 40 members were recorded in New Zealand by 1878. Another minister called J.R. Crewes was sent out to Christchurch, New Zealand during 1879, followed by Jeremiah Wilson during 1880. Despite initial difficulties, the New Zealand mission eventually prospered under the supervision, after 1886, of John Orchard, a minister from Victoria in Australia. Missions were established at Christchurch and Dunedin, and the membership quadrupled between 1887 and 1896. However, Methodist union in New Zealand during 1896 severed the link with the Bible Christian church in England. By 1896, some 11 Bible Christian ministers and 609 adult members were recorded within New Zealand.

Thomas Ruddle, the famous headmaster of Shebbear College, believed that the Bible Christian mission to China, which commenced in 1885, partly occurred because of Methodist union in Canada during 1883. He felt that the Bible Christians in England needed a new overseas venture in order to prosper, after "Methodist Union in Canada had just taken from us our most extensive colonial field".(5) The mission to China occupied the imaginations of Bible Christians back in England on an unprecedented scale. It was the last great venture of this small denomination before its amalgamation with other Methodist churches in 1907. As such, it will be discussed in the ninth chapter on the Victorian Era.

(1) : *Missionary Chronicle*, "Extract of a letter from Br. F. Metherall, dated Vernon River, November 27<sup>th</sup> 1845."

(2) : *The Bible Christians : Their Origin and History*, F.W. Bourne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1905, p. 258.

(3) : *This Side of Heaven*, A. D. Hunt, 1985, p. 105.

(4) : *The Bible Christians : Their Origin and History*, F.W. Bourne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1905, p. 555

(5) : *Samuel Thomas Thorne, Missionary to China*, T. Ruddle, 1893.

## Chapter 7

### THE DEVON CIRCUITS

The primary purpose of this chapter is to make a close study of the Bible Christian church within the county of Devon, concentrating upon the original circuit first established by William O'Bryan in 1815, which was later divided into the Shebbear, Kilkhampton and Ringsash circuits. The study will also include the other two Devon circuits established before 1837, centred upon Buckfastleigh and Devonport.

Thomas Ruddle, the 19<sup>th</sup> century headmaster of the Bible Christian college established at Shebbear, wrote an interesting description of his first impressions of North Devon. He recorded his arrival at Bideford on the train during January 1864 as follows:

"He was met at the station by a young man, apparently about his own age, but a stouter and in every way a finer-looking man, who introduced himself as the 'son of James Thorne of Shebbear'.

"The friends were soon seated and moving at an ordinary dog-cart trot. Presently they reached the bridge, a narrow insubstantial structure in bad repair.... A drive up a narrow street brought the friends to the 'Torrige Inn', where Mr Thorne left his horse for a short time while he and the schoolmaster walked round to Silver Street. Pointing to a building on the right hand Mr Thorne said, 'This is one of our chapels,' and then crossing the street added 'and this is the minister's house where we can get a cup of tea.' A moment after, Mr Thorne and his friend were welcomed into a very small but bright and cheerful room, with a blazing fire, and a table spread with plain but very inviting food.

"But there were 13 miles yet to travel before reaching Shebbear, and the friends were soon compelled to leave the cosy sitting-room in Silver Street, and bid good-bye to their kind entertainers. After the first mile the road from Bideford to Shebbear is uphill for three miles, and the progress is always slow.

"Mr Thorne's chief business for the first hour or hour and a half was to answer certain grunts and ejaculations, the import of which he seemed to apprehend pretty accurately. Presently he exclaimed 'These are the Annery Cottages mentioned in "Westward Ho!" and that little building yonder is one of our small chapels.' Twenty minutes later he said, 'This is Monkleigh. We have come four miles. One of our chapels is behind yonder building, but you can't see it from here.' The schoolmaster did not care a straw whether the chapel was within 100 yards or 100 miles, but he was disgusted to learn that they had left but four miles behind them and had to face nine that were yet before them. Frithelstock was next passed. Late as it was there was a blazing fire on a blacksmith's forge and the sound of ringing blows. 'The building just beyond the blacksmith's shop is one of our chapels,' said Mr Thorne. An hour that seemed three brought the friends to Stibb Cross turnpike. 'That little cottage is used as a preaching place for our people,' said Mr Thorne; 'one mile down yonder road is Langtree Chapel, and a little further on another chapel which we call Siloam.' All this seemed monotonous and provoking. In a half-hour Mr Thorne spoke again, 'That building yonder is one of our two Shebbear chapels. We call it Rowden Chapel'."(1)

This description of a journey from Bideford to Shebbear in 1864 shows clearly both the pride of the Bible Christians in their little chapels and also the scale of their presence within this part of Devon. The large number of Bible Christian chapels throughout this area is reflected in the Ecclesiastical Census of 1851. This census was conducted on the basis of the Poor Law unions first established in 1834. These unions were groups of parishes that each contributed towards the costs of running a central workhouse. A study of the church and chapel entries (shown in the 1851 Ecclesiastical Census) within the three Poor Law unions of Bideford, Holsworthy and Great Torrington is very revealing. The Anglican church still attracted the greatest number of worshippers in comparison with any other single church, but people attending the combined Methodist churches (Wesleyan, Bible Christian and Wesleyan Methodist Association) outnumbered the Anglicans by about 500 people. One has to remember that the Methodist cause in this part of Devon and Cornwall before 1815 was small and struggling, generally confined to Wesleyan chapels around Stratton and Bideford. Something of a religious revolution had occurred in the area between 1815

and 1851. The table below helps to illustrate this phenomenon:

Ecclesiastical Census of 1851: Unions of Bideford, Holsworthy and Great Torrington:

Denomination	Attendance			Number of Churches
	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	
Anglican	7,555	5,830	1,852	75
Bible Christian	1,492	2,614	3,643	59
Wesleyan	2,075	1,773	3,624	51
Wesleyan Meth Ass	125	211	471	6
Baptist Methodist		60	`	1
Baptist	621	678	1,075	16
Independent	945	206	891	10
Congregational		58		2
Un-named	22	14		1

As can be seen, the Ecclesiastical Census enquired into the numbers of worshippers attending each church and chapel during Census Sunday on March 30<sup>th</sup> 1851. Many places of worship did not hold three services, of course. Indeed, there was a tendency for most Anglicans to meet during the morning while worshippers from other churches were inclined to meet during the afternoon or evening. Obviously, many people attended their church or chapel for more than one service during this Sunday, so we cannot gain a completely accurate picture of the total number of individuals who attended each church during the whole of that day. However, one can certainly gain reasonably accurate estimates by selecting the service in each church or chapel that attracted the greatest number of people, and adding to this figure half of the number attending the next most popular service and a quarter of the number that came to the third service (if any). One then arrives at an estimated total number of worshippers attending each church or chapel on March 30<sup>th</sup> 1851. (2) These estimated figures appear in the table below:

Ecclesiastical Census of 1851 : Estimated Numbers of Worshippers within Unions of Bideford, Holsworthy and Great Torrington.

Denomination	Estimated Number of Worshippers	Percentage of Total
Anglican	12,263	42.98%
Bible Christian	6,150	21.56%
Wesleyan	5,961	20.90%
Wesleyan Meth Ass	651	2.28%
Baptist Methodist	60	0.21%
Baptist	1,171	6.21%
Independent	1,588	5.56%
Congregational	58	0.20%
Un-named	29	0.10%

The Church of England, with 75 churches and chapels, attracted the largest numbers of worshippers, as has already been stated. Some parishes contained more than one Anglican church building. Bideford, for example, had its main church (St Mary's) that attracted large congregations (700 morning, 200 afternoon, 800 evening), together with a chapel of ease and an Anglican chapel situated within the workhouse. Great Torrington also contained an Anglican workhouse chapel distinct from its main church. Unfortunately no statistics exist for the Anglican churches in Holsworthy, Bulkworthy, Bradford and St Gennys (in Cornwall), either because the documents are lost or because no services were held on March 30<sup>th</sup> 1851. The latter was apparently the case with Bulkworthy and St Gennys.

The Bible Christians can be described as the largest Methodist church in this part of Devon and Cornwall, outstripping the Wesleyans by about 200 worshippers. They gathered inside 59 different places of worship on this Census Sunday. Many parishes, of course, contained more than one Bible Christian chapel. Black

Torrington and Morwenstow supported three chapels in each parish, while Ashwater, Bradworthy, Buckland Brewer, Cookbury, Hartland, Holsworthy, Langtree, Shebbear, Week St Mary, Winkleigh and Woolfardisworthy contained two chapels in each parish.

The Bible Christian predominance in this part of Devon and Cornwall contrasts strongly with the general picture for the two counties in 1851 (as discussed in chapter 5). In Cornwall, the Bible Christians mustered some 21,661 worshippers as compared with 73,351 Wesleyans. In Devon, the Bible Christians attracted 13,576 worshippers as compared with 34,181 Wesleyans. The Bible Christians in north-west Devon and north-east Cornwall tended to be evenly distributed over a wide rural area, while the Wesleyans mustered large congregations in the towns. About 189 Bible Christians attended the Silver Street chapel in Bideford during three services on March 30<sup>th</sup> 1851, in comparison with an estimated total of 1,150 Wesleyans who attended two services in the Bridge Street chapel. Of course, Bideford had been a Wesleyan stronghold since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century; John Wesley had himself preached there on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1757. There were also substantial Wesleyan congregations in Holsworthy (some 227 people inside two chapels) and Great Torrington (about 263 people).

Some might argue that the estimated total of 651 people who attended the six Wesleyan Methodist Association chapels on Census Sunday should be numbered with the Wesleyans. This would be because this denomination seceded from the Wesleyans in 1837, only some fourteen years before this census was held. However, it should be noted that these six chapels were all situated within north-east Cornwall (at Bude, Marhamchurch, Poundstock, Stratton, Virginstow and Week St Mary). It would appear that Wesleyan dissenters within Devon either joined the Bible Christians or remained within the parent church. The one exception might be the curiously named 'Baptist Methodist' chapel situated at Appledore which was described in the census as an independent place of worship.

The Baptists maintained large congregations at Bideford and Great Torrington, while smaller groups worshipped within fourteen villages. The Independents enjoyed large congregations at Bideford, Hartland, Appledore, Great Torrington and Winkleigh, with smaller meetings at Ashreigney, Northam and Little Torrington. There were also two small meetings of worshippers called Congregational Independents who gathered at Great Torrington. One small group, that refused to call themselves by any specific name, met in the village of Dolton. Possibly this was an early Plymouth Brethren congregation.

Generally speaking, the Anglicans in 1851 still maintained a strong presence in both town and country, their main rivals in the rural areas being the Bible Christians. The Wesleyans and the old Nonconformist churches maintained a strong presence within the towns, although they had ventured out into the rural areas by the 1820s.

Much of north-west Devon, as covered by this study of the Ecclesiastical Census, fell within the pre-1837 Bible Christian Shebbear circuit. This circuit has been described as a giant fan in shape, the handle at Northlew and the tips running between Merton and Hartland, "From Appledore the preachers followed the rugged coast to Hartland town and Welcombe, and fetching back by Bradworthy and Sutcombe they went southward till they reached Brentor and Quither, coming northward through the present Northlew circuit, they drew their eastern boundary as far out as Merton". (3)

The baptisms registers for this circuit commenced in 1818, and a study of the baptisms entered between 1818 and 1840 has led to some interesting results. The pre-1837 register was particularly useful in that the entries usually indicated the parentage of the mother of the child being baptised. This makes it possible to reconstruct family groups that had between one and eight children baptised in this circuit during this period. Altogether, there were 315 families that had only one child baptised in the circuit between 1818 and 1840, 101 families with two children, 44 families with three children, 19 families with four children, 12 families with five children, 8 families with six children, 5 families with seven children, and only one family with eight children. This last family was that of William Pickard of Parkham, yeoman, and his wife Mary, who was herself the daughter of John and Mary Courtice. This couple had their eight children baptised between 1821 and 1833.

This large number of families with only one child baptised by the Bible Christians within this circuit may

reflect both the mobility of the population, and possibly also the lack of stability of some Bible Christian followers at this early date. It was apparently common for families to have some of their children baptised in their local Bible Christian chapel and others in their Anglican church. For instance, John Ayre of Langtree, tailor, and his wife Rebecca, had two children baptised within the Shebbear circuit in 1834 and 1836, and a third child baptised at East Putford Anglican church in 1840. Bible Christian adherents seemed to become more consistent later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when membership within the Bible Christian church became more acceptable to the local community. It should also be remembered that many Bible Christian families within this area were affected by emigration, which would have reduced the number of children baptised within each family if the emigrants sailed overseas while still producing children. Charles Denning, the minister from Kilkhampton, made the comment when he filled in the Ecclesiastical Census form for Atworthy chapel within Bradworthy parish, "through the excitement caused by emigration and other circumstances our congregation of the 30<sup>th</sup> March were limited."

This pattern of large numbers of Bible Christian adherents only having one child baptised within the Shebbear circuit was reflected within the other three Devon circuits. The Ringsash circuit formed in 1819 within the rural area just north of Winkleigh in mid Devon, produced an early baptisms register dating between 1820 and 1837. About 167 families had their children baptised within this circuit during this period, of whom some 101 families only brought one child forward for baptism. The Devonport circuit, that covered the Plymouth parishes and the rural area around, also left an early baptisms register dating between 1820 and 1837. About 82 families had their children baptised within this circuit during these years, of whom 50 families had only one child baptised. The Buckfastleigh circuit, that covered a vast rural area around the edges of Dartmoor and stretched as far east as Exeter, produced an early baptisms register again dating between 1820 and 1837. Some 26 out of the 36 families that had children baptised during this period brought forward only one child for baptism.

The two Shebbear circuit baptisms registers that date between 1818 and 1840 certainly reflect some of the geographical mobility of families moving around within the circuit. At least fourteen families were recorded in different parishes while their children were still being baptised. For instance, John Allin, yeoman, and his wife Alice were recorded at Holsworthy in 1834 and at Sutcombe by 1836. Moreover, there were some families with one child baptised within this circuit that had originally travelled much greater distances. William Harveyson, gardener, and his wife Jane had their son William baptised at Salem chapel within Buckland Brewer in 1836. The father was described in the register as "of Sidmouth" in east Devon. Benjamin Wolker, dyer, and his wife Mary had their son James baptised at Edystone chapel within Hartland parish in 1829: they had hailed from as far away as Kidderminster in Worcestershire!

The two Shebbear circuit baptisms registers also give information on the occupations followed by these early Bible Christians. As would be expected, most fathers recorded in the registers worked on the land. There were 99 fathers who worked as yeomen, farmers and husbandmen, and 249 fathers who worked as labourers. There were also another 14 fathers who were recorded as labourers at one date and as yeomen a few years later. These were probably farmers' sons who worked as labourers until they were able to inherit the family farm. The proportion of yeomen to labourers is interesting as it does seem to support the view, expressed earlier, that the Bible Christian church in North Devon enjoyed the support of a substantial number of the respectable local yeomanry.

Several fathers recorded in these Shebbear Circuit Bible Christian baptisms registers followed trades that serviced the agricultural community. They were recorded as masons, carpenters, tailors, shoemakers and cordwainers, blacksmiths, millers, butchers, shopkeepers, brick burners, carriers, coopers malsters and one millwright.

Several fathers of children baptised in the circuit practised trades that had little immediate connection with the agricultural community. George Wonnacott of Great Torrington, hatter, was recorded during 1837, while Samuel Allin of Sutcombe, innkeeper, appeared during 1836. Four schoolmasters were listed: William Andrews of Woolfardisworthy in 1825, William Gay of Black Torrington in 1839, Philip Mayne Hearle of Shebbear in 1826 and John Richards of Buckland Brewer in 1833. Mr Hearle of Shebbear probably taught at the village school, since Samuel Thorne did not establish his school within the parish until 1832. However, Thomas Stenlake of Shebbear, book binder, who had two children baptised at Lake

in 1830 and 1833 and Jonathan Chapell of Shebbear, printer, whose daughter was baptised at Lake in 1835, were definitely connected with the printing business established by Samuel Thorne during 1829. Samuel Thorne, printer, was also recorded in the registers, as was shown during the second chapter of the book.

Other fathers of children baptised in the Shebbear circuit between 1818 and 1840 were recorded as miners, servants and one 'sergeant'. Only one father was recorded with a maritime occupation, and that was John Lee of the fishing village of Clovelly, who was described in 1833 as a 'sea captain'. John Lee owned shares in three small ships, and was himself master of the 20 ton sloop, the "Thomas and Eliza", built at Clovelly in 1815.

There were another four fathers listed in these registers who were recorded as Bible Christian ministers. James Thorne has already been referred to, but two other distinguished ministers were mentioned. These were William Reed of Buckland Brewer, whose son, William Bryan Reed, was baptised in 1836, and Jacob Hunt Prior of Atherington, whose son, John Damrel Prior, was baptised in 1840. William Bryan Reed followed his father into ministry and became the first Governor of Edgehill College. The fourth minister was Abraham Morrice of Shebbear whose son, James Lane Morrice, was baptised in 1837. Abraham Morrice was sent to Canada during 1847.

Two of the three other Devon circuits displayed a similar pattern of predominantly rural occupations followed by these early Bible Christians. The Ringsash register listed some 32 yeoman and farmers with 69 labourers who were recorded as fathers between 1820 and 1837. Another 56 fathers were listed as carpenters, shoemakers, harnessmakers, tailors, coopers, blacksmiths, millers, masons, gardeners, thatchers, farriers, woolstaplers and one 'rodweaver'. The Buckfastleigh register listed 2 yeomen and 16 labourers between 1820 and 1837. The remaining 16 fathers were masons, gardeners, shopkeepers, carpenters, shoemakers, miners, woolcombers and one 'saddletree maker'. One father, John Tucker of Exeter St Olave, was recorded in 1837 as a cabinet maker.

As would be expected, the Devonport register reflected this circuit's urban and maritime base within the Plymouth parishes. The circuit also extended into rural East Cornwall, easily accessible by ferry across the River Tamar. However, no yeomen and farmers were recorded at all, and most of the 18 labourers listed probably worked within the urban area. One father, Thomas Davies of Stoke Damerel, was recorded as a shipwright, while another 12 fathers were listed as mariners. The remaining fathers were recorded as bakers, coopers, shoemakers, miners, masons, tailors, tinmen, sawyers, watermen, painters and glaziers, blacksmiths, carpenters, coachmen, book binders and printers. Two Bible Christian ministers were also listed, together with two soldiers, one boatswain and a cook employed by the Royal Navy. Work within the Devonport circuit was probably for many early Bible Christian preachers their first experience of an urban ministry.

(1) : *Thomas Ruddle of Shebbear*, G.P. Dymond, pp 37-39.

(2) : *The Pastoral Crook*, Thomas Shaw, Cornish Meth Ass Occasional Publication No. 16, 1970, pp 5&6.

(3) : *Memoir of James Thorne*, J. Thorne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1873, p. 213.

## Chapter 8

### EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

The most permanent memorials to the Bible Christian presence within North Devon are the two secondary schools founded by them, Shebbear College for boys and Edgehill College for girls. Shebbear College was founded as early as 1832 while Edgehill College in Bideford did not appear until 1884. F.W. Bourne wrote that the ministerial leadership “conceived the idea of establishing a school at Shebbear, where the sons of such of their own people as could avail themselves of the privilege might receive a good education without being prejudiced against the Church of their fathers.”(1) The need for basic educational and theological training for aspiring ministers was also partly met by the denominational school.

The history of Shebbear College can be dated back to as early as 1820 when Samuel Thorne, brother to James Thorne, expressed his hopes for the establishment of a school at Shebbear in a letter to a local friend. However, nothing more came of this for several years. Samuel resigned from the Bible Christian ministry in 1825. He, for all intents and purposes, ceased to be an itinerant when he took over the management of the printing press in 1822. He was not allocated to a circuit after 1823. Instead, he concentrated upon the printing business he had established at Devonport, now part of modern Plymouth, in 1823. He and his wife, Mary, (the daughter of William O’ Bryan) managed this printing business from their home at Mill Pleasant in the parish of Stoke Damerel until 1829, when, in the middle of all the uncertainty caused by the separation crisis, they moved to Shebbear. Mary Thorne described the move with graphic details in the pages of her journals. “We removed from Devonport to Shebbear March 20<sup>th</sup> 1829. It was a cold wet season.... We left Devonport on Friday morning 8 o’clock: I and my two dear little ones, Mrs Stenlake (our binder’s wife) and two children, and our apprentice girl had a covered cart, in which Mr Stenlake, Jabez Mountcastle, John Pett and Samuel Lawry rode occasionally. Some waggons, containing our goods, accompanied us. We arrived at Lake, the residence of my husband’s father, the next morning at 4 o’clock.” (2)

Samuel Thorne and family continued to live at Lake farmhouse until January 1830, when they were finally able to move into Prospect Place, the house near Lake built by Samuel for his printing business. The 1830 Shebbear Conference was held in this house. Mary Thorne led a hectic life during these years, bringing up a young family and helping her husband with his business affairs. She also had to contend with the agony caused by the separation taking place at that time between her father and the other Bible Christian ministers. She recorded one day during 1831, “Mrs Reed [from the family at Buckland Brewer] came a little way on the road with me, and spoke freely of my parents, and the troubles which had been; she shewed me a sympathy which scarcely any other individual did, and spoke kindly of them. How grateful I felt to her! How much I loved her!”(3)

The next move to establish a school at Shebbear was made during 1831. Mary Thorne wrote, “At the Conference 1831, William Reed was stationed in this circuit and fully concurred in my husband’s views of opening a school at Lady-day (March 25<sup>th</sup>) following. My husband was desirous of refreshing his memory with the Latin he had previously learnt, and of having a sight into a branch or two of Mathematics; he therefore spent several weeks of the winter in Devonport, for the benefit of private tuition.... We began our school at Lady-day 1832, and had more pupils than we ever expected.... Shortly after Conference, which was again held at our house, our harvest began; some of it had a week’s rain after it was reaped before it was carried. I was obliged to be continually in the school, that my husband might attend to the harvest, and he was helping his brother John.... January 13<sup>th</sup> 1833: Through the goodness of the Lord, I am brought to see the beginning of another year. As to temporal things, our school began again last Monday, after a fortnight’s holiday. The number of our scholars is not diminished; I am in the school continually. My husband talks of taking boarding scholars; I do not desire it much at present...besides the

printing office and binding business, we keep a stationer's and druggist's shop, and Samuel has just begun a circulating library." (4)

Affairs were obviously developing rapidly at Prospect Place. Mary Thorne constantly referred in her journals to her own hectic life, "September 8<sup>th</sup> 1834: a busy hurrisome day - a large wash, a full school, cheese making, books to be folded without number.... January 18<sup>th</sup> 1835: we have this week begun an evening school. On Wednesday evening I was obliged to go from the school-room to the class-meeting, and from class-meeting home to the school-room again to dismiss the scholars.... February 7<sup>th</sup> 1835: twenty persons in one family, a daily and evening school, three or four boarding scholars, preaching nearly every Sunday, two classes in the week, leave me no idle time.... May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1835: the school bears heavily on me. My husband is ready to take lads and grown men into the house as boarding scholars, though our house is so full; we are above twenty to the family, and have much company. The school devolves on me with the help of an assistant, Mr Braund, who is competent to teach arithmetic, measuring and land surveying entirely, and writing tolerably; but the grammar, geography etc come on me." (5) The assistant master recorded here was called John Braund: he was not recorded at the school in the 1841 census.

The year 1841 witnessed new developments at Prospect. Samuel Thorne and his family moved back into Lake farmhouse in the spring of that year, leaving the school and printing business at Prospect Place. The rules and regulations of the 'Bible Christian Proprietary Grammar School' were laid down during January 1841. Funds were raised to support this new venture in the form of shares sold to interested friends. A new chapel was also being constructed during this year to replace the smaller building established at Lake in 1817. Mary Thorne recorded the opening ceremonies for "our new Ebenezer" on November 1<sup>st</sup> 1841, when the preaching was conducted by Billy Bray and the Revd O'Donoghue. This latter figure was the first professional master appointed to the school. He had an MA from St John's College, Cambridge, and had been an Anglican clergyman. His presence at Prospect Place was recorded on June 7<sup>th</sup> 1841 when the first English census to name individuals was held. Rev 'Donoghue' was stated to be a clerk (or clergyman), aged about 50 years and born in Ireland. He was living at Prospect with his wife Susanna, two female servants, and eight students (all presumably boarders) aged between 20 and 12 years. One of these students was called John Thorne, aged 14 years; he was the eldest child of Samuel and Mary Thorne baptised at Devonport in 1826, but who died during 1847. Samuel and Mary Thorne were recorded in the census at Lake Farmhouse, living with six of their children, two apprentices, one servant and three agricultural labourers. Samuel's parents, John and Mary Thorne, had by this date moved into a separate building, just called 'Lake' in the census.

Unfortunately, Rev O'Donoghue did not survive his appointment for more than his first year, since he died during March 1842. The school was in financial difficulties during this period, and James Thorne moved back to Shebbear with his family during 1844 to take over the school management. He was appointed secretary of the school in 1844, before becoming the first governor in 1866. His wife, Catherine, became the matron. It was probably largely due to James' presence at Prospect Place that the school was able to survive during the next few years. The Bible Christian Conference formally took over the overall management of the school in 1846.

James Thorne and his family were recorded at Prospect on March 30<sup>th</sup> 1851 when the census of that year was held. He was himself listed as a Bible Christian minister aged 55 years; while Catherine was shown as aged 53 years. Four of their children were still living with them, Catharine aged 24, described as a writer, Susanna aged 18, described as a bonnet maker, William aged 16, described as a printer and John aged 12, described as a scholar. Thirteen pupils were recorded at Prospect Place during this census, aged between 23 and 11 years. The census also revealed that seven of these students had been born within Devon and Cornwall, three on the Isle of Wight, two at Chelsea in London, while George Kennedy, aged 15, had been born in Scotland.

Samuel and Mary Thorne were living at Lake Farmhouse in 1851, together with ten children, one visitor, two servants and four agricultural labourers. Unfortunately, part of this farmhouse was destroyed by fire during 1854, as recorded by Mary Thorne in her journals, although the "tenement occupied by my husband's father once" was saved.(6)

Samuel and Mary Thorne were still in residence at Lake Farm-house on April 7<sup>th</sup> 1861, when the census of that year was held. Samuel was described as a farmer of 181 acres, while his daughter Susanna (aged 23) was recorded as the local postmistress. The other children (James, William, Serena, Paul, Eden and Caroline aged between 29 and 9 years) were working within the printing business, being described as printers and bookfolders. Thomas Stenlake, who had moved up from Devonport with Samuel and Mary during 1829, was in residence at Holwill Cottage and was still employed as the book binder in the printing business. He had been born in Devonport circa 1803, according to this census. Samuel and Mary finally left Shebbear during August 1861 to return to Plymouth, taking their printing business with them. Samuel Thorne died at St Austell in Cornwall on May 23<sup>rd</sup> 1873. He was buried near his parents at Lake chapel, Shebbear, followed by his widow, Mary, who died at East Stonehouse in Plymouth on November 12<sup>th</sup> 1883.

James and Catherine Thorne were again recorded at Prospect House in the 1861 census, James being described as a Bible Christian minister aged 65 years. Four of their children were still living with them, Catharine (aged 34) being described as an accountant, Susanna (aged 28) as a milliner, and William and John (aged 26 and 22 respectively) being recorded as printers. The schoolmaster in residence at that date was John S. Lose, aged 24, and born at Broadwoodwidge, near Launceston. His assistant was Octavius Lake, aged 19, and born at Trellick in Monmouthshire. It was presumably during this period that Octavius Lake first became acquainted with Serena Thorne, daughter of Samuel and Mary, who was then living nearby at Lake farmhouse. Octavius emigrated to South Australia during 1870 and became a notable Bible Christian preacher in the colony. Mary Thorne recorded in her journals that four of her children (Ebenezer, William, Susanna and Serena) sailed to Queensland during 1863. Serena became the first Bible Christian to preach within Queensland before she later moved to South Australia, where, after so many years of separation, she married Octavius Lake.

Twenty-six pupils were recorded at Prospect House in the 1861 census, aged between 24 and 10 years. The three young men aged above 17 (John Orchard, William Goodale and William Hopper) were presumably trainees for the Bible Christian ministry. These 26 pupils had been born in a wide variety of places, as had been the 13 pupils recorded during the 1851 census. Seventeen originated from Devon and Cornwall, two from Somerset, one from the Isle of Wight, three from Monmouthshire, one from Kent, one from Portsmouth and one from London.

The decade after 1861 introduced notable changes to the school at Prospect Place. The headmaster, John Lose, died later in 1861. It was reported to the 1862 Conference that the school premises had just been altered and enlarged at considerable expense. Probably the greatest change, however, occurred during 1864 when Thomas Ruddle was appointed as headmaster of the school. Thomas Ruddle was born in Trowbridge, Wiltshire, in 1839, the son of a poor wool-spinner and the eldest of eleven children. He was trained at Trowbridge and London, before finding teaching jobs at Lewisham and Weymouth. He probably had little idea, when he first arrived at Shebbear, that he was to stay there until his retirement in 1909. His unfavourable description of his first arrival in Devon was recorded in the previous chapter. He was just as pithy concerning his first impressions of the school. He later wrote, "The school as I found it was not such as to inspire hope or confidence. There were 21 or 22 boarders all told, some of whom were candidates for the ministry. The buildings and appliances were utterly inadequate, and the routine of the school work was too exacting and inelastic."(7)

At first generally opposed to Bible Christian values, Thomas Ruddle ended his days as a local preacher of note, married to a local girl, Margaret Allin from Sutcombe and highly respected within the denomination. His qualities as a teacher led to the development and considerable enlargement of the school. James Thorne retired as 'Governor of the Connexional School' in 1870, and was succeeded by Robert Blackmore, and then by John Gammon in 1873. This development of a dual-control authority at the school sometimes led to conflict between headmaster and governor, although it probably worked without incident for most of the time. Thomas Ruddle, as headmaster, was in control of the educational development of his pupils, while the governors had the authority out of school hours. The 'dual-control' system was depicted in full operation on April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1871 when the census of that year was held. Robert Blackmore, aged 56 and born at Witheridge in Devon, headed the list of inhabitants at Prospect. He was described both as a Bible Christian minister and as Governor of the Connexional School. His wife Jane, who was described as the matron,

came next on the list, followed by his daughter Jane (an assistant matron), his daughter Louisa (a schoolmistress) and his son Robert (an assistant master). Thomas Ruddle, described as head schoolmaster aged 30 years appeared next on the list. Perhaps it is scarcely surprising that he moved out to Sheepwash for several years after he married Margaret Allin (daughter of Daniel Allin of Hawkwill in Sutcombe parish) on June 20<sup>th</sup> 1871.

Twenty-eight pupils were recorded at Prospect in the 1871 census. Again, there were four young men aged between 23 and 20 (Alfred Verran, William Hickerley, John Stevens and Arthur H. Goodenough) and 24 pupils were aged between 17 and 9 years. A large proportion of the pupils had been born within Devon and Cornwall (17 altogether), while three came from Somerset, one from Glamorganshire, one from Gloucestershire, one from Hoxton in London, one from Kent, one from Portsmouth and one from Rugby in Warwickshire. There were also another two boys, George E. Nathaneelly and Joseph E. Nathaneelly, who had both been born out in Ceylon.

The decade after 1871 witnessed a considerable expansion of the school at Prospect Place. A growing improvement in examination results, which was largely due to Thomas Ruddle's abilities as a teacher, led to increasing numbers of parents wishing to send their sons to Shebbear. The foundations for several new buildings were laid during 1877. Pupils began to arrive from South Australia and elsewhere in the world, while parents from other Christian denominations began to apply for places for their sons. Several Shebbear pupils eventually entered the ministries of other churches, while one master who worked at the school for a time became an Anglican clergyman.

The expansion of the school is reflected in the 1881 census, held on April 3<sup>rd</sup> in that year. Thomas Ruddle and his family were recorded at Ash Cottage, near the school. Mr Ruddle was by this date described as the headmaster of the Bible Christian College, this being the first reference in the censuses to the word 'college'. John Gammon, aged 65 and born at Swingfield in Kent, headed the list of inhabitants at 'Prospect College' and was described as a Bible Christian minister and the Governor of the College. His wife, Anne, was recorded as the matron, while his daughter, Louisa, was described as the matron's assistant. Three masters were in residence at Prospect. These were Walter Blackburn, the second master, who was aged 24 and born at Halifax in Yorkshire, George P. Dymond, the assistant teacher, who was aged 16 and born at Barnstaple, and Frederick Helliger, who was the German master and born at Eisleben in Saxony. George Dymond eventually worked for almost fourteen years at Shebbear and became the author of Thomas Ruddle's biography. He also established the Hoe Grammar School in Plymouth. The German master recorded in the 1881 census must be the individual who apparently first appeared at Shebbear during January 1881, his arrival apparently being delayed by "the severest snowstorm that has been seen or known in England since 1814."

Eighty-three boarders were recorded at Shebbear College in the 1881 census, which certainly does show a remarkable increase in numbers since 1871 when only 28 pupils were recorded. Five students were aged over 21 (John Robertson, Richard Oates, Henry Rundle, Edwin Hortop and Thomas J. Roach) and these were again presumably trainees for the Bible Christian ministry. The other 78 boarders were aged between 17 and 8 years. The proportion of pupils not born within Devon and Cornwall had also greatly increased since 1871, with only 40 out of 83 coming from these two counties. Eleven of the remaining pupils had been born in London, three in Sussex, two in Oxfordshire, eight in Kent, five in Somerset, three in Bristol, and one each from the Isle of Wight, Southampton, Scotland, Jersey, Bedfordshire, Dorset, Berkshire and Portsmouth. Another three pupils had been drawn from distant parts of the world, Seymoar Ward from the Cape Colony in South Africa, and John Robertson and Ethelbert E. Coombe from South Australia. Another student with Australian connections was Samuel J. Way, aged 14 and born at Morchard Bishop in Devon. He must have been related to the famous James Way, the first Bible Christian superintendent minister in Australia, who was himself born at Morchard Bishop in 1804.

The growing success of Shebbear College led to demands for the opening of a girls' school to be run on similar lines. The first moves in this new venture were made during 1882 and Edgehill House on the outskirts of Bideford in North Devon was purchased the following year. William Bryan Reed, the son of the famous William Reed of Buckland Brewer, became the first Governor of Edgehill, with his wife as matron. A daughter of another minister, Thomas Wooldridge, was appointed as the first headmistress. The

college was opened in January 1884 with 14 pupils in attendance. Mrs Reed died during 1887, and William Bryan Reed eventually married Miss Wooldridge. This couple remained as governor and headmistress at the college until their retirement in 1909. Some 72 pupils were recorded at the college in early 1887.

The Bible Christian denomination merged with the United Methodist Free Churches and the Methodist New Connexion in 1907, and the new United Methodist Church assumed the overall management of the colleges at Shebbear and Edgehill. Thomas Ruddle did not survive this change for very long, since he died on October 17<sup>th</sup> 1909, shortly after his retirement. He lies buried beside his wife in the graveyard at Lake chapel.

John Rounsefell, a former pupil at Shebbear, succeeded Ruddle and remained as headmaster until 1933. Considerable changes emerged during his term in office, including the abolition of the governor system in 1920. The college governor became the bursar, and a board of outside governors was appointed. Shebbear and Edgehill are still supervised by a joint board of governors. Pupil numbers in February 2007 were 321 at Shebbear and 200 at Edgehill College. Both schools still maintain Methodist traditions, attracting a proportion of their pupils from Methodist families living within Devon and Cornwall. In recent years both Shebbear College and Edgehill College have become co-educational.

- (1) : *The Bible Christians: Their Origin and History*, F.W. Bourne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1905, p. 262.
- (2) : *The Maiden Preacher*, S.L. Thorne, 1889, p. 96
- (3) : *The Maiden Preacher*, S.L. Thorne p. 99
- (4) : *The Maiden Preacher*, S.L. Thorne, pp 99-100
- (5) : *The Maiden Preacher*, S.L. Thorne, pp 101-102.
- (6) : *The Maiden Preacher*, S.L. Thorne, p. 128.
- (7) : *Thomas Ruddle of Shebbear*, G.P. Dymond, p.39

## Chapter 9

### THE VICTORIAN ERA

The Bible Christians existed as a separate denomination between 1815 and 1907. The history of this church can be described, in some senses, as the passage of two generations. The first generation was represented by James Thorne and the group of young people that gathered around William O'Bryan during the winter of 1815 to 1816. This group had practically died out after the death of James Thorne in 1872. The succeeding generation was epitomised in men such as Frederick William Bourne and Thomas Ruddle. The Bible Christian church assumed new characteristics after the 1860s when this new generation inherited the leadership of the church. It is also significant, perhaps, that both F.W. Bourne and Thomas Ruddle were never to witness properly the submergence of the Bible Christians within the United Methodist Church after 1907. Bourne died in July 1905 while Ruddle passed away during October 1909. It was a younger generation of Bible Christian ministers, men such as Richard Pyke, who were to rise within the ranks of the United Methodist Church after 1907 to assume leadership roles within British Methodism during the twentieth century.

The later career of James Thorne was briefly outlined in the fifth chapter. He relinquished most of his connexional responsibilities during 1869, and in 1870 he retired from his Governorship of Shebbear College to move to Plymouth. He remained as a preacher within the Devonport circuit until January 1872, giving his last sermon on January 7<sup>th</sup>. He was taken seriously ill during this month and finally died on January 28<sup>th</sup>. His body was taken to Shebbear to be buried in the graveyard at Lake with the rest of the Thorne family. His wife, Catherine, died about two years later on May 14<sup>th</sup> 1874. The Bible Christian church gave their highest honour to James Thorne when they named the chapel built in Barnstaple, North Devon, during 1875 and 1876 as the 'Thorne Memorial Chapel.' This building (later enlarged) is still used as a place of worship by the modern Methodist Church but with a new name, "Christ Church".

James Thorne's almost unchallenged position as the leader of the Bible Christian church after 1829 was eventually assumed by a young minister from Kent called Frederick William Bourne. The fact that a man from the South East could be given this position within a church of such strong Westcountry traditions must reflect the suitability of F.W. Bourne for this post. He was born in the village of Woodchurch in Kent on July 25<sup>th</sup> 1830, the eldest child in a family of six. His father was a Strict Baptist, and the family had been builders in the area for many years. A preaching-room was opened by the Bible Christians within Woodchurch a few years after James Thorne's first arrival in the county in early 1820. It formed part of the Tenterden Mission. By 1842 a Bible Christian Chapel had been built in the village. There was a revival in the area in the early 1840s that may have continued until 1848. Bourne was converted in Woodchurch during 1845 at the age of fifteen. He became a local preacher on the Tenterden plan when only 18 years of age, and entered upon a full-time ministry in 1850. He initially aroused some suspicions among his Bible Christian friends because of his youthfulness and sense of humour. He did not adopt the puritanical mode of dress worn by many ministers, and he caused eyebrows to be raised when his dog was permitted to follow him into the pulpit when he was preaching sermons! His early years were spent in Kent and London, and his first experience of the Westcountry was in 1852, when he was sent to Devonport.

F.W. Bourne soon earned the approval of his ministerial colleagues while working at Devonport and Swansea, and in 1859 he was given his first connexional appointment when he became Secretary to the Missionary Society. He returned to Devonport during 1862, and was given the added responsibility of the assistant editorship, under James Thorne, of the Bible Christian Magazine, a post with a great deal of influence within the church. He replaced James Thorne as the editor in 1866 and was also appointed to the position at which he excelled, that of Connexional Treasurer. Bourne was a moderately successful preacher and enjoyed being an itinerant, but there is little doubt that his colleagues preferred to use him as the

supreme administrator of the church. Bourne was appointed as the President of Conference for the first time during 1867, after only seventeen years in the ministry.

F.W. Bourne married his first wife in 1859, Mary the eldest daughter of James Horswell, whose family came from Devon. She gave him five children before she died in early 1873. He remarried in 1876 to Adelaide Chalcraft. Bourne was appointed the Bible Christian book steward in 1869, and in 1870 he returned to London, removing the Book Room with him. The Jubilee Chapel in Hoxton, London, was opened during 1870, and the Bournes moved to a home nearby. It was F.W. Bourne's recommendation that led to Richard Thomas Buttle's appointment as missionary or evangelist to Hoxton in 1897. Buttle gave a grim description of the slum conditions prevalent in this part of London in his autobiography. (1)

The Bournes moved from Hoxton to Clapham in 1879. F.W. Bourne became involved in authorship during this period of his life, his most famous book being the biography of Billy Bray, entitled "The King's Son", which has gone through numerous editions. He also wrote biographies of James Thorne and William Bailey. His greatest book, in terms of length and research content, was his history of his denomination entitled "The Bible Christians : Their Origin and History", published just before his death in 1905. The later chapters of this book are little more than a factual chronicle of events, but a possession of this book is a necessity for anyone interested in the history of the Bible Christians.

Perhaps the greatest moment of F.W. Bourne's career was his world tour of 1881 to 1882. He sailed from Plymouth during October 1881 and arrived in Australia on December 4<sup>th</sup>. He visited Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, and attended the South Australian Bible Christian conference in Adelaide. He was hosted by Samuel Way, the Chief Justice, who described him in a conference speech as "the leading spirit of their Connexion...the worthy successor of James Thorne". (2) Bourne sailed from Australia to New Zealand and then across the Pacific to San Francisco, from where he travelled by train to Port Hope in Canada, arriving in time for the Canadian Conference of Bible Christians. He was then able to sail across the Atlantic to reach England in time for the English Conference!

F.W. Bourne's period of leadership witnessed the final blossoming of the Bible Christian cause in England. The denomination was now generally accepted within the South West as an important influence in religious, social and political life. Aristocrats like the Earls of Portsmouth gave their favour to the Bible Christians, perhaps recognising them as an important influence within their political constituencies. The Earl of Portsmouth opened a block of new buildings at Shebbear College in 1878, and offered a £5 prize for the best essay on "The Effect of the Revolution of 1688 on Constitutional Progress and National Life." In 1886, the Earl sent a £5 donation to the Witheridge chapel bazaar, together with the message "I believe that no religious body is more active in good works than the Bible Christians, or more staunch in promoting liberal opinions". (3)

This reference to liberalism is interesting since, unlike some modern Evangelical churches that advocate a conservative cause, the Bible Christians shared with their fellow Methodists a strong disposition in favour of the Liberal Party, a trend still discernible within North Devon. The Liberals under Gladstone played a pre-eminent role within British politics during the Victorian era. James and Samuel Thorne advocated the same cause at an earlier period in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, Samuel outlined some quite radical views in a letter to Thomazine O'Bryan, his sister-in-law in America, written during 1835. He wrote, "the aristocrats of our nation are become voracious, unprincipled, dishonest, selfish...and dishonestly pensioned on the hard earnings of the working classes". (4) Samuel Thorne gave voice to his Liberal opinions in the "Ecclesiastical Record" and the "Western Herald", two newspapers printed by him at Shebbear. In 1832, the Bible Christian Conference urged those in its societies who had been granted the right to vote as a result of the Reform Act of that year to give their support to "such men only as they have good reasons to conclude will use their influence to abolish that deep national disgrace, the existence of slavery in the British colonies, and who will also further such measures as will remove all abuses in Church and State". (5)

One local member of the Devonshire gentry soon discovered, in 1858, that the Bible Christians were no longer the uninfluential body that had been so easily persecuted during the 1820s. Sir James Hamlyn Williams, the landlord at Clovelly Court in North Devon, enforced the closure in late 1858 of the barn at

Clovelly Dyke that had been used as a Bible Christian chapel since 1836. James Thorne wrote a strong letter of protest to the "North Devon Herald" on December 2<sup>nd</sup> 1858, stating that the approximately 70 members and 90 Sunday School scholars from the chapel now had to meet in the open air. Stung by this public attack, Sir James wrote to the paper on December 9<sup>th</sup> making a long list of accusations against the Bible Christians. James Thorne replied to these accusations on December 16<sup>th</sup>, but Sir James made no further response. The Bible Christians eventually had to build a new chapel just within the boundary of the adjacent parish of Hartland, but Sir James discovered that he had merely gained a pyrrhic victory. The opening of the new chapel, called 'Providence', was attended by the Mayor of Bideford, E.M. White, who expressed the support of most of the local community for the dispossessed Bible Christians. James Thorne was by this date recognised as a figure of local significance, not to be trampled upon by members of the Devonshire gentry. Thomas Ruddle recorded a conversation with a North Devon man when he first travelled to Shebbear in 1864. Ruddle's companion expressed his surprise that Ruddle knew nothing about James Thorne, stating that "every Devonshire man knows James Thorne, the Bryanite preacher". (6)

F.W. Bourne and Thomas Ruddle were also strong advocates of the Liberal cause. Bourne had a detestation for militarism and spoke out strongly against the British involvement in the Boer War at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He saw the South African war as an act of national apostasy against Liberal doctrines.

The strong Bible Christian support for the Temperance Movement also became a characteristic of their denomination. Many Bible Christian ministers took the pledge during the 1830s when the Temperance Movement was spreading through England. James Thorne became an abstainer in 1837, and it was probably his influence that inclined the Bible Christians towards teetotalism at such an early date, when other English churches were behaving more cautiously. James Thorne was also the founder of the first Bible Christian Temperance Society formed at Langtree in North Devon in 1837. Total abstinence never became a condition of Bible Christian membership, but it was almost unthinkable that any minister could enjoy the occasional drink. Some people have observed that the Bible Christian preoccupation with the Temperance Movement later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century became a replacement, for some of them, for the energies which were once devoted towards revivalist meetings. It is partly due to the Bible Christians that Westcountry Methodism is still very inclined towards teetotalism.

It was stated in an earlier chapter that the Bible Christians were never to expand in any significant manner beyond their established territories after the separation crisis of the late 1820s. Strong attempts were made, however, to penetrate into South Wales, the first chapel in Swansea being opened in 1852. F.W. Bourne was one of the first ministers to be sent to the Swansea Circuit. A Bible Christian foothold was also established within Cardiff during the late 1870s. Renewed attempts were made to establish openings in the north of England, around Askham in Westmoreland in the late 1850s, in Cumberland after 1870 and in other parts of Yorkshire and the Midlands during the 1870s and 1880s. However, the Bible Christians were never able to establish such a strong foothold as that made in Kent during the revival years. By 1900, the Bible Christians attracted the support of 16,582 members in Devon and Cornwall, another 9,890 members in South Wales and the south of England, and only 1,100 members in the Midlands and the north of England. Well over half of the membership still resided within Devon and Cornwall, the original heartland of the denomination.

The Yaxley Mission in Huntingdonshire in the East Midlands furnishes one example of a brave attempt made to move into a new area later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is of some personal interest to the author because he first became aware of this mission when researching material for his book, 'A History of Huntingdonshire', published during 1985. A Bible Christian chapel at Yaxley was recorded in the 1851 Ecclesiastical Census, held on March 30<sup>th</sup> 1851. William Rowe, who became President of Conference in 1872, signed the 1851 census return for the Yaxley chapel in his capacity as the residing minister, and made the statement, "although the said chapel was erected in 1844, yet it has only been occupied by us since Christmas last". Despite their short occupancy of the chapel, some 80 people attended the afternoon service on March 30<sup>th</sup> and another 140 people came to the evening service.

Yaxley is a large village on the edge of the Fens, a few miles west of Peterborough. Its population was expanding rapidly at this date because of the rapid development of the local brick industry. It is possible that a group of Westcountry people settled at Yaxley during the 1840s, attracted by the demand for

workers, and that they requested the establishment of the Bible Christian mission. The Yaxley mission was apparently first recorded in the Bible Christian Magazine during 1852, when one missionary, three local preachers, two chapels and 28 members were listed. William Luke visited the Mission during February 1857, and his report appeared in the Magazine for August 1857. He remarked that the “vast plains and fens (around Yaxley) are, to one who comes from either of the two western counties of England, remarkably strange.... Of the two places which constitute the Mission, Farcet at present bears the most promising aspect...but I do not see how the Station can reasonably be expected to become self-supporting, unless a wider field be occupied”. William Luke advocated the expansion of the Mission by venturing into the growing city of Peterborough. This advice was apparently followed, since the Bible Christian Magazine during 1860 referred to a preaching room being opened in Peterborough. However, nothing further was reported on the Yaxley Mission in the Magazine during 1861, and it was abandoned during this year.

The Bible Christian mission to China can be viewed as their final overseas venture before the union of 1907. The first Bible Christian missionaries were sent to China during 1885, at a date when the English church leadership was feeling the effect of the movement towards Methodist union taking place at that time within the British Empire. A desire to send missionaries to a predominantly heathen land had surfaced among the English Bible Christians as early as 1865, but the church leadership had felt restrained by their lack of material resources. Even in 1885, they had to send their missionaries to China with the guidance and assistance of the China Inland Mission, founded by the Rev. J Hudson Taylor.

The final decisions concerning the China mission were taken at the 1885 Conference, held in Bideford in North Devon. The response to the appeal for financial assistance for the China Mission was overwhelming, and a sum of £650 was raised within a few minutes. Lewis Court described this 1885 conference in his account of the lives of John and Elizabeth Sargent of Horrabridge near Tavistock. John Sargent was the village miller and a prominent but modest member of the local Bible Christian chapel. He was sent to the 1885 conference as a lay representative, and he was apparently so overcome by the enthusiasm expressed for the China mission that he committed a large sum of his own money to the venture. Lewis Court then describes how the poor man had to return home to face the wrath of his wife, “without whom he had reckoned in that hour of sweeping emotion and sublime self-abandonment”! (7)

Two young ministers, Thomas Grylls Vanstone and Samuel Thomas Thorne, were accepted as the first missionaries. T.G. Vanstone was born at West Putford in North Devon in 1851, while S.T. Thorne was born at Launcells within east Cornwall in 1860. S.T. Thorne was the son of Samuel Ley Thorne, who was himself the son of Samuel and Mary Thorne of Shebbear. T.G. Vanstone and S.T. Thorne arrived at their mission station in Yunnan Province in the south-west of China in mid 1886. Frederick J. Dymond and Samuel Pollard followed during 1887, and were themselves followed by John Carter and William Tremberth in 1890. Other missionaries, both male and female, followed in their footsteps. Some fourteen Bible Christian women missionaries worked in China between 1887 and 1907. Both Carter and Thorne died in China at an early date, and T.G. Vanstone had to return to England in 1892 because of poor health. Vanstone worked as a minister in the Chagford circuit in Devon upon his return, but died at an early age in 1898. His memorial stone can still be seen in the beautiful graveyard at the Providence Bible Christian chapel near Throwleigh, just east of Dartmoor.

Samuel Pollard, with other missionaries, continued to work in China for many years. In 1904, he took part in a revival among the Miao tribesmen, when many thousands accepted a new faith in Jesus Christ. He spent the rest of his life among the Miao (he died in 1915), and translated the New Testament into the local language. It is customary these days to undervalue these heroic young missionaries, but there can be little doubt that the Bible Christians in China accepted many hardships, poor living conditions and threats of physical assault in order to preach the Gospel to the people of China. The effectiveness of their ministry was reflected in the growing numbers of Bible Christian members among the Chinese. By 1907, there were 2,867 church-members in China, with another 2,552 people still on probation. It is now known that a large number of people among the Miao have held firm to their Christian beliefs, despite all the Communist pressures inflicted upon them. The Bible Christians, with the many missionaries from other churches, helped to lay the foundations of the rapidly expanding Christian church now present within Communist China.

- (1) : *My Life and Labours for God* R.T Buttle, 1908.
- (2) : *Memorials of F.W Bourne*, W.B. Luke, 1906.
- (3) : “*The Last Bible Christians*”, Devonshire Ass Trans R. Thorne, Vol 107, 1975, p. 51.
- (4) : *Samuel Thorne, Printer*, S.L. Thorne, 1874, p. 145.
- (5) : *The Bible Christians : Their Origin and History*, F.W. Bourne, Bible Christian Book Room, 1905, p. 213.
- (6) : *Thomas Ruddle of Shebbear*, G.P. Dymond, p. 36.
- (7) : *Some Dartmoor Saints and Shrines*, L.H. Court, 1927, p. 192.

## THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Bible Christian church had become a substantially different organisation by the time of the 1907 union as compared with the fervently evangelical movement that had developed within Devon and Cornwall during the years after 1815. The church still enjoyed a predominantly rural base, but there was a gradual shift during the Victorian era towards the cities and away from the rural areas. The leadership became increasingly involved in the desire to send its young and energetic ministers as missionaries to London and to other cities within the British Isles, as well as overseas to China. No Bible Christian conference after 1854 was held within a village but only in towns and cities. Shebbear always retained the distinction of being the centre of the original Bible Christian circuit, but Plymouth became in practice the primary circuit within Devon. This was partly due to rural depopulation, as compared with the expansion of the urban areas.

Roger Thorne's article on the "Last Bible Christians" states that this church "began as an evangelising body influencing those who were neglected by other Christians, but it ended as a small denomination, respectable, teetotal and unable to maintain the missionary zeal that was its *raison d'être*, although reports of small successes were couched in exciting terms. The last Bible Christians devoted their lives to their chapels, but they were like the clergy of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, full of good intentions towards those outside the church's ministry and increasingly out of touch with them." (1)

Some historians might argue that the 1907 union resulted because the Bible Christians had become, by this date, a denomination little different from the other Methodist churches. However, it would be too much of a generalisation to describe the disappearance of the Bible Christian church as the departure of a declining denomination. Rev R.K. Parsons believes, for instance, that the mission to China after 1885 had an invigorating effect upon the Bible Christian membership in England. Missionary reports from China appeared in the Bible Christian magazine, keeping the readers well informed about the work of the Gospel in that land. Reports on the outbreak of revival among the Miao people during 1905 were received with great elation. Rev Parsons has stated that "the Bible Christians went forward into church union not with a whimper but with a great shout of revival". (2)

Previous attempts to seek union with the Methodist New Connexion between 1863 and 1869 and with the Primitive Methodists between 1894 and 1900 had foundered, but negotiations were opened in 1902 with the United Methodist Free Churches and the Methodist New Connexion. This eventually led to the union of September 17<sup>th</sup> 1907, when the United Methodist Church, comprising all of these three denominations, was founded.

By 1907, the Bible Christians retained a membership of 32,202 people worshipping inside 640 chapels. However, they found themselves, after 1907 as the smallest denomination within the United Methodist Church. In 1901, the United Methodist Free Churches (composed of the Protestant Methodists, Wesleyan Methodist Association and the Wesleyan Reformers) had enjoyed the support of 72,568 members, while the Methodist New Connexion had mustered another 32,324 members. Some Bible Christian ministers, such as Richard Pyke, were eventually appointed to senior positions within the new church, but the influence of most former Bible Christians was probably not very substantial.

The United Methodist Church became involved in another union in 1932, when it was joined with the Wesleyans and Primitive Methodists to form the modern Methodist Church of Great Britain. Sadly, the UMC had lost 4,430 members between 1911 and 1931, and it became the smallest church within this union. In 1931, the Wesleyans had enjoyed the support of 500,010 members, the Primitive Methodists mustered another 200,816 members, while the United Methodist Church retained 140,458 members. It must be to

the credit of a former Bible Christian like Richard Pyke that he was appointed President of the new Methodist Church in 1939. The Methodist unions of 1907 and 1932 were sought for varying reasons. One motive was the desire for administrative rationalisation and financial economies, the anticipated result of the amalgamation of Methodist circuits and the closure of redundant chapels. Many chapel closures were strongly resisted, however, particularly in the rural areas where families had attended worship in these buildings for generations. Some Methodists preferred to withdraw from their membership rather than change to another chapel.

It was also believed by some that Methodist union would lead to renewal or even revival within British Methodism. An article in the 'Methodist Recorder', dated January 17<sup>th</sup> 1929, declared that "a Revival will coincide with the coming of Methodist union...with the consummation of Union, a great forward movement on quite unprecedented lines is anticipated; is indeed inevitable". (3) However, the Methodist union of 1932 did not halt the general decline in British Methodism that has been evident since 1920. Membership levels have fallen rather than risen during the decades since 1932. It should perhaps be remembered that Christian Revival generally comes if Christians themselves enjoy a strong and living faith, when they are prepared to pray for revival during the course of many years, and when they are united as a loving body and not split by divisions often caused by trivial issues. A renewal of faith and not ecumenicism will reintroduce the days of revival.

The legacy of the Bible Christian church remaining within south-west England can be measured in terms of its historical example and its social ethos that still permeates Westcountry Methodism. It can also be seen in the physical remains such as the surviving chapels and colleges at Shebbear and Edgehill. The four original Devon circuits were subdivided after 1837 into a larger number of circuits, which were themselves grouped into Districts. The 167 Bible Christian chapels and preaching places located within Devon in 1907 were grouped into twenty-one circuits, centred upon Devonport, Plymouth, Tavistock, Callington, Launceston, Shebbear, Kilkhampton, Holsworthy, Bideford, Great Torrington, Barnstaple, Hatherleigh, Northlew, South Molton, Exeter, Ringsash, Torquay, Kingsbridge, Chagford, Tiverton and Dalwood. Some of the circuits retained after 1932 remained solely Bible Christian in the origin of their chapels. This was true of the Shebbear, Northlew and Ringsash circuits, while the Hatherleigh and Chagford circuits each only contained one former Wesleyan chapel. The Northlew and Hatherleigh circuits now lie within the new West Devon circuit, while the Chagford circuit was recently divided between three other circuits.

The Bible Christian circuits in Devon were eventually grouped within the Devonport, Shebbear and Exeter Districts. Shebbear lost its position as head of a district in 1907, when it became part of the Exeter District. Bible Christian protests ensured that the name of this new district was altered in 1908 to the "Exeter and Shebbear District". However, Shebbear was again dropped after 1932, although it still remains as head of a circuit, with the superintendent minister living in a house near Lake Chapel.

Sadly, the 1932 union led to the closure of many former Bible Christian chapels within Devon (and elsewhere), although a substantial number of Wesleyan chapels were retained by the new Methodist Church. The Methodists in Bradworthy, for example, still meet inside the former Wesleyan chapel in the village, while the old Bible Christian chapel has now become an Anglican church hall. There were usually good reasons for the retention of Wesleyan rather than Bible Christian places of worship, since Wesleyan chapels were generally larger and more substantially built. Only in a few cases were the Wesleyan churches closed down while the Bible Christian chapels were retained. The former Wesleyan church in Barnstaple, for example, was a sad ruin for many years and has now been demolished. Modern Methodists worship inside the 'Thorne Memorial Chapel' opened by the Bible Christians in 1876. Some former Bible Christian chapels have now been closed because they were built within small rural hamlets. A typical closure of this nature has been Atworthy chapel, north of Bradworthy village. Many of these buildings have now become private dwellings.

One can still see the evidence of the former Bible Christian presence as one journeys through Devon today. Several Methodist chapels retain their slate tablets, giving the date of construction and naming the Bible Christians as the original builders. Examples are the chapels at Woolfardisworthy in north-west Devon, Bratton Fleming near Barnstaple, Rackenford near Tiverton and at Rowden near Shebbear. Some tablets, such as that found on the roadside chapel just north of St Giles on the Heath, near Launceston, give the date

of construction underneath the letters “B.C.”. This must cause confusion to the tourists driving past, who must wonder how a Methodist chapel could be built at such an early pre-Christian date!

- (1) : *“The Last Bible Christian”*, Devonshire Association Transactions, Vol 107, 1975, p.53.
- (2) : Words used by Rev R.K. Parsons while editing his book.
- (3) : *A History of English Christianity 1920-1985*, A. Hasting, 1986.

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## The Westcountry Preachers

*“Not many people today know of this Methodist sect, but under its founder William Bryant (or O’Bryan), of Cornwall, it spread the Christian message to many of the outlying villages in North Devon and Cornwall from its Shebbear headquarters.*

*“This booklet traces its growth to the second largest church in North Devon by 1951 and its later decline and absorption into the main Methodist body less than a century after its foundation.*

*“On the way, we hear about the many chapels that now dot our landscape - though often these have now been converted to other uses - as well as the two schools the sect founded, Shebbear and Edgehill Colleges.*

*“Mr Wickes is a professional genealogist, so it is no surprise that many hundreds of names are mentioned and well indexed.”*

Bideford Gazette, 13 August 1987

*“...a fascinating and largely forgotten story...”* North Devon Journal, 24 September 1987

*“It is very well researched - the author is a professional genealogist - and contains much material derived from official records.”* The Flame, January 1988

*“There have been other books on the Bible Christian movement, but surely none so detailed .... Thoroughly researched, it has a full bibliography at the end of each chapter and a good index. It relates the movement’s origin in remote Shebbear, its evangelistic outreach in this land and overseas, and the autocracy of William O’Bryan leading to inevitable separation.”* Methodist Recorder, 3 December 1987