

GLIMPSES INTO OUR PAST

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GLIMPSES INTO OUR PAST

1. SECRET MEETING AT LICHFIELD



Revd Dr Thomas Coke

Thomas Coke was born in Brecon in 1747 and became an Anglican curate but was dismissed in 1777 for his Methodist ways. He joined John Wesley who recognized his many gifts and he became a trusted confidant of his. In 1784 he was ordained by Wesley as superintendent of the Methodist Church in the now independent United States to which he sailed and, at the inaugural conference in Baltimore that year, he ordained as joint superintendent Francis Asbury, the 200th anniversary of whose death we commemorated earlier this year.

Following Wesley's death in 1791, there was some uncertainty at all levels as to Methodism's future direction. Coke, who had revisited the United States and seen how well the Methodist movement was working there drew up plans to remodel the Methodist constitution here. These included superintendents appointed by Conference and ordained elders and deacons. In 1794, Coke called a meeting of some of the senior preachers to fully discuss these plans. It was vital to him that the meeting be held in the utmost secrecy and Lichfield was an obvious venue since, as yet, there was no Methodist society there and thus no-one to recognise the participants. The meeting on 1st April at an unspecified inn in the city was attended by eight preachers in all who agreed, subject to Conference's approval, to what would have been far reaching changes.

Coke was sadly mistaken in thinking that the meeting could be kept secret! Here were strangers, clearly intelligent, meeting behind closed doors in an era of great political unease who could only give rise to suspicion. This they duly did and the local magistrates gave orders for the meeting to be watched. Further, it has been said that a commercial traveller who by reason of his occupation moved around the country recognised at least one of them. This could have been Coke himself. Standing only 5' 1" high he was rather small even for the time and quite rotund. The traveller let it be known that those attending the meeting were no less than Methodist preachers. In Lichfield there was nothing more likely to cause anger than dissenters particularly Methodist ones! It is said that the revelation brought the meeting to a hasty conclusion!

When the plans came before Conference they found little support. The meeting had rather shot itself in the foot by suggesting the Connexion be divided into eight divisions with six of them having one of their number as superintendent!

Coke is best remembered as the Father of Methodist Missions. He dedicated his later life to the missionary movement and established missions in the West Indies and Sierra Leone. He spent his own fortune on the work and thought nothing of going from door to door in London begging for funds. In 1814 he died while sailing to what was then known as Ceylon to establish the work there and was buried at sea.

Michael Green

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OUR METHODIST ANCESTORS

10. THE KIDGERS

William Kidger was born at Newbold in 1770 and his brother, Joshua, at Worthington in 1775 to William Kidger, a colliery overseer, and his wife, Mary. In his youth William had attended Anglican services but the turning point in his spiritual life occurred when, at the age of 21, he went to the Griffydam chapel in March 1791 to listen to the preaching of the sermon which followed John Wesley's death. He then became an ardent member there and played an important part in the great revival of 1794 when the Ashby circuit increased its membership from 450 to 700. As a result of his role in that revival, the then minister, Rev Joseph Pescod, appointed him a class leader.

Little is known about Joshua's early life. It would seem though that he continued to live in the area until at least 1804 as the Griffydam Baptism Register records that his youngest daughter, Ann, was baptised on 7th October 1804 having been born in Swannington. He then appears in 1811 in Lichfield at Gallows Wharf there on the former Wyrley and Essington canal, the wharf taking its name from the gallows erected nearby in 1532. All places where dissenters (non-Anglicans) worshipped had either to be registered with the bishop or the justices sitting at Quarter Sessions. Many of these records still exist and we know that



Joshua Kidger
(Courtesy David Peake)



Lombard Street Chapel
(Lichfield Methodist Church)

one of the signatories to an application to register a house at the wharf in 1811 was Joshua Kidger. Joshua was the wharfinger (wharf manager) and the house was presumably his. What had brought Joshua Kidger to Lichfield is not known. Obviously, he was one of those instrumental in establishing a Wesleyan society there which was done, we are told, with the aid of preachers from Birmingham. The society soon grew to such an extent that it was not long before there was a desire for a chapel and a suitable site was found in Lombard Street, Lichfield and, on the application to register it in 1813, the signature of "J Kedger"

appears. Joshua was well enough off to be able to employ an ostler who it is said found a purse containing money. Despite extensive enquiries the money was unclaimed and it became the first donation towards the chapel.

The Lombard Street chapel opened in 1814. Interestingly, it seems that Joshua brought with him a feature of the Griffydam chapel which was the associated burial ground. Methodist chapels rarely had them but the land in front of the chapel was set aside for one albeit on a far smaller scale! Amongst the trustees of the chapel were William, his brother, and James Burton from Swannington but there is



Burial ground at Griffydam

no evidence that either had played any active role in its establishment.

It was necessary for Joshua to find further help with the work at the newly erected chapel and this time he called on another member of the family. This was John, William's son and Joshua's nephew, who was born in 1795 at Griffydam. On 27th December 1812 aged 17 he had been converted along with around 12 others at a prayer meeting at the Griffydam chapel. It was while working at a colliery near Alfreton, where he had been appointed a class leader at a chapel nearby, that he was called in the spring of 1815. He was engaged at Lombard Street for 2 - 3 years before returning to North West Leicestershire to live with his parents in Coleorton from where he moved in 1820 to Belton to carry on a grocer's business. He opened his house to both itinerant and local preachers and, in his mid-twenties, married Mary, one of the daughters of James and Ann Burton (founder of JMA) of Swannington. Sadly the marriage was only a short one. At the age of 29 he died on 30th April 1825 of scarlet fever.

William carried on his work at Griffydam and was particularly interested in the mission field. He continued as a class leader until his death aged 55 from a stroke on 14th October 1825 which followed a period of intense nursing of his wife and other close members of the family through cholera.

Joshua remained in Lichfield and presumably with the Lombard Street cause. He left the wharf and established a grocer's and tea dealer's shop in Bird Street, Lichfield. Later, by way of complete contrast, he became a house agent and coal dealer! He died on 12th May 1861.

There is an interesting footnote. Not only were the Kidgers connected with Lichfield but there was also a link with Tamworth too as Joshua and John were parties to the lease and trust deed of Tamworth's second Wesleyan chapel in Bolebridge Street built in 1816.

Michael Green

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4. JOHN WESLEY'S VISIT TO TAMWORTH



John Wesley did not come to Lichfield. He may have been to Alrewas but equally he may not but he certainly did come to Tamworth or, more precisely, Bolehall !

In early January 1743, John and his brother, Charles, had visited Wednesbury and within days a society had been formed. Sadly, what had initially been good relations with the Vicar of Wednesbury turned sour and on April 17th the Vicar preached a sermon hostile to the Methodists which led to frequent riots by infuriated mobs. Methodists and sympathisers were personally assaulted, their windows and doors broken and furniture destroyed. Pleas to local justices were ignored.

Around the middle of June, while in London, Wesley learned in detail of the brutality of the attacks by the mobs and decided to do all he could to assist. On the morning of 22nd June he arrived in Wednesbury at the house of Francis Ward, a leading follower. While at one time he had had scruples about being involved with the law he felt that many of these had now disappeared and had agreed to take legal advice. Arrangements had been made for him to do this straight away since, in his Journal for 22nd June, he wrote "I therefore rode over to Counsellor Littleton at Tamworth". This raises two questions. The first is why Tamworth, a round trip of some 34 miles on horseback, when there would have been many lawyers much closer to Wednesbury? Perhaps he wanted to ensure the advice he received was impartial by distancing himself from attorneys who might be biased against the Methodists.

The second question is who was this Counsellor Littleton who had clearly been recommended? In Wesley's day, the description "counsellor" was sometimes used to refer to a barrister. In 1743, we know of two Littleton's residing in or around Tamworth. Living at the Moat House in Lichfield Street was Edward Littleton but it was not Edward who he came to see.

On his journey, in which he may have been accompanied by Francis Ward, he would have entered the town over the medieval Lady Bridge and travelled past the Town Hall before riding along Bullstake and Bollebridge Streets, across Bollebridge and up to Bolehall. His journey would have ended in what is now Moor Lane where, overlooking Warwickshire Moor, the home of Edward's uncle, Fisher Littleton, barrister at law, is believed to have been situated. Wesley appeared satisfied with the advice he was given for his Journal continued that he "assured us, we might have an easy remedy, if we resolutely prosecuted, in the manner the law directed, those rebels against God and the King." In other words, the law was on their side.

In October that year when he returned to Wednesbury, a hostile crowd besieged Francis Ward's house where he was shouting for him to come out. After he had spoken with the ringleaders and appeased them, he went outside and asked the crowd why they wanted him. The response was that they wanted to take him to a Justice of the Peace. Wesley readily agreed to go. However, the local Justices were uncooperative. One of them, Mr Lane, told the crowd who had taken him there to "go home and be quiet". It was no better when he was taken on to Walsall to one of Mr Lane's colleagues, Mr Persehouse, who was "in bed". In the end though there was an unexpected response from the two of them - a summons for the arrest of Methodist preachers for raising riots themselves! Wesley ruefully wrote "N.B The very justices to whose houses I was carried and who severally refused to see me".



Wesley and the crowd

There is no further record of Wesley visiting Tamworth but some 28 years later Methodist preachers arrived there when Samuel and Ann Watton opened their home to them in 1771.



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