

Methodism in eastern Sussex 1756-2017



The early history of Methodism in eastern Sussex starts in 1756 when the first Methodist preacher was posted to Rye. John Wesley had an interesting relationship with the Rye area from 1758, following in the footsteps of Methodist itinerant preacher Thomas Mitchell. He visited many times including the occasion when he gave his last outdoors sermon six months before his death in 1791.

Soldiers had a significant role from 1803 onwards in the furtherance of Wesleyan Methodism in eastern Sussex, west of Rye (see below for the significance of the date). This was during a period at the time of the Napoleonic wars when many troops from all parts of Britain were stationed on the Sussex coast. Hastings was a somewhat special case where there remained great opposition to Non-conformists, but in particular to Wesleyan Methodism in view of that denomination's aversion to smuggling, and it was not until 1817 that some progress was made there.

The early Sussex Wesleyan Circuit (centred on Rye which John Wesley set up), the Lewes Circuit (initiated by ordinary soldiers and formed in 1807), and the Hastings Circuit (eventually fully established in 1822) gradually grew and split into geographically smaller Circuits with many churches and chapels. We can follow the evolution of these East Sussex Methodist Circuits and the 1930s mergers of the Primitive Methodists and Bible Christians with the Wesleyans to form the Methodist Church that we know today.

A strong resurgence of Christian activity was taking place and it is no coincidence that John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield helped lead this national revival from the 1730s, the Wesley brothers in particular aiming their primary work at increasing Anglican church attendances, by creating Methodist societies within the Church of England. John Wesley's revival influence was first felt in eastern Sussex in the Rye area in the 1750s.

Wesley

Charles and John Wesley were both students at Christ Church, Oxford and in 1726 John was elected as a Fellow of Lincoln College. Charles, who is recorded as being a 'bit of a lad' at the start of his university career, became serious about his faith, and started a small group nicknamed 'the Holy Club', which met for prayer and Bible study. Shortly afterwards brother John became another leading light in this group. He in particular stressed the need for combining a deep inward faith with practical service to those in need. It was in the Holy Club that the Wesley brothers met George Whitefield, who also became an important part of the early Methodist movement, but who later took a more Calvinistic direction. They were first called "Methodist" in Oxford. Myles writes that the label was given in the first instance to Charles Wesley by a Fellow of Merton College, in typical Oxonian fashion, as an allusion to members of an ancient College of Physicians in Rome, at about the time of Nero, who were noted for putting their patients under strict methodical regimes and were therefore termed "Methodists". John Wesley preached the first of his open-air sermons at Whitefield's

invitation in Bristol in 1739, the year of the foundation of the Wesleyan-Methodist Society. As an Oxford don and an ordained Church of England minister, Wesley had a reverence for the 'proper' places of worship i.e. in an Anglican church and was quite uneasy at first about preaching in the open air.

Religious life in England in the middle 1700s was at low ebb. Unfortunately many working class people often felt excluded from their Anglican parish churches, so 'field preaching' became a key feature of the Methodist Revival. More and more preachers were trained, and either travelled around like Wesley, or remained 'local preachers'. Wesley went on to spend his life travelling the country, preaching to crowds on village greens, at pitheads, wherever he could find people to listen. During his lifetime he travelled an estimated 250,000 miles and preached 40,000 times. John Wesley is largely credited, along with his brother Charles, as founding the Methodist movement within Anglicanism which began when he took to open-air preaching. Wesley helped to organize and form societies of Christians throughout Britain and Ireland as small groups that developed personal accountability, discipleship and classes for religious instruction amongst members. His great contribution was to appoint itinerant preachers, some of whom he ordained himself or who were ordained by others⁴ and in addition he appointed un-ordained lay-preachers who travelled to evangelise and care for people in the societies. Many of the lay-preachers did not in fact move around very much and it is notable that local lay-preachers are still extensively used within the Methodist Church today.

It was not his intention to form another denomination and throughout his life Wesley remained within the Church of England and insisted that his movement was well within the bounds of the Anglican tradition. He encouraged many more people from the middle and lower strata of society to attend their local Anglican church. This did not actually seem to have been appreciated by most Anglican ministers, many of whom were the younger sons of 'gentry', enjoying a genteel life and steady income. Some described their poorer parishioners in the Archbishop's Visitation Returns of 1786-88 variously as '*Labourers*'; '*Chiefly tradesmen and lower farmers*'; '*Lower class*'; '*Low rank*'; '*Persons of very inferior status*'; and '*The lowest and most ignorant of my parishioners*'. Of the itinerant preachers one said '*They pretend to be duly qualified and are licensed for the purpose to play their engines against the church. They have got the art of tickling itching ears, besides great influence over the rabble and vulgar*'. As can be imagined these attitudes only helped boost Wesleyan meetings. If a more generous view had been taken the Wesley Revival would almost certainly have remained Anglican.

Wesley's unconventional use of what on the face of it was a legitimate Anglican society certainly met opposition within the Church of England and in high ranks. Because members of Wesleyan societies were often unwelcome in their own parish church they would gather in private houses or barns etc. for mutual support and preaching meetings. These gatherings were technically illegal and as soon as 1740 it was obvious that wherever possible it was essential to obtain rooms or build small chapels which could be legally licensed for preaching. Wesley remained somewhat ambivalent about meetings outside of the Anglican orbit, but it is noted that he made little or no attempt to influence the upper classes' opinions and often criticised fashionable society.

There is also clear indication that Wesley deliberately concentrated efforts where the rewards were greatest - particularly in the new industrial areas of the North and Midlands of England. By 1767 one quarter of all Methodists lived in Yorkshire, whereas in Sussex at that time there were only 176, clustered around Rye. He also clearly avoided competing 'on the ground' with the Calvinistic Methodist⁵ ministries of Whitefield and the Countess of Huntingdon (who lived in Brighton from 1757) in areas which they had already evangelised - such as mid Sussex. These areas did not attract much attention from him – in modern parlance he did not wish, in those early days, to 'split the vote'. In any case it would have been unlikely that the theological differences between them would have seemed obvious or even relevant to the vast majority of local inhabitants.

Toward the end of his life he was widely respected as "*the best loved man in England.*" Because of his charitable nature he died poor, leaving as the result of his life's work 135,000 members and 541 itinerant preachers under the name "Methodist". Many will be aware that it was said that "when John Wesley was carried to his grave, he left behind him a good library of books, a well-worn clergyman's gown, - and the Methodist Church."

Eastern Sussex

Methodism first appeared in the very east of Sussex when one of Wesley's assistants, Thomas Mitchell, who had commenced his ministry in 1748 and had experienced severe violence against his preaching in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire including a stoning⁶ and near drowning⁷, came to Rye in 1756 'where no Methodist had ever preached before'. He set up an active Society. Mitchell preached in the villages along the East Sussex-Kent border between Rye and Hawkhurst, but suffered some more persecution and personal violence in Hawkhurst⁸. In spite of this Mitchell must have reported back favourably to Wesley who commenced his visits to the area soon afterwards in 1758. Mitchell left Rye in 1760 and died in 1784. He was followed into Rye by John Murlin then in 1761 by Thomas Rankin⁹, who after his first posting was to return to Rye for a second posting in 1769.

Wesley's visits were mostly to Rye and Northiam where he often stayed with the Holman senior family in Ewhurst or the Holman junior family in Rye. When in Rye he stayed with the Holmans at their home at Cadborough House¹⁰ on the Udimore Road. He visited Robertsbridge five times en route to or from Rye and also twice visited Northiam, where one of the local doctors, Dr John Stonestreet, was a supporter. In all he made 14 visits to East Sussex (with a six year gap between 1778 and 1784, a period during which local membership faltered and some Calvinistic evangelistic preachers such as George Gilbert¹¹ were active). No less than twelve of Wesley's Sussex visits were to Rye which became the centre of a geographically huge but somewhat ungainly 'Sussex' Circuit which extended to Sevenoaks and Maidstone in Kent and (theoretically) all Sussex to the west.

Myles records that Rye 'had a chapel' in 1770. Holloway says that the Wesleyans used the old Presbyterian chapel, which had been built by the widow of Samuel Jeakes the second in 1703 next to her house (then called Hartshorn House) on Mermaid Street. This stood on the opposite side of the road from the old Baptist Chapel (built in 1753/4 on the site of what had formerly been a Quaker Meeting House built 1701 or 1704) and the present Jeakes House (which was an old wool-store). Hartshorn House later became known as the 'Old

Hospital', it having been used as a hospital in Napoleonic times. The Methodists used this old Presbyterian chapel between 1773 and 1789.

A new bigger chapel was built in Rye in 1788, just north of Ypres Tower in Gun Garden opposite the end of Church Street by John Haddock¹² and opened by Wesley in 1789. This was demolished in 1814 to build a much larger one to which later extensive Renaissance Revival style changes were made in 1852. Sadly this good looking church was destroyed by a German bomb aimed at the gun emplacements by Ypres Tower during World War II. The bomb missed the guns but demolished the church.



Rye's 1788 Methodist Chapel

The Rye Methodist Sunday School which had been built almost opposite on the corner of Church Lane on the site of an old Drill Hall in 1901 was converted into today's Church which re-opened in 1954. Their relative positions can be seen on 1920s aerial photographs published on the 'Britain from Above' website.

John Wesley had made a first and very successful visit to Winchelsea on 30 October 1771, arriving on foot from Rye to preach to "a considerable number of serious people". He returned on 28 January 1789, after opening the new Rye Chapel - by which time Winchelsea Methodists, inspired by his previous visit, also had their own small preaching house. This had been built in 1785 and was originally called Evens's Chapel, after the sympathetic neighbour who donated the plot and allowed the chapel to be built with a party wall to his house, but Swift records that the chapel was 'given' by James and Ann Jones who were members of the Winchelsea Society¹³. The "Preaching House" as it was originally called was opened in 1785, and registered on 2 October 1786 as 'Evens's Chapel' by William Boothby in the denomination 'Protestant Dissenters'¹⁴.



Wesley's pulpit in Winchelsea Historic Methodist Chapel

The pulpit from which Wesley preached on the 29th January 1789 remains in the Chapel, which is a National Methodist Heritage Site. From this pulpit Wesley preached to a room "*well filled with decent serious hearers, who seemed to receive the truth in the love of it*". For some reason the chapel was not conveyed to the local Trustees until 1921, remarkably late. Winchelsea also has the distinction of being the place at which John Wesley preached his very last open-air sermon on 7th October 1790. He was such a noted preacher that the chapel was too small for the large congregation which gathered, and being barred from the parish church¹⁵, he preached in the open air, possibly standing or seated on a table under a large ash tree. Whether or not he was seated, a chair that Wesley had sat on in Winchelsea had belonged to Mrs Ann Jones, and in due course her daughter Asenath Jones bequeathed the chair to Methodism in 1867. It was kept in the manse at Rye, but it was moved in 1931 to the John Wesley room at the New Room in Bristol^{16,17}. The table has been lost.

Wesley was accompanied by a young preacher named Robert Miller, posted to the Sussex circuit, who in his diary throws some interesting light on this last visit. He writes: "Mr. Wesley asked me concerning the state of the Society at Winchelsea. I informed him that the members were not so zealous or so free from discord as I could wish, adding 'I hope, Sir, you will give us a good rousing sermon.' To my surprise he preached from 'The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,' and the tears then shed, and the religious feeling excited were such as my eyes had never beheld." This visit was just six months before Wesley died and the very last time that he preached outdoors. The "Wesley Tree" is just around the corner from the Chapel and the present tree was grown from a cutting from the old tree that blew down in September 1927. After John Wesley's death in March 1791 his followers broke away from the Anglican Church and formed the Wesleyan Church, quite quickly registering new rooms for worship and undertaking new chapel building. The definitive schism from the Church of England was in 1795. In the respect of deriving from Anglicanism and being Arminian¹⁸ in

tradition it differed somewhat from the other Non-conformist churches. Most Non-conformist churches derived more from the Presbyterian-Calvinist tradition which had briefly linked with Anglicanism at the time of the puritanical Cromwellian Commonwealth, but had mostly separated again after the restoration of the monarchy and become more radical with diverging churches.

As so often Methodism was not free of fragmentation. The end of the 18th and the start of the 19th centuries, were times of intense discussions about Christianity, there were often strong and bewildering disagreements about interpretations of the Bible. These led to some divergences from the Wesleyan Church with the Methodist New Connexion¹⁹ being formed in 1797, the Primitive Methodist Church in 1807, the Bible Christian Methodists in 1815, the Wesleyan Protestant Methodist Church in 1827, the Wesleyan Methodist Association in 1834 and the Wesleyan Reformers in 1847.

The last three amalgamated in 1857 to form the United Methodist Free Church. In 1907 this United Methodist Free Church joined with the Methodist New Connexion and the Bible Christians to form the United Methodist Church. Finally the original Wesleyans, the Primitive Methodist Church and the United Methodist Church came together in 1932 to form The Methodist Church. So almost all Methodist sects were re-united by 1934. During the period of fragmentation the Wesleyan Church was always the largest Methodist group and the Wesleyan Church was predominant in East Sussex, although there were Primitive Methodist Chapels in both Bexhill and Hastings.

A 'Sussex' Circuit

From possibly as early as 1759 but certainly by 1788 a Sussex Circuit was formed which included parts of West Kent. This was centred on Rye and preachers were appointed to that circuit. As circuits grew in numbers of members they were split into geographically smaller circuits and from 1795 the new Rye Circuit ministers were appointed. The Rye circuit remained particularly strong on the Kent-Sussex border but Methodism at that time was not so strong in the rest of Sussex to the west of this area (See Chapter 4 for more detail of circuits). It seems that the nearer to Rye and the Kent border the earlier a successful Society was set up and a house was registered or a chapel was built – e.g. Ewhurst 1794, Icklesham 1795, Peasmarsh 1798, Beckley 1814, Sedlescombe 1812, Robertsbridge 1812, Northiam 1814. Wesley is recorded as having preached more than once at each of the last two villages, Austen has written about these visits and also about the Haddocks, Holmans and the Winchelsea Wesley tree. But there is no record at all of John Wesley visiting Battle or indeed Hastings, Eastbourne or Brighton.

The following are dates of the earliest South-East Sussex meetings.

Battle	1804
Beckley	1801
Bexhill ^{21*}	1808
Bodiam	1774
Brede	1810
Dallington*	1814
Ewhurst (part of a house)	1774

Guestling	1811
Guldeford & Iden	1815
Hastings*	1817
Hooe (Lower Ninfield/Russell's Green)*	1811
Hurst Green*	1808
Iden	1819
Mountfield*	1810
Northiam	1774
Peasmarsh	1777
Robertsbridge*	1774
Rotherfield*	1794
Rye	1774
Sedlescombe	1813
Staplecross	1788
Tanhouse (Northiam)	1810
Ticehurst*	1810
Wadhurst*	1792
Westfield	1811
Winchelsea	1774

*After 1807 the area of South-East Sussex west of Rye and the Rother Valley, with the exception of Hastings – which was 'No Man's land' - was in the Lewes Circuit which contained a 'Sussex Mission' which initially covered Mountfield, Hawkhurst, Robertsbridge, Ticehurst and Wadhurst. Hooe and Bexhill are listed in the very early years of the Lewes Circuit.

Sussex was a county hardly touched by John Wesley's itinerant ministry except, as discussed above, for the area adjoining the Kent border, where he had had early success and friends and supporters. Indeed west of the Rother Valley large parts of both east and west Sussex were part of the so called 'Methodist Wilderness'²² for some time and Hastings was 'bandit country'. Hickman points out that Methodism spread to the rest of Sussex in the first decade of the nineteenth century under the influence of Methodists in the armed forces. This could be a direct or an indirect influence as we shall see.

Military Methodists

The army was present in strength in Sussex from the start of the wars with France in 1793. To see off any attempted French invasion there were barracks containing in total tens of thousands of soldiers in the coastal areas, including at Battle on Whatlington Road (943 Infantry plus 120 horses), Hastings ([1794-1804 at Bo-Peep and Fairlight Down], [post-1804 at Halton²³] 554 infantry and 187 cavalry), Rye (187 cavalry) and Winchelsea (150 infantry). The biggest local barracks was at Robertsbridge (Silverhill) where there were 2132 infantry, clearly a reserve. Many of the soldiers barracked in Sussex at that time originated from northern England where Methodism had become particularly strong. The exceptions were in Hastings where the militias were in later years more local or Irish, and Bexhill where the 939 soldiers were mainly from the German Hanoverian Legion and would have been mostly Lutheran. We are told that the Hanoverian singing was most appreciated in St. Peter's, the local Anglican church.

It was not until an amendment to the Militia Act was passed in 1803 which allowed Methodists and other Nonconformists in the armed forces to be excused training on Sundays that military Methodists could become fully involved in local Methodist affairs. This

legislation was probably the indirect key to the formation of a Methodist meeting in Battle. The story is that in 1803, a Mr J Bagnall had become the Pastor of the Zion Baptist Church. He had previously been in the Militia barracked at Battle, but had moved back to Leicestershire. Whilst in Battle he had been a member of the Zion Church and a local preacher, so the Battle Baptist Church asked him to return. According to the Baptist history not long after his return a Wesleyan group was founded in the town. In 1804 Bagnall moved to the Wesleyans, taking with him some of his followers and conducting Wesleyan services, probably as a lay preacher. He obviously upset the Baptists en route as he had moved from the Baptist Calvinistic to the Wesleyan Arminian doctrine and Richard Sinnock (a prominent Battle Baptist benefactor) records in his memoir that Bagnall's character turned out '*so very bad that those who had supported him saw their error and left him*'. However we know no more than this about the affair. So a Wesleyan meeting was founded in Battle in 1804 and the members would have held open air services or rented rooms or used members' houses or barns in which to hold their services, although no definite evidence of registration of rooms in Battle has been found²⁴.

The role of soldiers in developing Methodism west of Rye and Winchelsea is further supported by Dunn-Wilson²⁵ and Swift. They describe the military role in Eastbourne, where there was no Methodist presence before 1803. A group of soldiers stationed at Southbourne (the area between Bourne and Sea Houses – two of the four small villages that were eventually to merge into Eastbourne) registered themselves as 'Dissenters' and they established a place of worship in a house at Sea Houses for the 'Society of the People called Methodists'. This house no longer exists. The local civilian population also joined the Society and – most importantly for the future of Methodism in the Hastings area – a man called Henry Beck, who was a baker and grocer, moved from Lewes to Sea Houses in 1804, set up a shop and joined. He became an important member of the local community and by 1813 he was recorded as one of the first Wesleyan preachers²⁶ in the Brighton and Lewes Circuit. Beck was very active and in 1806 helped Joseph Park, a bugler stationed in Eastbourne, set up another Wesleyan meeting in Lewes where the Calvinistic Methodists were already established. In 1807 the Lewes Circuit covered a very large area west of Rye. This is recorded as containing Bexhill, Hooe and Mountfield as well as Eastbourne. Their first preachers were Robert Pilter and William Homer. The Eastbourne Society built a permanent chapel²⁷ which opened in 1810. This struggled a bit, particularly after the military was disbanded and eventually Henry Beck moved to Hastings in 1817²⁸. His preaching presence may of course have been felt in Hastings and area before then. He started a bakery in Hastings at 3 Russell Street, near Wellington Square, serving the new expansion of Hastings into the Priory valley.

Hastings, Methodism and Smuggling

Although Methodism had attempted to develop in Hastings in the 1790s there were few or no active Methodists. The first brave registration of a Methodist place of worship was dated 25 January 1797, in St Clements Parish by Joseph Kyte²⁹. This clearly did not thrive and Methodism really struggled in Hastings against both a ferociously negative establishment and the aggressive smuggling community. Very few Wesleyan baptisms³⁰ are recorded and these are all in the Lewes or later Eastbourne Society Books. William H Balding in his pamphlet on the Centenary of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Hastings and St. Leonards dated 1921 described the methods employed whenever news spread in Hastings that a

Methodist preacher was visiting. If the preacher stood on the beach to address the people in the open air he was assailed by missiles from a mob of fishermen and smugglers, and sometimes guns were fired from vessels on the beach over the heads of the preacher and congregation. If the meeting was indoors it was a favourite method of annoyance to loose sparrows into the room to put out the candles.

Hastings and neighbouring areas such as Bexhill and Fairlight were heavily involved in smuggling. Few locals did not take part in it directly or indirectly and there were corrupt officials and many individuals who looked upon smuggling as an almost recognised profession. Those on the fringes of the 'trade' had a relatively clear conscience about it as duties on items such as tea, coffee, chocolate, lace and spirits were very high and in the 18th century were used to fund unpopular wars with France and the American colonies. John Wesley could not abide smuggling and had spoken out heavily against it. He produced a pamphlet '*A Word to a Smuggler*'³¹ of warning to smugglers about their sin. Although it has been romanticised in recent times smuggling was in fact a serious offence, with lawless and violent if not homicidal gangs. The members of the notorious Hawkhurst gang would frequent local inns in the mid-1700s '*carousing and smoking their pipes, with their loaded pistols lying on tables before them, no magistrate daring to interfere with them*'. In the end they went too far and big rewards were offered for their capture and many of them were hanged. Smuggling did not end there and the continuing situation put fear into the hearts of peace-loving people and this fear led to the staunchly anti-smuggling Wesleyans being avoided. John Wesley himself would not countenance anyone associated with smuggling being a Methodist Society member. He recorded in his diary of 22 November 1773 that Rye folk '*will not part with this accursed thing – smuggling*'. The '*A word to a smuggler*' leaflet was still being actively distributed by Wesleyans. Smuggling was somewhat suppressed during the Napoleonic War but after the victory at Waterloo in 1815 there was a brief resurgence.

From 1818 there were 'Coast Watchers' who made smuggling more difficult and had a pound on the Stade in old Hastings where they would break up captured smugglers' gear and boats if they had been caught, but as may be imagined it could be a dangerous job; they were few, even less popular than the Wesleyans and had an uphill struggle. Thankfully after the formation of the Coastguard in 1831, reduction in duties on goods and reform of the Customs Service in 1853 smuggling virtually died out. For more detail on smuggling in Sussex the reader is referred to its extensive literature.

With this, the coming of the railways and the increasing development of seaside towns as places for healthy sea-bathing, on a scale that was capable of attracting significant investment, old towns such as Hastings and Brighton and new ones, such as Eastbourne became from about 1795 part of the growing fashionable pursuit of health among English society which really 'took off' after 1810. So it can be of no coincidence that with the combination of eliminating smuggling and development of resorts with associated increasing populations Methodist congregations in Sussex coastal areas swelled.

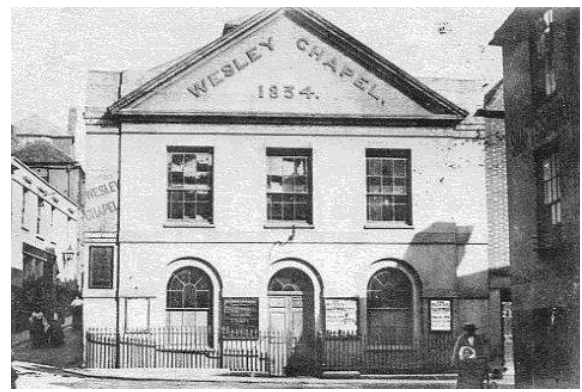
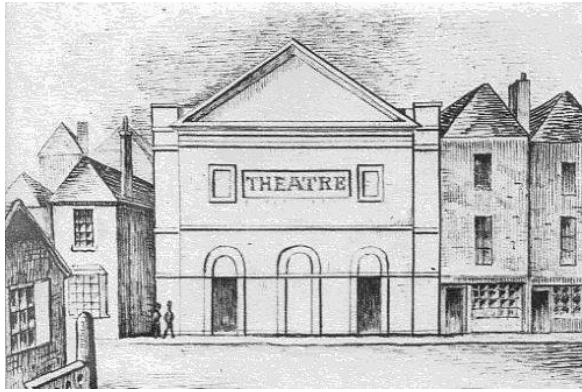
A Hastings Circuit

But Hastings had remained untouched by, possibly untouchable to, Wesleyans for some considerable time. The preachers in Rye were wary of the aggressive Hastings and in any case they had a huge area to look after to the east. It took brave Henry Beck, with the help of two lay-preachers from Rye, Messrs. Clarke and Hollis, who volunteered to help in the somewhat perilous undertaking, to break the deadlock in 1817. Henry Beck³² made available a room in his house above his shop at 3 Russell Street and meetings were held there. The story which is then told is that Mr Beck, whilst walking in newly built Wellington Square, had the good fortune to meet an assistant of an affluent Methodist, a Mr Butterworth who was visiting Hastings, presumably to enjoy the developing seaside resort. Beck and Butterworth then met. If this was Joseph Butterworth³³ (as seems highly likely) this was a fortuitous meeting indeed. Butterworth was a broad-minded Wesleyan, son of a Baptist minister, founder of Butterworths publishers, the second Methodist to be elected to the House of Commons (where he always spoke against Catholic emancipation although otherwise being quite liberal) who in August 1819 was appointed general treasurer of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, a post he retained until his death. Butterworth provided the funds for rooms to be rented in Winding Street.

The first minister appointed to Hastings, the Rev. W H Clarkson, came in 1820 before Hastings became a Circuit. He found a Society of 24 members and nine months later there were 60. The growing society eventually built a small chapel in 1822 in Waterloo Place, off All Saints Street. This was 12.8m x 9.75m and became the base for a minister and the core of a new Hastings Circuit. Attendances soared and at the Waterloo Chapel in 1829 were estimated to be 300-400. It must have been crowded. Hill's Arrangement confirms that John Geden was posted from the Rye Circuit in 1822 to become the first Hastings Circuit minister.

Further chapels were built at Hollington in 1825 (this was replaced in 1835 and again in 1887[closed 2017 and merged with Park Road MC to become St Leonards MC]) and at Belle Hill, Bexhill also in 1825 (closed 1938). This last chapel can still be seen just off the A259 dual carriageway. Baptisms are recorded in Bexhill from 1809 so there must have been pre-existing rooms or another building. The Battle chapel was built in 1826 – but more of this below. The first Ninfield Chapel was built in 1832 and Fairlight Down in 1838.

Hastings circuit grew rapidly and in 1833 a theatre on Bourne Street which had only been opened in 1825, but had commercially failed, was bought for £780 (plus another £600 for the next door house and cottage). It was converted to a large Wesleyan Chapel in 1834 (see 'before' and 'after' pictures below). This conversion must have been 'interesting' as it was described later in the Methodist Times as '*a quaint old place with two galleries, shaped like a coffin*³⁴' and '*the schoolroom is amongst the rafters, to enter which you have to ascend the second gallery and pass through a hole made in the ceiling*'. The debt after the conversion was about £2000 and was still being paid off into the next century.



Stephen Putland (who had association 40 years later in 1874 with Battle) opened a room at Norman Road in 1834. This grew and a 'good sized Society' built another Wesleyan Chapel in the same Norman Road, St Leonards later in 1834 (which burnt down in 1900 and was replaced).

Wesleyan Methodism really took off and at the religious census of 1851 it was reckoned that at Bourne Street 250 plus 182 Sunday school scholars (total 432) attended its Sunday morning service, 90 in the afternoon and 450 in the evening. At Norman Road the totals were morning 326, afternoon 210 and evening 280³⁵. There were also good attendances at the other chapels in both Hastings and Rye circuits. For more details reference should be made to the Religious Census of 1851. The old Hastings Chapel at Waterloo Place was converted to a British School for Girls, (patron of this type of school was the Duchess of Kent, Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld, Queen Victoria's mother), and the first headmistress was probably Mary Ann Selden.

'Father' Henry Beck laid the foundation stone of St Helens Methodist Church (vacated in 2017, with the congregation meeting at the Ore Centre, pending a decision on their future) on 14th June 1866. He died two years later at the age of 84 and was buried in Halton Churchyard. *"The rise...of Methodism in the neighbourhood was a prized memorial of his effort and prayer."* said the Rev. George Lester, one of the Circuit Ministers. The Waterloo Place building was replaced with a new Board School in 1853/4. The ex-theatre was demolished in 1939 and rebuilt in brick. It closed for Methodist worship in 2000. Since then it has been used for various commercial purposes, but is now called Bourne Hall and is converted into three dwellings.

Primitive Methodist chapels were established pre-1870 at Newgate Road, Bohemia. This was closed in 1938, but can still be seen). Another was at Beach Terrace opposite Pelham Place in Hastings (demolished 1930/31) and yet another chapel was opened at Caves Road, St Leonards, but this short lived chapel closed in 1900. The Beach Terrace Primitive Chapel was demolished in 1930/1 to widen the coast road. The Bohemia Primitive Chapel only remained open until 1938 after the merger into the Methodist Church in 1932. The Bohemia congregation merged with Park Road Methodist Church (now St Leonards Methodist Church) and presumably the Beach Terrace Primitives briefly went to Bohemia Primitive or transferred to either Central or Bourne Street Wesleyans. It is only a wonder that Beach Terrace had not been washed away before given its position virtually on the beach. It nearly was in the severe storms of March and September 1903.

Pre-1870 origin early Wesleyan chapels were Little Common³⁶ (an early 'Turf Erection'), Pevensey Sluice (Normans Bay – sold 1965), Fairlight Down (on the slope between Ore village and North's seat – replaced by St Helens, Ore) , Ashburnham, Netherfield / Netherfield Gun (a room in a house), Russell's Green (Hooe/Lower Ninfield – sold 1962), (Upper) Ninfield, Udimore, Icklesham, Camber and Catsfield (although the spired church was built in 1912 and closed in the 1990s a meeting place which was 'not a separate building' existed on the same site before then) as well as all those mentioned above. Sidley Green was mentioned on the Circuit list of 1836 but no information can be found about this. It may have been a room in a house and short lived.

The only Methodist chapel in the present circuit to have a pre-1870 origin which was not Wesleyan or Primitive Methodist is Pett. This was founded in 1848 by Coast Watch members of the Bible Christian Methodist Connexion posted to the area from the West Country³⁷. It was originally called Mount Calvary Chapel. The Bible Christians merged into the United Methodist Church in 1907 and finally the Methodist Church in 1932. An excellent history of this chapel can be found on Pett Chapel's website. Guestling, now closed and converted to a house, was also a Bible Christian Chapel at the time of the Religious Census of 1851, although at its founding in 1815 it was Wesleyan and it was still on the Wesleyan Circuit list of 1836. The chapel is marked as 'Plymouth Brethren' on the OS map of 1873 and as 'Wesleyan' once more on the OS map of 1899/1900 – an interesting history perhaps accounting for its waxing and waning in the Circuit lists.

Of course some Methodist chapels and churches came and went post 1870 and before the present day. It is beyond the scope of this paper to look at these in detail, but for example Haddocks Hill (now Wrestwood Road) Primitive Methodist Chapel in Sidley was built in 1873, and had a small offshoot in a shop in Reginald Road, but the congregation moved by 1910 to Christchurch Primitive Methodist Church in Springfield Road which opened in 1907 and remains active. The 'White Chapel' at Whatlington on the present A21 was Wesleyan, but the most notable example locally was the Central Methodist Church, Hastings which was a fine 900 seater church on Cambridge Road. Its site is now a block of flats. There was also an 1898 corrugated iron church (tin tabernacle) at Hamilton Terrace, Bexhill. Now long demolished, a new building on the site was home to Plymouth Brethren from 1935 and is now a Living Word Church. Of the still active post-1870 churches Calvert Road, Hastings was opened in 1891, although it was preceded by a 'tin tabernacle' in 1880, which would have temporarily served the Mount Pleasant and West Hill areas which were being built up at that time. Park Road (now St Leonards Methodist Church) was preceded by a shared meeting place in Bohemia Terrace) and Sackville Road, Bexhill both opened in 1892. Trinity, based at Broad Oak-Brede is an amalgamation of Broad Oak, Beckley and Westfield, the Beckley and Westfield Chapels having been sold. The Broad Oak Chapel (1833) is now physically the oldest active chapel in the circuit bar Winchelsea of course, Battle Chapel having been sold in 2011.

Two old circuit plans for Hastings Circuit have survived at Battle. These are for July to October 1834 (image below) and the same period in 1836. The 1834 Circuit comprised Hastings (Bourne), Battle, Bexhill (Belle Hill), Hollington, Hooe/Ninfield, Guestling, St. Leonards (Norman Road), Westfield, Boreham, Catsfield, Little Common, 'The Down' (? Fairlight Down) and Rye (twice in the period for the Pastor only, clearly a local

arrangement). Preachers included Henry Beck and no less than three Putlands including S[tephen] Putland and Samuel Putland). In 1836 the plan had been added to with Pevensey Sluice (Norman's Bay), Netherfield/Netherfield Gun and Sidley Green. Boreham disappears (it may have been transferred to the Lewes Circuit). Also mid-week services on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday at 7pm had been introduced at the larger churches.

Two points of interest from these Circuit plans are firstly that some preachers still came from the neighbouring Sandhurst and Lewes Circuits and secondly that once a quarter, in the larger churches, a service would take the form of what was termed a Love-feast. The congregation would share a simple meal of bread or cake and water or non-alcoholic punch and members would be asked to speak about what God had been doing in their lives. The Love-feast continued in nineteenth-century Methodism, particularly with the Primitive Methodists, who held quarterly Love-feasts well into the second half of the century. This type of service waned as the 20th century approached. This was because practices became more fixed in Methodist worship and revivalist services declined. A number of two-handled 'loving cups' used during these services have survived from the early years of Methodism (simple example above). As an historical experiment this service format was re-enacted at Winchelsea Chapel in 2015 and 2016.

There is a bit of a mystery about the early years of Battle Wesleyan Chapel. It was surrounded by meetings at Sedlescombe, Mountfield and Hooe, but is itself unrecorded between 1804 and 1822. Maybe it was in some sort of penumbral wilderness of its own and infrequently visited from Rye. It was a long way from Lewes which was the next Circuit. In 1822 the new Hastings Circuit was formed and history becomes clearer. The Hastings circuit initially comprised societies at Hastings, Bexhill, Westfield, Battle, Hooe and Guestling. Battle had an established membership by 1822. Before this it may have been part of a Mountfield meeting and not recorded separately, in which case records 1807-10 would be in Lewes records, 1810-1815 would have been in the Rye lists and after 1816 with the Sandhurst Circuit for which early records cannot be found.

Hooe and Bexhill joined the Hastings Circuit from the Brighton and Lewes Circuit. During the next few years chapels at Sedlescombe, Ninfield, Hollington, Catsfield, Crowhurst, Pevensey Sluice (Normans Bay), Netherfield and Fairlight Down were added. By 1843 yet more chapels at St. Leonards, Catsfield, Little Common and Netherfield had been added and by 1860 another at Ashburnham. Mountfield transferred in to the circuit in about 1860 and a pretty Mountfield Chapel was built in 1894 (although there had been previous incarnations) and Guestling re-joined the Hastings Circuit in 1894 and remained till 1914, presumably left for Rye but came back again in 1934. Westfield and Icklesham were added in 1934, and Pett in 1937.

Following a number of closures and re-organisations over the years by 2017 the local Methodist Circuit comprised 11 churches/chapels: Emmanuel Centre (Battle), Calvert Memorial (Hastings), Christchurch (Bexhill), Little Common (Bexhill), Ninfield, St. Leonards, Pett, Rye, Sackville Road (Bexhill), Ore, and Trinity (Broad Oak – a merger of Westfield, Brede and Broad Oak). Winchelsea Historic Methodist Chapel is part of 'Methodist Heritage' owing to its association with John Wesley, and no longer has regular services. This chapel is maintained by the local circuit via a management committee and each month an event is

held. This varies and includes services to mark the celebrations of Easter, Harvest and Christmas, coffee mornings, presentations, talks, open days etc.

Keith Foord, 2017

Endnotes

1For fuller details of other Conformist, Nonconformist and Catholic activity in Battle see 'Battle Abbey and Battle Churches since 1066'.

2These could have been Wesleyans but no proof of this has been found.

3Again fuller details are available in 'Battle Abbey and Battle Churches since 1066'

4This was a policy that put him at odds with many in the Church of England.

5The Wesleyan approach is Arminian

6 "No sooner was I at the town (Guisely) , than the mob came, like so many roaring lions. ..the mob followed me in a great rage, and stoned me for near two miles, so that it was several weeks before I got well of the bruises I then received."

7 (At Wrangle) "They came ...and carried me to a great pond, being ten or twelve feet deep. Here, four men swung me backward and forward. For a moment I felt the flesh shrink; but it was quickly gone. I gave myself up to the Lord, and was content His will should be done. They swung me two or three times, and then threw me as far as they could into the water."

8 "I had not spoken many words, before a numerous mob broke in, pulled me down from the place where I stood, and forced me out of the house. Then they struck up my heels, and dragged me upon my back about half a mile to a public-house."

9A bluff ex-dragoon Scotsman, he was one of John Wesley's trusted lieutenants. He was sent to America 1773-78 then returned to England. He was present at Wesley's death.

10 A house still exists on this site, but the original was destroyed when hit by a V1 during WW2.

11There is more about George Gilbert in 'Battle Abbey and Battle Churches since 1066'

12John Haddock's brother Henry was a Captain in the Coastguard Service and lost his life at sea accosting a smuggler. No doubt John Wesley heard this tale. John Haddock married his brother's fiancée, Miss Barnes, who was a staunch Wesleyan, three years after Henry's death.

13The next door house is still called Evens.

14It was not usual but also not uncommon for a Wesleyan chapel to be registered this way.

15The then Rector of Winchelsea, Drake Hollingberry, is recorded as saying about John Wesley: "If I saw the devil running across the churchyard with a Methodist on his back, I would not intervene. He would merely be taking care of his own!"

16 The New Room in Bristol is the oldest Methodist Chapel in the world (originally built in 1739) and the cradle of the early Methodist movement. It was built and used by John Wesley as a meeting place and a centre for helping and educating the needy members of the community.

17 There is some minor confusion reported in the Proceeding of the Wesleyan Historical Society concerning whether he might have stood on a table borrowed from the Jones and that the chair was in fact one that he sat in at the Jones' house, where he stayed in Winchelsea. A picture of the chair with Asenath Jones suggests the former as the chair does not appear strong enough to be stood upon! Maybe the chair was stood on the table and he sat in it.

18Relating to the theology of Jacobus Arminius and his followers. The Calvinist view was that salvation was limited to those whom God had chosen, whereas the Wesleyans adopted the Arminian position that all could be saved.

19From which the Salvation Army derived in 1872

20It is difficult to believe that there was no Methodist recording of this early Battle meeting, but nothing else can be found by the author to date. We do know from the Baptist's history that the early 19th century was a difficult time in Battle. There were problems obtaining land and premises which were mainly controlled by the Battle Abbey estate. Because of establishment resistance Third parties or individuals and/or benefactors often had to be involved as proxies to buy premises on behalf of Nonconformists. There were also clearly the difficulties being experienced in neighbouring Hastings. But there is a definite registration of a 'Wesleyan Arminian Methodist Chapel' at Mountfield dated 1810. This meeting was surprisingly large and it is conjectured that this may have been a meeting shared with Battle taking place outside of the Battle parish boundary. Alternatively or additionally the registration of a house on the High Street in Battle in 1820 by 'Dissenters' (see Chapter 1) may have been a Methodist meeting. There are only limited records to be found of Mountfield. In 1807 it was placed in the Sussex Mission, part of the Lewes Circuit. It had a membership of 37 by 1809. In 1810 it transferred to the Rye Circuit where there are detailed membership lists to 1815. In 1816 it transferred with other North Rother meetings to the Sandhurst Circuit where it stayed until transferred to the Hastings Circuit in the 1860s. Its meetings

from 1834 were held at Pankhurst Chapel, part of a house, and in the late 1800s at a building at the gypsum mines. The old chapel which can still be seen at Mountfield today was built by the Hastings Circuit in 1894 and is now converted to residential accommodation.

21Bexhill contributed financially to the Lewes Circuit in 1808 and had 23 members in 1809, but after that no other early record can be found

22Really a Wesleyan wilderness. There had been little Wesleyan missionary work in mid and west Sussex, west Surrey and north Hampshire, although Whitefield and the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion had set up Calvinistic groups in the Brighton area.

23The Duke of Wellington when still Sir Arthur Wellesley held a ball at the Swan Hotel, High Street, Hastings after taking command of the brigade in Hastings in January 1806. This must have been convenient as he was elected MP for Rye between 1806-09.

24There is no record at WSRO where these Chichester Diocese registrations are held and this is discussed elsewhere in this book. Numbers of registrations are missing but we know that a Society must have existed in Battle before 1822 when the Hastings Circuit was formed, as Battle is in its first list.

25A former minister in the Eastbourne Circuit

26He must have been a lay-preacher as he is not listed in Hill's Arrangement. Of curiosity is that in all the registers of Lewes and Eastbourne where his name appears his surname is consistently and clearly spelled Back. Throughout his long life in Hastings he was Beck, which name this book uses.

27In this they were assisted by the Rev. Robert Pilter who was posted to the Lewes Circuit in 1807-08

28This was probably a commercial move. Hastings was fast developing as a fashionable seaside resort, whereas Eastbourne developed more slowly and its economy was damaged once the soldiers moved out at the end of the Napoleonic war..

29One of the itinerant preachers posted to Rye 1795-96. The later Waterloo Place Chapel would have been in All Saints parish, not St Clements so this was probably a room.

30The Bartlett, Dowle and Fret families for Hastings and the Deeprise family from Ninfield

31The 'Word' is not a short word. It comprises about six pages of close print....

32Henry Beck was a baker. His children were baptized in the Bourne Wesleyan Chapel. He continued to be a lay-preacher and preached in Battle as well as Hastings. He laid the foundation stone of St Helens Methodist Chapel when he was 82 and lived to be 84.

33Balding says this was 'James' Butterworth M.P., but it was Joseph Butterworth who was the M.P

34The site is actually coffin shaped so this is probably the source of this comment.

35Concerning all these numbers it has been reckoned by Caplan and others that attendees or 'hearers' were usually approximately three times the numbers of members. A significant portion of attendees would attend both Anglican and Nonconformist services, often drawn to the latter by the quality or quirkiness of a particular preacher. Religion was also entertainment in those days!

36Turf Chapel was built in 1834 as an offshoot of Belle Hill. It was the first church in Little Common, preceding the Anglican church by five years. It was rebuilt in brick in 1859, but sold in 1915 to help provide the funds for a new Church which is still active.

37It had become normal for the Coast Watchers to be from different parts of the country to reduce any influence by locals engaged in smuggling.

38According to Pocock this area was most of Mid and West Sussex, West Surrey and most of Hampshire, and may have even included Wiltshire and parts of Berkshire, where there had been little Wesleyan Methodist missionary activity for the 30-40 years prior to 1829.

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