

The Bible Christian Heritage of Week St Mary - a visitor's guide

Introduction

The Bible Christian Church was one of the strands of nineteenth century British Methodism. Its birthplace was the village of Week St Mary in north Cornwall in 1815. Their heartland was always the south-western counties of England, although they did spread to many other parts, and overseas. The Bible Christians merged with two other branches of Methodism in 1907 and ceased to exist. Although they were only ever regionally important, nevertheless, in the early twentieth century they were the fastest growing of the English Methodist churches.

Background

In the eighteenth century Cornwall was one of the prime areas for John and Charles Wesley's Methodist movement which aimed to rejuvenate the Church of England. John, in particular, came to Cornwall many times and preached at Week St Mary on eight occasions. Some of these were in the Parish Church, since the Rector, John Turner (1716 - 1770), was one of the few Anglican clergy who welcomed Wesley. However, most Methodist ministry in Cornwall was centred around the mining areas further west and had left untouched large parts of north Cornwall and most of Devon. In the early years of the nineteenth century the Wesleyan Methodists were beginning to reach this area and a number of mission stations were founded, including Stratton in 1811.



Figure 1. Week St Mary parish church, where John Wesley preached on several occasions.

William Bryant/O'Bryan

William Bryant was born in 1778 at Gunwen Farm, Luxulyan, north of St Austell. He later changed his name to O'Bryan to reflect his supposed, but unproven, Irish ancestry. His father was an Anglican but member of a Methodist Society and his mother's family had Quaker roots. William developed his faith from an early age; in 1785 he was blessed by John Wesley after he had heard him preach, a blessing he never forgot. As he grew older he inherited the family farm but always felt he was called to a life of evangelism. His first steps were in his local area and he began preaching in around 1810. But he was never



Figure 2. William O'Bryan, 1778 - 1868.

content to be organised by others and completely disregarded instructions and schedules set by his Methodist Circuit (a circuit being the group of Societies into which the Methodist Church was organised). He went off and did his own thing wherever he felt he was called. Eventually he was called to task on this and expelled. That didn't stop him, however, and he was soon preaching in the area north of Bodmin. These new locations were absorbed into adjacent Methodist Circuits and O'Bryan set off for pastures new, further north. In 1814 he came to the area straddling the River Tamar, north of Launceston, an area where there had been little Methodist preaching, but which had been allocated to the Stratton Mission as described above.

The incident that started it all

O'Bryan was initially welcomed by the local Superintendent Minister, but they soon crossed swords over O'Bryan's undisciplined ways. He had also been expelled, again, from his home circuit at St Austell. A new circuit Minister, George Banwell, was appointed and covered Stratton, but he too had difficulties with O'Bryan. The Circuit Steward, Richard Spettigue, from Week St Mary, tried for a compromise because the local Methodist Society had taken to O'Bryan. On 1st October 1815 O'Bryan was preaching to a meeting of Wesleyan members

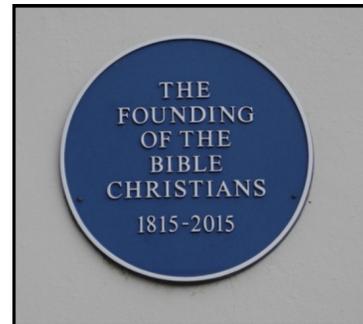
at Spettigue's house at Week Orchard in Week St Mary. Rev Banwell arrived and asked each of them in turn if they supported O'Bryan.



Figure 3 (above). *The entrance to Week Orchard. Richard Spettigue's farmhouse was down the private lane on the left.*

They all did, and there and then Banwell tore up the Week St Mary Methodist Society's membership roll. The meeting may have started as a Wesleyan meeting but thus became the first of a new denomination which later was known as the Bible Christians.

Figure 4 (right). *The plaque on the current Methodist Chapel that commemorates the birth of the Bible Christians at Week St Mary.*



Beginnings

From Week St Mary O'Bryan, two days later, came to Shernick in Launcells parish and founded another Society, and then two days later to Cookbury, east of Holsworthy. It was here that he met James Thorne, from Shebbear, who invited O'Bryan to come and preach at Lake Farm, the Thorne family farm. This he did on 9th October and another new Society was formed; the Thorne family, at Lake, went on to be the backbone of the new organisation. The infant denomination spread rapidly and by 1817 there were two circuits, based on Kilkhampton (which included Week St Mary) and Shebbear, and a number of Societies. By 1819 there were 12 circuits, and over 2000 members. By 1823 they were in Kent, London, Bristol, Somerset and the Isle of Wight, but their heartland was always north Cornwall and west Devon.

Later expansion and developments

The name 'Bible Christian' was first used in 1816 and it became their official name, although for many years other names were used, including Bryanites. They adopted much of the organisational style of the Wesleyan Methodists, although right from the start they did use women preachers. They continued to expand, at the religious census in 1851 there were 34,038 attendees at their services. Chapels were built, and rebuilt and expanded, to replace the original meeting places in farm kitchens and hired buildings. They founded schools, sent missionaries to China, and emigrating Cornish miners took their Bible Christian faith with them to Australia, Canada, and South Africa, and to other parts of the UK. By 1900 they had a membership of 27,572, of which 60% were in Devon and Cornwall.

The Bible Christian Heartland

West Devon and north Cornwall was always the heartland of the Bible Christians. It was the area they started in, where they had their first two circuits, where they founded a secondary school at Shebbear in 1841, where many of their early conferences were held, and where they were always proportionately the strongest. But it was an unlikely location to found a mission based church. In 1815 it was remote and sparsely populated with no significant towns; the land was poor - 'where every living thing is crushed between the hammer of the west wind and the anvil of the cold clay'; communications were bad, nearly everywhere in the country had turnpike roads by then, but this area didn't, and railways came very late. As the century progressed they were also working against a background of rural depopulation, many areas of Devon and Cornwall lost up to 50% of their population. And yet, despite starting in such an unpromising location, they were able to grow.



Figure 5. In the corner of the square at Week St Mary a glimpse can be had of the first Bible Christian Chapel - the single storey building at the rear, now a house. On the left is the rear of a house that may have been the first BC preaching place in the village.

Progress in Week St Mary

As elsewhere, early Bible Christians met in farmhouse kitchens, in hired rooms, and in workshops. The 1819 Plan (preaching diary) for the Kilkhampton Circuit lists a number of these in and near Week St Mary including the village itself, Week Orchard, Treskinnick Cross, Langdon and Whitstone. By 1829 they were able to build (or convert) a permanent chapel, just off the Square in the centre of the village (see Figure 5). By 1842 they were able to build something bigger and land was bought on the east side of the main road through the village

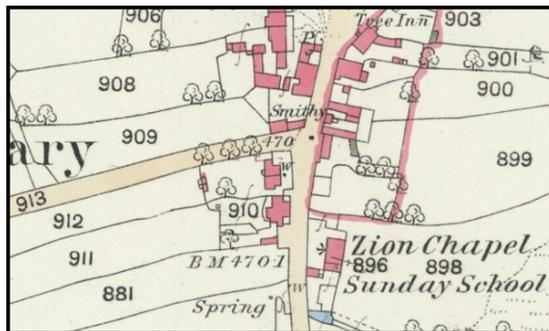


Figure 6. Extract from the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map, 1883, showing the 1842 Zion Chapel. The first chapel of 1829 is the building due north of the 'S' in Smithy (see photo figure 5). (Map courtesy National Library of Scotland).

and a new chapel built. It was called Zion - many of the Bible Christian chapels were given Biblical names such as Bethel, Rehoboth, etc. By the 1880s this was becoming too small and in poor condition, adjacent land was purchased, and a brand new chapel and Sunday School erected in 1888. This has been modernised over the years but is still the chapel in use today.

Figure 8 (right) The 1888 chapel from the north and **Figure 7 (below)**. The datestone of 1888 on the gable.



Elsewhere in the parish another Bible Christian chapel was established at Bakesdown by 1833. It was still in use in the 1880s but was converted to a house by 1903. At Week Orchard the original Bible Christian preaching place was replaced by a Wesleyan Chapel after change in ownership, but this had closed by 1886.

Figure 9. The chapel at Bakesdown as shown on the 1883 Ordnance Survey map. (Courtesy National Library of Scotland)



In 1831 Week St Mary became the head of its own circuit which included chapels over a wide area, including nearby chapels at Maxworthy, Eden, Dimma and Canworthy Water. This remained the situation until August 2009 when a merger resulted in the current Week St Mary and Camelford Circuit. Over the years many local families have produced Bible Christian Ministers and leaders and many of the family names are still in the area today.

Merger and legacy

Methodism as a whole had split into a number of different denominations and towards the end of the nineteenth century talks began on merger. In 1907 the Bible Christians merged with the Methodist New Connexion and with the United Methodist Free Church to form the United Methodist Church. In 1932 the UMC and the Primitive Methodists merged with the original Wesleyan Methodist Church to form the Methodist Church. The legacy of the Bible Christians can be seen in their buildings, especially in this area, where every remote crossroads seems to have had a chapel at one time. But their

Figure 10. The United Methodist Free Church chapel at Week Green which closed in the 1930s.



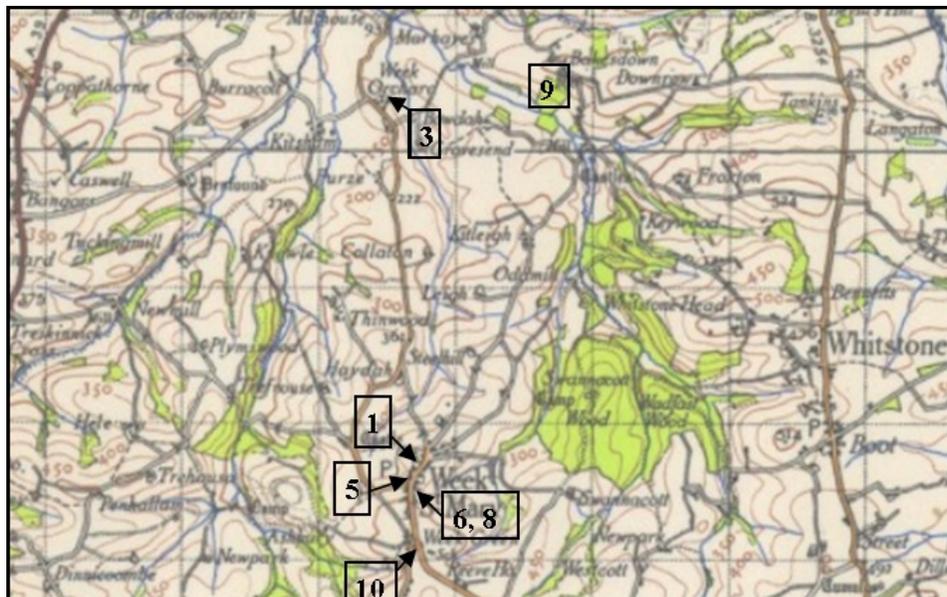
legacy is also in their early use of women preachers, their involvement in rural issues, and the schools they founded at Shebbear and Bideford. Through the Thorne family Shebbear had become their spiritual home; later histories of the Bible Christians were largely written by those with roots in Shebbear and downplayed the role of Week St Mary where it all started. This leaflet about the Bible Christian heritage of Week St Mary may redress the balance.

The Bible Christian Heritage of Week St Mary

The illustrations in this guide (as numbered below) show the places where this heritage can be seen.

1. The Parish Church of St Mary where John Wesley preached at the invitation of the Rector
3. The entrance to Week Orchard where Rev Banwell tore up the membership roll and the meeting became the first Bible Christian Society.
- 5 & 6. The first Bible Christian chapel in the village, of 1829
6. The location of the second Bible Christian Chapel, of 1842
- 7, 8, & 12 The third Bible Christian Chapel, of 1888
9. Bakesdown Bible Christian Chapel
10. United Methodist Free Church chapel

Figure 11. Locations of places described above (based on the 1" to 1 mile OS map of 1946, courtesy of National Library of Scotland).



Our Chapel and the relevance of the Bible Christians today

When the Bible Christians started they had no ministers and no recognised local preachers and yet they grew rapidly by empowering and relying on lay people. They tried new ways of doing things and they were, by the standards of their time, pretty informal. Much the same could be said of Week St Mary Methodist Chapel today.

We have a variety of services ranging from traditional to a completely informal cafe church. Our services can involve videos, drama, illustrations, and new music; and many services are led by our own church members. The chapel is a community hub with the Parish Council, Women's Institute, and a sewing group all meeting here. There is a thriving children's music and drama group - Bright Sparks - who have done productions ranging from Bugsy Malone to a Variety Show, including leading an annual Christmas drama service.

There are other leaflets available giving further information about the chapel and its activities, and the ways in which we aim to bring people to faith in God.

Acknowledgements and Further reading

We would like to thank Bob Booker for some of his local research on the Bible Christians and their families.

Other further reading includes

- The Bible Christians 1815 - 1907; Thomas Shaw, 1965
- Feet of Clay - The life and ministry of William O'Bryan; Thomas Shaw and Colin C Short, 2007
- Week St Mary Village, a community at large; David Martin, 2007
- The West Country Preachers; Michael Wickes, 1987



Figure 12. *The 1888 Bible Christian chapel in the centre of the village. The school-room is on the right.*