

# *THE INFLUENCE OF PRIMITIVE METHODISM ON RURAL LIFE IN EAST ANGLIA*

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When John Wesley died in 1791 he left a tightly organised 'Connexion' of some sixty thousand members. Within six years of his death, however, signs of dissension appeared in the movement which he had founded. The more radical elements within the Connexion wished to give the laity far more say in the councils of Methodism. The expulsion of Rev. Alexander Kilham, the leader of these dissidents, led to the setting up of the Methodist New Connexion in 1797.

Thereafter there was a tendency for the leadership of the mainstream Wesleyan church to become yet more authoritarian and for the church itself to become more 'middle class' and respectable – an Establishment church, if not an Established one, turning its back on the 'field preaching' techniques which had enabled Wesley to reach the unevangelised and downtrodden masses from which so many of his early converts had come.

In America, however, open-air evangelistic meetings continued to be an important part of church life, especially amongst the settlers in the thinly populated areas on the ever expanding western frontier. Christians amongst the frontiersmen would come together from a wide area to camp in the woods and hold revivalist 'Camp Meetings' which could go on for some days.

In 1807 Lorenzo Dow (a camp meeting preacher from the United States) visited the Harriseahead chapel at the foot of Mow Cop in Staffordshire. His preaching so moved the members there that, under the leadership of Hugh Bourne (a local timber merchant and carpenter who had founded the chapel a few years earlier) they arranged a series of one-day Camp Meetings on their own – the first being held on Mow Cop on 31 May 1807.

In the same year the Methodist Conference meeting in Liverpool addressed itself to the question: 'What is the judgement of the Conference

concerning what are called "Camp Meetings"? The answer was given: 'It is our judgement that even supposing such meetings to be allowable in America they are highly improper in England and are likely to be productive of considerable mischief and we disclaim all connexion with them.'<sup>196</sup>

In 1808 Hugh Bourne's name was removed from the roll of Burslem Circuit and in 1810 his associate, William Clowes, was similarly disciplined for giving his support to a Camp Meeting organised by Hugh Bourne and his Camp Meeting Methodists. In 1811 these Camp Meeting Methodists and the supporters of Clowes united, and in 1812 the new grouping adopted the name *The Society of Primitive Methodists*.<sup>197</sup>

Such was the evangelistic ardour of its founders that the new church soon spread beyond the boundaries of Staffordshire. The troubled years after the Battle of Waterloo saw a great revival in the Midlands – one Camp Meeting in Nottingham Forest is reported to have attracted twelve thousand people. It was at this time that their unconventional and emotional preaching earned Primitive Methodists the nickname 'the Ranters' – an originally contemptuous epithet that they soon learned to accept with pride.

Primitive Methodist evangelists first reached East Anglia in 1821 in which year Joseph Reynolds came to Cambridge from Tunstall in Staffordshire. A letter written to his home church gives us a glimpse both of the man and of the conditions of his times:

Barnwell, near Cambridge, August 8, 1821

Dear Bretheren,

I wish to spend my health and strength for God's glory and the good of souls.

When I left Tunstall I gave myself up to labour and sufferings, and I have had them; but they have been for God's glory. My sufferings are known only to God and myself.

I have many times been knocked down while preaching; and I have had many sore bones, but God was with me.

Once I was knocked down by the people, trampled under the feet of the crowd, had my clothes torn, my money taken from

<sup>196</sup> B. Aquila Barber, *A Methodist pageant* (London, 1932), 23

<sup>197</sup> The phrase 'primitive Methodists' was one which Wesley himself had used a few years before his death to describe the original adherents of the movement he had founded.

me, and in consequence of this, I had to suffer much hunger.

On another occasion, I had travelled thirty miles with a penny cake, then preached at night to about 2,000 people. I was scarcely able to stand; and, after all, supped on cold cabbage. Then, being unwilling to express my necessities, I was driven to lodge for the night in the fields, where I slept under a haystack until four o'clock in the morning when I was awake by the birds.

I arose and proceeded into the town, where I preached at five to a many people.

Thence, I proceeded to Cambridge (where I have been for a fortnight), and preached to a large congregation with a body almost worn down with hunger and fatigue. That day I was glad to eat the pea-husks on the road, as I walked along.

Nevertheless, I believe all things have worked together for good; hundreds will bless God in eternity for having sent unworthy Reynolds here. There are few Methodists in this county.

Cambridge is a large county town, and has hundreds of ministers in it; yet very little preaching, and thousands of people are living in iniquity.

In a general way, they are very desirous of hearing the Word; still it may truly be said, 'No man careth for their souls.'

The few Methodists, and other professing people are dead and formal. I have suffered a little persecution but now it is dropping, and thousands flock to hear the Word of Life.

I have many times seen them in tears, and souls are converted to God every day. I have been called up in the morning to pray with persons who have been wrestling all night for God to pardon their sins.

Sinners are frequently falling down and crying for mercy. Hallelujah!

Some have come many miles, burthened with sin, and have gone home rejoicing. I cannot describe fully what a work there is about Cambridge.<sup>198</sup>

<sup>198</sup> E. A. Harvey, *The tale of the years* (Watton, Norfolk. Published under the auspices of the Lynn and Cambridge Primitive Methodist District Centenary Committee, 1908), 19

Note that at that time single Ministers were paid a salary *not exceeding* £4 a quarter; married men were paid a sum *not exceeding* fourteen shillings a week.<sup>199</sup>

Also in 1821 Oscroft and Charlton came from Lincolnshire and 'opened a mission in the county of Norfolk, where the work of the Lord spread rapidly, and hundreds were soon converted to God'.<sup>200</sup>

The missionaries came to this area at a time when there was considerable rural unrest. Memories of the 1816 hunger riots were still green and Luddite activities were rife. But despite, or perhaps because of, this their mission met with considerable success, and by 1822 there were fifty-seven preaching places on the first Primitive Methodist preaching plan for East Anglia.

In 1823 Lynn, Norwich, Fakenham and Cambridge were established as four of the six branches of the Nottingham Circuit. The Fakenham branch stretched from Syderstone in the west to Southrepps in the east, a distance of some twenty-six miles, and from Wells in the north to Litcham in the south, about sixteen miles. Sunday services were held in thirty-eight villages and weekday services in sixty-seven. Because of the distances to be travelled in this and similar circuits, the stipendiary itinerant preachers were sometimes absent from their homes for a whole month.

The stipendiary ministers were supported by unpaid 'local preachers' who would take services in villages within walking distance (that is to say within twenty miles) of their homes. These local preachers were often poor labourers whose employers were not always sympathetic to their nonconformist activities. This may explain why, in December 1822, the Fakenham Quarterly Meeting sanctioned the coming on to the plan of a certain brother but agreed that he should have 'a fictitious name against his number'.<sup>201</sup>

That many of the preachers were sound and sincere men need not be doubted but, not surprisingly, there were also some who had been caught up in the emotionalism of the revival but whose spirituality did not run so deep. The Minutes of the Fakenham Circuit Preachers' Meetings in the 1820s record

very large numbers of preachers being taken off the plan for various reasons, including debt, intemperance, harvest frolicking,

improper conduct, quarrelling, bad language, gambling, non-attendance at the means of grace and often neglect of appointments.<sup>202</sup>

At this time the four stipendiary itinerant preachers (i.e. ministers) in the Fakenham Branch were the Revs Woodford, Braithwaite and Kinsley and Sister Woolfit. From its earliest beginnings Primitive Methodism had accepted the full-time ministry of women. The affectionate respect accorded to these ladies may be illustrated by the following verses which appeared in October 1836 in the preaching plan of the North Walsham Circuit under the title 'Farewell to the old, and welcome to new preachers'

SISTER SYMONDS Jesus'

servant,

We must take our leave of you;

Faithful, useful, zealous, fervent,

Now we say, adieu, adieu,

Hasten on to tell the story,

Dying love and mercy too;

Only aim at Jesu's glory,

SISTER SYMONDS now adieu.

Welcome, welcome, SISTER

BULTITUDE,

Come and sound the jubilee;

Tell to all the wond'ring

multitude,

Pardon and salvation free,

All around may trembling sinners

Weep and for salvation cry;

And may old and new beginners

Glorify the Lord most high.<sup>203</sup>

Elizabeth Bultitude was the best known of the East Anglian women ministers. Born in 1810 she was converted in 1828 at a Camp Meeting on Mousehold Heath. In 1832 she entered the Ministry and was stationed first at Norwich. After this she had sixteen other postings eventually becoming a Superintendent minister. At one station she recorded, 'What money I had would not allow me to dress smart enough for the people'. Much loved and respected, she was nevertheless well known for her eccentricities. It was said that nothing would induce her to rock a cradle however much the baby cried. She would not allow any man to speak to her in chapel in her own pew; she would request him to go into the next seat. In 1862 she was superannuated and retired to Norwich. When she died in 1891 she was the last of the Primitive Methodist women ministers as by that time the Conference had ceased to call women to the rigours of

<sup>199</sup> Ibid. 14

<sup>200</sup> Ibid. 10

<sup>201</sup> Ibid. 16

<sup>202</sup> Ibid. 17

<sup>203</sup> E. Dorothy Graham, 'Women itinerants of early Primitive Methodism' in *CIRPLAN: the Bulletin of the Society of Cirplanologists*, 8:6 (1985), 106-15

itinerancy. The Conference noted the disappearance of her name from the list of preachers where it had stood so long 'as though to remind us that the gifts of the Holy Spirit were without distinction of sex'.<sup>204</sup>

Mid-Norfolk was evangelised in the early 1830s by Robert Key, a converted coal heaver from Great Yarmouth, so strong that he once split a table asunder when he struck it with his fist to emphasise a point at a London meeting. Key needed a strong constitution for he met with considerable hostility in the course of his ministry. The parishes of Shipdham, Watton and East Dereham, he said, might have been 'matched against any other three places of similar size for brutal violence and inveterate hatred of the truth'.<sup>205</sup> Key is generally thought to have provided the model for the Primitive Methodist preacher in George Borrow's *Lavengro*:

It was a strange sounding hymn, as well it might be, for everybody joined in it. There were voices of all kinds – of men, of women and children – of those who could sing and those who could not; a thousand voices joined, and all joined heartily. No voice of the multitude was silent save mine.

The crowd consisted entirely of the lower classes, labourers and mechanics and their wives and children.

I have recalled that hymn to mind, and it seemed to tingle in my ears on occasions when all that pomp and art could do to enhance religious solemnity was being done – in the Sistine Chapel....

There stood the preacher, one of those men – and thank God they are not a few – who, animated by the Spirit of Christ, amidst much poverty, and, alas, much contempt, persist in carrying the light of the Gospel amidst the dark parishes of what, but for their instrumentality, would scarcely be Christian England.<sup>206</sup>

The folk that Robert Key worked amongst were described by his biographer, W. T. Godrick:

.... a people to whom religion was unknown except by name,

<sup>204</sup> J. Ritson, *The romance of Primitive Methodism* (London, 1909), 131–32

<sup>205</sup> B. Aquila Barber, *A Methodist pageant*, 78

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.* 75, 81

whose morals were loose, and their habits vicious; a class from which the ranks of the poacher, the farm robber, and the stack-burner were ever and anon recruited.... Cock fighting and man-fighting were cruel sports freely indulged in.<sup>207</sup>

In 1834 the Poor Law Amendment Act exacerbated the degradation of the rural poor. The abolition of outdoor relief forced many into the newly established Workhouses. The period saw an increase in child labour and the development of the notorious Gang System of itinerant labour. Unrest in the countryside led to arson, sheep stealing and cattle maiming. In 1835 troops had to be called in to quell a riot in Great Bircham after five or six labourers had refused to accept relief in kind (flour, and tickets for shop goods) instead of money.<sup>208</sup> But the seeds sown by men like Oscroft, Charlton, Reynolds and Key took root and grew, in some communities with dramatic results as witness the conversation between Robert Key, on the Cambridge Circuit, and R. Wheaton, a farmer at Bluntisham, where, he said, there used to be

a gang of desperadoes, who actually plotted a scheme to burn down the whole parish and they actually succeeded in destroying sixteen houses, and burning sixteen families out of house and home ... you may put these fellows into jail, or upon the treadmill, and they will come out the same devils as they went in; but if the grace of God get into their hearts, it will change them, and that alone for nothing else can do it.

Mr Wheaton paid a man two shillings a night during the whole winter to watch his premises, and

even then we went to bed full of fear lest we should be burnt out before the morning: we were in constant dread.

But, thank God it is not so now. Your people came here, and sung, and preached, and prayed about the streets (you could not get these fellows into a church or chapel); the word was brought to bear upon their guilty hearts, and now they are good men in your church.<sup>209</sup>

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.* 77

<sup>208</sup> J. P. D. Dunbabin, *Rural discontent in nineteenth century Britain* (London, 1974), 37–8

<sup>209</sup> E. A. Harvey, *The tale of the years*, 6

In 1830 there was much agitation amongst agricultural labourers. Although a causal relationship would be hard to prove, it has been noted that there was more violence in those counties where Methodists were fewer on the ground.<sup>210</sup> There was, for example, more violence in Suffolk where the proportion of those with Methodist affiliations stood to the population at 1:151 as against Lincolnshire where it stood at 1:23. That Methodism 'saved England from revolution' has been the boast of some, the complaint of others. Cobbett described Methodist ministers as 'the bitterest foes of freedom in England':

Rail they do ... against the West Indian slave holders; but not a word do you ever hear from them against the slave holders in Lancashire and in Ireland. On the contrary they are continually telling the people here that they ought to thank the Lord ... not for a bellyful and a warm back but for that abundant Grace of which they are the bearers and for which they charge them only one penny per week each.<sup>211</sup>

Archetypal of those ministers that Cobbett loved to hate was Jabez Bunting (1779 – 1858), four times President of the Wesleyan Conference, who once observed that 'Methodism hates democracy as much as it hates sin.' It was during Bunting's period of greatest influence (in 1834) that the six Dorset labourers known as the Tolpuddle Martyrs were transported for daring to form a trade union amongst farm workers. Five of these men were Wesleyans, three of them, including their leader George Loveless, being local preachers. Not surprisingly, Bunting found the whole affair highly embarrassing, and the Wesleyan Conference offered the men no support at all, not even aligning itself with that public outcry against their transportation which finally led to their being brought home again.

Yet it was the faith that they had learned in their Wesleyan chapels that continued to sustain the Martyrs through their ordeal. Later George Loveless was to contrast his own religion with that of those who defended transportation in Religion's name:

I have been told it is done 'for the good of society, and to uphold our most holy religion!' Good God, what hypocrisy and

<sup>210</sup> R. E. Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Working-Class movements of England, 1800-1850* (London, 1937), 262

<sup>211</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class* (Harmondsworth, 1963), 434

deceit is here manifest! the most cruel, the most unjust, the most atrocious deeds are committed and carried on under the cloak of our religion! If I had not learnt what religion was, such practices would make me detest and abhor the very name.<sup>212</sup>

But if increasing respectability was blunting the cutting edge of the Wesleyan Church amongst the rural poor, the 'Prims' continued their evangelistic campaigns with unabated ardour. It was while the Tolpuddle Martyrs were in Van Dieman's Land that Primitive Methodism first came to Newmarket. The area was missioned for three years with little success until 1837, when a preacher by the name of John Bunn arrived. His diary provides illuminating insights into the attitudes of that time:

1 July: Newmarket is chiefly supported by horse-racing and other carnal sports, which tend to sink the inhabitants to the lowest ebb of human depravity.

4 July: Preached at Saxon Street... Oh what a land of cruelty and crime this is!

10 July: preached at Cheveley. This village appears to be mainly under the influence of the clergyman, who is a magistrate, a farmer, and a great friend to the spirit of the country. The bells rang all the time I was preaching.

3 May 1838: At night preached in Mildenhall market place to a large congregation. The persecutors shouted and threw rotten eggs. The persecution at this place gets awful, and those who ought to restrain such work seem to be the encouragers.

[25 May: Bunn was charged with obstructing the highway and committed to Bury gaol of ten days.]

11 June: Was rather unwell. In the evening I addressed three or four hundred attentive hearers in Mildenhall market place. Our enemies blushed while they heard me tell all about the jail, and what it cost to get me there, and that I intended to go forward. From that time the opposition began to subside. But, lamentable to relate, we lost thirty members through the raging blast of persecution; while some who have stood have sustained temporal losses. But God will reward the faithful ones.<sup>213</sup>

<sup>212</sup> G. Loveless, *The victims of Whiggery – a statement of the persecutions experienced by the Dorchester labourers* (London, 1837). (Facsimile reproduction published by Communist Party of Great Britain, 1969), 25

<sup>213</sup> E. A. Harvey, *The tale of the years*, 64–66

John Bunn's problems with the bell-ringing vicar of Cheveley were by no means atypical of the relationships between the Anglican church and the Primitive Methodist evangelists. And if the parochial clergy were not actively hostile, they were often 'bemused' by the unconventional activities taking place in what they could only see as rival churches to their own. Later in the century the gentle and compassionate Rev. Richard Cobbold, Rector of Wortham in Suffolk, was to write thus about the Primitive Methodists in his parish:

The Ranters' Chapel:

I believe this is the only house I never was in in my Parish! – and as nobody dwells there I might very well be excused entering it.... If vehemence of diction, action, voice and singing be devotion – the Ranters beat us – but when I hear them I often think of Elijah's address to the prophets of Baal – 'Cry aloud for he is a god – etc., etc.'

I mean no evil feeling towards any of them, but knowing as I do that the Lord touches the heart in the small still voice 'more than in the loud clap of thunder', I often think with pain how mistaken these poor people are who groan and sigh and roar and rant and make longer and stronger prayers than ever we do. But God forgive them, and me, and bring us to peace at the last.<sup>214</sup>

The increasing estrangement of the rural working class from the established church was, of course, due to a number of factors, not least amongst which was the tendency for the labourers to be treated as second-class citizens even during the worship itself. In the early 1850s a farm worker's seven year old son left the church at Barford in Warwickshire

<sup>214</sup> R. Cobbold, 'Features of Wortham' in R. Fletcher (ed.) *The Biography of a Victorian Village* (London, 1977), 145–46. The fondness which the Primitive Methodists developed for the nickname 'Ranters' may be seen from the use of the word in the following hymn:

As I roved out the other day  
I met a pilgrim on the way  
Into conversation we did enter,  
I soon found out he was a Ranter.  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah,  
Hallelujah to the Lamb!

Oh, how dead we all have been!  
Christ revive his work again.  
He will gather to the fold  
Rich and poor, and young and old.  
Hallelujah, etc.

while his elders remained to take communion. Curious to know what was going on inside he peeped through the keyhole. 'What I saw', he later wrote,

will be engraved on my mind until the last day of my life. That sight caused a wound which has never been healed. My proud little spirit smarted and burned when I saw what happened at that Communion service.

First, up walked the squire to the communion rails; the farmers went up next; then up went the tradesmen, the shopkeepers, the wheelwright, and the blacksmith; and then, the very last of all, went the poor agricultural labourers in their smock frocks. They walked up by themselves; nobody else knelt with them; it was as if they were unclean – and at that sight the iron entered straight into my poor little heart and remained fast embedded there. I said to myself, 'If that's what goes on – never for me!' I ran home and told my mother what I had seen, and wanted to know why my father was not as good in the eyes of God as the squire, and why the poor should be forced to come up last of all to the table of the Lord.<sup>215</sup>

The boy was Joseph Arch who was later to become a Primitive Methodist local preacher and who in 1872 founded the National Agricultural Labourers Union. Arch had, it is true, the support of a few Anglican clergymen but, in general, it was from the Methodist churches, especially the 'Prims', that his Union drew both its inspiration and its leadership.

In 1872 the total Methodist membership for Norfolk, Suffolk and Lincolnshire was approaching 50,000. In Norfolk and Suffolk 11,183 of these were 'Prims', 6,525 Wesleyans, and 2,550 members of the United Methodist Free Churches.<sup>216</sup> Given that for every member there are likely to have been four adherents, this meant that approximately 187,000 men and women in the three counties were linked to Methodism: 14 per cent of the population. In the same three counties 30 per cent of Union officials were also office holders in one or other of the Methodist

<sup>215</sup> J. Arch, *Joseph Arch: the story of his life* (1898). Reprinted as *The autobiography of Joseph Arch* (London, 1966), 25

<sup>216</sup> There were more Wesleyan Methodists in Lincolnshire.

Churches.<sup>217</sup> In the year that the National Union was founded the September Quarterly Meeting of the Aylsham Primitive Methodist Circuit agreed that the name of a young man called George Edwards should appear on the preacher's plan as an 'Exhorter'. He was planned to take his first service on the third Sunday in October of that year. Edwards' own account of this service makes interesting reading:

Up to this time I could not read, I merely knew my letters, but I set myself to work.

My dear wife came to my rescue and undertook to teach me to read.

For the purposes of this service she helped me to commit three hymns to memory and also the first chapter of the Gospel according to St John. It was a big task, but this is how it was done.

When I returned home from work after tea she would get the hymn-book, read the lines out, and I would repeat them after her. This was repeated until I had committed the whole hymn to memory.

I might say that at my first service I was not quite certain of the figures. I had, however, committed to hymns to memory correctly, and also the lesson, and I made no mistakes.

In those days we used to give out the hymns two lines at a time, as very few people could read, and they could possibly remember the two lines.<sup>218</sup>

That many good local preachers should be illiterate should not surprise us, for in those days education was not free to all. More surprising, perhaps, was the attitude of some 'Prims' to education in general. When a formal ministerial training was proposed, the Cambridge Circuit wrote to Conference: 'We thoroughly disapprove of the proposed training scheme ... as dangerous to the piety of our young men. What they would gain in Light they would lose in Heat'.<sup>219</sup> Notwithstanding such objections, Hartley Primitive Methodist College was eventually established with the great Biblical scholar, Dr A. S. Peake, as one of its first tutors.

<sup>217</sup> N. Scotland, *Methodism and the revolt of the field* (Gloucester, 1981), 25 and 69.

<sup>218</sup> G. Edwards, *From crow scaring to Westminster* (London, 1922), 32.

<sup>219</sup> F. Tice, *The history of Methodism in Cambridge* (London, 1966), 70.

In 1873 the farmers began to organise opposition to the Unions and there was a lock-out in part of Essex by members of the Essex & Suffolk Farmers Defence League. In March 1874 a strike by labourers at Exning, near Newmarket, was the first in a chain of strikes and lock-outs throughout East Anglia and beyond. Ten thousand men lost their jobs for belonging to a Union, and there were many evictions. George Edwards by this time had been 'on the plan' for two years, and had gained in confidence as a public speaker. His study of theology had, moreover, begun to affect his political attitudes: 'I soon began to realise that the social conditions of the people were not as God intended they should be.' And during the lock-out he writes: 'religious services were held on Sundays and spiritual addresses given. I at once threw myself into this kind of work, although only a young man of twenty-four years of age, and in the village where I then lived I preached my first Labour sermons.'<sup>220</sup>

The link between Methodism and the Labour Movement was already being forged. The lock-out dragged on until July. The Unions survived, and could point to a general increase in wages since their activities began, but they had been weakened. The late 1870s saw a series of bad harvest; cold springs and wet summers brought 'poor cereal crops, mildew in wheat, mould in hops, blight in other crops, disease in cattle, rot in sheep', while 1879 was 'the most disastrous farming year in living memory.... It knocked farmers flat for the moment, and before they could get up again the first wave of the deluge from overseas met them in the face'.<sup>221</sup> So began the agricultural depression, which ruined many farmers, and over the next few years the Unions gradually died.

One major social advance, however, was the Third Reform Bill of 1884, which gave farm labourers the vote. In the 1885 Parliamentary election Joseph Arch successfully stood as Liberal candidate for West Norfolk. His election manifesto called for: extension of Free Trade to all articles of good; complete reform of the land laws; the disestablishment of the Church; free secular elementary education; and Sunday closing of public houses, except to *bona fide* travellers. The last item is interesting in the manifesto of a man seeking election from the votes of working men, but Joseph knew his constituency and the strength of teetotal Methodism among his fellow labourers.

<sup>220</sup> G. Edwards, *From crow scaring to Westminster*, 42.

<sup>221</sup> R. Groves, *Sharpen the Sickle* (London, 1949), 81.



The 1890s brought hard times to the countryside, and led to continuing migration and emigration. Many men from East Anglia moved to the towns or to the mines or sought employment on farms in other parts of England. Factors would recruit labour in East Anglia for twelve-month contracts on farms in Yorkshire: if the man left within six months the factor had to provide another at his own expense. Letters from the author's great-uncle, George Amos, show how important their Methodism could be to some of these migrants. George had left Wighton in north Norfolk to work on a farm near Bridlington:

*24 April 1893:* I have to feed & clean & muck out two young horses that they are breaking in. I look after them of a morning from 4 till 1/2 past five & then I have my breakfast and then go into the field the same as I did when I was at Crabbe.... We don't have tea only of a Sunday night but we have milk for breakfast & tea, & water & beer for dinner but the beer is not worth drinking so they say for I have not tasted it. We are very much tied & on a Sunday you can go out from 1/2 past 8 till 11 & then you have to feed the things & have dinner at 1/2 past 12 & then I am free till 4 & have tea at 5 & then I have till 8 but I have kept out till 1/2 past 9. Went to P.M. chapel once the first 2 Sundays and twice last Sunday in the morning & night I have two miles & 1/2 to walk to chapel half the way is along the edge of the cliff. It is a large chapel & there is an organ in it.

*24 June 1893:* I expect by the time you get this the anniversary [of the Sunday School] will be over how I should like to have been there for more than one reason. I went to Bridlington Quay P.M. anniver: last Sunday week it was the first time I was ever in that chapel & I think it is the largest & the prettiest one I was ever in. There is an organ in it.

*14 August 1893:* I am glad to tell you that I am still trusting in the Lord but I very much miss the means of grace. When I had a chance to go I did not go as often as I might have done as you know but I have no temptation to stop away now when I have the chance to go. I think if it had not been for that I should have been like Bob Vincent I think I should have come home again.

*24 September 1893:* I fancy I have got to leave here at Martinmas which is the 23rd of November, I don't know yet. I daresay you wonder what I have got to leave for. Well there has

been a row between the master's brother-in-law and the yardman and it was about me. They don't like me going to chapel twice on a Sunday, that is what he got on to me about. The others go into Bridlington twice on a Sunday and very nearly every Saturday night but nothing is said to them.

The faith that had been George's greatest support thus engendered the prejudice that led to his downfall. Later, however, it was to assist his climb up the social ladder.

*4 December 1901:* I have got a better job this time [with the Scottish Legal Friendly Society] and I am under a very nice district manager who is a local preacher on our circuit and also a teacher in our school. I am a personal friend of his and he has promised to help me all he can.

In 1906 the Tories lost the General Election, the greatest defeat they had ever experienced. In the countryside there was much victimisation of workers suspected of having voted Liberal and George Edwards was asked to form a new Union to defend the workers' rights. From this approach grew *The Eastern Counties Agricultural Workers' and Small Holders' Union*. The new union's links with Methodism were as strong as had been those of Arch's *National*. The religious sensibilities of the Union's leadership may be illustrated by the following extract from George Edwards' autobiography:

At this time (1908) I received an application from the East Winch Branch to hold a Sunday meeting on the common in that village. I objected, and only consented on the condition that the meeting should be of a strictly religious character. This they agreed to, and on the last Sunday in July the meeting was held, and I advertised it as follows:

E. C. A. W. A. S. H. U.

A Camp Meeting will be held under the auspices of the above on the Common, East Winch. Services to commence at 2.30 and 6.30 p.m. Addresses will be given by C. Reynolds, G. Edwards, General Secretary, and others. The Westacre Brass Band will be in attendance. Sankey's hymns will be sung.



... I took for my text in the afternoon 'The labourer is worthy of his hire', and in the evening my text was 'Thy kingdom come'.<sup>222</sup>

Such meetings proved a great success, and in the following year labour hymns were introduced along with Sankey's. One such hymn ran as follows:

Wife I have found the Labour Church  
And worshipped there today:  
It's not like those so long we've known  
Where parsons preach for pay.  
But one that's built of human love  
To bless the human race,  
No Church that ere before it stood  
Filled so divine a place.

The longest strike in history was organised not by any trade union but by the children of Burston in Norfolk who themselves went on strike, refusing to attend their village school when, in 1914, their teachers, Tom and Kitty Higdon, were dismissed for supporting the farm workers' union. George Edwards naturally took the part of the children and their dismissed teachers. Of a meeting at which he had spoken at Diss he later wrote: 'The meeting was held on strictly religious lines, and I took for my text, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour".'<sup>223</sup> The following Sunday John Sutton, a farm labourer, Primitive Methodist local preacher and friend of the Higdons, conducted a service on the Green. Sadly the dispute split the chapel because of the attitude of Mr Fisher, a farmer and prominent chapel-goer (a rather unusual combination), who persuaded the Superintendent Minister to censor Mr Sutton.<sup>224</sup> After this many of the striking children stayed away from the chapel as well as from the parish church; but the faithful John Sutton helped with a Sunday School and baptised new-born infants.

For a Methodist Local Preacher to play such a pastoral role in a village was by no means uncommon. During the 1930s Rev. Harold Davidson, vicar of Stiffkey, was unfrocked for activities which earned him

<sup>222</sup> G. Edwards, *From crow scaring to Westminster*, 116

<sup>223</sup> Ibid. 187

<sup>224</sup> B. Edwards, *The Burston School strike* (London, 1974), 120, 123

the title 'the prostitutes' padre' from the national press. During the months when the vicar was spending his weeks in the red-light districts of the metropolis, returning to Norfolk only to take his Sunday services, most of the pastoral work in the village was carried out by Tom Sutton, the local chimney-sweep, who was Society Steward at the Stiffkey chapel and senior Local Preacher on the Fakenham and Wells Circuit. In the nearby staunchly Methodist parish of Wighton Tom Sexton, the Society Steward, and John Yarham, the author's farm-worker grandfather, would frequently be called, in preference to the parson, to pray with the dying. Their position in the Society was negatively endorsed by the boast of one noted local unbeliever that 'when I die I want neither Tom Sexton nor yet Jack Yarham to come to pray at my deathbed.'

In 1920 George Edwards was elected as Labour candidate for southwest Norfolk, and he remained active in union affairs and politics for the rest of his life. He never, however, neglected his duty to his church and in his autobiography he wrote:

Amidst all the turmoil of my public life I have been loyal to the first Church of my choice, the Primitive Methodist Church, and filled most of the offices open to laymen in connection with that Church....

I came to the conclusion that the Labour movement was built on the very rock of Christianity and that I was as much serving God by preaching what I believed to be the gospel of God, namely economic freedom, as when I occupied the pulpit.<sup>225</sup>

Like all other churches the Primitive Methodists suffered a decline in membership after the first World War, but they remained an important spiritual and social force in the villages in the inter-war years, a period which saw them lose their separate identity as they became part (in 1932) of a united Methodist Church.

As late as the 1950s the National Union of Agricultural Workers (which had evolved from George Edwards' E.C.A.W.A.S.H.U.) still held church parades in Wells Methodist Chapel, and on some farms, as Egmore near Walsingham, the predominantly Methodist workforce would start work at 5 o'clock on a Monday morning rather than desecrate the Sabbath by loading sugar beet on a Sunday.

<sup>225</sup> G. Edwards, *From crow scaring to Westminster*, 236

In the author's youth every child in the hamlets of New Holkham and Quarles attended Sunday School in the converted granary which still serves the communities as a chapel. The Sunday School anniversary was one of the highlights of the year and would attract folk from all the villages nearby (some even hiring coaches to bring them to the event). Collections made amongst the workers on at least two local farms would always feature in the list of donations read out at the end of the service.<sup>226</sup>

The post-war years, however, brought catastrophic changes to village life and many village chapels have gone the way of village schools, village shops and even village pubs in communities where weekend cottages now often outnumber the inhabited houses. Nearer the towns the influx of affluent commuters has sometimes enabled chapels to expand, but the old traditions of working-class Methodist Socialism are almost lost. Almost, but not quite. The following report was submitted as recently as the 1970s by the Social Responsibility Secretary of a Methodist Church in what is now a commuter village near Cambridge:

We have had meetings every week, one week the Methodist Fellowship, the next a Labour Party meeting in my home (both in my home). We have had various speakers on Reflections on Russian visit by a Christian Biologist, talks on Christian Socialism by a Quaker Teacher. In fact the Labour Party people would talk about Pacifism more than the Methodists with a Minister present. We hope to put up seven candidates for the coming Parish Council elections in the spring, we are doing a house to house canvas for the party and people are keen. Quite a few are anti the church (C. of E.) no criticism of Nonconformists but think they ought to be more active in Local Govt.

That church continues to grow, and Bro. John's adamant refusal to separate Methodism and Socialism has never, so far as I know, been a hindrance to it!

<sup>226</sup> So few are the children in the area now that there is no longer a Sunday School in the Granary; but the anniversary is still held, old scholars bringing their own children back to take part.