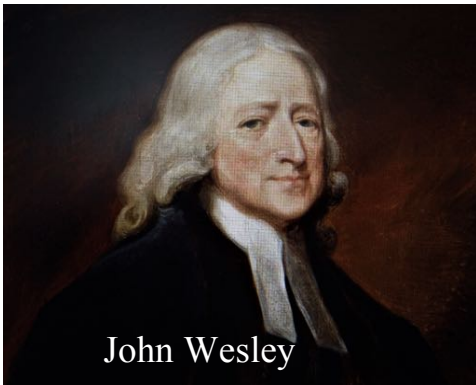


## The Methodist Church in Cotgrave

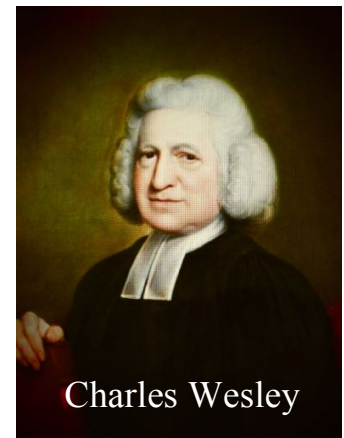
Methodism grew strongly during the eighteenth century, largely as a result of a sad decline in the religious conscience of the Anglican Church of England. The Established Church was dominated by Parliament (who were responsible for appointing Bishops – and performed this function largely from purely political motives), while the appointment of Rectors and Vicars was generally in the hands of the local aristocracy. In Cotgrave, for example, the Pierrepoint family was responsible for selecting the Rector at All Saints Church and made sure the appointee was either a family member (the ‘second son’ syndrome!) or, at least a close friend of the family. The result was a church which catered all too frequently to the interests of the upper classes, while ignoring those of the working man and this tendency became heavily accentuated by the Industrial Revolution. The growth of large towns and cities, with their conglomeration of factories, with expanding workforces enduring far from satisfactory working conditions, left thousands of



John Wesley

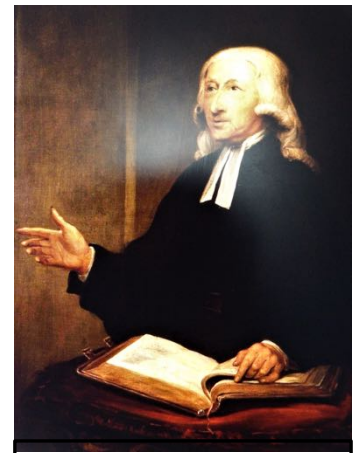
working-class people with little, if any, connection with a religious organisation. It was this which pricked the consciences of reformers such as John Wesley who firmly believed that Christianity should be concerned with the welfare of everyone, no matter what their social status. Indeed, he firmly believed that salvation was available to each and every person – an important distinction compared to the tenets of the Calvinist reformers who believed in ‘pre-destination’. Methodism therefore grew initially in urban locations and spread only slowly into country villages such as Cotgrave.

John Wesley was born in 1703 in Epworth, Lincolnshire where his father Samuel was Rector of the village church. Samuel had benefitted from an Oxford education and both John and his younger brother Charles followed him, taking their degrees at Christ Church. John later became a fellow of Lincoln College, having first been ordained as an Anglican Deacon then, two years later, as Priest and, in spite of his numerous disagreements with the Church, he remained an Anglican to the end of his days. While in Oxford, he became leader of the ‘Holy Club’, a group of earnest young men devoted to the holy life. They were nicknamed ‘Methodists’ on account of their adherence to a set of life rules and the name was later attached to the Wesley-inspired Church. Starting in 1735, John and Charles spent two years in America in a relatively unsuccessful attempt to evangelise the local populace and returned, disconsolately to London, where they recovered self-confidence from association with members of the Moravian Church. Then, stimulated by a fellow ‘Holy Club’ member, George Whitefield, John (against his better judgement!) began preaching in the open air, a practice which he continued in later life whenever he was not allowed to preach in Anglican Church buildings. This was in 1739 and, from that time onward, his movement grew rapidly and he found himself running up against Anglican opposition when he was obliged to encourage lay preaching – there being far too few ordained clergy available to succour the increasing number of active Methodists. He travelled widely within England on his favourite horse, leaving behind more and more groups of devoted followers, each organised and led by Class Leaders. It became a feature of Methodism that the laity (including women) should play an ever-increasing role in both Sunday worship and in education – many young people obtaining what little education they could from Methodist teachers.



Charles Wesley

It is clear that the success of Methodism stemmed from the deeply felt sincerity of its early adherents but such serious thinking would always be at risk of leading to schism. If schism from the Anglican Church seemed almost inevitable, schism within Methodism was hardly less likely and, indeed, was characteristic of religious life in the early part of the nineteenth century. First came the development of the Methodist New Connection, then in 1810 an even more significant development, the formation of the so-called 'Primitive Methodists'. This was in response to a widely held view that Methodism, as such, was a religion for the new 'middle classes' who had developed from the turmoil of the Industrial Revolution, leaving the poor working class citizens out in the cold. It was, perhaps, a sign of the times that yet another division in social status should be reflected in yet another division in religious practice. There were other divisions of increasing subtlety then, happily, a gradual coming together of the various factions during the early part of the twentieth century to form the United Methodist Church of Great Britain. We shall see something of all this in its effect on the history of Methodism in Cotgrave which we now proceed to examine.



John Wesley  
preaching

How, exactly, did Methodism come to Cotgrave? The answer seems to be: 'with some difficulty and with more than a little opposition!' The initial stimulus appears to have been a visit by John Wesley to Bingham in 1770, following which Methodist groups became established in Nottingham and in Radcliffe and it was a Nottingham preacher who, in 1799, first succeeded in awakening the people of Cotgrave to the virtues of Methodism. He followed his Sunday morning address in Radcliffe with a visit to the village, accompanied by a posse of Radcliffe people. During this assembly one of the Radcliffe women, a Mrs Foster was struck by a rotten egg thrown by a Cotgrave bystander but, showing remarkable tolerance, she remarked that it was an honour to receive such an 'accolade' in the service of Christ, a response which certainly impressed several of those present. Indeed, it was following this incident that a local man, John Cooper opened his house for Methodist preaching and, within a matter of three or four years, the Society had some twenty members. From such small beginnings Methodism grew rapidly but not without a certain amount of opposition from the 'Establishment'. Both Charles Pierrepont and the local Rector did what they could to discourage its presence in the village.

In 1808 John Cooper was harassed by Earl Manvers' steward, Robert Burgess and had to defend himself by pointing out that his house was properly licenced as a Methodist meeting place. Then in 1815 a new steward gave him notice to quit and made it clear that the reason for such notice was his association with 'The Methodists'. Clearly, it was time for the group to find a purpose-built meeting room but even this was made difficult by Earl Manvers. They were forbidden from building any kind of structure on Estate land and local labour was warned not to be involved with such construction work on pain of losing their right to work on any Manvers project. But, by the skin of their teeth, the Methodist hopefuls managed to purchase, from a Yorkshire owner, a parcel of land near Chapel Yard and were greatly assisted in their building plans by a Mr John Brewer, a Methodist Local Preacher from Radcliffe. "A good Chapel was erected and the cause of God flourished there." A Circuit Plan for the Nottingham Circuit of 1818 shows that by that time Cotgrave had a well-established Wesleyan Society.

Cotgrave's Methodists were clearly very much indebted to John Brewer, though, sadly, there is no record of exactly where this first Chapel was built. However, much more detail is available concerning later buildings – in 1838 the need for a larger Chapel was met by the building which we now know as the 'Scout and Guide Hall' (also in Chapel Yard), this being just one of a number of new Methodist buildings erected around Nottingham in honour of the Centenary of the founding of Methodism. Plans for the much larger Chapel along Bingham Road (the building which we now recognise as the Cotgrave Methodist Church) date from 1901, the opening ceremony actually taking place in April 1902 and, finally, in the early 1920s plans were drawn up for a Sunday School which was certainly up and running by 1925, some 60 years after the opening of the 'New School' (the Church School) in Plumtree Road. Teachers from the Methodist Parliament Street Chapel came out to Cotgrave to provide what little education many local children ever enjoyed. (Far-sightedly, the curriculum covered a much wider spectrum than just Bible Reading.)



Scout & Guide Hall

All this was undoubtedly worthy and generally beneficial to village life but, as we hinted earlier, the progress of Methodism in Cotgrave was not without its troubles. It appears to have started in 1850 with the defection of two regular members, Thomas Thurman and his cousin Samuel Voce, though their views were probably no more than a reflection of those of many 'reformers'



Methodist Church

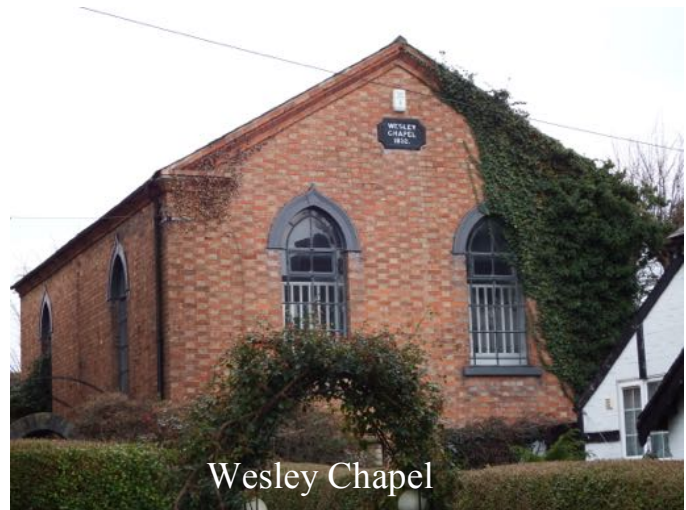
throughout the Methodist movement. Thurman was a joiner whose workshop at the top of Chapel Yard employed three assistants – he was probably relatively well off, compared to many Cotgrave folk – while Voce was a framework knitter. They appear to have fallen foul of a newly-appointed Superintendent at the Nottingham South Circuit for the years 1849-50, Rev. James Loutit. He was a strict disciplinarian and would stand no 'nonsense' from any would-be 'reformers', his reaction leading to expulsion rather than negotiation. It therefore transpired that, as from 1850, Thurman and Voce could no longer consider themselves

members of the Cotgrave Methodist Society, while their reaction was to start planning a breakaway movement. Initially, these reformers met in Thurman's workshop which was religiously swept and cleaned each Saturday in readiness for the following Sunday service. However, they were obviously supported by a significant number of others, together with adequate financial backing because they were able to build their own (Primitive Methodist) Chapel at the top of Pepper Street (now Church Lane) and this was opened within two years of the original schism. It was known officially as the United Methodist Free Church but frequently referred to as 'Thurman's Chapel'. This building survives intact today and is clearly labelled with the year of its completion 'Wesley Chapel 1852'. The Southwell and Nottinghamshire Church History Project tells us that it held seats for one hundred worshipers and had standing room for forty! One point of interest is the very simple architectural form, compared with the more flamboyant style of the Bingham Road establishment, typical, perhaps, of the down-to-earth beliefs of the Primitive Methodists. Looked at from a strictly Cotgrave viewpoint, we might notice that in 1881 the Cotgrave poet 'Rusticus' (alias George Hickling) published a book 'Sectarianism vs Christianity or What is Religion?' in which he took exception to the aggressive arguments which typified Methodism at the time and made a heartfelt case for the virtue of tolerance.



We have no record of the precise differences between the Thurman-Voce faction and the original Wesleyan Chapel members but, in general terms, Primitive Methodism laid greater emphasis on the participation of lay people (compared to the more formal structure of Ministers favoured by the Wesleyans), preferred simplicity to elaborate ceremonial and appealed to the rural poor, rather than the more affluent middle classes. In the case of Cotgrave, we can imagine that it was well supported by hard-working farm labourers. In any case, the division was destined not to be permanent – during the early 1930s tentative discussion took place between the two Churches (a Mr Thurman – almost certainly the original Thomas Thurman’s grandson - still representing the breakaway faction, while the Voce family seem to have left the village altogether) and in April 1934 it was “resolved that the two Societies become one, as from the first Sunday in September.” The Pepper Street building was later sold and at one time functioned as the Anglican Church Hall – it was, after all, ideally located.

Music was always central to Methodist services and, as everyone knows, Charles Wesley wrote some 600 hymns for use in Wesleyan Chapels (and, of course, more widely). A particularly significant date in the life of the Bingham Road Chapel, March 1915, saw the installation of a new organ. It was built by Messrs Lloyd and Co of Nottingham and, so the story goes, was intended for a different church whose members were unable to raise enough money so Cotgrave Methodists were fortunate enough to obtain an excellent organ. Other snippets of information concern the fact that round about the end of the nineteenth century William Lewin played the harmonium in the United Methodist Free Church, while Miss Lucy Hames performed the same operation in the Wesleyan Chapel.



### **John Orton – 2020**

Much of the information in the above History is taken from the excellent booklet written by the late Ruth Okrafo-Smart: “The Centenary of Cotgrave Methodist Church 1901-2001 and a Short History of Methodism in the Village”. I am indebted to her husband, Victor for the loan of a copy.