

Early History of Cropwell Butler Methodist Chapel: 1773-1875

Start of Methodism

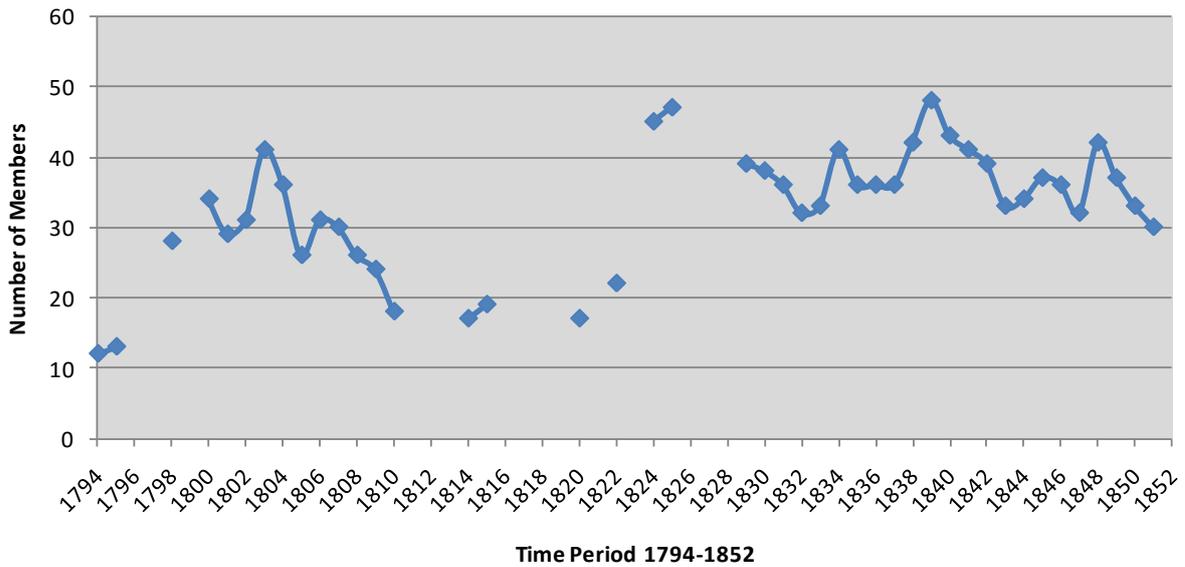
Methodism first came to Cropwell Butler in 1773 when Thomas Innocent applied to register his house as a dissenting meeting house. There are no further records until 1794, at which point the Society had 12 members; it then grew rapidly, with the group splitting into two classes in 1798 and reaching a high point of 8% of the village population by 1801. Shortly after, members from neighbouring Cropwell Bishop left to form their own Methodist Society.

Although the exact date of the original Cropwell Butler Wesleyan chapel is uncertain, at some point in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century the Society moved from meeting in private houses to erecting its own building on land leased from one of its earliest members, Ann Parr. The land was purchased in 1825 'with moneys collected by the Wesley Methodist Society in and around Cropwell Butler' and a further larger surrounding area bought in 1831. The precise level of expansion of the premises is uncertain, but changes were probably made to accommodate the Sunday school. It is difficult to identify the exact size or layout of the original building because of the major extension in 1903 but it could apparently accommodate 210 people.

Members and Membership

From 1794 John Newton was the class leader until his death in 1808, while other leading villagers such as Henry Barratt, Thomas Crampton, John Innocent and Thomas Wragby became early members, at least for a time. Up to the middle of the nineteenth century, total membership fluctuated (see graph – gaps are for missing records) but what is less obvious is that there was always a high turnover and members often stayed for only a short time. Indeed from 1794-1832, 50% of members left after one year. Sometimes the loss of members was because families moved out of the village, usually looking for work, but it was also because of 'backsliding', the old-fashioned term for a loss of commitment to the Chapel. At this time, membership meant coming to class meetings each week and paying a subscription, so many people who stopped being members would still attend services and Chapel events.

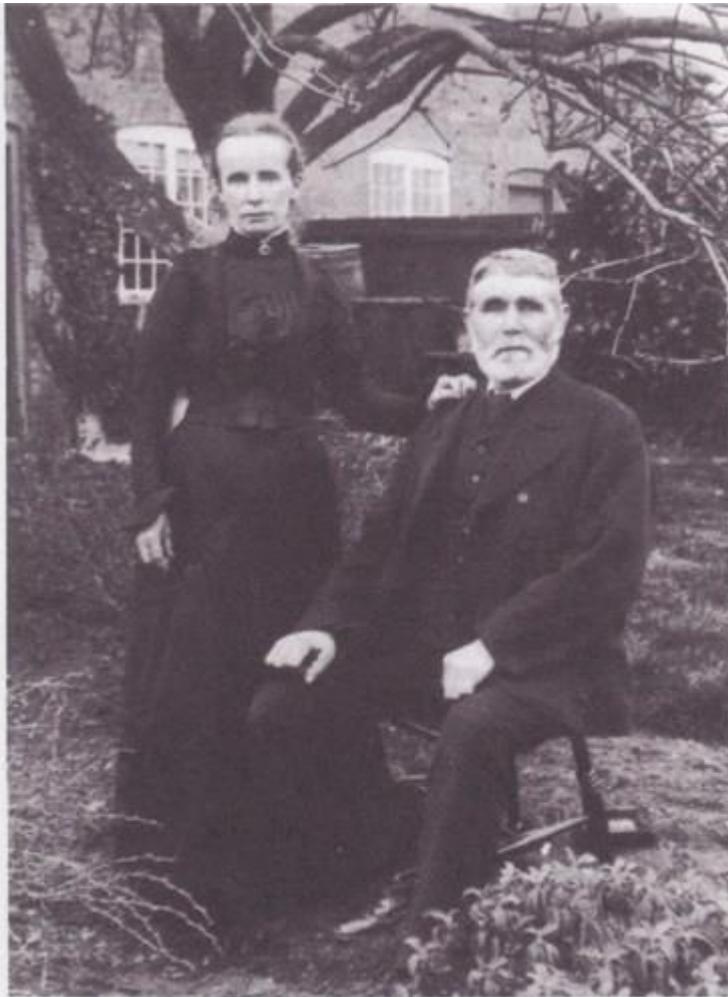
Cropwell Butler Wesleyan Membership 1794-1851



The two key families in this early period were the Cramptons and the Kemps. The Cramptons had been in the village for generations. John Crampton was on the first membership list in 1794 and a class leader from 1809 to 1822. He was then succeeded as a leader from 1824-40 by his son Thomas, a tailor and shopkeeper, who was also a Sunday school teacher and one of the two Cropwell Butler trustees for the land purchases in the 1820s. He continued as a member and trustee throughout his life (d.1883). Randall Kemp was the other trustee, joining the Society in 1798 and becoming a leader in 1808 until his death in 1841. His family were shoemakers and George Kemp (probably his brother), unusually chose a Methodist baptism for his children as early as 1833.

In the 1840s, the most significant new family joining the Chapel was the Coopers. Agricultural labourers, Matthew and William Cooper were both class and Sunday school leaders, with William continuing as a class leader and trustee until he died in 1892.

Matthew and his family emigrated to Canada about 1860, where the photograph was taken.



Matthew and Hannah Cooper

At this time the steward was John Newton, son of a tenant farmer of 170 acres, the seventh largest farm in the village in 1851. In 1848 he married Mary Crampton and so established a link between two major Chapel families. It is likely that they had family connections with George Newton, also a farmer, and a member from at least 1830 until his death in 1848. The

Newtons moved to Colston Bassett and their youngest child was baptised in the Cropwell Bishop chapel in 1860 but John Newton remained as treasurer until 1878.

Another important family was the Barratts. Individuals from this extensive village family appeared on the earliest membership lists and by the 1840s George and Sarah Barratt were key members, with George becoming a trustee

in 1851. By the 1860s the Walker family from Tithby also began to undertake important roles

Some of the key members in 1863 and their occupations can be seen in the following table.

George Barratt	Ag. Lab.
Harriet Bateman	Lace worker
William Carlile	Ag. Lab.
William Cooper	Ag. Lab.; Shepherd
Thomas Crampton	Tailor
John Newton	Farmer
George Oliver	Groom
Francis Walker	Blacksmith
William Walker	Blacksmith

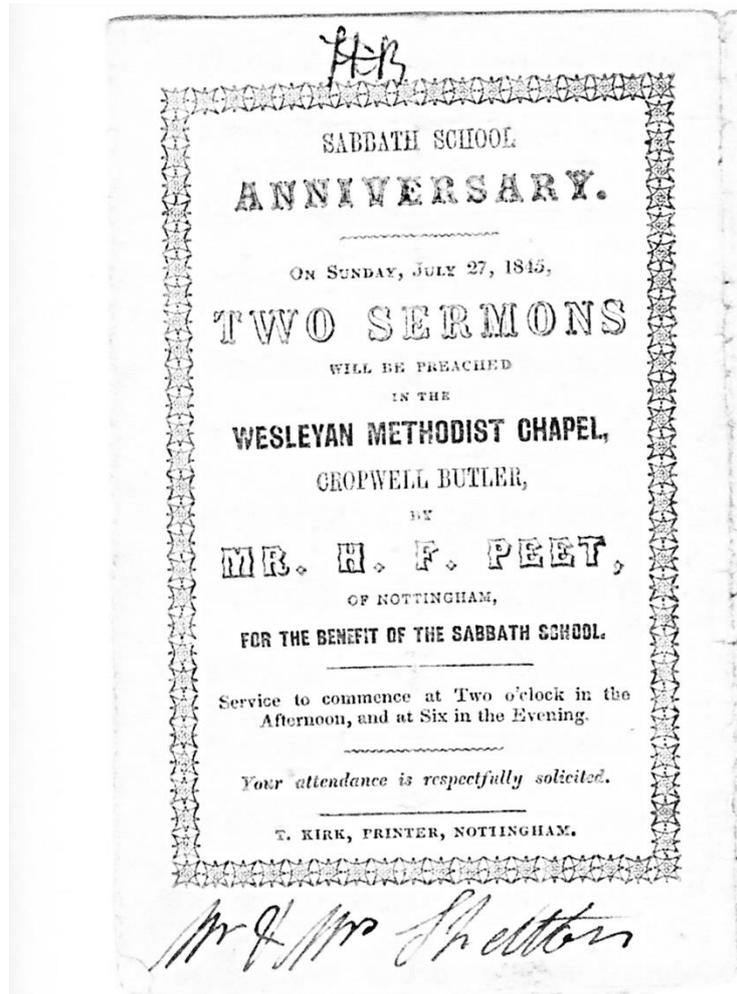
The leading Wesleyans were tradesmen and agricultural labourers, with just the one farmer leaving by 1860, so members and most of the congregation were probably also drawn from these groups.

Most of these families increasingly chose to have their children baptised in the Chapel, rather than the parish church and sent their children to the flourishing Sunday school, whose anniversaries had clearly become important village occasions from at least the 1830s. Nevertheless, the wider group of attenders dropped in and out of the Wesleyan Sunday school and used Methodist baptism on occasions, but not always. Therefore, they were likely to be attending the parish church and / or the Primitive Methodist Chapel, as well as worshipping at the Wesleyan Chapel.

Sunday School

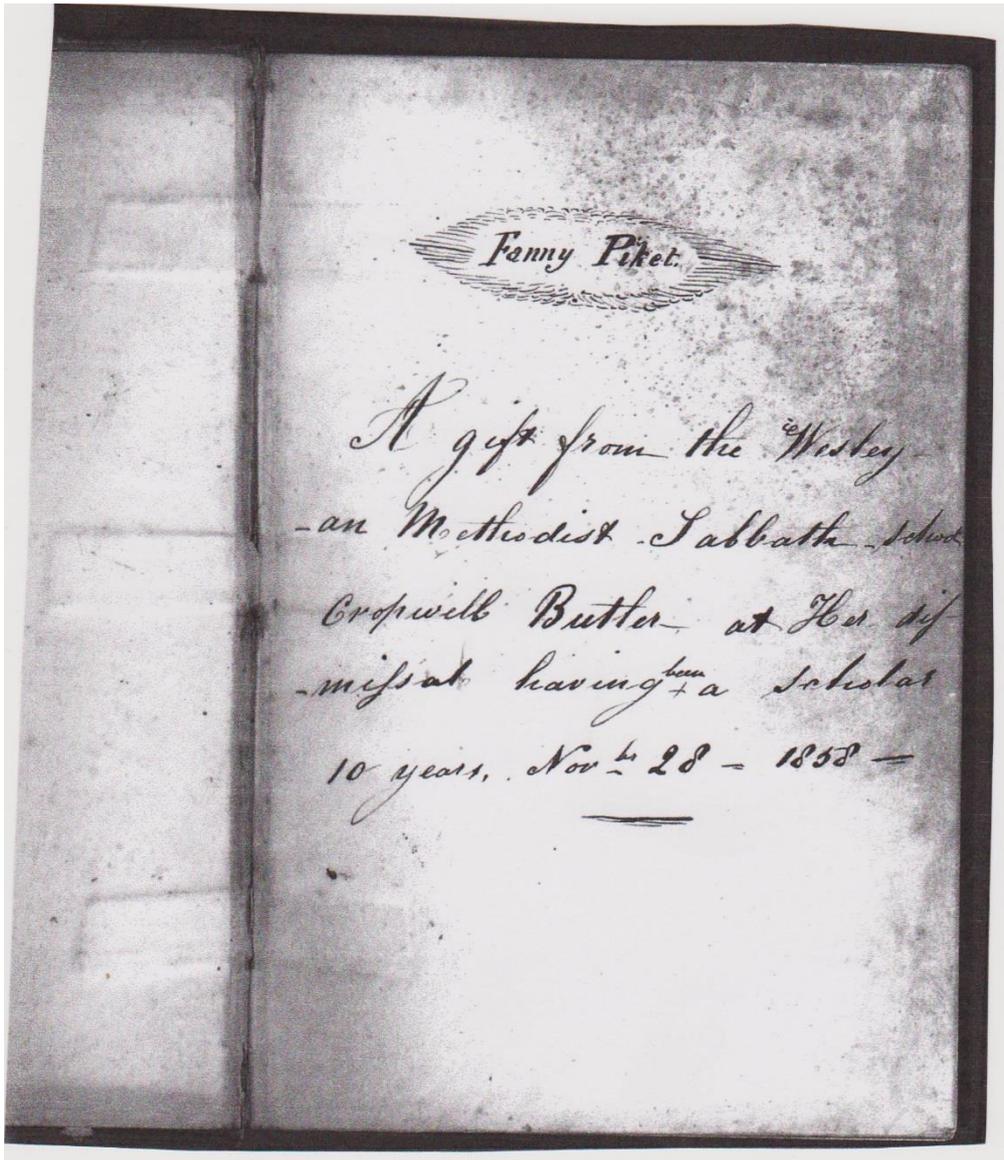
The Sunday school was set up at some point in the first part of the nineteenth century and a set of Sunday school anniversary invitations from 1837-46 show big events with special visiting preachers, (see invitation for 1845 reproduced below).

In 1851 there were 79 children on the register, which was 46.7% of the children in Cropwell Butler and Tithby between 4 and 13. Scholars who left the school after a substantial period of attendance were usually presented with a bible, sometimes at the anniversaries but also at other times. The inscription shown below is on the first page of a family bible given for an anniversary display in 2011.



According to a newspaper report in 1852 'the teachers of the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist Sunday Schools at Cropwell Butler, gave their scholars the usual treat of plum-cake and tea upon Christmas Day in their respective chapels'. At this time, plum-cake appears to have been a particular treat.

Sunday school occasions continued into the second half of the century and in 1869 there were anniversary services on a Sunday, followed by a public tea and meetings on Monday. However, by 1869 there were only 40 children on the register, with the average attendances also reduced.

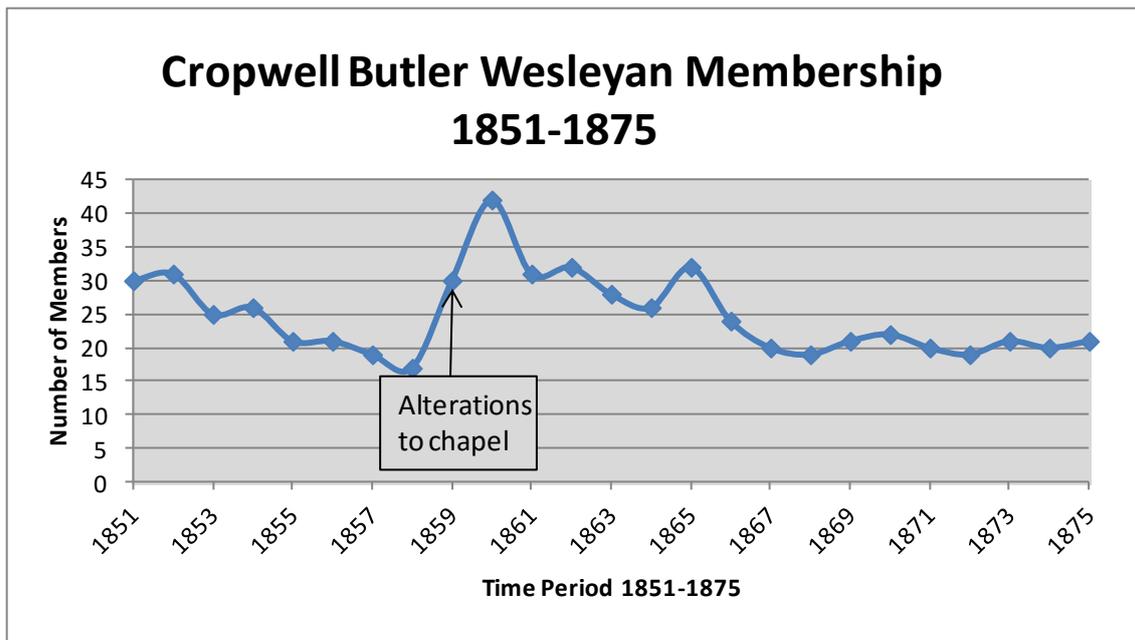


Religious Census

In 1851, the first and only national census of religious worship was held. It was not concerned with people's religious beliefs but in counting how many people attended the various services. In the Cropwell Butler and Tithby parish, only 53% of the population of the two villages attended anywhere on census Sunday, which was noticeably less than in many of the surrounding places. One possible reason may have been the distance of the parish church from Cropwell Butler. The rector at that time was worried about this and had commented a few years earlier 'there are two dissenting Chapels in Cropwell to which I firmly believe many resort more from the convenience of having a place of Worship near them than from any disaffection to the Church'. 75 people attended the Chapel for the morning service (10.30am) and 90 in the evening (6.00pm). Still, there were undoubtedly individuals who attended two or more places of worship within the two villages.

Chapel Life in later Nineteenth Century

The decade from 1857 was initially a time of growth but this was short-lived; a decline from 1860-67 settled down to stable total membership numbers until 1875. Nevertheless, the population was declining and at the end of the decades from 1851-81, the Chapel had maintained its position relative to the number of inhabitants, (3.8% in 1851 and 3.9% in 1881).



Throughout this period there continued to be a high turnover of members. 60% left because of backsliding, with 26.2% due to removals from the village. It was clearly a struggle to keep committed members, although new people constantly joined the Chapel community. There was still much activity: fund raising through annual sermons, anniversary celebrations, Christmas and summer treats, meetings about foreign missions and collections for the hospital.

Alterations to the chapel undertaken in 1859 may have been partly because membership growth at that point led to some confidence about the future, although it was also necessary because the chapel had apparently 'sunk into a state of delapidation'. The cost of £178 3s 10d was considerable and over 44% must have been raised locally since the eventual outstanding debt was £100, (not reduced until almost the end of the century). Apparently there were problems with the management of the Chapel at this time, since the circuit noted that 'the accounts of Cropwell Butler Chapel are in such confusion that a Meeting of the New Trust must be held as early as possible to examine the whole. Till then, no fair statements can be had'.

Primitive Methodists

The Primitives were another branch of Methodism which appeared in Cropwell Butler in 1839. Although it was quite separate from the Wesleyans in the

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the eventual merger of the two branches in 1932 meant that it is part of the broader history of the Chapel. By 1844, the Primitives were holding two regular Sunday services (2pm and 6pm) and a weekday meeting and were busy purchasing land and constructing a chapel building. Its opening services were held in 1845, with a tea party next day, where 'more than three score persons sat down to a cheering beverage'. At the 1851 census, their two services had attendances of 70 and 65 respectively and by 1852 they had set up a Sunday school.

John Garratt was the steward in 1851 and Robert Willimott a local preacher in 1862 and possibly a class leader. Both were labourers, as were most of the families using Primitive baptism, although there were a few craftsmen. The congregation probably came from the same sections of village society.