

George Cosens (1805-81): the first known Caribbean Church Minister in Britain

Robert Higginson

George Cosens is listed in Leary.

COSENS, George

Shown as entered 1824, but no stations given until 1832 at Guernsey

Ref Petty 306f: 322: Native of West Indies: m. Mary Burnett 1830: See

Mag 1833/90: Ref Mag 1832/451

But the information in Leary is very limited, and you would not know any of the story we are about to discover. Information about George is very scarce. It reminds me of the saying about Wagner. “Moments of inspiration amongst hours of tedium.” We have flashes of knowledge about the life of George Cosens, and years of obscurity.

George Cosen’s obituary appeared in the *Dudley and District News* on 27th August 1881 (page 2). There is a parallel with myself – starting out in Methodism, and ending up at Cradley Heath Baptist Church, where I found out about him from the Church history.

CRADLEY.

DEATH OF AN OLD BAPTIST MINISTER.—The Rev. George Cosens, who has been a minister of the Gospel for over half a century, died last week at Cradley, and was buried on Saturday morning in the Cemetery at Brierley Hill. Cosens, who was a mulatto, was born in the island of Jamaica, and when about 18 years of age, joined the Primitive Methodists, by whom he was sent out as a travelling minister. In connection with the body he laboured in many parts of the country, and amongst the scenes of his labours were the North of England, Jersey, and Guernsey. Eventually, however, he joined the Baptist denomination, and became pastor of the church at the Four Ways, Cradley Heath, about the year 1834. Subsequently he removed to the Old Baptist Chapel, in Brettle Lane, and after some years' pastorate there, had charges at Tarrington, Bewdly, Usk, and Netherton. Leaving Netherton, he came to Cradley Heath, the scene of his earlier ministry, and there he continued until his retirement a year or two ago, after a pastorate of fifteen years. Though suffering from a severe and exhaustive illness, he continued to preach almost to the day he died. On the Sunday before his death he preached twice, and had arranged to do so on the Sunday following. As a speaker he was apt, and often manifested much readiness and humour. At the time of his death he was 75 years of age, and out of that period he had been a preacher for half a century. In the neighbourhood he was known as a staunch political Dissenter.

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George Cosens was born in Jamaica in 1805. (Date inferred from his age in the various censuses, and his obituary)

His father was a plantation owner; his mother one of the slave women. I intend to find out more by contacting the Jamaican High Commission.

The conversion of young George in 1822, at the age of 17.

Idris Williams (in his centenary history of Cradley Heath Baptist Church) records that George was studying in London, and was converted when he and a fellow student went into a church to while away some time.

Speculation 1 – that George Cosens senior sent his son to be educated to take over running the plantation.

Speculation 2 – that George was saved in a Primitive Methodist chapel. (Somewhere in London – for further study, see if any histories of London P.M. chapels record George's conversion.)

Idris Williams records that George was disowned by his family for his new-found Christian faith. Why?

George Cosens remained in London, and from 1824 is listed as being a Primitive Methodist Preacher.

George Cosens finds a home amongst the Prims.

There must have been something about his abilities, for him to be accepted as a Preacher at age 19 only 2 years after conversion.

The prime sources for George's life include items in Primitive Methodist Magazines; John Petty *The history of the Primitive Methodist Connexion* (1860); W.M. Patterson *Northern Primitive Methodism*; H.B. Kendall, who wove together many sources for his 1906 history *The origin and history of the Primitive Methodist Church*.

The next glimpse - Marriage

After 4 years of obscurity, George meets Mary Burnett, whom he married in 1830.

We turn to one of the most detailed aspects of his life. Mary died after only a year of marriage, and George wrote a *Memoir of Mary Cosens, late wife of Geo. Cosens, Prim. Methodist Travelling preacher* published in the Primitive Methodist Magazine 1832, page 452

The key dates in Mary Cosens life are:

Born – 18 December 1797

Parents – Michael and Margaret Burnett

Birtley, near Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Conversion – 1816

Married – 24 June 1830

Gave birth – 17 July 1831

Died – Saturday 27 July 1831

This biography also includes some details of George's life.

This includes his friendship with John Petty, and some of his movements as a Travelling Preacher.

George is found at

- **Winlaton** in 1828.
- **Durham** in 1830.
- **Sunderland** in 1831.

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The missions in other places when he was sent from Sunderland are still recorded as “Sunderland”.

“In May 1831, in consequence of the sudden and mysterious removal of two of our brethren (Messrs’ Branfoot and Hewson,), we removed by order of the Circuit Committee to Sunderland”.

The death of **Branford** and **Hewson** was in the Heston Waggon-way incident of 26th February 1831.

Kendall and Petty record that **John Petty** was sent to Sunderland immediately.

According to George’s account, Mary had not been well for some time and a few days after she gave birth he records

“At the time I was in the chapel vestry, in company with Brothers Aspinall and Petty. I heard a great noise upstairs”

His account of the life and death of Mary is instructive, recording her happiness in going to God and exhortations to him to have faith. He concludes with the words

“O that my latter end may be like hers”

What was the effect of George’s grief on the next 2 years of his ministry?

In this account, George does not name the daughter. Nor does the Editor, who adds the note about the baby’s death. [Although the baptismal register of Flag Lane, Sunderland survives; there is no entry for Cosens].

The next phase – May 1832

George’s wife died in July 1831, and their daughter a month later.

At about that time, the Sunderland Circuit’s mission to Scotland declined.

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But the Circuit saw a time of revival. This led to a missionary vision for the Norman Isles, along with **William Towler**'s ministry in South Shields.

In March 1832 letters from John Petty of the Sunderland Circuit and William Towler of the South Shields Circuit appeared on pages 230 and 231 of the Primitive Methodist Magazine giving the background. Sailors from the Norman (or Channel) Islands had been converted whilst visiting Sunderland and the two Circuits agreed to fund a mission.

George was sent in May 1832.

Kendall covers the first year of the mission on pages 208-209 of volume 2 of his 1906 history. He states, "The Norman Isles mission is of some importance historically because it was but part of a much larger scheme that never came into being. The Norman Isles were to be but the stepping –stones to France" (p209)

John Petty's more first-hand account which formed the basis for Kendall is found on pages 247 to 249 of the first edition of his book.

"We must now record the commencement of a mission to the Norman Isles, now more commonly called the Channel Islands, being situated in the British Channel. They are within sight of the coast of Normandy, in France, from which they are but a few miles distant. Some sailors from Guernsey, one of the principal islands of the group, had attended some meetings of extraordinary power, in the Primitive Methodist chapel, at South Shields, where a revival of religion was progressing – and being favourably impressed, were wishful for a missionary to be sent to their native island. A great revival of religion had happily occurred in the neighbouring town of Sunderland and its vicinity, and that circuit was therefore able to undertake a new mission, especially as its mission in Edinburgh had been transferred to another circuit. Sunderland and South Shields Circuit agreed to send a missionary to the islands in question, - and Mr. George Cosens, a native of the West Indies, and a person of colour, was selected for the purpose. He sailed from Sunderland on Monday evening,

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May 7th, 1832. A few friends went on board to accompany him out of the harbour, and a large concourse followed along the pier. With pious simplicity and fervent zeal they sang a hymn of praise to God; and the stillness of the night, the melody of numerous human voices, the occasion of the gathering, and the view of the calm majestic ocean, all conspired to render the scene one of thrilling interest. Many devout aspirations ascended to heaven in behalf of the missionary, that he might have a safe and prosperous voyage, and be rendered abundantly useful in the lovely islands to which he was bound. He was favoured with a quick passage, arriving at Guernsey on the 11th of May, only four days after he sailed out of Wearmouth. On the following Sabbath morning he preached on board the Hebe, the vessel in which he had sailed from Sunderland, to about four hundred persons; and



in the afternoon to a large assembly on the New Ground, a beautiful place in the outskirts of the town, whither multitudes resort for purposes of pleasure and recreation. Above a thousand persons were supposed to be assembled on this occasion, all of whom conducted themselves with the utmost decorum, and listened with marked attention to the fluent and animated preacher, and it was hoped that deep religious impressions were made on many minds. He preached again on board the Hebe, at six o'clock in the evening, when

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hundreds who could not find room on board stood on the shore, and devoutly listened to an earnest and soul-stirring sermon. The next night Mr. Cosens preached on board again, to a great concourse, and with similar freedom and effect as on the former occasions.

On Wednesday, the 16th he preceded to Jersey, the largest island in the group, and preached there on the 20th. He occupied the Parade Ground, in the outskirts of the town, where he spoke twice to much smaller congregation than he had addressed in Guernsey. About one hundred and fifty persons surrounded him in the afternoon; some of whom were attentive, but others very careless. In the evening, about two hundred and fifty persons were congregated to hear him, and a much better impression was produced than in the afternoon. Guernsey, however, was deemed the more suitable island for the first station, and Mr. Cosens accordingly returned to it without delay. But Mr. Joseph Haughton was soon afterwards sent to assist Mr. Cosens in the mission, and then both Guernsey and Jersey were occupied; a preaching room was fitted up in each island, and a society formed in each. In the month of March following, the mission numbered one hundred and ten members. But an unhappy circumstance immediately afterwards occurred which brought the society into disrepute, and clouded the fair prospect of the mission in Guernsey. Some thoughtless, giddy young persons had conducted themselves in a very unseemly manner, in the preaching room at St. Peter's Port, Guernsey, and Mr. Cosens unhappily employed an imprudent expression respecting the behaviour of one of them, for which he was summoned to the royal court, where a heavy fine was inflicted upon him, and the case, greatly exaggerated, was reported in the Gazette, the most widely circulated paper in the island. In many parts of England, the imprudent expression would not have excited much attention; but in Guernsey, prejudice and various circumstances which we need not name, caused it to be regarded in a most unfavourable light, and it proved a great impediment in the way of the society's progress for some time. “

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We have the preceding account, in the letters, of the revival and contact with sailors from Jersey and Guernsey, which led to the Norman Isles Mission.

Then we have the account of George Cosens being sent, and nearly a year of successful ministry. These lines from Petty appear to quote some of George Cosens' Journal. The Primitive Methodist Magazine of 1833 contains two extracts.

On pages 15 to 17 there is an account of July 15th to August 27th. Starting in Jersey, he spent a week in Guernsey noting, "the cry of the people is 'Send us a Primitive Methodist missionary'" Back on Jersey he preached in St. Helier, Gorcy, Havre-des-Pas and St. Aubins. He visited families, especially during August when a cholera epidemic broke out. He notes that there are now 50 in the Society, and on August 22nd Joseph Houghton, a second missionary, joined him.

Pages 91 to 93 contain his account of September 16th to 25th. He was now preaching to hundreds, with a thousand being present on St. Peter Port pier. Again he visits families, and the cholera hospital, noting when the membership slowly increases. His accounts are followed by an extract from the journal of J. Houghton, sent out to work with George Cosens and who found George to be "almost worn down with his labours".

The timing of the mission might be relevant: George went to the Norman Isles just before his second wedding anniversary, and less than a year after the death of his wife and child.

We can conclude that the mission to the Norman Isles was successful for about 10 months, from when George arrived in May 1832 until the incident in March or April 1833.

Petty records that the "incident" came in March 1833, whereas the impression from Kendall is that it happened almost as soon as George Cosens arrived. Otherwise, Kendall is a faithful redactor.

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I need to carry out further research, looking at *The Guernsey Gazette* for about April 1833.

Petty says that the incident was exaggerated in the reports.

Petty's history of Primitive Methodism is the primary source for the accounts used by Kendall, along with Petty's reports in the P.M. Magazine.

This is for both the mission to the Norman Isles, and the later mission to Dorset.

Following the incident in Guernsey, Patterson (Northern Primitive Methodism, page 251) informs us that Petty "was sent to Guernsey by the Sunderland Circuit in 1833" to replace George Cosens.

None of this will be found in Leary as he lists ministers as "Sunderland" without the details of where they were sent for missions.

The Dorset Mission

The next, and final, phase of George Cosens' Primitive Methodist career was the **mission to Dorset** sent by the Sunderland Circuit.

He went with **John Nelson**, who was the senior member of this team.

Petty describes the Dorset Mission on page 261 of the first edition of his book.

"We must now turn to another part of Dorsetshire, as a field of missionary labour which Sunderland Circuit undertook to cultivate. The missions in Guernsey and Jersey, chiefly supported by that circuit, were gradually recovering from the injury they had sustained through the imprudence mentioned in the foregoing chapter, and were raising an increasing measure of support towards the maintenance of the missionaries there; and as Sunderland Circuit found itself in circumstances to support additional missionary labours, it wisely determined to undertake a new mission. Weymouth, a fashionable sea-port town in Dorsetshire, was selected as the centre of operations, and

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Messrs. Nelson and Cosens were appointed to this new field of labour. Their reception was highly flattering, and the prospect of great success was cheering. At Dorchester, indeed, they met with serious interruption; guns were fired, artificial thunder was produced in the theatre near which they stood, and other noises were made in order to prevent them from preaching, or render them inaudible; and on one occasion a bucket full of water was poured upon the head of Mr. C, and on another he was pelted with cabbage stalks and other missiles. But these annoyances were not of very long continuance, they gradually subsided, and the services were held in comparative peace. At Weymouth and other places, no such interruptions were experienced. Congregations listened peacefully to the fluent and fervent addresses of the missionaries, and many persons appeared to be convinced of sin and to become anxious seekers of salvation. A large room was taken on rent at Weymouth, and a small society formed there on the 16th of May 1834. Unhappily, however, the flattering prospect with which the missionaries had been elated was soon clouded. They had not perhaps made due allowance for the excitement and curiosity produced through Mr. C. being a man of colour, nor for other causes which contributed to their cheering reception. But a difference which arose between themselves was the greatest hindrance to their success. This weakened their energies, and created a party spirit among the people, some taking the side of Mr. Nelson, and others that of Mr. Cosens. It gives us no pleasure to record these matters; we are actuated solely by a sense of duty, and a desire to maintain historic fidelity. We enter not into the cause or occasion of this unhappy difference between the two brethren; we express no opinion on the merits of the case on either side; we simply record the fact, and we do this with deep regret, as it proved greatly detrimental to the infant mission, and led to the separation of both brethren from the Connexion. Mr. Cosens soon resigned his office as a preacher, and withdrew from the society, some of the members also going with him, and he shortly afterwards became a Baptist minister. Mr. Nelson left the Connexion soon after he removed from Weymouth.”

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The history (Kendall quotes Petty with some re-writing) is of a generally successful mission, with chapels being built up in membership.

However, in 1836 a disagreement between Nelson and Cosens led to both of them leaving the Prims. The effect of this was a major setback to the P.M. work in that part of Dorset.

Petty carefully avoids describing what the disagreement was about.

John Nelson transferred to the Manchester Circuit in 1836.

However, there was some issue about the way Hugh Bourne handled the Dorset incident (Petty, quoted in Kendall).

The result was that in 1837, Nelson joined the **Methodist New Connexion**.

Speculation

The nature of the disagreement with John Nelson is not stated. (Petty spares his friends the embarrassment.)

Possible factors –

- Grieving for his wife;
- His ethnicity;
- Was he already thinking about joining the Baptists?
-

George Cosens joins the Baptists

George was baptised by immersion at Weymouth Baptist Church some time in 1836. In 1837 he became Assistant Pastor at Aylesbury Baptist Church. By November 1837, he had become the Pastor of Cradley Heath Baptist Church. He was the second pastor in the history of CHBC.

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Idris Williams in his *History of Cradley Heath Baptist Church* (1933) p. 17 notes that he was already serving the church in a pastoral capacity by November 27th 1837.

“There is reason to believe that several members left the church at this time on the grounds that they did not care for a ‘black man’ as minister.

Such Mr. Cousens was. He was actually a native of Jamaica and hence a mullato. From a note left by the late John Fellows, it is learned, that his arrival created quite a sensation when he came riding into Cradley Heath by coach. The whole populace turned out to see him. He soon gained acceptance with the people, and speedily effected additions to the cause. The popularity of the ‘black minister’ is indicated by frequent requests the church received for his services to conduct School Anniversaries. He is found serving the New Connection of Methodists at Tipton and Cradley Forge, Darkhouse (Cosley), Wolverhampton and other places.”

At Cradley Heath Baptist Church, George required a baptistry to be built, and the Rules to be printed.

From the minutes books, it appears that he re-constituted the Church, with the original doctrinal statement of founding pastor **Jabez Tunnicliffe**. (Tunnicliffe later founded the **Band Of Hope**.)

In 1838, two baptism services were held, with a deacon, Joseph Billingham, baptising the converts. (This may have been in the cut). In February 1839, George baptised 6 people. He received an invitation from a church at Brierley Hill in August 1839, and left Cradley Heath later that year.

Although George Cosens left CHBC in 1839, he returned there twice.

His Baptist career is not part of this talk, other than to note that he worked in the Ministry for the rest of his life, as hard as he had worked for the Primitive Methodists.

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Footnote

John Petty was Minister in the **Dudley Circuit** from **1836** to **1839**.

Cradley Heath is situated about 3 miles south of Dudley, and a mile north of Halesowen, the most southerly point in the Dudley Circuit.

The Brierley Hill Circuit was split off from Dudley in about 1850.

I think that it is very likely that John Petty and George Cosens renewed the friendship, which had been forged in Sunderland, when Petty was there to comfort George in his great sorrow. There is no explicit mention of this, but the sympathy with which Petty narrates the Dorset incident suggests that their friendship continued. The fact that so many invitations to preach in 1838 came from Methodist New Connexion chapels raises another question. Did the old friendship with John Nelson also get restored? Or was it simply because George Cosens had been a Methodist?



CRADLEY HEATH · FOUR-WAYS · BAPTIST CHURCH

GEORGE COSENS

1805 - 1881



**THE FIRST KNOWN AFRO-CARIBBEAN
CHURCH MINISTER IN BRITAIN**

George Cosens came to Britain from Jamaica to study in London. In 1823 he responded to the Gospel when he and a fellow student went to a Church to while away some spare time. From 1824 to 1836 he worked as a Primitive Methodist mission preacher. This took him from Tyneside to Guernsey. Then he joined the Baptists.

George Cosens was born in Jamaica, the son of a white plantation owner and a slave woman. He married Mary Burnet in 1830 and (widowed) Betsy Dancer in 1842.



George Cosens - Baptist churches

Aylesbury 1837 (Assistant Pastor)
Cradley Heath 1837 - 39
Brierley Hill 1839 - 42
Great Torrington 1842 - 46
Cradley Heath 1846 (3 months)
Bewdley 1846 -54
Kington 1854 - 61
Usk 1861 - 64
Netherton 1864 -69
Cradley Heath 1869 - 79
Brierley Hill 1879 - 81

Cradley Heath Baptist Church welcomes you. Sunday service 11 a.m.