

## **“Labouring with success”: Early Primitive Methodist women preachers**

### **Introduction:**

Paul Wesley Chilcote, my friend and fellow historian of Methodist spirituality, has in considering the place of women in Methodist history claimed that the `memory of women has been lost .. [they have] not been permitted a voice and therefore to shape our memory. This must be rectified for our Christian family ever to be truly healthy`. (Chilcote: 9) Zechariah Taft, whom we shall briefly meet later, reflecting on the ministries of women in his time two centuries earlier reflected that “many females, whose praise was in all the churches while they lived, have been suffered to drop into oblivion”. (Chilcote:15)

Long ago, Amy Richardson, a PM local preacher in Leeds (1872-1953) whose name was not placed on the Leeds II Circuit Plan even though authority was given to her to preach in 1896, caused Colin Dews a hundred years later in his *Celebration of Methodist Local Preaching in Yorkshire* to raise the question that `the use and impact of female local preachers within Methodism ... requires further research` (Dews:58). That still remains the case, as is evidenced by the wealth of material, some new and unpublished [which will be shared at this conference. In the slot available to me in its programme, I don't want to spend valuable time covering material that has already been worked on by previous scholars.] I want here to pay tribute especially to Dorothy Graham who first introduced me to the importance of giving attention to the neglected and suppressed topic of women preachers in Methodism, and contributed a chapter in the book *Workaday Preacher: the story of Methodist Local Preaching* edited by Geoff Milburn for the Epworth Press for the bicentenary year of 1996 (the first official conference recognition of the office of local preacher) for which I also wrote. In addition, I pay respect and give thanks to one of our Englesea Brook volunteers and supporters, Margaret Gleave, who has done valuable work on the significance of female preaching in the first fifty years of Primitive Methodism, in an article entitled `An Extraordinary Calling`. (Ranter`s Digest 15: Spring 2017, pp.4-13). She points to the work of over 200 women preachers among Primitive Methodists and Bible Christians as the two branches of Methodism who employed women preachers in the most sustained way over the centuries of their existence.

I want to concentrate on some unpublished material, now in the Stephen Hatcher library [at Englesea Brook Chapel and Museum of Primitive

Methodism where I serve as Research Director,] to highlight aspects of what has been apparent in such studies in the past decades, namely the opposition to women preaching, the invisibility to its reality, and the deafening silence of the women themselves in the official records of the day. We will remedy this by listening to the voices of three women, **Elizabeth Allen, Ruth Watkins** and **Mary Burks**, whose testimonies and witness survive thanks their doggedness in responding to the bureaucratic nature of early Primitive Methodism and its obsession with gathering data, a practice it shared with Wesleyans and later Methodists, even to this day. But first we need briefly to set the context for why within Primitive Methodism there came to be a place for women preachers in the early days of its development but why this too proved as problematic as it did for the Wesleyans.

Too few preaching plans have survived for the early period of Methodism to give a reliable estimate of the full extent of female preaching in Methodism, especially as their names were not always included even if they were used as preachers, evident from other records. (Lloyd:12). And yet, as Jennifer Lloyd has clearly demonstrated in her book on women preachers, they were present, challenging the patriarchal hierarchies with limited and diminishing success in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, `never exercised in complete equality with their male colleagues.` As Elaine Kaye and others note, their contributions were valued but always limited by rules within the wider connexions which prevented them from exercising too much power`. (Lloyd: 3) David Hempton, however, claims that `Methodism was comprehensively shaped by women in ways that we do not fully understand`. (Hempton: 138, 149), citing instances of their role as `purveyors of hospitality, deaconesses, visitors, evangelists, prayers, exhorters, testifiers, class members and leaders and preachers who helped to define the character of the Methodist movement`. As the most prominent and influential role shaping the movement, it is essential therefore to have more work done on the role of female preachers and to unearth more evidence of its reality and significance. Lloyd`s thesis that female preachers were most useful in the conversionist period of the development of early Primitive Methodism certainly seems to fit the evidence offered of the higher percentage of female itinerants before 1834 (as much as 20%) but more work needs to be done on critique of the reasons behind this. One key factor may be that observed by Hugh Bourne when he met Elizabeth Evans, whose preaching he admired, (the model you remember for George Eliot`s Dinah Morris) when he said that he believed that “she had lost some ground when entering the married state”.

(Kendall Vol.1:144). Certainly, it caused some difficulties for the Wesleyans from whom she parted company in the early 1830s because of the `stigma attached to women`s ministry` to join the Arminian Methodists, though she subsequently returned to the fold.

**Context:**

John Wesley`s ambivalence towards women preachers is well recognised as he and others stated that “we know not where it will end”. (quoted Graham: 164). Yet he used Sarah Mallett and others and tolerated the initiatives of Mary Bosanquet and Mary Barritt as bearing fruit in the revival. But the more exuberant revivals sparked by William Bramwell and others in Yorkshire and elsewhere in the 1790s were a different matter, forcing the Connexion after his death to re-examine the role of women preachers. Such revivals were ably aided by women helpers. Of Mary Barritt, chief agent with Bramwell of the Nottingham revival of 1799-1800 it was said that “It is at the peril of your soul that you meddle with [her]. God is with her – fruit is appearing wherever she goes”. (Brown: 72). For more information on the use of female preachers, of Nanny Cutler and Mary Barritt, one can consult James Sigston`s *A Memoir of the Life and Ministry of Mr. William Bramwell* written in 1820 at the height of the PM acceptance of the ministry of women amongst them. Their example encouraged a new generation of those aspiring to be preachers. Phyllis Mack sees the 1790s onwards as a period of `heightened gender consciousness in their campaign to publish women`s life stories and spiritual writings..` (Mack: 291)

When the first signs of growing apprehension and then opposition to women preachers arose in Wesleyanism, they found a champion in Zechariah Taft, whose *Thoughts on Female Preaching* in 1807 nevertheless failed to sway the Wesleyan Conference of that year to severely restrict the use of women as preachers. “In general they ought not” was a judgement which became enshrined in Wesleyan practice for most of the rest of the century with some few but notable exceptions, slipping under the connexional radar with local connivance for practical reasons. Revivalist zeal gave way to a more cautious conservatism and the need to tow the establishment line in a revolutionary era.

But from the beginning, picking up many converts from Wesleyanism because it has set its face against revivalism and a more proper role for women, the Primitive Methodist connexion, appealing to a poorer and more rural base,

attracted a considerable number of women, some of whom were enlisted first as local preachers and then as itinerants in the first two decades from its emergence as the Camp Meeting Methodists in 1807 and the Primitive Methodist Connexion in 1811. Joseph Nightingale, erstwhile follower of Thomas Paine and ex Wesleyan, described the revivalists as “simple, harmless, and well-meaning ... but enthusiastical and ungovernable”. That’s what the government feared. (Warner: 27)

By 1818, 20% of all its preachers were women (Lloyd: 65-71). Hugh Bourne, its co-founder with his experience of those female helpers in parallel movements (Dorothy Ripley with Lorenzo Dow, Hannah Peacock with Peter Phillips and the Independent Methodists, and Nancy Foden with the Magic Methodists) saw the tremendous value of the contribution women could make in the rapid development of his movement. A full account of his *Remarks on the Ministry of Women* can be found in Antliff’s Memoirs. Mary Dunnell, preacher for the Independents, was one of his earliest helpers. He praised her for her “volubility of speech and flowery eloquence” when she spoke at the first August camp meetings to the hundreds gathered from all over the North Midlands and Cheshire. Such use of course laid them open to the charge that they allowed the use of “females to preach in promiscuous assemblies”, in line with much of the orgiastic assumptions of most of the anti-Methodist propaganda of the time. But it is Sarah Kirkland who has the honour of being the first female preacher on a PM plan of 1814, aged only 18, and a “travelling preacheress” two years later. She attracted thousands to the camp meeting in Nottingham Forest, a feeding ground for the recruits gathered and harvested in the numerous preaching places being established in the very period Wesleyans were post-Peterloo closing ranks against such vulgar expressions of a religiosity which would not only bring notoriety but also risked losing credibility in an age of retrenchment. She is the only woman included in George Herod’s *Historical Sketches* in 1855. The examples of some of those women as well as men who risked not only their reputations but also their security are amply evidenced in the *Primitive Methodist Magazine* accounts of such women as Elizabeth Smith, Elizabeth Clifford, Elizabeth Brownhill and Mary Porteous, some of whom we will reference (if there is time) later. (Lloyd: 90ff)

There was a clear need to justify such activity as we can deduce from the article in the second PMM of 1821 when a piece appeared entitled “*The Female Preachers` Plea*”. Already many were viewing such preaching as dangerous and divisive, a view highlighted by the departure of Ann Carr who

split off in 1825 with the Female Revivalists in Leeds, nicknamed the `Jumping Ranters`.

### **Some new evidence:**

I want now for us to listen to three voices which come from the obsessive collection of data and publications which from early days marked out the PM Connexion in its projection of a self-identity as a growing movement keen to bureaucratize the charisma of the founding fathers in ways which prevented its demise. They come from a collection of 186 returns following on from a minute of the 1827 Conference relating to preachers, requiring all preachers to make a return, with their dates and places of birth and conversion, as well as dates and places of service as both local and travelling preachers, with forms sent out from the Book Room at Bemersley. While they are mostly the completed forms, there is supplementary material given by some who had not received the forms or chose to add to the account. As yet, they have not been fully analysed and cross checked against other listings, but for today`s lecture I have extracted the only three identifiable returns from women preachers (despite their numbers being around 20% of the total). The male language of the minute clearly implied that they were not expected to make the returns even though the minute said it would only take them 30 minutes to complete!

ELIZABETH ALLEN FORM : Writing from Grimsby Circuit April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1828, to James Bourne, Book Steward at Bemersley

*Dear Brother and Farther in Christ,*

*Grace and peace be multiplied upon you from God the Farther and from our Lord Jesus Christ. My design in writing in this manner is. In looking at the Minutes of the last Conference held at Manchester, I find that each preacher is requested to give bn account where he has travelled . But as the females Preachers are not mentioned in this minute, I did not know whether it was my duty to write or not. But I have been told that two printed forms has come into the Circuit to be filled up with the above mentioned and Bro [Robert] Atkinson says he lost one on account of which he advises me to write a few lines by way of letter. Here they are at your service, and do with them as you think proper after so many reasonings about the matter whether to do it or whether I should not. I hope you will excuse it coming so late. I remain your unworthy sister in the kingdom and partner of our Lord Jesus, Eliz. Allen*

*I Elizabeth Allen was converted at or near Coathillin the parish of Lazonby and County of Cumberland in the year 1820 and as a ;local preacher my name never appeared upon the plan till that same quarter that I was taken out to travel which was by the Hull Circuit at the Sept. 1824 Q[uarte]r Day. But I did not enter upon my labour till the last of Octbr. Or the first of Novfr. 1824 being then 22 years of age. I travelled in that Circuit till the 25<sup>th</sup> December in all 2 years and 3 months. Then was removed to Louth in Lincolnshire and travelled there till Christmas with the exception of a few days being ill. When leaving Louth I came to Grimsby where I am at present and am labouring with success. May the Lord grant we may have an abundant harvest of preccious souls gathered to the standard of the cross which may be the crown of our rejoicing in the day of the Lord, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you. E. Allen*

*NB When I am removed from this Circuit which I expect will be before winter is over if you could get me into some easy circuit I would be much obliged to you as I have been ill and am weak at present.*

#### RUTH WATKINS` FORM

*Pursuant to the order of the Annual Meeting or Conference of 1827, I transmit the following account of myself:*

*I Ruth Watkins was born at Earlswood in the county of Monmouth and was brought up to the occupation of Dress Makeing. At the age of twenty one I was converted to the Lord. My conversion took place at Earlswood in or about the month of Feby 1824. began to labour as a local preacher Nov. 1824 and did continue till March 1825 which was about five months. On the 24<sup>th</sup> March I was taken out to labour as a travelling preacher in the Primitive Methodist Connexion by the Tunstall Circuit; and an account of my itinerant labours is contained in the following table:*

*March 24<sup>th</sup> 1825, Tunstall Remaining 3 years one week.*

#### MARY BURKS` FORM

*Primitive Methodist Connexion 18 [28 crossed out] 31*

*An account of the itinerant and other labours of me Mary Burks.*

*I Mary Burks was born at Gringley in the county of Nottingham and was brought up to the occupation or employment of a House Keeper. At the age of 23 , I was converted to the Lord. My conversion took place at Stockwith in Lincolnshire in or about the month of April 1819. I began to labour as a local preacher in June 1820 and continued till March 1822 which was about one year and nine months. On the seventh of March I was taken out to labour as travelling or itinerant preacher in the Primitive Methodist Connexion by the Scotter Circuit, and an account of my itinerant labours is contained in the following table:*

<i>March 18<sup>th</sup> 1822</i>	<i>Scotter Circuit</i>	<i>Dec. 17<sup>th</sup> 1822</i>	<i>9 months</i>
<i>Dec 26<sup>th</sup> 1822</i>	<i>Louth Circuit</i>	<i>June 26<sup>th</sup> 1823</i>	<i>6 months</i>
<i>July 6<sup>th</sup> 1823</i>	<i>Scotter Circuit</i>	<i>June 23<sup>rd</sup> 1824</i>	<i>1 year</i>
<i>July 6<sup>th</sup> 1824</i>	<i>Lincoln Circuit</i>	<i>June 26<sup>th</sup> 1826</i>	<i>2 years</i>
<i>July 6<sup>th</sup> 1826</i>	<i>Grimsby Circuit</i>	<i>Dec 24<sup>th</sup> 1826</i>	<i>6 months</i>
<i>Jan 1<sup>st</sup> 1827</i>	<i>Hull Circuit</i>	<i>Jun 26<sup>th</sup> 1829</i>	<i>2 years 6 months</i>
<i>Jan 1<sup>st</sup> 1830</i>	<i>Grimsby Circuit</i>	<i>June 26<sup>th</sup> 1830</i>	<i>6 months</i>
<i>July 6<sup>th</sup> 1830</i>	<i>Louth where I am now</i>		

*I have sent 2 years subscription money of my entrance*

*Primitive Methodist Connexion Louth Circuit 1831*

*To the Preachers and members of the Fund called the Primitive Methodist Preachers Fund assembled at the District Meeting at Grimsby and at the Conference in Leicester.*

*Dear Fathers and Brethern, Grace and Peace be with you, Amen.*

*I Mary Burks, desirous of becoming a member of your Fund being myself considered eligible first as to age being 35 years, of good health and a sound constitution. I now offer myself as a candidate for the said fund. I was informed that a minute was passed last conference giving me the privilege of entering the said fund as from last Conference (if these my present documents should by you be received) by sending my entrance and this year`s subscription money. An Account of my birth, conversion, commencement of my ministerial labours, and the circuits in which I have laboured, you will find annexed with this*

*document. I remain your sister in the Gospel of the Redeemer, Mary Burks.  
Louth Feb. 9<sup>th</sup> 1831*

*Approved by the Quarter Board at Louth April 4<sup>th</sup> 1831*

*William Byrom, President*

*William Ball, Secretary*

In the six years before her death in 1837, she served two further circuits in Yorkshire, before retiring to East Stockwith in the Scotter circuit where she resided with her father. She remained a class leader and local preacher till her death in January 1837, aged 41. It would be interesting to find out whether she was able to acquire any of the benefits of her subscription to the Preachers` Fund (assuming that she was accepted). (PMM 1837: 451)

Sometimes the voices of women preachers are filtered through their husbands or colleagues to ensure that their presence and contribution is not overlooked. This was the case with William Suddard, born in Bradford in 1805, a PM itinerant in the Hull circuit in 1824 who had been an itinerant preacher with the Wesleyans from 1820 until that year. He wrote the following in his return to the Connexion:

WILLIAM SUDDARD`s FORM

*At which time I peaceably withdrew feeling an impression upon my mind of it being my duty to go abroad as a missionary; at the instigation of some of the Wesleyan Preachers, I offered myself for foreign labours in their Body. My wife being in the habit of Preaching – the Conference, nor yet the Missionary Committee could sanction my going out unless she would cease from acting in that public way – Mr Zechariah Taft informed the Conference “She would preach and go where she would” – upon which it did not appear practicable for me to go.*

And so he jumped ship and joined the PM Connexion in the Hull Circuit. But there is no record of whether his wife continued to preach or to support him informally. He is listed in the Minutes of Conference as itinerant in the Hull Circuit in 1825 and 1826 but not thereafter?

But what of those missing from the records? I cite but a few to instance the way in which the record is sadly incomplete.

Jane ARNDALE, who played a vital role in the introduction of PM to Hexhamshire and Weardale in the 1820s, was one of the preachers from Shotley Bridge who came at the invitation of John GIBSON to Hexham to preach in October 1822. She was accompanied by another travelling preacher, William Studdards whom she was later to marry.

Another female preacher known in that area was Mary PORTEOUS (1783-1861) who was active in the 1830s but whose work was interrupted by injury sustained in her travels. She wrote in a letter: "We have some five jum;pers in the shire. I feel delighted in being among them but have not yet learned to jump with them". (Milburn:30)

Elizabeth RUSSELL (nee SMITH) was born in Ludlow 1805, brought up by her grandmother after she was orphaned. Apprenticed as a dressmaker she went to London and worked for an actress. Then later she moved to Water Stratford in Buckinghamshire where she worked for a local vicar. In a troubled spiritual state she returned home to Ludlow in 1824 where she had a conversion experience under PM preaching, despite the local `cause was low`. Encouraged to pray, she did so causing `a stout man to fall as one shot in battle`. This was taken as evidence of the power of her calling, encouraged by Sarah Evans, confirmed by the quarterly meeting which sent her to a new mission in Radnorshire. She walked the 30 miles from Ludlow, unafraid of what she had to maintain herself. Giving up her dressmaking earnings, she was given an allowance of two guineas a quarter (half of what her male colleagues could have expected). As her obituary recorded, "though but a weakly woman, she overcame opposition with her plain firm method" and established a number of new places which led to several societies being formed.

Three things stand out as characteristic of the contribution she and others made

- Her diligence and frugality – shorthand for not costing the local cause as much as others with family ties and responsibilities
- Her consent to open mission – breaking new ground through this extraordinary call with a sense of novelty and fresh enthusiasm
- Her enduring trouble and affliction in a thinly inhabited country – shorthand for being prepared to go where others hesitated

The series of letters written to her colleague and mentor Sarah Evans in the period 1826 to 1828 are indicative of the reality of she too “laboring with success” as she recalls in February 1828 that “In the branch we are doing well. I have lately joined a good number of members; and we are building a new chapel. Our societies are growing in grace. We long for greater work. The congregations daily increase”. (PMM 1837:139)

But where was her record in the 1828 return of itinerant preachers? Lost on the road from Radnorshire to Ludlow and on to Bemersley? Or never delivered to that branch of a sparsely populated county? We don't know. But fortunately have the record of the Primitive Methodist Magazine with extracts from her letters to tell of the reality of her perseverance in the face of great difficulties in a key area of mission.

In 1828, after her grandmother's death, she was transferred from her work in the Ludlow and Presteigne branches to Brinkworth in Wiltshire with five male colleagues. Here too she had a “zeal for missionary labours”. In 1829, she moved to Wootton Bassett in Berkshire where it was recorded that “her preaching talents as a female are more than ordinary; her way is perfectly open, and she has been a very useful”. A classic assessment and understatement by a male colleague! Her subsequent marriage to Thomas Russell, an itinerant preacher imprisoned for his beliefs, and work together in Hampshire, Berkshire and then Staffordshire are equally remarkable in the rapid growth of the causes in these parts. But we must move on. I am tempted to say that, like the end of John's gospel, there are many more things which could be added to this narrative. She survived scarlet fever in 1833 only to have her daughter Julia succumb to smallpox in 1835. She herself died the following year. Over 1,000 people attended her funeral in the new chapel in Ludlow.

### **Some conclusions:**

We can from these evidences see that a pattern has emerged which in the main fits with the conclusions drawn by Graham and Lloyd and Stott.

1. More than the male counterparts, female preachers were likely to be young, less than 20 years old, and overwhelmingly at the time of stationing single. Maybe as Malmgreen suggests wanting move in defiance of parents? Most came from poor backgrounds in agricultural settings or cottage industries.

2. Their length of tenure on those stations was as short as their male colleagues and sometimes cut short for reasons mainly of illness or for marriage. Their lives were counter cultural in orientation. Compassion and hospitality were key concepts, cutting across social norms and boundaries.
3. Their role was predominantly evangelistic and revivalist. They were engaged in conversations concerning the state of the soul, especially at times of illness or approaching death, talking of their own feelings and telling of their conversions. They were usually moved on once a society had been formed. The novelty value of their presence offered much in the attraction of converts and recruits to the movement. Though we have little direct evidence, by inference we can deduce that the characteristics Obelkevitch lists of early PMs in Lincolnshire, that its preachers preached the 3 Rs, ruin, repentance and redemption, and that their preaching was `plain, pithy, pointed and practical`.
4. Once ceasing to itinerate, they were sometimes continued as hired local preachers to assist in circuit missions and special services. That was the situation for Ann Brownsword, sister of Thomas the boy preacher, who itinerated until she married, having been the cause of the conversion of many rough Bolton factory workers, then settled in Burslem and continued as a local preacher. For many, as Mack concludes `the missionary project became a family project` as women retreated into dictated domesticity. (Mack: 298)

More work needs to be done in testing the Stott hypothesis that public preaching was abandoned for the domestic world as plebeian village evangelists became respectable middle class philanthropists. While this may fit neatly with the experience of Wesleyanism, I would want to query whether it sits well with the continuing egalitarian nature of Primitive Methodism. I hope other contributions and discussions might bring out this more clearly. Stott`s conclusion that `a cottage religion centred on the labouring household` allowing more scope for female agency fits the earlier part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We shall no doubt hear when the rot set in and male ascendancy prevailed against such earlier aspirations and experiences. Perhaps how women were allowed (by men) to read their bibles may determine whether such reading empowered and liberated them or rather constrained and suppressed their God given gifts.

## **Bibliography**

Brown, G K: Women of the Word

Chilcote, Paul W: Her Own Story: autobiographical portraits of early Methodist women. Kingswood. 2001

Dews, D Colin: *Ranters, Revivalists, Radicals, Reformers and Revolutionaries: a Celebration of Methodist Local Preaching in Yorkshire, Leeds Methodist District, 1996*

Gleave, Margaret : `An Extraordinary Calling`: A discussion on the significance of female preaching within Primitive Methodism 1813-1867, in the Ranters` Digest Issue 15: Spring 2017, Tentmaker Publications 2017

Graham, E Dorothy: Women Local Preachers in Workaday Preachers: the Story of Methodist Local Preaching, edited Geoffrey Milburn, Epworth Press, London, 1995

Hammond, Geordan and Forsaith, Peter, eds. Religion, Gender and Industry, : exploring Church and Methodism in its local setting. Pickwick Publications, 2011

Herod, George: Historical and Biographical Sketches of some of those preachers ... of the Primitive Methodist Connexion, London 1855

Lenton, John: Support Groups for Methodist Women Preachers 1803-1851 in Hammond and Forsaith

Lloyd, Jennifer: Women and the Shaping of British Methodism – Persistent Preachers, 1807-1907, Manchester University Press, 2009

Mack, Phyllis: Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment : gender and emotion in early Methodism , CUP, 2008

Malmgreen, Gail : Religion in the lives of English Women

Milburn, G E: The Ranters in Hexhamshire

Obelkovitch, James: Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825-1875, OUP, 1976

Sigston, James: A memoir of the Life and Ministry of Mr. William Bramwell, London 1820

Stott, Ann : Chapter 6 Women and Religion in eds. Barker, Hannah and Chalus, Elaine: Women`s History : Britain 1700-1850 , Routledge, 2005

Valenze, Deborah: Prophetic Sons and Daughters

Warner, Julia Stewart: The Primitive Methodist Connexion: Its background and early history, University of Wisconsin, 1984