

Alderman John William Payne J.P., (born Guyhirn, 22 September 1887; died, Wisbech, 12 July 1959) was a Liberal politician, a champion of public education, and of smallholders, in the former county of the Isle of Ely and in East Anglia more widely. A farmer, businessman, Primitive Methodist preacher and administrator, he was twice Liberal candidate for the parliamentary constituency of [Cambridgeshire](#) (1929 and 1935) and, reportedly, a personal friend of [David Lloyd George](#).

He was born into a devout Primitive Methodist family, which was staunchly Liberal in its politics. His father [Richard](#), was a platelayer on the Great Northern and Great Eastern Joint line, who would in middle age be elected to the Isle of Ely county councillor and become chairman of the local Liberal Association. John was the middle child of five children, and attended Guyhirn School until the age of twelve. His mother, Amy, was an enthusiastic reader to her children, favouring religious and moralistic tales such as 'Little Meg's Children' by [Hesba Stretton](#). This tale was first published in 1868 by the Religious Tract Society of London, and was, so an inscription on the title page tells us, a particular favourite of hers.

Amongst John's surviving preaching notes, there is one that suggests that it was on a "November evening with mother" that he first felt "the convincing power of the Holy Spirit" at "the usual prayer meeting" (presumably at [Guyhirn Primitive Methodist Chapel](#)). He was twelve years old.

At the age of nineteen, he felt "the call to preach" and his "first pulpit" was in 1908, on a January morning at [Harold Bridge chapel](#), near Gorefield, in the Isle of Ely.

In 1910 his sister Thirza wrote a letter addressed to him, at the home of Mr. & Mrs Betts of Whitechapel, in the East End of London. We do not know why he was lodging with the Betts but one possible reason was that he was engaged in some way with the work of the [Whitechapel Primitive Methodist Mission](#), and may have fallen under the influence of the charismatic [Rev. Thomas Jackson](#), who, as well as being a Primitive Methodist luminary, was also very active in progressive Liberal Party politics.

We know too that, in later years, his younger brother Harry also visited London, and toured the Houses of Parliament, presumably through his father's Liberal Party connections. It is certainly possible that John was also afforded such an opportunity. In later life both brothers stood for Parliament.

It was also in 1910 that he gave his "FIRST SPEECH" (as a note in his scrapbook reads) - in a debate at Guyhirn's Working Men's Institute, chaired by the local County Councillor, [William Weston](#), on the question, "Should bachelors be taxed?" His father spoke in favour of taxation whereas, "Mr J. W. Payne jun. made a great speech in opposition. He characterised the man who had nothing to do with women as a real hero, and told several stories in support, which caused considerable amusement."

At the 1911 census, John was still living at home in Guyhirn and working as a fruit grower, alongside his father, but by 1912 he was preaching as far afield as Donington, in Lincolnshire where his older brother, Richard Jr., was a railway signalman.

For a devout and idealistic young man, confident in his abilities in the pulpit, and possibly seeking purpose and direction, it is possible that John considered entering the ministry, for he penned notes entitled "Ordination 1914" from which some of his early biographical details

are sourced. If this is the case, the path to ordination was not taken, but around this time John met and befriended a young man from Acle, Norfolk - [Harold Wright](#) - who did go on to train as a Primitive Methodist minister. Harold studied at Hartley Hall in Manchester, most likely from 1911 or 1912, and in 1914 was stationed at Thetford, in Norfolk, as a probationary minister.

When, in 1915, John married Gertrude Weston (the organist at Guyhirn chapel, and daughter of the late William Weston) the service was conducted by Harold Wright. The bridesmaid was John's younger sister, and erstwhile correspondent, Thirza. She and the Rev. Wright jointly gave the happy couple a tea service and in 1918 Harold became John's brother-in-law.

One year to the day after the wedding, Gertrude gave birth to a daughter, Sylvia Gertrude. She was to be their only child. Around this time John took up farming on three acres at Hook's Drove, close to the village of Murrow where the family attended [Murrow Primitive Methodist Chapel](#).

It is notable that John did not, as far as we know, volunteer for military service during the Great War. The only recorded reference made by him to the period of the war was when he spoke at a meeting in Murrow on the matter of small holdings for ex-Service men. Asked to speak because the representative of the British Legion had not turned up, " he intimated that he had not prepared any matter. He said that he had taken a very keen interest in small holdings [from] his early years. Since he could work he had been a small holder. He had interested himself in the ex-Service men's small holdings, and although he did not go to the war he was not sorry, though it was not his fault." Marriage and his scheduled occupation (as a farmer) probably saved John from the conscription that was introduced in 1916.

In 1919 he was elected to the Isle of Ely County Council for the ward of Leverington and Parson Drove. He later said that it was the issue of smallholdings for returning servicemen which drew him into politics. His father was already a county councillor, and John found his way onto the education, smallholdings and agricultural committees.

In Murrow he was active in the life of the chapel, running a young men's Bible class and teaching at Sunday School, and by 1921 was Chairman of the village's sports committee. On 3rd June 1923 he became Station Secretary for the Wisbech Primitive Methodist Circuit.

At some point he began to supplement his income by trading in straw, hay and animal feed. With so many interests competing for his time, he needed labour and was known to have employed local men as drivers, often using their neighbours telephones to reach them.

In 1929 he was selected as the Liberal Party's parliamentary candidate for Cambridgeshire. He might have enjoyed a better chance on his local patch - the Isle of Ely constituency - but [the incumbent MP](#) was a Liberal. It is around this time that he began to collect reports of Lloyd George's speeches, culled from The Times newspaper, and pasted them into a ledger that he used as scrapbook.*

At this election his brother Harry also stood for the Liberals in Rutland and Stamford constituency, but both brothers came third in three horse races, with John garnering 30.7 and Harry 24.7% of the respective vote tallies.

On 4th February 1930 he was elected Chairman of the Education Committee, of the Isle of Ely County Council, a position he was to hold for the next twenty nine years.

He was selected again as the Liberal Party's candidate for Cambridgeshire for the 1931 General Election but was asked to stand down in favour of the incumbent Conservative candidate, in support of the National Government. He did so, perhaps reluctantly (Lloyd George was certainly opposed to this strategy) but in December of that year, "the party's gratitude to their champion was expressed by the gift of a gold watch and chain to Mr. Payne, a silver tea service to Mrs. Payne, and a box of chocolates to their daughter."

The following year he joined his father as an [Alderman](#) of the Isle of Ely county council, and in 1935 they were joined on the Aldermanic bench by his younger brother Harry.

In 1933 his influence on the Education Committee saw a new village school opened, in the ward he represented, at Parson Drove. It was named the Payne School in his honour, and is, at the time of writing, still the Alderman Payne School. His nephew, [Stanley Payne](#), was employed at the new school as a teacher.

In 1935 he stood once more for Parliament in Cambridgeshire but with the Liberals' resurgence on the wane, he came a distant third.

In April 1939 he was appointed as a Justice of the Peace, to the Wisbech bench. In later years both his brothers, Richard (Junior) and Harry, joined him on the magistrates' bench.

During WWII - the period he later recalled as his busiest - he served as chairman of the Isle of Ely County Council (1939-46) and of the Isle of Ely Wartime Agricultural Executive (1939-47). He was also the Isle of Ely's representative to the National Agricultural Council. He and Gertrude took in evacuees. In July 1943 he addressed a Farm Sunday Gathering of 2,000 people in Wisbech park moving a proposition that "this community assembled here pledges itself to do all in its power to ensure that every crop shall be safely gathered in," adding that, "no German submarine could sink the harvest of our own land."

Excessive commitments would most likely be the reason that he retired from farming in 1940, auctioning off his farming stock and equipment, and moving from Murrow to a detached property with a barn, on the Leverington Road, in Wisbech, from where he conducted his forage merchants business, with the assistance of his nephew Maurice Payne. (Despite having the barn on the property, they were known to store surplus stock in the municipal cemetery, which backed onto the property.) In his spare moments he tended roses, which he grew in the garden, and which were a familiar sight to passers-by on the Leverington Road. The house was renamed Floral Lodge.

But it was for his work as the chairman of the Isle of Ely County Council's Education Committee, for which he was best known during his lifetime. During his chairmanship (1930-59) he was credited with greatly advancing public education in the county, opening many village and secondary schools and modernising many more. In 1931 he became a governor of both Wisbech High School for Girls, and the town's [Grammar School](#) for Boys. In 1936 he became Chairman of the Governors of the Grammar School. However his key achievement in this field was the establishment of the county's first further education college, the Isle of Ely Further Education College And Horticultural Institute (later shortened to [Isle](#)

[College](#)), Wisbech. This was a long held ambition and one that he doggedly and unflaggingly pursued.

He often expressed the view that Christian faith and public education shared common roots and were inseparable. For example, in an address to the March United Bible Class in 1933, he expounded upon this theme, drawing from the ministry of Jesus, the early church and St Augustine. He also spoke of the Methodist revival, of the work of Bell and Lancaster, and the establishment of National Schools (one of which he had himself attended). "Christian responsibility", he concluded, "[calls] for us to provide the means to equip our boys and girls for life and citizenship to endow them with faculties trained, sensitive to appreciate all life offers - Nature, Art, Poetry, Music - with minds alert to read the messages of great minds, to give the joy of knowledge which makes them seek to know."

In May 1952 he was a steward for the Wisbech circuit, and presiding officer for the East Anglian Methodist Synod held in the town's [Trinity Methodist church](#). His opening address was reported in the local press: "Mr. Payne said he considered no society ever established in this country had ever done so much for it as the Methodist church.'We live in an age something like that which existed when Methodism was first established. There is an under-current of anxiety, a sense of insecurity and a sense of danger.' Mr Payne appealed for a revival of gospel preaching with the same fire and enthusiasm which the early Methodists displayed."

From this it is not unreasonable to assume that he practiced what he [literally] preached and that his preaching style could be impassioned. He preached in the favoured Primitive Methodist style, improvising from notes. His preaching notes have survived and remain in the possession of the family. They always begin with a Biblical reference, and the points arising from that, typically four to six, that he intended to make, all on small cards that would easily fit within his hand. Following a convincing win in the Wisbech town Council elections of May 1958, a local newspaper correspondent wrote, "of all the candidates, Mr. J. W. Payne, a county alderman and chairman of the Isle Education Committee, is the daddy of them all... aged 70, he is a more lively speaker than many half his age."

In September 1955 he retired from the animal feed business - which was, along with Floral Lodge, sold to his nephew and protégé Maurice Payne, by this time also an Isle of Ely County councillor.

In 1955 he became the first Chairman of the governors of the Isle of Ely Further Education College And Horticultural Institute.

Two years later, at the Wisbech Free Church Federal Council, he spoke in favour of a letter of protest against nuclear weapons. "From a Christian standpoint you cannot get away from the fact that it's wrong... there are people in all the countries just as worried as we are," he said.

In this same year he lost his position as chairman of the Isle of Ely Liberal Association when younger members left to form an alternative association. Whilst tending his roses, he told a reporter, "I know I am still the chairman of the old association but I appear to be the only one left. The best thing for me to do is drop quietly out."

The first half of 1959 he continued to work - but with the preparations for the official opening of Isle College being his primary concern. He had spoken of retirement but only once the Isle College was officially opened. However, on Saturday 4th July, after presiding over the Wisbech Magistrates bench in the morning, he fell ill at Quadring, near Spalding, where he was to have opened the Methodist Church garden fete. Gertrude performed the duties in his place and then they were driven home. Later that day he suffered "another attack", and was taken to the North Cambs Hospital, in Wisbech, where he died at around 7am on Sunday. He was due to have preached that morning.

For the following week flags were flown at half-mast on schools, government buildings and police stations, throughout the Isle of Ely.

His funeral took place at Trinity Methodist Church, Wisbech, on the following Wednesday. The Wisbech Standard reported that, "...many were in tears as the coffin was taken from the Church to its last resting place... There were four lorry loads of wreaths, and people lined the streets to pay their last respects to a man they loved. Flags on public buildings were flown at half mast, and blinds were drawn along the route." As well as the scores and scores of representatives of various councils, organisations and churches, the Standard's report also notes that, "the [coffin] bearers were former pupils of Ald. Payne's Bible Class at Murrow Methodist Church," and included in the list of "Family Mourners", amongst dozens of cousins, were "Mrs Kingston and Mrs. Beevor (London, former evacuees)".

Later that month, a memorial service was held at Ely Cathedral attended by over 700 mourners including the sitting Member of Parliament for the Isle of Ely, and the Lord Lieutenant of the county. In his address, the Dean of Ely, said of him that "He belonged, in fact, to that band of men and women which is, thank God, so numerous in this country, who give their services to the community in which they live freely... [and] what is apparent is the debt that the children of the Isle owe, and will continue to owe, to Alderman Payne.

The Payne School (now the Alderman Payne School) at Parson Drove, opened in 1933, was named for him. He is buried in Wisbech General Cemetery.

Following his death there were calls in the local press for the Isle College to be named in his honour but these went unheeded. It is now part of the College of West Anglia.

Positions held

On the inside frontispiece of his scrapbook John kept a list of all the positions he held and their date of commencement.

Local Preacher Jan 1908

Circuit S. S. Secretary

John Bends Charity Trustee 9 years Tholomos Drove 1914 - Vice Chairman 1936,
Chairman Nov 1949

Parson Drove 1919

Circuit S. S. Secretary June 6 1923 - 18 March 1935

Circuit Steward 18 March 1935 - Dec 1949

[Advisory Committee For 3 years Dec. 2 1940 1943 1946 1949]

Second Term Jan 1950 - 1954

County Council 1919

Chairman of Ed. Com. Feb 4 - 1930

Alderman Nov 1932 CCA 1932
Vice Chairman County Agriculture Com May 5 - 1926
" Small Holdings Com: May 5 - 1926
Governor Wisbech High School for Girls
Governor Wisbech Grammar School March 1931
Appointed - Council of Agriculture 1930
Mrs J W Payne appointed to the County Agricultural Com. 20 Feb 1929
Small Holdings May 1929
Chairman Sea Cadets 1942
Chairman Murrow Managers, 1935
Chairman of Governors Wisbech Grammar School 1936 Oct.
Chairman of Goosetree Sub. Com. April 1937
Member of Visitors - Mental Home April 1937
Vice Chairman County Council May 25 1938
First Meeting Nov 23 1938
Magistrate April 1939
Chairman of Council May - 1939-1946
Chairman War Agricultural Executive - Sept 1939 - 1944
Chairman County Agricultural Committee
Chairman smallholdings - June 3 1940
Chairman Pilotage Committee 1954
River Board 1954
Elected Wisbech Town Council Nov. 1945
Wisbech Northside Drainage Authority Deputy Chair 1952
Chairman of Isle Ely College of Further Education 1955

Sources

Scrapbook of Newspaper Cuttings, with articles dating from 1910 to 1957, mostly drawn from the Isle of Ely and Wisbech Advertiser, the Cambridgeshire Times and the Wisbech Standard. These are generally dated but often the specific publication is not definitively identifiable.

J. W. Payne's preaching notes (handwritten), in the possession of the Payne family.

Recollections of Winnie Lott (aged 99 years), recorded in 2017.

Recollections of Joan Jarvis (aged 80 years), recorded in 2017.

A Little Primitive. Lysons, Kenneth (Church in the Market Place Publications, 2001)