Jane Donovan’s article on Henry Foxall admirably sets out new information on his career as an ironfounder on both sides of the Atlantic. My only regret is that towards the end she abandons the firm ground of historical fact and the primary sources from which they are derived and reverts to popular mythology. The close friendship between Foxall and Francis Asbury in their later years is well documented; but Donovan adds that it is “certainly dated to their childhood days in England’s West Midlands” and goes on to say, “Foxall’s parents and Asbury’s parents had been close friends and fellow Methodists. Some sources suggest that Asbury was for a time apprenticed to Foxall’s father” (Methodist History, July 2003, p.190).

Not only is this one of the myths of Methodist history, but it can be traced with some confidence to its exact source. It is a good example of how one person’s guess can pass through other people’s imaginations and emerge as ‘fact.’

To find its source we go back to one of Asbury’s 19th-century biographers, F.W. Briggs, who in 1874 put it forward as a conjecture. In the absence of firm evidence, that was fair enough. Since then other writers, more careless or less scrupulous, on both sides of the Atlantic, have repeated it as fact and have done so without indicating its source. It crops up at least twice in the Encyclopedia of World Methodism and you will even find it in the scholarly history of the Foundry Church by Homer Calkin, a meticulous researcher and historian.

For good measure, F. W. Briggs wrote as though Asbury and young Foxall were school-fellows. Here he was more at fault, since it was relatively easy to check that there were thirteen years between their ages, and Foxall was only eight when Asbury went off to be an itinerant in 1766.

The Foxall and Asbury families must have known each other by virtue of belonging to the local Methodist society; but I know of no evidence (more reputable than the patter of modern tour guides) that they were “close friends.” And what of Asbury’s supposed apprenticeship to Thomas Foxall? Well, Briggs’ conjecture can be shown to be wrong by early local evidence that bears all the marks of reliability. In the first place, there are notes left by a local West Bromwich historian, Joseph Reeves, who remembered the Asbury family and in 1834 wrote down what he knew and had heard of Francis’ early years. This included the fact that he was apprenticed to a “chape-filer” named John Griffin, who lived only a few yards away from his boyhood home on Newton Road, now a place of pilgrimage. (A “chape,” for
the uninitiated like myself, was a metal loop or plate, such as the piece of metal on the side of a bucket to which the handle is attached or the part of a buckle which joins it to the belt.)

Secondly, there is early confirmation of Asbury's apprenticeship from another, and independent, source. The Rev. John Emory was the first to represent American Methodism at the British Conference. This was in 1820 and his diary has survived at Southern Methodist University. Here is his account of some travelling he did while he was in England:

On Monday [July 24] hired a horse and rode into the country, Mr. Mumford accompanying me, to make enquiries concerning Mr. Asbury, whose native place was Perry Barr in the parish of Handsworth, a few miles distant from Birmingham. I called on Mr. Rogers, an aged man, cousin of Mr. Asbury, near Walsall. I also visited the house and saw the rooms in which Mr. Asbury's father and mother lived and died. I sat in the old gentleman's chair, at the table which they had formerly used and ate, the kind old lady of the name of Embrey (called in the neighbourhood Emery) having invited us so to do (without my knowing at first that these were old Mr. and Mrs. Asbury's table and chair). I was also in the house in the village of Newton and parish above named, in which Mr. Asbury served his apprenticeship to the making of buckle chapes, a branch of the buckle-making business.

Though the facts may speak for themselves, it is never easy to dislodge a cherished myth from the minds of either the tourist industry or tourists themselves. But the attempt is always worthwhile.