



## DISCOVERY

Edited By  
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### JOSEPH PILMORE'S ORIGINS

Joseph Pilmore is well known to readers of *Discovery* as being, with Richard Boardman, one of the first two preachers sent by Wesley to the American colonies in 1769. He left a *Journal* which was published by Fred Maser 30 years ago. The *Journal* is most useful. There is with the journal a biographical assessment by Frank B. Stanger. Much of this summary of Pilmore's life was based on what he said in his old age. In the Nineteenth Century the British Wesleyan Methodist Minister J.P. Lockwood produced a biography of Pilmore and Boardman entitled the *Western Pioneers*. For it, Lockwood did detailed research in the North Riding from where Pilmore came, which had pointers towards the mystery surrounding Pilmore's early years. Recent works like Stanger's have tended to assume that what Pilmore said in old age about his youth was correct.

Joseph Pilmore was an important and successful figure who has often been downplayed by Methodist historians, in part because he later entered the Anglican ministry and partly because he was not Asbury. Many historians have been led into false stories of his origin (Telford called him an Irishman!). Of the two sent out, Boardman, aged 31 to Pilmore's 26 and traveled six years to Pilmore's four, was clearly the more experienced. Despite this, Wesley clearly trusted Pilmore since he was in 1770 made Assistant over the more experienced Boardman, though Wesley reverted to making Boardman the senior preacher in both 1771 and 1772. In fact the vast distances in America meant each was practically independent of the other.

New light has been shed on Pilmore thanks to the research done by a British historian, Isabel McLean, on a little known Scots Quaker called Joseph Foord, later a maker of watercourses and engineer in Yorkshire in the 18th Century. Her book published by the North Yorkshire Moors Parks Authority called *Water from the Moors* is available from them via their web-

site. This Scotsman, Foord, then Steward to the Duncombe landowning family, was living at Skiplam on the edge of the North York Moors. On 31st October 1743 an illegitimate child was born to Foord's second cousin, 30-year-old Sarah Pilmore, in the neighboring village of Fadmoor. She claimed Foord was the father. Joseph Pilmore was not born in 1739, as in his old age he told his vestryman Joseph Latimer. Historians have repeated this ever since. Latimer's reliability as a source can be assessed by his calling Wesley's Kingswood School near Bristol "Kingford." Joseph, given his father's first name, was in 1747 baptized at Nunnington to the south of the nearby Vale of Pickering where Sarah was then living with her brother Francis. The father denied paternity and cited Sarah and others for defamation and slander in the York Consistory Court (December 1743 to February 1744). Meanwhile the local Quaker Meeting held an inquiry into the errant Joseph Foord. On 22nd February they met both Joseph and Sarah. The records show they decided Foord had been Sarah Pilmore's lover. The Archbishop of York also decided against Foord in his Consistory Court. The evidence for these cases has survived and shows that he was almost certainly responsible and therefore Joseph Pilmore's father. It also proves that this is our Joseph Pilmore.

In 1754 Sarah Pilmore married William Sleightholme, a yeoman of the village of Fadmoor, by whom she had a second son in 1755, another William Sleightholme, and the eleven year old Joseph Pilmore was then brought up by his stepfather whom he called "father." He naturally drew a cloud over his early years and previous biographers have accepted he was born in 1739. This is not true and he was younger than he represented himself to be. Pilmore was a farm servant first at Muscoates near Nunnington. There he attended week night meetings at Beadlam (north of Nunnington) to hear the Evangelical vicar (Conyers) of Helmsley. This probably provided the connection with Wesley who certainly preached from Conyers' pulpit in 1764. Converted around age 16 by Wesley, so about 1759, he was sent to Kingswood for education to be a Preacher. According to report he spent four years there, studying Latin, Greek, Hebrew and English Literature. Latimer claimed Pilmore said he had been sent to Ireland to preach at 18, which would have been in 1761. This is possible. There is no other evidence for it, but there were no printed Minutes and other preachers have no reference. It remains doubtful like much of his early Methodist career.

He appeared in the Minutes in 1765 as admitted on trial, that is he had begun to travel as an itinerant preacher, so quite possibly this had started the year before in 1764 or even 1763 if the four years are correct for Kingswood. Minutes were only regularly printed from 1765 so this is quite possible. There is no record of which circuit he was in that year. In 1766 he was in East Cornwall. In 1767 he moved to Wales, a large circuit including most of South Wales. In 1768 Wesley thought so highly of him he made him Assistant, and left him in Wales. His Welsh journals for these two years have survived.

In 1768 Wesley spread news of the invitation from America. At the Bristol Conference in August he asked his preachers to consider whether they were called to America. "It was left for their consideration to the next Conference." Pilmore according to his Journal was during that year "frequently under great exercise of mind respecting the dear Americans, and found a willingness to sacrifice everything for their sakes." At the 1769 Conference at Leeds Wesley renewed the challenge. Eventually Pilmore and Boardman volunteered.

Pilmore's Journal account here is important. First he went back to see his Mother. He was afraid the trial of parting would be too great "but God had prepared her for it before I came." He mentions staying in and preaching outside his "father's house," and his "relations," but he does not mention his stepfather in his Journal, perhaps since Sleightholme had not been known to him in his infancy. The places mentioned where he preached are close, "Kirby" being Kirby Moorside, the closest place of any size to the south; "Notsor" is possibly Nawton, also south of Fadmoor. Barnsdale is west of Fadmoor; "Gillimer" is Gillamoor to the east. He then went to join Boardman at York and ride to London where they had interviews with both George Whitefield and Charles Wesley, who both gave them their blessing. They arrived in America late October 1769. The story of Pilmore's highly significant next five years in America is best left to his Journal, though I hope to return to him and some of his letters to Americans and others in a subsequent article.

A footnote to this story of Pilmore's paternity is as follows: Joseph Foord married and had a family. He survived to an old age when both his wife and family had predeceased him. In 1786, aged 72, he declared his intention of going to the newly independent USA, now at peace with the home country. Was it to see and be reconciled with the son whose paternity he had rejected so many years before, and who had in 1785 been ordained priest there in November? It is an alluring thought, but unproven. There is no record of a meeting between father and son. But what other reason could there be? Joseph Foord went and returned to Britain as he said he would. After his return, he died and was buried in England.

What is the importance of all this? It is not just that Pilmore was younger than had been thought, with implications both for his relations with Boardman, now definitely his senior and Asbury (only slightly younger).

Also the stigma of illegitimacy must have been with Pilmore throughout his life, making him feel a little insecure. In America when Wesley recalled him it was he who felt particularly humiliated and refused to accept Wesley's direction at first, unlike Boardman. He tended to look for security and approval from the Americans. There was this settling down in the cities rather than in the countryside, of which he and Boardman were accused. Eventually he became an Anglican clergyman in the new United States. He was not alone in heading this way. Gareth Lloyd in a recent article has shown that this "Church Methodist" view was mainstream in Britain until

Wesley's death. Methodists were Anglicans. Preachers should aim at becoming Anglican clergy and if this was impossible, not seek to break away but work together loyally. It remained important in Britain into the nineteenth century. The victors, who in both America and Britain insisted on separation, rewrote history to suit their views, not the historical facts. In America important Methodist preachers such as Samuel Spraggs and Thomas Vasey, like Pilmore, were to become clergy in the Anglican Church. They did not "join" the church, but remained in it. It was Asbury who left. After all both John and Charles Wesley died as priests of the Church of England. But Asbury inspired the Methodist historians and these saw Pilmore as a traitor.

Finally the question of his surname. There are many spellings of Pilmore. His ancestral family usually used Pilmoor. In the British Minutes it is usually Pillmoor, sometimes Pilmoor, occasionally Pillsmore and once Pilsmore. However, in the baptismal register at Nunnington it is clearly Pilmore, and he signed himself the same, so I have settled for that.