



## DISCOVERY

edited by  
Kenneth E. Rowe

### Francis Asbury in the Wiltshire Circuit

by John A. Vickers

In 1770-71, immediately before he offered for America, Francis Asbury was stationed in the Wiltshire South Circuit, which was centered on Salisbury but extended over a wide area of Southern England. He was the second man in a two-man team, with John Catermole as his senior. Little is known of his circuit work in England, apart from a brief reference to his later *Journal* (under the date July 24, 1774) and an early letter which indicates that he had already "supplied" in Wiltshire two years earlier (October 26, 1768 to his parents).

A further glimpse is furnished by a "History of Methodism in Hampshire," written by John Sundius Stamp early in the last century but never published. The manuscript is in the Methodist Archives and Research Centre (now located in the John Rylands Library at Manchester) and a pencilled note says "written in 1826". Much of Stamp's material relates to Winchester, where the leading figure in the Methodist society was a layman named Jasper Winscom, well known for his correspondence with Wesley himself. Stamp draws freely on Winscom's manuscript journal, which I have not so far been able to locate.

Writing of the two preachers appointed to the Wiltshire Circuit by the Conference of 1770, Stamp describes the assistant, John Catermole, as "much addicted to melancholy" and reports that "after going twice round the circuit [he] retired from the itinerant work," leaving Asbury to assume the superintendency. Stamp continues:

“His [Asbury’s] firmness to the rules of Methodism and presence of mind in apparent internal broils were put to the test by the Society at Portsmouth. He had many warm friends, but want of understanding on their part rendered them in a great degree of very little service to him. Yet previous to the ensuing Conference all unpleasant affairs were amicably settled.”

Stamp gives details of the cause of Asbury’s problems with the Portsmouth society. A certain William Norman who had earlier neglected a call to preach in favor of matrimony found himself the leader of the Portsmouth society because of the removal of other leading figures. He proved himself something of a despot, to such an extent that “neither preacher nor people could bear” it. Asbury found himself having to deal firmly with the situation and eventually succeeded in replacing Norman with another steward.

During that year the Methodists suffered hostility and violent persecution at the hands of “the lower orders of the people,” but Stamp does not indicate whether Asbury himself was involved in this. Finally he quotes Winscom’s journal for July 26, 1771: “Bro. Asbury left Winchester after we had a lovefeast together, when we found the Lord to be present. I think we may say he is a good preacher and an honest Christian, fitted for the work by the Lord.” Winscom’s temperate approval of Asbury carries more weight than many less thoughtful panegyric. He goes on to describe how he and Asbury travelled together to Bristol for the Conference and his subsequent return with the preacher appointed to succeed Asbury; but he makes no reference to the appeal for preachers for America or to Asbury’s offer of himself. Great events do not always reveal themselves to the eye-witnesses.

Stamp transcribes three of Asbury’s letters to Jasper Winscom, only one of which was included in the standard edition of Asbury’s letters, the letter of August 15, 1788.<sup>1</sup> The following two newly discovered letters shed much light on the early Asbury. The recipient of the letter of May 27, 1789 is not specified, but from the context and content is clearly Winscom.

---

<sup>1</sup> Francis Asbury, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, vol. III, *Letters*, edited by J. Manning Potts (London: Epworth; Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), pp. 60-64.

**Letter from Francis Asbury to Jasper Winscom, 27 May 1789**

May 27, 1789

I am exceedingly obliged to thee for thy faithful correspondence. I have but little hope that the Methodists in Europe or in this land will be much better than others, was it not that I hoped the Church is coming out of the wilderness. I expect that the organization of our Church will purify it. Bro. Coke will present you with our form of discipline. No man can come upon trial with us without examination as to his character. None can be a deacon or elder without election of a majority, no conferring of orders on friends and favourites. I am sorry our dear old Daddy is so offended with me. I have dictated too free, and expect we shall never come upon terms, especially when he has so many Elbow friends. I esteem it as one of the greatest calamities of my life so highly to grieve him, and he has made me feel very sensibly by his letters, as fallen! fallen! Indeed I am not the same man in the main as I always was, though I have some more knowledge of men and things. I am comforting myself that not a man in the connection would have been more attached than I have been to Methodism under all the many and great changes. I think I have as great consolations as ever. I know the Lord blesses my labours and a glorious work goes on. We have none of the gew-gaws thou hast named, but Ah we are not all holy. I have written at large to Alex. Mather and stated things of a critical nature. I wished him to shew it to confidential men, they must be such or they will make mischief. My time is short, Bro. Coke sails shortly. I hope hundreds are converted to God. We have noise and shouting and you must have the same or you will not get the work revived. The work of God has been long trod upon—'not too long—too loud—so many minutes and all this is order, order but no souls converted to God.' Oh Bro my soul has been baptized, and I have felt more in my own soul, and the people & preachers also under me, within these 16 months, than for 26 years before. We must be all alive. I hope the shout will begin at Conference, and run all over the kingdom. I wish you to second each other by Amens and Shouts. The greatest & soundest works of God are brought about at such times as these. Souls have been moved that smelt so much of hell as if twice dead, yet the Lord & the faithful bring them down. Glory! Glory! Glory! O my Brother I feel it now! Do not continue to travel unless power attends thy word, and thou seest souls convinced and converted.

Pray for this—preach for it and inspire the same spirit and expectation in others. Some of our Capital towns & cities feel this strange power, where the Devil has been forted [sic] for 200 years the seat of pride and wickedness. I am with great respect thine,

Francis Asbury

**Letter from Francis Asbury to Jasper Winscom, 23 January 1796**

Charlestown Jany. 23, 1796

My very dear Winscom,

I have received thy kind letters not many days ago. I am sorry they contain no great news of Zion's prosperity, in the lines of my former labours. I have received blessed news from some parts of the Kingdom of thousands brought to God. It must be expected that as the dear aged Father of that Connection belonged to the most excellent church, his children would go that way and now establishments shake to the centre. It was my care to do all I could for this connection, that they may do as well or better without me.

I arrived at a general council from all the united states, 1500 miles from north to south, and near 1000 miles from east to west, but this could not be obtained. We then moved for a general conference; this is not fully organized, one in four years is hardly often enough. The members of this ought to be of sufficient standing, some of them having been several years in the Connection. Our case prosperity is injurious to the work of God, we have nothing very special only here and there a few souls brought to Jesus. I am persuaded Law establishments are and have been a curse to Religion in any direction whatever. Many priests are thus supported in Old England now that would not be heard of nor paid for if the money were not leavd [levied?] and collected by law.

We had a school. Dr. Coke in his bigness printed and nominated it a college. It was never agreeable to the public mind of the Methodists, they did not willingly support it. It was not in Baltimore our chief friends would help. We kept house eight or nine years, spent in building and house-keeping 8 or 10000£. Incorporate! said one. Then at last I had it incorporated my own home. I cleared myself of my family, my care, my dreadful income of trouble and distress. In about twelve months after the house was burnt to ashes by some wicked fiend, and nobody need mourn

much unless the people near it. Now our Baltimore brethren have bought a house built for dancing near our church, with a design to set up an Academy, and have engaged to give about the worth of the College. I wanted nothing but a Kingswood School.

As to trade, I am more and more out with that, there is such a want of public justice—in selling books—in Methodists dealing with Methodists—our preaching [preachers?] getting into the trade—now here and there marrying fortunes—and some going into trade and cheating their dear brethren out of hundreds. Oh Brother and Brother, till I have bought you Brother, I have sold you Brother amongst white and black.

Dr. Coke had well nigh ruined his credit by recommending one of the worst men in the Continent, an adulterer, a cheat, a murderer, that he deceived me, set Dr. Coke and Mr. Wesley against me with his lies. Had it not been for myself and one of the President Elders, Dr. Coke would have given letters of such credit, that having no capital and no property of consequence, it would have done great damage. And after all he had the assurance to publish hand bills with the Doctor's name as if he was going into trade with him.

To be brief, I receive no letters from my friends in England, but there is a little about trade, unless from preachers and one or two. I can recommend Jacob Baker and Company, but I would have you not to mention my name. I am for no trade but truth. I see no reason why we should not have a revival of Religion but for worldly prosperity. Many of our preachers have gone on boldly in single life. We have not great provision for married ones, so many stop, whether this is a benefit or a calamity, I cannot say. I have not much opinion of idle drones doing much. I suppose no man in the world labours and suffers as Ministers more than our Preachers, from the extremities of the north to the south. North West and east among the back settlers.

I am as ever thine in Jesus. I feel thankful I have entered the 51st year of my life & have hitherto kept clear of worldly entanglements. I am as ever thine.

Francis Asbury