

FRANCIS ASBURY'S FIRST CIRCUIT: BEDFORDSHIRE, 1767¹

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On Tuesday, August 18, 1767, John Wesley “met in Conference with [his] Assistants and a select number of preachers” at London.² Among the items of business during the next six days, two were to have personal significance for a young man from Barr, near West Bromwich, by the name of Francis Asbury. The first was the decision to include him in the list of preachers “admitted on trial” and the second his stationing as the junior preacher on the Bedfordshire Circuit. Although he had apparently already been helping on his home circuit during the illness of a preacher, this was his first formal appointment as a Methodist itinerant.³

We know very little about Asbury’s experience during that first formative year. He did not begin to keep his journal until he embarked for America in 1771 and there are no surviving letters from this period.⁴ But it is possible, from local records, to build up a snapshot of the Bedfordshire circuit that Asbury knew, to say something about the way in which Wesley’s connection was beginning to spread across rural England, and to pose some questions about the way in which Asbury’s English experience shaped his American ministry.

The minutes of the Conference of 1767 listed twenty-five circuits in England. Like most, the Bedfordshire circuit covered a great swathe of territory, perhaps a thousand square miles, embracing not just Bedfordshire itself but large parts of Northamptonshire, Huntingdonshire, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, and Buckinghamshire. Unlike the London, Bristol, Norwich, Sheffield, Leeds, or Newcastle circuits, this circuit was not centered upon a large, urban base. It was an entirely rural affair made up of small societies whose total membership was just 208 people.

Perhaps the first thing to be noted about the Bedfordshire circuit was the diverse origins of its earliest societies. Formed either in 1765 or shortly before, the circuit’s three oldest societies had all begun quite independently of

¹ Originally published in *Methodist History* 41.2 (January, 2003).

² W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition., (Oxford and Nashville, 1980), vol. 22, 99.

³ The preachers stationed on the Staffordshire Circuit in 1766 were William Orp, N. Manners, and John Poole. It is not clear for which of them Asbury stood (J. M. Potts, ed., *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury* [London and Nashville, 1958], vol. 1, xii, and Vol. 3, 8).

⁴ There are two letters, however, which date from Asbury’s second period in the Bedfordshire Circuit in 1769-1770 (Potts, vol. 3, 6-8).

Wesley's connection and only gradually had been drawn into its orbit.⁵ The Bedford society could trace its origins back to a religious society founded while the brothers were still in Georgia.⁶ That society had been drawn into Methodist circles by Benjamin Ingham, who preached in the town in 1739 and in 1742 had accepted Moravian leadership. One of those who had been affected by Ingham's preaching in 1739 was William Parker, a local grocer who had been among the first to become a member of the Moravian Church.⁷ Parker never settled into the strict discipline of the Moravian community. As early as 1742, when the Moravians began to hold their services at the same time as the parish church, Parker wrote to John Wesley "entreating him to come down and help us" and had to be persuaded to write again withdrawing the invitation. Four years later Parker was engaged in a dispute with the Moravian leadership over his involvement in borough politics and again in 1750 over a property deal that had fallen through. Finally, in December, 1752, he was expelled for allowing his daughter to marry without the permission of the elders.

Undaunted, Parker seems to have formed his own society and issued a fresh invitation to John Wesley to come and visit. Wesley initially asked his brother Charles to make the visit, but Charles found it "impracticable" and on October 15, 1753, John himself rode out from London to meet "the little society."⁸ Other visits followed and gradually the new society was integrated into Wesley's connection. In July, 1754, Wesley spent two days in the town on his way back from Norwich to London and "preached near St. Peter's Green, having never preached abroad since I was there before."⁹ From July, 1756, Bedford was included on the round of the London preachers and by 1761 seems to have spawned offshoots in the villages of Great Barford and Clifton.¹⁰

About 20 miles to the west of Bedford, a Methodist presence developed in the village of Whittlebury and the nearby town of Towcester around 1760.¹¹ It began when two local men, Samuel Basford and Thomas Simons, were converted while on a trip to London. On returning to Towcester, Basford

⁵ In 1765 the first annual Minutes of Conference were published. These included a list of circuits and the preachers appointed to them. It is not known whether this marked a wholesale reorganization of the movement or a staging post in a slow process of circuit formation.

⁶ John Walsh, "The Cambridge Methodists," in Peter Brooks, ed., *Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Gordon Rupp* (London, 1975), 251-283.

⁷ Parker's account of his dealings with the Moravians is recorded in Wesley's journal entry for October 8, 1753 (Ward and Heitzenrater vol. 20, 476-479).

⁸ Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 20, 479. In a letter to Charles, October 20, 1753, John wrote, "I came back from Bedford last night . . . I am sure it was God's will for you to call there" (Frank Baker, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 26 [Oxford and Nashville, 1982], 526).

⁹ Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 20, 489.

¹⁰ Letter from John Wesley to Thomas Olivers, July 10, 1756 (John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley* [London, 1931], vol. 3, 112). Barford is mentioned in Wesley's sermon register in 1757 and in his journal in 1761 (Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 21, 302). A house in Clifton was licensed for preaching by William Parker in 1761 (Edwin Welch, *Bedfordshire Chapels and Meeting Houses, Official Registration, 1672-1901* [Bedford, 1996], 54).

¹¹ *Methodist Magazine* (hereafter cited as *MM*) 1801, 476.

talked to several of his friends about his experience and, as a result, three or four people at Whittlebury began to meet together for “prayer and Christian conversation.” Soon after they “heard of Mr Wesley,” though how and from whom is unclear, and began to receive visits from Methodist preachers. It is possible that by 1767, this society was sufficiently well established to have built its own meeting-house.

Further south, a third center of Methodist activity developed around the village of Luton. When Lord Sundon died in 1752, his estate to the north of Luton passed into the hands of his niece, Elizabeth Cole, whose husband William was the son of a member of the society at the Foundry in London.¹² Wesley travelled with the Coles to Sundon in April, 1754, and although he commented in his journal on the spiritual dangers of inheriting such wealth, he clearly found their home very comfortable and returned to it on at least eight occasions over the next twelve years, often staying for several days.¹³ On some of these visits Wesley mentioned preaching, the first being in September, 1759, and in his account of a visit in 1764 he seems to suggest that Sundon was the scene of rather more concerted, if ultimately unsuccessful, work: “after all our preaching here, even those who constantly attended no more understand us than if we had preached in Greek.”¹⁴ Whether there was ever a society or class-meeting in the village remains uncertain, but there was certainly a society in the neighboring village of Luton.¹⁵ This was apparently formed about the year 1750 by a newcomer to the village named George Bull. After meeting for a while in various houses, the society began to use a barn that had been used as a preaching house a hundred years previously by the Baptist leader John Bunyan.¹⁶ In the early 1760s, this society may have been part of a preaching circuit organized by the Reverend John Berridge, the evangelical vicar of Everton, in eastern Bedfordshire.¹⁷ By 1766, however, it had been included in the new Wesleyan circuit and was sufficiently important for Wesley himself to preach there twice within one week.¹⁸

This process, by which various scattered Methodist groups were drawn into the orbit of Wesley's connection, may well have gathered strength fol-

¹² Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 20, 487, n. 64.

¹³ Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 20, 486-487. The other recorded visits were June 17-20, 1754; March 6-9, 1758; November 22-23, 1759; January 9-10 and February 6-7, 1762; August 18, 1762; January 23-27, 1764; February 17-18, 1766; November 10-14, 1766.

¹⁴ Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 21, 442.

¹⁵ There was no society at Sundon in 1781 when the Bedfordshire Circuit book begins (Bedfordshire Record Office, MB 1).

¹⁶ The earliest account of the origins of Methodism in Luton is contained in a January 24, 1839 letter written by George Spilsbury, the grandson of one of the founding members. Spilsbury believed that the society was originally formed by a Mr. Bull, “a small grocer and rush basket maker,” who was already a Methodist before he moved to Luton, but no date is given. *The Luton Reporter*, November 7, 1885, contains an account of a speech given by the Rev. Samuel Vincent to mark the centenary of William Cole's death. He put the date of 1750 on the formation of Bull's society, but gave no explanation of his source.

¹⁷ *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* (hereafter cited as *WMM*) 1901, 922.

¹⁸ Monday, November 10, and Friday, November 14, 1766.

lowing the circuit's formation. Certainly, by the time Asbury entered the circuit in 1767 there were also societies at Wotton Pillinge, Millbrook, Lidlington, and Cople, all villages just to the south of Bedford, and places which had previously been the scene of Moravian activity.¹⁹ A society at Northampton had also been added to the circuit, which had been formed by a Calvinistic Methodist army officer. It was the success of this society that had persuaded Wesley to increase the number of preachers on the circuit from one to two, leading directly to Asbury's stationing.²⁰

In the spring of 1766, the Royal Horse Guards had been quartered in the town. One of their officers, Captain Scott, had been converted at a meeting organized by the Countess of Huntingdon and, lacking Methodist preaching in Northampton, had written to Wesley to send a preacher. Richard Blackwell, one of the London preachers, had visited the town in August and again in October. Late in October, James Giassbrook, the Bedford preacher, began to visit the town. Scott wrote to Wesley again in October, 1766, to warn him that he and his regiment were about to be moved to Leicester and to advise him that several local people had offered to help with the expense of obtaining a meetinghouse: "As long as our regiment stays we can contrive to let them have our riding-house. The persons that came to me hope that you will continue to send them a preacher. Indeed, there seems to be a prospect of much good being done. I therefore trust you will take this affair into serious consideration and send another preacher into the Bedford circuit who can take Northampton and two or three villages in that I know would receive you." On November 10, 1766, Wesley himself set off for Northampton with Richard Blackwell, but just south of Luton was met by James Glassbrook his Assistant on the Bedfordshire circuit and discovered that, owing presumably to some misunderstanding, Glassbrook had committed him to preaching at a number of places in Bedfordshire.²¹ Blackwell went on alone but Wesley had presumably been sufficiently convinced of the need and opportunity to send the second preacher to the Bedford circuit as requested. By the time Asbury arrived, this society too had acquired their "own room," possibly an old dissenting meeting-house.

The diverse origins of these societies still must have been evident during Asbury's time in the variety of theology, experiences, and local practices. However clearly the distinctions between Moravians, Calvinists, and Wesleyans were drawn in Wesley's own mind, there can be little doubt that in circuits like Bedfordshire the travelling preacher had to live within a more diverse and broader Methodist community. Many Wesleyan Methodists in Bedfordshire continued to view John Berridge as a great man long after he

¹⁹ Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 22, 67-68. A list of the Moravian members for 1744 is found in the Bedfordshire Record Office, M03.

²⁰ The most detailed account of early Methodism in Northampton is a press cutting from an unknown source in the collection of the Wesley Studies Centre, Oxford. The lengthy article titled "Methodism in Northants" was written by G. Beamish Saul, a Methodist minister stationed in Northampton between 1903 and 1906.

²¹ Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 22, 67-68.

had fallen foul of John Wesley and the Methodists at Towcester attended Moravian sermons.²² Nor did the wider public distinguish among Moravian, Whitefieldite, and Wesleyan. The niceties of these distinctions were lost on the great majority of contemporaries. The Rector of St. Peter's, Bedford, certainly had no grasp of them and was content to label the members of the Bedford Moravian society simply as "Methodists" in his burial and baptismal registers.²³

A second feature of the Bedfordshire circuit, by the time that Asbury joined it, was that it served a Methodist community that was, in some senses, already in decline. When Benjamin Ingham preached the first Methodist sermons in Bedford in 1738, hundreds had flocked to hear him and George Whitefield's preaching the following year attracted a congregation thought to number "about three thousand."²⁴ Thirty years later, visiting preachers found far smaller gatherings waiting to hear their sermons. Wesley himself, on his visits in 1759, 1761, 1763, and 1766 drew no greater crowd than could be accommodated in the society's own room.²⁵ In eastern Bedfordshire, the beginning of John Berridge's evangelical ministry in 1758 had drawn people in the thousands from miles around to Everton Parish Church, but by 1767 the excitement was already quieting down.²⁶ Even at Northampton, where Methodist preaching had only just begun, while the first sermons in 1766 had filled the two thousand seat Riding School, in 1767 the venue was moved to "a small meeting house." Evangelical preaching was no longer a novelty that drew public attention; it had become part of local life of interest to only a small minority.

Even among that minority the temperature of spiritual enthusiasm seems to have been on the wane. At Everton in 1759, Wesley's preaching had been greeted with an ecstatic response: "One sunk down, and another, and another. Some cried aloud in agony of prayer. I would willingly have spent some time in prayer with them. But my voice failed, so that I was obliged to conclude the service, leaving many in the church crying and praying, but unable either to walk or stand."²⁷ By 1766, the congregation at Bedford were "drowsy people" and in 1767 "civil" and "heavy."²⁸ It was some time before the flood tide of revival flowed through these societies again. The Bedford society still had only 35 members in 1781 and Northampton had not risen above 55 members even by 1793.²⁹ The little village societies fared even worse, Great Barford, Clifton, Cople, Millbrook, and Wootton Pillinge

²² *Arminian Magazine* (hereafter *AM*), 1791, 361.

²³ Joan Anderson, *Early Methodism in Bedford* (Bedford, 1953), 7.

²⁴ William Wale, ed., *George Whitefield's Journals* (London, n.d.), 269.

²⁵ Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 21, 234, 299, 433, and vol. 22, 31, 68.

²⁶ Nigel R. Pibworth, *The Gospel Peddler: The Story of John Berridge and the Eighteenth-Century Revival* (London, 1987), 80.

²⁷ Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 22, 225-226.

²⁸ Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 22, 68, 107.

²⁹ Bedfordshire Circuit book; George Lawton, "Notes on Early Methodism in Northampton," in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, vol. 25, 92.

had disappeared completely by 1781. It is hard to escape the thought that nostalgia for the heady days when the gospel tidings were new must have hung heavily over the circuit.³⁰ Asbury himself had to come to terms with the embarrassment of reporting, at the end of his first year in the itinerancy, a decline in the membership of the societies in his care, from 208 to just 170.

A third feature of the circuit, in all likelihood, was that its membership was drawn overwhelmingly from the poorest sections of society. A London Methodist visiting Bedford in 1758 found the Bedford society "poor in general" and a preacher based in Northampton in 1778 that the people were too poor to provide him with a horse.³¹ Wesley himself described the congregation at Lidlington in 1766 as a "company of plain, country people."³² A circuit membership list for 1781 reveals a community that was disproportionately plebeian, not only in relation to the population as a whole, but also to Methodism in other parts of England.³³

Occupation of Wesleyan Members

	Gentry	Professional	Farmers	Tradesmen	Artisans	Laborers
Manchester Circuit, 1759	1.7%	2.1%	11.9%	3.8%	61.7%	18.7%
Keighley Circuit, 1763	0.3%	1.0%	19.3%	4.5%	65.1%	9.8%
Sussex Circuit, 1777	5%	1%	14%	8%	35%	36%
Bedfordshire Circuit, 1781	0%	0%	5%	7%	37%	49%
General Population	1.2%	4.4%	24.8%	12.1%	20.9%	36.6%

One of the reasons for this may have been that more affluent Methodists tended to be drawn to join the local Moravian congregations. The Bedford Moravian congregation included some very wealthy members. The living conditions in their settlement were sufficiently comfortable for the Countess of Huntingdon and Lord Rawdon, together with a full retinue of servants, to stay for more than a week in 1761. In fact, 32% of the men who joined the Bedford Moravian community between 1753 and 1762 were gentry, professionals, or farmers with only 11% laborers.³⁴ The Moravian congregation at Northampton likewise included "several of the magistrates and other considerable persons of the town."³⁵ It is quite possible that this social discrep-

³⁰ Nor was this gloom confined to the Bedfordshire Circuit. By 1777 the question was asked in Conference, "Are the societies in general more dead or more alive to God than they were some years ago?" Wesley's response was to argue that "you, and you, can judge no further than you see. You cannot judge one part by another" (Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 23, 64-65).

³¹ *AM*, 1780, 104; Thomas Jackson, *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers*, 3rd ed., (London, 1878), vol. 6, 267.

³² Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 22, 67.

³³ Clive D. Field, "The Social Structures of English Methodism: Eighteenth-Twentieth Centuries," *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 28 (1977), 202. Sussex Circuit book, East Sussex Record Office, NMA/411/1. Bedfordshire Circuit book.

³⁴ Catalogue of the Bedford Moravian congregation, Bedfordshire Record Office, M04.

³⁵ *Moravian Church in Northampton*, 3.

ancy was not accidental, but reflects the fact that rich and poor were not comfortable in each other's company. Even those wealthy people who were aligned with Wesley's connection seem to have kept a certain distance from the life of the circuit. William Cole, High Sheriff of Bedfordshire, generous patron of Methodism in Luton, and Wesley's host on numerous occasions, is a name that is curiously absent from the circuit membership list. But his is not the only name missing: in fact, many of Wesley's hosts on the Bedfordshire circuit appear not to have been society members.³⁶ Cole and his kind may have been on Mr. Wesley's circuit, but it is not at all clear that their homes would have been open to a young preacher like Francis Asbury.

As well as being predominantly poor, the members under Asbury's care would also have been predominantly female. It is evident that women formed a sizable majority in Methodism here, as elsewhere, from the outset. The membership list of the Bedford Moravian society in 1744 contained 254 names, of whom 57% were women. The Bedford Wesleyan circuit membership list for 1781 contained 299 names, of whom 61% were women.³⁷

This correlates approximately with the proportion of female members in Sussex in 1781 and Bristol in 1783, and it seems reasonable to conclude that the gender ratio in 1769 must have been similar.³⁸

When they became Methodists, many of these people were young. Half the people who joined the Moravian congregation prior to the Wesleyan secession in 1752 were still unmarried at the time and several observers noted that the crowds attending Berridge's preaching in the late 1750s included "few ancient people."³⁹ By 1767, these early recruits were, of course, maturing and given the failure to recruit new members, the average age of the membership must have been rising. By 1781, the proportion of unmarried members was down to 16% and the proportion of widows and widowers had risen to the same level. Berridge too, looking at his congregation in 1780, would note that "grey hairs are sprinkled upon us."⁴⁰ But in 1767, that process was only beginning and it would probably be fair to say that the 22 year-old Asbury was preaching to gatherings made up of people who were mostly middle-aged and younger.

If the average member was young, poor, and female that was almost certainly not the profile of those who dominated the local societies. William Parker, 59 years old, a successful grocer, and founder of the Bedford society

³⁶ We know of ten homes in the county of Bedfordshire in which John Wesley stayed. His hosts were disproportionately drawn from among the ranks of the better-off: William Cole and George Livius were gentleman, John Berridge and Samuel Hicks were clergyman, "Mr. Hampson" was a solicitor, William Parker was a grocer, John Hill the landlord of an inn, John Farey a farmer, and Thomas Eagle a turner (a woodworker, or perhaps a potter). The occupation of Mr. Sales is not known. Only two of these hosts, Parker and Eagle, appear to have been members of a Methodist society.

³⁷ List of Moravian society members, 1744, in the Bedfordshire Circuit book.

³⁸ Sussex Circuit book; John Kent, "Wesleyan Membership in Bristol 1783," *Publications of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archeological Society*, vol. 11 (1976), 107.

³⁹ Catalogue of the Bedford Moravian congregation; Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 21, 198.

⁴⁰ Pibworth, 163.

was, by virtue of his money and his role as a Local Preacher, a presiding presence in the circuit. The Moravians had not found him an easy man, nor had John Berridge. Did Asbury and his colleagues find him any easier?⁴¹ A letter to Charles Wesley in 1781 speaks of a member who had left the Bedford society because “some in that society, [were] straightened in their own bowels.” Was Parker one of them?⁴² Seven years later, after Parker’s death, John Wesley wrote of Bedford that “as all disputes are at an end, there is great hope that the work of God will increase here also.”⁴³

A fourth feature of the Methodist community among whom Asbury traveled on his first circuit was that they lived in an often tense relationship with their neighbors. Although there were a few landowners, like William Cole, and some clergy, like John Berridge, who were sympathetic, most of the local political and religious establishment viewed Methodist activity with a mix of distaste and distrust. The large crowds which had greeted the first Methodist preachers, and the outbursts of religious enthusiasm which they stimulated, were an alarming reminder of how quickly the common people might get out of hand. In 1757, Sutton Hall, the home of Sir Roger Burgoyne, had been surrounded by a mob of 1,500 men stirred up by rumors that a new act of Parliament would mean local men being pressed into military service in the American colonies. They agreed to disperse only after Sir Roger handed over the militia list to be burnt and supplied them with beer and cash.⁴⁴ Little wonder then that when John Berridge began to gather enormous crowds to his preaching in the neighboring parish just twelve months later there was a strong, negative reaction. A contemporary observer of Berridge’s preaching noted that the rich “generally show either an utter contempt of, or enmity to, it.”⁴⁵ On one occasion at least, local landowners seem to have tried to break up Berridge’s services. On Sunday, May 20, 1759, “Mr Berridge about this time retired, and the Duke of Manchester and Mr Astell, came in. They seemed inclined to make a disturbance, but were restrained and, in a short time, retired.”⁴⁶ As well as fearing riot, landowners also seem to have been concerned that late night prayer meetings and long excursions to hear sermons were an excuse for idleness. A poem by Berridge records that:

When Israel’s grieving tribes complain’d
Of Pharoah’s hard oppressive hand ;
“Idle ye are,” the tyrant cries,
“And therefore would go sacrifice.”

And now when sinners flock to hear,
The tidings of salvation dear;
“Idle ye are,” task-masters say,

⁴¹ Pibworth, 100-101.

⁴² Letter from John Barham to Charles Wesley, December 4, 1781. Methodist Archives and Research Centre, DDPr 1/9.

⁴³ Anderson, 19.

⁴⁴ Joyce Godber, *History of Bedfordshire, 1066-1888* (Bedford, 1969), 365.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Blackwell; Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 21, 198.

⁴⁶ Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 21, 197.

“And therefore would go sing and pray.”⁴⁷

The squire of Everton and other local landowners attempted to have Berridge dismissed from his living, and neighboring clergy thundered against him from their pulpits, but he was sufficiently well connected to fight off eviction.⁴⁸ Not everyone, however, had such powerful friends. When Jacob Rogers, the curate of St Paul's Bedford, turned Methodist in 1738 he was quickly dismissed from his post.⁴⁹

It was not only with the squire and the parson, however, that people becoming a Methodist put themselves at odds. Dislike of the new sect seems to have been widespread. At Luton the society were “much disturbed at their meetings” and one preacher was apparently hit on the head with a dead cat.⁵⁰ At Whittlebury the society found that “the enemy powerfully opposed them; they frequently surrounded the house where the Methodists were assembled, with instruments of terror.”⁵¹ Sarah Reeve, one of Berridge's converts, “had many trials to endure” including “violent opposition.”⁵² Writing from the circuit on January 3, 1768, John Smith advised Wesley that, “no man is of use to this round but such as neither fears man or devils.”⁵³ Some of this opposition can perhaps be understood as the local lads finding entertainment in baiting a group of people who had made themselves vulnerable by acting differently to the rest of the community. Berridge's preaching certainly attracted “laughers and mockers” who “endeavoured to make sport by mimicking the gestures of them that were wounded.”⁵⁴ Some of it may also have been a general instinctive reaction to anything that was new and strange, some of it the result of tensions within families, between wives and daughters who had become Methodists and husbands and fathers who had not. It may be that the Methodists themselves actively provoked a good part of the opposition.

In 1758, a visitor to Bedford found that the Methodist meetings, held in a room above a pig sty, were regularly disrupted by William Parker's own nephew who fed the pigs during the sermons so, “that the noise as well as the stench might interrupt his uncle.”⁵⁵ We are not told the reason for the ill feeling between nephew and uncle but we do know that Parker was Mayor of Bedford at the time and was using his office to enforce a reformation of manners on the town: “There is no cursing or swearing heard in these streets, no work done on the Lord's Day. Indeed there is no open wickedness of any

⁴⁷ Pibworth, 39.

⁴⁸ *AM*, 1794, 272-274.

⁴⁹ George Whitefield wrote of Rogers, “He has lately been thrust out of the synagogues for speaking of justification by faith, and the new birth . . . I believe we are just the first professed ministers of the Church of England, who, without cause are excluded from every pulpit” (Luke Tyerman, *The Life of the Rev. George Whitefield, BA, of Pembroke College, Oxford* [London, 1876], vol. 1, 231).

⁵⁰ Letter from George Spilsbury, January 24, 1839. Methodist Archives and Research Centre.

⁵¹ *MM*, 1801, 476.

⁵² *MM*, 1818, 446.

⁵³ Saul.

⁵⁴ Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 21, 216.

⁵⁵ *AM*, 1780, 104.

kind to be seen in Bedford.”⁵⁶ Few other Methodists had the same opportunity to alienate quite so many people but the Methodist rule of reproving sin meant that all the members were encouraged to do their best. At Whittlebury in 1774, a Methodist revival among the children of the village led to many instances of eager young converts reproving their elders: “Another time they met with a man, who being vexed with his work, was cursing it. When they reproved him, he made a jest of it; but they soon let him know they were in earnest, and talked soundly to him of death and judgement, heaven and hell. On his telling them, He knew those things as well as they, they replied, The more was the pity, as his practice was no better.”⁵⁷ Was this the man who threw a stone through the window when Wesley stayed in the village?⁵⁸

A fifth feature of the Bedfordshire circuit, and of rural circuits like it, was the marginal role which preachers played in its life. By the time that Asbury was travelling the circuit the large crowds at open-air sermons were a thing of the past and Methodism had retreated into preaching rooms. Instead, Methodist life was increasingly centered on the private introspection of the weekly class-meeting. It was in this intimate gathering that fellowship was created and the class leader’s authority to act as pastor to the other members was established. The preachers were no doubt welcome visitors but they were certainly not the central figures in rural Methodist communities.

With class leaders overseeing the pastoral care and nurture of the members and stewards handling the business of the societies, the role of a traveling preacher, like Asbury, was to travel and to preach. Given the wide extent of the circuit, there was little time for anything else. We do not know exactly how the preachers on the Bedfordshire circuit worked their round in 1767, but we have some clues. John Berridge seems to have worked his circuit by preaching at Everton on Sundays and then heading off on Monday to preach in a neighboring village. He would stay overnight and then move on to another village and continue this pattern until Saturday when he returned to Everton ready for his Sunday duties. On Monday he would head off again, but to a different sequence of villages, returning to each place only once every six weeks.⁵⁹ Twenty years later the preachers on the Oxford Wesleyan circuit also seem to have followed a six week rotation, though with three of them working the circuit it meant that each village society had preaching once a fortnight.⁶⁰ The image of incessant labor is probably slightly misleading, however, and included in that rotation was, almost certainly, some period of rest. John Hickling, who travelled the Bedford circuit from 1793-1795, seems to have worked on a rotation that kept him in Bedford for a whole fortnight.⁶¹ It is quite possible that during that time he made visits

⁵⁶ Ward and Heitzenrater, vol. 21, 91.

⁵⁷ *AM*, 1788, 494.

⁵⁸ Saul.

⁵⁹ Pibworth, 81.

⁶⁰ Thomas Durley, *Centenary Annals of the Birth and Growth of Wesleyan Methodism in Aylesbury and the Surrounding Villages* (Aylesbury, 1910), 7.

⁶¹ *AM*, 1795, 390-395.

to villages close to town, but it is unlikely that he had to do so every day. John Pescod, who was on the same circuit from 1782-1785, makes passing reference to spending “the great part” of a week in town.⁶² One final clue is that we know of approximately 21 preaching places within the circuit at this period. This would seem roughly consistent with a six-week rotation: a week around Whittlebury, a week around Northampton, a week around Luton, a week, perhaps, to the southwest of Bedford, a week to the east, and a week in the town itself.⁶³

In 1769, when Asbury returned to the Bedfordshire circuit for a second year, the arrangements may have been slightly different. Asbury himself distinguished between the year he spent “travelling through” Bedfordshire and the year in which he was “appointed assistant in Northamptonshire.”⁶⁴

According to the printed minutes of Conference, however, he was neither an Assistant in 1769, nor was there yet a Northamptonshire circuit. Rather, as in 1767, he was appointed simply as the junior preacher on the Bedfordshire circuit. What is possible is that, second time around, his role was a much more autonomous. He was based not in Bedford, with the Assistant, but at Towcester in Northamptonshire and that he and the Assistant had their own rounds, which they interchanged regularly, rather than a single round which they both travelled.⁶⁵

It was no easy life. Writing to his mother from Towcester, in November, 1769, Asbury complained that, “I have much work on my hands and am put to it for time to do what I want.”⁶⁶ By the end of that second year he had clearly had enough. He told his parents, “I am in trying circumstances about the people and places; but sometimes I please myself that I shall go hence and leave these parts.”⁶⁷ In a little over a year he had embarked for America, never to return.⁶⁸ Of the four years that Asbury spent as a travelling preacher in England, two were spent on the Bedfordshire circuit and the rest in other southern, rural circuits.⁶⁹ His experience was not shaped by the life of the

⁶² *AM*, 1788,70.

⁶³ One other, Weedon, was definitely part of the circuit in 1767. Wesley preached there in October (*Works of Wesley*, XXII, 107). Another eight places may have been part of the circuit in 1767 and were certainly part of it by the time of Asbury's second year on the Bedfordshire circuit, 1769: Pirton, where Asbury is remembered as having preached in the home of the Hudson family (*WMM*, 1829); Brackely and Coventry, where tradition has it that Asbury was the first preacher (Saul); Cranfield, in Bedfordshire; and Ashton, Brington, Haddon and Harpole, in Northamptonshire—which were all part of Wesley's tour of the circuit in 1769 (Ward and Heitzenrater, Vol. 22, 208-209). The society at Hertford may also have been part of the Bedfordshire circuit at this point for we know that Asbury became good friends with Abraham Andrews, the patron of Methodism in the town (*Journal and Letters*, III, 9).

⁶⁴ Potts, vol. 1, 126.

⁶⁵ Potts, vol. 3, 6-8.

⁶⁶ Potts, vol. 3, 7-8.

⁶⁷ Potts, vol. 3, 6-7.

⁶⁸ Asbury embarked for America on September 3, 1771.

⁶⁹ Asbury recounts traveling in Bedfordshire, “Sussex, etc.,” Northamptonshire, and Wiltshire. The Minutes have him in Bedfordshire, Colchester, Bedfordshire, and Wiltshire (Potts, vol. 1, xii, 125).

Foundry, or by the New Room at Bristol, or by the large societies in Cornwall or Yorkshire, but by preaching to small congregations in villages and farms, like Whittlebury and Pirton. To what extent did this early English experience shape his long American ministry? Did the longing for revival have its roots in the dullness of the Bedfordshire societies? Was his insistence on the authority of the preachers shaped by memories of William Parker? It would be interesting to know if those familiar with Asbury's later career can detect any resonances.