



## DISCOVERY

Edited by  
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### A NOSTALGIC VISIT YIELDS AN HISTORIC DISCOVERY

I had not thought much about a place named Heptonstall near Haworth in Yorkshire, England until recently when my wife and I made a nostalgic visit to the Bronte country. Fifty years ago my wife had spent about two months in Haworth gathering materials for her book *The Young Brontes*, published in 1938 by the Viking Press.

Haworth today draws a large number of tourists. Shops and restaurants dot the hilly narrow street that leads to the sign directing one to the Bronte parsonage, museum and, of course, the church. The church had once been a focal point for the Methodists. Its rector, William Grimshaw, a friend of John Wesley and an Anglican priest, aided the Methodists in building a chapel near-by and himself encouraged the Methodist movement. After Grimshaw's death several priests served the church until 1820 when Patrick Bronte became rector. He served the Haworth parish for over forty years. Wesley, himself, preached at Haworth on numerous occasions. The Brontes, of course, did not know John Wesley nor did they become Methodists. Today they lie buried in a vault beneath the front of the church. There is a special place for Emily Bronte, author of *Wuthering Heights*.

Besides visiting the museum, the parsonage and the church at Haworth, we tramped over the moors. When we reached a particularly high point on our hike I shouted "Heathcliff" at the top of my voice, but he did not appear.

But Haworth is a separate story. My real reason for writing this piece is to tell you about Heptonstall, a taxi ride from Haworth on a high hill or mountain overlooking Hebden Bridge. There are at least two good reasons for visiting Heptonstall: first, to see the magnificent ruins of the Church of St. Thomas á Becket (Anglican). It was still standing in all its glory when Wesley visited Heptonstall, and in his *Journal*, Wesley mentions preaching here. The church was partially

destroyed in 1847 by a hurricane and never fully restored. A totally new church building was erected nearby. Today one can capture both churches in one picture—the ruined thirteenth century church and the new church built in 1854.

The other reason for a visit to this city on a hill is to see the octagonal Methodist church which claims to be “The oldest Methodist chapel in the world in continuous use.” It is not my purpose to argue this claim, although during my pastorate at Old St. George’s in Philadelphia, I was convinced that Old St. George’s was the only church with the right to this honor. We could not discuss the matter with the pastor since we were unable to find him, and we did not attend the service on Sunday. We worshipped instead in both the Methodist and the Anglican churches at Haworth. However, the Vicar of the Anglican church in Heptonstall, whom we did meet, insists that the claim is a misnomer since there is another Methodist chapel in England that antedates Heptonstall by at least six months. I am writing to my good friend, the Rev. Dr. John C. Bowmer, President Emeritus of the Wesley Historical Society in England for further information.

But back to the octagonal church. It is well worth a visit. Wesley apparently first preached in the neighborhood in 1748. On Friday, August 26 of that year he noted in his *Journal*,

At twelve we came to Heptonstall Bank. The house stands on the side of a steep mountain, and commands all the vale below. The place which I preached was an oval spot of ground surrounded with spreading trees, scooped out, as it were, in the side of a hill, which rose round it like a theatre.

This was probably a place known as Dickey Brown Hey, between Hebden Bridge and Heptonstall. Wesley added:

The congregation was equal to that at Leeds; but such serious and earnest attention! It lifted up my hands, so that I preached as I scarce ever did in my life.

The lack of space makes it impossible for us to trace all of Wesley’s numerous visits to Heptonstall, but on Wednesday, April 8th, 1752 Wesley noted in his *Journal*,

We rode to Heptonstall, a little town on the round top of a very high mountain, with a steep ascent on every side.

This is an exact description of Heptonstall. When we were there we were glad we were riding in a taxi and not walking. The hill is steep enough to challenge an experienced hiker.

By 1764 the Methodist society at Heptonstall had evidently begun to build a chapel and Wesley noted in his *Journal*,

... before one we got to Heptonstall, where I preached in the shell of the new house.

The chapel was being built under the direction of Wesley, himself, who favored the octagonal shape.

The interior of the church at Heptonstall is well preserved, centering in a high pulpit. Its box pews, its narrow gallery, extending completely around the building and the pulpit, and its stained glass window add to the beauty and peacefulness of the setting that once was marked by great preaching and crowded congregations. The Anglican vicar told me that today only about a dozen people attend the services.

The vicar insisted also that Wesley preached more often in the now ruined thirteenth century Anglican church. Certainly Wesley preached in this church and he mentions the fact in his *Journal* on Monday April 18, 1774:

The Minister at Heptonstall [this was the Rev. Tobit Sutcliffe] sent me word that I was welcome to preach in his church. It was with difficulty we got up the steep mountain, and when we were upon it the wind was ready to bear us away. The church was filled not with curious but serious hearers. No others would face so furious a storm.

It is well worth the time to go carefully through the Curnock edition of Wesley's *Journal* and read the references to Heptonstall. Most of them are entertaining, and they do present an excellent picture of the Anglican church, the Methodist chapel and Heptonstall itself, situated on a high mountain.

Today, the Methodist church which once must have stood out clearly on its high plateau, is surrounded by homes, and one has to follow the signs to locate the church. A bulletin board announces the service and an overgrown churchyard filled with slate colored grave stones surrounds the octagonal building. The exterior grounds are not particularly well cared for, but the interior and exterior of the building are in a good state of repair and would probably be instantly recognized by Wesley were he to return today.

We hope some day to return to Heptonstall. I would dearly love to preach from its pulpit. Unfortunately, however, I could not locate the Methodist pastor in Heptonstall and the pastor at Haworth was on "holiday." His service, the Sunday we attended was combined with that of the neighboring Baptist church, with the Baptist pastor delivering a very acceptable sermon. There were a little over forty persons present in all.

Wesley, by the way, preached for the last time in Heptonstall at the Anglican church on Monday, April 24th, 1786. Amusingly, he refers to this grand old church as "the ugliest I know." However, Wesley's aesthetic sense cannot always be trusted. He once referred to the Cologne Cathedral—called one of the finest examples of Gothic architecture in the world—as "mere heaps upon heaps: a huge, misshapen thing, which has no more of symmetry than of neatness belonging to it."

Let us thank God that Wesley was a far better preacher and church administrator than an art critic.