

THE METHODIST CHURCH IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE
WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE FORMATION OF THE
STROUD CIRCUIT BETWEEN THE YEARS OF 1787 AND 1843

The first recorded visit of John Wesley to the Stroud area was on October 7th 1739 when he preached at Randwick. The following day he preached to 5 or 6,000 people on Minchinhampton Common. After that it is recorded that his visits were almost annual (at the commencement of his northern tour of the societies) until March 1790 - the date of his final preaching appointment in Stroud.(1)

During this time, various societies were created nationwide and grouped geographically into Circuits under the Superintendency of a visiting Minister.

The Methodist Recorder of August 20th 1903(2) records that the first preaching place in the Stroud area may have been a house at Wallbridge, but in 1763 the first church was built in Acre Street, Stroud under the Superintendency of Alexander Mather. The Society has since moved to Castle Street and the church - the first in the Stroud area - is now used by the Salvation Army.

Between 1763 and 1770 Stroud was at the southern end of the Staffordshire Circuit - a circuit that extended as far as Coventry and Shrewsbury(3). In 1770, the Gloucestershire Circuit was formed, and in 1788 the Worcestershire Circuit was separated leaving Stroud, Cheltenham and Gloucester as three churches on a smaller geographical circuit as follows:-

<u>Society</u>	<u>Membership (1791 July)</u>	
Gloucester	62	
Painswick*	20	
Stroud*	49	
Littleworth*	14	
Thrupp	12	.. joined with Brims-
Cirencester*	19	combe Society in
Winchcombe	10	1795, reappearing
Gretton	23	briefly in 19th C.
Stanley	15	... continued to 1799 only
Tewkesbury	49	
Deerhurst	23	
Tirley	6	
Ashleworth	9	
Cheltenham	<u>5</u>	
Total	316	

Further societies joined in the circuit in the period 1780 to 1796 with membership for the first year as follows:-

Ebley*	1796	12(earlier note of Society '88-'90)
Upton	1794	12(earlier note 1793)
Brimscombe*	1794	6(" " 1793)
Newent	1795	13
Gorsley Common	1795	10

Kemerton	1795	-
Weston	1796	20
Taddington	1787/8 only	-
Poulton	1788 only	- reappears 1841
(Minchin)Hampton	1788-90 only	- reappears 1822

In 1797 (Note A) those societies marked * formed the basis of the first Stroud Circuit, which by the year 1800 had a membership as follows:-

<u>Society</u>	<u>Membership</u> (July 1800)
Painswick	23 .. Church rented/sold to
Stroud	126 Baptist Denom in 1831/2(4)
Littleworth	36
Cirencester	32 .. not recorded 1810-15
Ebley	10 .. ceased in 1802
Bisley	13 .. formed 1797
Brimscombe	15
Ketleigh	21 .. formed 1799-1807 only
Camp	5 .. 1798-1802 only; reformed 1817
Ashton (Keynes)	6 .. 1798-1801 only
Chalford	10 .. formed 1797
Oakridge	12 .. formed 1797

Further societies joined the Circuit between 1801 and 1823 as follows, again the date indicates the first reference of the society in the membership records:-

Woodchester	1804-06 only	11	
Randwick	1806	13	
Box	1806 only	12	.. merged with Stroud
Chalford Lynch	1813-15 only	4	1809
Slad	1813-15 only	-	
Pitchcombe	1814-29 only	10	
Northleach	1822	11	.. annexed to Cheltenham Circuit 1840
Tarlton	1821	9	do
Coln Rogers	1821	13	.. do
Sheepscombe	1821 only	-	.. may have been Camp
Minchinhampton	1822-24 only	12	Society (see above)

giving a total membership in 1824 of 597.

Between 1824 and 1843 the following societies joined the Circuit:-

Stanley End (Dudbridge)	1828	10	
Little London	1828 only	11	
Backpath (Note B)	1829-30	10	
Machhouse (Note B)	1833	4	
Cockshed (Note B)	1838	11	
Cainscross	1837 only	10	
Callowell	1839-41	5	.. earlier ref.
Poulton	(cf 1788) 1841		1830 on preaching plan

so that the circuit of 1843 consisted of:

<u>Society</u>	<u>Membership</u>
Stroud	138
Littleworth	69

<u>Society</u>	<u>Membership</u>
Brimscombe	43
Bisley	9
Oakridge	42
Chalford	55
Randwick	36
Stanley End	16
Cockshed (B)	5
Tarlton	6
Cirencester	37
Callowell	-
Poulton	8
Total	<u>464</u>

In terms of numbers, the Stroud Circuit appears to have at its zenith around 1824, when it had a total membership of 597. The Circuit was also at its most flexible with new societies forming and merging at regular intervals. The influence of the primitive Methodist movement had still to make itself felt, with the formation of its own churches and circuit.

From 1824, membership numbers slowly declined and the principal changes in the Wesleyan circuits took place with the subsequent amalgamation of circuits and societies.

- Notes
- A Document 5 gives the date as 1794, but this is not confirmed by Circuit records.
 - B The location of these Societies have yet to be determined.

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REFERENCES

1. John Wesley, Journals Epworth Press
2. The Methodist Recorder, August 20th 1903, GLOS.R.O. NC20
3. Stroud Circuit Records, lists of members of Societies and lists of contributions to various funds 1791-1838.
Custodian: Minister, Epworth Lodge, Field Road, Stroud.
4. Brief History of Painswick Baptist Church, 1806-1970., GLOS. RO NC52
5. C.R. Hine, Gloucester Circuit Records from the time of John Wesley to 1970, GLOS.R.O., NC48.