

**From the Prairies to the Potteries – Cultural Adaptation and the English Camp Meeting**

British Methodism has at the heart of its theological self-understanding acts of remembrance and of proclamation. The Doctrinal standards of the church set out in Clause 4 of the Deed of Union declare that the church ‘*ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith and declares its unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission.*’<sup>1</sup> (CPD Pt2 p 213) The phrasing does of course have echoes of Wesley’s own understanding of the purposes of his movement and reflects the distinctive noted by James C Logan

‘...Methodists were a mission movement before they ever became a church...Other church traditions may trace their origins to distinctive confessional or theological patterns. Wesleyans on the other hand, became a church not for confessional reasons but for evangelistic or missional reasons’<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, the historical celebration of origins in the tradition, if it is to be done theologically, is necessarily a re-examination of the identity and purpose of Methodism – not simply a recollection of ‘what happened when’ but rather of ‘why we did happen and why we continue to exist as a tradition’

This year of 2007 has seen the celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first English Camp Meeting held at Mow Cop in Staffordshire on May 31<sup>st</sup> 1807. The event led within weeks to censure by the Wesleyan Conference and the formation of a new Methodist<sup>3</sup> community the *Primitive Methodists*. The camp meeting became both a motif for the new community and a widely used missional event but those who first organised the meeting had never themselves attended one, instead relying on reports from the *Methodist Magazine*, on a handful of pamphlets and on one notable eyewitness. In introducing the idea to the English potteries region an event developed which, whilst having some similarities to the American model from inspired it, was significantly transformed to ‘serve the present age’ of early 19<sup>th</sup> Industrial England.

The central figure in the development of the English Camp Meeting was Hugh Bourne (1772-1852). It was Bourne’s leadership of a class at the Staffordshire village of Harriseahead which led to the holding of a camp meeting at nearby Mow Cop in 1807 which led to the establishment of the Primitive Methodists as a separate community. In organising the meeting Bourne’s adaptation of the American model was greatly shaped by his own approach to the relationship between the Wesleyan theological tradition and the ecclesiological expression of it. It was the reading of a number of volumes of the *Arminian Magazine* borrowed from a Methodist farmer John Birchenough who hosted the local society proved instrumental in Bourne undergoing a conversion experience in the spring of 1799, subsequently joining the Burslem Wesleyan society at Birchenough’s invitation in June 1799<sup>4</sup>. Bourne remained a voracious reader, of Wesley’s sermons, *The Life of John Fletcher* and the autobiographies of Methodist preachers like Thomas Taylor and John Haime.<sup>5</sup> Following the conversion of Daniel

---

<sup>1</sup> *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church* (Peterborough: MPH 2006) 213

<sup>2</sup> JC Logan *The Evangelical Imperative: A Wesleyan Perspective* in Logan (ed) *Theology and Evangelism in the Wesleyan Heritage* (Abingdon: Nashville 1994) 16

<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this paper the terms ‘Methodist/ism’ will be used to refer to the theological tradition and ‘Wesleyan’ to refer to the original connexion founded by John Wesley.

<sup>4</sup> J Wilkinson *Hugh Bourne 1772-1852* (London: Epworth Press 1952) 24-27

<sup>5</sup> G Herod *Biographical Sketches of Some Preachers of the Primitive Methodist Connexion* (London 1855 / Stoke on Trent; Tentmaker Publications 2002) 448

Shubotham, a hard drinking collier and cousin of Hugh Bourne, on Christmas Day 1800<sup>6</sup> he and Bourne became leaders of a class at Harriseahead where Shubotham lived. Many later accounts of Primitive Methodist origins suggest that Bourne and Shubotham formed this class themselves but as J H Anderson<sup>7</sup> has noted, in Bourne's letters to Aaron Leese, a Wesleyan local preacher who had written a pamphlet about the development of Wesleyanism in Tunstall, he acknowledges the existence of the society at Harriseahead for some years before the cousins became its leaders. The Wesleyans had failed to provide an experienced person to lead the prayer meetings there, despite Bourne's request. In addition, Shubotham's reluctance to lead the class had led to the role being a shared one between Bourne, another collier Matthais Bayley and Thomas Cotton. H B Kendall notes that Bourne believed this to be the practice early Methodism and corroborated it with reference to Wesley's views in the 1744 Minutes<sup>8</sup>. In fact his journal Bourne says he read Wesley's views in the minutes some years afterwards but at the time he was convinced '*it had been graciously owned by the Lord and if Mr France had tried to get it put away he would have received a sharp answer*'<sup>9</sup>, This comment is revealing of Bourne's approach to Wesleyan authority at this time, as William France was an anti-revivalist Wesleyan minister stationed in the Burslem circuit until 1805<sup>10</sup> (Walford 125)

As Werner<sup>11</sup> outlines the society at Harriseahead became thus an environment where a multi-voiced approach to worship and prayer became familiar:

*As a result the Harriseahead prayer sessions quickly developed a style of their own. Chief among their departures from the recommended Wesleyan pattern was the absence of a single leader and a great deal of noise and confusion. After an initial hymn and an opening prayer, a second hymn was sung. Then someone would begin to pray and 'in less than a quarter of a minute another would dash off and so on, until the whole were exercising with all their faith, hearts and minds, and with all their voices, and the noise might be heard a considerable distance'*

Kendall sums up the situation at Harrishead thus; '*It moved on early Methodist lines; and yet for a time it was unattached, or but slenderly attached to the official Methodism of the locality.*'<sup>12</sup> During a prayer meeting in the spring of 1801 it seems some were wishing to continue beyond the allotted time. Daniel Shubotham is then reported to have said "*You shall have a meeting upon Mow Cop some Sunday and have a whole days praying and then you will be satisfied*"<sup>13</sup> According to the first history of the Primitive Methodists written by Bourne himself some 20 years later, Shubotham repeated the words on another occasion<sup>14</sup> At this stage, as Walford<sup>15</sup> noted the desire was simply for a protracted time of prayer rather than an open air evangelistic meeting; Shubotham probably played another possibly more important role in the instigation of the camp meeting in encouraging Hugh Bourne along with his brother James to hear Lorenzo Dow preach at Harrishead in April 1807 and his earlier words may well have been read back in the light of later developments to have had exaggerated prophetic significance. They do however seem to have been recalled as Bourne and others read the accounts of the US camp meetings reaching England via the *Methodist Magazine* over the next few years.

Hugh Bourne did in fact preach in the open air on Mow Cop on July 12<sup>th</sup> 1801 He did so due to popular demand as a revival amongst the society at Harriseahead was gathering pace. Once again one has to be wary of a sense of exaggerated prophetic significance: Bourne himself makes much of it in retrospect, claiming ...'*here on Mow Cop the Lord caused open-air worship*

---

<sup>6</sup> Wilkinson op cit 31

<sup>7</sup> JH Anderson *Sidelights on the Origins of Primitive Methodism in Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society Vol 56Pt 2 May 2007*) 38

<sup>8</sup> H B Kendall *The History of the Primitive Methodist Church* (Vol 1) (London: Primitive Methodist Publishing House c1907) 33

<sup>9</sup> J Walford *Memoirs of the Life and Labours of Hugh Bourne* (Vol 1) (1856/Stoke on Trent; Tentmaker Publications 1999) 126

<sup>10</sup> Walford op cit 125

<sup>11</sup> J S Werner *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: Its Background and Early History* (Wisconsin: UWP 1984) 57

<sup>12</sup> Kendall op cit 31

<sup>13</sup> Walford op cit 81

<sup>14</sup> H Bourne *History of the Primitive Methodists* in L Dow *The Dealings of God Man and the Devil...* Vol 2 (New York: Sheldon, Lamport and Blakeman 1854) 266

<sup>15</sup> Walford op cit 81n

*to be commenced on a broader foundation. Truly the Lord was at the head – the mountain that day was consecrated to the most high and the day was gloriously crowned*<sup>16</sup> In reality the service only took place in the open air due to the large number overflowing from the house where the meeting was scheduled to be. However, once again a number of aspects of the event are both consistent with the nature of his leading of the Harriseahead class and with what was to come: In viewing the event Bourne sought to stress the continuity of the event as a ‘broadening out’ of the open air worship present within the Methodist tradition which he was familiar with but he was preaching without official Wesleyan sanction – he never appeared on their circuit plan and this date for his preaching debut was chosen due to a gap in it. Also, Bourne’s voice was only one of those heard that afternoon since his contribution to the afternoon was followed by the prayers and exhortations of others. Kendall suggests that the significance of the events of July 12th was most likely *‘the influence it exerted on the mind of Hugh Bourne in leading him to develop on principle what others had struck out casually. It suggested a modification of field preaching, in harmony with Hugh Bourne’s ruling idea of variety, and the co-operation of the many in evangelistic work.’*<sup>17</sup>

The accounts of multi-voiced open air work happening in the United States which began to appear the following year in the *Methodist Magazine* were then, for Bourne, timely. They began in the edition for June 1802 with the reproducing of an account of a camp meeting from a Presbyterian minister in Kentucky, to another in Philadelphia which had been written in August 1801. The accounts featured regularly in the magazines until April 1806 ending with a letter from a presiding elder in Delaware district to Francis Asbury, containing a detailed description of a number of camp meetings in the district written on August 5<sup>th</sup> 1805. The reports have a great focus on the huge numbers of people involved but also evocative and atmospheric accounts of camp meetings and some informative outlines of what actually happened. One extract may be taken as representative of many more. The issue for February 1803 contains a letter<sup>18</sup> from Colonel Robert Paterson of Lexington Kentucky to the Revd Dr John King written on September 25<sup>th</sup> 1801. Writing from Concord, Paterson provides an evocative description of *‘a thick grove of beechen timber’* candlelit by the congregation on a still calm night, with about 4000 attending, and 250 communicating in a tent, and 12 wagons present. Paterson then offers descriptions of meetings at Stoney Creek (40 wagons, 4 carriages, 8000 persons, 350 communicants, 250 *‘struck down’*) Lexington (6000 attending, 300 communicants, 70 *‘affected’* from Friday to Tuesday) and Indian Creek (Thursday to -Thursday day and night bar the first night, 12000 present 125 wagons, 900 communicants, 300 *‘struck’*) After mentioning in passing meetings at Walnut Hill, Salem, Beaver, and Blue-Spring, *‘all familiar to those I have described’* Patterson then gives a general description of the pattern of a camp meeting. He writes of large congregations assembled in woods, of ministers preaching night and day, and of the camp ground illuminated with candles on trees, wagons and on tents (here the 21<sup>st</sup> century health and safety conscious reader flinches somewhat!) His account describes how persons falling down are carried out of the crowd by those next to them and taken to some convenient place where *‘prayer is made for them’* and a suitable hymn or psalm sung. Patterson continues *‘if they speak what they say is attended to being very solemn and affecting (many are struck under such exhortations) but if they do not recover soon, praying and singing is continued, alternately, and sometimes a minister exhorts over them, for generally a large group of people collect and hang around, paying attention to prayer and joining in singing. Now suppose 20 of those groups around; a minister engaged in preaching to a large congregation in the middle; some moaning, some rejoicing .... and you will form some imperfect idea of the extraordinary work. Opposers call this confusion! But in any of these parties, employment for the mind may be found. the work being engaging, persons subsist with less sleep and food than at other times’*<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Walford op cit 90

<sup>17</sup> Kendall op cit 36

<sup>18</sup> *Methodist Magazine* (London: The Bookroom February 1803) p82

<sup>19</sup> Op cit 86

Reading this 200 years later, it is no easy task to read it as Bourne must have read it. The accounts of those falling over and receiving what today would be described as ‘prayer ministry’ are inevitably mediated via the experience of charismatic renewal which has touched most major Christian traditions throughout the world in the last 40 years. In his adaptation of the American camp meeting model described by Paterson and many other correspondents in the *Methodist Magazine*, Bourne extracted from the accounts a number of transferable principles which transcend the otherness of their geographical and cultural settings. Conversant as he was with the lives of the early Methodist preachers and with Wesley’s journal, Bourne was able to read these accounts of open air witness as authentically Methodist events in harmony with the tradition at a time when such work within Wesleyanism was far less common. Some years later, commencing in the January 1821 issue of the *Primitive Methodist Magazine*, then edited and substantially written by Bourne, a series on ‘*Worship in the Open Air*’ ‘series commenced which sought to offer a detailed apologetic for the camp meeting being not only a consistent development within the Methodist tradition but also with the Christian open air worship of Biblical times. In the accounts of ‘falling over’ Bourne may well also have seen echoes of early Methodism recorded there on a number of occasions as being a sign of the Holy Spirit at work, for example in the Journal account of the love feast of January 1<sup>st</sup> 1739 where Wesley writes that ‘*the power of God came mightily upon us in so much that many cried out for exceeding joy and many fell to the ground*’<sup>20</sup> Secondly and equally importantly, for one who held a commitment to a ‘*ruling idea of variety, and the co-operation of the many in evangelistic work*’, the idea of a revival of outdoor meeting which provided ‘*employment for the mind*’ though engaging work for many would have had an obvious appeal. Bourne in an unpublished autobiography describes the effect of the camp meeting reports in the *Methodist Magazine* as ‘*opening upon us like the light of the morning*’<sup>21</sup> In the same place he also states that ‘*about the year 1803...instead of interceding with the Lord to grant us a day’s praying...our minds were so enlarged that we besought the Lord to open our way*’<sup>22</sup> suggesting that at this early stage the intention to hold an open air meeting had already undergone some modification of purpose in the light of the *Methodist Magazine* articles.

The final factor, which was to prove the decisive one both in the impetus to hold an English Camp meeting and to immediate Wesleyan oppositionism, arrived in Liverpool on Dec 24th 1805 in the unkempt shape of Lorenzo Dow. Dow (1777-1824) named the *first camp meeting I ever attended* as being Shoulderbone Creek in February - March 1803<sup>23</sup> By 1804 he began to organise meetings himself<sup>24</sup> and continued as a camp meeting preacher into 1805<sup>25</sup>. Dow was a wild figure whose dishevelled appearance, long hair and ecstatic preaching had earned him the nick-name ‘Crazy Dow’ in his native USA. On his arrival in Liverpool, an invitation to preach was declined at a Wesleyan leaders meeting but offered by the New Connexion.<sup>26</sup> Whilst preaching at Zion New Connexion chapel in Maguire Street, Dow met Peter Phillips<sup>27</sup> and made contact with another breakaway group, the Quaker Methodists of Warrington. Soon after this he visited Manchester, unsuccessfully trying to contact Jabez Bunting (from this year assistant secretary of Conference). He did hear Bunting preach and visited the Bandroom, a Wesleyan preaching place then at the height of a local controversy, and received there an offer of lodgings for two days<sup>28</sup>. Whilst in Manchester he preached again in a New Connexion chapel, distributing hand bills to advertise the event. Here Dow met Adam Clarke. He encountered him again preaching at the 1806 Conference in Leeds, where Clarke was President Dow recorded in conversation that he was *made up against the Camp Meetings in America*<sup>29</sup> Dow attempted to give a copy of his journal to each Chair of District via a preacher who agreed to take them into the Conference hall but they were all returned.

---

<sup>20</sup> J Wesley Ed. N Curmook *The Journal of the Rev John Wesley AM* Standard Edition vol II London: Epworth Press 121-22

<sup>21</sup> Wilkinson op cit 128

<sup>22</sup> Op cit 30

<sup>23</sup> L Dow *The Dealings of God Man and the Devil...* Vol 1 (New York: Sheldon, Lamport and Blakeman 1854) 75

<sup>24</sup> Op cit 87

<sup>25</sup> Op cit 89-114

<sup>26</sup> Op cit 118-126 for Dow’s first year in England.

<sup>27</sup> J Dolan *The Independent Methodists – A History* (Cambridge : J Clarke & Co 2005) 38

<sup>28</sup> Dow’s designation of it as ‘Brodas’ (Broadhurst’s) Bandroom possibly indicates that his visit is after the congregation have separated from Wesleyan Methodism, i.e. after Jan 31st 1806 Dolan op cit n.53, 39)

<sup>29</sup> Dow (vol 1) op cit 124

Clarke did buy one from Dow at his lodgings where he invited Dow to join him for breakfast. The conference of 1806 read a negative letter from Nicholas Snethen, stationed in New York 1804-6, to Joseph Benson and agreed to shun Dow. The contents of the letter are unclear but Dow hints at a suggestion of having taken 200 dollars in one contribution.<sup>30</sup>

During 1806-7 Dow divided his preaching ministry between Lancashire, Cheshire, Staffordshire and Ireland and during this time he wrote a number of pamphlets extolling camp meetings, including *An Account of the Origins and Progress of Camp Meetings and the Method of Conducting Them* (1806) and *Queries, Observations and Remarks, or Thoughts on the Times and Camp Meetings etc with a Word to the Methodists* (1807) as well as compiling a hymn book *A Collection of Spiritual Songs used at Camp Meetings in the Great Revival in the United States of America* (1806)<sup>31</sup> During his preaching in England Dow 'gave a lively and glowing description of the Camp-Meetings, both in public and in private conversation'<sup>32</sup>

Daniel Shubotham heard Dow preach in the autumn of 1806 at Macclesfield<sup>33</sup> Hearing Dow seems to have revived a flagging conviction regarding open-air worship for Shubotham and it was probably he who encouraged Hugh Bourne along with his brother James to hear Dow preach at Harrishead in April 1807. Bourne heard Dow again at Burslem at 4pm that afternoon and Dow led services the following day at Congleton at 5am and 9am and at the second service the Bourne brothers were present. At the end of the service Hugh Bourne purchased 'some American Camp Meeting publications'<sup>34</sup> from Dow. These tracts almost certainly included Dow's recent output in defence of the camp meeting as well as SK Jennings *Defence of Camp Meetings*. Bourne wrote in his journal of the tracts 'For about five years I had been accustomed to monthly camp meeting readings; yet there appeared a sort of newness in these and I read them with pleasure'<sup>35</sup> Dow's first visit to England ended on 6th May 1807<sup>36</sup>: by the end of that month the first English camp meeting had taken place.

Dow is a fascinating character whose appearance in England caused consternation amongst Wesleyan authorities He was thoroughly Methodist doctrinally but also notoriously free of any Conference discipline and his eclectic approach to denominationalism was salt in the wound of Wesleyanism still open from the New Connexion succession of 1797 and being stung by a number of smaller more localised difficulties in the North West of England at the time of his arrival, difficulties which through his contacts with the Manchester Band Room and the Quaker Methodists of Warrington Dow seems to have pitched straight into. It is Dow whose association with the 'wrong' kind of Methodists hardened the Wesleyan attitudes towards the camp meeting movement both connexionally and locally. In the minutes of the Wesleyan Conference which began in Liverpool on July 27th 1807 less than a month after the first camp meeting, following the now-famous judgement in Question 20 of the Minutes that camp meetings were '*highly improper in England and likely to be productive of considerable mischief; and we disclaim all connection with them*' comes Question 21 as follows (emphasis mine)

*Q: Have our people been sufficiently cautious respecting the permission of strangers to preach to our congregations?*

*A : we fear not: and we , therefore again direct , **that no stranger, from America or elsewhere, be suffered to preach in any of our places, unless he come fully accredited**; if an Itinerant Preacher, by having his name entered on the Minutes of the Conference of which he is a member; and if a Local Preacher, by a recommendatory note from his Superintendent.*<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Op cit 126

<sup>31</sup> J Kent *Holding the Fort – Studies in Victorian Revivalism* (London Epworth Press 1978) 50. See also Wilkinson op cit 45n.

<sup>32</sup> Herod op cit 212

<sup>33</sup> Wilkinson op cit 45, Dow vol 1 op cit 129 '28<sup>th</sup>(Oct) set off on foot for Macclesfield'

<sup>34</sup> Bourne in Wilkinson op cit 45n

<sup>35</sup> Walford op cit 129

<sup>36</sup> Wilkinson op cit 45n

<sup>37</sup> Minutes of Several Conversations of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Yearly Conference of the People Called Methodists in the Connexion Established by the Late Rev John Wesley AM, Begun in Liverpool on July 27th 1807 (London: The Bookroom 1807)

On his return home following the Conference, Rev John Riles the Burslem Superintendent forbade all local preachers and leaders to attend camp meetings, issuing a handbill on July 8<sup>th</sup> to distance the local Wesleyans from them Riles opposition stemmed from his time in the Macclesfield circuit from 1804-6 when a group of 'Christian Revivalists' had seceded from the Wesleyans and built their own chapel which Dow had opened.<sup>38</sup>

At Bourne's instigation the camp meetings continued with four in total in 1807 and a further six the following year. It would be an exaggeration to suggest that in initiating and then persisting with the camp meetings Bourne's attitude towards the Wesleyan authorities was the same as that of Dow's. Bourne remained a Wesleyan member until he was expelled by Burslem Quarterly meeting On June 27<sup>th</sup> 1808 and the date of May 31<sup>st</sup> for the initial meeting was suggested in order to comply with the Wesleyan preaching plan to which at this stage all present still adhered to. At a subsequent camp meeting held on Sunday August 16<sup>th</sup> 1807 at Brown Edge, Hugh Bourne and Thomas Cotton addressed a crowd, many of whom were from Harrishead. At 2pm, as still-faithful Wesleyans they trooped into the chapel to hear the appointed preacher, later recommencing until 6pm<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, Dows' influence reveals once again the attraction to what Bourne perceived as the first principles of Methodism rather than any particular ecclesiological expressions of them was to prove a key catalyst in the formation of the new community of *Primitive Methodism*. In his published account of the first English camp meeting<sup>40</sup>, Bourne himself sited Dow's preaching and exchanges as a catalyst and also mentions another tract purchased from him as influential: '*Lorenzo Dow...published a defence of Camp-Meetings, by the Rev SK Jennings AM with other remarks on the subject which together with the lively and wonderful descriptions of the work which he gave, both in the pulpit and in conversation, appear to have been the chief means of introducing them*'<sup>41</sup>

From Jennings Bourne once again got a justification of the meetings as being entirely consistent with Methodist tradition: his tract '*Defence of Camp Meetings*' is in part a counterblast against those in the US who dismissed the innovation of the camp meetings in light of them *being* associated with the Methodists. Jennings takes Paul's instructions to Timothy *Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine* (Tim. 4:2. KJV) and then contends '*Whether the Methodist preachers do not, in a very considerable degree, act up to this exhortation; will scarcely admit of a question*'<sup>42</sup> In Dow's '*An Account of the Origins....*' Bourne would have read '*a Word to the Methodists*' as promised in the title, which included the following plea:

*'Being about to sail to the land of my nativity, I entreat all into whose hands this may come, to pay attention to the following remarks:-.....*

*....There is a need for a pious and holy body to have recourse to first principles; therefore it is not amiss to read the old magazines to see if there be any contrast'*<sup>43</sup>

John Kent believes that '*there was certainly a connexion between Dow's appeal for a return to first principles and Bourne's attempt to revive 'primitive Methodism'*'.<sup>44</sup> It may well have seemed to Bourne that the accounts of US camp meetings in the not-so-old Wesleyan *Methodist Magazine* pointed to a first principle of earlier Methodism which contrasted with official Wesleyan attitudes to open air work at this time.

---

<sup>38</sup> Anderson in WHS op cit 39

<sup>39</sup> Walford op cit 168

<sup>40</sup> '*Observations on Camp Meetings, with an Account of a Camp Meeting held on Sunday, May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1807, at Mow near Harrishead*'

<sup>41</sup> reproduced in Walford op cit 133

<sup>42</sup> Reproduced in Dow vol 2 op cit 256

<sup>43</sup> Reproduced in Herod op cit 197-8

<sup>44</sup> Kent op cit 31

When planning the first camp meeting and in their subsequent development, it was that fidelity to ideas Bourne regarded as consistent with Methodist tradition – the need for open air work and for maximum participation which enabled him to adopt the form. Kent has questioned whether the gathering on Mow Cop on May 31st 1807 can be called a camp meeting at all on the grounds that *‘it took place only on a Sunday, without much preparation and the number of people who came – between two and four thousand-took the organisers completely by surprise’*<sup>45</sup> A serious objection to the use of the title could perhaps be levelled at the absence of the two defining characteristics of the early American model –the importance of the Lord’s Supper as a central activity and the overnight camping of visitors from some distance away. On the first point the lack of Communion as a focus point may reflect both the original impetus for the meeting arising primarily from a desire for prayer, or from the logistical difficulties in finding a suitably authorised person amongst the local largely hostile Wesleyans to conduct such a service. Either way the love feast seems to have soon replaced the Lord’s Supper in the English model, with most camp meetings ending with one at 6pm. As Stephen Hatcher has shown, the Lord’s Supper does not appear to feature in Primitive Methodism until 1816 and not in Staffordshire until 1824<sup>46</sup> On the second count - the absence of overnight campers from a distance – only two early meetings followed the extended American model: those on Mow Cop once again on July 18<sup>th</sup> and Norton on August 23<sup>rd</sup> were of three days duration. In fact the Norton meeting was the first to be suggested by Bourne:

*‘In the village of Norton we had yearly suffered loss by the wake or parish revel held yearly, about the 23rd of August. This had given me much concern, and it came into my mind that if we could hold a camp meeting for about three days it would engage our young members and preserve them from being seduced by the wake vanities’*<sup>47</sup>

William Farndale contended that the first May meeting at Mow Cop differed in format due to it being held for a different purpose for that of those held over several days to counteract the wakes being simultaneously held. Farndale pointed to the desire for *‘a days praying’* and the intention only to publish it amongst Christian friends in support of the view that the first gathering on Mow was intended for building up the faithful rather than reaching out to the lost as was the intention of subsequent meetings. He claimed *‘To seize that differentiation is vital’*<sup>48</sup>. The planning for the Norton meeting, as outlined by Bourne<sup>49</sup> involved the used of Hugh and James Bourne and Thomas Cotton as preachers and a host of praying labourers from Harrishead and Mow Cop’ thus suggesting a recognisably evangelistic camp meeting format. The plans for Mow Cop, though, with the provision of a preaching stand, seem to have followed a similar pattern. Bourne had already built in to his planning for Norton the need to avoid by stealth the opposition of some Burslem and Tunstall Wesleyans<sup>50</sup> and arguably the wariness about spreading the news of the planned meeting at Mow Cop too far had as much to do with this as it had about any ‘in house’ focus on prayer on the planned day.<sup>51</sup> In addition, the multiplication of preaching stands and the constant flow of people onto the grounds on May 31<sup>st</sup> suggests that as the day progressed its course became increasingly evangelistic in nature. Whatever the reason, the format of Norton does suggest that Bourne may have felt initially that the extended ‘camp’ was an idea which might have transferred culturally across the Atlantic. Kendall notes the diminished numbers on the third day at Norton<sup>52</sup> which may have been a factor in the extended format not being henceforth repeated, and Bourne was able to relinquish it with the essential essence of the meetings intact. In fact in making changes to the American format, Hugh Bourne effectively invented the English camp meeting, and appropriated the phrase to have a distinct English meaning.

---

<sup>45</sup> op cit 58

<sup>46</sup> S Hatcher *The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper in Early Primitive Methodism* in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* Vol XLVII Pt 5 May 1990 223

<sup>47</sup> Walford op cit 129, Wilkinson op cit 45-46

<sup>48</sup> W Farndale *The Secret of Mow Cop* (London : Epworth Press 1950) 29

<sup>49</sup> Walford op cit 129

<sup>50</sup> Op cit 129

<sup>51</sup> see Walford 130

<sup>52</sup> Kendall op cit 81

The phrase 'camp meeting' had in fact itself already been redefined in terms of American usage. Charles Johnson noted the existence of 'Camp Meeting Rules' drawn up by Baptist John Waller in Virginia Colony in the 1770's<sup>53</sup> but Waller's gatherings appear to have been men-only affairs, with those attending depending on the local community for sustenance.<sup>54</sup> The revival in Kentucky of 1801 inaugurates a recognisable model but after 1805 and the adoption of the camp meeting by American Methodism, the model is altered again to reduce the importance of the Lord's Supper in the proceedings. In fusing Shubotham's idea for a day of prayer with the reports of open air preaching from the *Methodist Magazine* and those received from Lorenzo Dow's enthusiasm and pamphlets Bourne effectively re-defines the term for English usage. An interesting declaration of intent by Bourne is to be found at the end of his pamphlet published *Observations on Camp Meetings...*, which is worth reproducing in full.

*The provision made for strangers at the camp meeting that is past was small, the cause of which was, that such a meeting being a new thing in England, the managers were unacquainted with the proper method of making preparations for it. In those that are now appointed, they intend to follow the advice of their friends, that is:*

- 1. To get the ground regularly licensed under the toleration act, that all interruption, or misbehaviour, in the time of meeting, may be prevented, or else punished as the law directs.*
- 2. To provide a sufficient quantity of stands and seats.*
- 3. To provide tents, &c., sufficient to defend the people from the inclemency of the weather.*
- 4. To provide a large supply of coals, lanterns, candles, &c., to light the camp during the night.*
- 5. To get provision sufficient to supply all distant comers, during the Sabbath.*
- 6. To defray these expenses by public collections during the meeting<sup>55</sup>.*

For the first time, in effect, Bourne is setting out what an English camp meeting will look like, in terms of what will be provided in its environs. In later years he was to specify the events of the day much more proscriptively, but from now on the American-English term 'camp meeting' has its own British-English usage as being descriptive of a day-long meeting in the open air, with the 'camp' being those facilities provided for protection from the English weather.

What remained for Bourne once the cultural trappings of the American frontier had been removed were a number of key principles – the need for open air work which was evangelistic, multi voiced and which had prayer as a key feature<sup>56</sup>. All these he saw as being consistent with the Methodist tradition he sought to apply them to serve his 'present age' which was far removed in many ways from that of the American prairies. In his doing so, the process of marking out the camp meeting supporters as a distinct ecclesiological community began. Wesleyan Methodism, the church to which all of the leading protagonists loyally belonged to, arguably bore a responsibility both positively and negatively in this. The *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* had conveyed the excitement of events in America via its pages to the Potteries so effectively that Lorenzo Dow had a captive audience for his testimonies and his publications from the likes of Shubotham and the Bourne brothers. Then at a crucial moment, when the first camp meetings on Mow Cop had proved a success, the Wesleyan Conference meeting in Liverpool in July of that year declared that whatever else they were, English camp meetings could not, institutionally, be 'Methodist' at this time, according to their definition. The Wesleyan resolution, as well as defining the 'camp meeting Methodists' as 'other' also gave them an identity and self awareness as a people seeking to return to what they perceived as a

---

<sup>53</sup> C A Johnson *The Frontier Camp Meeting* (Dallas : SMU Press 1955) 265

<sup>54</sup> Op Cit 27

<sup>55</sup> Reproduced in Walford op cit 137

<sup>56</sup> Revealingly, when Bourne later felt that the role of prayer was beginning to be neglected, to the detriment of the camp meeting, in 1816-19, he turned once again to the US model for inspiration. See Kent op cit 55-57 for a discussion on this.



purser, more faithful, more primitive form of Methodism by putting them at odds with what later became known to the camp meeting supporters (and not in a good way) as ‘modern Methodism’.

In developing the English camp meeting model Hugh Bourne demonstrated an ability to prioritise the missionary purpose of the Methodist tradition both over a particular cultural expression of it and over a restrictive ecclesiological expression of it. In doing so he became one of the founders of a new Methodist denomination. In this he was being entirely consistent with a tradition which ‘*became a church not for confessional reasons but for evangelistic or missional reasons*’ since to make alternative choices at key times would have placed confessional loyalty to the institution of Wesleyan Methodism above the evangelistic, missional loyalty he owed to the Methodist tradition. Bourne could have silenced the many voices of the Harsehead prayer meetings as the revival there gathered pace. He could have refused the invitation to preach in 1801, delaying doing so until an acceptance on to the plan. He could have shunned Lorenzo Dow as a denominational infidel. He could have ceased holding camp meetings following the opposition expressed both at Conference connexionally and locally. All these things he could have done in confessional faithfulness to Wesleyanism. However, as HB Kendall wrote ‘*It was Methodism as it had been and as it ought to be again, rather than the particular Methodism of the Burslem circuit or of the annual conference that attracted Hugh Bourne*’.<sup>57</sup> In choosing the moniker of *Primitive Methodists* in 1812, this new community showed itself to be at one with its founder.

200 years after that first camp meeting, Martyn Atkins this years President of the British Conference contends that ‘*The Missionary nature of the God, the pursuing of the Mission Dei and the goal of the Kingdom of God in a changing world naturally produce new ecclesiology and fresh expressions of church...From the beginnings of Christianity and throughout Christian history there is a continuing conversation between existing ecclesiology and emerging ecclesiology, sometimes quiet and content, sometimes heated and agitated. This is the situation today*’.<sup>58</sup> (55) In those heated moments it is useful to look back to similar times of agitation to see what were regarded as the essential Methodist contributions to the conversation. For Bourne, the voices to be heard from the Methodist tradition in the reports of the burgeoning American camp meeting movement seem to have been those of open air work, the importance of prayer and of the involvement of many, and it is these things which survived his adaptation of the American model. This is not of course to suggest that the missionary challenge facing the church today is akin to that facing Hugh Bourne in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To argue so would be especially grievous to the memory of a man who understood well the need for cultural adaptation, as essential to spanning the Atlantic then as to spanning 200 years now. Whilst the call for prayer and the involvement of many in mission is still strong in our tradition perhaps the Methodist voice speaking thorough the open air events of the past is heard today where fresh expressions of church are being sought with opportunities to learn of faith which ‘*start where people are*’ and ‘*are culturally relevant and engaging*’.<sup>59</sup> After all, in the Wakes Bourne’s impetus for suggesting an English version of the camp meeting was an existing popular cultural event. Whilst Bourne’s answers will not be our answers, the question he poses, ‘In serving the present age, what is faithful to Methodism’s purpose as a mission movement?’ must still heard and wrestled with as our primary task, if Methodist ecclesiology is to find its rightful place, as in Wesley’s day and in 1807, as subservient to the ‘intentional recovery of the missionary nature of the church’.

©Tim Woolley 2007

---

<sup>57</sup> Kendall op cit 88

<sup>58</sup> M Atkins *Resourcing Renewal: Shaping Churches for the Emerging Future* (Peterborough: Inspire 2007) 45

<sup>59</sup> P Pillinger & A Roberts *Changing Church for a Changing World* (London: Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes 2007) 54