

Pages scanned and written to disk by Don Haywood, a member of the Isle of Wight Family History Society, in September 2015. Disk and hardcopy pages donated to the Brading Community Archive Group. Pages include information on the coming of Mary Toms (who later married William Warder and lived in the Old Post Office building) to the Island.

Extracted from A History of the Bible Christian churches on the Isle of Wight

By Rev. J. Woolcock date 1897

ISBN: ORN0081360

Ref County Record Office 280/ISL/1897

Published by Fredk. Lee, Printer and Publisher, 53 Pyle Street, Newport I.W.

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The following transcription is an extract from Chapter IV, History of the Individual Societies: Brading (begins page 48). A transcription of Chapter 3 follows.

BRADING

This is probably the oldest town on the Island. Saint Wilfrid, Bishop of Selsea, landed here in 704, on a missionary tour to convert the inhabitants from heathenism. Here he made his first converts to Christianity, and erected a church on the site of a heathen temple. Brading is an old corporate town, whose position "at the head of a broad and sheltered estuary, early secured it considerable importance; and it carried on an active trade in the supply of provisions to the vessels anchored in the haven of the neighbouring roadstead." Near the eastern part of the church stands the headstone of "Little Jane," immortalised in the writings of Legh Richmond, a former vicar of this parish.

Mary Toms commenced preaching here soon after coming to the Island (1823), and founded a Society about the middle of the November of that year. This was done in the midst of what she calls "a glorious work," and doubtless it was. The spirit of persecution, however, was rife as in other places. Miss O'Bryan speaks of the rabble at Brading being just as bad as ever, and of the friends having to seek the protection of the law. But great good was done despite the opposition. The converting power of God could not be stopped. After Mary Toms became Mrs. Warder, she and her husband settled down at Brading, and thus the Society received a great gift from God, but it gave back to the Connexion more than it received. It gave Miss Wheeler to the ministry, and subsequently to become the wife of the Rev. George Tilley. Mrs. Tilley married Mr. Henry Hayden for her second husband. She is yet with us, and we are able to give an excellent portrait of her. <included on page> It is only lately that Mrs. Hayden has given up preaching.

Miss de Boyce, who as a local preacher was a great power in the Island, was also a native of Brading, and at a suitable time became the wife of the Rev. Samuel Pollard, and the mother of the Rev. Samuel Pollard, jun. (missionary in China), also the mother of the wife of the Rev. A. Knight.

When the Rev. James Way was the pastor of the Island circuit, he resided at Brading until he came to Newport to live. The first preaching place was called Warder's Chapel. The first chapel, rented at 50/- per annum, was opened here on October 13th and 15th, 1837; the present one- Connexional - with a school underneath it, was built in 1867. They are very nice premises; the chapel will seat about 200 persons; and the debt is small. At present the Society is not strong, but the friends are interested and true. Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs and Mr. and Mrs. Osborne are the chief workers, and take the responsibility. Besides those I have named, Brading has had many godly people, notably a man of great faith and prayer by the name George Stay; and then there was another fine old man, William Henley, a person of high principle and holy living. When the clergyman and this good man's employer's wife wanted Henley to take away his children from the Bible Christian Sunday School and send them to the Church School, and when the threat was held over him that if he did not he would lose his situation, he quietly said, "No! I would sooner sell matches than sacrifice my religious liberty, and, what is more, I will take William out of the Church choir, and keep clear of the Church altogether." William, the son here referred to, is now a most worthy and intelligent local preacher, living at Cowes. When the squire had matters represented to him by his wife, and was told what she and the parson desired should be done with Henley, he said, "I am quite sure I am not going to discharge so good and faithful a servant as he is for any such reason. What have I to do with my gardener's religious opinions?" Nor was he discharged, but soon after he had his wages raised, and when he became disabled for work, he was pensioned off, receiving support until his death. It was my privilege to know him, and though blind, I found him a peaceful and happy saint, no murmur against his affliction ever escaping his lips. He was one of the early converts of the first Bible Christians on the Island, did grand service as a local preacher, and was popular with all. Originally he was from Brixton. He loved to talk about the early days of the Connexion and its ministers; and of his earthly end it may be said that he calmly fell asleep in Jesus. There have been some splendid spirits in the Society at Brading.

Chapter III.

Some Facts about the Opening of the Mission on the Island

The facts of the coming of the first Bible Christian missionaries to the Isle of Wight, and the commencement of their work there, are, especially for Bible Christians, matters of considerable interest. The first agent was a young woman by the name of Mary Toms, a native of Tintagel, in Cornwall, who, prior to joining the Bible Christians, was a Wesleyan Methodist. It appears that while on a visit to Plymouth, she went to hear Mr. O'Bryan preach, and through this service came into the possession of a great spiritual blessing, accompanied by the conviction that God had a work for her to do amongst the Bible Christians. And this was no delusion, as subsequent events proved. She became the first Bible Christian missionary to the Isle of Wight, which came about in a somewhat singular way. It appears that on a certain occasion some persons were talking to her about this Island – a place she did not remember having heard of before – and at that moment there entered into her heart such a feeling as she could not express in words. For some moments she was unable to speak at all.

She told her friends of this singular experience, and one day, having had an introduction to Capt. John Caws, of Bembridge, Isle of Wight (of whom I have before spoken), she also told him that she felt it to be her duty to go to the Island to preach the gospel. He encouraged her in it, and told her that there was a great work to be done there. She could not go then, however, as there was no one to fill her place, even if she had had the means, and at the following conference she could not go because the funds of the Missionary Society were too low. Writing of her call to the Isle of Wight, and her experience after she got there, she says: "While in Luxilian and St. Ervan circuits, the Lord revealed to my mind many places in this Island as I have seen them since. I had no rest; the Island was in my thoughts day and night. Did the friends but mention its name, my heart was full; and at times my feelings were such that I believe had the road from Cornwall here been covered with fire, I should have willingly suffered the pain of travelling it, if convinced I should live to serve God and tell of His goodness in the Isle of Wight. At last I resolved and was determined in my heart to obey Him, whatever I might suffer, even if I begged my way here. At this time I had leave from you to go, but could not be supported from the missionary fund. Nevertheless, this was a great joy to me, and, glory be to God, He soon provided. I begged, and He opened the hearts of those around me who knew a little of what I felt and suffered. They came forward liberally in contribution. These supported me to this Island, and supported me in it, until the Lord changed the hearts of many of the people; and blessed be His holy name, He soon did it. It was all His doings, and to Him be all the glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Methodism was introduced into the Scilly Isles under similar circumstances. In the year 1788, Rev. Joseph Sutcliffe was travelling in the St. Ives circuit, Cornwall, "and on crossing the point of Land's End, felt an irrepressible interest for 'the souls of the poor smugglers', 'who were notorious on those rocks of the sea'. He prayed his two colleagues to spare him for a week. They replied, "If we let you go we must supply your appointments, and we haven't a night at liberty". But one day a Cornish Methodist called to say that his men had agreed to forego a night's fishing in order to take Sutcliffe to Scilly. This was an opening of Providence which so influenced preachers and people that they were afraid to obstruct the evangelist any longer. Accordingly, he sailed. On arriving he stood up at the door of an inn, and cried aloud, "God so loved the world" etc.; and again in the evening proclaimed, "Be it

known unto you, therefore men and brethren”, etc. And thus it was that Methodism was introduced into the Scilly Isles.

The Bible Christian Connexion came into existence by and through this constraining and directing of the Divine Spirit. The hand of God was upon the leaders, and they heard His voice, and saw visions of Him. Had this not been the case the denomination could not have come into existence. It was not born of wealth nor of social influence, but of Divine power. It was of God infinitely more than of man. Soon after Mr. O'Bryan's conversion, at eighteen years of age, he was constrained by the Spirit of the Lord to preach to his friends and neighbours, and to exhort them to repent and turn to God; also ultimately to sacrifice home, comforts, business and worldly prospects, and to encounter hardship, difficulty, and danger, that he might undertake the work of an evangelist in parishes of Devon and Cornwall where there was no evangelical preaching; and thus commenced the Bible Christian Connexion. James Thorne was convinced from childhood that God had a work for him to do, and after his conversion he longed to be engaged in preaching the gospel, and at times felt that he could run to the ends of the earth thus to do the will of God. He was so under the dominating influence of the Divine Spirit, and was so absorbed with the theme of the way of life, that he “cared not for anything in the world”. He heard God calling him to be a minister of the cross, and he was in living earnest to obey. At the same time, but few men ever felt the responsibility more. Before he preached his first sermon, he spent the whole night in prayer. And this might be said of many others in those early days of the connexion. The prophecy of the prophet Joel was, as it appears to me, fulfilled in them – “Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions” – visions of God, visions of duty, visions of power in the service of the gospel, visions of salvation for lost men and women. And these visions were as real and as clear to them as if God had pictured them on the sky, and that they had seen him do it. To be able to see such visions is the true genius of the Christian life, and such visions completely move those who see them to perfect obedience to the will of Christ. There is no deeper and grander insight by vision than to discern the will of God.

The Bible Christian Conference of 1823 was held at Mill Pleasant, Stoke Damarel, and on the day it closed (Tuesday, July 29th), Mary Toms sailed from Plymouth for the Isle of Wight, and arrived at West Cowes about ten o'clock at night. There was no one to meet her, and there was not a person in the place whom she knew. It was with considerable difficulty that she secured a place to sleep for the night, and when she did, it would appear from the circumstances that the Lord had the most to do with it. The place was very full of people, it being regatta week. The person who at last took her in was a Mrs Pooke, the wife of a shoemaker. They were Wesleyans. The following Sunday she went to East Cowes for the purpose of preaching in the open air, alone, without a single person on whom to rely for help. The weather was most inclement – wind and rain – but having obtained the loan of a chair on which to stand to deliver her message, she commenced to sing –

Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity, joined with power;
He is able, He is willing; doubt no more.

Numbers of persons gathered around the young woman to hear what she had to say. There was a novelty about it, and the service caused much interest and excitement. True, some

laughed and others scoffed, but others were serious, and there was commenced in that service a great and widespread religious awakening and converting power that thousands are blessing and praising God for today. The young evangelist announced that she would conduct another service on the morrow in the open air should the weather be favourable, and should it not be, and anyone would grant the loan of a room for the purpose, the service should be held under shelter. A woman who was feeling the power of the truth she had heard, and was in great distress of mind because of her sins, offered a room in her house. This offer was accepted, but when the time came the crowd was so large to hear this "woman preacher", that all the rooms in the house were not sufficient to accommodate the multitude. The only alternative, therefore, was again to preach in the open air, which was most gladly acceded to, and at the close of the service many persons were found to be seeking the Saviour for salvation. Among them was a man who had come to the meeting with a rope, having vowed that he would at the close of the service put this rope around the preacher, with a noose, and then drag her into the flowing tide. But the Spirit of God so wrought upon his mind, during the delivery of the discourse, that he not only had to abandon his wicked project, but became truly penitent and received the Lord Jesus as his Saviour. It is needless to say that he became one of the preacher's truest friends. There were also present at that service a lady and gentleman who had been too proud ever to hear this dissenting brother preach, but went out of curiosity to hear this dissenting sister, and they were so impressed with what they heard, that many times after they greatly befriended her. It was quite striking in those days to see a lady, with fine ribbons and long waving feathers, attending the preaching of, and standing by the person of a "Bryanite" evangelist, holding books, and rendering what other help she was able. Mary Toms soon had more invitations to preach in other parts of the Island than she could accept.

It was these pressing calls that constrained Mrs. O'Bryan and Eliza Jew to come to the Isle of Wight so soon after Mary Toms as they did – viz., about six weeks after her. Arriving at East Cowes, from Southampton, at nine o'clock in the morning, they of course proceeded to make inquiries after Mary Toms, and at length reached the house where she had lodged, only, however to hear that she had gone to Wootton Bridge. Thither they were going to find her, when they learnt that a friend at Ryde was the likeliest person to whom to apply for information as to the part of the Island where Mary Toms was now conducting services. Being informed that it was almost certain she was not at Wootton Bridge, they walked to Ryde, which from East Cowes is about nine miles. They did not, however, find Mary Toms, so they left Ryde, and resolved to walk to Newport, seven miles more. They had not had anything to eat since their breakfast at East Cowes, but some distance out of Ryde they had a drink of water and felt refreshed. Some people before leaving the town could have afforded to pay for a good square meal, but all the money these dear creatures had was 10/-, and not a friend, as far as they knew, in the whole Island at whose house they would be welcome to partake of the most frugal repast without paying for it. Before they reached Newport, Mrs. O'Bryan was so much fatigued, and her legs so swollen that she was obliged to rest by the wayside, and take off her boots and put slippers on. They reached Newport, however, about eight o'clock and were kindly received and entertained by Mr. Wickenden, but found that Mary Toms had gone to Haven Street to preach. They were now ready for supper, having walked sixteen miles. Mrs. O'Bryan said, in writing to her husband, "I felt truly thankful that the Lord had given me strength to walk so many miles on cold water, on a warm sunshiny day, and that I did not feel it tedious. Glory, glory be to God, who upholds the weak!"

When Mary Billing came to the Island in March of the year 1824, she had just as much difficulty to find where the preachers were as these sisters had. In the face of the facts of their experience, one is thankful, in these days of seventy years later, for the railway, the telegraph, and the penny post, which aid us in avoiding such inconveniences as they had to put up with.

All these early missionaries voice the fact that many of the people showed them great kindness. One of them said, "The Cornish are proverbial for kindness to strangers. I do not think the very best of them scarcely exceed the kindness of the people in general in this Island, or at least those whom I have met with". Before the year 1824, Mrs. O'Bryan and Eliza Jew had returned from the Island, and in this year I find that William Bailey, William Strongman, Mary Billing, and Mary O'Bryan were the preachers. Mary Toms had become united in matrimony to a Mr. Warder, of Brading, but zealously continued her preaching in a local sphere, and rendered good service in helping to carry forward the work she had so successfully commenced. In less than one year from the opening of the mission, the agents were able to report that there were more than 250 persons in Christian fellowship with them. I am here reminded of what Mr. Wesley said after his second visit to the Island, viz.: "Surely if there were any here to preach the word of God with power, multitudes would soon be obedient to the faith;" and facts proved that he was truly prophetic. What has been already adduced proves this.

From what I have written it will be seen that the pioneers of the Bible Christian Connexion in the Isle of Wight were the most part women. This was so marked a feature, especially at first, that some of the people were accustomed to ask whether there were any men preachers in the denomination, while others boldly stated that it was altogether a woman's cause. But these women were doubtless called of God to do this work, and had strong confidence in Him and in the success of the cause which they had taken up. During the first years of the mission one of the sisters, writing to Mr. O'Bryan for another evangelist to be sent, says, "You need not be afraid to send a man, for we have many good friends here who will not see the cause come down." These women preachers did not find it all sweetness, or plain sailing as they carried on their sacred work. One of the early female local preachers was so opposed that there was a notice posted throughout a certain parish with the following heading: "Beware of the doctrine of Martha Toogood." It can be well judged who the leaders were in this opposition. It was a serious matter with some, when these women evangelists could draw larger numbers to hear them preach than the clergy could.

A female local preacher in Cornwall, who lived for nine years in a clergyman's family, could get to hear her preach, either in the chapel or in the open air, five times as many as the clergyman could get to hear him in his church, and she saw, through her ministry, larger numbers turned from sin to salvation than he did. In the case of this clergyman, however, there was an exception to the rule. In contrast to others of his class, he offered no opposition to female preachers, nor, indeed, to any other agents that were doing good. It says a great deal for the moral worth of the young woman to whom he would entrust the bringing up of his children, and put up with her preaching occasionally in the same parish, on the same day, and perhaps at the same time as he was himself preaching in the church. Nevertheless it was so; but there were few like him. For the most part, the clergy offered the strongest possible opposition to female preaching – speaking against it, writing against it, etc. One of them, attacking the Bible Christians, made a special feature in a pamphlet of denouncing female preaching, which called out Rev. James Thorne as a pamphleteer against him, and I

think a part of the reply is too good, and too smart to omit quoting here. After referring to a number of passages in the Old Testament, he sums up his defence as follows: "Now, sir, can it be supposed that the apostles by the Divine Spirit prohibited women from praying and preaching, and yet encourage them to do so, by giving them directions how to appear when they prayed and prophesied, by entreating a true yoke-fellow to help them, and by acknowledging them as *fellow-labourers*. The very idea of such a contradiction is absurd, and therefore it is much better, with the learned Dr, A. Clarke, to suppose that in 1 Cor. xiv. 34-35 ('Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is a shame for women to speak in church,') reference is not made to praying or preaching, but to disorderly talking". Then Mr. Thorne asks the question, "If, sir, the Bible Christians are wrong in allowing women to pray or speak, 'to edification, exhortation, and comfort,' how do you justify the practice of your own church, when the regal authority is vested in a Queen, in acknowledging her as the supreme Head of the Church, who, consequently, nominates the Bishops?"

More than one woman has been a sweet saviour unto God, and the means of leading sinners to the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, on the Isle of Wight, before the Bible Christian female preachers came – for example, Elizabeth Wallbridge ("The Dairyman's Daughter"), who became converted to God through the preaching of the Rev. James Crabb (Wesleyan), while she was living as a servant at Southampton. After she returned home her conduct and her saintly character greatly impressed Legh Richmond and many others.

The Rev. James Thorne had the honour of forming the first Bible Christian Society in the Isle of Wight, on Oct. 3rd. 1823. He says in his journal, "I went on board the Cowes packet about eleven, and arrived at the Isle of Wight about one." He travelled from Portsmouth to Ryde, having previously come from London there. "I walked to Newport," he adds. "having my portmanteau to carry. I lay down for about an hour and a half, and then walked to Rookley corner, and preached to an attentive congregation, who filled the little house, from Matt. xi. 28. After preaching I gave the congregation a brief sketch of my life and Christian experience, and proposed forming a class. Three gave their names, viz., James Herridge, Jane Herridge, and Leah Wight; several others appeared serious. This is the first Society that has been formed in the Island by us. I slept at the house; the person's name is Attrill. James and Mary King, their daughter Ann, and Robert Moses, of Wroxall, joined the following night at Godshell. The two elder Kings had promised Mary Toms before, so that, properly speaking, they were the first two who joined Society."

While I have been making myself acquainted with the men and women, through historical facts, who did the initiatory and foundation work of the Bible Christian Connexion in the Isle of Wight, I have discovered that they were pioneers whose spiritual exercise was that of much prayer, and therefore they were persons, in an eminent degree, of great spiritual power – men and women filled with the fulness of God, and baptised with the *Holy Fire*. They knew well this divine fulness and holy fire, and in *them* was the secret of their success in soul winning. Oh, for a more intimate acquaintance therewith today, that with the like courage and whole-heartedness resulting therefrom, and a self-sacrificing spirit, such as they had, there may be through our labours more manifest and general results in the extension of our Lord's blessed and glorious kingdom! And why not?