

Mary Toms Warder (1795-1850) the first Bible Christian missionary to the Isle of Wight

The Bible Christian Church was a Methodist denomination founded in 1815 by William O'Bryan, a Wesleyan Methodist preacher, in North Cornwall. Controversially, they allowed females to preach. Mary Toms was born in 1795 at Tintagel, Cornwall. At age 16, Mary was strong, vigorous, and active, reportedly she "feared and cared for nothing" and when visiting an Aunt in Plymouth she chanced to hear a Methodist preacher. From then she worshiped with the Methodists until around the age of 22 when Mary was attracted to the Bible Christian church and in 1820 began her work as a preacher where she travelled from town to town throughout the local circuit. Often encountering opposition, it was a hard life for a woman preacher as Mary was then operating in a society when at that time few women achieved leadership roles of any kind.

Although never having visited there, she had a conviction she was being called to serve on the Isle of Wight, so in July 1823 now aged 27 Mary sailed from Plymouth to the Island, arriving at Cowes where she reported "Oh, could you see the sins committed here". Starting to preach at East Cowes, soon two of the local Wesleyan preachers joined Mary which enabled her to travel further into the Island. The cosy alliance between the Established Church and the Landed Gentry was about to be challenged. Soon Mary was overwhelmed with invitations to preach in other parts of the Island and began conducting open air services and helping to establish numerous Bible Christian societies. She preached in Gunville, Gatcombe, Rookley, Godshill, Merstone, Wootton-Bridge, Littleton, Wroxall, Nettlecombe, Brading and Ventnor. After Mary had been on the island about six weeks, the Bible Christian Connexion sent Mrs. O'Bryan and Eliza Jew to the Isle of Wight to help her. They had great difficulty catching up with Mary. They walked from town to town, each time finding that she had moved on to yet another location.

Although their message was taken with enthusiasm by farm labourers, they were reluctant to open their cottages for worship as their activities were not welcomed by the local parson and squire. This threatened a loss of work and eviction from their cottages. Their popularity forced the established Church in the form of the vicar of Brighstone, Samuel Wilberforce, to urge that their influence be countered by having their adherents sacked from their jobs and turned out from their cottages. At a cottage being used for worship in Chale, opponents smeared the gates with tar and night-soil and fixed tubs of filth leaning against the door. They were not to be stopped, by 1835 there were 26 Bible Christian Societies on the Isle of Wight and their chapels are to be seen across the Island to this day.

Mary continued traveling about the island preaching until she lost her voice from so much speaking and was worn out and at times fainting. When it appeared that she might have to go back to Cornwall to recover her health, William Warder from Brading asked her to remain on the island and marry him. They were married on January 5, 1824 at Brading and settled in the town. When Mary recovered, she still did a little preaching. In October 1837 they opened a preaching chapel in West Street, Brading called Warder's Chapel. William also became active in Bible Christian circles. He served as a circuit steward for the first quarterly meeting which was held at his house in Brading on April 12, 1824. Late in 1824, William and Mary had their first child, so she gave up her travels about the countryside but continued to preach in the local sphere. Mary lived the rest of her life at Brading and died there on August 3, 1850 at the age of 54. A remarkable woman at the spearhead of change. By 1851 on the Island the Bible Christians had 26 places of worship, second only the Church of England at 39.

The Bible Christians on the Isle of Wight always recognized Mary as one of their most important early leaders. Years later, during the construction of a new chapel in East Cowes, they incorporated a stone to the memory of Mary in a conspicuous position in the front part of the building. It reads "Laid in memory of Mary Toms by Mr. R. Bullen, J.P." The Bible Christians remained a separate church until 1907 when they combined with two other churches to form the United Methodist Church. In 1932, the United Methodists united with the Wesleyan Methodists and Primitive Methodists to once again form a unified Methodist Church.

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- A History of the Bible Christian churches on the Isle of Wight by J. Woolcock date 1897 ISBN: ORN0081360
- woottonbridgeiow.org.uk/marytoms
- www.wmcnitt.net/england/toms.htm
- Religious Census of Hampshire 1851, ISBN 1 873595 30 1



*Location of Warder's Chapel, 'Music Room formerly a Chapel'*