

The Methodist churches in London

Aims and approach

This document is designed for those who wish to explore an aspect of the religious heritage of the Methodist churches in London, in particular the history of an individual church.

It will explain ways of finding out more about important aspects of the history of a Methodist church, and also wider London Methodism, in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Background: Methodist churches in London

(The information in this section is taken largely from the **Dictionary of Methodism**, which is available online at www.wesleyhistoricalsociety.org.uk/dmbi/).

London has strong links with John Wesley, the eighteenth century founder of Methodism. The first Methodist society was based in London at the Foundery in Moorfields. Here there was a preaching house (holding 1,500), living quarters, stables for preacher's horses, a schoolroom and a book room. In 1778 Wesley moved his headquarters to City Road Chapel. In the eighteenth century there were also centres for Methodism at West Street Chapel in the West End, Snowfields Chapel, Southwark and in Spitalfields.

Early London Methodism grew comparatively slowly, with the single London Circuit only divided from 1807. However, like other denominations, the Methodists responded to the rapid growth of London through programmes of church extension. In 1861 the Metropolitan Chapel Building Fund was established to 'promote the erection of commodious chapels in suitable situations in and around the metropolis, to assist in the enlargement of existing chapels...and to secure eligible sites, especially in the new localities'. This work was complimented by the work of the East End Mission from 1885, which began in 1861 under the leadership of Alexander M'Aulay and went on to carve out five new circuits in the East End, and the West London Movement (1887). The [1851 Religious Census](#) indicated that there were 154 Methodist places of worship in the London Registration District. A *Daily News* census of London worship in 1902-3 showed 383 places of worship. There were six Methodist Districts, which served London and the larger part of the south-east until 1957, when these were reduced to four. In 1988 a London District was created with some circuits in suburban areas moved into other Districts.

In 1989 there were 252 Methodist churches in the Greater London area. The majority (162) were now in the suburbs. However, the increase of migration to London in the late-twentieth century has seen a growth in Methodism in the inner London area and the rise of multi-racial congregations and worship.

Researching the history of a Methodist church and congregation

Finding out about a Methodist church and congregation can be rewarding; however, it can also present a range of challenges. Sometimes it can be difficult to know where to start your investigations and which resources to use. It can be that libraries and archives appear confusing, or even intimidating. This guide will explain how you might begin your research and introduce you to the range of sources that are available to you.

You can find out quite a lot about the history of a church without doing any research in a library or archives, and even without doing much reading. We suggest the following sequence of activity:

Look-Listen-Read-Research

There are a variety of useful resources for carrying out research into a Methodist church. You should begin your investigations by looking at the following:

Look

Look at the building itself – which may already be very familiar – with new and inquisitive eyes.

- When was it built? A foundation stone and/or dedication tablet may well quickly give an exact date, but architectural style and other evidence will give useful clues. Which Methodist denomination built it? A former Primitive Methodist chapel will usually look much simpler than a former Wesleyan church.
- Has it been significantly extended, altered or rearranged during its history? If so are there clues as to when and why?
- What ancillary buildings are there? (Hall? Sunday school?) What was their original purpose and how might this have changed?
- How does the church relate to its physical surroundings? Is/was it on a main road or a back street? Do/did a lot of people live nearby? Does it look like a focal point for a community, or a building that is easily ignored?

Listen

The memories and testimony of others can form a significant component of a research project. Talk to older and more longstanding members of the congregation. What can they tell you about the past history they have lived through, and perhaps about earlier periods they had themselves heard about? Do not accept what they tell you uncritically: they may well have particular viewpoints or prejudices, or simply have been misinformed. On the other hand their perspective on the past is to be valued and affirmed as part of the collective memory of the church community, and is likely to give you valuable insights into why people behave and think as they do.

There is also a [Methodist Sound Archive](#) at the British Library which includes interviews with ministers, lay office holders and ordinary members, as well as recordings of church events. Included in the archive are reminiscences of the founding of Camden Town Methodist Church and the re-opening of Wesley's Chapel. There is also a collection of sermons, including some by Donald Soper.

Read

General resources

There are two published books available which are informative guides on writing a church history:

Wesley Swift, *How to Write a Local History of Methodism* (1964, 1972, 1981, 1986)
William Leary, *My Ancestors were Methodists: How can I find out more about them?* (1995)

The Wesley Historical Society [www.wesleyhistoricalsociety.org.uk] has published its *Proceedings* since 1895 and includes articles from all periods of Methodist history rather than just the time of the Wesleys.

The Society's website allows free access to expanded version of the ***Dictionary of Methodism***. This is an invaluable resource, allowing you to search for by area, church, individual and theme.

Published books

Published material can provide an excellent 'way in' to a project, perhaps orientating you to different themes and issues or describing a wider historical context. Furthermore, you will find that many

individual London Methodist churches already have an older written history. Before you begin a project, it will be worth searching the online databases of the specialist libraries below. In particular, the Methodist Archive at the John Rylands University Library (see below) has a collection of several thousand chapel and circuit histories indexed by place. You could also refer to the [British library integrated catalogue](#) and the [London's Past Online database](#).

For finding out about the local context (for example, population growth, industry and employment and other churches) a useful resource is the Victoria County Histories. These are available on line at [www.british-history.ac.uk] (from the home page click on 'London'). For some basic information of the architecture of local churches the six London volumes in *The Buildings of England* series may be helpful.

General histories of British Methodism:

John A Vickers (ed), *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland* (2000) [Expanded and updated version available on line]

Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp (eds), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* Volume 1 (1965)

Rupert Davies, A Raymond George, Gordon Rupp (eds), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* Volume 2 (1978)

Rupert Davies, A Raymond George, Gordon Rupp (eds), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* Volume 3 (1983)

Rupert Davies, A Raymond George, Gordon Rupp (eds), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* Volume 4 (1988) [Contains documents, source materials and bibliography. Annual bibliographies of Methodist historical literature are published as supplements to the *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*.]

Barrie W Tabraham, *The Making of Methodism* (2010, 2nd ed)

John Munsey Turner, *Wesleyan Methodism* (2005)

Geoffrey Milburn, *Primitive Methodism* (2002)

John Munsey Turner, *Modern Methodism in England 1932-1998* (1998)

David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (2005)

General books about aspects of London Methodism:

Brian Frost with Stuart Jordan, *Pioneers of Social Passion: London's Cosmopolitan Methodism* (2006)

Timothy S Alexander-Macquiban, 'British Methodism and the Poor: 1785-1840', unpublished University of Birmingham PhD thesis (2000)

Stuart Jordan, *Back Towards the Future: 144 years of the London Committee*, unpublished lecture given to the London Wesley Historical Society 2005?

John Vickers and Betty Young, *A Methodist Guide to London and the South East* (1980)

Major central London Methodist Churches:

Wesley's Chapel, City Road

George J Stevenson, *City Road Chapel, London and Its Associations* (1872)

Helen McKenny, *A City Road Diary: The Record of three years in Victorian London 1885-1888* (1978)

John Telford, *Wesley's Chapel and Wesley's House* (1926)

Max Woodward, *One at London: The Story of Wesley's Chapel* (1983)

West London Mission/Hinde Street

Alan Brooks, *West End Methodism – The Story of Hinde Street* (2010)

Philip S Badwell, *Outcast London: A Christian Response. The West London Mission of the Methodist Church 1887-1987* (1987)
Nehemiah Curnock, *Hinde Street Chapel 1810-1910* (1910)

Westminster Central Hall

John V Ellis, *Wesley's Centenary Memorial* (1982)
Paul Sangster (ed), *Eight Essays* (1982)

Methodist institutions in London

F C Pritchard, *The Story of Westminster College 1851-1951* (1951)
Eva Williams, *The History of Southlands College 1872-1972* (1972)
[Westminster and Southlands were the two Methodist colleges for training teachers in London.]

Leading figures of London Methodism

John Scott Lidgett

Lidgett established the Bermondsey Settlement and was warden from 1892 to 1949. He was President of the Wesleyan Conference in 1908 and first President of the Methodist Conference in 1932. He was leader of the Progressive Party on the London County Council and Vice-Chancellor of London University. He was Chairman of the London South district from 1909 to 1949. See:
Alan Turberfield, *John Scott Lidgett: Archbishop of British Methodism?* (2003).

Ensor Walters

Walters was superintendent of the West London Mission from 1902 to 1907 and General Secretary of the London Mission Extension Fund from 1921. He was President of the Methodist Conference in 1936. See E. W. Walters, *Ensor Walters and the London He Loves* (1937).

Hugh Price Hughes

Hughes was the first superintendent of the West London Mission from 1884 and leader of the Forward Movement. He was President of the Wesleyan Conference in 1898. His wife, Katherine, created a Sisterhood within the West London Mission and was one of the first women elected to the Wesleyan Conference. See:
Christopher Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes: Founder of a new Methodism, Conscience of a new Nonconformity* (1999)
Dorothea Price Hughes, *The Life of Hugh Price Hughes* (1904)
Katherine Price Hughes, *The Story of My Life* (1945).

Donald Soper

Soper became superintendent of the West London Mission in 1936 and was famous for his preaching at the Kingsway Hall, Tower Hill and Hyde Park. He was President of the Methodist Conference in 1955 and created a life peer in 1965. See:
Mark Peel, *The Last Wesleyan: A life of Donald Soper* (2008)
Brian Frost, *Goodwill on Fire: Donald Soper's Life and Mission* (1996).

Leslie D. Weatherhead

Weatherhead was minister of the Congregational City Temple, the Methodist Conference having refused to appoint him to Wesley's Chapel.
John Travell, *Doctor of Souls: Leslie D Weatherhead 1893-1976* (1999).

William Lax

Lax spent 35 years as superintendent of the Poplar Mission from 1907. See:
William Lax, *Lax of Poplar* (1927)
William Lax, *Lax His Book: The Autobiography of Lax of Poplar* (1937).

Thomas Jackson

Jackson was a Primitive Methodist minister who served in the East End for 56 years. He established the Whitechapel mission and founded the Garment Workers' Union. He was President of the Primitive Methodist Conference in 1912. See: William Potter, *Thomas Jackson of Whitechapel* (1929).

William Edwin Sangster

Sangster was minister at Westminster Central Hall from 1939. His post-war Sunday evening congregations were the largest in London. He was President of the Methodist Conference in 1950. See:

Paul Sangster, *Doctor Sangster* (1962)

Simon Ross Valentine, *William Edwin Sangster* (pamphlet, 1998).

On Methodist leaders in the East End see: Ronald C Gibbins, *Methodist East Enders* (1995).

Specialist libraries

Most of the books above will be available at the British Library. However, there are also specialist Methodist libraries:

- The Methodist Archives and Research Centre was established by the Methodist Church of Great Britain in 1961 and transferred in 1977 to the [John Rylands University Library in Manchester](#).
- The Wesley Historical Society's library at The Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History, Oxford Westminster Institute of Education, Oxford Brookes University, Harcourt Hill, Oxford OX2 9AT. 01865 488319 04 488377 [see www.brookes.ac.uk or email wco.archives@brookes.ac.uk]. This library and the libraries of Kingswood School, Bath; John Wesley's Chapel, Bristol; and Wesley College, Bristol can be searched [online](#).

Research

Archive material

Undeposited material

You may well find that there are invaluable sources still in the possession of the church or members of the congregation. As already mentioned, church records may still be in the possession of the local church. Is there an old run of church magazines gathering dust in a side room? Or has some-one kept a parent's or grandparent's diary or photograph album recalling church life in the earlier twentieth century? Such material can be very useful and revealing.

Church-related material

The deeds of most local churches will be stored in the circuit safe and may include original documents and occasionally church records.

Individual churches made records of their life and work, and these are important sources for research. For Methodist churches, the most useful of these are the circuit and church minute book together with records of church committees and organisations. Minute books and records may be located in a variety of places. Unfortunately, some have been discarded or are in private ownership; however, you will find that many are still available. They may be in the possession of the church, so it will be worth consulting the secretary or treasurer of the congregation. However, they may well have been deposited, either as an individual archive or as part of a larger circuit archive. Some such archives are held at local reference libraries [see list below] or the [London Metropolitan Archive](#). Two useful resources for locating church records is the [National Register of Archives](#) database

[<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/default.asp>] and [AIM25](http://www.aim25.ac.uk/) [<http://www.aim25.ac.uk/>]. Some records may be in the record offices of the old counties e.g. Hertfordshire or Surrey.

Many churches published monthly magazines, and even annuals, for their members. These are often a gold mine of insight into the life and activities of a congregation. These will often be located with the church records described above.

Circuit-related material

Record related to individual circuits might be found at the [London Metropolitan Archive](#) or in a local reference library [see list below]. These records might include circuit meeting minutes, circuit notes and preachers' minute books. A Circuit Plan will include the names of local preachers and their appointments. The largest collection of these is to be found at the Methodist Archive at the John Rylands University Library (see above). While not comprehensive, it contains material on most circuits and across the connexions. The Archive also contains District Minutes, which provide insights into Methodism and district and circuit level.

Newspapers

Local newspapers will often contain reports about the opening of churches and significant events and anniversaries. Many of these are held at London's local archives:

- [Barnett Archives and Local Studies Centre](#)
- [Brent Archive](#)
- [Camden Local Studies and Archives](#)
- [Chiswick Local Studies and archives](#)
- [Ealing Local History Centre](#)
- [Enfield](#)
- [Hackney Archives](#)
- [Hammersmith and Fulham Archives and Local History Centre](#)
- [Haringey Archives and Local History](#)
- [Harrow Civic Centre Reference Library](#)
- [Hillingdon Local Studies, Archives and Museums Service](#)
- [Hounslow Archive](#)
- [Islington Local Library](#)
- [Kensington and Chelsea Local Studies and Archive](#)
- [Tower Hamlets Local History & Archives Library](#)
- [City of Westminster Archives Centre](#)

Additionally, denominational newspapers included reports on individual churches (openings, anniversaries and outreach etc.) and ministers (articles, obituaries). There are a range of Methodist newspapers belonging to the different Connexions within the wider movement, including *The Methodist Recorder* (1861-), *The Watchman* (1835-84), *The Methodist Times* (1867-69, 1885-1932), *The Methodist Times and Leader* (1932-37), *The Primitive Methodist* (1868-1905), *Primitive Methodist Leader* (1905-32). The specialist libraries listed above will hold collections of individual newspapers, but the [British Newspaper Library](#) [<http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/inrrooms/blnewspapers/newsrr.html>] at Colindale is also an excellent resource.

There is a thorough list of Methodist periodicals ('A Checklist of British Methodist Periodicals' by E. A. Rose) available at the Methodist Archive at John Rylands University library, Manchester.

Finding out about aspects of a church and congregation's history

The most useful histories of Methodist churches do not simply relate to bricks and mortar – rather they will give insights into the people and life of the congregation, perhaps themes in the history of the church, and also its interaction with the local community. The following are aspects of church life that you might wish to explore:

Beginnings of a church

There will always be specific reasons for the setting up of an individual congregation. It may have been a deliberate church 'plant' (perhaps funded by the Metropolitan Wesleyan Chapel Building Fund). Some congregations had their origins in a Society based in a private house before the construction of the new building. Often in London the first building was an iron church, a 'tin tabernacle'. Local and denominational newspapers will often provide another angle for investigation. Details about the establishment of the church might be found in church or circuit records. Additionally, local newspapers will often have articles on the opening of a new Methodist church. For late-nineteenth century churches, you might find draft applications to the Metropolitan Chapel Building Fund available in the church and circuit archives.

Ministers

A minister, of course, will have played a central role in the life of the church and congregation. There are various ways of finding out about individual ministers. Church minute books will contain some information.

The obituaries of Methodist ministers have been published in the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* (or its equivalents in the other denominations) and later in the annual *Minutes of Conference* of the different Methodist denominations (these can be found at the British Library and the Methodist Archive at the John Rylands University Library). Earlier obituaries did not concentrate on factual information but on the character and death of the minister. The *Minutes* also list ministerial appointments for that year and the addresses of the ministers.

The following reference books may be helpful:

- *Hall's Circuits and Ministers* was published at intervals between 1885 and 1925. Under the names of circuits it lists all the Wesleyan ministers who had served in them since their establishment in chronological order.
- *Hill's Arrangements* was published at intervals between 1819 and 1968. It listed all the Wesleyan ministers up to 1932 and their circuits. From 1932 it included all Methodist ministers. The 1968 edition included an alphabetical list of all ministers who had died in the ministry until that year with the year of their ordination and death. This is helpful for finding which volume of the *Minutes* the obituary might be found. *Garlick's Methodist Registry* was published as a one off in 1983 with biographies of most the ministers serving in that year. It also includes helpful lists of office holders in the major Methodist denominations.
- William Leary, *Directory of Primitive Methodist Ministers & their Circuits* (1990) lists all Primitive Methodist ministers and their circuits. A booklet containing corrections and additions was published in 1993.
- Oliver A Beckerlegge, *United Methodist Ministers and their Circuits* (1968) lists all the ministers of the following Methodist denominations: Methodist New Connexion, Bible Christians, Arminian Methodists, Protestant Methodists, Wesleyan Methodist Association, Wesleyan Reformers, United Methodist Free Churches and the United Methodist Church.

- *Who's Who in Methodism* (1933); *The Methodist Local Preachers' Who's Who* (1934); *Who's Who in the Free Churches* (1951).

Church Attendances

Many Methodist churches in London experienced significant growth during the late nineteenth century, but often experienced decline in the early twentieth century. However, you will find a great deal of variation where attendances are concerned. Don't assume that a church was necessarily full in the past, or indeed that it had low attendances if that has been part of its recent story. One way of examining attendances is to consult the religious censuses of London religion of 1851, 1886 and 1903-4. A compilation of the 1851 statistics for London (mostly north of the river) contained in the [original printed report of the Religious Census](#) is available here as a pdf (with permission from ProQuest's *Parliamentary Papers* online). In order to consult the original returns you will probably need to go to the National Archives (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk) at Kew, although it would be worth checking whether your local borough archive or local history library holds a copy of returns relevant to your area. It is, however, straightforward to view the returns at Kew. They available on microfilm in the open access reading room, for which it is not necessary to obtain a readers ticket or make an appointment. The results of the census conducted by the *British Weekly* in 1886 were published as *The Religious Census of London* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1888), available online at www.openlibrary.org/b/OL14037667M. The census conducted in 1902-3 by the Daily News was particularly thorough and informative and was published as Richard Mudie-Smith, *The Religious Life of London* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), with extensive commentaries and analysis. It is available online at www.archive.org/details/religiouslifeofl00mudi.

Lay people

It can be difficult to find out about individual lay people through archive research. Church minute books may provide interesting insights into lay leadership. Other possible sources of information are church magazines; baptismal and marriage; and donation lists (on these, see the relevant article by John H. Lenton in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, Vol. 55, 2005).

Outreach

In the Victorian and early Edwardian period many Methodist churches were very active in their engagement with the local community through evangelism, such as open air ministry, and social action. Many Methodists churches provided direct and indirect welfare through community programmes, clubs for children and adults or temperance societies. You will find insights into the activity of churches in their individual church records and magazines. You may also find local and denominational newspaper articles (see list above) that give a picture on the engagement of an individual church with their local community. There is significant material relating to outreach in the archives of the East London Mission and West London Mission available at the London Metropolitan Archives.

Sunday school/youth clubs

Sunday schools have often been an important part of the life of a congregation. Many grew rapidly from the mid nineteenth century, and there became an urgent need for more accommodation which resulted often in the building of halls and rooms. You will often find Sunday school minute and attendance books in the church and circuit records, if you are able to locate them. Furthermore, church magazine and annuals will be a useful source of information.