

The Bible Christians of Shebbear in North Devonshire

by

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The Bible Christian movement was a reaction to an environment of poverty and religious hypocrisy in a remote and rural area of North Devonshire at a time of strong religious revivalism across the south west of England. Although the movement was founded in Devonshire, it was conceived in Cornwall and whilst its stronghold was in Devonshire, there was a significant following in Cornwall with about a quarter of its chapels located within Cornwall. In the 92 years of its existence, its influence spread way beyond its roots in the rural community of Shebbear. Whilst the movement was strongest in Devonshire, Cornwall and into Somerset and Dorset, there were circuits across England and Wales. Missionaries went to Australia, Bermuda, Canada, China, New Zealand and the United States. Its members emigrated in their thousands from the south west of England.

The Founder - William Bryant

The movement was founded by William Bryant who was born in Luxulyan, near St Austell, Cornwall in 1778, the son of William and Thomasine Bryant. They were farmers and Wesleyan Methodists. His great-grandfather, John Grose, was a member of the Society of Friends and William Bryant acknowledges his strong religious background within his writings. His name is most commonly spelt as Bryant, but his descendants appear to use the variant of Briant. William Bryant claimed that his family originated in the Republic of Ireland and were originally called O'Bryan. He further claims that since coming to Cornwall, the "O" was dropped from the name. There is no evidence for this claim and as Michael Wickes, in his book *The Westcountry Preachers*, says: "...genealogical research is strewn with these old family legends, many of which bear little relation to the truth. The surname Bryant and its variants are quite common in Cornwall." Whilst William Bryant became known as William O'Bryan, on his gravestone he is known as William Bryant.

William Bryant was a Wesleyan Methodist and it was through the Methodists that he met his future wife, Catherine Cowlin, who was born in Perranzabuloe in Cornwall on 29 May 1781. It may also not have been a coincidence that two of William Bryant's first cousins, James and Samuel Lawry, had married Catherine's elder sisters. William and Catherine married in Perranzabuloe on 09 July 1803 and subsequently had seven children: Ebenezer William, Mary, Tamson, Edin Ebenezer, Catherine Cowlin, Serena and Ebenezer. The whole remaining family, except Mary, emigrated to the United States in 1831, where William spent his days as an itinerant preacher. William and Catherine Bryant are buried in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York.

William Bryant applied to be a Wesleyan preacher, but was rejected and eventually broke away to form his own ministry. In 1815 he was in Week St Mary in North Cornwall and established an independent circuit on 01 October of that year.

The Formation of the Bible Christians

James and John Thorne met William Bryant in Cookbury, North Devonshire on two occasions and upon the second on 05 October 1815 invited him to preach at their father's farm in Shebbear. On 09 October 1815 William Bryant preached to a group of Devonshire farmers and their wives and afterwards 22 of them stayed behind to encourage him to form a religious society. There were the family Thorne and 15 others, whose names have not been recorded. The Bible Christian movement was born. The movement was originally known as the Bryanites, but Bryant preferred the title of the Arminian Bible Christians, which was popularised as the Bible Christians by 1816.

The term Arminian refers to the doctrine of Arminius, a Dutch Protestant theologian, who opposed the views of Calvin.

Lake farm was the home of family Thorne and became the home of the Bible Christian movement. John Thorne, James's father, donated land for a chapel which still stands today albeit that it has been extended. It is now a Methodist chapel.

The Family Thorne

Although founded by William Bryant, the family Thorne came to dominate the movement and the same autocratic behaviour by Bryant that led to his separation from the Wesleyan Methodists also led to him losing the leadership of the Bible Christians to James Thorne. William Bryant was its first superintendent until 1828 when, following internal strife, he was replaced by William Mason, with James Thorne as Secretary. The name was changed to the popular Bible Christians.

The Thorne family are believed to have had their origins in Newton St Petrock in North Devonshire, a parish that adjoins the parish of Shebbear. However, James Thorne was born on 21 September 1795 to John Thorne and Mary Ley at Shebbear. The Thornes were farmers and devoutly religious persons. Mary Ley's father, Samuel, had been a keen follower of the Wesleyans and his religious outlook had influenced Mary in her views. James was the younger brother of Mary and John Thorne and the elder brother of Samuel and Susanna Thorne.

Whilst the whole family Thorne became Bible Christians and even Mary Thorne, James's mother, went off to preach around the countryside, it was James and Samuel who made the greatest impact upon the movement with John, their brother, leaving the farm and emigrating as a missionary to Canada on 11 April 1845. He died in Bowmanville, Canada in 1861.

Samuel Thorne established the Bible Christian printing press at Stoke Damerel in Plymouth, where he married Mary O'Bryan, the daughter of William O'Bryan, on 28 November 1825. The press was subsequently moved to Shebbear in 1829. Samuel and Mary had nine children of which Samuel Ley Thorne was the best known, as a preacher. As well as running the Bible Christian press, Samuel Thorne also ran Lake Farm in Shebbear.

James Thorne became a full-time minister within the Bible Christian movement and eventually its leader. In 1823 he was on a mission in Kent. On 15 September 1823 he married Catherine Reed in Shoreditch in Kent. James and Catherine had six children: one in Kent and five in Shebbear: Catherine, Mary, Susanna, William Reed and John. Following the demise of William Bryant, it was recognised within the movement that James Thorne became its undisputed leader from 1829, until his death in 1872. In his memory, the Thorne Memorial Chapel was subsequently opened in Barnstaple in 1876.

The Family Reed

Catherine Reed, the daughter of William and Catherine Reed, was a preacher in her own right and a preacher of some repute. The Reed family from Holwell Farm, Buckland Brewer, in North Devonshire, were a strong force within the Bible Christian movement and Catherine's brother, William, became a notable preacher. In recognition of his work the William Reed Memorial Chapel was opened by the Bible Christians in Buckland Brewer in 1901.

The Foremost of the Early Preachers

In addition to William Bryant, James Thorne and William Reed, others became itinerant preachers gaining reputations and prominence within the Bible Christian movement - preachers such as James Blatchford, Andrew Cory, William Courtice, John Hicks Eynon, Henry Freeman, William Lyle, William Mason, Harry Major, Francis Metherall, John Parkyn, Richard Sedwell and Edmund Warne.

From the very beginning, female preachers played a significant part in the work of the Bible Christians. Mary Thorne, the mother of James Thorne, had preached around Shebbear at the very beginning. Catherine Reed did much work to establish the circuits in Kent and London. The preaching of Mary Thorne, née O'Bryan, was described in *The Maiden Preacher* by her son, Samuel Ley Thorne, in 1889. Mary's mother, Catherine Bryant, had become a Bible Christian preacher. There are others: Johanna Brooks, Elizabeth Courtice, Elizabeth Dart, Anne Mason, Mary Ann Verry and Mary Toms. For a brief description of the life of Mary Toms see web site:

<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Woods/8049/england/toms.htm>.

Inevitably, marriages occurred between the itinerant preachers. James Thorne married Catherine Reed. Henry Freeman and Anne Mason were married after leaving the Bible Christians to become Quakers. Elizabeth Dart married John Hicks Eynon and both left England to take up the leadership of the Bible Christians in Canada, setting up their first church in Coburg, Ontario in 1836.

Missionaries

By the beginning of the 1830's the Bible Christians had begun sending missionaries abroad. There was a significant amount of emigration amongst the followers of the Bible Christians. and probably over 55,000 Bible Christians emigrated to North America, Australia and New Zealand by the end of the nineteenth century. The largest percentage was from Cornwall to, primarily, both South Australia and Canada. From North Devonshire emigrants went to Prince Edward Island {<http://www.islandregister.com/>} in Canada and a very strong Bible Christian presence became established on the island, which quickly spread to the mainland of Canada.

The first superintendent for Australia was James Way. He and James Rowe went to Adelaide in 1850. The son of James Way, Samuel, became Attorney General in South Australia in 1875, Chief Justice of South Australia in 1876, Lieutenant Governor of the state in 1897 and a member of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in 1897.

The Followers

Amongst the early Bible Christian followers were John Trewin and his wife, Judith Thorne, who was also from the Thorne family of Newton St Petrock. They farmed 113 acres of land at Ladford Farm, Milton Damerel, in north Devonshire, a parish that adjoins Shebbear. Two of their children went to Australia, one as a missionary and one as a missionary's wife. James Trewin and his wife, Jane Webber, together with James's sister, Betsy Trewin, left Shebbear in 1864 for Australia, where Betsy married another missionary, Richard Warren, the son of William Warren and Mary Lawry. James spent his life as a preacher in South Australia and was one time President of Conference of South Australia. He is buried in Adelaide and John and Judith Trewin are buried side by side in the graveyard at Lake Chapel, Shebbear.

A third child, also John Trewin, who had married Sally Martin of East Putford, emigrated to Canada with the Bible Christians, where he became a farmer. Their four children died within a few years of emigrating. Three died from measles within a month of each other. John and Sally and their children are buried at Cadmus, Ontario, near Bowmanville.

Another Trewin family, that of William Trewin, his wife Alice Nicholls and their six children; John, William, Samuel, Thomas, Grace and Silas, also from Milton Damerel and Bible Christian followers, had emigrated to Canada in 1843, and they lived just north of Bowmanville, where John Thorne is buried.

Thus, family members or whole families emigrated for economic and/or religious reasons with the Bible Christians, taking their beliefs with them. With the passage of time, there must now be millions of people who are descendants of those early Bible Christians who know little or nothing of their origins in a small non-conformist group from north Devonshire, England.

Chapels and Circuits

The Bible Christians built numerous chapels. In many communities across Devon and Cornwall there was a Bible Christian chapel. The chapels were arranged in circuits and each circuit would have at least one minister. The Shebbear circuit, for example, encompassed: Berry Cross, Black Torrington, Bradford, Bulkworthy, Cookbury, Frithelstockstone, Langtree, Lower Twitchen, Milton, Petersmarland, Putford, Rowden, Shebbear, Sheepwash, Stibb Cross, Sutcombe and Thornhillhead. It is for this reason that Bible Christian records are kept by circuit, and not by chapel. A list of the Bible Christian circuits for Devonshire may be found in *The Last Bible Christians* by Roger Thorne.

Frederick William Bourne

During the period of their existence, the Bible Christians were prolific writers and were not too modest to write about themselves. In this respect, the work of FW Bourne must be seen as one of the foremost. Frederick William Bourne was born at Woodchurch in Kent in 1830. Frederick Bourne joined a Kent Bible Christian circuit as a preacher. After coming to the Westcountry, he rose to the position of assistant editor of the Bible Christian Magazine under James Thorne and replaced him in 1866. He was elected President of the Conference in 1867 and effectively led the Bible Christians following the departure and subsequent death of James Thorne in 1872. He was appointed as the Bible Christian book steward and moved the Book Room to London. He too, relocated with his family to London.

Frederick William Bourne wrote several books. The best selling was *The King's Son*, the story of Billy Bray, a Cornish lay preacher in the Bible Christian movement. He wrote *The Centenary Life of James Thorne of Shebbear*. He wrote about William Bailey. His greatest work was *The Bible Christians: Their Origin and History*.

FW Bourne married a Devonshire girl, Mary Horswell in 1859. They had five children before Mary died in 1873. He later remarried in 1876, to Adelaide Chalcraft. Frederick William Bourne died in 1905 and is buried at Lake Chapel in Shebbear.

The End

Soon after the death of the third leader of the Bible Christians, the Bible Christians merged with the United Methodist Free Churches on 17 September 1907. The resulting church, the United Methodist Church joined with the Wesleyan Methodists and Primitive Methodists in 1932 to form the Methodist Church as it is today.

Whilst the Bible Christians are no longer, they left a legacy for future generations. It is not the purpose of this site to discuss the religious aspects of the Bible Christians, although there must be no doubt that their existence, no matter how brief within the time scale of religious belief, had an impact far beyond their comparative size within the religious community. The Bible Christians gave many communities a meeting place within their chapels, many of them remain today and many of them are still meeting places for worship.

Lake Chapel and the Bible Christian Colleges

The original Bible Christian chapel built at Shebbear in 1817 still stands as part of an extended chapel which is used today by the Methodist church. Next to the chapel is the original school room and surrounding both these buildings is the graveyard with many of those prominent within the Bible Christian movement buried therein.

Next to Lake Chapel is Shebbear College, founded in 1832 by the Bible Christians as a college for the sons of Bible Christians. A college for girls was founded in 1884 in near-by Bideford and is known as Edgehill. Both these schools continue to provide educational facilities today.

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