

TOCT Guide to the religious context of the Chapel

It is perhaps hard for anyone living in the early 21st century to imagine the importance of the Christian religion in the social, cultural and institutional life of Great Britain two hundred years ago. Religion permeated everything: education, social conduct, the law, politics, and the identity of individuals and groups. Further, this was a time of massive religious contention: the established church, the Church of England, was in crisis. Not only were its congregations relentlessly diminishing, its credibility and authority were creaking under the combined strains of accusations of financial and political corruption, internal schisms, and the rapidly growing congregations of the non-conformist churches and movements. The strongest of these movements was Methodism, and to identify as a Methodist in this period was to stand outside of the establishment.

Methodism was seen as a threat to the established church for a number of reasons. Its ministers, generally, were not university trained, and therefore they were seen as dangerously ignorant by their detractors. Methodists believed their mission was to put all people directly in touch with the word of God through scripture, and therefore literacy for the masses was important. They were prime movers in the development of Sunday schools and the teaching of reading and writing (though writing on the Sabbath was contentious for some within Methodism). At a time when many believed that all people 'should know their place', and that 'the poor will always be with us', the prospect of social mobility and further, claims on political power through the spread of learning and knowledge were anathema to conservative thinkers. For substantial numbers within the established Church, the time Methodists spent worshipping, hymn-singing, and learning would be better spent by labouring in fields, in the rapidly-developing factories, or in mines.

The building of Tolpuddle Old Chapel and the worship within it are undoubtedly part of this turbulent history, but currently, we have only scant records of details. We know through press reports that there was a violent anti-Methodist riot at the Chapel's opening in 1818; we know through the correspondence of James Frampton, the prosecutor and persecutor of the Martyrs, that he despised and distrusted Methodism; we know from an allegation in George Loveless's writings that in the mid-1820s men in Tolpuddle 'were persecuted, banished and not allowed to have employ if they entered the Wesleyan Chapel.' These together with other fragmentary pieces of evidence allow us to recognise Tolpuddle Old Chapel as a controversial initiative. But we know very little about how the building was financed or the nature of its use, beyond the reasonable supposition that as a Wesleyan Chapel it would have followed the models of worship laid down by the Methodist Conference at the time. Even this might be disputed by some historians who suggest that independently built chapels of this kind (there are no records of a foundation made by the wider Methodist movement) were less subject to such formal regulation. We do not know at this time whether there was a Sunday school.

While historians have pursued extensive research on Methodism in this period in other regions (for instance in Devon and Cornwall or the mining areas of the north-east), there is relatively little work on Dorset's Methodist history available beyond John Simons's *Methodism in Dorset: A Sketch*, published in 1870. TOCT supports and encourages further research into this area, for there is surely more to discover of the period from the Chapel's beginnings in 1810 up to 1834, when the Tolpuddle Martyrs were precipitously hurled into the national limelight.

TOCT Guide to the Agricultural Context of the Dorchester Labourers

This section is written by Abbie Hussey, who worked on placement at the Trust while an undergraduate student at Oxford Brookes University.

The life of the agricultural labourer in early nineteenth-century England was one of economic struggle. The end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 saw an agricultural depression in which the price of corn dropped drastically. To keep prices high and protect British producers and landowners the government introduced the Corn Law of 1815. The consequence of this was that large numbers of the population could not afford the rising cost of food due to their low wages. In response, the 'Bread or Blood' riots broke out in 1816. Labourers demanded an increase in wages or a reduction in food prices, and threatened violence. One famously recorded proclamation from a protester stated that, 'Here I am [...] between Earth and Sky – so help me God. I would sooner lose my life than go home as I am. Bread I want and Bread I will have.' Social unrest continued to steadily mount across England, and the Corn Laws were not repealed until 1846.

Three consecutive years of poor harvests from 1828 to 1830 only worked to intensify agricultural labourers' dissatisfaction. A combination of the dread of another bad harvest, rural poverty, and the threat against labourers' livelihoods posed by new farming machines caused this situation to reach a climax in the form of the Swing Riots which began on 28th August 1830 in Kent, where the first threshing machine was destroyed. Labourers across Southern England protested for an increase in wages, adopting methods such as machine breaking, arson, threatening letters signed by 'Captain Swing', and attacks on overseers and justices. Special constables were employed in some Swing counties to forcibly stop the riots. Protesters were sentenced to death, and others transported to Australia. Although most employers quickly agreed to either increasing wages or promising not to cut them further, wage increases brought about by the riots were often temporary. Many employers went back on their promises after the threat of Swing had subsided and reduced pay once again.

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 intensified rural poverty and discontent among agricultural labourers. The new Poor Law was enforced to alleviate the middle and upper classes from the increasing costs of looking after the poor. Under the new legislation, parish relief would no longer be given to able-bodied people and their families, who could now only claim it if they entered the workhouse. The conditions of workhouses were purposefully made brutal to deter all but the most desperate from applying for relief.

In Dorset, agricultural labourers received the lowest wages of any county in England, with 44% of the population relying on poor relief. It is no surprise then that the Swing Riots had spread to Dorset by 22nd November 1830. The riots began in the east of the county in areas directly exposed to the disturbances occurring in neighbouring Wiltshire and Hampshire. As in other Swing counties, Swing in Dorset consisted of riots, machine breaking, arson, and illegal meetings. There were significant riots in the Piddle Valley in 1830-31.

In response to Swing, magistrate James Frampton (a major landowner in Tolpuddle, and the architect of the Martyrs' prosecution in 1834) swore in special constables to put a stop to the riots. In total, 91 individuals from Dorset were arrested for their involvement. Frampton was unwavering in his militant response to Swing, where a number of other Dorset landowners swiftly gave in to labourers' demands and increased wages to 10 shillings per week. The violence inflicted upon peaceful protesters by Frampton's special constables caused labourers to threaten an attack on his home.

The aftermath of Swing in Dorset saw improved wages, relief, and employment for agricultural labourers. However, these conditions were again temporary. Revd Henry Yeatman, a prominent Dorset magistrate and clergyman, wrote, 'now that the alarm and terror of the moment have subsided, [promises have] been broken in a manner the most treacherous and dishonourable.' Amidst continuing wage disputes, a group of agricultural labourers from Tolpuddle went to their employers in 1831 to petition for the same 10 shilling wage as labourers in neighbouring parishes. This group included George and James Loveless, who would later be recognised as two of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. Frampton claimed to have been told that both brothers were involved in the Swing Riots, although George Loveless denied any participation.

The men of Tolpuddle were paid 9 shillings per week at the beginning of their negotiations with their employers, which was then cut to 8 shillings. They went to magistrate William Morton Pitt for advice, who recommended they select a spokesperson (a role delegated to George Loveless) to visit Frampton. Despite the promise of higher wages made during Swing, Loveless was told that the labourers, 'must work for what our masters thought fit to give us', rather than having a fixed wage for all parishes. Wages were reduced to 7, then just 6 shillings per week. This was impossible for the labourers and their families. It has been estimated that the average family needed at least 14 shillings every week to pay for rent, food, clothes, and other necessities.