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A Village Labourer Encounters Early Primitive Methodism

"O Lord, let thy blessings be upon them!"

(William Peacefull, Watchfield, Thurs, 11 Feb 1835)

By Steven Carter

Amazing Qualitative Evidence the PM Archives

My enthusiasm for reconstructing the story of my ancestor, Thomas Carter (1789-1861), was challenged when I discovered that he had an infamous, triple-murderer grandson.⁶ Was I celebrating the life of a similar wife-beating monster? I judged the question unanswerable. How could historical documents provide a character reference for a poor, insignificant agricultural labourer in the small backwater village of Watchfield? A chance find in Google Books, however, uncovered an unexpected answer: the 1862 Primitive Methodist magazine recorded Thomas's obituary and identified him as "a great friend to the cause of God." This radical religious movement disregarded worldly hierarchies and judged Thomas's life worthy of note. Such accounts depict not only lives but also character. The PM documents allowed a detailed reconstruction of the movement's progress towards Thomas's village of Watchfield and deep insights into his religious experience. This article offers an individual village labourer's micro-level perspective on the Berkshire mission. As an amateur family history enthusiast dealing usually with dates and dry facts, I stand amazed at the qualitative evidence the PM archives can furnish.

Thomas Carter's Biography

The usual genealogical sources reveal Thomas's biographical data. The fourth of five brothers, he was born in 1789 (the year of the French Revolution) to a moderately affluent farming family, part of the emerging middle classes. During Thomas's life-time, the industrial revolution got underway with capitalism replacing the remnants of feudalism.

Thomas was orphaned in childhood.⁷ He spent his teenage years

⁶ John Carter was hanged in Reading Gaol in 1893 for the brutal murders of three wives in succession. Madame Tussaud's exhibited his waxwork in its criminal horrors section (until destroyed by fire in 1925).

⁷ OFHS, Transcription of Faringdon Memorial Stones (1980s survey): "To the memory of Richd Carter of Littleworth who died Jan 9th 1795 aged 42 years. In

apprenticed as a saddler at Faringdon, a network hub in that golden age of coach travel. Thomas was next on the south coast with the Oxfordshire Militia (1809-13), watchful against the fearful threat of a Napoleonic invasion. He transferred into the Third Guards Regiment of Foot and was injured in a bloody battle at the siege of Bayonne (1814).⁸ His PM obituary mentions his capture and thereby permits Thomas's Bayonne battle experience to be described almost minute by minute (which is unusual for a rank and file soldier).⁹ After the war ended he recuperated in Chelsea Hospital and returned to Berkshire, working in his brother John's bakery in Marlborough Street, Faringdon. He married and settled down in the 1820s as an agricultural labourer on his brother Richard's farm in Watchfield, where he remained until his death in 1861.

The Berkshire Mission

John Ride launched the Berkshire mission from Brinkworth and then based it at Shefford. He noted that "for violent persecution it is perhaps not equalled in any part of the nation." In 1833 the Shefford Circuit had 13 travelling preachers on their staff, more than most circuits, but felt a shortage because there was such a large area to cover in mission. Ride's Mission Strategy and various preachers' journals and reports give fascinating insights into their activity (and stamina!), illuminating the process by which Primitive Methodism reached Watchfield.

memory of Sarah wife of Richard Carter who died May 31st 1799 aged 48 years." The gravestone has since been lost.

⁸ One document in the National Archive describes him as 'about twenty four Years of Age, is 5 Feet 10 Inches in height, brown Hair, grey Eyes, fresh Complexion and by trade a Sadler. Wounded left thigh at Bayonne & Deaf.'

⁹ The Allied forces were thinly stretched along siege lines outside the fortress city of Bayonne in southern France. Thomas was on picket duty opposite the citadel. In the pitch black, moonless, early hours of April 14 1814 three columns of several thousand French garrison troops emerged from the citadel. One column soon overwhelmed Thomas's zone. In confined spaces close hand-to-hand combat ensued, with bayonets used to deadly effect and causing most of the numerous fatal injuries. Meanwhile gunboats from the River Ardour blasted the Allies. Thomas was bayoneted in the thigh and deafened (by shellfire). He was captured and taken into the citadel for two weeks, before Bayonne surrendered. He was eventually shipped back to England and spent two months in Chelsea Hospital. He was discharged in October 1814 as unfit for further military service, due to his injuries.

Each preacher was to take on eight places (prioritised by population numbers) and to visit these places every week, preaching three times on Sunday and five more times during the week, usually in the open air, winter and summer. So that they were not at the mercy of the weather, they should try to obtain a house in which to hold prayer meetings; and perhaps even food and lodgings – the preacher was expected to live from his mission.

Preachers should also be diligent with family visiting; aim to form societies; use every means to cultivate the minds of the people; and form classes and class meetings. He must meet the classes after preaching and bring forward all he can to pray.

As the movement grew, preachers were to seek to establish local preachers and exhorters; thereafter visiting once a fortnight, so that other villages could be included in the preacher's eight. When the missionary has preached a quarter at his eight places, he was to take a general collection at every place in support of the mission and the preacher's salary, which Eide predicted such collections would almost always cover. (Finance is given serious consideration to avoid overburdening the struggling rural poor!)

Ride recommends that where preachers could not yet be supplied, a praying company of two prayer leaders could temporarily fill the gap. They would hold open air meetings at different places on Sundays where they would sing, pray, exhort, read and preach (as they felt best, but with the proviso to keep things short). This is a nursery for the growing of local preachers.

Ride also noted that if at any place there is grievous persecution, it should be made known through the circuit, that prayer may be made for that place.¹⁰

The Faringdon Mission

The epic story of Primitive Methodism's spread reads in the PM magazine's pages like a sequel to the Book of Acts. As the drama is

¹⁰ 1834 *PM Magazine*, page 102-3.

enacted on this new stage, we can almost glimpse Thomas in the rapidly moving spotlight.

Thomas Russell, the Apostle of Berkshire, records that the Faringdon mission opened at a time of great trials and severe persecutions.¹¹ He himself was repeatedly beaten by mobs and harassed by the respectable classes. The Government had answered the rural labourers' Swing Riots (1830-31) with the hated, repressive, money-saving workhouses. The Governor of Faringdon Workhouse, commenting on the "moral condition of the labouring classes in your parish", reassured the Poor Law Commissioners that the new system made them "more submissive to their masters, and consequently better labourers." They were "better behaved, always attentive to orders."¹² In such a world, the PM itinerant preachers were inevitably condemned as radical agitators.

Yet success attended their labours.¹³ In 1834 Henry Heys travelled in what became the Faringdon circuit (1837) in the infancy of Primitive Methodism in this locality.¹⁴ Heys and other PM pioneers visited surrounding villages, including Watchfield.

Sometime in 1834-5 Thomas Carter encountered Heys and "the Spirit of God brought him under a concern about his soul." For about six months, Thomas experienced "mourning in bitterness of soul" until he attended one of the meetings at Bourton-on-the-Hill, and there by believing in Jesus, he found peace to his troubled soul.

William Harvey was reluctant to become a minister until in 1834 he responded to John Ride's appeal for "young men of grit, grace and go" to help in the mission to "the ignorant and degraded villagers" of Berkshire.¹⁵ His journal records his preaching at Bourton on Nov 26 1835 – perhaps even one of the very meetings Thomas attended.

¹¹ *The Writings of Thomas Russell* (2005), p.75.

¹² *The First Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners for England and Wales* (1836), page 201.

¹³ *The Writings of Thomas Russell* (2005), p.75.

¹⁴ *PM Magazine* 1856 May, Childrey Tea-Meeting, page 243-4.

¹⁵ He was stationed at Shefford (1834-38) and Faringdon (1840-42).

"I was so tried with the enemy of souls, that I was tempted to think I was never called to preach, and could scarce believe what I preached was true, and yet God was at work, and four were made happy that night at Bourton, and the work has been reviving ever since." If Thomas was not one of the four made happy that night, then he was at a similar meeting at Bourton about this time.

Any tired, dispirited worker might reflect that Harvey doubted his call and yet that day's work is being recalled almost two centuries later; and that each one "made happy" might have their own micro-level story to tell.

Revival of the Work of God

In July 1835 William Peacefull joined the Faringdon branch and helped to lead a revival of the work of God (then very low). All resolved to face the fierce persecution as Satan began to rage. Old societies were refreshed and new ones established. Quickened and fired afresh, all entered ardently into the work together.

Extracts from Mr Peacefull's journal illustrate his sheer hard work and his heart-felt dependency on God – and the progress towards Watchfield. Since Thomas attended Bourton meetings (3 miles away), he almost certainly made all at Shrivenham (1 mile):

Sunday, Aug 16 1835: Walked thirteen miles, visited eight families; preached at Shrivenham at 9 am, Bourton at 10.30, Bishopstone at 5.00, and afterwards spoke at a Missionary Meeting. This has been a very hard day's work, but the Lord has helped me through.

On Sunday 11 Oct 1835 Mr Peacefull formed a society of 11 members at Shrivenham, including 5 who had attended classes at Bourton. Thomas has the credentials to be one of these five.

Sunday, Jan. 31, 1836: Led a lovefeast at Shrivenham. The people spoke well, a gracious feeling rested on the meeting; tears flowed from many eyes, and groans and sighs ascended to God for deliverance. I invited the penitents to step forward to be prayed for; and they complied, and the blood of the Lamb was applied, and four or five professed to be made whole. Two joined society.

Wednesday 10 Feb – Preached in the evening at Shrivenham. A house full of people, a blessed time. One joined society.

On Thursday 11 Feb 1836 Mr Peacefull preached at night at Watchfield to a large congregation (possibly in Thomas's house or barn) and had "a powerful time". A new society was formed with four members, very probably including Thomas (given his subsequent leading role in the village). Mr Peacefull records in his journal: "O Lord, let thy blessing be upon them!" – which, no doubt, included Thomas!

A Great Friend to the Cause of God

After his conversion, Thomas maintained a life-long commitment: "By Divine grace his heart was changed, and from that time to the day of his death, he remained steadfast in the faith." He was indeed "a new creature in Christ Jesus, and walked not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

Thomas was a great friend to the cause of God. His house (or barn) was registered for non-conformist worship on 17th May 1836 and was Watchfield's centre for PM worship in Watchfield for 18 years.¹⁶ Anyone supporting the PM preachers might lose their job or home; but Thomas (employed by his brother) had less to fear.

To his home the servants of God were always welcome. The alternative for the itinerant preachers was to sleep out in the night – unhealthy and dangerous – often drenched with rain. Such hospitality amidst severe persecution meant the "darkness [was] shot through with light." These humble cottages and farm-houses where the preachers found sympathy and shelter enabled PM to take root in the villages.

Thomas Carter's Character Reference

Unlike his infamous, brutal grandson, as a husband and a father Thomas was kind, gentle, and affectionate. In the community, "he lived by the Christian's rule, loving his neighbour as himself," and was anxious to do good. He loved all and was respected and loved by all who knew him. He accepted an Exhorter role: sometimes when sin was manifested by his

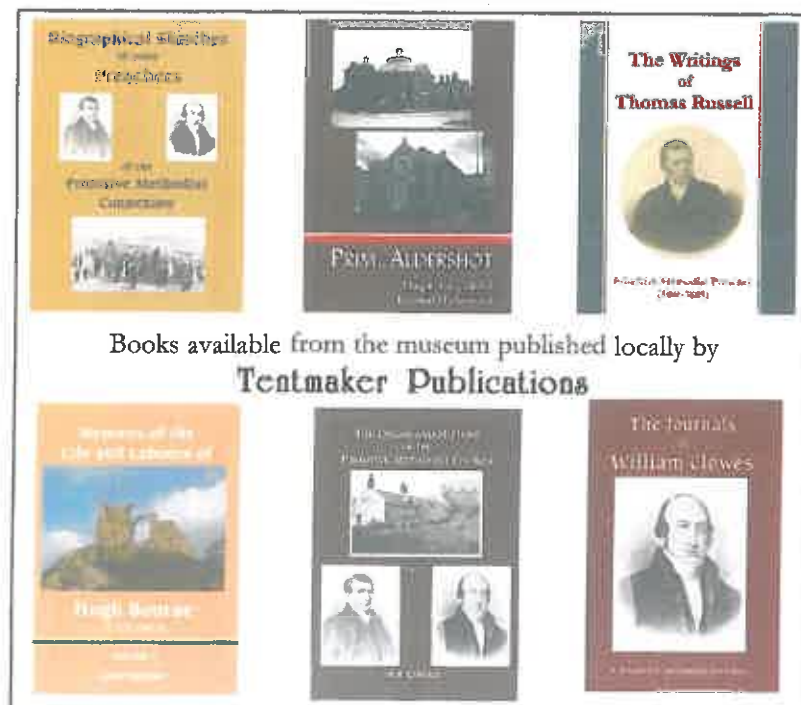
¹⁶ Berkshire Record Society: Register of Non-Conformist Worship Places: Thomas Carter's House registered for Non-Conformist Worship on 17th May 1836; Robert Langford; William Harvey; John Excell; and Charles Carter.

neighbours, he exhorted them with tears to turn from it, saying, 'Oh! why don't you repent? Why do you live in sin? Why don't you fly to Christ? Oh! if you live and die in such a state there will be no heaven for you.'

As a Christian he loved God with all his heart, was much devoted to prayer, and constant at his class-meetings and other religious services. He often said, "the word of God was sweeter to him than his natural food." He rejoiced evermore, and in all things gave thanks, insomuch that the children of the village gave him the appellation of "Happy Tommy." He was a consistent member of the PM Connexion for 25 years and a total abstainer from intoxicating drinks for twelve.

His Last Day

Despite his Bayonne injuries, he was able to work in the fields. On the day of his death he had been in the fields at work during the former part of the day, and coming home to dinner he seemed as



well as usual, ate a hearty dinner, and went into the garden, singing, "The sweat of death is on my brow, All is well. My feet are in the river now – All is well."

And going into a barn that was close by the garden, he fell in a fit, and the bright angels came and took his happy spirit home to glory.

He had ten children already in heaven, to welcome him on his arrival. He has left an aged widow and four children behind to mourn their loss.¹⁷

Conclusion

Thomas provides a test case for assessing hagiographical influences in PM obituaries. Yes, the before-and-after-conversion is starkly put: he had been "a slave to sin" and "alien to God" (even though his links with non-conformity might actually go back to his teenage years).¹⁸ Nevertheless, the PM obituary has great biographical detail, entirely consistent with the other non-PM sources, enough to reassure that this was no edifying pro forma into which any name could be inserted. Thomas's life defined the obituary.

The quality of the information currently being made available through the newly launched PM community archive promises to truly amaze family historians.

Bibliography

The Primitive Methodist Magazine: this marvellous resource includes Obituaries and Biographies, Stations of Preachers, Journals and Reports on the Progress of Missions and Circuits, Chapel Openings, and even Tea-Meetings.

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¹⁷ PM Magazine 1862, page 318-9.

¹⁸ Thomas had enough non-conformist sympathy back in 1821 to baptise a daughter in Marlborough Street's Independent Chapel (and may well have attended its Sunday School in his teens).