

Secession and Revival:

Louth Free Methodist Church in the 1850s*

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A grand new chapel was opened in the Lincolnshire market town of Louth on 31 December 1854. The visiting preacher spoke on ‘The Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ’, dwelling on the manifestation of the Saviour’s power. At the conclusion of the sermon, however, the speaker turned his attention to his hearers in order to extend a blessing to the ‘preachers, leaders, officers, and people, connected with this sanctuary’. ‘*Your spot*’, he told them with emphasis, ‘*has been the very Crimea of religious conflict and agitation.*’¹ They were telling words. The country had been at war with Russia for almost two years, with the Crimean peninsula the main theatre of struggle. The battles of Balaclava and Inkerman had taken place within the previous two months. Louth, the preacher was suggesting, had been the scene of similar hand-to-hand fighting, but between Methodists. The preacher was James Bromley, a Wesleyan preacher who had been active in the internal disputes of the connexion twenty years before.² The context of his sermon in 1854 was the greatest convulsion suffered by Wesleyan Methodism in its history, the disruption over reform in the middle years of the century. The audience consisted of members of a circuit that seceded in that revolt against the Wesleyan authorities around Jabez Bunting to form a distinct ecclesiastical body, the Louth Free Methodist Church. It remained an entirely separate church for the rest of the 1850s. This study is an analysis of the emergence and work of this remarkable body. For contemporary Methodism its appearance on the religious landscape could seem an episode as momentous as the Crimean War for Britain.

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¹ *Revivalist* [hereafter *R*] (London and Louth), February 1855, 23 (James Bromley).

² W. R. Ward, *Religion and Society in England, 1790-1850* (London: Batsford, 1972), 161-2.

The field has been helpfully explored by previous historians. David Gowland's *Methodist Secessions* examines a series of agitations against the policies of Jabez Bunting and his circle who dominated the Wesleyan Conference between the 1820s and the 1850s. Gowland's central concern, however, is with three case-studies in Lancashire, so that he does not touch on Lincolnshire.³ Reg Ward's *Religion and Society in England, 1790-1850* traverses some of the same ground, culminating in a chapter on the schism precipitated by the reform crisis around 1850. Again, however, Ward's evidence, though extending to East Anglia, is drawn chiefly from the north of England and does not embrace Louth. Conversely the telling study of south Lindsey, the part of Lincolnshire containing Louth, between 1825 and 1875 by James Obelkevich called *Religion and Rural Society*, while discussing the Methodism of the area, deliberately excludes coverage of the reformers of around 1850.⁴ William Leary's overview of *Lincolnshire Methodism*, on the other hand, does give a brief account of the creation of the Louth Free Methodist Church; and Oliver Beckerlegge's short book on the United Methodist Free Churches, the denomination which the Louth reformers eventually joined in 1859, includes mention of the amalgamation of the two.⁵ There is a valuable essay by P. W. Robinson in the journal of the Lincolnshire Methodist Historical Society for 1977 that sets out the broad parameters of what happened.⁶ The most useful account, however, is by Rod Ambler in his volume of the history of Lincolnshire on religion between 1660 and 1900. Ambler places the development in the broad context of the county's Methodist history.⁷ Yet there is scope for further examination. The Lincolnshire County Record Office contains not only preaching plans, minutes and similar basic records but also

³ D. A. Gowland, *Methodist Secessions: The Origins of Free Methodism in Three Lancashire Towns* (Manchester: For the Chetham Society by Manchester University Press, 1979).

⁴ James Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey, 1825-1875* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

⁵ William Leary, *Lincolnshire Methodism* (Buckingham: Barracuda Books, 1988), 80-2; Oliver A. Beckerlegge, *The United Methodist Free Churches: A Study in Freedom* (London: Epworth Press, 1957), 71.

⁶ P. W. Robinson, 'Louth and the Rise of Free Methodism', *Lincolnshire Methodist Historical Society* (1977). There is also William Leary and D. N. Robinson, *A History of Methodism in Louth* (Louth: Louth Methodist Church, 1982).

⁷ R. W. Ambler, *Churches, Chapels and the Parish Communities of Lincolnshire, 1660-1900*, A History of Lincolnshire, Volume IX (Lincoln: History of Lincolnshire Committee, 2000).

documents drawn up by the reformers in the course of their creation of the Free Methodist Church. Even more revealingly, it holds manuscript note books on the crisis written by two of the Wesleyan ministers resolutely hostile to reform. Here all the failings of their opponents are mercilessly exposed. Furthermore the British Library possesses a set of the monthly magazine issued by a leading figure in the church throughout its existence. The magazine's title, *The Revivalist*, points to a central preoccupation of many of the Free Methodists. So there are ample resources for a fuller scrutiny of the Louth Free Methodist Church.

Louth, a town in north-east Lincolnshire within fifteen miles of the North Sea coast, stands on the banks of the River Lud. This relatively small stream nevertheless made a noisy impression on the early Anglo-Saxon settlers because the name of river and town alike means 'loud'. Laid out in the eleventh century by the first Norman bishop of Lincoln, the town prospered from the wool trade during the middle ages. The resulting wealth enabled the inhabitants to build a sumptuous parish church dedicated to St James, crowned in the early sixteenth century by a fine spire that is often the visitor's chief memory of the town. In 1536 the townsfolk participated in the Lincolnshire Rising against Henry VIII's religious innovations, but the Reformation subsequently put down deep roots. Nevertheless the vicar from 1780 to 1830, Wolley Jolland, was no more than an amiable eccentric, so surrendering some of the traditional hold of the Church of England on the townspeople. Enclosure in 1801 reinforced that process by allotting more than a third of the town lands to the vicar, together with the Anglican master of the grammar school, and so creating significant resentment. Partly as a result, the town proved a favourable environment for the growth of Methodism. The most marked development of the early nineteenth century, however, was sharp

population growth, from just over 4,000 in 1801 to well over 10,000 fifty years later. By the 1850s Louth had become the third largest town in the county after Lincoln and Boston.⁸

Why did the Free Methodist Church come about in the town? A catalogue of the causes must begin with the prosperity of Louth. The town stands at the eastern edge of the Wolds, a broad chalk ridge five to eight miles in width stretching forty-five miles from Spilsby in the south to Barton on Humber in the north. During the earlier years of the nineteenth century this area had been turned into a showpiece of high farming. Large farms, modern equipment and intelligent use of crop rotation had dramatically increased the production of wheat, barley, oats, turnips, wool and mutton.⁹ On the other side of the town, towards the North Sea, there lies the Marsh, a low-lying region much like the Fens in appearance. The part of the Marsh closer to the town, consisting of poorly drained clay land, was in the nineteenth century much less profitable than the Wolds, but in the Outer Marsh along the coast there were many smallholders making good incomes from cattle fattening.¹⁰ Louth was recognised, according to a directory of 1856, as ‘the emporium of a rich grazing and agricultural district’.¹¹ Its role had been enhanced when, in 1848, the Boston to Grimsby railway opened a station in the town.¹² Carriers plied regularly between the villages and the town, taking poultry, eggs, fruit and dairy products to the urban population and bringing back goods ordered from the shops, so that there was a tight bond between Louth and its hinterland.¹³ The town displayed its growing wealth ostentatiously. In 1853 an imposing Corn Exchange was opened, boasting a figure of Ceres bearing a wheat sheaf over the entrance. In the same year the Mechanics’ Institute, begun in 1834, acquired the town’s former assembly rooms as its headquarters. A new town hall was erected in 1854 and in the

⁸ Richard Gurnham, *A History of Louth* (Chichester: Phillimore & Co., 2007), 1-131.

⁹ Charles K. Rawding, *The Lincolnshire Wolds in the Nineteenth Century*, Studies in the History of Lincolnshire, 1 (Lincoln: History of Lincolnshire Committee, 2001), 1-27.

¹⁰ Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society*, 6.

¹¹ *White’s Directory of 1856* quoted by Rawding, *Lincolnshire Wolds*, 37.

¹² Gurnham, *History of Louth*, 131.

¹³ Rawding, *Lincolnshire Wolds*, 44.

following year over £1,500 was expended on paving and lighting the main streets.¹⁴ Louth was pulsating with energy and self-confidence. It was no accident that the Free Methodist Church emerged in precisely these years. It too was an embodiment of the spirit of progress, improvement and civic pride.

Methodism was unusually strong in the area. Lincolnshire, the home county of John Wesley, had proved specially susceptible to his message. He had frequently visited Louth, finding by 1766 that earlier mob resistance had faded away.¹⁵ The town became head of its own circuit in 1799.¹⁶ In 1808 a sizeable chapel was erected in Eastgate, the principal thoroughfare of the town, and in 1835 it was enlarged to hold 1,600 people.¹⁷ In the following year there were as many as 700 Wesleyan members living in the town alone.¹⁸ In ‘point of number, intelligence and respectability’, according to the superintendent minister, the Louth congregation was ‘certainly not exceeded, and perhaps hardly equalled by any in the County’.¹⁹ In addition there were sixty-six regular preaching places in the circuit with a total (including those on trial) of 2,333 members. The demands on the three travelling preachers were immense. In 1836 nine villages on the circuit plan never received a visit from the preachers and they attended six more places only once a quarter for the distribution of class tickets. Consequently the degree of pastoral contact was slight. A gulf was emerging between pastors and people. Although a fourth preacher was added to the circuit staff that year and subsequently maintained, numbers of members continued to grow, so that personal rapport between the preachers and many in their flocks was minimal.²⁰ Underlying the great success of Methodism in the circuit there was potential alienation, based on a sense of

¹⁴ Gurnham, *History of Louth*, 131, 135, 127.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁶ *Hall's Circuits and Ministers*, ed. T. Galland Hartley (London: Methodist Publishing House, [1914]), 335.

¹⁷ Gurnham, *History of Louth*, 139.

¹⁸ William Horton to Jabez Bunting, 29 July 1836, in W. R. Ward (ed.), *Early Victorian Methodism: The Correspondence of Jabez Bunting, 1830-1858* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 155.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 154-6, spec. 154 n. 4.

neglect, among the people against the travelling preachers. These embers of antipathy could be fanned into a flame of agitation when the conditions were right.

Despite the overwhelmingly agricultural character of the town and neighbourhood, industry was not absent from Louth. A canal was opened in 1770 linking the town to Tetney Haven on the coast, so greatly enhancing facilities for the despatch of corn and wool and the receipt of coal and household goods.²¹ The canal made Louth a busier port than the nearby coastal town of Grimsby.²² An industrial suburb sprang up around the canal basin on the eastern edge of Louth. There were two shipbuilding yards, a bone-crushing mill and a number of oilcake factories. In the 1850s Louth boasted six agricultural machine makers, five iron and brass foundries and four lime-burning businesses.²³ The commercial and industrial development had a direct bearing on Methodism. Not only did many of the members at Eastgate Chapel work for these firms, but also the circuit decided to cater for them by erecting a second chapel close to the canal. This was Riverhead Chapel, an unpretentious single-storey structure, opened in 1849.²⁴ Riverhead rapidly acquired an unsavoury reputation with the travelling preachers who represented Conference authority. In 1852 one of them judged the chapel to be ‘A failure, & a nest of Radicals’.²⁵ The bulk of the inhabitants of the area decided to stay away from the chapel in protest against Conference policies. In October 1853 William Nicholson, a coal porter of Riverhead, taunted the assigned preacher about the tiny congregation there until the man left without delivering his sermon; and Nicholson challenged a second regular preacher in another chapel a fortnight later.²⁶ In

²¹ Gurnham, *History of Louth*, 108.

²² Neil Wright, ‘Transport in the Wolds’, in D. N. Robinson (ed.), *The Lincolnshire Wolds* (Oxford: Windgather Press, 2009), 57.

²³ Gurnham, *History of Louth*, 128, 131.

²⁴ R[obert] Bond, ‘Louth Circuit Memorandums’, in ‘Volume of Manuscript Memoranda and Printed Pamphlets, 1853-1858’ [hereafter ‘MM’], Lincolnshire County Record Office, Lincoln, Meth B/Louth [uncatalogued].

²⁵ J[ames] Loutit, ‘The Louth Case, 1852’ [hereafter ‘LC’], Lincolnshire County Record Office, Lincoln, Meth B/Louth/32/5, f. 30. Although the author signed himself ‘Loutitt’, on other occasions he and others gave his surname as ‘Loutit’.

²⁶ MM, South Willingham, 23 October 1853; River Head, 9 October 1853.

the following year Nicholson was serving as an exhorter in Free Methodism.²⁷ Three local preachers from Riverhead became what the Wesleyan ministers classified as troublemakers. One of them, Thomas Topham, was labelled ‘one of the Fa[the]rs of Agitation’.²⁸ The local Wesleyan authorities decided to suppress the nuisance by closing Riverhead Chapel.²⁹ The building was dismantled in 1854 and transferred to Theddlethorpe, a village needing a Wesleyan presence.³⁰ It is clear that Riverhead, with its less settled commercial and industrial population, was a centre of reforming zeal. It provided some of the impetus for schism.

Politics also undergirded the Methodist troubles of mid-century. Lincolnshire, traditionally a Whig county, was divided by the Reform Act into two separate constituencies. At the 1832 general election the new North Lincolnshire division that included Louth returned two Liberals.³¹ Emboldened by the Reform Act, a group of more advanced Liberals determined to press new issues to the fore. In 1834 a committee was formed to resist church rates, rousing sympathy among the many Methodists who did not see why they should pay for their parish church as well as for their own chapel.³² The official policy of the Wesleyan Conference, however, was to have nothing to do with such radical causes, and so tensions arose within Methodism.³³ When the Municipal Corporation Reform Act was carried in 1835, the new Louth council appointed the organiser of the anti-church rate campaign as its first town clerk.³⁴ A rising Wesleyan corn merchant, John Booth Sharpley, soon became a prominent figure on the council, serving three times as mayor.³⁵ Sharpley was a resolute

²⁷ *Louth Circuit Plan of the Free Methodist Preachers, from April 2nd, to July 30th, 1854*, Lincolnshire County Record Office, Lincoln, Meth B/Louth.

²⁸ LC, f. 24. The others were W. Phillipson and Michael Clipsham: LC, ff. 30, [13].

²⁹ LC, f. 30

³⁰ Gurnham, *History of Louth*, 172.

³¹ J. Vincent and M. Stenton (eds), *McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book: British Election Results, 1832-1918* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1971), 175.

³² *Ibid.*, 142.

³³ David Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society, 1750-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1984), 186.

³⁴ Gurnham, *History of Louth*, 141-2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

Liberal in county elections.³⁶ In 1841, when there was a keenly contested general election, he was a champion of the Liberal candidate. The official Conference policy of ‘no politics’, on the other hand, did not prevent its leaders from endorsing the Conservative cause.³⁷ The travelling preachers, taking their cue from Conference, were usually strong Conservative sympathisers. There can be little doubt that at least one of the Louth ministers, James Loutit, was among them.³⁸ In the constituency as a whole twenty-seven Wesleyans cast both their votes for the Liberal whereas twenty-five supported the two Conservative candidates.³⁹ The almost equal split reveals a deep fissure within Methodism, separating the ministers from some of their leading laymen such as Sharpley. The next contested election, in 1852, when two Conservatives were returned because of strong protectionist feeling among the farmers, inflamed old political antipathies at the very time the Wesleyan reformers were edging towards separation.⁴⁰ Partisanship in secular politics fostered the growing division within Methodism.

Ecclesiastical politics, however, formed a far more important factor. Resentment had gradually built up against the tight control exercised over the Wesleyan connexion by Jabez Bunting, officially a secretary of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society but in reality the dominant decision-maker in denominational affairs. In 1834-35 Wesleyanism was racked by controversy about the new Theological Institution over which Bunting was to preside. Some of the reformers of this period abandoned the Wesleyans in order to found a new body, the Wesleyan Methodist Association. So eager was the Association to exclude authoritarianism that it called its annual gathering an ‘assembly’ rather than a ‘conference’. At its first assembly, in 1836, there was a representative from Louth.⁴¹ Soon there was a

³⁶ Ambler, *Churches, Chapels and the Parish Communities*, 162.

³⁷ Hempton, *Methodism and Politics*, 187.

³⁸ LC, written by Loutit, has a strong tone of order throughout.

³⁹ Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society*, 211.

⁴⁰ R. J. Olney, *Rural Society and County Government in Nineteenth Century Lincolnshire*, History of Lincolnshire, X (Lincoln: History of Lincolnshire Committee, 1979), 153.

⁴¹ Beckerlegge, *United Methodist Free Churches*, 24.

small Wesleyan Methodist Association chapel on Watergate in the town, an extreme rarity in Lincolnshire. Although the cause collapsed and the chapel was sold in 1846, its leading figure, William Brown, remained true to his anti-despotic principles. In 1849, as the Wesleyan reform crisis gathered momentum, Brown published a pamphlet to encourage the Wesleyan membership to rise up against the Conference.⁴² A further disturbance in ecclesiastical politics occurred in Louth in 1841-42. John Hanwell, the superintendent minister, tried to enforce Buntingite measures locally. Bunting and his friends insisted that only ministers possessed pastoral responsibility. An implication was that the leaders' meeting, consisting of laypeople, held no authority for the admission or expulsion of members. Accordingly Hanwell decided to abandon the accustomed practice of reading the names of new members to the Louth leaders' meeting. The issue caused a stir: why should class leaders, those responsible for the weekly spiritual nurture of the members under their care, not hear the list? The Louth leaders' meeting petitioned the 1842 Conference to allow the traditional procedure to continue. Conference, however, replied that the practice was improper and must stop.⁴³ This apparently technical issue symbolised something far greater. Should Conference take powers to override local sensibilities? Many in Louth thought not and were deeply hurt by the abridgement of their liberties. Although at the time the dispute was contained, it was remembered a few years later when the reform crisis broke out.

Other groups beyond the Wesleyan ranks played a part in the lead-up to the secession. The Primitive Methodists also possessed a presence in Louth. They had arrived in Grimsby in 1819 and shortly afterwards established a preaching station in Louth.⁴⁴ During the 1830s they expanded hugely under a young preacher in his first charge, John Stamp. Over the three years 1835-38 the members of the Louth station grew in numbers from only 204 to 610.

⁴² Ambler, *Churches, Chapels and the Parish Communities*, 162, 169 n. 56.

⁴³ Benjamin Gregory, *Side Lights on the Conflicts of Methodism* (London: Cassell, 1898), 326, 337.

⁴⁴ R. W. Ambler, *Ranters, Revivalists and Reformers: Primitive Methodism and Rural Society: South Lincolnshire, 1817-1875* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1989), 38.

They also erected as many as sixteen chapels.⁴⁵ The local Primitives greatly overreached themselves, saddling their poor members with enormous debts. Happily for them, however, a large-scale farmer, John Maltby of Louth Park, one of the few Primitives who had achieved gentility and who subsequently served as general treasurer of their missionary society, was able, with a colleague, to bail them out.⁴⁶ By 1850, therefore, they were able to extend their Louth chapel to accommodate 800 and at the religious census of 1851 they drew 700 evening attenders.⁴⁷ There was expansion during the 1850s in the surrounding countryside. In 1854, for example, advancing work was reported at Yarborough and Ludborough.⁴⁸ The Primitives therefore provided an example to the Wesleyan reformers of an effective Methodist agency free from clerical pretensions. The reformers' magazine, *The Revivalist*, gave space to the Louth Primitive Methodist minister, Thomas Greenbury, in its third issue. He recounted the story of the deathbed conversion in Louth of a woman who ended her days crying, 'Hallelujah! Hallelujah! I'm going to Heaven! I'm going to Heaven!'.⁴⁹ That was the type of soul-saving ministry that many reformers wanted to pursue. It is significant that when the Louth Free Methodist Church secured its first full-time minister in 1855, he was lured away from the Primitives.⁵⁰

An aspect of chapel life that was flourishing among the Primitives but restricted among the Wesleyans was temperance work. Louth possessed its full share of drink outlets. In 1856 there were twenty-seven inns and twenty-five beerhouses. Eight of the inns brewed their own beer and there were five other breweries in the town.⁵¹ Hence there existed a sense of rivalry between chapel and public house. 'Dancing and revelry in the temple of Satan',

⁴⁵ H. B. Kendall, *The Origin and History of the Primitive Methodist Church*, 2 vols (London: Edwin Dalton, [1899]), 1, 452.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ R. W. Ambler (ed.), *Lincolnshire Returns of the Census of Religious Worship, 1851*, Lincoln Record Society 72 (Lincoln: Lincoln Record Society, 1979), 183.

⁴⁸ *R*, April 1854, 172.

⁴⁹ T[homas] Greenbury, 'A Brand Snatched from the Fire', *R*, August 1853, 39.

⁵⁰ *Eastgate Methodist Church: 1854-1954* ([Louth: Eastgate Methodist Church, 1954]), 9. O. A. Beckerlegge (comp.), *United Methodist Ministers and their Circuits* (London: Epworth Press, 1968), 135.

⁵¹ Gurnham, *History of Louth*, 134, 156.

remarked a Methodist reporting on a Louth revival meeting of 1857, ‘a few yards distant, at the same hour, excited a feeling of pity in the breasts of God’s people.’⁵² Because of the opposition between revivalism and the tavern atmosphere, the Primitives embraced the temperance movement at an early date. Their general committee approved the radical policy of teetotalism in 1841.⁵³ Already John Sharp, while in Louth during the mid-1830s, had championed the cause. John Maltby, the Primitive Methodist proprietor of Louth Park, served as president of the local temperance society, which in 1845 used the Primitive phrase ‘camp meeting’ for its annual festival.⁵⁴ The Primitives gave unstinted support to the battle against the bottle. The Wesleyans, by contrast, were ambiguous. It is true that there was a total abstinence society among their number in Louth by 1849,⁵⁵ but the official Conference policy, upheld by the travelling preachers, was that teetotalism was a dangerous alternative to the gospel. Here was another cause of tension within the Wesleyan ranks. Conference insisted on retaining fermented wine for communion; the temperance party wanted it dropped.⁵⁶ In its very first issue, the Louth reformers’ magazine carried an elaborate allegory in which Alcohol proclaimed that it would make his chosen stronghold ‘the temple of the Most High, and men shall deem it sacrilege to molest me in my work of murder’.⁵⁷ The magazine carried many articles favouring the temperance movement and notices advertising its literature over subsequent years.⁵⁸ Once more an underlying issue tended to separate the more progressive chapel members from their more conservative pastors.

Not only the Primitive Methodists operated alongside the Wesleyans in Louth. There were also two Baptist chapels, both General Baptist, but one of the Old Connexion and

⁵² *R*, February 1858, 26.

⁵³ Ambler, *Ranters, Revivalists and Reformers*, 80.

⁵⁴ Robinson Cheeseman, *The Earnest Christian: Or a Biographical Sketch of John Maltby, Esq., of Louth Park* (London: E. Davies, 1864), 54. Gurnham, *History of Louth*, 145. I owe the former reference to Rod Ambler.

⁵⁵ Gurnham, *History of Louth*, 145.

⁵⁶ Timothy Larsen, *Friends of Religious Equality: Nonconformist Politics in Mid-Victorian England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999), 176.

⁵⁷ *R*, June 1853, 15.

⁵⁸ E. g. *R*, February 1856, 24; December 1856, back cover.

another of the New. The Old Connexion chapel on Walkergate, less Evangelical in its outlook, attracted only 152 to its evening service on census Sunday in 1851, but the enthusiastically Evangelical New Connexion chapel on Northgate drew in 420.⁵⁹ The New Connexion Baptists, Arminian in their theology, differed little in ethos from the Methodists and so it is not surprising that they lent the Wesleyan reformers their chapel for communion services and their schoolroom for public meetings.⁶⁰ The Independents, whose Cannon Street chapel assembled 200 for the evening service on census Sunday, soon copied the Baptists in allowing the reformers the use of their building.⁶¹ A British School teaching undenominational religion and so supported by the Baptists and Independents existed in the town, but it was not started by these bodies of Dissenters. Rather the initiative had been taken in 1840 by J. B. Sharpley, the Liberal Wesleyan corn merchant, during his first term of office as mayor.⁶² The Wesleyan reformers naturally occupied the premises of the British School for Sunday worship while they were awaiting their own building.⁶³ Not least because of the co-operation with the Dissenters in the British School, the progressive Wesleyans felt an affinity for them. In particular the ecclesiology of the Baptists and Independents found an echo in the developing ideas of the reformers. The Dissenters believed that each local church held the authority to govern itself without external interference. The reformers, though asserting the rights more of the circuit than of individual congregations, were similarly averse to outside meddling in their affairs. The influence of the Independents can be traced more precisely. When the reformers started holding communion services without their Conference preachers, they passed the bread and cup from hand to hand in the manner of the Independents.⁶⁴ The Wesleyan practice was for the travelling preachers to give the elements

⁵⁹ Ambler (ed.), *Lincolnshire Returns of the Census of Religious Worship, 1851*, 182-3.

⁶⁰ 'Louth', 28 February 1853, MM; 'The Wesleyan Chartists', May 1853, MM.

⁶¹ Ambler (ed.), *Lincolnshire Returns of the Census of Religious Worship, 1851*, 182. 'Louth', 28 February 1853, MM.

⁶² Gurnham, *History of Louth*, 146.

⁶³ 'Sunday evening Louth, 2 October 1853', MM.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

to the worshippers, but the reformers wanted to symbolise their fraternal equality. A leaven of Dissenting thought and practice was affecting the party opposed to Conference.

Another, and more potent, factor at work in the prelude to secession was revivalism. The authorities in the Wesleyan connexion were not opposed to revivals, but Bunting wanted them to be orderly so that they would not offend respectable folk, whether Wesleyans or not.⁶⁵ The epitome of irregular revivalism in the later 1840s was James Caughey, an Irish-American preacher who travelled round Britain rousing audiences with fiery oratory and reaping harvests of spectacular conversions. The 1846 Conference, however, prohibited Caughey from speaking on Wesleyan premises because he refused to accept the discipline of the British Conference.⁶⁶ Nevertheless many dissatisfied Wesleyans flocked to his meetings. *The Wesleyan Times*, a new weekly launched in 1849 to represent the Liberals in the connexion, declared 'Revivalism to be an essential part of pure and healthy Methodism'.⁶⁷ The newspaper's Louth readers objected to the obstacles placed by Conference in the path of revival. For many in the town the ideal of a Methodist leader was George Nicholson, a hired local preacher who served the circuit and was a dedicated revivalist. Long before, in 1818, Nicholson had toured the area preaching with John Oxtoby, 'Praying Johnny', a man who shortly afterwards became a pioneer Primitive Methodist evangelist in the north. Together they promoted revival in a string of north Lincolnshire villages. One of their converts, Gilbert Tyson of Welton, was to serve as a Free Methodist local preacher and class leader in his village nearly forty years later.⁶⁸ Nicholson himself, a man of independent spirit, refused to bow to the authority of the travelling preachers if they inhibited the chances of revival. Thus in 1853 when one of them stopped a weekly prayer meeting after the evening service in

⁶⁵ D. W. Bebbington, *Victorian Religious Revivals: Culture and Piety in Local and Global Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 95.

⁶⁶ Richard Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism: Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America, 1790-1865* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 128-30.

⁶⁷ *Wesleyan Times*, 23 January 1849, 35.

⁶⁸ George Shaw, *The Life of John Oxtoby ('Praying Johnny')* (Hull: William Andrews and Co., 1894), 23-6.

Louth because the radicals seemed to abuse the event, Nicholson insisted on restarting it.⁶⁹ He became something of a popular hero among Free Methodists. Once they had separated from the Wesleyans and so had no ministers, they made Nicholson their main preacher.⁷⁰ After his death in 1855, steel engravings of the man were sold for one shilling each.⁷¹ The Louth circuit clearly appreciated Nicholson's orientation towards revival. A belief that the powers-that-be in Wesleyanism constituted an obstacle to revival was a major explanation of the turning of so many against them.

So far the longer-term causes of secession have been surveyed, but there were also shorter-term factors at work. From 1844 to 1849 a series of *Fly Sheets* voiced all the resentments against Bunting's London-based bureaucracy that had been building up nationally for years. They were eagerly read in Louth.⁷² The crisis became more acute when, in 1849, the three men held responsible for the *Fly Sheets* were expelled by Conference. Fifty officers of the Louth circuit, incensed at this turn of events, invited the dismissed men to speak in the town. In November 1849 all three appeared during a tour of the provinces. Samuel Dunn preached in the Primitive Methodist chapel, James Everett addressed sympathisers in the Mansion House and William Griffith roused enthusiasm in the Guildhall. Although the charge for admission to each meeting was the large sum of one shilling and sixpence, together they attracted more than 600 attenders.⁷³ The circuit was naturally represented at a national delegate meeting of reformers at Albion Street Independent Chapel, London Wall, in March 1850, and sent a memorial to the 1850 Wesleyan Conference calling for reforms to restore the peace of the connexion.⁷⁴ Conference, however, was in no mood for compromise. The president, Dr John Beecham, had written an *Essay on the Constitution*

⁶⁹ 'Louth', 11 April 1853, 6, MM.

⁷⁰ *Louth Circuit Plan of the Free Methodist Preachers, from April 2nd, to July 30th, 1854*, Lincolnshire County Record Office, Lincoln, Meth B/Louth,

⁷¹ R, February 1857, back cover.

⁷² Ambler, *Churches, Chapels and the Parish Communities*, 162.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 163. Leary, *Lincolnshire Methodism*, 81.

⁷⁴ Beckerlegge, *United Methodist Free Churches*, 36. Ambler, *Churches, Chapels and the Parish Communities*, 164-5.

of *Wesleyan Methodism* (1829) that had laid the intellectual foundations for Bunting's high doctrine of the pastoral office. Ministers alone, Beecham asserted, held the commission of Christ for the welfare of his church. Under no circumstances might they share the responsibility with laymen.⁷⁵ Accordingly the Conference of 1850 took a stern line. Preachers were required, before they were assigned to circuits, to declare that they would 'uphold the discipline of the body by visiting delinquent Radicals with due punishment'.⁷⁶ When, in September 1850, the Louth superintendent, William Bacon, asked Beecham as president how to deal with members who were withholding financial contributions, the reply was robust. Beecham, who came from Barnoldby-le-Beck, within ten miles of Louth, would tolerate no insubordination in the town.⁷⁷ He told Bacon to abandon conciliation and adopt 'measures equal to the emergency'.⁷⁸ By March the following year Bacon was expecting that 400 names might have to be dropped from the class lists,⁷⁹ but, probably because the ex-mayor J. B. Sharpley was still at this stage trying to maintain the cohesion of the circuit, no decisive action was taken. The 1851 Conference therefore selected a man as superintendent for Louth who would execute its policies to the letter: James Loutit.

Loutit was a stormy petrel of a minister. He knew the circuit well, for he had served there as a junior preacher in 1839-41, at a time when ecclesiastical and political troubles were both brewing.⁸⁰ He was immediately recognised by the county press on his return in 1851 as 'a high-toned Conference man'.⁸¹ Elsewhere superintendent ministers, though commissioned by Conference to keep control, often used tactful diplomacy and deft manoeuvre. In Cornwall, for example, the district chairman, Robert Young, ensured by mild but firm

⁷⁵ Ward, *Religion and Society*, 149-52.

⁷⁶ Quoted by *ibid.*, 270.

⁷⁷ John A. Vickers (ed.), *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland* (London: Epworth Press, 2000), 25.

⁷⁸ Quoted by Ambler, *Churches, Chapels and the Parish Communities*, 165.

⁷⁹ Ambler, *Churches, Chapels and the Parish Communities*, 165.

⁸⁰ *Hall's Circuits and Ministers*, [1914], 335.

⁸¹ Quoted by Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society*, 186.

measures that there were virtually no losses of members during the reform crisis.⁸² Loutit, by contrast, believed in confrontation. ‘There are certain notorious and inveterate agitators in this circuit’, he wrote to Bunting in December 1851, ‘whom I cannot rid Methodism of but by a trial.’⁸³ Knowing the procedure would be contested, he sought the best advice on how to expel members without risking failure. ‘A separation in Louth’, he concluded, ‘is not only unavoidable but desirable.’⁸⁴ Loutit took measures to limit the power of the malcontents. He started issuing preaching plans on a quarterly, not a half-yearly, basis so as to keep the local preachers on a tighter rein. He brought in preachers from other circuits, paid at his own expense, who aroused anger because his opponents resented the intrusion of such strangers. He terminated the lovefeasts at Eastgate because these experience meetings were, as he put it, ‘just what the Agitators & Moderates wished th[e]m’.⁸⁵ And he proceeded to institute a formal trial against the three men who had represented the circuit at the London reform meeting in the previous year. Events hurried towards a crisis.

Loutit’s chief opponent was the corn merchant J. B. Sharpley. The ex-mayor, one of the most prominent men of Louth, served as an efficient member of the local bench, ‘a kind of leading star among the magistrates’. As a public speaker he could make a strong impression with his ‘clear, ringing’ voice. Like many another self-made businessman of his generation, he could also be brusque. A friend described him as ‘a little impatient with impudence and wilful ignorance’. The chief bane of his life, the friend continued, were the impudent and ignorant ‘when strutting abroad in sacerdotal vest’, that is preachers of Loutit’s stamp.⁸⁶ Sharpley, with the other senior officers of the circuit, had exerted himself to keep the Wesleyans together in previous crises,⁸⁷ but Loutit’s aggression had turned him into the

⁸² Bebbington, *Victorian Religious Revivals*, 96-8.

⁸³ James Loutit to Jabez Bunting, 17 December 1851, in Ward (ed.), *Early Victorian Methodism*, 411.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 413.

⁸⁵ LC, ff. 26, 25, 22.

⁸⁶ Richard Chew, *James Everett: A Biography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1875), 472.

⁸⁷ *The Regulations of the Louth Free Methodist Church, with Introductory Observations* (Louth: Edwin Squire, 1856), 1-2.

leader of the reformers. Sharpley held a variety of local offices in Methodism. He acted as a class leader, but he was also secretary of the local preachers and treasurer of the trustees of the country chapels.⁸⁸ His role as trustee was pivotal. At the trustees' meeting, he and a colleague, John Larder, could determine decisions. 'The principle of this meeting', reported Loutit darkly, 'is not healthy. It has no rules of action but the will of one or two persons in Louth.'⁸⁹ The title deeds of Eastgate Chapel were kept in an iron safe in the vestry, and, since Sharpley held one of the keys, he could tell when the superintendent, the other keyholder, was consulting the legal documents.⁹⁰ He could also ensure continuing access to the Eastgate premises. Classes and business meetings of the reformers continued on the site long after Loutit had excluded them from the connexion.⁹¹ It was Sharpley who made the resistance to the Conference in Louth formidable, and subsequently it was Sharpley who moulded the reformers of the circuit into a new denomination.

Sharpley contributed more than organisational ability to the movement, for he was also a man of ideas. Possessing a substantial library, he would sit 'among his books like an astrologer among his spheres'.⁹² He was well read in theology and the constitutional issues of Methodism. As a political Liberal, he readily deployed the discourse of English constitutionalism. He spoke with feeling of 'full liberty of speech' and the reformers' 'right of being tried by their peers'. By contrast he condemned the doctrine of 'divine right'. He therefore spoke of the antithesis between the 'Christian liberty' of the reformers and the 'despotic power' asserted by the ministers.⁹³ The central issue for the Wesleyans, he urged, was whether the pastors could act alone in determining policy, as the Conference claimed, or whether the leaders' meeting should have a say in such questions. Sharpley claimed that a

⁸⁸ LC, ff. 26, 27.

⁸⁹ LC, f. 27.

⁹⁰ LC, f. 28.

⁹¹ [Address to the Wesleyan Methodist Conference re Reform Movement in Circuit, 1853], Lincolnshire County Record Office, Lincoln, Meth B/Louth/9/5, 3

⁹² Chew, *James Everett*, 472.

⁹³ *Regulations of the Louth Free Methodist Church*, 2-3.

Conference resolution of 1797 allowing lay participation in decisions on membership matters confirmed ‘the rights and immunities which had always been enjoyed in the Louth Circuit’.⁹⁴ He gave the reformers of the circuit a firm rationale for their case. Furthermore, Sharpley had been influenced by the constitutional conflict of another church in the previous decade. In 1843, at the culmination of a ten years’ struggle, the Free Church of Scotland had left the established church north of the border because it was not allowed its spiritual privileges. The Free Churchmen had argued that Christ was the sole head of the church and so the liberties enjoyed by a church looking to his authority must not be infringed.⁹⁵ Sharpley thought similarly, claiming that the ‘Headship of Christ’ over the church meant that Christian freedom must be defended.⁹⁶ The Scottish influence is evident in Sharpley’s adoption of the Presbyterian practice of calling prominent laymen ‘elders’, men responsible as ‘ruling elders’ for the welfare of the flock alongside the ministers, the ‘teaching elders’. Sharpley saw Methodist class leaders including himself as elders. ‘I am an ordained Elder of this Church’, he claimed in February 1852. ‘I was ordained 30 years ago when I was appointed to the office of Leader.’⁹⁷ That was why he felt able to preside at the Lord’s Supper in February 1853 as the reformers moved towards independence.⁹⁸ It was Sharpley who drew up the constitution of the Louth Free Methodist Church at the end of 1854, incorporating the ideas of the Scottish Free Churchmen. The new body, he wrote, ‘at once, and for ever, repudiates the right of any man, or order of men, to assume headship over, or independence of, *the Church*’.⁹⁹ The amateur constitutionalist provided an intellectual groundwork for secession.

Events moved towards a crisis in the spring of 1852. In March Loutit summoned a Special District Meeting, a device invented by Bunting in the 1830s to impose discipline on

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹⁵ Stewart J. Brown, ‘The Ten Years’ Conflict and the Disruption of 1843’, in Stewart J. Brown and Michael Fry (eds), *Scotland in the Age of Disruption* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 1-27.

⁹⁶ *Regulations of the Louth Free Methodist Church*, 3.

⁹⁷ ‘Notes of J. B. Sharpley’s Address at Eastgate Chapel, February 3rd, 1852’, MM.

⁹⁸ ‘Louth’, 28 February 1853, MM.

⁹⁹ *Regulations of the Louth Free Methodist Church*, 3.

refractory members. The three men who had attended the delegate meeting in the previous year were expelled. At an adjourned session of the Special District Meeting held in the nearby town of Horncastle in May, Sharpley and his fellow class leaders were required to pledge faithfulness for the future. When they refused, they were dismissed from office.¹⁰⁰ An appeal to Conference against the ruling was summarily rejected.¹⁰¹ Sharpley and several other class leaders refused to accept tickets from the ministers the following month.¹⁰² Technically at that point they ceased to be Wesleyan Methodists even though they continued to attend worship, meet their classes and hold business meetings as if they remained in the connexion. A decisive step had been taken, but the results were still to be worked out.

Who were the Louth reformers who were forced out in 1852? Rod Ambler has shown that in Lincolnshire the reformers who became Free Methodist trustees were far less likely to be farmers than among the Wesleyans. Large numbers were tradesman and shopkeepers. In Louth circuit only 16% of Free Methodist trustees were farmers compared with 48% among the Wesleyans, but 32% of Free Methodist trustees were shopkeepers.¹⁰³ Among the local preachers and class leaders of Louth there were a few nearby farmers such as John Ashton of Eastfield.¹⁰⁴ But there were far more tradesmen who conducted worship or led classes: they numbered in their ranks two hatters, a joiner, a basket maker, a paper hanger, a tanner and a builder. Some ran shops in the centre of Louth – men such as Joshua Kime, a butcher of Eastgate, and George Slight, a tailor and draper of the same street. In the villages, where there were as yet few shops, the occupations were more agricultural, but there were also tradesmen such as a shoemaker called Colbeck in Utterby, who was dismissed by Loutit as an

¹⁰⁰ *Regulations of the Louth Free Methodist Church*, 2-3.

¹⁰¹ LC, f. 14.

¹⁰² LC, f. 24.

¹⁰³ Ambler, *Churches, Chapels and the Parish Communities*, 166-7.

¹⁰⁴ LC, f. 13. The following individuals are taken from the *Louth Circuit Plan of the Free Methodist Preachers, from April 2nd, to July 30th, 1854* and *List of Leaders in Connexion with the Louth Free Methodist Church, 1858*, Meth/C/Louth, Eastgate/A/3/2, Lincolnshire County Record Office, Lincoln.

‘incurable Radical’.¹⁰⁵ One of the most prominent reformers was Henry Boothby, a boot and shoe salesman in Louth Market Place who, according to another of the Wesleyan preachers, was ‘one of the notorious agitators’.¹⁰⁶ Because Boothby sent regular reports of the oppressions of the travelling preachers to *The Wesleyan Times*, he was one of the first targets for dismissal and was excluded in March 1852.¹⁰⁷ Another expelled at the same time was Richard Hurley, a grocer in Eastgate who was particularly proud of his ‘Improved English Baking Powder’.¹⁰⁸ Hurley, who attended Sharpley’s class, subsequently preached a sermon on ‘The Universal Reign of Christ’, in which he denounced what he called ‘Anglo-papacy’ within each denomination, a thrust at the authoritarianism of the Wesleyan ministers.¹⁰⁹ So the pioneers of the Free Methodist Church in Louth were a solid bloc of successful small businessmen, individuals who were prospering from the economic developments of the day.

The women involved in the secession are harder to identify. We know that, of the twelve loyal Wesleyan class leaders in the Louth society in 1852, the remarkably high proportion of five were women.¹¹⁰ So there may have been less inclination by women to tread fresh ecclesiastical paths. Yet there were two female class leaders in Louth who did leave the Wesleyans. One, predictably, was J. B. Sharpley’s wife Elizabeth. She exercised a powerful influence over her class: when invited to take Wesleyan tickets in the autumn of 1852, when eleven were absent, only three accepted but seven refused.¹¹¹ By 1858 Elizabeth Sharpley was responsible for three classes in the Free Methodist Church, more than anyone else.¹¹² The second formidable female class leader was Mildred Crampton, a woman of firm opinions. When Loutit called on her in August 1852, she refused to acknowledge the authority of the Special District Meeting held in the spring and told the Wesleyan preacher

¹⁰⁵ LC, f. 33.

¹⁰⁶ *R*, February 1856, back cover. ‘Louth’, 11 April 1853, p. 9, MM.

¹⁰⁷ Loutit to Bunting, 17 December 1851, in Ward, *Early Victorian Methodism*, 413. LC, f. 8.

¹⁰⁸ LC, f. 10. *R*, March 1856, back cover.

¹⁰⁹ *R*, September 1853, 52.

¹¹⁰ LC, f. 2.

¹¹¹ ‘Mrs Sharpley’s Class’, MM.

¹¹² *List of Leaders in Connexion with the Louth Free Methodist Church, 1858*.

she paid her money to the dissentients.¹¹³ In 1858 she was still a class leader in the Free Methodist Church. Other women contributed to the cause. Mrs Sanderson, who was a keen supporter of revivalism, held a bazaar to support reform in 1852.¹¹⁴ And, in one of the villages, Sotby, ‘Miss Storin blotted her own name fr[o]m ye [Wesleyan] Class book’.¹¹⁵ Women had their reward in Free Methodism. The female right to vote in all meetings except disciplinary cases was entrenched in its regulations.¹¹⁶ Although women did not participate in the leadership of the reform movement, there were some who were convinced adherents.

Other people in the circuit, however, were waverers. An address by Louth loyalists to the 1853 Conference claimed that ‘to a small extent’ some of those who had adopted reform views had been reclaimed.¹¹⁷ Eight local preachers who had withdrawn their names from the Wesleyan plan asked to be restored to it in October 1852. Others were approached by the superintendent to see if they could be persuaded to return, and two more did so in December.¹¹⁸ The most significant waverer was Joseph Hay, the sole circuit steward. In the spring of 1852 he identified with Sharpley’s party, even giving instructions that the Wesleyan travelling preachers were not to have the use of the circuit horses and gig. ‘We are to walk’, exclaimed Loutit in vexation at the time.¹¹⁹ The next year’s ministers, however, were to win Hay round. By the spring of 1853 he was at the head of the Louth officials who sent a loyal address to Conference.¹²⁰ There must have been many such individuals in the villages who felt torn between the two sides. Thus in Covenham there lived a man called Wright who was visited by Robert Bond, the second Wesleyan preacher, in October 1852. Bond recorded Wright in his note book as ‘A Radical’, but the preacher found him friendly, giving tea to his

¹¹³ LC, [f. 3].

¹¹⁴ LC, f. 8. Cf. Ambler, *Ranters, Revivalists and Reformers*, 74.

¹¹⁵ LC, f. 33.

¹¹⁶ *Regulations of the Louth Free Methodist Church*, 9.

¹¹⁷ [Address to the Wesleyan Methodist Conference re Reform Movement in Circuit, 1853], 2.

¹¹⁸ Minutes of the Local Preachers’ Meetings in the Louth Circuit [1852-1870], Meth B/ Louth/18/1, Lincolnshire County Record Office, Lincoln, 19 October 1852, 5; 30 December 1852, 8.

¹¹⁹ LC, ff. 19, 21.

¹²⁰ [Address to the Wesleyan Methodist Conference re Reform Movement in Circuit, 1853], 5.

visitor.¹²¹ There was a great deal of scope during 1852-53 for the two sides to compete for the allegiance of the Methodist people.

Hence the Free Methodist Church emerged gradually. The reformers first produced a rival preaching plan in November 1852.¹²² They issued their own society tickets from December.¹²³ Yet they still called themselves, to the chagrin of the Wesleyans, ‘The Louth Wesleyan Methodist Society’.¹²⁴ George Nicholson, the hired revivalist, long straddled the boundary between the two factions, but in the spring of 1853 resigned as a Wesleyan local preacher and started to take pulpit assignments that meant ousting the planned preachers loyal to Conference.¹²⁵ In May 1853, for example, he supplanted the official Wesleyan preacher at Riverhead.¹²⁶ With the rival preaching plans in operation, local confrontations multiplied over the next few months. A calculated campaign to send reform preachers into villages without a significant existing body of supporters is discernible. Thus Nicholson went in June to North Cotes, where only two class tickets had been withheld by the Wesleyans from malcontents a year before.¹²⁷ In the following month, Nicholson, accompanied by Richard Hurley and two others, went to Theddlethorpe. They failed to secure the pulpit at the morning service, but at its end Hurley announced from the gallery that Nicholson would preach that afternoon in the chapel yard and twenty came to hear him.¹²⁸ These efforts amounted to a deliberate recruitment drive. It was not until the end of the year, however, that the Louth Free Methodist Church was formally established. Sharpley drew up the regulations, proudly declaring that it possessed the allegiance of about 600 members in Louth and 800 in the surrounding villages.¹²⁹ A new venture was launched.

¹²¹ ‘Covenham’, 31 October 1853, MM.

¹²² Ambler, *Churches, Chapels and the Parish Communities*, 165.

¹²³ 7 October 1853, MM.

¹²⁴ [Address to the Wesleyan Methodist Conference re Reform Movement in Circuit, 1853], 3.

¹²⁵ ‘The Louth Circuit’, 1853, MM.

¹²⁶ ‘George Nicholson’, MM.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* LC, f. 33.

¹²⁸ ‘George Nicholson’, MM.

¹²⁹ *Regulations of the Louth Free Methodist Church*, 4.

The question of buildings took some time to resolve. In early 1853 Sharpley held a meeting of the trustees of the whole circuit, voting Wesleyan loyalists off and replacing them with reformers. There were instances of the fitting of new locks and the forcing open of doors. The scheme of the reformers to seize control of the existing village chapels largely failed because the Conference party was able to invoke the law on its side.¹³⁰ Only one former Wesleyan building, apparently the chapel at Benniworth, remained in reforming hands by 1855.¹³¹ Consequently the reformers had to erect their own. By December 1853 they had eleven, with five more under construction.¹³² The countryside round Louth is studded with chapels dated 1853, 1854 and 1855, sometimes saying 'Methodist Chapel' over the door with the preceding word, once 'Free', erased.¹³³ In some places the Free Methodists were highly successful. At Binbrook, for example, a village north-west of Louth in the Market Rasen circuit, they had great appeal. Binbrook was an unusually commercial village. At the 1851 census, of the 532 working people, as many as 140 were in crafts or retail.¹³⁴ A meeting in 1853 attracted 300 reformers and two years later a chapel with 500 sittings was built, remarkably large for a village.¹³⁵ Meanwhile in Louth the reformers were using the newly erected Corn Exchange for worship.¹³⁶ A relation of J. B. Sharpley, Roger Sharpley of Kelstern Hall, however, provided a site for a Free Methodist Chapel on Eastgate, in the centre of the town. Situated opposite J. B. Sharpley's house, it became known as 'the house that Jack built'. It was graced with eight Corinthian pillars outside and accommodated 1,200 inside.¹³⁷ Opened, as we have seen, at the end of 1854, it provided a worthy headquarters for the new denomination.

¹³⁰ [Address to the Wesleyan Methodist Conference re Reform Movement in Circuit, 1853], 4.

¹³¹ *Eastgate Methodist Church: 1854-1954*, 6. James Loutit to Robert Bond, 10 March 1855, MM.

¹³² *Regulations of the Louth Free Methodist Church*, 4.

¹³³ For example, Conisholme, a chapel still functioning in 2012.

¹³⁴ Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society*, 67.

¹³⁵ Rawding, *Lincolnshire Wolds*, 220.

¹³⁶ *Louth Circuit Plan of the Free Methodist Preachers, from April 2nd, to July 30th, 1854*.

¹³⁷ Leary, *Lincolnshire Methodism*, 82, 102.

The big issue facing the Free Methodists was where to find ministers. Since there was no question of taking Wesleyans, some other source had to be discovered. At first there seems to have been thought of an arrangement with the Methodist New Connexion (MNC), the first body to secede from the Wesleyans over half a century earlier. William Martin, a reformer from Manchester who favoured merger with the MNC and eventually joined that body, was one of the speakers at the laying of the foundation stone of the new Eastgate Chapel in July 1854.¹³⁸ During that month a MNC minister, Silas Henn, preached in the Louth area for the Free Methodists.¹³⁹ Henn, however, was put off by the biting attacks of the seceders on the Conference. The reformers, he observed, ‘do not appear to me to pay the respect to Christian ministers which they ought’.¹⁴⁰ Instead of Henn the new body made do with the local George Nicholson. Although never ordained, Nicholson was acceptable as a teaching elder in Free Methodist ecclesiology. He preached at the Corn Exchange on most Sundays, also visiting most of the villages.¹⁴¹ The Wesleyans were horrified that he ‘publicly administers the Sacraments, and assumes the office of a regular minister’.¹⁴² Nicholson was assisted by two others in the work of ministry. One of them, David Robertson, was a Scot who preached in the Corn Exchange on a majority of Sundays in the spring and early summer of 1854.¹⁴³ He seems to have been specially concerned to evangelise young people, writing an ‘Epistle to Young Converts’ in *The Revivalist* for their benefit.¹⁴⁴ Nicholson, however, died in 1855 and Robertson moved on, so that the problem of providing pastoral ministry arose again.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 87. Gowland, *Methodist Secessions*, 63.

¹³⁹ *S. Henn's Journal of Christian Experience and Labours*, part 2 (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1855), 27-9. I owe this reference to Rod Ambler.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁴¹ *Louth Circuit Plan of the Free Methodist Preachers, from April 2nd, to July 30th, 1854*. Nicholson was assisted by two others.

¹⁴² [Address to the Wesleyan Methodist Conference re Reform Movement in Circuit, 1853], 5.

¹⁴³ *Louth Circuit Plan of the Free Methodist Preachers, from April 2nd, to July 30th, 1854*.

¹⁴⁴ *R*, April 1854, 161-5.

This time the Free Methodists turned to an ex-Primitive Methodist, securing James Kendall, who remained in post until the end of the Louth Free Methodists as a separate denomination. Kendall was only twenty-seven years old, but had already served as a minister within the Primitives. He was an uncle of H. B. Kendall, the historian of the Primitives, and so near the heart of his denomination.¹⁴⁵ He was a Lincolnshire man, from Brigg, and his local connexions may have attracted him to Louth. If a sermon published in 1856 is a fair sample, he preached rather fancifully. Called ‘The Spiritual Sailor’s Voyage from Earth to Heaven’, it identified the chart as the Bible, the compass as the Holy Ghost, pride as a dangerous rock and so on.¹⁴⁶ The other ministers were drawn from the Wesleyan reformers elsewhere, still in an embryonic state before their consolidation in the United Methodist Free Churches (UMFC) in 1857. W. M. Hunter, another Lincolnshire man, from Holbeach, had entered the ministry in 1850 and was now thirty-one. T. W. Townend, though originally born in Lancashire, was called to ministry when he lived in Louth itself at the age of twenty-one. And Alfred Jones came at the age of twenty-four from Free Methodist service in Worcester. All these young men were to go on to become president of the UMFC.¹⁴⁷ They were men of energy and ability who put the fledgling denomination in Louth on a firm basis. For a while the problem of ministry appeared to have been solved.

The Free Methodists flourished in other ways. They issued a *Local Preachers’ Magazine*, edited for a while by W. Harris, the third of their first batch of ministers.¹⁴⁸ A Louth printer who adhered to the reforming cause, Edward Squire, began a monthly periodical, *The Revivalist*, in June 1853. Although it was pan-Evangelical in tone, regularly publishing anecdotes of great preachers of the past such as George Whitefield and John Berridge,¹⁴⁹ it was of special interest to Free Methodists. It published the occasional sermon

¹⁴⁵ Beckerlegge (comp.), *United Methodist Ministers*, 135.

¹⁴⁶ *R*, February 1856, 17-28.

¹⁴⁷ Beckerlegge (comp.), *United Methodist Ministers*, 123, 238, 130.

¹⁴⁸ *R*, February [1854], back page. No copies of the *Local Preachers’ Magazine* have been found.

¹⁴⁹ E. g., *R*, [September 1853], 63, 57.

by one of their preachers; it advertised the wares of the denomination's Louth shopkeepers. It proudly proclaimed to be the sole magazine of any kind published in the county, but its circulation was far wider, extending to Norfolk and even Cornwall. By June 1856 it was printing 3,500 copies per issue. Yet its largest clientele remained in Louth and neighbourhood.¹⁵⁰ The magazine gave the fledgling denomination a sense of identity and mission.

The changing contents of the magazine are instructive. At first there was no distinctive theological line beyond the standard Evangelical priorities, with conversion to the fore. Gradually, however, the teaching of entire sanctification took a substantial place. The doctrine was the idea, derived from John Wesley, that a perfect form of holiness is attainable before death. Sin, many Methodists believed, can be eradicated from human life through faith in Christ.¹⁵¹ Members of band meetings were expected to be seeking the experience. It may therefore be significant that Nicholson held a band meeting in the town in October 1853.¹⁵² We know that earlier in the same year an individual testified to having been cleansed from all sin.¹⁵³ The experience was therefore known in the circuit even before the formation of the Free Methodist Church. From April 1855, however, the subject of heart purity frequently appeared in the magazine. 'This', claimed an article of that month, 'is the secret of many of the mightiest deeds of Methodism: you must look for it in this doctrine of "holiness by faith now".'¹⁵⁴ William Braimbridge, a revivalist from the East Riding of Yorkshire, urged the editor to press the teaching on the readers of his pages.¹⁵⁵ This brand of holiness teaching became a staple theme, creating a sense of heightened spiritual expectation.

¹⁵⁰ *R*, July 1856, front cover.

¹⁵¹ David Bebbington, 'Holiness in Nineteenth-Century British Methodism', in W. M. Jacob and Nigel Yates (eds), *Crown and Mitre: Religion and Society in Northern Europe since the Reformation* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1993), 161-74.

¹⁵² 'Saturday Band Meeting', 8 October 1853, MM.

¹⁵³ *R*, September 1858, 137.

¹⁵⁴ 'Preaching on Heart Purity', *R*, April 1855, 52.

¹⁵⁵ William Braimbridge to editor, *R*, May 1856, 73.

The temper fostered by entire sanctification was closely associated with revivalism. The title chosen by Squire for his periodical, *The Revivalist*, shows that the interest in the subject that had preceded the reform crisis continued afterwards. The magazine deliberately encouraged attention to the topic, for example by offering a prize for an essay on revivals in 1856 with the three Free Methodist ministers of Louth as the judges.¹⁵⁶ R. D. Maud, a reformer secured from Wakefield in 1856 for ministry in Louth, preached in a revival meeting at Grainthorpe in the following year.¹⁵⁷ More significant, however, were revivalists from outside the circuit. Sarah White, a Methodist from Northampton, toured the villages holding revivals during 1857.¹⁵⁸ She was joined by William Braimbridge from East Yorkshire and followed by Richard Poole from Sheffield, both notable Methodist conductors of revivals.¹⁵⁹ ‘Confusion there might be’, it was said of Poole’s three-week revival meetings in Louth during December 1857, ‘but it was the confusion of battle when the enemy is routed’.¹⁶⁰ These events were clearly lively affairs where soul-saving proceeded amidst cries and groans. Some of the Free Methodists, such as ‘the flaming spirits of Grimoldby’, became active revival workers.¹⁶¹ The persistent revivalism contributed a major portion of the growth of the church. By April 1857, the editor of *The Revivalist* claimed that the Free Methodists had garnered over the previous four years ‘Upwards of 1000 souls’.¹⁶² The crowning glory of their life as a separate denomination was a visit in June and July 1859 by the Irish-American James Caughey, the revivalist who had fallen under the censure of the Wesleyan Conference in the 1840s. Unprecedented crowds thronged the town as Caughey delivered nightly addresses in the Free Methodist chapel. A single afternoon prayer meeting gathered an estimated 1,500 people. Over one hundred names were taken of those who received special

¹⁵⁶ *R*, June 1856, inside front cover.

¹⁵⁷ *R*, May 1857, 70. Cf. Beckerlegge (comp.), *United Methodist Ministers*, 158.

¹⁵⁸ *R*, March 1857, 44; April 1857, 51; May 1857, 70.

¹⁵⁹ *R*, March 1857, 43-5; April 1857, 49-50; May 1857, 74-9; July 1857, 107-8; February 1858, 25-6.

¹⁶⁰ *R*, February 1858, 25.

¹⁶¹ *R*, April 1857, 49.

¹⁶² *R*, May 1857, 79.

blessings, either conversion or entire sanctification, through Caughey's visit.¹⁶³ It was a triumph of Methodist revivalism. In 1858 *The Revivalist* noted that newly organised churches generally concentrate on 'the *sole* and *simple* truth of the Gospel'.¹⁶⁴ That seems to have been the case with the Louth Free Methodist Church. It became a powerful channel for the revival spirit of the age.

Nevertheless the problem of providing ministers persisted. John Schofield, a preacher recruited from Louth itself in 1858, was to resign from the ministry only eleven years later and, despite staying in the town until 1862, may have had a relatively disappointing time there.¹⁶⁵ In any case a regular supply of home-grown preachers could not be expected. The Louth Free Methodists therefore decided to approach the UMFC, the body that was the outcome of a merger in 1857 between the bulk of the Wesleyan reformers and the Wesleyan Methodist Association. Robert Eckett, long the driving force of the Association and then the president of the united denomination, was invited to speak at Louth on the constitution of the UMFC. Stressing circuit independence, he made a good impression.¹⁶⁶ Accordingly the Louth circuit affiliated to the UMFC, allowing it to secure ministers from that source from September 1859 onwards. The first superintendent, Thomas Pearson, was an experienced man of fifty-four who remained for three years: the arrangement proved satisfactory.¹⁶⁷ Thus the experiment of a denomination coextensive with a single circuit came to an end. Thirty years later, however, the class tickets still bore the words: 'Free Methodist Church [not 'Churches', as in the UMFC title]. Louth Circuit.'¹⁶⁸ The memory of the independent church had not disappeared.

The origins of the Louth Free Methodist Church belong in the developments, secular and religious, of the previous half-century or so. The prosperity of the town gave the people

¹⁶³ *R*, September 1859, 142, 143.

¹⁶⁴ *R*, February 1858, 25.

¹⁶⁵ Beckerlegge (comp.), *United Methodist Ministers*, 208.

¹⁶⁶ Beckerlegge, *United Methodist Free Churches*, 71.

¹⁶⁷ Beckerlegge (comp.), *United Methodist Ministers*, 180.

¹⁶⁸ Leary, *Lincolnshire Methodism*, 84.

the self-confidence to create a new church. The very success of Wesleyan Methodism in the area created a distance between the Conference preachers and their flocks. An impetus to separation was given by the industrial/commercial population of Riverhead; and political Liberalism mobilised leading laymen against the Toryism of the travelling preachers. Ecclesiastical politics played a more major role, for there was a history in the town of resistance to Conference policy. Primitive Methodism gave an example of lay initiative, and its temperance enthusiasm, when imitated by a number of Wesleyan laypeople, dug another fissure between them and the official version of Wesleyanism. Baptists and Independents gave further examples of freedom from pastoral tyranny. At the same time sympathy for revivalism in the Louth circuit caused strong reservations about Conference restrictions on gospel efforts. So long-term factors constituted the necessary conditions for the upsurge of discontent between 1849 and 1853. Yet similar influences swayed Wesleyans in other parts of the country where there were no explosions. Consequently the immediate prelude to the establishment of the Free Methodist Church was crucial in bringing about division. The *Fly Sheets* controversy caused passionate debate all over the country. Loutit was sent to Louth to put down radical sentiments, thereby alienating Sharpley, whose activities and ideas were the chief precipitants of the schism. Tradesmen and shopkeepers were in the van, and even some women played significant parts. The reformers campaigned to recruit waverers at the same time as struggling over buildings. The chief problem of the new denomination was continuity in the provision of ministers, though for a while it obtained the services of able men. The Free Methodists produced literature, became keen on entire sanctification and turned ardently to revivalism. Although the problem of ministry eventually, in 1859, dictated merger with the UMFC, the revivals ensured significant growth. The reformers of Louth were unusual, though probably not unique, in creating a strong separate identity with revivalism as a prominent component. Born in secession, the Louth Free Methodist Church became an agent of revival.