

# *Observations on the first Bible Christian Society*

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The origins of the branch of Methodism known as the Bible Christians lie in the work of William Bryant (Shaw & Short (2007)). The movement dates from 1 October 1815, when Bryant separated from the Wesleyans in the Stratton Mission, with whom he had been working as an evangelist. From 29 June 1818 Bryant was known as William O'Bryan (Shaw & Short (2007) 97f). In 1829 O'Bryan fell out with the main part of the movement's leadership, led by James Thorne of Shebbear, and separated from them. He founded a separatist group known as Arminian Bible Christians – confusingly a title once used by the mainstream movement ! In 1831 he emigrated to the United States of America, although often returning (Shaw & Short (2007) 133-150).

Two accounts of the movement's first Society exist. One exemplifies the adage, "History is written by the victors," in this case the mainstream Thorne-supporting group at the 1829 schism. The main source of this account is the work of James Thorne in 1865 (revised 1866) known as *Jubilee Memorial Volume*. Frederick Bourne closely followed this work in his account of 1901. It had been further expounded in the two biographies of James Thorne in 1873 and 1895.

In this version the Bible Christian movement began in the Thorne family home, Lake Farmhouse, near Shebbear, on Monday 9 October when William Bryant enrolled twenty people, including James Thorne, into his Shebbear Society (Shaw & Short (2007) 74).

Thereafter the Thornes of Shebbear were to have a central place in the story of the Bible Christians. Understandably, they liked to think of that evening's meeting at their home as the birth of the movement. Indeed the plaque alongside what was once their front door states it to be so. it is doubtful though whether William O'Bryan would have agreed with the plaque, and not only because of the falling-out of 1829.

That is because the second – and different – account of the first society is William O'Bryan's. The source "O'Bryan (1824)" is what William O'Bryan himself published in his role as editor of the (Bible Christian) *Arminian Magazine*, in a long series under the title, "The Rise and Progress of the Connexion of people called Arminian Bible Christians." It seems to be based on O'Bryan's Journal, and unfortunately is sometimes not as explicit as one would wish.

In this version, prior to the break with the Stratton Mission at their Quarterly Meeting on Wednesday 22 September, a house had been taken for William Bryant at Week St Mary, seemingly as a Meeting Room, possibly as a residence (O'Bryan (1824) 254). There was a Wesleyan Society in the Stratton Mission in the village. When the split with the Wesleyans became certain, William Bryant, "entered on my Circuit," (O'Bryan (1824) 256) on Sunday 1 October, by visiting Week St Mary. The Wesleyan Society came over to him.

Arguably, this was the first Bible Christian Society. Certainly, it had been Wesleyan, but by 2 October 1815 it was unambiguously part of "Mr. Bryant's People."

Then on 3 October William Bryant visited Shernick Farmhouse, to the north of Bridgerule. There he records (O'Bryan (1824) 256) ten joining his Society. Whether these were Wesleyans previously isn't entirely clear, but the fact that a number were recorded as joining suggests they might not have been. Possibly this was the first 'pure' Bible Christian Society. However the Shernick Society did not persist.

There are though at least two Bible Christian Societies in the O'Bryan account prior to the Shebbear one.

What are we to make of these two accounts ? What is clear is that the Shebbear Society consisted of new converts, who without any doubt had not previously been part of any Methodist Society. Unlike Shernick, the Society persisted: it was successful. In fact, most of the movement's early leadership came from the Shebbear side of Holsworthy. And the Thorne camp prevailed over O'Bryan in 1829, without any doubt, correctly. So it is not surprising that Week St Mary (let alone Shernick !) does not register a mention in Bourne's early twentieth century history.

Rev.Tom Shaw, writing in 1965, wrote of Shebbear,

It was the real foundation of the new denomination, but it was not its birthday as has  
been commonly stated. Shaw (1965) 19

### Bibliography

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