

COMMUNITY CHAPELS AND CHAPEL COMMUNITIES

The Need for Community and the Growth of Methodism in 19th century Rural England

If 'Church' and 'Chapel' still conjure up any mental images in the the mind of the average member of the English public they are, surely, of a medieval parish Church in the midst of a thatched village and of a soot-stained brick Bethel backing on to a railway line. Not that it is just in the popular mind that Anglicanism has been seen as the religion of the countryside and Methodism as a religion of the industrial towns, even some academic histories have treated Methodism as essentially a phenomenon of the process of industrialization.¹

There certainly was a period, at the end of the 18th century and the very beginning of the 19th century, when Methodism was largely restricted to the industrial districts. In 1800, while there were 153 chapels in Yorkshire and 98 in Cornwall, Cambridgeshire had but 2, Buckinghamshire and Sussex only 3 each, Berkshire and Huntingdonshire only 4, Surrey and Bedfordshire 5, and Hampshire 7.² There is general recognition now, however, that that situation did not continue for long and that Methodism was soon every bit as much a rural phenomenon as an industrial one. Indeed, by the middle of the 19th century Methodism was proportionately stronger in Lincolnshire, Bedfordshire and the Isle of Wight than it was in the West Riding; and stronger in Norfolk, Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Buckinghamshire, Dorset, Wiltshire and Shropshire than it was in Lancashire.³

Serious study of the growth of rural Methodism in England began with Alan Everitt's The Pattern of Rural Dissent in 1972.⁴ Although principally concerned with analysing the way in which factors such as patterns of settlement and landownership shaped the geography of rural Nonconformity, Everitt also suggested that the reason for its rapid growth was that it offered a sense of community in a period of intense social dislocation. Since then the idea that the village chapel was in some way an expression of 'community' has been almost universally accepted though there have been very different interpretations of what that means. James Obelkevich's Religion and Rural Society, published four years after Everitt's work, presents the growth of Wesleyan Methodism as the product of a nostalgic impulse, an attempt to preserve a traditional village community that was fast disappearing:

'For those who were reluctant to give up the sociability of the old village community, Methodism created a new, artificial community. Farmers and labourers could unite in the same congregation and class meeting when they were being separated from each other in the wider society'.⁵

Others have seen the chapel as pointing to the future rather than the past, an expression of the gradually developing identity of a new community within the village - the agrarian working class. So Nigel Scotland in his Methodism and the Revolt of the Field argues that Methodism was essentially an alternative community to the traditional village hierarchy:

'Methodism promoted independent action by the country poor. The building and establishment of a chapel was often an act of open rebellion against parson, squire, and

¹ Most famously, of course, E.P. Thompson for whom Methodism was part of the process by which workers were subjugated to factory discipline, E.P. Thompson The Making of the English Working Class (2nd edition, 1968).

² William Myles, A Chronological History of the People called Methodists, (4th edition 1813), pp.427-445.

³ John Gay, The Geography of Religion in England, (1971), p.320.

⁴ Alan Everitt, The Pattern of Rural Dissent: the Nineteenth Century, (Leicester, 1972).

⁵ Obelkevich p.217

farmers. Within the chapel communities the labourers learned self-respect, self-government, self-reliance..⁶

This paper looks at Methodism in one of its 19th century rural strongholds, Bedfordshire. It attempts to assess the function which Methodist chapels played in Bedfordshire village life during the century and to explore how the evolution of the chapel's place in the wider community relates to the pattern of Methodist growth.

A Community Apart

Situated at the point where East Anglia, the Midlands and the South East all meet and merge, Bedfordshire was at the very heart of what, by 1851, had emerged as Victorian England's 'Bible Belt'. The Ecclesiastical Census found that something between 20 and 25% of the county's total population were attending its 78 Wesleyan and 18 Primitive Methodist preaching places.⁷

Half a century before there had been just 250 members in Bedfordshire amidst a population of some 63,000 and no indication at all that Methodism would find the county fruitful ground. The first footholds had been gained at a surprisingly early date - the Luton society was formed by 1752 and that at Bedford came into the Wesleyan Connexion in 1753 - but progress after that was extremely slow. Before attempting to explain the dramatic growth experienced in the early 19th century it is worth pausing to consider why it was that Methodism failed to make any real impact here in the 18th.

Later generations of Methodists had their own explanation, the early Methodists were:

'sorely persecuted, and even the children of the Methodists were scoffed at and beaten in the streets. Foul horse play was practised on them in their most sacred moments, dogs being sent into their midst with tincans tied to their tails, while birds were made to fly into their meetings and put out the lights'⁸

But there is little contemporary evidence to support such claims. Rather, there is considerable evidence that, from the beginning, Methodism enjoyed the support and patronage of some wealthy and influential people. At Bedford, William Parker, who founded the society, was a man of sufficient substance to be Mayor, another Alderman gave the society property and Ann Hurst was wealthy enough to leave a bequest of £100 for the support of the preachers.⁹ Luton had, at least until 1785, the patronage of William Cole, High Sherriff of the county, who built the society a chapel and endowed it. At Biggleswade the society were given not only a chapel but a manse and an endowment of £3,000 by Madam Harvey of Ickwell Bury.¹⁰

An alternative explanation for Methodism's failure to flourish may lie within the nature of the early Methodist communities themselves. The scattered geography of the societies and the lack of preachers made it impossible before 1800 for public preaching services to form more than an occasional highlight in the life of most rural Methodist communities. Instead, it was the class meeting which acted as the focus for the Methodist community's life. Held in private and intimate in its nature, the class meeting was a powerful force in binding Methodists together but its very intimacy and its emphasis on mutual discipline also created a sectarian dynamic. Week by week members received practical advice from their class leaders on how to avoid the snares of an evil world.

⁶ Nigel Scotland, *Methodism and the Revolt of the Field*, (Gloucester, 1981), p.22.

⁷ cf. D.W. Bushby, 'The Bedfordshire Ecclesiastical Census 1851' in *Publications of the Bedfordshire Historical Records Society* Vol.54 (1975).

⁸ from a lecture published in the *Luton Reporter* 7/11/1885.

⁹ Joan Anderson, *Early Methodism in Bedford*, (1953).

¹⁰ *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* 1835, p.212. She also gave the Connexion chapels at Baldock and Stevenage and built a private chapel at Hinxworth which Methodist preachers used during her lifetime.

Members were encouraged to choose both business and marriage partners from within the confines of the society, to keep contact with the wider world to a minimum, to shun traditional social gatherings and to mark themselves out by a distinctively plain style of dress. The Methodists were quite definitely a community apart, a tightly knit network of families following a distinctive, almost Quaker, way of life. One can imagine them singing with particular feeling the verses from Wesley's Hymns that pray -

Men of wordly, low design,
Let not these thy people join,
Poison our simplicity,
Drag us from our trust in thee.

Never let the world break in;
Fix a mighty gulf between;
Keep us little and unknown,
Prized and loved by God alone.¹¹

The sense of belonging was no doubt intense but it was a belonging that rested on a rejection of the wider community. A rejection so intense that it was actually quite difficult for an outsider to bridge the gap and join a Methodist society. It was a community apart rather than a part of the community and its failure to thrive was a direct consequence of that.

A Community for the Young

This exclusive, sectarian pattern of Methodism seems to have continued in many places in Bedfordshire well into the 19th century but it was to be increasingly challenged, and eventually overwhelmed, by a quite different pattern of community life. In 1794 the unwieldy 'Bedfordshire' circuit, which in fact extended across 5 counties, was divided into three and in 1798 the number of Itinerant Preachers on the Bedford circuit, as it was now called, was increased from two to three. Membership began to climb. Between 1800 and 1806 the number of Methodists in Bedfordshire more than doubled from 250 to 538. By 1814 the county had been divided into no fewer than 7 separate circuits and membership surged again, with the Luton circuit's membership rising from 366 to 435 in the first year and Leighton Buzzard's from 350 to 435. It was a level of growth out of all proportion to the advance of the Connexion nationally and unmatched even in neighbouring counties.

Contemporary opinion seems to have ascribed the sudden growth to the skill of individual preachers. At Luton there was 'but a very small congregation till the Rev. Maximilian Wilson, a noted preacher, was stationed here in the year 1808' and at Biggleswade the need to enlarge the chapel was seen as mark of the success of John Ward's ministry.¹² Excellent those these individuals no doubt were, the truth is probably that what was really significant was that whereas there were only two Itinerant Preachers in the county in 1797 by 1815 there were eleven. The relationship between growth and the provision of ministers is further underlined by the fact that the great majority of the new members were to be found in the towns and larger villages where those preachers efforts were concentrated. Of the 85 new members reported by the Leighton Buzzard circuit at the end of its first year 35 were to be found in Leighton itself and 31 at either Eaton Bray or Wing.¹³ A Plan for the Leighton Buzzard circuit in 1817 shows that at least two of the three services being held at Leighton each Sunday were led by one of the Itinerant Preachers and one of the two services at Wing, and that at Eaton Bray all three Sunday services were taken by the Itinerants every other Sunday. In the same quarter they took none of the services at eight village societies.

¹¹ Number 475 in the 1780 Collection of Hymns for the People called Methodists.

¹² Fredrick Davis, A History of Luton, (Luton, 1855), p.119; W.M.M. 1835, p.213.

¹³ Leighton Buzzard circuit book, Bedfordshire CRO MB 1533.

In some of places the number of members became so large that it was necessary to divide them into several classes. By 1806 there were no less than eight separate class meetings in Bedford, five at Eaton Bray and three at Luton.¹⁴ This had far reaching effects for it inevitably meant that in these societies the intense fellowship which had in the past produced such tight cliques was dissipated. The opening up of these societies was further helped by the emergence of a whole new category of Methodist, the 'Hearer' or adherent. Where Methodism was able to offer regular public preaching, in a comfortable purpose-built chapel, led by a gifted professional preacher it was now attracting congregations beyond the narrow circle of those attending class meetings. Some of these adherents went on to join classes but many did not and continued to attend the services, sometimes for many years, without officially becoming members. In some places the number of such adherents seems to have been considerable, at Bedford the new chapel, built in 1804, was soon 'in general completely filled'.¹⁵ These adherents not only multiplied the size of Methodism but must also have helped to break down some of the rigid distinctions between its members and the wider community, transforming a private religious society into a Christian denomination.

One of the fruits of this transformation seems to have been a new attitude amongst the Methodists in such societies to the world around them. At Luton in 1803, then at Biggleswade in 1810 and Leighton Buzzard in 1814, Sunday Schools were commenced.¹⁶ In accepting a responsibility for the education and Christian instruction of children generally rather than simply those brought up within Methodist households, Bedfordshire's Methodists took another step into the mainstream of society. Over the next decade the Sunday Schools were followed by Bible Societies, tract societies, Clothing Clubs, and, perhaps most significantly of all, Missionary societies.¹⁷ For the cause of Foreign Missions stretched the mental horizons of many Methodists beyond their own narrow circle, beyond even their own town. Even the architecture of the chapels being built by these open societies reflected a more confident and evangelistic mood. The old eighteenth century chapel in Luton had been a small, windowless, anonymous structure but its replacement was a self-consciously public building with architectural pretensions.

It is not difficult to see how all these developments would have made it far easier for outsiders to come in to the Methodist community but it is rather harder to establish who exactly the people were that actually took that step. One thing that is clear is that many of them were young. At Bedford no fewer than 41% of the membership was unmarried in 1806, eleven years previously the figure had been just 14%, and in the county as whole spinsters made up 27% of the total membership.¹⁸

¹⁴ Bedfordshire circuit book, BCRO MB 1.

¹⁵ Anderson, Early Methodism in Bedford.

¹⁶ Joseph Hawkes, The Rise and Progress of the Wesleyan Sunday School, Luton (Luton, 1885), p.5; F. Phillips, Wesleyan Methodist Church, Biggleswade Circuit. A brief History of each Society in the circuit, from its formation to the present time, with Illustrations of each Place of Worship (Biggleswade, 1905), p.9.

¹⁷ An Auxiliary Missionary Society was formed in Luton in 1824.

¹⁸ Bedfordshire circuit book.

	<u>1795</u>		<u>1806</u>	
Single men	4	2%	26	7%
Married men	42	26%	101	29%
Widowers	7	4%	2	1%
Single women	24	15%	97	27%
Married women	56	34%	109	31%
Widows	32	19%	18	5%
Total	165	100%	353	100%

Marital status of Methodist members in Bedfordshire

We can only speculate about why this should have been the case but it seems a fair guess that in communities which must have offered very few opportunities to socialize, particularly for young women, preaching and hymn-singing were a form of respectable entertainment that would have been seized upon with enthusiasm and relief. There were now some Methodist societies performing a function within the life of the community rather than outside it, and where this happened the growth was dramatic.

The Community Chapel

By 1815 that first wave of expansion run its course. Methodism was firmly established alongside Dissent as part of the life of the county's market towns and a few of the larger villages but it was still unknown in most communities. Where Methodist societies did exist in agricultural villages they continued, almost without exception, in the tradition of the family based piety of the 18th century.

It was not until the end of the 1820s that Methodism really began to penetrate the countryside. In 1828, after more than a decade of stagnation, Methodist membership in Bedfordshire began to grow again. The Luton Circuit recorded an increase of 150 members (33%) that year and Bedford of 66 (14%). For the next seven years that growth was to continue uninterrupted, and each of the county's circuits saw its membership double, Luton's in fact tripled. Suddenly, Bedfordshire had become a Methodist stronghold, particularly the south of the county where something like 5% of the total population were in full membership, compared with a national average of about 1.7%.

Whereas the growth at the turn of the century had largely come in the towns, this time it was the villages that were providing the new members. In the Leighton Buzzard circuit while the membership of Leighton itself grew by 72% between 1827 and 1836 that of villages like Billington, Heath, Tilsforth, and Stanbridge grew by anything between 90 and 266%.¹⁹ Many completely new societies were formed and unprecedentedly large numbers of people flocked to attend Methodist services. Soon chapels and cottage kitchens alike were bursting at the seams. At Biggleswade, the chapel was 'filled with worshippers' and at Ashwell 'the spirit of hearing prevailed to such an extent, that the old barn was filled, while others were glad to catch a word at the windows or door'.²⁰

To house these multitudes the various circuits launched a determined building programme constructing a total of 27 new chapels and extending or renovating almost all the existing sanctuaries. The new buildings were unequivocally places of public worship. The chapel at Turvey was 'a very substantial building and neatly fitted up' and at Newnham was 'capable of holding all the inhabitants of the parish'.²¹

¹⁹ Leighton Buzzard circuit book, BCRO MB 1533.

²⁰ W.M.M. 1834, p.217 and 1835, p.213-4.

²¹ W.M.M. 1829 p.275 and 1835, p.213.

The immense capital outlay on new chapels is particularly striking because this Methodist boom took place against the background of increasing economic hardship. By the late 1820s a deepening agricultural depression, compounded by the pressures of an ever increasing population, had reduced the condition of many agricultural labourers and their families to one of unremitting wretchedness. Rioting broke out in 1828 at Toddington and the following year at Millbrook, Lidlington and Eaton Bray. In the autumn of 1830 a wave of rick-burning swept across the county and there was a serious disturbance at Stotfold when the labourers tried to intimidate farmers into raising wages. A mass protest on the Dunstable Downs had to be broken up by the Yeomanry. Fines, transportations and executions temporarily restored order but they did nothing to assuage the discontent and violence continued to erupt until 1835.²²

The relationship between that social and economic background and the swelling numbers attending Methodist meetings was far from simple. One thing is clear, however, that contrary to Obelkevich's view that Methodism provided a last bastion of social cohesion in a time of social dislocation, 'a new, artificial community (in which) farmers and labourers could unite in the same congregation' the new Methodist chapels, in Bedfordshire at least, were a vehicle for social division, a means by which the labourers could separate themselves from the village hierarchy.²³ Far from being a cross section of the community the village Methodist chapel was increasingly becoming the preserve of the agricultural labourer and his family. In the 1820s 15% of the fathers in the villages around Bedford who had their children baptised by a Methodist preacher had been farmers but by the 1830s that figure had fallen to 10%. At the same time the proportion who were labourers rose from 65% to 76%.²⁴ The new social make-up of village Methodism is all the more striking because it contrasts both with the situation in the town chapels, where artisans tended to be overrepresented and with the village Independent chapels which continued to draw a strong following from among the farmers.

	Rural Population 1831 Census	Bedford Circuit Village Societies			Roxton & Turvey Independent Churches, 1830s
		1820-29	1830-39	1850-52	
Farmers	8%	15%	10%	4%	16%
Tradesmen	8%	10%	3%	7%	9%
Artisans	13%	10%	11%	12%	11%
Labourers	70%	65 %	76%	77%	64%
Baptismal Registers : Father's Occupation					

Part of the attraction of Methodism may have been that its Arminianism answered a real and quite profound need for hope at a time when there was precious little about. John Buckmaster, remembering his childhood in Slapton, recalled how Methodism 'gave these poor men . . . comfort in time of want and suffering; it was to them the only thing which made this life tolerable, with the hope of a better'.²⁵ In particular, he had been struck by a ploughman who as he worked 'used to give out verses of hymns, such as 'And am I born to die?' . . . 'Come on my partners in distress' and then to

²² A.F. Cirket, 'The 1830 riots in Bedfordshire' in *PBHS* Vol. 57 (1978).

²³ James Obelkevich, *Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825-75*, (1976), p.217.

²⁴ Bedford circuit baptismal register. BCRO MB 2 and MB 115.

²⁵ John Buckmaster, *A Village Politician, the life-story of John Buckley*, (reprinted 1982), p.40.

sing them in a low tone of voice, and appeared happy, although his singing was far from being cheerful or musical'.²⁶ The class meeting, in particular, came into its own as a cathartic outlet for fears, worries and grievances, often 'the trials and temptations to which such men were exposed found relief in the weekly prayer meeting or class meeting and hymns and their earnest appeals to the Lord for strength showed their sincerity'.²⁷

There was more, however, to the attraction of Methodism than simply the 'chiliasm of despair'.²⁸ For far from anaesthetising the rural poor to their lot it seems to have provided many of them with a means of protest which was directly relevant to their situation. In an age when the existence of God was at least as real as the existence of Parliament, the chapel gave labourers an opportunity to petition him directly for redress. 'The landlords and some of the farmers were prayed for by name. "Cursed is he who removeth his neighbour's landmark, and oppresseth the poor and needy, and joineth land to land," . . . these sentences always met with hearty amens'.²⁹ Attending the chapel was also a way to register protests with the authorities nearer home. For with the Church of England so inextricably involved in landownership and its clergy so prominently involved in the magistracy, consorting with seditious and heretical Methodists was one way to reject the established pattern of authority. At Stotfold the curate, the Reverend John Lafont, had been at the forefront in the suppression of the riot by agricultural labourers in 1830. After that date there seems to have been a boycott of the parish church and on the Sunday following the trial of the rioters Lafont's service was disrupted.³⁰ At the mass meeting on the Downs above Dunstable one of the speakers denounced 'kings, bishops, parsons and landlords' as an unholy partnership.³¹ Religious dissent and rioting were varieties of the same unrest, burnt hayricks and full chapels both weapons with which to threaten the establishment.

By 1836 Methodism had well and truly emerged from the shadows into the mainstream of village life. There were now a string of parishes where 'three fourths of the people were Methodist if they were anything and one fourth were nothing' and where the Methodist chapel had become a major institution, the church of the labouring community

Chapel Communities

After 1836 there was, perhaps inevitably, a period of decline. For a few years Methodism lost ground in Bedfordshire both relative to the population and in absolute terms. The losses were particularly severe in the areas where the recent gains had been most dramatic, in the overpopulated arable parishes at the centre of the unrest. There is some evidence which may suggest that one reason for this was a clampdown on Methodist societies by a number of local landowners. At Ampthill in 1837 three Methodists lost their jobs because they refused to give up attending the Methodist chapel and at Slapton, where Methodism was blamed for disaffection in the parish, one of the most outspoken Methodists was thrown out of his cottage.³² But there were plenty of other landowners who looked favourably on Methodism, believing that it was a force for social conservatism. Several contributed to local chapel building funds and throughout the late 1830s the local Tory newspaper took great care to

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.40.

²⁸ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (second edition, 1968), p.411.

²⁹ Buckmaster, *Village Politician*, p.40.

³⁰ Cirket, 'The 1830 riots'.

³¹ Buckmaster, *Village Politician*, p.55.

³² Anon., *A Short Account of the Cruelties Inflicted on Dissenters by the High Church party, occasioned by the dismissal of five men from the service of Joseph Morris, Esq.*, (Bedford, n.d.) and Buckmaster, *A Village Politician*, p.43.

of the Divine judgement on the faithfulness of the Methodist community.³⁸ Losses were now a matter of deep humiliation that had to be atoned for with days of penitence and with redoubled efforts to achieve expansion.³⁹ In the 1830s Methodism had grown as a result of tensions within the village community, in the 1840s it grew of its own will. The new societies, however, unlike those that had appeared in the 1830s were in the village rather than of it and rarely attracted significant levels of support.

By the early 1850s the opportunities for geographic expansion were almost exhausted and internal dissension over the Reform agitation sent most of the local circuits into a period of decline but in 1859 a major revival broke out across much of the county. Over the next three years the Bedford Wesleyan circuit gained 400 members (38%), Luton 250 (17%) and Leighton Buzzard 236 (30%). The growth appears to have been the result of a series of very sudden and dramatic increases in membership in particular villages one after another. Thus the comparatively limited growth of the Biggleswade Circuit, just 56 members (11%), was the cumulative effect of a revival at Stotfold in the spring of 1859, followed by one at Baldock in the spring of 1860 and a third at Shefford in the winter of the same year.⁴⁰ The great majority of villages were completely unaffected but others were gripped by the excitement two or three times.

At the heart of these revivals was a new kind of evangelicalism, boisterous, emotional and centred upon the need for a tearful and traumatic conversion experience. Although building on an English tradition of revivalism it owed much more to America. Enthusiastic accounts in the religious press of a "Second Awakening" sweeping the United States encouraged many in England to attempt to achieve something similar for themselves. Across Bedfordshire people began to gather for special prayer meetings to call down "an outpouring of the Holy Spirit." Individual chapels organised missions and special services. In some places the excitement became infectious and soon the expectation of sorrowful, public conversions began to be fulfilled. Although there were revivals in some of the towns, this was by and large a predominantly village phenomena. Small, quiet communities were swept along by the atmosphere created as tense, highly-charged services were held night after night, sometimes for several weeks. At Cranfield a third of the entire village claimed to have been converted.⁴¹

The effect of the revival on the Wesleyan Methodist community in Bedfordshire contrasts quite strikingly with its effect on their Primitive Methodist neighbours. Primitive Methodism had gained its first foothold in Bedfordshire in the late 1830s, possibly as result of disillusionment with the parent body, and expanded strongly during the 1850s, again probably at the expense of the Wesleyans. Of the 36 Primitive Methodist village societies in 1861 no fewer than 23 were in villages which had a pre-existing Wesleyan society. Some of the mantle of the labouring community chapel of the early 1830s seems to have fallen on these Prim societies, their congregations were certainly almost exclusively from that class. The revival of 1859-62 brought considerable gains to the local circuits the Bedford Mission grew by 140 members (56%), and the Luton Circuit by 120 (40%) and prompted a spree of chapel building to house the swollen congregations.

There was no comparable building programme among the Wesleyans, however. Indeed it seems that none was needed and that the converts were largely people who were already within the chapel

³⁸ James Everett's Wesleyan Takings of 1839 exemplifies this attitude, giving details of several hundred Wesleyan ministers and rating them according to the increase, or decrease, reported by circuits in which they travelled.

³⁹ In 1842, when the Luton circuit reported a loss of members, the two circuit stewards resigned. Minutes of the Quartely Meeting, BCRO.

⁴⁰ Biggleswade circuit schedule. BCRO MB 835 and 836.

⁴¹ From a report in Revival, quoted in J.E. Orr, The Second Awakening in Britain, (1949).

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community. At Leighton Buzzard the number of Wesleyan Sunday School children who were members of the society rose from 2 to 27 and in the Circuit as a whole to 71.⁴² This represented almost a third of the Circuit's total increase between 1858 and 1861. It is perhaps an indication of how separate from the wider community the life of the Wesleyan chapel had become that even the rival Primitive Methodist chapel, which in so many senses was more sectarian, seems to have been more in touch with the general population.

By 1862 the novelty of the new style mission services had worn thin and the revival was already beginning to fade, though similar outbursts of religious excitement would be seen in a few villages over the next decade. It was to prove to be village Methodism's last moment of glory in Bedfordshire, with the highest membership levels ever recorded. After that date rapid rural depopulation sent the membership of village chapels across the county into a steady and relentless decline. By the 1880s village chapels were beginning to close.

Community and Growth

The need for a focus for communal life seems then to have played a significant part in the growth of rural Methodism, at least in Bedfordshire (and was to play an equally important role in the expansion of urban Methodism in the county after 1870 but, of course, that is another story). What is remarkable is that the period of growth was so brief. Although there were Methodist societies in the county from the 1740s the pattern of their piety kept them 'little and unknown'. The provision of more preachers in the opening years of the nineteenth century, eventually established Methodism in the market towns but it was not until the Swing riots of the early 1830s that it really emerged as a presence in the villages. Even then, it was as if Methodism was pushed out of the shadows unwillingly, swept along by the wider community who seized upon it as a vehicle for expressing their protest against the established authorities. For a brief moment the Methodist chapel became the community chapel, a significant institution in village life, but it was only for a brief moment. Methodist structures ensured that control of the village chapel remained firmly in the hands of the more affluent members and soon neutered the community chapels, turning them back into chapel communities.

⁴² Leighton Buzzard circuit Sunday School schedule. BCRO MB1558.