

Religion, geography and identities in Cornwall: the Bible Christians.

Chapels are an ubiquitous feature of the Cornish landscape. They are an everyday reminder of the importance of Methodism in understanding Cornwall's past and its present society. If we look closely at these monuments to our religious past we might on occasion discern the initials BC carved onto the front of the building. Now and again, this is extended to spell out that the chapel once served as the meeting place for Bible Christians. But what was the place of this denomination in nineteenth century Cornish Methodism? Here, I explore that question and identify the relative position of this sect in relation to the broader body of Methodism of which it was a part. That done, I shall move on and speculate on the influence Bible Christianity in Cornwall may have had on identities beyond the religious.

The origins of the Bible Christians

The Bible Christians came about as one of the various Methodist schisms that split away from the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion during the half century or more after John Wesley's death in 1791. Wesley's visits to Cornwall from 1743 onwards had stimulated an early growth of Wesleyan societies. By 1785, 31% of Cornish parishes had a Methodist society.¹ Penetration was greatest in the west, where a precociously early industrialisation had tended to throw up new communities out of the reach of gentry control or the influence of the Established Church. It was the period from the 1780s to the 1810s that saw Methodism firmly implant itself as the dominant religious persuasion in Cornwall. Its growth was bracketed by the two great revivals of 1799 and 1814, years that saw membership soar. It was able to do this because its institutional foundations had already been laid.

Chapels had begun to appear more widely in the 1760s and by 1791 there were 64 Methodist chapels in Cornwall. Numbers then grew rapidly over the following two generations and particularly in the troubled years around the turn of the century, a period of major economic and social dislocation. This growth prepared the ground for the mass revivals which were the mechanism through which Cornish Methodism grew in the period from the 1790s to the 1860s. First recorded in 1782, revivals were at that time confined to the societies themselves. But by 1799 they had moved beyond the chapel and into the community, something which could only happen because Methodism was already attracting large numbers of attendants and adherents who were not yet members although poised on the brink of so becoming. It was during the excited times known as revivals that the transition to formal membership occurred.²

The controversies and secessions that plagued Methodism from the 1790s to the 1850s were as often as much about the degree of central control exercised by the Wesleyan Conference as about doctrinal issues. To an extent both of these came together in the formation of the Bible Christians. Yet the Bible Christians were special, as they were the only example of a denomination founded by a Cornishman. William Bryant was born at Gunwen in the northern part of Luxulyan parish in 1778. He led the early Bible Christians away from the Wesleyan Methodist parent body in 1815. Although Bryant himself fell out with his co-religionists in the new society in 1829 and emigrated in 1831, the institution he founded led an independent existence from 1815 until the first wave of Methodist union in 1907, when it joined with the United Methodist Free Church and the Methodist New Connexion to form the United Methodists.

Bible Christians became popularly known as Bryanites, named after their founder who had quixotically changed his name to William O'Bryan in 1818. In doctrinal matters the Bible Christians varied little from Wesleyan Methodists. Bryant was an evangelist who believed firmly in the role of conversion. He held on to a revivalism that by the 1810s was becoming out of favour with the Wesleyan hierarchy outside Cornwall. They preferred a more patient, administratively sound expansion to the periodic outbursts of religious fervour that brought in thousands of new members during mass revivals but then saw many of them 'backslide'. Nonetheless, Cornish Methodists

generally, and more especially in the west, stuck with a more familiar revivalist approach throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. They were able to resist the pressures from the centre precisely because their local societies and chapels had tended to pre-date the emergence of a centralised Wesleyan Methodist bureaucratic structure. In consequence, Cornish Methodism retained a healthy suspicion of new-fangled, upcountry ways.

The growth of the Bible Christians

The lack of any large difference between rural Wesleyan Methodism in the west and the cottage religion of the Bible Christians meant that the latter struggled to compete in those areas of Cornwall where Wesleyanism was strongly entrenched. Nevertheless, as active Wesleyan missioning was pulled back after the agricultural depression of 1815, the Bryanites were able to move into some gaps. They picked up the Wesleyan Methodist baton in districts such as the eastern part of the Lizard peninsula, St Columb and particularly across north Cornwall and north west Devon, introducing regular preaching to these areas and attracting some of the 'backsliders' who had drifted away from Wesleyan Methodism after the 1814 revival.

As an example, by 1819 there was a Bible Christian presence in St Keverne and the Bible Christians arrived on the Roseland in the 1820s, drawing in the rural dispossessed. But it was in the zone north of St Austell, near to William Bryant's home, that the brand of straightforward revivalism offered by the Bible Christians struck the greatest chord. Untrammelled by the constraints imposed by the Wesleyan hierarchy, the Bible Christians could invoke an earlier cottage religion, with its valorisation of the spiritual role of the home. Here and in the north of Cornwall, Bible Christians continued an earlier tradition of informal, flexible Wesleyan conversion.

A typical example might be furnished by the biography of Francis Benton, born in 1793 at St Wenn of 'industrious parents'.³ Aged 24, after a lapse of a few years, Francis 're-united' himself to his local Wesleyan society. 'He and three other young men of Tregonetha, commenced a prayer meeting in an outhouse in the village.' Eventually a society was formed and a barn obtained for prayer meetings, followed by class meetings. In 1818 the Bible Christians introduced regular preaching to this bottom-up vernacular religious culture. Men and women came alternately to 'preach the unsearchable riches of Christ' and Francis Benton joined this new sect, becoming a preacher. 'For a while they occupied an old, dilapidated barn, with the window-pane stopped with straw; and in 1822, an adjoining stable was added to it; part of the walls that were feeble they rebuilt, and fitted it up a little better than at first. In 1836, the building was greatly enlarged again and greatly improved – now the chapel'. This was the pattern, channelling loosely organised and spontaneous local religious practice into organised preaching, that the Bible Christians occupied themselves with in the decades from the 1810s to the 1840s.

However, even the Bible Christians succumbed to the pressures posed by finding the money to pay for the construction and upkeep of their chapels. Like the Wesleyans earlier, by the 1840s a formalisation of worship can be detected as Bible Christian circuits concentrated on consolidation and practical priorities began to blunt the evangelising zeal of the first generation. But despite, or because of, this they had managed to ensure a presence in over half of Cornwall by mid-century. Having set the context, we then have a unique snapshot of the strength of mid-century Bible Christians, along with every other religious denomination, in the shape of the religious census of 1851.

The 1851 religious census

Concerns about the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation had combined with moral panics in the 1840s about standards among the poor. This panic was fuelled by the insurrectionist threat, at least as seen by the propertied classes, posed by Chartism. However, the fears existed in a statistical vacuum. In an attempt to rectify that, the Registrar-General, Major George Graham, appointed a

barrister - Horace Mann - to conduct a religious census at the same time as the scheduled 1851 Census of Population.⁴

Officially described as a Census of Religious Worship, individuals were not asked directly about their personal religious preferences. Mann deemed this too intrusive, even though it was later adopted for Irish censuses. Instead, forms were delivered to local ministers or some other nominee responsible for each place of worship. The forms enquired after the date of the building, number of seats and the numbers attending on Census Sunday, which was March 30th 1851. The form also asked informants to estimate the 'average' number of attendances during previous months. Anglicans, nonconformists and Quakers each received a different form, with those for Church of England clergymen also seeking extra financial information on sources of income.

The census discovered that overall in Great Britain the population was greatly in excess of the number of seats available in churches and chapels, this being especially the case in the rapidly growing cities. For Horace Mann, the conclusion was stark; a state of 'spiritual destitution' existed in Britain. Historians have been more sanguine, noting that up to half the population may have attended a religious service on that day in 1851 and contrasting that with modern levels of non-observance.

How accurate was this census however? It remained voluntary although census officials made every effort to pursue missing or non-returned forms. Anglican clergymen, at least in Cornwall, seem to have been most sceptical and prone to non-cooperation. For example, the Vicar of Tywardreath, Charles Lyne, reported merely that his church was 'full' at both morning and evening services, while his neighbour at Fowey, John Renfree, sidestepped the question by reporting attendance was 'uncertain' although comprising 'a large majority of the inhabitants'. Given that at nearby St Austell church a pew space for 628 was less than a third occupied, with 201 adults present at the morning congregation and 183 in the evening, the claimed popularity of the Anglican churches at Tywardreath and Fowey would seem unlikely.

However, such deliberate instances where clergy refused to provide at least an estimate of attendance were rare and gaps in the Cornish returns are very few. Many estimates of attendances contained suspiciously rounded numbers but detailed analyses of the religious census have reached the consensus view that it provides a fairly accurate picture of the general state of religious attendance in 1851, even though care is needed at the micro-level.⁵

The census therefore provides us with a detailed chapel-by-chapel picture of religious activity. Take Luxulyan parish for example, the home of William Bryant.⁶ Here we find that there were four Bible Christian chapels in 1851. The largest was at Ebenezer near Higher Menedew, built in 1820 and with 226 seats. According to the return it was standing room only here in the evening when over 300 packed in to participate in the service. At Bridges, another chapel, with a capacity of 168 attracted 111 attendants to its evening service. In addition we find a tiny chapel at Innis, also constructed in 1820, with 25 seats and 21 present at an afternoon service. Finally, a dwelling house at Harrows served as a meeting place, with 20 at its evening service.

Historians of the religious census have adopted two measures – the index of attendance (IA) and percentage share of attendance (PS). The former provides an absolute impression of the attendance by adding up all those present (excluding Sunday school pupils) and expressing this in relation to the total population (dividing by the total population and multiplying by 100). The latter is a relative measure, telling us the percentage of the total attending at each denomination's places of worship. The table below takes Luxulyan again as an example. With a population in 1851 of 1,439 we can calculate the IA and PS for each denomination active in the parish.

Table 1: Religious attendances at Luxulyan, 1851

	Attendances	IA	PS
Church of England	200	14	13%
Wesleyan Methodist	570	40	38%
Bible Christian	694	48	46%
Primitive Methodist	40	3	3%
total	1,504	105	100%

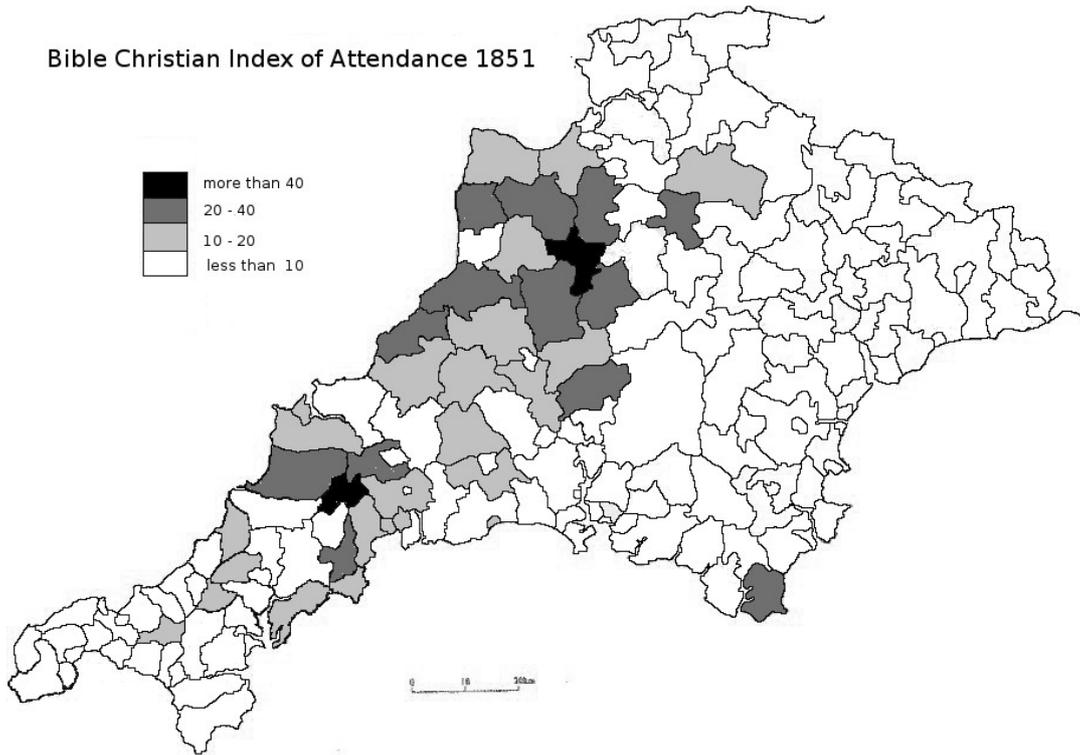
As can be seen, Luxulyan was one of the very few parishes where the Bible Christians were the largest denomination in 1851. It also enjoyed one of the highest IAs, suggesting that a considerable proportion of the adult population attended church or chapel more than once that day.

What are the more general patterns across Cornwall (and Devon)? Those clergy who were not that keen to reveal the extent of the Established Church's support in Cornwall were right to be worried. The Methodist PS turned out to be around two thirds of total attendances. While the Anglicans struggled to surpass an IA of 30 in most Cornish registration sub-districts, Methodists in contrast enjoyed over 30 in most of Cornwall and in many places exceeded 50.

And what of the Bible Christians? The first map below shows the weakness of the Bible Christians in the far west and the south east of Cornwall. In relatively few registration sub-districts did Bible Christians manage to achieve an IA of over 20. However, it had two marked areas of strength. In the north east of Cornwall a broad area of higher Bible Christian IAs began at Boscastle and then stretched eastwards north of Launceston and over the Tamar into north west Devon. There, its greatest support was received in Black Torrington and Broadwoodwidge, while the zone of Bible Christian strength petered out east of Shebbear, site of the first Bible Christian society and location of a school for sons of Bible Christian ministers, later Shebbear College.

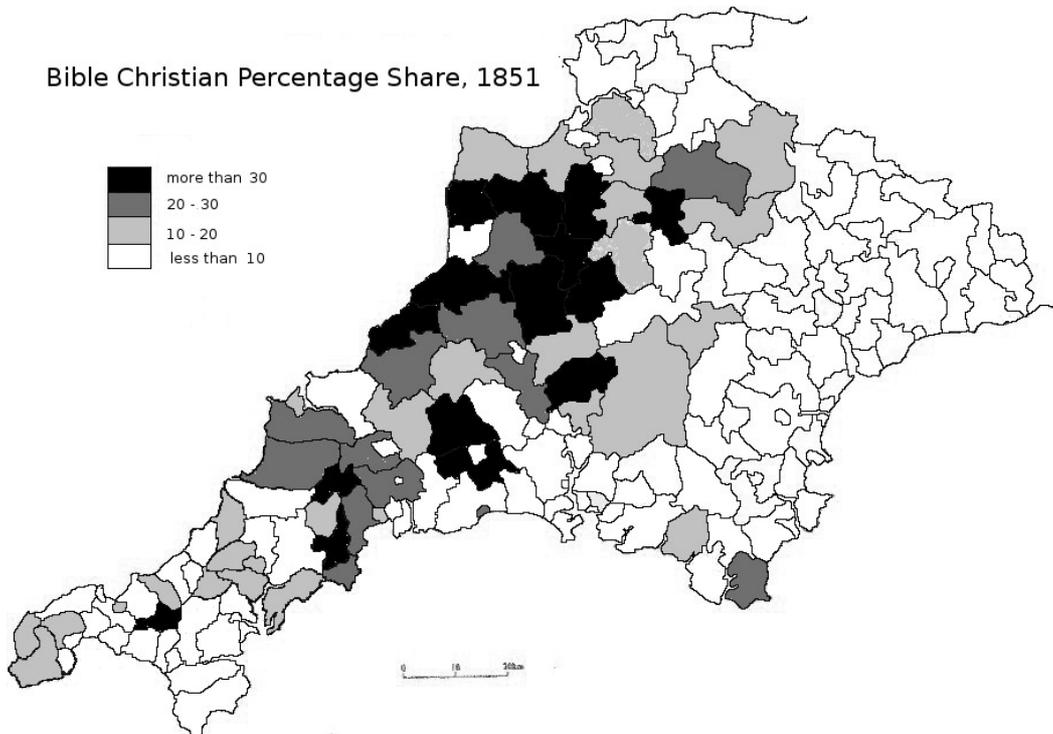
In Cornwall its heartland lay further west in what was to become the clay country, encompassing William Bryant's home parish of Luxulyan, along with Roche and St Dennis to the west. It was in these three parishes that the Bible Christians achieved their greatest success in Cornwall, outnumbering Wesleyan Methodists in 1851. It was probably no coincidence that this district also saw some revealing comments about relations between the Established Church and its parishioners. At Roche the Rector, the Reverend Pearse, wrote that 'modern Methodism has developed itself in all its rankness in this parish – split into squabbling factions – but united in deadly enmity against the scriptural but sober teaching of the Church'. At neighbouring St Dennis, where just 15 parishioners were found at the morning service (in a church with a seating capacity of 360) the (non-resident) Minister had not filled in the census form. This was eventually completed by Richard Nance, a churchwarden. Nance disarmingly wrote that 'perhaps there would be a much better attendance were the Minister and his clerk more popular and respected by the parishioners'.

Bible Christian Index of Attendance 1851



Overall, the Bible Christians accounted for 19% of nonconformist attendances in Cornwall, lagging a good way behind the Wesleyans. While Wesleyan Methodists were present in 85% of Cornish parishes the Bible Christians possessed a chapel or meeting place in 56% of parishes. In Devon, the Bible Christians were more popular than Wesleyan Methodists in a swathe of territory in the north west of that county. But their implantation was less extensive, with much of south and east Devon untouched by Bible Christian activity.

Bible Christian Percentage Share, 1851



The church of the rural poor?

The Bible Christians have long been associated with two features. The first is that the denomination was particularly attractive to agricultural labourers; the second that it was predominantly rural.⁷ But was it rural because it was attractive to farm labourers or did it attract farm labourers because it was rural? In fact, in 1851 there was no significant correlation between Bible Christian attendances and male occupations. This is unlike the Wesleyan Methodists who were positively correlated with mining and fishing communities and negatively associated with agricultural districts. As we have seen, the early Bible Christians tended to move into districts where the Wesleyans were less active or where they had decided to cease active missioning. This in turn explains its concentration in rural, agricultural areas.

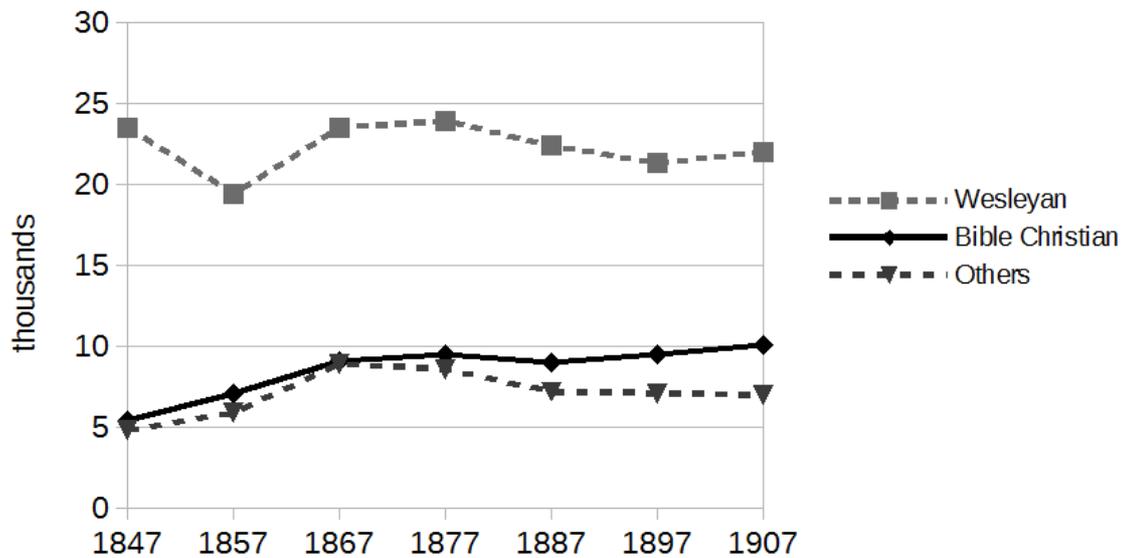
John Probert has challenged the myth that the Bible Christians consisted solely of agricultural labourers.⁸ As he points out, the socio-economic make-up of their membership merely reflected local occupational structures. In agricultural areas they were mainly composed of agriculturists; where they were able to penetrate mining communities we find a considerable number of miners in their chapels; in fishing communities there was a large number of fishermen and their families and so on. Because agricultural labourers outnumbered farmers, more labourers would be found in Bible Christian congregations than farmers, outside the far north of Cornwall and the Week St Mary circuit that is. There, small farmers seem to have been attracted to the denomination in equal numbers. That said, as the Bible Christians were in 1851 confined mainly to rural districts and as the rural mining parishes had already been claimed by Wesleyan Methodism, their membership was always in consequence likely to be dominated by agricultural labourers. So the impression of being a church for the poor was reinforced, even though the Bible Christians' membership structure was more a function of its geography than the result of any special appeal to the poor.

However, the Bible Christians were most definitely a rural sect at mid-century. They were very distinctive as, unlike other varieties of Methodism, they moved from the countryside into the towns rather than from the towns to the countryside. In 1851 the denomination was still weak in most urban areas across Cornwall and Devon. And even when they did manage to establish a meeting place they found it difficult to compete with those other chapels which had been founded earlier. For example, there was no Bible Christian activity in Redruth in 1851. A Bible Christian society was later formed in the town in 1860 by some members who had moved from neighbouring Gwennap. This society then endured a constant struggle to maintain itself in a context of multiple Methodist (and other nonconformist) chapels. John Probert points out the significant consequences of the Bible Christians' rural aspect. As a result the organisation lacked the support of urban professional and middle classes. This reinforced their perceived lower status and meant that they lacked the well-heeled financial benefactors who could help keep them and their chapels afloat.

After the 1851 census

Nonetheless, despite a lack of middle class patronage, the Bible Christians were well able to hold their own after 1851. Moreover, they succeeded in expanding their relative share of the Methodist community. In fact, Bible Christian membership in Cornwall rose rapidly in the 1860s and 70s to reach 9,500 in 1877, up from 6,400 at the time of the 1851 census. Numbers went on growing after the 1870s, to reach 10,100 members on the eve of Methodist union in 1907.⁹ This is even more impressive when we remember that the Cornish population fell by around 10% in these decades as the result of mass emigration. Moreover, it contrasts markedly with the other Methodist denominations where membership stagnated after the 1870s. Only the United Methodist Free Church (earlier known as the Wesleyan Methodist Association) grew faster from 1851 to 1907. However, that denomination saw all its growth occur before 1877, after which its membership was stable. Put another way, Bible Christian membership had stood at 28% of the Wesleyan membership in Cornwall in 1851. By 1907 it had risen to 46%. The Bible Christians were the most successfully performing Methodist denomination in Cornwall in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Methodist membership: 1857-1907



Historians of Methodism have strangely failed to make much of this phenomenon. Yet its implications cry out for further research on the relationship between Bible Christianity and late nineteenth century cultural and political identities in Cornwall. Why was it that during the Victorian 'salvation industry' period the Bible Christians were able to expand their appeal while other Methodists languished or declined after the 1870s?¹⁰ To some extent this was a function of differential emigration rates, as Wesleyan miners were more likely to depart for overseas, but that cannot explain the absolute growth of Bible Christian membership. Furthermore, what consequences did this have for religious life in Cornwall and the Cornish identity? If the latter was strongly structured by Methodism then what did the growing role played by Bible Christians in the later Victorian and Edwardian years portend? Earlier, Bible Christians had not been keen on fashionable fripperies. Some of them had condemned 'frills, laces, curling the hair and double-breasted coats' while the denomination was slow to welcome organs into its chapels.¹¹ Did the social conservatism associated with the sect influence working class Cornish culture more generally in the later nineteenth century? Is it too fanciful to suggest that the democratic, egalitarian manners and tastes that characterised late nineteenth century popular Cornish culture also owe something to the growing sway of the Bible Christians, the church of the poor?

There may also be an underplayed role for the Bible Christians in the forging of a nonconformist radicalism in the late nineteenth century. A lot of nonsense has been written about a 'Liberal-Methodist nexus', which is sometimes simplistically deemed to have appeared in the early nineteenth century, even before the Bible Christians had been founded. In fact, it was not until the 1840s that middle class Wesleyans who had the vote began less ambiguously to view themselves as nonconformists. This then brought them closer to what was fast becoming nonconformity's political wing in the 1860s, the emerging Gladstonian Liberal Party. In 1881 William Grylls, a Liberal solicitor, pointed out that Wesleyan Methodist 'preachers and people may be depended on much more than 25 years ago, as Liberals'.¹² What was becoming clear by the 1880s had still been uncertain in the 1850s and 1860s. But, with the expansion of the franchise in 1867 and particularly in 1884, a new more working class, male electorate was in the making.

Those new voters would have been much more likely to have been influenced by the Bible

Christians, who, as we have seen, were expanding their influence within the larger body of Cornish Methodism at this time. Perhaps the influence of Bible Christians appears in the social conservatism and simple egalitarianism of early twentieth century Cornish Liberalism. Moreover, religious, political and territorial identities may have fused in other ways. The Bible Christians, straddling the Tamar, had always been comfortable with cross-border activities. Indeed, confined largely to the south west of Britain, they might be seen as an early 'Devonwall' institution. It is entirely possible that their attitudes to Devonwall coloured twentieth century Liberal Party ambivalence about the significance of the Cornish border, especially as the Bible Christians' nineteenth century core areas of support were replicated neatly in the rise of 'Tamarside Liberalism' in the 1950s and 1960s.

The geography of the Bible Christians, limited by the context of the early growth of Methodism in the more industrial west of Cornwall in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to heartlands in mid and east Cornwall and across the border in Devon, may be a lot more significant than previously considered. The denomination's relative success in late nineteenth century Cornwall requires further investigation as does its links to the emergence of what many see as the 'classic' Cornish identity and the Liberalism closely associated with that identity by the Edwardian period. Socially conservative but culturally egalitarian, the Bible Christians may well have played a critical but hitherto understated role in the creation of twentieth century territorial and political identities in Cornwall.

- 1 The best and most detailed account of the growth and historical geography of Cornish Methodism is David Luker, 'Cornish Methodism, Revivalism and popular belief, c.1780-1870', unpublished D.Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 1987.
- 2 For revivals see David Luker, 'Revivalism in Theory and Practice: The Case of Cornish Methodism', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 37.4 (1986), pp. ; John Rule, 'Explaining Revivalism: The Case of Cornish Methodism', *Southern History* 20/21 (1998-99), pp. 168-188.
- 3 'Memoir of Francis Benton,', *Bible Christian Magazine* 9 (1844), pp. 34-40.
- 4 The census report can be accessed at Histpop: Online Historical Population Reports at <http://www.histpop.org/ohpr/servlet/PageBrowser2?ResourceType=Census&ResourceType=Legislation&ResourceType=Essays&ResourceType=Registrar%20General&ResourceType=TNA&SearchTerms=census%20of%20religious%20worship&simple=yes&path=Results&active=yes&titlepos=0&mno=32&pageseq=1>. The detailed returns for Devon have been published in Michael Wickes, *Devon in the religious census of 1851: a transcript of the Devon section of the 1851 church census*, the author, 1990. The returns for Cornwall remain unpublished but are available at the Cornwall Record Office, FS/2/93-95.
- 5 Keith Snell, *Church and Chapel in the North Midlands: religious observance in the nineteenth century*, Leicester University Press, Leicester, 1991, p. 52.
- 6 For the local history of the Bible Christians in Luxulyan see John Rowe, *Methodism in Luxulyan: a brief history of Methodism in the parish of Luxulyan*, the author, 2001.
- 7 Keith Snell and Paul Ell, *Rival Jerusalems: The Geography of Victorian Religion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 153.
- 8 John Probert, 'The Bible Christians the odd man out?', *Journal of the Cornish Methodist Historical Society* 9.2 (1998), pp. 36-40.
- 9 Peter Hayden, 'Culture, creed and conflict: Methodism and Politics in Cornwall, c.1832-1979', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Liverpool, 1982, pp. 427ff.
- 10 For the context of the 'salvation industry' see Bernard Deacon, 'Religion and community: frameworks and issues', *Family & Community History* 5.1 (2002), pp. 33-44.
- 11 John Probert, *The worship and devotion of Cornish Methodism*, the author, Redruth, 1978.
- 12 Cited in Edwin Jaggard, *Cornwall Politics in the Age of Reform 1790-1885*, Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 1999, p. 203