John Wesley: a Lincolnshire lad.

John Wesley and all but one of his siblings were yellowbellies – eighteen of them were born either in the village of South Ormsby or else in the little nearby town of Epworth situated in what is now the unitary authority of North Lincolnshire. In those days, it was known as the Isle of Axelholme, an inland island surrounded by rivers, streams, bogs and meres. The rector of Epworth and his wife, parents of those children, were not Lincolnshire folk at all. They were Londoners, both the offspring of clergymen who had been ejected from their livings in 1662 for refusing to agree to the Act of Uniformity which sought to impose order on a Church of England still fighting for its identity in the aftermath of the Reformation a century earlier.

Samuel Wesley, the rector, was well connected but his friends in high places were unable to secure a comfortable living for him. It was always thought that it was Queen Mary, impressed by a flattering poem he'd written for her, who offered him Epworth but more recent research suggests it was King William. In any case, though an improvement on the very primitive (and poorly paid) parish of South Ormsby, it was far from the kind of place he'd longed for. He and Susanna, his wife of ten years, arrived in 1697 with four small children. They settled into a parish that was replete with difficulties. While Susanna seemed constantly to be giving birth (only ten of her children survived into adulthood), Samuel was coping with serious problems, some of them of his own making. He remained in Epworth until his death in 1735.

The people of the parish had sided with Parliament against the King in the Civil War (1642- 1651) and for a very good reason. Their whole way of life had been destroyed by the decision to drain the land in order to turn it over to agriculture. A brilliant Dutch engineer, Sir Cornelius Vermuyden (1627-1629), had been commissioned to undertake this work. It may have been a logical (and even desirable) thing to do but, at a stroke, it destroyed a whole way of life. An ancient deed had conferred on the commoners the right to forage, to gather reeds, take fish and fowl and other wildlife for food. With the draining of the land, all this was lost. So too was such traditional employment as that done by swanniers and ferry operators. Annual otter hunts on the River Trent came to an end and a great deal of local culture was lost. We can hardly wonder at the resentment this caused. It festered well into the new century and Samuel Wesley, a High Tory and Crown appointee, would undoubtedly have been on the receiving end of much of this from the very moment he arrived.

Samuel Wesley did nothing to assuage the villagers' discontent. In the rowdy (and contested) election of 1705, he played an active part in supporting the Tory candidate. He wrote tracts which were highly critical of dissenting groups. They, in turn, vented their spleen on the rector, "drumming, shouting and firing pistols and guns" under the rectory windows, threatening to "squeeze his guts out" if they caught him and even issuing threats to his children. Their animals were stabbed and there is a distinct possibility that it was a mob of dissenters that set fire to the Rectory in 1702 and 1709. It was during the second of these that John Wesley, then a small boy aged six, was rescued from the flames by a human ladder formed under his bedroom window. He saw the hand of God in this miraculous escape; it led him to describe himself as a "brand plucked from the burning."

Three Wesley boys survived into adulthood. All of them were sent to London for their formal education as soon as they were old enough. But not before they had all received a rigorous formation at the hands of their truly remarkable mother Susanna. It was she who taught them to read, to keep their promises, to confess their faults. She believed that it was vital to "break the wills" of her children as early as possible. Only then, she believed, could the slower process of understanding be developed. This seems to have worked well enough.

In 1714, armed with a letter of introduction from the Duke of Buckingham, John began his life at Charterhouse. Charles was later to attend Westminster School where the oldest boy, Samuel, had become a teacher. John and Charles went on to Christchurch, Oxford, where they excelled at their studies. John graduated in 1724 and, after his ordination as deacon in the following year (he was ordained priest in 1728 at the hands of the Archbishop of Canterbury), he was elected to a fellowship of Lincoln College, a position he kept until his marriage in 1751. By this time Samuel, the oldest son had taken a position in Tiverton and remained there with his wife and children for the rest of his life. He was conscientious in his desire to keep a watchful eye on his younger siblings and also on the needs of his ageing parents. He became critical of the "methodistical" development of his two younger brothers and put a lot of pressure on John to return to Epworth to help his father and, eventually, to take over the parish from him, something John resolutely refused to do.

The direct association of the Wesley family with Lincolnshire ended with Samuel's death in 1735. By that time, the seeds of what was to become

Methodism had been planted. Charles Wesley and a group of his Oxford friends formed an association that was often referred to as "The Holy Club"; John Wesley was drawn into this and gave it shape. Its timetabled activities – study, prayer, prison visitation, fellowship etc., - led bemused observers to describe those who attended it as "Methodists" – because they went about their lives so methodically. This intense devotional activity made the brothers aware of a need on both their parts for some deeper inner awakening which, though they were both ordained, seemed still lacking to them. Later, John was to describe himself at this stage in his life as an "almost Christian."

The two brothers accompanied General James Oglethorpe to America where he was in the process of founding the colony of Georgia. Despite their woeful failure in this venture, John and Charles became mightily impressed by the spiritual depth of some Moravian fellow-travellers. They also witnessed the cruelties of American slavery and thus began a life-long passionate disapproval of it. John's very last letter was written to William Wilberforce in 1791, just days before his death, in which he urged the young MP to continue with his efforts to banish "the execrable villainy" of slavery.

The search for an inward confirmation of the Christian principles to which their lives were so obviously dedicated came to climactic moment in May 1738 when both brothers underwent a profound conversion experience. "I felt my heart was strangely warmed," John wrote in his journal, "and I received an assurance that God had forgiven my sins, even mine." Charles burst into song, "My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed thee." After a brief flirtation with Moravianism, John Wesley decided to launch a Methodist society. He rented a ruined foundry at Moorfields in East London, did some hasty repairs, and began his work there towards the end of 1739. Methodism was now born. It was never intended to be a schismatic body, a new church. Those who attended its meetings were urged to see them as complementary to the services of the parish church. And this continued to be the stance of John and Charles Wesley until their dying day. Events were, however, to point in other directions.

The "Foundery" (*sic*) stood just two hundred yards to the south of the New Chapel which replaced it in 1778. It is now called Wesley's Chapel and I have been its minister for the last 19 years. All the distinctive hallmarks of Methodism can be traced to what was happening there. The message being preached was aimed at everyone without distinction, even "harlots and publicans and thieves" could enter into a gracious relationship with their

Maker. There could be no question of mere pietism – it would be a case of "practical divinity," there would be perceptible outcomes. Members visited people on "death row" in nearby Newgate prison and even, on occasion, accompanied them on the grisly ride across town to the gibbet at Tyburn. A ragged school, for girls and boys, functioned there with the children from the surrounding Moorfields slums clothed and fed according to need. A prototypical health service was established that was free at the point of use. There was a "revolving loan fund", a micro-finance project, to help people with their cash flow problems or else to offer some venture capital to those wanting to establish a business. Elderly and indigent people were housed and fed. This extraordinary programme stands as a reminder not only to non-Methodists but also to subsequent generations of Methodists of the core values (and practices) of Methodism.

Soon, John Wesley was travelling the length and breadth of the country. Bristol, Newcastle and London became his staging posts. In the course of his ministry he is said to have travelled (on horseback) 250,000 miles – an average of 5,000 per annum. He made 33 visits to Ireland and included the Channel Islands in his itinerary. He would preach anywhere he could get a hearing – market places, inns, fields, private homes. He confided to his journal that, in putting himself around like this, he had "submitted to become more vile."

At first, these populist activities were frowned upon by members of his own class. And some thought that they might be subversive. The year 1745 saw the arrival of Bonnie Prince Charlie and the last stutterings of Jacobite rebellion. The Methodist insistence on an activist faith led some to suspect the Wesleys of endangering public order. Indeed, John was the subject of a cartoon where he was labelled "a Jesuit fox."

Little could stop the spread of Methodism, however, and it eventually gained a national character. It might have remained what it was always intended to be, a renewal movement within the Church of England. But events in America changed all that.

The American victory in their war for independence left the Church in complete disarray. The Bishop of London was nominally the Bishop of America too and he was certainly not going to send priests to the upstart revolutionaries who had defeated the king's armies. John Wesley wrote to him a number of times pleading with him that the pastoral needs of the people of America over-rode all other considerations. But the Bishop was adamant. So

John Wesley took action. Invoking a precedent from the fourth century Alexandrian church, he set pastors apart, he ordained them, for service in America. He authorised his right hand man (Dr Thomas Coke) to travel to Baltimore to ensure an orderly transfer of power to the leader of the American Methodists, a man named Francis Asbury. Their famous meeting on Christmas Day 1784 marks the beginning of the Methodist Episcopal Church of America. This act did more to separate Methodists and Anglicans than any other and was a decisive step along the way to the creation of a Methodist Church in Britain.

Charles Wesley died in 1788 – “the sweet singer of Methodism” had contributed an armoury of hymns to his people, enabling them to sing their theology and learn their catechism through song. John Wesley died three years later. He’d acquired the status of Grand Old Man by then and his movement had already spread into the West Indies, parts of West Africa and continental Europe.

Roy Hattersley, in his recent biography of John Wesley, is quite astringent in his assessment of Wesley’s character which he doesn’t find very attractive. But he makes a strong case to suggest that the work begun by Wesley in the eighteenth century became one of the shaping influences on nineteenth century Britain. The development of Trade Unionism, the birth of the Labour Party, the rise of benevolent capitalism, a devotion to social enterprise, a commitment to education and learning, all of which can be traced to the age of Wesley, flourished mightily in the century following his death. Methodism has continued to grow. It has become a worldwide communion and currently numbers in excess of 70million.

Let me end as I began – in Lincolnshire. In 1742, long after his family’s connection with the county had come it its end, John Wesley entered Epworth on one of his preaching tours. In common with so many others at that time, the Rector refused him permission to preach in the parish church. So he jumped on to his father’s tomb which became the platform from which he began to preach. A large crowd soon gathered. And Wesley was able to reveal the energy, imagination and determination which were the hallmarks of his entire ministry. He had (literally) a field day and the event became part of the Wesley legend.

Towards the end of his life, he paid his last visit to Epworth and seems to have been overcome by nostalgia. He quoted the Latin poet Ovid and offered his own translation:

> The natal soil to all how strangely sweet!
> The place where first he breathed who can forget?

A Lincolnshire lad to the end!

Leslie Griffiths.