Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

When Charles Wesley arrived at Westminster School in 1716, he'd not quite reached the age of 9. Yet he came formidably well equipped for the intellectual road that lay ahead of him.

His father, Samuel, was the Rector of Epworth – a boggy parish on the Isle of Axelholme in Lincolnshire. His wife, Susanna, had borne him 19 children only ten of whom survived infancy. There were three boys and seven girls. The oldest son was named for his father. He was 19 years older than Charles and, at the time of the youngest brother's birth, he was already at Christchurch, Oxford, after completing his studies at Westminster. The remaining son, destined to be the most famous of them all, was John. He was almost 5 years older than Charles and, unlike the other two boys, he went to Charterhouse. Both parents were the children of clergymen who'd been ejected from their parishes in 1662 for refusing to give their assent to the Act of Uniformity. But both Samuel and Susanna had found their way back into the established church. They were high church Tories with some sympathy for the Stuarts. The father had accepted the inevitability of a change of dynasty after the death of King William but Susanna was obdurate in her loyalty to "the king over the water." She seems to have been a closet Jacobite and, in line with this, there has been some speculation about her reasons for naming her last child as she did.

Like all his siblings, Charles was home-educated by his mother. Her pedagogical methods, together with her steely discipline and determination, ensured that all her children could face the world well prepared for its demands. Especially the boys. She began their education when they reached the age of 5. They were expected to learn the alphabet on their very first day of schooling. Soon they were reading the scriptures, singing the psalms, listening to edifying stories, taking an interest in what was happening around them. Long before their formal education began, their mother had seen to it that she'd broken their wills; only then, she believed, could she be sure of success. She set aside a special one-to-one time for each of her offspring. Charles was "Saturday's child." In these sessions, she would see to it that the children could handle adult conversation. It was expected of them that they should obey instructions, speak kindly to one another and forgive each other graciously.

By the time Charles was ready to go away to school, his brother Samuel had completed his studies at Oxford and was well established as an Usher at

Westminster. Not only that, but he'd recently married the daughter of the Rev'd John Berry who kept a boarding-house for Westminster scholars. So Samuel and his new wife Ursula could accommodate the younger brother and keep a close eye on him too.

Charles Wesley arrived at Westminster in 1716 at a turning point in the nation's history. The Elector of Hanover, King George the First, had just come to the throne and this ushered in a Whig ascendancy within the political order of the day. The ecclesiastical realm, meanwhile, was dominated by bishops of an erastian disposition who became the spiritual arm of the social and political order, ready to tolerate and carry out its decisions. So the Stuarts, the Tories and the High Church party were all pushed to the sidelines. The Jacobite rebellion of 1715, an uprising intended to kill the new regime at birth, offered proof that there were significant groups of people who were deeply resentful at the passing away of the old order.

Westminster - the parliament, the Abbey and the school – were particularly affected by these developments. Thomas Spratt was Bishop of Rochester and Dean of Westminster Abbey from the early 1680s till his death in 1713. His tenure had begun in the reign of James II, gone through the Glorious Revolution and survived until the eve of Queen Anne's death. He'd had to be Janus-faced to survive these changes. His successor in both roles, Francis Atterbury, was nowhere near as subtle or pragmatic. He'd already nailed his colours to the mast in the way he'd defended George Sachaverell in the disturbances following his November 5th sermon of 1710. Indeed, it was he who wrote Sachaverell's much-admired speech delivered in his defence at the bar of the House of Commons. Though he'd sworn the oath of fealty to William and Mary in 1688, he joined others who plotted the return of the Stuarts. There is some likelihood that, but for Queen Anne's sudden death in 1714, these activists might have secured their objectives and restored what they considered "legitimate" rule. In the event, Atterbury was arrested, imprisoned in the Tower, tried, stripped of all office, and banished to exile in France. Suspicion reigned on all hands, nowhere more than at Westminster.

There was no way the nine year old Charles Wesley could remain on the margins of this tumult. His brother Samuel had been closely related to the political events that played themselves out at the very heart of the school. He'd enjoyed the patronage of both Thomas Spratt and Francis Atterbury. Spratt had ordained his father and, perhaps for that reason, chose him as a reading companion, a role he didn't really like; he felt suffocated by the

attentions of the Bishop, describing him as his *inimicus amicus* (his unfriendly friend). It was very different with Atterbury, however. Here was a man who fostered his gifts and offered him real friendship. Samuel remained loyal to Atterbury throughout his troubles and, indeed, after his condemnation; he defended him publicly and wrote to him in exile. It's hardly surprising that he was widely suspected of sharing Atterbury's views.

John and Charles Wesley were just children when all these events were unfolding. Their older brother's position, however, was only too obvious. And it led to his losing all chance of preferment – in the school and in the Church. When Dr Nichol became headmaster in 1733, Wesley (by then the Head Usher) had high hopes of stepping into his shoes as Under Master. He'd played a significant role in establishing St George's Hospital at Hyde Park corner, the first public institution of this kind and yet, despite his efforts within and beyond the school, he was passed over. This filled him with a bitterness which he nursed to the end of his life. He left Westminster to become headmaster of Blundell's School in Tiverton where he remained until his death in 1740.

The fact that Charles Wesley spent five years living with his oldest sibling is too often forgotten by those seeking to evaluate the qualities of the younger man. After four years under his brother's roof, Charles entered St Peter's College as a King's scholar. He was then 13 years of age and, four years later, became Captain of the School. His whole career at the school saw him close to Samuel "whose fine scholarship, poetic genius and Christian feeling made him a fit guide and counsellor for his younger brother." So wrote John Telford, one of the earliest biographers of Charles Wesley. I believe that much of what happened in Charles' later life can best be explained by the intimate relationship with his oldest brother during his formative years at Westminster School.

Charles Wesley forged friendships whilst at school which were to last him the whole of his life. The most significant of these was with William Murray. Murray had come to London from Perth where he'd attended the local grammar school for a couple of years. His family had had strong dealings with the Jacobites and this was not a propitious time for them. What's more, Murray spoke with a pronounced Scottish accent and was therefore subject to much taunting and mockery. On one occasion this led to a fight on the Green within the Cloisters when, surrounded by a large crowd of cheering and jeering boys, Charles Wesley stepped in to defend Murray. He fought off those seeking to down the newcomer. There were to be other such battles to fight and win

and Charles was always ready. The two boys became firm friends. Their subsequent lives went off in radically different directions but, curiously, both of them went on to play a significant part in preparing public opinion for the great cause of abolishing the institution of slavery. And they became neighbours towards the end of their lives and called on each other frequently.

In 1735, almost a decade after leaving Westminster, Charles Wesley travelled to Georgia as secretary to General Oglethorpe the first governor of the colony. He remained there for just over a year before being sent back to London with despatches from Oglethorpe. Illness prevented his ever returning but he never forgot the time he spent there. An article in the founding charter of the colony specifically forbade slavery – for fear that runaway slaves might seek refuge in the Spanish-controlled territory of Florida. Within fifteen years however, after the military defeat of the Spanish, slavery was legalised in Georgia though it was as he travelled through the Carolinas on his way to London that Wesley had direct experience of the institution. What he saw made him an inveterate opponent of slavery. The descriptions in his journal still make grim reading. This is what he wrote in August 1736:

> [Journal August 2nd 1736] I had observed much, and heard more, of the cruelty of masters towards their Negroes; but now I received an authentic account of some horrid instances thereof. The giving a child a slave of its own age to tyrannize over, to beat and abuse out of sport, was, I myself saw, a common practice. ……A gentleman I often met [would] first nail up a negro by the ears, then order him to be whipped in the severest manner, and then to have scalding water thrown over him, so that the poor creature could not stir for four months after. Another much-applauded punishment is drawing their slaves' teeth. One Colonel Lynch is universally known to have cut off a poor negro's legs; and to kill several of them every year by his barbarities. ….. [Another man, a teacher in Charlestown, once] whipped a she-slave so long that she fell down at his feet for dead. When, by the help of a physician, she was so far recovered as to show signs of life, he repeated the whipping with equal rigour, and concluded with dropping hot sealing-wax upon her flesh. Her crime was over-filling a tea cup.

This direct experience made him and his brother John implacable opponents of slavery. John wrote his *Thoughts upon Slavery* in 1774 and, from his death bed in 1791, wrote his very last letter to William Wilberforce urging him to pit all

his energies in the struggle to put an end to what he called “this execrable villainy.”

It’s interesting to note the way William Murray too became a significant player in the campaign to abolish slavery. In 1756, he was made Lord Chief Justice and ennobled as Baron (later Earl of) Mansfield. In James Somersett’s case in 1772, he ruled in favour of the discharge of a black slave who’d escaped his American master whilst on a trading voyage to England. The slave was captured and pressed aboard a British ship by people intent on selling him back into slavery when the ship arrived in Jamaica. [Slavery is] “so odious,” he wrote, “that nothing can be suffered to support it but positive law. Whatever inconveniences may, therefore, follow from a decision, I cannot say this case is allowed or approved by the law of England; and therefore the black [man] must be discharged.” He remained uncertain how the law might be enforced and this led him, in his will, to specify that his great niece, a mulatto named Dido Elizabeth Belle, should be considered a free woman. She was the illegitimate daughter of his nephew; she’d been born into slavery in the West Indies and remained technically a slave though she lived with the nephew and his wife for 30 years. This was a simple but significant step towards creating an atmosphere within which efforts to abolish the slave trade (and indeed slavery itself) could be furthered.

Wesley and Murray became near neighbours towards the end of their lives, one living in Chesterfield Street and the other in Bloomsbury Square. They’d frequently walk over to each other’s house and continue their friendship over a glass of wine. When Murray’s house was sacked and his library burned by a mob during the Gordon riots in 1780, Charles Wesley was among the first to comfort him and offer him solace. The twilight years of both men offer a charming picture of a lifelong friendship.

Other schoolboy friendships produced a more variegated pattern of ongoing relationships. Once Charles Wesley embarked on his evangelistic career, his lifestyle hardly lent itself to much social inter-action with his old friends. Take Richard Robinson, for example. He and Wesley left Westminster for Christchurch together in 1726. They’d held leading roles in the Latin play produced at the school in their final year. It was Terence’s *Andria*, an intricate little play about love and social class where an impossible situation eventually gets sorted out by the discovery that a peasant girl was all along the daughter of someone of noble birth. Shakespeare resorted to this kind of plot again and again. Richard Robinson played the part of an Athenian nobleman named

Chremes while Charles Wesley acted a slave named Davus. Chremes is imprisoned within the attitudes of his social set while Davus is free to roam, to pick up information wherever he can and to act on it creatively. Looking back on these roles and at subsequent events in the lives of Robinson and Wesley, this theatrical moment seems to have anticipated the social roles they were eventually to play in real life.

After their time at Oxford, they went their separate ways. But their paths crossed from time to time and the friendship they'd had for each other soon blossomed again. By 1748, Charles and John Wesley were itinerant preachers breathing life and shape into the emerging Methodist movement. In July of that year, while Charles Wesley was preaching in an orchard near Bristol, a coach drew up and those sitting in it listened attentively to his sermon and sang the hymns. One of them, Sir William Bunbury, hailed Wesley as an old school friend and they had a good conversation. The party returned to the preaching on successive days and, on the last occasion, they brought Richard Robinson with them. The two former thespians, both now ordained clergymen, seemed glad to see each other but were soon locked into a theological argument. Robinson told Wesley that he had refused to believe many of the scandalous things he had heard about Charles and John Wesley but that his greatest surprise had been to hear that they employed laymen. "It is your fault, my lord," Charles is reported to have said. "My fault, Mr Wesley?" "Yes, my lord, yours and your brethren's." "How so, sir?" said Dr Robinson. "Why, my lord, you hold your peace, and so the stones cry out." The friends took a turn around the field in silence. Then Dr Robinson said, "But I hear they are unlearned men." "Very true, my lord; in general they are so; so the dumb ass rebukes the prophet." Wesley declared that when God called anyone to preach the gospel and his calling became evident by repeated conversions then he wouldn't ever dare reject such a person. They talked with great candour and obvious affection for each other.

Robinson, soon after this meeting, headed for Ireland. Through the influence of two Lords - Holderness and Sandwich (both laymen) and two Dukes - Dorset and Northumberland (both laymen), he was soon enjoying his own very different experience of itinerant ministry as he became successively Bishop of Killala (1751), Ferns (1759) and Kildare (1761) before his final translation to the archiepiscopacy of Armagh as Primate of All Ireland in 1761. Had the two school chums met after this astronomical rise to power, I'd like to imagine that Charles Wesley might, with wicked irony, have pointed to the role of lay people in effecting the prelate's advancement in life. Robinson turned out to be a very

able and committed leader; he was soon transforming Armagh from "a collection of mud cabins to a handsome town." John Wesley visited Armagh in 1787 and found the city strikingly endowed with fine buildings but, quoting the Latin poet Horace, he offered a wry comment on the prelate's continuing obsession with his building projects. A piece of marble, suggested Wesley, should serve as a *memento mori.* He should be thinking of the tomb that he'd soon need rather than yet another palace waiting to be built.

Charles Wesley would have bumped into a dozen or so Westminster schoolmates in Oxford. He was away from the influence of his family for the first time in his life and his undergraduate days took on a surprising pattern. He seems to have enjoyed the company of a school contemporary called Stephen Lushington, something of a smart, elegant, indolent young man, not averse to losing money at cards, failing to put in an appearance at the beginning of term and susceptible to female charm. Charles seems to have had thoughts of copying the Lushington example, finding it difficult to work, only too easy to play. He was, for a while, bewitched by a young actress and only drew back in alarm when the young lady's mother sought to press him into marriage. It was that experience, together with the arrival of his brother John to take up a fellowship at Lincoln College, that forced Charles to take stock of his position and to re-connect with the lifestyle he'd enjoyed before his arrival at Oxford.

The influence of the school and the network of friends and acquaintances (good and not-so-good) it offered Wesley should not be underestimated. Bishops, politicians, top lawyers, country squires, educators, aristocrats, - all retained fond memories of Wesley and he, in turn, was always glad to encounter any of them as he travelled hither and yon. But his life was about to veer off into a direction radically different from any of theirs. And it's to that we must now turn.

Charles Wesley was undoubtedly chastened by the worldly life he'd been living and the near miss occasioned by his flirtation with the actress. He resolved to give greater attention to his spiritual life. With a small group of friends at Christchurch he formed what came to be known as the "Holy Club." At first, they met together to pray and read the Scriptures; soon they added hymn singing to these activities. Wesley, with his greater erudition, was concerned as far as possible to revive the traditions of the Apostolic Church. This meant, as far as they understood it, regular reception of the sacrament, so sadly neglected by their contemporaries, the nourishment of the interior spiritual life by regular devotional readings, and the acceptance of religious discipline

through fasting, almsgiving and a renunciation of worldly pleasures. One of their number decided to visit a condemned prisoner in the Oxford prison. Soon Wesley and his associates were making regular visits to the Castle and the other Oxford prison, the Bocardo, the chief inmates of which were poor debtors. They took services and administered Communion, conversed with and comforted the prisoners, distributing pious tracts, giving alms, clothing and fuel. They also gave some teaching their children. They took immense pains to help the poor prisoners, interesting themselves in the legal aspects of some of their cases. Charles Wesley retained an active interest in the visitation of prisoners for much of the rest of his life. Members of the Holy Club frequently ran the gauntlet of the sarcasm and jibes of fellow students. And, no doubt Wesley and his friends displayed a degree of priggishness too. They were soon being called "Methodists," a term used either as a badge of honour or else opprobrium as fitted the case. Charles Wesley is often described (and with due reason) as "the first Methodist." His older brother John, however, soon took over the running of the Holy Club; it was a tool that suited his purpose and, under his astute and brilliant leadership, it spread Methodism throughout the university.

Mention has already been made of Charles Wesley's voyage to the newly established colony of Georgia as General Oglethorpe's secretary. His older brother John also went but with a priestly brief – to offer spiritual oversight to the British colonists and, he trusted, to convert the native people to Christianity. The mission of both brothers was thwarted. Charles' health did not allow him to continue in his role and John's zeal was too much for anyone's taste. Both brothers could look back at their American adventure with a sense of utter failure. Nor was that all. They'd met a group of Moravians whose faith had impressed them mightily. It seemed to be of a different order from theirs. Each of the brothers came to see himself as, in John's descriptive phrase, "an almost Christian." Soon, both these ordained Anglican clergymen were seeking the sense of assurance they'd seen in the Moravians, a missing factor in their own spiritual make-up - the disposition of the soul and the open-ness of the heart, that would allow the Holy Spirit to flood their inner beings with a new understanding of their mission and a release of pent-up energy to go about God's business.

And it came with a bang in 1738. Charles was overwhelmed by a religious experience that carried his faith onto a different level. That was on May 21st of that year. Three days later, his brother John entered into a similar experience. "I felt my heart strangely warmed," he wrote famously in his journal, "I felt I

did trust in Christ, in Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved me from the law of sin and death." Charles recorded his experience in verse. It's from this moment that we begin to see his poetic genius emerge. "And can it be," he wrote, "that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood?" Later in the same hymn he answers his own question resoundingly: "My chains fell off," he wrote, "my heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed thee."

The Methodist movement was well and truly launched and John and Charles Wesley together now threw themselves into the work of, as they put it, spreading scriptural holiness throughout the land. First, they separated from the Moravians. Whilst they had admired the tenacity and assurance of these evangelical Christians, they could not agree with their doctrine of "stillness." The Moravians held no truck for any activity that purported to add to the faith granted them by God: – prayer, fasting, almsgiving, attendance at Holy Communion, all were rejected. For the Wesleys this was nonsense, the "means of grace" were simple acts which could help to focus a believer on the need to grow in faith, or dispose a non-believer towards the claims of faith. This parting of friends led to the Methodists acquiring a place of their own – a disused ruin, a one-time government munitions factory situated near Moorgate, right by the City of London. This building, the "Foundery" as it was called, became the headquarters from which John and Charles Wesley took their revival across the land.

The tireless energy with which they undertook their work still beggars belief. They criss-crossed the country from Newcastle in the North East to the furthest corners of Cornwall in the South West. In London, they addressed huge crowds in the open air at Kennington and Moorfields. They travelled through Yorkshire and the Midlands, into Wales and into Ireland. They preached three, four and five times a day, indoors and out of doors. Increasingly, they were banned from Anglican pulpits, widely reviled for their "enthusiasm." Their exhortations reached swathes of the population who rarely attended church services – tin miners in Cornwall, coal miners in and around Bristol, foundrymen and metal workers in Staffordshire and so many others. As John Wesley put it, they had "submitted to become more vile" by leaving the precincts of the Church and taking their activities into the streets and market places, into the fields and along the highway. The clergy accused them of abandoning the ordered liturgical life of the Church of England. Others accused them of being "Jesuits, seducers, bringers in of the Pretender." They were attacked and persecuted by mobs while the constabulary and magistracy were organised to deny them the

freedom to preach at will. One example must suffice. In May 1743 Charles Wesley, in the company of a band of hymn-singing Methodists, walked from Wednesbury in Staffordshire to Walsall in the company of a band of hymn-singing Methodists. He found his opponents lying in wait for him:

> "The street was full of fierce Ephesian beasts (the principal man setting them on), who roared and shouted, and threw stones incessantly. Many struck without hurting me. I besought them in calm love to be reconciled to God in Christ. While I was departing, a stream of ruffians was suffered to bear me from the steps. I rose, and having given the blessing, was beat down again. So the third time, when we had returned thanks to the God or our salvation. I then, from the steps, bade them depart in peace, and walked quietly back through the thickest rioters. They reviled us, but had no commission to touch a hair of our heads."

Such incidents were numerous. Excrement and dead cats, as well as sticks and stones were thrown. This was a time of turbulence in the country at large. There was widespread fear of another attempt to restore the Stuarts. So these Methodist disturbances were suspected by some to be a deliberate agitation intended to subvert good order and make a Jacobite rebellion more likely to succeed.

Thousands of people responded to the preaching of Charles Wesley and he wore himself out in the work he felt called to do. His marriage in 1749 to Sarah Gwynne saw the couple set up home in Bristol. From this base Charles superintended the Methodist work in the south and west of the country (with occasional forays further afield). Their happy marriage was scarred by the death of a succession of children in infancy. It must have been with some relief that, in 1761, with two young children (their third was yet to be born) they left Bristol for London. The frenetic energy he'd invested in the cause during the 1740s was modulated in the decade following his marriage. Once in London, he stopped itineracy altogether and limited his activities, focusing now on the work being done in the capital city. He also developed a social life, especially in his desire to further the development of his astonishingly gifted children.

He was now able to develop his friendship with Priscilla Rich, the wife of John Rich who'd built the Covent Garden Theatre in the early 1730s. She was converted under his ministry in the mid-1740s and gave up her life as an actress as a consequence of her new-found faith. But she didn't give up her friendships or the network of contacts enjoyed by her husband. And Charles

Wesley was able to benefit from these. Mrs Rich had three step daughters. One, Isabella, was married to John Frederick Lampe, a German who'd lived in London since 1725 and who played the bassoon in the Covent Garden Theatre orchestra. He was one of the leading composers of his day. He too was converted under Wesley's preaching and was soon setting his hymns to music. The two men became firm friends. The second step daughter was Cecilia who married Thomas Arne. She was frequently engaged by Handel to sing in his oratorios. Arne was a leading operatic composer of the time. This is the man to whom we owe *Rule Britannia*!. And the third step-daughter Charlotte had married John Beard, one of the most eminent of English tenors at that time, for whom Handel composed the tenor parts in the *Messiah* and other oratorios. John Beard was the first London authority to confirm the verdict on the rare talent of Charles Wesley's first son (also called Charles). Mrs Rich had given the youngster (born in 1757) a copy of Handel's songs and Beard gave him Scarlatti's lessons and music by Purcell. Dr Johann Christoph Pepusch also hovered on the edges of this amazing musical circle. He was the organist at the Charterhouse and greatly sought after in royal circles. Mrs Rich's step daughters were all taught by Handel. When the great man quarrelled with the conductors at the Opera House, her husband put his own theatre at his disposal and this was how the paths of Handel and Wesley crossed. They met at the Richs' home in Chelsea and enjoyed their occasional meetings for fourteen years until Handel's death in 1759.

It's worth mentioning at this point an event that occurred in 1826. Samuel Wesley, the second son of Charles and Sarah (another Samuel!), had become one of England's leading musicians. He was an organist and in the forefront of efforts to popularise the music of J.S.Bach in the first decade of the 19th century. Whilst examining some autograph Handel manuscripts in the Cambridge University Library, he discovered a sheet that contained tunes composed by Handel for three of his father's hymns. The friendship between the two men had clearly been practical and productive as well as merely social.

The actor David Garrick was another member of this astonishing circle of friends. They held soirées at Mrs Rich's Chelsea home and also at the Wesleys' home in Marylebone. There were many raised eyebrows amongst the Methodists and John Fletcher, a national leader of the cause, was led to write in 1771:

> "You have your enemies, as well as your brother; they complain of your love of music, company, fine people, great folks, and the want of your

> former zeal and frugality. I need not put you in mind to cut off sinful appearances."

Wesley weathered these storms easily enough. The hymns and poems that he was writing in huge numbers were his best protection against such criticism. Over 6,000 hymns flowed from his pen in a steady succession. When the first official Methodist Hymn Book was compiled in 1780, it contained 525 hymns, most of them culled from 37 short collections that had begun to leave the press in 1739, a few months after his conversion. This Hymn Book was to the earliest generations of Methodists what the Book of Common Prayer was to Anglicans, the breviary or the rosary to Catholics. They sang their faith. "Methodism was born in song" – so declared the opening words of the Preface. Further reading makes its claims clear:

> "It …. contains all the important truths of our most holy religion, whether speculative or practical; yea, to illustrate them all, and to prove them both by Scripture and Reason. The hymns … are carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians, so that this book is in effect *a little body of experimental and practical divinity."* (my italics).

The beating heart of the book is the section dedicated to "Believers"; here are 283 hymns intended to nurture and strengthen the faith, hope and love of those who have entered the portals of belief. There are ten sub-sets and it may be of interest to list them. These are hymns for believers rejoicing, fighting, praying, watching, working, suffering, groaning for full redemption, brought to the birth, saved and interceding for the world.

What is remarkable about the hymns of Charles Wesley is the number of them that are cheerful, joyous, uplifting, even merry and happy. They combine the cultivation of inward piety with a concern for outward and practical action. These hymns were for use by the body of people brought to faith by the Methodist Revival.

In addition to these "Methodist" hymns, of course, Charles Wesley wrote any number of hymns to resource the classical and traditional festivals of the Church. "Hark! The herald angel sings," "Christ the Lord is risen today," and "Hail the day that sees him rise" are perfect vehicles for congregational singing at Christmas, Easter and the Ascension. He could turn into verse the complicated doctrine of the Trinity with a brilliance all his own:

Three uncompounded Persons One,
One undivided God proclaim:
In essence, nature, substance one,
Through all eternity the same.

Amazing! If he'd been alive in the patristic era they'd have made him Pope!

We can see the learning he'd acquired at Westminster pulsing through his verse. There are abundant references to the Church Fathers, especially Ignatius, Tertullian, Jerome, Eusebius, Lactantius and Augustine. Thomas Aquinas and Thomas ā Kempis figure, so does the Book of Common Prayer. The Caroline divines and William Law touched and sharpened his thought. Secular literature constitutes another rich seam in his creative output. There are allusions to Horace, Virgil, Caesar, Aesop and Homer; and also to Milton, Dryden, Pope, Prior, Young, Shakespeare, Herbert, Quarles, Walter and Cowley. And everything he wrote is shot through with his intimate knowledge and love of Holy Scripture.

He wrote for every conceivable occasion. There are hymns inspired by his conversion, his marriage, the panic surrounding the 1750 earthquake, the rumours of an invasion from France, the defeat of Prince Charles Edward at Culloden, the Gordon riots, every festival of the Christian church, every doctrine of the Christian faith, striking scenes which came within his view, the deaths of friends, little children, and so much else. We can only allude to them here.

Charles Wesley died in July 1788 and was buried at St Marylebone's parish church.

And so we bring this narrative to a close. We began with Charles Wesley and his older brother Samuel at Westminster School. We end by returning to Westminster, but this time to the Abbey. Dean Arthur Stanley in 1876 ordered an inscription to be cut on a flagstone in the south cloister to remember the four "infant children of Samuel Wesley, brother of John Wesley." Then, touchingly, their names and the dates of their death are given:- Nutty 1725, Susanna 1726, Ursula 1727 and Samuel 1731. In fact, Samuel and Ursula Wesley were survived by just one child from the seven they bore. A tragic but not untypical story of that time.

The same Dean Stanley dedicated a carving of John and Charles Wesley by J. Adams-Acton fixed to the wall of the south choir aisle. His wife had died just a short time before and, as he unveiled the tablet, he quoted a verse from one of Charles Wesley's hymns, explaining how deeply he felt its meaning in his present circumstances:

> Come, O Thou traveller unknown,
> Whom still I hold, but cannot see!
> My company before is gone
> And I am left alone with Thee;
> With Thee all night I mean to stay,
> And wrestle till the break of day.

In the words of an early report of this event: "The pathos of the Dean's touching reference to his great bereavement is still fresh in the hearts of those who were in the Chapter House on that memorable morning, when the Old Westminster boy found a fitting memorial in the Abbey he knew and loved so well."

And so this story ends where it began and perhaps now many of us may understand it for the first time.