# “It Came to Pass…”

## *Beatrice C. Stevens*

With notes on
Ely · Sutton · Stretham · Haddenham · Witcham · Wardy Hill · Coveney · Littleport · Little Downham · Pymoor · Westmoor · Prickwillow · Brandon Bank

Foreword by Michael J. Petty

*Transcription checked against the original July 1981 booklet. The printed pagination is preserved. Yellow highlighting marks readings or printed dates requiring verification. The cover map and later handwritten marginal annotations are excluded from the printed-text transcription.*

# FOREWORD by Michael J. Petty

“... how weary, stale, flat and unprofitable...” might have been the thoughts of John Wesley as he waded through water on a cold November day in 1774 on his approach to the Island of Ely; if in his inner mind he did echo Hamlet's words he did not confide them to his diary which records instead an impression of a "fruitful and pleasant country" with its "plain-living people". But the Isle was at that time certainly weary, with ground in places so wet and clinging that 'it made you grunt to walk through it', as my grandfather would say, explaining that this was why 'Grunty Fen' was so named (although historians see instead Norwegian place name influences meaning 'muddy shallow fen'). 'Stale', stagnant ponds and slow-moving rivers contributing to all manner of unpleasantness covered by the term 'fen ague' were common; 'flat': certainly the land surrounding the Island could be so described though this description would not be echoed by any cyclist who has tried to climb Haddenham hill! As for 'unprofitable', certainly compared to today's agricultural returns the small income that was made by 'tigers' who could exploit the eels, wildfowl and fen crops seems insignificant, but it was sufficient to encourage fenmen to fight the drainers of the seventeenth century. One of the fenland cottagers' fuels was peat, yet despite its warmth and "uncommonly severe" weather many people made the effort during the last Thursday of that long-departed November to journey to hear this traveller and his words, words that themselves kindled flames in those that heard them; groups became congregations, private houses gave way to chapels which in their turn were rebuilt as larger numbers sought to hear the message of Wesley echoed throughout the district.

Now one who has not only heard and listened to the repeated words but herself has contributed to their spread has put together the story of Methodism in the Isle of Ely, an Island now remembered only in history and on maps such as that on the cover of this booklet.

The sources for that story are varied and Mrs. Stevens has used them all, the chapel documents, the fragments of history which have already been published, the memories of present congregations and the comments of newspaper correspondents. This latter needs some brief annotation for in the nineteenth century the local newspapers did not always give the balanced views striven for by those of today. Many of the words and comments come from "The Cambridge Chronicle and University Journal" which did not actively support the nonconformist

cause and in fact often omitted to report major events - like the re-opening of the chapel at Stretham - altogether. The reports that they did carry have come to light due to the detailed indexing of that paper which has been completed in the Cambridgeshire Collection in Cambridge's Lion Yard Library; the other version of the story as recorded in the more sympathetic "Cambridge Independent Press" remains as yet to be discovered and evaluated...

This present booklet now becomes one other source which can be used by some future researcher intent on discovering how "It came to pass". They will see the names of benefactors on chapel walls and foundation stones, note the names of Ministers from the Circuit plans and they will wonder just what it was like to be a Sunday School scholar in 1930, to be a member of the congregation throughout the harsh and uncertain days of world war. If "Honest Mr Tubbs" who guided Wesley through mud and water away from our Island home had set down his own thoughts and memories then think how interesting they would be to us today. Each of you reading this is in your own way as significant as that first supporter; if the History now presented encourages you to set down your own experiences and stories then it will be doubly welcomed by those who will follow you in the Methodist faith.

# INTRODUCTION

This booklet began as a brief history of Methodism in Stretham, but it has been extended to include a few notes about other places in the Ely Circuit.

The Methodist Church at Stretham will celebrate the centenary of the opening of the present building in 1986, and it is possible that a more detailed history will be written then, bringing the story of this village Church up to date.

People living in other places in the Circuit, obviously, know much more about their own Churches than I do, and, maybe, they will be encouraged to write down something of what the Methodist witness has meant in their own community.

The Circuit system has always been a feature of Methodism, and it is certain that the people who are "Circuit-minded" find their faith deepened by fellowship with others of like mind.

Notes about other Churches appear as they are set out on the Circuit Plan.

Some of my information came from family memories, and I learned much from a talk, "From the Circuit Archives", which the Superintendent Minister, Rev. John Garfoot, gave to members of the Circuit Women's Fellowship in March 1981.

Michael Petty kindly supplied extracts from Cambridge and Ely newspapers of the last century, and has helped to produce the booklet as well as correcting a few errors! Mary Collins made a new copy from my inexpert typing, and further help was given by the Rector of Stretham, Rev. John Askey, who generously offered to do the duplicating. I thank them all.

A booklet such as this hardly merits a dedication but, as I have gone back in memory to the past, I have thought often of my father, Henry Acred, whose devotion to the Methodist Church and to his Lord is still remembered by his family and friends. Through him I became a member of the Methodist Church and it was his example that encouraged me to follow the Christian way of life.

July 1981. Beatrice Stevens

# METHODISM IN STRETHAM AND THE ELY CIRCUIT

How did it all begin, and where? Surely, it was on May 24th, 1738 when, as all Methodists know, John Wesley had the experience of the "warmed heart", while at a small meeting at a house in the East End of London.

Afterwards, he wrote in his journal ".....Just as I went out (in the morning) I opened my testament on these words: 'Thou art not far from the Kingdom of God'. In the afternoon I was asked to go to St. Paul's. The anthem was: 'Out of the deep have I called unto Thee, O Lord.'..... In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given to me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

So began John Wesley's life's work of evangelising England. More, the work spread throughout the world, for he declared 'The World is my Parish'.

It was nearly 37 years after the conversion experience at Aldersgate Street that John Wesley came to Ely, and, although there is no record of a visit to Stretham, it was obviously as a result of preaching in this area that Methodism first came to Stretham.

To quote again from Wesley's journal: Tuesday November 22nd, 1774:
"I took a solemn and affectionate leave of the society at Norwich. About twelve we took coach. About eight, Wednesday 23rd, Mr. Dancer met me with a chaise and carried me to Ely. O what want of common sense! Water covered the high-road for a mile and a half. I asked, 'How must foot-people come to the town?' 'Why, they must wade through.'

About two, I preached in a house well-filled with plain, loving people. I then took a walk to the Cathedral, one of the most beautiful I have seen! The western tower is exceeding grand, and the nave of an amazing height. Hence, we went through a fruitful and pleasant country, though surrounded with fens, to Sutton. Here many people had lately been stirred up: they had prepared a large barn. At 6 o'clock it was

well-filled, and it seemed as if God sent a message to every soul. The next morning and evening, though the weather was uncommonly severe, the congregation increased rather than diminished.

Friday 25th. I left them in much hope that they will continue in the earnest, simple love. I set out between eight and nine in a one-horse chaise, the wind being high and cold enough. Much snow lay on the ground, and much fell as we crept along over the fen banks.

Honest Mr. Tubbs would needs walk and lead the horse through water and mud up to his mid-leg, smiling and saying, 'We fen-men do not mind a little dirt.' When we had gone about four miles the road would not admit of a chaise. So I borrowed a horse and rode forward; but not far, for all the grounds were under water. Here, therefore, I procured a boat full twice as large as a kneading trough. I was at one end and the boy at the other, who paddled me safe to Earith. There, Miss L. waited for me with another chaise, which brought me to St. Ives. No Methodist, I was told, had preached in this town. So I thought it high time to begin, and, about one, I preached to a very well-dressed and yet well-behaved congregation. Thence my new friend (How long will she be such?) carried me to Godmanchester, near Huntingdon.

A large barn was ready, in which Mr. Berridge and Mr. Venn used to preach. And, although the weather was still severe, it was well-filled with deeply attentive people.

Saturday 26th. I set out early, and, in the evening, reached London."

Mr. Berridge, Vicar of Everton, had been suspicious of Wesley at one time, but after being introduced to him by a mutual friend, John Welsh, of Bedford, Berridge's opposition changed to admiration, and, like Wesley, he became a "field preacher". The Mr. Venn referred to in the journal was Vicar of Yelling, not many miles from St. Ives and Godmanchester, hence Wesley going there to preach.

As far as it is known John Wesley never preached in Cambridge, but he made a note in his journal: "Rode through miserable roads to Cambridge". He was then on his way to Lakenheath, on October 11th, 1763, and 23 years later, almost to the day, on October 10th, 1786, he wrote, "One o'clock, Cambridge, dinner." Wesley was an Oxford man, and his loyalty seems to have prejudiced him against the sister University!

The first Methodist Society was formed in Stretham in the year 1802, and we might ask whether those people who had been "stirred up"

at Sutton in 1774 were responsible for spreading the Gospel of Grace preached so fervently by Wesley. It seems that East Anglia was fruitful ground. Norwich and Lakenheath were both in Wesley's itinerary, and it is reasonable to suppose that he preached at other places on his journeys. It is known that a countryman, named Pinder, from Thetford in Norfolk, had been converted by early Wesleyan preachers, and, following the leader's footsteps, he came to Ely, where he stayed for a few days before going on to Haddenham, where the local clergy led a mob who gave him a very rough reception. Supposedly, he walked through Stretham, for the road between Stretham and Ely was a frequently used one, being on the stage-coach route from London. He could, of course, have taken the shorter route through the fen, but the drove might well have been in a worse state than John Wesley experienced between Sutton and Earith. One likes to think, however, that one travelling preacher, at least, stopped in Stretham and preached near the village Cross, near the gates of the Parish Church. It is interesting to think of those early Methodists meeting in a cottage in our village. Life was very dreary for poor people, and one can imagine with what joy they heard the Gospel; a few could read and they became the natural leaders of the Society.

One such was John Dring, and a tablet to his memory fixed to the wall of the present schoolroom annexe states: "This tablet is erected to the memory of John Dring, who died December 16th, 1852, aged 77 years. He joined the Methodist Society on its formation in this village in 1802, and for 47 years, as a Local Preacher in this Circuit, published a full and free salvation through Christ. After having borne a half-century's testimony to the power of the Gospel he fell asleep in Jesus."

Poor though they were, these first Methodists regularly contributed a penny a week to the Society. This was Class Money, for they were all grouped into classes, whose leaders met them weekly for Bible Study and Prayer. And if one realises how little a man received as wages in those days, the penny was a generous contribution; where husband and wife were members of the Society the double contribution was often sacrificial. "Seat-rents" were often paid by families, who had their own special place.

That, however, was not the end of their giving, for by 1814 a Chapel had been built. John Dring was probably a prosperous tradesman, for he advertised in the "Cambridge Chronicle" on June 21st 1813 for two journeymen blacksmiths, and others of the leaders of this first Society might have been in similar positions, giving money and effort to erect a Chapel for the preaching of the Word.

In those days non-Conformists worshipped in a "Chapel", and we remember that the same word was also used for buildings set apart for worship elsewhere, as the Chapel attached to stately homes or a small place within a large Church. But the early Methodists were distinctive in one respect: they were members of a Society rather than Church members.

Part of the original Chapel which had a gallery, still survives as an annexe to the present schoolroom, and the brick floor remained until the nineteen-twenties, when a new wooden floor was put in, on a level with the floor of the schoolroom. I hope John Dring would approve.

As the years passed some of the influential people in the village joined the Wesleyan cause, masters and men holding office as stewards and trustees. As in the Church at Phillipi, where two women, Euodias and Syntyche, had a disagreement, there was one difficult member of the Society at Stretham, for the "Cambridge Chronicle" reported on June 8th 1867: "Ann Langford was accused of disturbing the Wesleyan congregation." One wonders the reason for her discontent! The same newspaper also had this to say, the date being July 20th 1867: "The Wesleyan Sunday School Treat, one of the greatest holidays during the year, was held. Children and friends, numbering 460, walked in procession to W. Wright Blinch's close, where they enjoyed out-of-door sports."

Other events reported on during the next few years also included entertainment of various kinds.
May 13th 1876. "A hundred people attended a Social at the Wesleyan Schoolroom; tea was served, after which the party assembled in the Chapel to enjoy an entertainment given by Miss Charles and her pupils, and consisting of recitations, etc. of a religious character. The young people acquitted themselves well. The Chapel was crowded."
Was Miss Charles a daughter of the Mr. King Charles, whose name is on a foundation stone of the present building? It seems very likely.

Less than two months after the entertainment the Sunday School treat was held.
July 1st 1876. "Wagons took Wesleyan school children to the station for an excursion to Hunstanton. A hundred went."
December 22nd 1877. "Wesleyan Chapel held an entertainment."
But not all was entertainment. One presumes that only these were thought worthy of publicity. Class meetings continued to be held, and one class-leader lived in Wilburton, where there was no Methodist Society, and young women in her class used to walk there every week from Stretham.

Organs in churches were not in common use until the last century, although the hymns of Isaac Watts had been written for the Independents, a hundred years before. Charles Wesley had written many hundreds or even thousands, as some sources suggest, but, as in Cathedrals where a Precentor was appointed, so many Methodist Chapels depended on someone who could 'set the tune' to start the hymn-singing. However, on March 30th 1878 readers of the 'Cambridge Chronicle' learned: "The Wesleyan Chapel unveiled its new harmonium, and invited Rev. E. A. Telfer from London to lead the service. Later, there was a public tea, which 120 people attended. The day concluded with an evening lecture by the invited Minister on 'The Scottish Covenanters.' The proceedings, including tea, raised £16. 'The general impression was that the harmonium was highly approved of.'" Music was important, for we remember that 'Methodism was born in song.'

It will be seen that the Society had grown, and the better-off people among them began to plan for a new and bigger Chapel. Fund-raising efforts were held, and in January 1884: "A Christmas Tree was organised by the Wesleyans in aid of the Chapel building fund. Articles of artistic merit were sold, and £15.6s.6d. raised."

On the west side of the first Chapel was a row of cottages, and these were bought. Some were demolished to clear the site for the proposed new building, but two were left standing and, together, now form the Caretaker's house.

The front room of one of the cottages became a scullery with an open hearth and a built-in copper, the latter used for boiling water for Chapel teas as well as on Mondays for the Chapel-keeper's weekly wash. In the latter part of the nineteen-sixties the house was modernised and the former scullery is now a pleasant sitting-room, one wall of which forms part of the Chapel itself.

The prosperous business people who were members of the Society had somewhat grandiose ideas, and the new Chapel was to be big enough to hold the regular congregation with room to spare for those who would come on special occasions, hence a building to seat more than two hundred and fifty people. The present smaller congregation would be content with one to accommodate a hundred!

The architect was Josiah Gunton, who designed many similar buildings, and the Chapel was acclaimed as "one of the prettiest in the area." The Methodist Recorder said 'It is most commendable architecturally...' Its grooved ceiling and impressive pulpit are of special merit, and we have to thank those Methodists of the late nineteenth

century for the coloured glass windows. They carry no pictorial design, that would be too much like Popery these worthy men might think. The cost of replacing one of the windows in 1978 ran into hundreds of pounds.

One of those active in the scheme for the new building was Briggs Savidge, who had the present Post Office at Stretham built. There he carried on an extensive business: drapery and grocery, and he was also a baker. The former Post Office at Ely was also built for him. Henry Acred, as a young man, worked for Briggs Savidge, and here was an example of master and man working together in the Wesleyan cause. Briggs Savidge used to say that he walked such long distances collecting for the new Chapel that his feet bled and, while administration might have been of first importance to him, the spiritual life of the people was of more concern to Henry Acred.

The last event to be held in the first Chapel was in June 1885, when an address on evangelistic work in the cities was given by Rev. G. Beebee of Norwich; demolition of the Chapel had been delayed until after this event.

The stone-laying of the Chapel took place on July 15th, 1885. In view of his fund-raising efforts it seems strange not to see the name of Briggs Savidge on one of the foundation stones, but the name Savidge is there twice: Mr. F. W. Savidge and Miss A. Savidge. Both were Briggs' children, and each had contributed the sum of five guineas for the privilege of having their names engraved on the large stones. Another stone was laid by Miss E. J. Peters, who later became Mrs. Bradshaw, and gave long and devoted service as Sunday School teacher, organist and trustee. The name of King Charles does not refer to one of the Stuart Kings, but is in the village records as landlord of the Royal Oak, the one named on the foundation stone being, it is thought, his son, who died in 1897.

Other names on the stones are I. and M. Murfitt, Murfitt being a name still associated with us, and names there for a perpetual record also include W. Thompson, Esq., J.P., Mr. A. Williamson, of Ely, Mrs. W.H. Norman, of Ely, Rev. Richard Roberts and Neville Goodman, Esq. I wonder who decided whether the prefix "Mr." should be used or the supposedly more noble 'Esquire'! The Mrs. Norman, of Ely, was, as far as we know, no relation of the Norman connection, happily still with us. That branch of the family came from Witcham. In addition to the large foundation stones thirty bricks were laid, and it seems from the initials on them that four or five came from the Savidge family.

Henry Acred, with a widowed mother to support, could not afford five guineas, but he gave what he could, a pound, and his initials are engraved on a small red brick, along with the others. Briggs Savidge's three-weeks old grandson, Alan, also laid a brick, albeit by proxy, and, in later years, he liked to tell how he was the youngest person present at the stone-laying. Josiah Sennitt did not aspire to have his name on a foundation stone, but gave two clocks, one for the Chapel and one for the schoolroom, and the former is still there, keeping good time.

A report of the proceedings was published in a Cambridge paper, and read, "The first stone was laid by Neville Goodman, who gave a short address, the children's stone was laid by Rev. Richard Roberts, of London, one of the ablest Wesleyan preachers of the time; the other people are as named on the stones themselves, and to each was given a Bible. A tea was held in Mr. E. Dimock's barn, which was decorated with flowers and evergreens, and in the barn Mr. Roberts gave a sermon. The takings amounted to £150." Looking back, I think it a pity that one of the children was not chosen to lay the children's stone...

The opening of the Chapel took place in December 1886, and the "Cambridge Independent Press" referred to it as "an attractive building....." continuing, "The site and building had cost £1,200. To date £875 had been raised and property worth £100 left. The collection of £75 went to lessen the outstanding £225... The sermon by Rev. Richard Roberts was followed by a lecture in the Chapel after which they adjourned to the old Chapel at the back of the new building, turned for the occasion into a temporary dining-room... Later, the architect, J. Gunton, addressed the gathering." The builders were James Lofts and Sons, of Ely.

The demolition of the first Chapel referred to earlier, was only partial, part of it still being in use as an extension of the Sunday schoolroom.

While the scheme for the new Chapel was being considered the London Baptist Evangelical Mission opened a hall in Stretham, its first pastor being a Mr. Newell. Villagers flocked to the lively services, where Sankey's hymns were sung, and the new Chapel was found to be too big for the Sunday congregation which, however, numbered from 80 to 100 people twice on a Sunday, and many more on special occasions.

In 1884 the Sunday School had 49 scholars, and among the congregation were men who, like John Dring, felt called to preach the Gospel. Fred Savidge, the 'F.W. Savidge' who laid a foundation stone, became

a Minister and went as a missionary to India, and the Minutes of a Circuit Local Preachers' Meeting in 1887 stated: "It was proposed that Brothers Papworth, Russell and Acred be examined in English Grammar. It was urged that those preparing for full plan should read Wesley's sermons according to Conference rules. Mr. G. Richardson kindly offered to lend Mr. Acred Wesley's sermons." Henry Acred was then 23 years of age, and George Richardson a few years older, and both were members of the Stretham Society.

Other members of the local congregation became "Exhorters", that is, they were allowed to conduct services in the Circuit without passing the Examinations which fully-accredited Local Preachers had to take, but until the nineteen-fifties, when two brothers, Denis and Peter Cockerton were "received on full Plan" as accredited Local Preachers, there is no record of any others from Stretham.

Although Methodism's Founder never came to Stretham another John Wesley was prominent in the Wesleyan cause. A large employer of labour at the Grove Works he took a leading part in village affairs at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, and his influence at the Chapel was an important one. His daughter and daughter-in-law shared the duties of organist with Mrs. Bradshaw and Mrs. George Richardson, and ministers were assured of hospitality at his home. Even as late as 1920 an open-air service was held in the garden of his home, when the famous world-wide evangelist, Gypsy Smith, came to preach.

Farmers Jonathan and Tommy Jacobs were also Wesleyans, and Anniversary Teas were held in Tommy Jacobs' barn on Ely Road. Initials on foundation bricks indicate the interest of these families at the time of the building of the Chapel.

Others who would consider themselves more humble in the sense that they had little money nevertheless served the cause with loyalty and devotion, having humility in its truest aspect, the humility of Christ. Among them were Arthur Clark, chief "Chorister", John Green, the Chapel-keeper. Note, not "Caretaker". There were Cockertons, but there is no record of a relationship to the family mentioned already, Constables and Richard Creek, born in Stretham, but living for some years in Sheffield before returning to his native village. Other names remembered are Gautrey, Mrs. Gautrey being a daughter of Briggs Savidge, Lythells, Murfitts, Sennitts, Taylors, Woottons and Wrights. Rather later came two sisters, Mrs. Joe Dimmock and Mrs. John Murfitt, the latter notable for the lovely black cape which she invariably wore.

In days when the Chapel provided much of the social life of the village as well as ministering to people's spiritual needs, the Anniversary was a great occasion, and famous preachers came to Stretham: Hugh Price Hughes from the West London Mission, Mark Guy Pearce - names to savour! Dinsdale Young from the Central Hall, Westminster .....

Good Friday was also a great day, with an afternoon and evening service and a tea in between the two services. Long tables were set up in the schoolroom (for the barn was not always used), and the women of the congregation offered a "Tray" for the tea. This involved supplying food for anything up to 20 people, and the hostess took her own best cups, saucers and plates, and either a fine copper urn or two silver teapots. Each hostess would provide large plates of thin bread and butter and two kinds of cake: fruit and plain. No sandwiches and no fancies, you notice. There was less likely to be competition that way, but there was always hopeful anticipation as to whether the visiting preacher might choose to have his tea at your table.

Not all was preaching, however. On at least three separate occasions a Grand Recital was given by Madame Jessie Strathern, an operatic singer who had been converted, and now dedicated herself to "singing for the Lord." On a less high level there were Magic Lantern shows, popular with young and old alike.

Special evangelistic missions were a feature of all Church life, although not always on the scale of the Sankey-Moody services nor the huge Billy Graham missions of today. At Stretham a mission was held every few years and one of the most memorable was conducted by Sister Myra, a Wesley Deaconess. When I say "memorable" it is not in the sense of the number of converts, but rather for the charm of Sister Myra herself, gracious and good. This particular mission took place during the First World War.

Early in the century a Band of Hope existed, and later, when it was re-formed in the mid-nineteen 'twenties, attracted sixty or seventy children every week. They crowded into the schoolroom, and this was before it could be extended by opening doors to include the annexe, as it is today. The 'old Chapel' was still there, with a step leading up into the schoolroom. It was at the Band of Hope that Miss C. Acred, who now plays the organ, first led the singing at the piano, the children singing lustily.

At this time there were five services on Sundays, if Sunday School is included. The Sunday School children had their own service

at 9.30 a.m. and again at half past one, and most of them went twice. A Prayer Meeting at 10.30 brought together mainly the grey heads, and mostly men, as the roast dinner was a "must" when Sunday was the only day when the whole family was at home at mid-day, and meat was too expensive to be left to cook itself.

Preaching services were at 2.30 and 6.30, always held in the big Chapel, warmed in winter by a huge Tortoise stove and lit on winter evenings by hanging oil-lamps. The Minister came once a fortnight on a weekday, arriving in the afternoon to visit the flock, and preaching in the schoolroom in the evening. To conduct the service he stood in a wooden pulpit, with a step a foot or so from the ground, and enclosed on three sides. A Prayer Meeting was held during the week when the Minister did not come, and this would be led in turn by one of the men. Some of the same men were Sunday School teachers, their whole time, apart from work, being devoted to their Chapel.

The Wesley Guild movement was strong in the Circuit at the end of the nineteen-twenties, continuing right up to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, and, at Stretham, some forty young people used to meet every week in the schoolroom. Although organised by Methodists it had members from all the Churches, who learned to lead meetings and give what was termed "papers", in reality a short address, and they also gave concerts in Stretham and the surrounding villages. It was a very lively group.

And so we come to the war that changed so much of Church life. In the winter evening services were impossible because of the difficulty of blacking out the huge windows, although this had been done in the First World War by painting over portions of the coloured glass and hanging curtains over the lower part of the windows. An added problem was that the schoolroom was used as a day school, the local Infants' School alternating with the Infants' Department of a school evacuated from London. Needless to say, the premises were "knocked about a bit", and some correspondence passed between the Headmistress of the evacuated school and the Secretary of the Trustees, the latter pointing out that "Damage to Church property, in this case, was not the responsibility of the Church Trustees." After this more frequent use the premises were in need of renovation and, in 1949, the Chapel, Schoolroom and Caretaker's house were renovated at a cost of £291. Similar work was carried out in 1965. The Caretaker's house was completely modernised by voluntary labour in 1968-1969, the two small cottages built 150 years before becoming a compact, well-cared for home.

Around 1920 new pulpit furnishings and carpet for the Communion area were bought, the blue and grey replacing the dark red which had been there since the opening of the Chapel, and in 1979 a gift in memory of a former scholar, Gertrude Lythell (Austen), enabled further replenishing in tapestry. A year later, matching carpet for the Communion area was provided by Mrs. Austen's daughter.

There is no account of an organ being bought for the new Chapel in the reports published of the opening and the cost of the project and, for years, an American organ led the singing. Not one, actually, but several, each replacing a previous one.

When the Sedge Fen Chapel (near Shippea Hill) was no longer used by Methodists, Mr. F. Tucker, Secretary of the Sedge Fen Trustees, offered the small piped organ to the Stretham Church. In correspondence we were now a Church, although to most people the name Chapel was preferred. The organ had been dismantled and it was brought to Stretham on a borrowed lorry, literally in bits and pieces, and it took many hours and much patience before it was reassembled.

A name on the small instrument shows that it was made by the "Positive Organ Company" and, quite accidently, through the reading of a biography, it was discovered that the proprietor of the "Positive Organ Company" was a Thomas Casson, father of Sir Lewis Casson, the famous actor-manager and husband of Dame Sybil Thorndike. Further, it transpired that Sir Lewis worked with the company at the time the organ was made. He had now died, but the Church Secretary wrote to Dame Sybil telling of the pleasure at the discovery, and received a hand-written letter in reply.

During the 95 years since its opening the Chapel has been served by scores of devoted people, not for any praise which they might receive, but seeing in their service, completely unpaid, a means of glorifying God. One remembers Sunday School teachers, stewards, trustees, organists and class-leaders and, not least, Local Preachers, who have been responsible in leading others in worship. Some have come from other places and others had their roots in Stretham, deeply-rooted in the Rock of Ages. Travelling in the old days was not easy. Some preachers came from Ely on foot, others learned to ride a bicycle in order to fulfil their appointments more easily, and there was horse transport, which allowed two, three or four men to travel together to their appointments and, once a Quarter, on the Plan, there would be "H", denoting a collection for the Horse-hire fund.

George Richardson never learned to ride a bike, but Henry Acred did, and rode many miles on Sundays to preach the Gospel, often having taught in Sunday School first, and prayed with the other brethren in the Prayer Meeting.

But there were times when these two men journeyed together, occasionally accompanied by Richard Creek. Their steed was a mule, owned by a Mr. Langford, the father of Mrs. Humphrey and Miss Langford, later of Sutton. The animal was stabled conveniently near to Henry Acred, who had help with its yoking from George Richardson. Mules are notoriously stubborn, and this, although a "Methodist animal" was no exception. At one time, the three men set out after dinner to preach: one at Witcham, another at Coveney and the last at Wardy Hill. Having deposited George Richardson at Witcham the other two drove on, but, on the incline to Coveney, the mule showed an objection to going further, so came to a sudden stop. No amount of coaxing would persuade him to move, (and Local Preachers refrained from cursing, of course!), so, having looked anxiously at their watches, they tied the recalcitrant beast to a strong gatepost and walked the rest of the way to the Chapels, where the congregations awaited them. Needless to say, it was pouring with rain. The animal was still there in the evening, and having had a good rest, was now docile, and the journey home was made without incident. Another time, when Arthur Lemmon, the butcher, of Ely, was with them, they found themselves in a fen dyke, not far from Littleport, one of them being on the way to Dairy Houses. St. Paul wrote of his beatings and imprisonment, shipwreck and other hardships suffered in the cause of Christ; these men accepted discomfort and weariness..... for love of their Lord.

The Horse-hire Treasurer's account for 1889 for a journey from Ely included: Trap, Sutton, 2/6; Westmoor, 3/6; Haddenham, 4/-.

Ten years later the Haddenham Leaders Meeting discussed the expense of stabling and baiting the preachers' horses on Sundays. The preacher came for nothing, but was usually fed, Methodists being "given to hospitality". But who wanted to shelter and feed his horse?

**ELY.** As we already know, John Wesley came to Ely in 1774. It is believed that Methodism established itself in Littleport before a Society was formed at Ely, and that "Methodists from Littleport took their stand in a carpenter's shop at which services were held." A small Chapel was built on the present site in 1818 and opened on December 30th by Rev. Jabez Bunting, of London, and the Rev. C. Whiteside, of King's Lynn. Services were held morning, afternoon and evening. Jabez Bunting was one of Wesley's preachers and records show him to have been Secretary of the Bristol Conference on July 28th 1819, and this was only one of the offices which brought him prominence in the early days of Methodism.

The present building was erected in 1858 and, in 1891, the front was entirely reconstructed, the chancel added and other improvements took place. In more recent years memorial gifts have been used to beautify the Church; these include stained glass windows, an illuminated Cross and tasteful furnishings.

The Minutes of 1919 recorded: "It was proposed that new class rooms be built of steel frames with asbestos roof and walls." This is the Church Parlour.

Like other Methodist premises the schoolroom was used during the war for other purposes, including the temporary billeting of soldiers and the distribution of ration books.

Side by side with the Ely Wesleyan Circuit there had been the Ely Primitive Methodist Circuit, with one Minister and, although the two Circuits amalgamated at the time of Methodist Union 1932, there remained two Methodist congregations in Ely: Ely Wesley, in Chapel Street, and Ely Primitive, in Victoria Street. It was not until twenty-eight years after Methodist Union that the two Societies became one; this coming-together was tactfully supervised by the Supt. Minister, Rev. T. W. Harrison, and a "Marriage Supper" was held to celebrate the occasion. Although the Primitives were fewer in number their fervour and devotion proved to be an enrichment to the larger congregation and, together, they found a new impetus in their Church life.

**SUTTON.** A report of the Bishop's Visitation in 1779 led to the Curate of Sutton and Mepal writing as follows: "Presbyterians, Quakers and Independents are active in the Parish" adding, "There are many in the Parish called Methodists, and of late years, they are in a fluct-

uating state." We remember that it was only five years before, in 1774, that John Wesley had preached at Sutton, and this was but a little time in which a Society could be firmly established. However, in spite of the Curate's report of their fluctuating state, the Wesleyan Methodists built a Chapel in Sutton in 1790, that is, sixteen years after Wesley's visit, and as it was enlarged in 1814, we can presume that numbers were growing. In 1846 pews were altered and a front gallery put in.

Obviously, the work continued to grow, for a new Chapel was opened on Wednesday, May 22nd 1872. The weather was fine, a large number of people attended, with over 300 sitting down to a Public Tea. The Preacher was the Rev. Dr. Rule, D.D. A Bazaar of "useful and fancy articles" was held in the evening, and the Great Eastern Railway ran a special train which left Sutton for Ely at 9.30 p.m. "For the accommodation of the visitors".

A correspondent in the "Cambridge Chronicle" urged that the village buy the first Chapel for a Reading Room or Mechanics' Institute, arguing his cause by adding, "The building is dry and can be had for £100, a mere bagatelle of what it cost."

It would appear that Primitive Methodists were active in Sutton at this time, for a newspaper reported that Memorial Stones in connection with the new Primitive Methodist Chapel were laid in June 1880, the day's proceedings amounting to £50. As at Stretham there were several influential business people among the Methodists at Sutton, and the work continued to grow, so much so, that another Chapel was planned, and the present building was opened on December 5th 1914. The "Methodist Recorder" in its article on Methodism in the Ely Circuit, already referred to, mentioned that there was an evening congregation of 150 (in 1908), so it was no wonder that another larger building was felt to be necessary.

The sum of £840 was required, and of this £707.1s 3d had been contributed by the opening date. Mr. H.J. Perkins was Treasurer, and Messrs. H.B. Cheesewright and R.P. Humphrey, joint secretaries, and generous help was given by Mr. A. Drake, J.P. The opening ceremony was performed by Miss Russell, and other familiar names mentioned in connection with the proceedings include Allerson Gimbert, Papworth, Dewey and Miss Langford. Gifts of a tangible nature included the Communion Carpet and the Pulpit Bible.

**HADDENHAM.** The Curate of Haddenham, like the one at Sutton, had no great opinion of the Methodists, at the time of the Bishop's Visitation of 1779, he wrote, "We have some Dissenters in our Parish, who call themselves Methodists, but they are absolutely without any form or method, for they sometimes have a Quaker speaker, sometimes a Presbyterian preacher and sometimes a Methodist preacher, but for the most part, a shoemaker. I live in peace with them all, but I cannot see any tendency in their great change of novelties towards promoting true Christianity." But apparently the preaching of the man from Thetford in Norfolk had borne fruit, in spite of his rowdy reception by a mob.

A first Chapel was built in the village in 1800 and enlarged in 1814. This was near the junction of Aldreth Road and High Street, with Duck Lane. Much of the work was done by voluntary labour, and other work put out to what we know as "sub-contractors". In 1841 the present site was bought for £200, and two years later the Chapel was built. It is interesting to note that, while building was taking place, "Tolls were paid at Witcham and Ely for carriage of building materials for the Chapel".

The Chapel was rebuilt in 1891, and with the gallery, accommodates 250 people. Early trustees included two schoolmasters, three shoe-makers and two tailors. Messrs. Feast and Waters, good Methodist businessmen, carried out the work for £576. 2s 3d. They submitted the following: "We present (with great diffidence) alternative plans for Lobby and East front, but while we can, with confidence, assure you that you will get from us sound, solid and substantial workmanship, we are not artists, we are only mechanics." What a graceful, Christian way to submit an estimate.

Tribute was paid to "the devotion and indefatigable industry of various people" and these were named, "and especially to Mrs. H. Robinson in her zeal in collecting subscriptions."

The "Methodist Recorder" of 1908 said that "this is one of the prettiest Chapels in the Circuit."

**WITCHAM.** In 1851 the Vicar of Witcham complained: "This parish has been greatly neglected: and Dissent consequently has much prevailed, and laxity of principle." A Wesleyan Methodist Chapel had been established in 1813, and a Primitive Methodist Chapel post 1840. At

the time when the Vicar made his complaint there were congregations of 90 and 19 at these Chapels respectively. The former also had a Sunday School of 40 children, which increased to 60 in 1884.

A report in the "Ely Weekly Guardian" of 24th June 1898 stated:... "For some time it has been in mind to renovate the old (Wesleyan) Chapel and £90.12s 7d has already been subscribed. But, on second thoughts, it was decided it would be more practical to build a new one" and the foundation stones of the present Chapel were laid.

The report went on to say that Rev. J. Gould, Chairman of the District, conducted the service and "after the interesting ceremony several bricks were laid, each brick representing something substantial." The total amount raised from the "something substantial" was £84.16s 6d. Two hundred people had tea, ticket sales realising £3.14s, and £4.19s 3d was further subscribed. The grand total was £186. 1s 4d, rather more than the foregoing figures. Did the Treasurer contribute a little more as Treasurers have a habit of doing? "The tea was served in Mr. Vye's barn", the report added.

The 7 o'clock meeting was also held in the barn, and Rev. W. Good gave the financial statement. Mr. Good came from Haddenham, where the "second" Minister lived in those days. Speakers at the 7 o'clock meeting included Rev. J. Gould and Rev. R. Davies. The custom of two addresses at special services is still continued, but one of the speakers is usually the Chairman of the meeting. Methodists were always good listeners!

Work proceeded apace, and the Harvest Festival was held in the Chapel in October, reports being published in the "Ely Weekly Guardian" and the "Ely Gazette." An afternoon service was followed by tea, and in the evening the speakers were Rev. J. Gould, "Chairman of the East Anglia District", and the two newly-appointed ministers. Three addresses this time!

There was a debt of £15 on the new Chapel, and it was announced at this service, also described as being "opened after restoration" that the debt had been entirely wiped out.

The site of the former Primitive Methodist Chapel is not known.

A stone tablet on the interior wall of the present building evidently relates to a family associated with the Society in its early days. It reads: "To the memory of Louisa Maria Piggott, died February 1838, aged 18 years..... and to Will, her brother, died July 1838, aged 22 years."

Some eighty or more years later the name "Piggott" was still a familiar one in the Ely Circuit, frequent appointments on the Circuit Plan being given to "H. Piggott". This particular Local Preacher, however, lived at Ely. One wonders, was the Brother Papworth referred to in the Minutes of the Local Preachers' meeting of 1887 a member of the Witcham Society?

When the present building was being erected gravel was fetched from Sutton station, the horse and cart being loaned by a farmer who was a "pillar" of the Society. Those of his men who were Methodists, and no less worthy, gave their time in loading and unloading, and one of them, in later years, told his daughter of some of the difficulties and triumphs of those days.

Witcham is famous, nowadays, for the notable men who accept invitations to preach at the Anniversary celebrations, coming from the largest City Missions to this small village in East Anglia.

**WARDY HILL.** The first Methodist Chapel in this small hamlet was built in 1837 at a cost of £118, and in 1854 a schoolroom was added. This addition to the premises cost £39. Thirty years later, the Circuit Sunday School Schedule showed that Wardy Hill had 60 scholars.

It should be remembered that Coveney, less than two miles away, had no Methodist Chapel until the end of the nineteenth century, and it is reasonable to suppose that any followers of John Wesley from that village would attach themselves to the cause at Wardy Hill. The same would apply to children who would walk from outlying farms to the Sunday School in the hamlet.

Wardy Hill has a link with the enormous Central Hall at Westminster in that both benefited from the Twentieth Century Fund. The Central Hall was built mainly as a result of an appeal to Methodists to contribute a guinea, and contributors known to us include Mrs. Maggie Garfoot, then a young girl, and Henry Acred. The Twentieth Century Fund also made a grant of £40 towards the building of the present Chapel at Wardy Hill, opened in 1903, where Henry Acred preached almost every Quarter. Certificates, given to all who contributed to the Twentieth Century Fund, are still treasured.

Still another connection between Wardy Hill and the Central Hall, Westminster, is that of Walter Constable who played the American Organ at Wardy Hill and later became assistant organist at the vast Central Hall.

**COVENEY.** It was in July 1892 that the foundation stones of the Wesleyan Chapel were laid at Coveney. (A Cambridge newspaper referred to them as "Memorial Stones.") Those who laid stones included the Hon. Arthur Brand, Mr. William Duncan and Mr. James Neal, of Cambridge. The address was given by the Rev. John Gould, and the ceremony was followed by a meeting, with Mr. Walter Porter as Chairman. Tea was provided in a marquee, and the proceedings were of an enthusiastic character. A report concluded: "The collection in aid of the project was very liberal."

The Coveney Chapel was built through the influence of the Lord of the Manor, Mr. Walter Porter, an Anglican. When a ritualistic Rector was installed in the Parish there was considerable concern, members of the Parish Church congregation arguing that the services were contrary to those customary in the Church of England. It was, doubtless, owing to Mr. Walter Porter's influence that the Apostle's Creed, in large lettering behind the pulpit, should be a constant reminder to the Methodist congregation of the affirmation of belief inherent in the Christian faith. Coveney is one of the few Methodist Chapels to have its own burial-place.

**LITTLEPORT.** It is believed that the Methodists held their first services in Littleport in a small cottage in Crown Lane. From there they went to a small Chapel, which in 1835 was enlarged. Galleries were added about ten years later to accommodate the growing congregation and, in 1888, a scheme to build a new Chapel was started, the former building to become the Sunday Schoolroom. Mr. Josiah Gunton, of London, an architect responsible for designing several Chapels in the area, was instructed to prepare plans, and the estimated cost was nearly £1,600, including the site. Messrs. Feast and Waters, of Haddenham, submitted a tender for £1,088 7s 3d, excluding gas, water, etc.

The opening of the new Wesleyan Chapel took place at the end of April 1890. We note that this was a Wesleyan Chapel. The "Cambridge Chronicle" described the style as "Gothic of the Tudor period, and is well-adhered to throughout in both general design and minor details." Seating accommodation is for 275 on the ground floor and 100 in the gallery. On the day of the opening the Chapel was crowded, and the preacher was Rev. J.E. Clapham, of London, the Secretary of the Home Mission Fund. The Chairman of the District was there, Rev. R. Jenkin, and six other Ministers.

The ladies of the Chapel had a busy day, for there were tea and supper, both served in the Public Hall, with nearly 300 people sitting down at each meal.

As in other places, descendants of those people of 90 years ago are still worshipping and working at Littleport. Names mentioned of those helping with the catering included Adams, Barrett, Chapman, Cheesewright, Cragg, Crabb, Heygate, Graham, Lee, Metcalfe, Scotting, South, Washington, Young.

It was nearly a year after the opening that the first wedding took place. This was in February 1881, when Mr. William Driver, of Keighley, married Miss Emma Cragg. The Minister from Keighley, Rev. C. Greenwood, performed the ceremony, assisted by the resident Minister, Rev. W. James, who presented the newly-married couple with a copy of Wesley's Hymns, with tunes, this being given by the Trustees.

About 1835 a break-away group established a Primitive Methodist congregation which built a Chapel in Victoria Street in 1845. This Chapel was restored in 1871. The two Methodist Churches came together in the year 1966, worshipping at the former Wesleyan Chapel, now St. John's Methodist Church. The Primitive Methodist Chapel became a house.

**LITTLE DOWNHAM.** Reporting on Wesleyanism at Little Downham, the "Methodist Recorder" article of 1908 stated: "In the middle of the nineteenth century two Methodist 'serving boys', John Brooke and John Leach, brought Methodism to Little Downham, where there was a hot-bed of Calvinism and Predestinarianism. As a result of the zeal of these two young men the Superintendent Minister and Brothers Pearson and Parker visited Little Downham in 1872 'to ascertain the feeling of the people as to the establishment of Methodist services, and that they be empowered to secure a suitable place for services if they deem it desirable.'" Obviously, they felt it desirable, for a Chapel to seat 80 people was built in 1877. It still stands, a clock on the front wall, facing the village street, and this first Chapel is now the schoolroom.

The enthusiasm of the 'serving boys' was infectious and the work continued to grow so that in little over twenty years, a larger building was envisaged. The foundation stones of a new Chapel were laid in October 1907, the site being to the west of the original

building. It was a great day for the village, and £143 was contributed. The population of Little Downham was then 1,500. The final cost was £4,000, most of which was raised locally. The opening of the Chapel took place Easter 1908, and Anniversary services have always been held at Easter, and continue to the present time. The Chapel accommodates 200 people and, in its early years, was nearly full on Sunday evenings.

**PYMOOR.** The lovely little Methodist Church at Pymoor is the newest in our Ely Circuit, and was opened in June 1953. It replaced a Chapel at Oxlode, situated on the river bank near a small cluster of houses, but two miles from the village of Pymoor and about the same distance from Little Downham. Oxlode served the little community well, and had a flourishing Sunday School of 60 children in 1884, but with the building of more houses at Pymoor, it seemed sensible to build where the present population was, when it was seen that the Oxlode Chapel was in need of replacement.

The new Chapel cost £7,360, which gives some idea of the change in money values since the much bigger buildings at Stretham and Littleport were erected for £1,200 and £1,600 respectively. But even £7,360 was a low figure compared to 1981 values.

The raising of the money was done by members of the small community, including a farmer who had played the organ at Oxlode since his boyhood, and who gave generously to the new Chapel. Others collected subscriptions from people over a wide area, spending many hours and travelling many miles in order to do so, giving time and money almost to the point of sacrifice.

Memorial windows in stained glass enhance the beauty of this fenland Chapel, built to serve the people of a fenland village.

**WESTMOOR** is a little "Chapel in the fens" situated at Second Drove. The name itself is an indication of its position. In good weather it can be reached from Littleport by a fairly short route but, in winter, the longer journey by Black Bank may have to be taken.

Preachers from Ely usually go via Little Downham, the more direct way. About a mile from Downham is a level crossing in charge of a

gate-keeper, and it behoves the preacher to allow plenty of time for his journey in case the gates are not quickly opened.

There are few houses on Second Drove, and most of the congregation travel a good distance to attend the little Chapel.

The present one was built in 1896, and cost £160. The estimate referred to it as an "iron Chapel", and the building replaced an earlier one situated near to the cluster of houses known as St. Matthews, the Chapel being just off the Wisbech Road. The interior walls are completely wood-clad, and the Chapel is lit by Calor gas, heat being provided by a Tortoise stove, painted silver.

A year after the present Chapel was built an additional building was put up, "a copper house", this costing £13, and at Anniversary services, held in May each year, the copper is still used to provide water for the tea, stoked with care by loyal members of the congregation.

On summer Sundays the door of the Chapel is left open and the preacher can look above the heads of the congregation to crops of potatoes being grown in the rich fen soil. One invariably wants to sing "Yes, God is good in earth and sky."

It seems incredible that the Circuit Education Schedule for 1884 shows Westmoor as having 108 scholars in the Sunday School, but children were used to walking long distances to day school, and thought it no hardship to do the same on Sundays. And on winter evenings scores of people made their way, along fen dykes, lighting their steps with lanterns. One wonders, did they sing, "Lead, kindly light"?

**PRICKWILLOW.** The present Methodist Chapel was built in 1894, but there were flourishing Methodist congregations in the village some time before that date.

An organised Wesleyan Methodist congregation was formed in 1826, ten years after the Baptists, the first religious group to do so, had built their first chapel. Indeed Nonconformity seemed to find favour in Prickwillow and the surrounding fens and by 1846 a Primitive Methodist congregation was also holding services in the village. The established church did not appear upon the scene until 1849 when a building serving as both school and church was erected, and this in turn was replaced by the present St. Peter's Church built in 1866.

By 1894, when the new Primitive Methodist Chapel was built, the Wesleyan congregation had virtually ceased to exist and their small wooden chapel was acquired by the Anglican Church. It was renamed "The People's House" and later still "St. Peter's Hall" and was used as a centre for religious and social meetings. The building was finally demolished in July, 1974.

The new Chapel cost £230 13s 10d, a considerable sum in those days for what was described as "a small society for working people", and the occupations of the Trustees at that time were as follows:-
a miller, three bakers, a butcher and five labourers.
The Chapel flourished and for many years the Baptist Chapel, a larger building, was used for Sunday School Anniversaries, so that more people could be accommodated more easily.

In 1954, 60 years after the opening of the Chapel, the need to expand was met by the opening of a schoolroom, which took place after some nine years of fund raising.

**BRANDON BANK.** This little Chapel, as one might suppose, stands by the bank of a river, the Little Ouse, and the hamlet in which the Chapel is situated, is called Little Ouse. Not much imagination used there!

A former Primitive Methodist Chapel, this was one of the outposts of the Ely Primitive Methodist Circuit and, after Union, was included in what became the Ely Methodist Circuit, and was supplied by our Local Preachers, to some of whom it was almost foreign territory.

The hamlet of Little Ouse is reached by turning off the Littleport/Mildenhall Road, and travelling for a considerable distance on a minor road. Crossing the river by means of a steep bridge was always an adventure.

The Chapel was built in 1910, and has always been well-cared for by farming families and others living in the area. An earlier Chapel was sited some half a mile along the river bank, away from the hamlet.

When families retired and moved away in 1975 the future of the little Chapel caused some concern, and there were those who feared it might be closed. Regular evening services had been held, but with the former congregation living five or more miles away there seemed little prospect of the Chapel remaining open. However, it happened just at that time, that the small Parish Church in the hamlet was re-

ported to be in an unsafe condition: the result, an ecumenical venture, which began with a Uniting Service on July 25th 1976.

Now services are held once a fortnight, on Sunday mornings, an Anglican form of worship alternating with the traditional Methodist type of service.

The little Church is linked with the Parish Church at Littleport, whose clergy officiate once a month, and with the Ely Methodist Circuit, which provides preachers from the Ministry and Order of Local Preachers.

There were two other Methodist Chapels in the Ely Circuit, both beyond Littleport. One was Dairy Houses, some distance off the Wisbech Road, and the other was Mildenhall Road, its name indicating its position.

For some years after Methodist Union two other ex-Primitive Chapels were in the Circuit: Brandon Creek and Steam Engine, but both have now been demolished. The former was by the side of the road, a mile or two this side of Southery, where two rivers join, and Steam Engine was by the Hundred Foot Bank between Pymoor and Suspension Bridge where, incidentally, there was another Methodist Chapel, but not in the Ely Circuit.

The Wesleyan Chapel at Soham was at one time in the Ely Circuit, but that is no longer in existence, the present Methodist Church being the ex-Primitive Chapel. It appears that Methodism was never very successful in Witchford, as the following extract from the Circuit Minutes shows:
"1884. In consequence of the great difficulty in supplying Witchford (Wesleyan) it was agreed that it be transferred to the Primitive Methodists who are willing and able to supply it." But, by 1895 even the Primitives had given up Witchford.

In the notes about Stretham there was a reference to Sedge Fen. Here, near Shippea Hill and three miles from Lakenheath, but further from Littleport and Prickwillow, was the Chivers' Estate, with premises providing all kinds of recreational facilities.

The Chivers' family, who were Baptists, established a Free Church there, a lovely little place, which could well have been the drawing-room of the pleasant house of which it was an integral part.

After the death of the farm-manager, a Christian who looked after the well-being of members of the little Church, it was difficult to find preachers, and the Ely Methodist Circuit was asked to take it

over, which they did, and kept the pulpit supplied for several years. At one time, during this period, a Supernumerary Minister and his wife lived in a flat above the Chapel.

Eventually, however, the Circuit found it a problem to send preachers this long distance. The congregation had dwindled through removals, and an application from American Christians at a near-by air-base to hire the premises was granted.

Mention has been made about children in some of the Sunday Schools, and it is interesting to learn that in 1884 there were 952 children on the registers throughout the Circuit, with 164 teachers. The figures are: Ely, 140; Haddenham, 85; Littleport, 158; Soham, 38; Stretham, 49; Sutton, 90; Oxlode, 60; Little Downham, 104; Westmoor, 108; Witcham, 60; Wardy Hill, 60.

It may be that there are younger people who ask, "Why Wesleyan and why Primitive Methodists?" Briefly: the Primitives broke away from the main body of Methodism as did the Bible Christians and the United Methodists. The Wesleyans were thought to have a more clerical basis, following the Churchmanship of the Wesley brothers, while the Primitive Methodists gave more authority to the laity. The Methodist Church as it is today came into being in 1932, incorporating the Wesleyans, Primitives and United Methodists. The two first were the only ones with Churches in this area.

What of the future? The Ely Circuit is not a large one numerically, but it has its place in the wider work of the East Anglia District, and in this year of 1981 the District has been honoured to have Conference held at Norwich. Conference is the "Parliament" of Methodism, to which representatives come from all over the country, with visitors from world-wide Methodism. It is interesting to note that the representatives are drawn from Ministers and Laymen (with women in both groups!) in exactly equal numbers. Methodism reaches far beyond the shores of these islands, thus fulfilling the declaration of the Founder, "The world is my Parish."

Methodism was called into being to spread Scriptual holiness, and present-day Methodists, in accepting the privilege and responsibilities of membership, are expected to read their Bibles and to give themselves to regular prayer and Bible reading.

One hopes that the Methodist Church will never lose this particular emphasis, but use it to enrich and deepen the spiritual life of the whole universal Church.