

# Peter's People



The Story of the early Independent  
Methodists of Warrington and their leader  
Peter Phillips



To mark the bicentenary of Friars  
Green Church,  
Warrington

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based on  
an address given to the  
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by  
John Dolan  
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FRONT COVER PICTURES

Peter Phillips  
The first Friars Green Chapel, 1802

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Friars Green Chapel, built 1859



The second building of  
Brick Street Sunday School, 1867

of churches is only 100, a sharp contrast to the meteoric growth of the Primitive Methodists with whom they had early links. However, it is to the credit of those early Independent Methodist leaders, who served God with unstinting devotion, often in the face of great prejudice, that they brought into being a movement which continues two centuries later.

Today, the issues which brought Independent Methodism into being seem to belong to another age. Acute poverty, illiteracy, radical politics, disillusioned Quakers and autocratic Wesleyan ministers are no longer centre stage. Like other Christians, today's Independent Methodists face the challenge of a secular age which has little interest in the finer points of denominationalism. How they respond to this challenge will, no doubt, be evaluated by historians of the future. For the moment, it is sufficient to note that, in Warrington at least, the Independent Methodists have played an important part in the town's spiritual and social development, whilst the 10 churches which currently form the Warrington Circuit continue to maintain a Christian witness and presence in the life of the communities around them, often in close co-operation with other churches. The newest of the ten churches was opened only nine years ago in the developing residential area of Appleton and it has proved a successful venture, whilst other, older churches have adapted themselves to the changing world around them and are endeavouring to apply the enduring truths of the Christian gospel to the world of 1996 - which is so different from 1796. So whilst the denomination may appear to be a quaint relic of the age of Methodist division, its current activity and its individual churches are not necessarily so!

We thank God for all that has been done through the work of the churches whose story began so quietly in the events of 1796 and look forward to the fruitful work which remains to be done through their service and witness in the future.

## Preface

The Independent Methodists have the distinction of being the longest lasting division of Methodism. Others have disappeared as Methodism's various branches have united over a period of time. But this year sees the Independent Methodists of Warrington marking the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of their first church, founded in 1796. It is, therefore, an appropriate time to look at the origins and development of the denomination.

Most of the other groups which broke away from the parent Wesleyan body from the 1790s onwards had a single point of origin from which they spread outwards. They set up new structures quickly and formed new Connexions of churches, each bearing a single, identifiable name. But the Independent Methodists were very different. Theirs is not the story of a definable splinter group which broke away from Methodism at single point in time; it is the story of several breakaway groups, bearing different names, which came together years later. This brief sketch looks at the story of the earliest one of them. As we examine it, we shall effectively look at the wider story of Independent Methodist origins through Warrington eyes. It covers the years up to 1853 when Peter Phillips died; this coincided with a watershed in the history of the denomination so it is a fitting point at which to end the account.

As an old scholar of Friars Green Sunday School, I take this opportunity to congratulate the church on its 200<sup>th</sup> birthday. The story which follows is written in grateful acknowledgement of the teaching and influence which I received there.

John Dolan,  
May 1996

## Bank Street Chapel

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<sup>46</sup> Zion's Trumpet, September 1855, 46f.

<sup>47</sup> Zion's Trumpet, September 1855, 40.

<sup>48</sup> Zion's Trumpet, December 1855, 75.

Our story begins in the Warrington of the 1790s - a town with about 10,000 inhabitants, many of them living in narrow streets in the centre of the town. It was one of many places visited by John Wesley on several occasions during his ministry and in 1778 a chapel was built in Bank Street for the town's growing Methodist society. At this time, Warrington formed part of the Liverpool Methodist Circuit, but in 1792 it was transferred to the newly-formed Northwich Circuit. This meant that it fell under the supervision of the conference-appointed itinerant preacher (superintendent minister we would call him today) who lived at Northwich and visited Warrington at intervals, along with the rest of the societies under his care. Inevitably, his visits were infrequent, which meant that the Warrington society had to rely upon its local preachers - lay people - for both leadership and preaching. Some of these were evidently able people and they began to hold cottage meetings for worship, prayer, testimony, Bible reading and preaching. The story of what happened subsequently is drawn entirely from accounts which were written down long afterwards. There are no surviving records such as church minutes to tell it as it happened. It must also be acknowledged that the accounts are the version given by those who chose to break away from the parent Methodist body, so they tell one side of the story only.

In 1796, possibly aware that Bank Street was experiencing an unusual degree of local autonomy, the Methodist Conference proposed to give Warrington an itinerant preacher of its own. The leaders at Bank Street responded to this by saying that they already had gifted local preachers, so an itinerant was unnecessary. In any event, they claimed, they were too poor to pay for his services. Conference evidently accepted this response and it was not until 1812 that an itinerant preacher was eventually stationed in the town. James Atkinson, who chronicled some of the events of the time, noted, with grim humour, that Thomas Preston, the preacher in question, resided in Dolman's Lane, 'amidst abundance of bugs'.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Rift of 1796 and the Early Leaders**

However, attempts to bring Warrington under more direct control by the Methodist authorities took another turn in 1796, when the Northwich itinerant, who was still responsible for the pastoral oversight of Bank Street Church, gave instructions that the cottage meetings which were led by the local preachers should be discontinued and that all meetings should take place in the church premises under his supervision. A number of local preachers felt in conscience that they could not do so and withdrew from the church, quietly and without fuss. They formed the nucleus of what was to become the first Independent Methodist Church.

**So who were the people who withdrew from Bank Street Chapel? Some examples**

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<sup>1</sup> J. Atkinson, Memorandums of Events in the Northwich and Warrington Circuits, undated M.S.

Churches came into being during the present century, the Independent Methodists reflected something of the outlook of their early leader by becoming founder members of both bodies.

Lastly, we should note Phillips' pastoral role at Friars Green. Taking his lead from St. Paul's tentmaking ministry at Corinth, he aimed to show that a minister could sustain himself and his family without charge to his church. In this he was remarkably successful. Along with others of his contemporaries, he developed a pattern of ministry which has been maintained in Independent Methodist Churches ever since. Unusually, for this age of revivalism, he was reputed to have been calm and reflective as a preacher - unlike the passionate style of many of his contemporaries.<sup>47</sup> Peter Phillips led Friars Green Church for 50 years, but the Independent Methodist system of plural, unpaid ministry meant that others were in place to continue his work after he died. Whether any had his personal charisma was another matter.

In the closing years of his life, one particular fear concerned him. He was a strong believer in the autonomy of the local church and was suspicious when moves were made to develop a collective Connexional discipline among the Independent Methodists.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the aged Peter Phillips found himself in opposition to his rising successors in the Connexion - Alexander Denovan of Glasgow who greatly surpassed him in learning and William Sanderson of Liverpool who was a far more commanding pulpit orator. Even on his deathbed, he expressed his fear that their plans would bring great harm to the churches and rob them of their freedom. Perhaps this reflects limited thinking on his part since his fears proved groundless.

Peter Phillips died on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1853, deeply respected and dubbed the 'founder' of Independent Methodism, not so much on the basis of his initial work at the time of its origins, but on account of his unrivalled contribution to the denomination's growth and development in its early decades. He was also highly regarded in the town of Warrington for the valuable contribution which he made to its life.

### **Conclusion**

The early Independent Methodists were drawn from the poorest of the poor, which meant that their resources were very limited both in terms of finance and in terms of people of ability. Preaching was often done by people who were partially or even totally illiterate. Church management and leadership were exercised by people with little idea of how to give direction. Mission work was limited through lack of funds and the movement expanded very slowly; 200 years on, the number

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<sup>43</sup> Association for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge in Connection with Temperance, unpublished pamphlet, Warrington, 1836. IM Archives.

<sup>44</sup> T.K. Glazebrook, A Record of the Events during the Plague in Warrington, London: Whittaker, Treacher, Arnott, 1833, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Zion's Trumpet, April 1855.

# H Y M N S

TO BE SUNG AT

## STOCKTON HEATH CHAPEL,

On Sunday, Sep. 23rd, 1821,

AND FRIARS' GREEN CHAPEL,

Warrington.

Service to commence at Stockton Heath at Two o'Clock in the Afternoon, and at Six o'Clock in the Evening at Friars' Green Chapel.

### HYMN I.

**E**TERNAL Wisdom! Thee we praise,  
Thee the Creation sings:  
With thy loud name, rocks hills and seas,  
And heaven's high palace rings.

Thy hand, how wide it spreads the sky,  
How glorious to behold!  
Ting'd with a blue of heavenly dye  
And star'd with sparkling gold.

There, thou hast hid the globes of light  
Their endless circuits run:  
There, the pale planet rules the night;  
The day obeys the sun.

There, like a trumpet, loud and strong,  
Thy thunder shakes our coast,  
While the red lightnings wave along  
The banners of thy host.

Thy glories blaze all nature round,  
And strike the wond'ring sight,  
Thro' skies, and seas, and solid ground,  
With terror and delight.

Infinite strength and equal skill  
Shine through thy works abroad:  
Our souls with vast amazement fill,  
And speak the builder God!

But the mild glories of thy grace,  
Our softer passions move:  
Pity divine in Jesu's face  
We see, adore, and love.

### HYMN II.

**H**APPY the heart where graces reign,  
Where love inspires the breast:  
Love is the brightest of the train,  
And strengthens all the rest.

The Teachers in behalf of the 300 Children taught in this School, embrace the present opportunity of returning the Friends of this Institution their sincere thanks for past favours, and again solicit a share of their Patronage. Donations will be thankfully received by D. S. LEATHER, W. S. MAGINNIS, T. EARON, E. COOK, and S. BALNER.

J. Harrison, Printer, Warrington.

Knowledge, alas! 'tis all in vain,  
And all in vain our fear;  
Our stubborn sins will fight and reign,  
If love be absent there.

'Tis love that makes our cheerful feet  
In swift obedience move;  
The devils know and tremble too;  
But Satan cannot love.

This is the grace that lives and sings,  
When faith and hope shall cease:  
Till this shall strike our joyful strings  
In the sweet realms of bliss.

Before we quite forsake our clay,  
Or leave this dark abode,  
The wings of love bear us away  
To see our smiling God.

### HYMN III.

**N**OW in a song of grateful praise,  
To my dear Lord my voice I'll raise,  
With all his saints I'll join to tell,  
My Jesus has done all things well.

And when to that bright world I rise,  
And join the anthems in the skies,  
Above the rest THIS NOTE shall swell,  
My Jesus has done all things well.

### IV.

Worthy the Lamb that was slain, to receive  
power, and riches, and wisdom, and honour,  
and glory, and blessing; for thou wast slain  
and hast redeemed us to God. By thy blood,  
thou hast made us Kings and Priests, worthy the  
Lamb. Blessing, and honour, and glory, and  
power, to Him that sitteth upon the Throne,  
and to the Lamb, for ever, &c.

Hymn Sheet for Stockton Heath Charity Sermon, 1821

will help to form a picture. **Richard Mills** was the first leader of the group. William Brimelow says of him, 'He was a man of considerable force of character, a popular preacher, but withal somewhat impulsive, for after some years of admirable service he ceased his connection with Independent Methodism.'<sup>2</sup> **Richard Harrison**,<sup>3</sup> then 51 years old, had been a local preacher since 1780 and became the elder statesman of the new group. When, eventually, the various Independent Methodist groups came together, he served on at least one occasion as President of the Annual Meeting. **William Maginnis**,<sup>4</sup> aged 22, although a native of Warrington, became a Methodist whilst serving his apprenticeship as a glasscutter in Manchester, where he received his first class ticket from Joseph Benson at Oldham Street Chapel in 1794. On completion of his apprenticeship, he returned to Warrington to pursue his trade. He also joined Bank Street Chapel, where he met and married the daughter of William Young, his class leader and one of the local preachers. He and his wife were two of those who left in the split of 1796, though his father-in-law remained at Bank Street.<sup>5</sup> Maginnis became a leading member and a preacher in the new group.

**Peter Phillips** was the most significant of all, though he was only 18 years old at the time of the split. We shall note some facts about his early life at this point and return to him later in order to evaluate his career. Phillips was born in 1778, one of 12 children, whose father was the town crier of Warrington and frequently drunk and violent.<sup>6</sup> Early in his life, his mother placed him in the home of Thomas and Mary Watt, Quakers and tallow chandlers, who lived at Friars Gate.<sup>7</sup> They were to prove a formative influence in his life, though other people played their part too. Another mentor was Peter's older brother, John, who took him to Bank Street Chapel where, as a boy, he heard the aged John Wesley preach. In adult life he became a chairmaker and, on his marriage in 1802, made his home in Ship Yard, a passageway behind the Ship Inn in Bridge Street. He married Hannah Peacock who later became an important figure in her own right in the life of the new church. In the same year, he preached his first sermon in a cottage at Whitley Reed.<sup>8</sup>

## The First Chapel

The new group existed alone until 1806, apparently without outside contact. They continued to teach Wesley's doctrines and retained the class meetings which were

<sup>2</sup> [Independent Methodist Magazine](#), January 1897, 7

<sup>3</sup> [Independent Methodist Magazine](#), April 1827, 296

<sup>4</sup> [Wesleyan Methodist Association Magazine](#), 1849, 403

<sup>5</sup> [Independent Methodist Magazine](#), February 1825, 487 (Obituary of William Young, by William Maginnis.)

<sup>6</sup> [Zion's Trumpet](#), April 1855

<sup>7</sup> The remains of Thomas and Mary Watt are buried in the Quaker Burial Ground, Buttermarket Street.

characteristic of Methodism. At first they met in a room above a shop next door to the 'Rose and Crown' in Bridge Street, but in 1802 they set themselves the task of building a chapel. They obtained a piece of ground on St. Austin's Lane and undertook the building work themselves at the end of each day's work. The thoroughfares in this part of the town took their names from the great Augustinian Friary which previously occupied the site - hence the name given to the church - Friars Green, located on the former green of the Friary. The new chapel was plain and simple, facing on to St. Austin's Lane, with land to both north and south used for burial purposes.

### Quaker Influence

As we have already noted, similar groups were also emerging in other towns, generally of revivalist character and all without a settled, paid ministry. But the Warrington group was unique in one sense. In addition to its Methodist founders, its ranks had been augmented by disaffected Quakers. This must have made for a curious mixture. On the one hand there were the Methodists, followers of John Wesley, who steadfastly refused to leave the Church of England and remained one of its clergy to the end of his life; on the other hand there were the Quakers, followers of George Fox, who had nothing good to say about the established church and who initiated the most radical nonconformity of all. In many ways, the blending of these two movements is a subject which has never been fully explored, so we shall now consider briefly why this fusion may have happened and how it seems to have worked in practice.

The early influences of the Quaker home in which Peter Phillips lived must have played a significant part in the new church's development. He had gained a deep respect for the inner strength and quiet confidence of this devout couple and no doubt introduced some of their practices into the church. But not all Quakers had the spiritual vitality of the Watt family. During the eighteenth century most Quaker groups had either retreated into passive stillness or had absorbed the rationalism of the Enlightenment. The fiery passion of their forefathers was hardly to be seen by now and their numbers had steadily fallen over several decades. Quakerism had begun as religion of immediacy, with a strong sense of the direct guidance of God to the individual believer, without any clerical leadership or oversight. The 'inner light' or 'the light that lightens every man' was their guiding principle, but it was a light that had dimmed with the passage of time.

Now, in Warrington, there was a new group which must have appeared to have so much that they valued, including something of what their own movement had lost in terms of evangelistic vitality. For reasons such as this, members from two distinct and very different traditions came together and formed a church which had characteristics of both. Hence, Friars Green did not initially use the name 'Independent Methodist', but 'Quaker Methodist'. So how did the mixture work

Rylands, Crosfield, Stubbs, Greening and Monks: the town's leading industrialists, no doubt concerned about absenteeism and poor work performance by employees who drank to excess. Another member was William Beamont, solicitor and historian, the town's first mayor and one of its leading citizens. But the committee also included those who had first pioneered temperance work in the town - the Independent Methodists Peter and William Phillips, George Mather and Thomas Eaton, and the Wesleyan Methodist William Clarke. Perhaps their inclusion indicates that their work in the temperance field had made sufficient impact upon the town to bring them some public recognition.

Both Peter and Hannah Phillips were practical philanthropists. This was vividly demonstrated during the 1832 cholera epidemic, when the part of Warrington where they lived was the worst affected of all, especially Lower Bank Street, which backed on to their home in Ship Yard. The triangle of land bordered by Bridge Street, Buttermarket Street and Mersey Street became known as 'sewer island'.<sup>44</sup> In July, the hottest month of 1832, out of 116 people who died of cholera in the town, 90 lived in this area. Many people fled to the countryside, but Peter and Hannah Phillips remained and exercised a personal ministry of care to the sick and dying. Theirs was philanthropy rooted in Christian belief and the comfort given was spiritual as well as practical.<sup>45</sup>

Peter Phillips was also something of an ecumenist before his time. This was possibly born of his own mixed background - he was fully aware that he was debtor to Anglicans, Methodists, Quakers - and possibly others too. He welcomed the formation of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846 as an attempt to bring evangelical Christians of all denominations together, long before present day ecumenical bodies were formed, but he felt a deep sense of injustice when he found that churches such as his own and the Quakers were to be refused admission on the basis that they had no regular ministers. Nevertheless, when a meeting to promote the Alliance was held in Warrington, he spoke in support of it.<sup>46</sup> Doubtless it would have pleased him that the Independent Methodist Connexion eventually joined the Alliance 149 years later! He also strongly supported the local Sunday School Union. He was keen that Christians of all denominations should work together, whilst his temperance interests showed he would work with people of other persuasions and possibly none for the benefit of others. Perhaps it is no coincidence that when the Free Church Federal Council and British Council of

<sup>37</sup> William Beamont, Walks about Warrington, 1887, 151.

<sup>38</sup> Zion's Trumpet, April 1855.

<sup>39</sup> John Dolan, From Barn to Chapel, 1989, 40ff, 123.

<sup>40</sup> William Durant, The Story of Friars Green Church, Warrington 1951, 67ff.

<sup>41</sup> Arthur Mounfield, The Beginnings of Total Abstinence, Warrington, 1902.

<sup>42</sup> Henry Carter, The English Temperance Movement, Epworth Press, London, 1933, 24ff.

<sup>8</sup> Zion's Trumpet, April 1855

the Rev. Edward Owen; here he learned to read and write.<sup>37</sup> As an adult he was responsible for establishing two Sunday Schools which provided elementary education in an age when there was no state provision. The first was at Stockton Heath, begun in 1807. William Phillips, Peter's son, was present at the opening and later wrote an affectionate description of the school and his father's role in it.<sup>38</sup> The children attended from 8.30.a.m. until the end of the afternoon session, bringing their lunches with them. Sunday School was a whole day activity, as this was the only education they received. By 1821, over 300 children were attending, but many travelled long distances in order to do so, as Sunday Schools were still relatively few in the Warrington area.<sup>39</sup> This was at a time when the Wesleyan Methodists were under pressure from their leader, Jabez Bunting, to refrain from the teaching of writing in Sunday Schools. Independent Methodist Sunday Schools had no such problem; it was probably an awareness that others faced this kind of external pressure which made them value their independence so much.

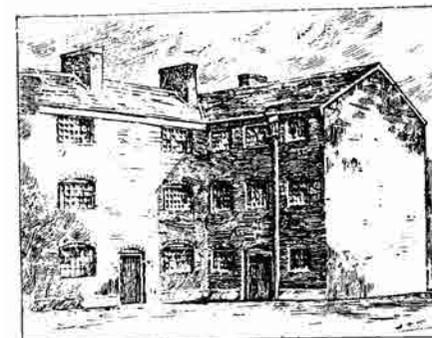
One day in 1823, Phillips was walking through the Cockhedge area of the town, a growing area of terraced housing, where he saw many poor children who obviously had little hope of betterment in life. This prompted him to launch another Sunday School at Brick Street, which remained in existence until 1985.<sup>40</sup> Many of its scholars went on to become leaders at Friars Green and some became prominent citizens of Warrington.

Another area of interest for Phillips during the middle years of his life was the growing temperance movement. Alcohol abuse was a major social problem in the early nineteenth century. One way of tackling it was to form temperance societies, in which members pledged themselves to abstain from alcoholic drinks. Peter Phillips and other early IMs, such as Thomas Eaton at Stockton Heath, supported this approach. The result, in 1830, was the formation of a society at Stockton Heath, which, it was later claimed, was the first one in the country to adopt a pledge of abstinence from all alcoholic drink, not just wines and spirits, which were the subject of earlier pledges.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps it is significant that this society was formed in the same year in which the Beerhouse Act was passed, allowing the proliferation of unlicensed beerhouses or 'jerry shops' as they were known.<sup>42</sup> These added to the problem of excessive drinking among the poorer sections of the population.

In 1836 an association was formed in Warrington 'for the promotion of useful knowledge in connection with Temperance.'<sup>43</sup> The list of officers and committee members of the association tells a story of its own. It included the names of



Hannah Phillips



The home of Peter and Hannah Phillips, Ship Yard

<sup>34</sup> Arthur Mounfield, *A Short History of Independent Methodism*, IM Bookroom, Warrington, 1905, 13.

<sup>35</sup> *Zion's Trumpet*, December 1855, 66f.

<sup>36</sup> *Zion's Trumpet*, April 1855.

in practice?

Like the Methodists, this new group held Class and Band Meetings, Lovefeasts and Camp Meetings. They held services after the Methodist pattern, using the hymns of the Wesleyan revival, but they also had times of silent waiting upon God after the Quaker manner. Like the Quakers, they were non-sacramental at first - hence the early registers at Friars Green and Stockton Heath were 'Births and Namings' Registers, rather than registers of baptisms. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the sacraments came to be practised as in other Independent Methodist Churches.

The decision of the Methodist dissidents to have no paid ministry had an obvious appeal to the former Quakers who had long eschewed the idea of separation of clergy from laity. The two strands of thought coalesced and the new church operated on the basis of the equality of all members. At first, this may have been due to the poverty of the Bank Street members, who said that they were too poor to pay an itinerant, but it eventually became a matter of principle. The Independent Methodists, like other groups with a 'free gospel' emphasis, tended to claim the moral high ground in their rejection of clericalism and payment, much as the Quakers had claimed it over a century before. But this was not simply the making of a rather negative point; it was also an affirmation of their belief that every believer was equal before God and each had a contribution to make to the total ministry of the church.

The Friars Green members adopted the speech, dress and mannerisms of the Quakers. Like both early Quakers and early Methodists, they used open air preaching for evangelistic purposes. The rather functional nature of the church's first building reflected the Quaker view that meeting-houses were not, in themselves, sacred. God was, in their view, just as present in the cottage meetings which had meant so much to the early founders.

There is one other factor, neither Quaker nor Methodist, which should be noted in any analysis of this new group, It catered for the poorest of the population; it was a church run *for* working people *by* working people and its benefactors were few. This must have given it an ethos which was quite different from any other church. But it also reflected something of the spirit of the age into which it was born, as it sought to bring the equivalent of political democracy into the governing structures of the church.

### Links with other groups

At first, the Quaker Methodists of Warrington had no thought of starting a new denomination. Several years would pass before any moves were made in this direction. We turn now to the process which brought this group into contact with others.

congregation. The precautions proved needless as Phillips used his text to preach a message of pacifism.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps this was another example of his Quaker sympathies coming through, but it served to steer his church away from being involved or even implicated in the politics of violent revolution.

On the other hand, he was neither passive nor docile. He did not hesitate to criticise injustice when he encountered it and organised a silent protest march through the town to express the abhorrence felt by many over King George IV's treatment of Queen Caroline after he had locked her out of his coronation ceremony.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, when the followers of Robert Owen, were active in the town, he openly criticised their secular utopianism. In addition to preaching against them in the chapel, he and other members went to the doors of their meeting room and urged those who planned to attend, 'to save themselves from those God-despising people.'<sup>35</sup>

### Peter Phillips

The last three examples return us to the subject of Peter Phillips. Some further appraisal of his life and work will give an insight into the concerns and priorities of the church which he led and the other churches which came to look to him for leadership.

There is no doubt that he was the most prominent leader among the early Independent Methodists, at least until the early 1840s when advancing age began to limit his activities. He served as the denomination's President on nine occasions and was, invariably, the one who was contacted by other churches for help and advice.

He and others travelled great distances, often by foot, in order to preach at each other's churches. This was the main way of keeping in touch with each other in the days before railways and the penny post. A graphic account by his son tells of how he accompanied his father when they walked to Sheffield in order to attend the Annual Meeting which was being held there.<sup>36</sup> But this was not exceptional; preachers from other branches of Methodism could have told similar stories.

He was a great believer in the importance of education. Like others of his day, he had no formal theological training and was largely self-taught. As a child he attended a Sunday School held in one of the courts off Bridge Street, organised by

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<sup>30</sup> Rothwell, 26ff.

<sup>31</sup> W.R. Ward, The Early Correspondence of Jabez Bunting, Royal Historical Society, London, 1972, 21ff.

<sup>32</sup> Hugh Kelly, The Stone Cut Out of the Mountain, J. Marshall, Newcastle, 1821, 13.

<sup>33</sup> James Vickers, History of Independent Methodism, IM Bookroom, 1920, 32f.

The Westhoughton and Bolton stories raise the question of the political sympathies of early Independent Methodists. These and other groups which emerged around 1819 were strongly sympathetic to radical reform. At least two founders at Bolton, John Meadowcroft and John Fallows, both cotton spinners, were imprisoned under the Combination Laws in 1823.<sup>30</sup> The literature of the Independent Methodists of this time expresses a vigorous, almost militant approach to issues of social justice. A particularly notable instance occurred on Tyneside where a demonstration after the manner of Peterloo took place on Newcastle Town Moor, drawing a crowd of 50,000. One of the speakers was a young schoolmaster and Methodist local preacher, William Stephenson. He was censured by the Methodist authorities for doing so and expelled from his position as a local preacher.<sup>31</sup> The result was the formation of 14 Independent Methodist churches in the area within a year. Hugh Kelly, one of the leaders of this group of churches gave expression to their aspirations for social justice when he preached at the opening of the chapel at North Shields: *'Unequal laws and partial administration plant a thorn in every breast and spread a gloom on every countenance; grievances are unredressed, and discontent and misery necessarily prevail.'*<sup>32</sup> This reflected the outlook of a group of Christians who were as concerned for the earthly 'New Jerusalem' as for the heavenly one.

But any such sympathies at Warrington had a softer focus, though the Quaker Methodists, with their democratic tendencies, came under some suspicion from the authorities. It was at this time that Peter Phillips surprised the congregation at Friars Green by announcing that on the following Sunday he would preach on the text, 'He that hath no sword let him sell his cloak and buy one.' (A verse which became popular amongst chartist preachers at a later date!) News of his announcement spread around the town and people braced themselves for what was to come. Neighbours boarded up their windows in case of an ensuing riot and the church was crowded with people who came to hear the prophet of revolt. Officers of the law came into the church and placed themselves conspicuously in the

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<sup>22</sup> Lynn MS, IM Archives.  
<sup>23</sup> S. Rothwell, Memorials of Folds Road Chapel, Bolton, IM Bookroom, Bolton, 1887, 84.  
<sup>24</sup> Independent Methodist Magazine, October 1827, 404.  
<sup>25</sup> William Broadhurst, The Culcheth Independent Methodist Church, A Semi-Historical Survey, Leigh, 1945, 2.  
<sup>26</sup> Rothwell, 81 ff.  
<sup>27</sup> Independent Methodist Magazine, October 1826, 130f.  
<sup>28</sup> Ethel Howell, Whispers of Wingates, 13.  
<sup>29</sup> Independent Methodist Magazine, May 1824, 273.

In 1803 **William Bramwell**, a Methodist itinerant preacher based in Leeds, made an abortive attempt to unify revivalist groups in Manchester, Macclesfield and Leeds but abandoned the attempt and placed himself under conference discipline again.<sup>9</sup> This was significant for what followed later as it indicated that there were groups which had enough in common to form a new union of reformed Methodists. In the event, it was the influence of freelance, unsponsored evangelists which paved the way for these groups to come together. Perhaps their quasi-apostolic role caused them to be seen by the embryonic Independent Methodist movement in a different light from paid clergy. From the beginning the Independent Methodists would draw a distinction between paying ministers to lead local churches and paying evangelists to travel from place to place, starting new churches.

Two such evangelists made a great impact upon Warrington when they visited the town in 1804 - namely **Dorothy Ripley**, a Quaker preacheress who stayed at the home of Peter and Hannah Phillips, and **Dr. Paul Johnson** of Dublin. But it was the arrival of the American evangelist **Lorenzo Dow** at the end of 1805 which proved the necessary catalyst to bring together the various revivalist groups. His journal gives graphic detail of his visits to the Quaker Methodists of Warrington and other similar groups. He first met Peter Phillips in Liverpool and received an immediate invitation to stay at his home in Warrington.<sup>10</sup> For the whole of his stay in England, the Phillips home became his main base. As soon as he had arrived in the town and met the people at Friars Green he began his work: *'The first evening he and the society entered into a covenant to pray for a revival of religion; and very soon they had the unspeakable satisfaction of seeing their prayers answered.'*<sup>11</sup>

Space is insufficient to give a portrait of this controversial character, but it is enough to note that his travels served to identify other groups similar to the Quaker Methodists of Warrington. He travelled to Macclesfield and Stockport, where he found groups of revivalist character who had left the Methodist New Connexion.<sup>12</sup> He went to Manchester and met a group, later known as the 'Bandroom Methodists', who had operated in breach of Methodist discipline and who were therefore required to leave the Methodist body.<sup>13</sup> He went to Preston and found a group whom he described as 'Free Gospellers.'<sup>14</sup> In Oldham, he came across a newly formed body using the name 'Independent Methodist' - probably the first church to do so.<sup>15</sup> Dow noticed the factors which were common to these groups and he termed them the 'Third Division' of Methodists: the Wesleys being the first and Alexander Kilham's Methodist New Connexion the second. But 'Third Division' was not a name which stuck!

### First Conference

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<sup>9</sup> W.R. Ward, Religion and Society in England 1790 - 1850, Batsford, 1972, 81.  
<sup>10</sup> Zion's Trumpet, April 1855



Lorenzo Dow

## Expansion

Despite the limitations of an unpaid system, the early Independent Methodists experienced some growth in numbers and new churches were started. Like the Methodists, they published circuit plans which showed how their preachers were planned at each church from week to week. A plan of 1826 shows how, from one church in 1796, a whole circuit of churches had grown around Warrington within 30 years. By mapping out some of these churches, we can see the growth pattern of the early nineteenth century (see map). In some cases, like Lymm,<sup>22</sup> there was no chapel until the 1830s - just a small group of people meeting in a house. As we have noted, Stockton Heath dated from Lorenzo Dow's work in 1806. So did Risley, but this came under the orbit of the Primitive Methodists - it appears on their first preaching plan - and only became fully Independent Methodist by 1851. Homes were often licensed as meeting houses, such as that of James Ashton at Lowton, who took out a licence after receiving public abuse for holding services in his home. A congregation met there for many years and then formed the church at Golborne.<sup>23</sup> Another house meeting began at Bedford (Leigh) in 1818.<sup>24</sup> Culcheth began in the kitchen of a tenant farmer.<sup>25</sup> Lowton Common (now known simply as 'Lowton') was the location of a privately owned chapel operated by the Wesleyan Methodists from 1793 but later abandoned. Local residents contacted Peter Phillips at Warrington and asked him to re-open it, which he did in 1819.<sup>26</sup> A vivid account is given of the beginnings of the church at Parr, St. Helens, where Samuel Ashton, the travelling Independent Methodist missionary recorded, '*It was delightful to see the poor colliers with their black faces listening with the deepest attention to the word of life.*'<sup>27</sup> It was among people such as this that the early Independent Methodist preachers found a ready audience.

The same year also saw the Independent Methodists draw in Wesleyan Methodists who were disaffected after the Peterloo Massacre, as a result of their ministers' unsympathetic attitude to the radical reform movement. Some of them, in Westhoughton, invited Peter Phillips to come and explain the Independent Methodist system to them.<sup>28</sup> He did so and they formed a new church. Dissident Wesleyans in Bolton made a similar contact a year later and a church was formed which would later be a springboard for further expansion in the area.<sup>29</sup> As the map shows, the Independent Methodists of Warrington found their main scope for expansion in the growing industrial towns of central and east Lancashire, rather than the rural areas of Cheshire.

## Political Sympathies

<sup>19</sup> William Lister, *The Life of the Reverend and Venerable William Clowes*.  
William Garner, London, 1868, 166-7.

<sup>20</sup> *Zion's Trumpet*, April 1855

<sup>21</sup> *Zion's Trumpet*, April 1855

noted. During the 1808 Annual Meeting, he wrote a tract on the ministry of women, in which he advocated that women who had gifts of preaching should be given the opportunity to use them.<sup>18</sup> No doubt this served to crystallise a discussion which had taken place among the delegates at the meeting. It became a principle which the early Independent Methodists quickly adopted and which continues to stand to the present day.

### The Primitives Separate

However, by 1811, Bourne, Clowes and their followers felt that they could no longer, in conscience, stay with the pattern of unpaid ministry which had become an inviolable principle of the Independent Methodists. In fact, their decision to adopt a paid ministry was urged upon them by their followers, as Clowes' biographer explains:

*'We are rather surprised that such men as Hugh Bourne and William Clowes, who had been trained in the Methodist community to give of their substances towards the support of the gospel, should dream of receiving from the members of the society no money, which Mr. Clowes says was the case. In this sense, the disciples were wiser than their teachers. They had the good sense to know that as ministers who gave themselves entirely to the Word of God could not command food and raiment, and houses and furniture gratuitously, they must of necessity be chargeable to the church for maintenance.'*<sup>19</sup>

This was a significant split for both parties and set them on different courses, though personal friendship and some degree of mutual support remained for a long time. The Primitive Methodists grew rapidly; the Independent Methodists did not, and records show that many of them felt a sense of frustration with a system which offered such limited scope for expansion. By the 1830s this would see many Independent Methodist churches switch to other branches of Methodism for this very reason.

But how adamant were the early Independent Methodists about the unpaid system? Peter Phillips was firm in his belief that local church ministry should be unpaid, but refused to join in any verbal attacks on ministers who worked on a stipendiary basis.<sup>20</sup> This was at least a charitable approach, which is more than can be said for some of his successors, some of whom were quite vitriolic in their anti-clerical rhetoric. In fact, when Phillips was, in 1814, offered the paid pastorate of a church, he did not immediately dismiss it but gave it careful consideration and finally declined it courteously.<sup>21</sup> It would have been financially advantageous for him to take it, but he declined on the basis that his convictions lay to the contrary.

<sup>17</sup> MS Journal of Hugh Bourne, Methodist Church Archives.

<sup>18</sup> The tract is printed in: J. Walford, Memoirs of the Life and Labours of the Late Venerable Hugh Bourne, 1855.

On 23<sup>rd</sup>. July 1806, Dow left Oldham on foot for Leeds and reflected on Bramwell's earlier attempts to bring these groups together. He concluded: *'Though most of these societies had no particular intercourse or communion together, I suppose I was the first preacher who made them a general visit.'* He then added, significantly: *'They called a conference some weeks ago to know each other's minds, and see how near they could come towards the outlines of a general union.'*<sup>16</sup> In such an informal way did the early Independent Methodists first meet together; this is the only surviving information about this meeting, but it is sufficient to show clearly when the denomination began. 1796 was Friars Green's date of origin but the Connexion of Churches is dated properly from the meeting of 1806 which Lorenzo Dow mentions. An Annual Meeting was held in 1807 at Macclesfield; this is noted by Hugh Bourne, who would later lead the Primitive Methodist Connexion, and who was present at the meeting.<sup>17</sup> He was present again in 1808 - and for this meeting the minutes still exist. They show five churches represented - Manchester, Macclesfield, Warrington, Stockport and Oldham, though their numbers also included small mission churches which they had started. Their total membership was 1219.

Lorenzo Dow was an evangelist rather than someone who nurtured and built up new churches, but two Independent Methodist Churches in the Warrington area owe their existence to his work: Risley and Stockton Heath. In the latter case, circumstances prolonged Dow's stay in Warrington, as his wife and infant daughter (the only child they ever had) lay ill at the Phillips home. During this time he went nightly to Stockton Heath where he had just started to hold meetings in a barn. This was to prove a fruitful area of work, which we shall mention again presently. Sadly, however, his daughter died and was subsequently buried in an unmarked grave in the burial ground at Friars Green.

We have already mentioned that Hugh Bourne, who eventually started the Primitive Methodist Connexion, attended at least two Independent Methodist Annual Meetings. A great friendship grew up between Bourne and the Quaker Methodists of Warrington. He worked closely with Peter Phillips and for a time it looked as though their paths lay together in a single movement. He and his co-worker William Clowes regularly stayed at the home of the leader of the church at Stockton Heath, Thomas Eaton, whose residence Clowes termed a 'pilgrims' inn.'

One lasting legacy from Hugh Bourne to the Independent Methodists should be

<sup>11</sup> George Herod, Historical and Biographical Sketches, etc. 1823, 182.

<sup>12</sup> Lorenzo Dow, Dealings of God, Man and the Devil, Applegate & Co, Cincinnati, 1860, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Dow, 118, 124.

<sup>14</sup> Dow, 120.

<sup>15</sup> Centenary Souvenir of Independent Methodism in Oldham, 1916.

<sup>16</sup> Dow, 124.

# Independent Methodist expansion from Warrington

Bolton, Folds Road \*  
(1820)

Westthou ghton \*#  
(1819)

Bedford  
(1818)

Lowton Common \*#  
(1793 - IM from 1819)

Culcheth # (1833)

Hindley +

Stubshaw Cross #  
(1854)

Downall Green #  
(1832)

Golborne  
(1847)

Lowton \*  
(1806)

Croft (pre - 1826)

Par  
(1826)

Prescot \*#  
(1818-23, 1851-)

Risley #  
(1806)

Friars Green \*#  
(1796)

Sankey

Lymm \*#  
(1801)

Grappenhall #  
(1855)

Stockton Heath #  
(1806)

High Legh #  
(1783 - IM from 1851)



Dates of origin of churches in brackets

- \* Church which planted other churches
- # Church still in existence
- + not the present Hindley Church; this one appears to have existed only briefly

This map does not show the spread of the movement from other areas, e.g. Liverpool and Manchester, nor does it show churches which began after 1855