

Chapter 2

Social and Political Factors 1815-60

1. Poverty, Radical Politics and the Free Gospel

The Independent Methodists experienced a new influx of churches during the years 1818-24, firstly in Lancashire and subsequently on Tyneside. The factors common to them were poverty, radical politics or both. The end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 was followed by hardship on the domestic front. Town dwellers in particular suffered as a result of the passing of the Corn Law which raised the price of bread. Moreover, there was a glut on the labour market as men returned from the war to find peacetime employment.¹ Wages were pushed down accordingly and the gap between rich and poor widened. To some Methodists, the funding of ministers (and often chapels with mortgages) became an impossible financial burden, with the result that they embraced free gospelism for reasons of poverty rather than principle. Handloom cotton weavers were among those who suffered and who turned to radical politics, particularly during the years 1816-19.² The self-employed status of the weavers, whose work and domestic lives functioned closely together, gave them a natural affinity with the local autonomy offered by Independent Methodism.

In the second decade of the nineteenth century, the attention of the Wesleyan Methodist leadership in Liverpool was drawn to the substantial Welsh element in its membership and the needs of its Welsh-speaking society. Help was sought from the Conference in the provision of a Welsh-speaking preacher, but the lean post-war times caused the Conference to look for economies. Special provision for a minority group began to look like an unaffordable luxury, as Jonathan Crowther, a leading itinerant, wrote:

it looks strange to me that Liverpool itself should claim £94 19s. 6d. for supporting a Welch [sic] preacher in that town. I think if our very large society of English Christians there, cannot supply their poor Welch townsmen with preaching, they ought to be without, at least till times grow better.³

Despite Crowther's misgivings, Conference continued to appoint a Welsh minister to Liverpool, but the relationship between English and Welsh, Conference and local society, was an uneasy one, and money was always a problem, the Welsh contingent proving disruptive and unwilling to pay full contributions to funds.⁴ In 1818, matters came to a head in the Welsh Wesleyan Methodist Church at Benn's Gardens, when a new rule was framed whereby only those who had paid their weekly and quarterly contributions could benefit from the Poor Fund.

Thomas Jones (1785-1864), former slave ship sailor and now self-employed bookseller,⁵ was the Poor Steward at the time and therefore responsible for enforcing the rule, which he regarded as unreasonable. On 7 May, he surrendered his class book at a Leaders' Meeting to the minister, Edward Jones, saying that he objected to taking as much as sixpence per week, from women who were old and poor, so that the minister and his colleagues could enjoy at least £200 per annum.⁶ Uproar ensued and a further meeting failed to resolve the matter. Thomas Jones offered to meet with those who sympathised with him, upon which invitation the minister declared that anyone who attended would be expelled. A number of people took up the gauntlet and, according to Thomas Jones, their response led to the formation of the first Independent Methodist Church in Liverpool.

The comparison between the minister's stipend and the poverty of the poorest members inevitably carried great emotional weight. Jones's argument was, of course, somewhat specious, as payments into the Poor Fund had no bearing on the minister's income. Nevertheless, the timing of the new rule was bound to provoke a backlash, given the circumstances of the poor at the time. The Welsh societies in Liverpool suffered a drop of fifty-three in their membership between June and September 1818 and it is reasonable to assume that most of these were the people who joined Thomas Jones in his newly-formed Independent Methodist Church.⁷

The constitution of the new church reflected the views and sympathies held by Independent Methodists generally.⁸ Its doctrines were uncompromisingly Wesleyan, but the polity was firmly congregational and ministry was gratuitous. The members described their church as one 'which acknowledges no head but Jesus Christ, for we consider ourselves all brethren; all enjoy the same equal rights and privileges as men and as Christians; no one member assuming a power to rule over the rest'.⁹ The blame for the rift at Benn's Gardens, rightly or wrongly, was attributed to the perceived privileges of a paid ministry which was not accountable to the local congregation. Thomas Jones became a determined proselytiser for Independent Methodism, taking every opportunity to see it established in his native North Wales over the next twenty years.¹⁰ As a businessman whose interests took him into the principality, he had the obvious freedom of movement which employed people lacked.

In 1819, the Wesleyan Methodist society at Lowton Common (Lancashire), where many members were weavers, was at low ebb and, for a number of weeks, no preachers were sent to it. Richard Eckersley, one of the leaders, complained about this to the circuit authorities and reportedly received the reply, 'You do not deserve any preaching; you send us no money.'¹¹ Thereafter, an approach was made to the Congregational Church in Leigh to take over responsibility for the chapel, but this was declined.¹² Next, Peter Phillips was contacted at Warrington. The outcome of his visit was that the Warrington Independent Methodists agreed to spend forty pounds on improvements and arranged for a supply of preachers. In this way the church became affiliated to the Independent Methodists.¹³ Throughout the nineteenth century, it remained a strong village society and typified the kind of environment where Independent Methodism thrived.

The clash between members' poverty and the demands of the Wesleyan superintendent minister at Lancaster in 1824¹⁴ provides a further illustration of this recurring problem, but it also shows that such clashes were sometimes influenced by specific, local issues, in this instance a trade depression in the town.¹⁵ Despite this adverse economic situation, which affected most of his members, the Wesleyan superintendent minister was determined to enforce the rule which required them to pay weekly class pence and a shilling quarterly, threatening expulsion to those who failed to do so. Most of the leaders sympathised with their poorer members and resigned their offices and membership. Of 132 members recorded in the Wesleyan Society, only forty-one were still in membership three years later. Of those who were lost, fifty-five formed themselves into a new society, taking the name 'Methodist Independent', though a few later returned to the Wesleys. The new society included three former Wesleyan class leaders – Richard Tomlinson, a chairmaker, Robert Burrow, a coal dealer, and James Furness, a shoemaker.¹⁶ Once again, this would be a church led by tradesmen. The new body made contact with the Quaker Methodists at Warrington and was duly represented at the 1825 Annual Meeting when it was received into membership.¹⁷

The foregoing examples appear to have had little direct political involvement, but elsewhere the political leanings of some Methodists undoubtedly led to internal conflict and, ultimately, schism. Wesleyan Methodism's caution over radical politics dated back to the 1790s,¹⁸ but more recent issues now focused its collective mind. In 1811, the Connexional solicitor, Thomas Allan, had successfully campaigned against the plans of the Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, to curb itinerant preaching. In the aftermath of this, he prepared an address to the Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval, pointing out that Methodism had been a means of keeping the working classes docile and that it had no wish to engage in

politics, being thoroughly loyal to the government.¹⁹

A year after Sidmouth's Bill was lost, a new Toleration Act was passed on 29 July 1812, largely through Allan's influence, resulting in the repeal of the Five Mile Act and the Conventicle Act. Methodism and old Dissent alike benefited from the new legislation which now affirmed the rights of their ministers in law. However, the new status accorded to Methodists meant that they had to maintain loyalty to the crown and good order during a time of radical ferment.²⁰ A circular was issued in the wake of the new Toleration Act, urging all Methodists to 'Fear the Lord and their King and meddle not with them that are given to change.'²¹ Nevertheless, the following years saw an increasing involvement of Methodist lay people in reform groups and activities. Members whose trades were adversely affected by changing social conditions and work practices found themselves forced to choose between their reformist convictions and calls to loyalty and submission by their ministers.

On 19 August 1819, a public meeting was held in St. Peter's Fields, Manchester, when people marched from various north-west towns to demonstrate peacefully in favour of parliamentary reform. Fearing a riot, the Manchester magistrates sent in armed soldiers to arrest the speakers and break up the gathering. In the chaos which ensued, several people were killed and many more injured. The 'Peterloo Massacre', as it became known, resulted in a huge public outcry. However, Methodism's response showed little sympathy to those who had suffered injury or bereavement. Its Committee on Religious Privileges, still concerned that government repression could fall on Methodism, wrote an open letter to the societies in November, denouncing 'tumultuous assemblies' and the 'wild and delusive political theories' which occasioned them. The letter called upon all Methodists to abstain from such meetings and warned them not to join 'private political associations privately organised.' Then came the ultimatum: 'Any person connected with our body persisting after due admonition in identifying himself with the factious and disloyal shall forthwith be expelled from the Society according to our established rules.' Finally, the poor were urged to 'bear their privations with patience and to seek relief not in schemes of agitation and crime, but in reliance on Divine Providence, and in continuous prayer for the blessing of God on our country and on themselves.'²²

Among those present at Peterloo were some handloom weavers from Wingates (Westhoughton, Lancashire), members of the Methodist society at Rose Bank, where the minister, S. Sugden, took a dim view of their political interests and their backwardness in paying contributions. A late nineteenth-century chronicler, John Coop, told one side of the story which, by this time, had passed into local folk-lore:

He [Sugden] was unwilling to accept their pleas for poverty as a sufficient excuse for their laggard payments, and their politics were heinous indeed and aggravated matters. George Hodson frankly told Mr. Sugden that Wingates folk could preach and pray for themselves, as indeed they had to, since he only came for their money. Robert Bamber said 'his politics was a part of his religion, because in a state of political thralldom there could be no such thing as spiritual freedom.'²³

There is no independent verification of Coop's version of events, but Peterloo appears to have brought about the final rift between the minister and the weavers. Bamber was present on the fateful day in Manchester and he and others later rented a cottage where they started holding meetings. Contact was made with Peter Phillips at Warrington and he came to them to explain the organisation and principles of the Independent Methodists, whom they duly joined.²⁴ As at Lowton Common, the egalitarian polity of the Independent Methodists suited the independent-minded weavers of Wingates who, by their own admission, were only too willing to 'preach and pray for themselves.' This church was born as much from political convictions as religious ones and it continued to be a force for social and political change in ensuing years.

Politics and poverty also raised their heads in nearby Bolton, where there was an awareness that the problem was not merely local:

The year 1819 was a period of much affliction and trial to the members of the Wesleyan connection [*sic*], on account of the frequent introduction of political matters into the pulpit, and the rigorous exactions made upon the poor for their contributions, many of whom were unable to support the preachers to that extent they required, and consequently they did not experience that kindness from them, which, in consideration of their privations, they stood so much in need of.

The writer went on to say that this was the case at Bridge Street Church, Bolton, where Thomas Hill was then the superintendent minister. He continued:

Mr. H[ill]'s conduct was exceedingly oppressive; taking names out of class papers when members could not pay; continually pressing upon them for money, both in the pulpit and in the classes; and also intermixing political matters with the preaching of the gospel.²⁵

Although Wesleyan Methodism forbade the pursuance of radical politics, it allowed preachers to remind their congregations of the need

for loyalty to the crown and to submit themselves to the ruling authorities. Reformist members resented this as a blatantly one-sided practice which amounted to 'intermixing political matters with the preaching of the gospel.'

Several of the Bolton members, most of them weavers, held radical views and admired the campaigner, Henry Hunt, who played a prominent part in the Peterloo demonstration, but Thomas Hill took a different view. Some of his members were accustomed to imitate Hunt by wearing white felt hats. On one occasion, they placed their hats on a table during a week-night meeting, whereupon Hill allegedly swept them off the table, remarking, 'Who do these belong to?' This was, reputedly, the last straw which broke the camel's back. The outraged Radicals duly decided that they could no longer stay where they were and resolved to make for themselves a new spiritual home.²⁶ Ten men left Bridge Street and in February 1820 formed a new church. According to William Fallows, who later left Bolton for America, all were Radicals.²⁷ John Fallows, in whose house the new church began, was committed to the Radical cause enough to name one of his children Henry Hunt Fallows after his hero.²⁸ Once again, Peter Phillips was contacted and the new church adopted an Independent Methodist identity.

When the Independent Methodists were strong enough to build their first chapel in Folds Road, it became known as 'the Radical Chapel'²⁹ though its leaders were at pains to point out that its political interests were secondary to its spiritual ones. 'We bless God for His gracious work amongst us,' they noted, 'that some have come to hear out of curiosity thinking to hear something of politics, but the ever-blessed Spirit has over-ruled their coming as the means of their conversion.'³⁰

On the other side of the country, the anger and sense of injustice felt nationally at the events of Peterloo led to a public demonstration at Newcastle Town Moor, where some 50,000 people gathered on 11 October 1819. Among the speakers was William H. Stephenson, teacher at Burton Colliery and Methodist local preacher in the North Shields Circuit. Referring to the events at Manchester, he spoke of the 'barbarous and cruel yeomanry' and the 'cruel magistrates', argued that the offences committed warranted capital punishment, and concluded, with a rhetorical flourish, 'I would rather die with Pompey in the cause of liberty than be enthroned with Caesar on its ruins.'³¹ His action in addressing a radical meeting precipitated a crisis which affected Methodism nationally. The North Shields superintendent, Robert Pilter, came under pressure to remove Stephenson from the plan and asked him to stand down voluntarily, but he refused.³² Pilter was on the horns of a dilemma, pressurised on the one hand to remove Stephenson but realising that this could result in the loss of members and the resignation of some local preachers. There was no

easy answer, so the matter was referred to the Methodist Committee on Religious Privileges which ruled that it was improper for a Methodist to speak at a reform meeting, that any local preacher or class leader who did do should be suspended and that expulsion would follow unless he promised not to do so again. This was followed by a further ruling which debarred members of private political associations from becoming members of Methodist societies.³³

Stephenson refused to give an undertaking to refrain from attending further reform meetings, with the result that he was duly suspended from the plan and expelled from membership. Infuriated with the outcome, he wrote to Pilter and his colleague Robert Jackson. After complaining about his expulsion, he went on to attack the itinerancy on the grounds of what he saw as elitism and greed:

The people are groaning under the pecuniary burdens which are imposed upon them from time to time. One collection follows another in rapid succession, and they never know where the misery will end. There are more than seventy collections every year, either public or private – was this always the case? We answer, It was not; a time was, when Methodist preachers had little more than fifty pounds per annum; their wants then were few, they laboured for souls, and success in their labours was to them a sufficient recompense. Superfine coats, water-proof hats, silk stockings and gold watches were never the object of their pursuits – Surely, Sir this cannot be said for the present race of Methodist Preachers.³⁴

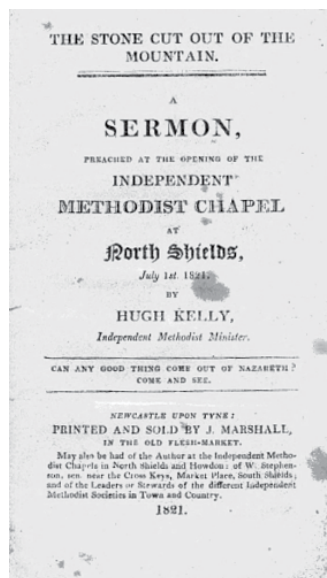
The picture Stephenson painted of Methodist preachers was hardly fair or accurate, but it created a caricature which passed into Independent Methodist folklore in the years ahead. It also gave him a form of martyrdom which attracted the sympathy of others.

While the Stephenson case was still *sub judice*, two preachers in the nearby Gateshead Circuit were also threatened with expulsion unless they renounced all connection with the reformers. This they refused to do and, unlike Stephenson, quietly withdrew their Methodist membership, along with about twenty other members.³⁵ A Methodist class leader was also (reputedly) expelled because his wife hung a red ribbon (Hunt's favour) at the door of their house while he was ill.³⁶ A new door opened for the Gateshead reformers when they heard of the Independent Methodists and obtained a copy of the rules of the church at Sheffield. They resolved to embrace Independent Methodist principles and, on 28 October 1819, their first place of worship opened at Gateshead Fell, where two men, Thomas Fletcher, a pitman, and Dennis Turnbull, a shoemaker, gave the use of their

cottages. Four years later a chapel was built in the grounds of Fletcher's cottage.³⁷

During the same week, a further two preachers in the North Shields Circuit withdrew and joined the Independent Methodists. One of them was Hugh Kelly, whose later account of the events provides a valuable picture of the movement's early attempt to establish itself in the Northeast.³⁸ The political factor in his choice was plain:

He had long venerated the preachers for their piety and usefulness, and admired in them that penetration and discernment which seemed to characterise them: But, when the subject of *Reform* was agitated, the only antidote afforded by them against the dreaded spread of this spirit, was, '*Do not dip too deep into politics.*' Now he could not help seeing that the grand principle of politics was founded on that saying of Jesus Christ, *as ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.* Hence his reasons for quitting the old connexion, may be found in the opposition of the preachers to the purest principles of morality.³⁹



Title page of a sermon by Hugh Kelly

The Wesleyans expected the new movement to wither and die, dismissing its preachers as obscure and illiterate; the idea that the gospel could be preached and new churches planted without a paid ministry was regarded as impracticable. Countering this point, Kelly argued that some Methodist societies received a travelling preacher only once a quarter, so they effectively functioned on the voluntary system already.⁴⁰ Another allegation made against the Independent Methodists was that they taught politics, to which Kelly replied, predictably, that if it was wrong for a reformer to publish political sentiments from the pulpit, it was equally wrong for a Whig or Tory to do so. He insisted that the members of his new denomination were loyal to the king and government, industrious and honest, but that they had a right to petition against abuses.

In December 1819, further churches were started on Tyneside and a 'union' was established, with quarterly meetings. By July 1820, the impact on Wesleyan Methodism in the area was beginning to be felt. Pilter wrote to Bunting:

Stevenson [*sic*] and his radicals have done us hurt. A new chapel opened for Sunday evening service in the next street and occupied by an Independent youth said to equal the late Spence of Liverpool seriously affects our congregations.⁴¹

In May of the same year, the church at Gateshead reported by letter to the Independent Methodist Annual Meeting, held at Sheffield, but said that financial embarrassment prevented it from sending a delegate.⁴² A year later, Stephenson attended the Annual Meeting, this time at Oldham. His report evidently aroused sympathy and interest among the delegates and he was given nine pounds to help the churches out of their current difficulties.

In 1822, the IM preachers went into Sunderland where they held a mass meeting on the Town Moor which led to the formation of another church.⁴³ A local benefactor donated a piece of ground and a public appeal was launched to fund the building of a chapel.⁴⁴ By 1824, the Gateshead and Shields Union, as it was then called, had seven churches, seven branches, 331 members and nineteen preachers.⁴⁵ The preachers were to be unpaid, but provision was allowed where a preacher was sent out to plant or visit churches: 'if the churches which he is visiting are not able to support him, the church which sends him forth shall give him wages to do them service.'⁴⁶ This was a greater concession than any other IM church would make at this time; for most of them, the very suggestion of 'wages' would have smacked of 'hirelingism.' However, weaknesses were beginning to show and Kelly frankly exposed them.

Having suffered verbal abuse from others, their pulpits were soon similarly 'desecrated by controversy and a strife of words.'⁴⁷ The publicity about the opening of the chapel at Newcastle was couched in such intemperate language that, as Kelly said, it 'caused it to be treated with well deserved contempt,'⁴⁸ while Stephenson also drew Kelly's personal criticism, after preaching and printing an inflammatory sermon on the coronation of George IV.⁴⁹ They also attempted to prove that they could plant churches without paid ministers and opened more places than they could manage, resulting in a shortage of preachers and financial embarrassment.⁵⁰ This was compounded by their attempts to attract people by telling them that they wanted no money, with the result that people gave none. As Kelly put it, 'They found now that it was much easier to destroy than to excite a spirit of Christian liberality.'⁵¹ Finally, lack of experience in leadership led to stormy meetings and personality conflicts. Stephenson was at the centre of one particular squabble which ran on for two years, and he was finally expelled in 1823.⁵²

The later history of this group of churches is lost in obscurity; after defecting to the Wesleyan Protestant Methodists in 1830,⁵³ little is known

of them. They were perhaps more significant as a marker of Wesleyan Methodism's loss of influence among the working classes than for any lasting impact upon the Independent Methodist movement. The massive expansion of Primitive Methodism in the area during the next forty years was to bring a new revivalist impulse and a strong body of churches rooted in working class-culture.

2. Peter Phillips and the Pacifist Response

The involvement of Peter Phillips in the new Lancashire churches illustrates the extent to which he was regarded as the main focus of reference for the Independent Methodists at this time, though they accorded central authority to no one. Paradoxically, he shared none of the radicalism of the Wingates and Bolton people and positively eschewed the polemics of people like William Stephenson. His only extant sermon, written shortly after Peterloo, reflected a Quaker view of violence. Phillips announced in advance to his congregation that he would preach on the text, 'He that hath no sword let him sell his cloak and buy one.' In a town which had its fair share of insurgents, this was enough to attract widespread attention. A large congregation gathered, including officers of the law, while neighbours barricaded their windows in anticipation of a riot. However, the alarm proved to be unwarranted and Phillips, in the event, preached a pacifist sermon. He began:

Can these words mean a weapon of destruction? I think not. From the character of Christ, which according to prophecy was that he should be called the Prince of Peace; that His government should be a government of peace; that in His kingdom (His holy mountain) they should neither hurt nor destroy; that the sword should be made into a ploughshare and the spear into a pruning-hook. And therefore, the angels sang when He was born, 'Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace.'

In conclusion, he said:

Lastly, it cannot mean the sword for destruction of life, because He hath said, 'Thou shalt not kill' and 'Thou shalt do no murder.' And we know that when the apostles wanted to call for fire from heaven to destroy, Christ said, 'Ye know not what spirit we are of. The Son of Man came not to destroy men's lives but to save.'⁵⁴

Through a timely announcement and a single sermon, Phillips had deflected official suspicion away from his own proletarian church.

The question inevitably remains: how did the pacifist preacher of Warrington not only attract the attention of dissident Methodists in radical communities,

but also win their confidence? The answer may be twofold. Firstly, the loose nature of Independent Methodism made no requirement of member societies on questions of political allegiance. Each society could adopt its own standpoint, so long as it adhered to the two basic principles of a free church and an unpaid ministry. Secondly, Phillips had shown by example that a church run by working people *for* working people could not only survive but flourish and go on to plant other churches. This exactly matched the aspirations of the groups in question. Furthermore, his own background as a self-employed tradesman gave him an affinity with spinners and weavers which an increasingly professional Methodist clergy was ceasing to have. Beside these issues, his pacifism was of less significance to them and may even have tempered the views of those who would have gone to greater extremes in the pursuit of reform.

3. Persecution

Whatever their aspirations, one of the recurring themes among sectarian groups was that of persecution. They were not welcomed by the establishment, either civil or ecclesiastical, to whom they posed at best a nuisance and at worst a threat. To the more respectable, order was important and justified their opposition to undisciplined sectarian groups; to the sects themselves, disapproval appeared to be only a thin line apart from persecution. Verbal denunciation of their revivalist activities by a local vicar or even a Free Church minister was perceived as persecution; so was the termination of their tenancy of a chapel or meeting house, especially when this was influenced by squire or parson. The small society at Lane Delph, Hanley, was typically held in low regard.

Independency is so contrary to the views of all other professing Christian sects here, that we are counted as the filth and offscourings of all things.⁵⁵

Mob reaction to open air preaching and neighbourhood hostility to cottage meetings compounded a sense of social ostracism. In the early years of the nineteenth century, home meeting places were prone to physical attack. On one occasion at Roe Green, (Worsley, Lancashire) a slate was placed over the chimney of Joseph Okell's cottage to smoke the worshippers out, while on another occasion, the door was boarded from the outside to keep the Bible Class members in!⁵⁶

In 1811, James Ashton, whose house at Lowton, Lancashire, had been used by the Independent Methodists for preaching purposes since before 1806, was admonished as a 'refractory person' by the local Rector, John Pennington, and ordered to produce a meeting house licence. In fact, Ashton had taken out a licence five years previously in the mistaken hope that legality would bring security.

. . . a multitude of persecutors of the most bitter character surrounded his house whenever he and his brethren met for worship. Stones, sludge and brickbats were hurled at them, while their ears were saluted with the most awful and bitter language. These mobs were frequently headed by those who professed to be the friends of religion.⁵⁷

This sense of religious persecution was undoubtedly compounded by sheer poverty, prompting comments such as that of the Manchester Church in 1827 that they were ‘a poor and despised people’.⁵⁸ A low self-image would last for at least two generations before they became more prosperous and respectable.

4. Education

Early Sunday Schools aimed to provide elementary education for poor children, many of whom formed a cheap labour force during the week, working long hours and with only Sunday free for recreation or education. For millions of them, the Sunday School provided a route into literacy and, for many of them, out of poverty. It was, as W.R. Ward has said, ‘the only religious institution which the nineteenth century public in the mass had any intention of using.’⁵⁹

Sunday Schools were sometimes operated by town committees, sometimes by individuals and sometimes by churches, which included all the main Protestant denominations.⁶⁰ In the case of Wesleyan Methodism, the superintendent Minister had oversight of schools in his circuit and was expected to ensure that they conformed to Conference regulations.⁶¹ By contrast, churches of an autonomous character, such as the Independent Methodists, could organise schools entirely in their own way. The address to the churches at the 1824 Annual Meeting reflected their growing recognition of the value of the institution:

The instruction of youth requires and calls for your utmost exertions. To implant right sentiments in their minds, and good principles in their hearts, is the most important point of education; it tends frequently to the enjoyment of grace and peace here, and glory hereafter, thus producing those happy consequences and results that it is impossible fully to describe. It becomes, then, an imperious duty for you, as parents, to place in the hands of your children those books that are calculated to forward this object, and also to become advocates for, and assistants to, those useful seminaries of religious instruction, the Sabbath Schools.⁶²

Only three IM churches are known to have started Sunday Schools before 1815. Some, such as Stockport and Macclesfield, made no attempt to do

so, being located near to huge undenominational town schools, the one at Stockport being the largest in the world, catering for over 6,000 children.⁶³ However, during the 1820s, most Independent Methodists embraced Sunday School work enthusiastically; by lining themselves up with a national movement they were unwittingly moving away from separatism.

The first Independent Methodist Sunday School owed its origins to Peter Phillips, who, as a child, had benefited from the provision of an Anglican Sunday School near to his home in the 1780s and knew its value. By 1807, with a number of small cottage-based churches already under his care, he saw an opportunity to venture into this field himself. Stockton Heath, two miles from the centre of Warrington, was a community which lacked any place of education. Here he set about establishing a school in the same barn where the church met. An eyewitness account of the opening, written later by his son, tells the story:

I was present at the opening and well remember the circumstance – it was a very humble beginning . . . there were only a very few books; a large sheet was posted behind the door, on which was printed the alphabet, and my father, surrounded by the boys, pointed with a stick to the letters, and the whole group with all their might, shouted A, B, C. . . .

After the morning lessons were over, those of the children who came from a great distance ate the dinner which they had brought with them in the school-room. . . . The older boys and girls, when they knew my father had to preach in the afternoon, would be sure to wait for him, and if he happened to come before the time, they solicited him to sing with them the hymns and anthems which he had taught them. He used to draw a stave upon the door and teach them the elements of music: he was remarkably kind and affable with them, and became a great favourite.⁶⁴

Sunday School was a full day affair and the Stockton Heath rules indicated that sessions began at 8.30.a.m. and 1.00.p.m.⁶⁵ By the early 1820s, it numbered over 300.⁶⁶ Sunday Schools were still few and far between, with the result that places at them were in great demand and children walked some distance to attend. Such was the success of the school at Stockton Heath that Peter Phillips went on to establish schools at Friars Green in 1810 and Brick Street in 1823. In the latter case, he was moved by the ragged appearance of children in the Cockhedge area of the town, where poverty was rife. With the object of providing secular instruction as well as Bible teaching, a school was built where adults as well as children found opportunity to learn.⁶⁷ Phillips' philanthropic outlook both reflected an IM response to poverty and helped to shape it.