



Like many other Methodist causes in Ireland, Strabane Methodism can claim links with John Wesley in that he passed through the town (then on the main road from Dublin to Derry) on a number of occasions. However, he saw few prospects to develop work there, only stopping three times, and his view can be judged by a letter to his assistant, John Grace, at Londonderry, posted in London on 25 October 1789: 'If Strabane receives the gospel, we may certainly say there is nothing too hard for God...'

Nevertheless, Methodism took root in the town. Amongst the earliest Methodist preachers to arrive was George Brown, one of Wesley's Irish-born itinerants, who in 1774 preached 'by moonlight to a great congregation near Strabane'. Despite local

opposition, a Methodist society was formed. Strengthened by visits from Adam Averell, and following the leadership of Mathew Lanktree and Samuel Alcorn on the circuit, they felt secure enough to build a church and manse in 1814.

Strabane was amongst the earliest societies to espouse the temperance movement (1834), and their church was the first in the town to establish Sunday school work.

Strabane was also one of the areas most affected by the split of Irish Methodism in 1816 over the relationship to the Established Church. The dissident 'Church Methodists' established a society in 1820, and Adam Averell opened their Primitive Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in 1830 to rival Wesleyan Methodism for the people's allegiance.

The effects of the split were mitigated by a religious revival in the area, resulting in many new converts to both branches of Methodism, and new classes being formed. At one stage, Methodist Sunday schools in the circuit had an enrolment of over 600. This period of growth was brought to an end by the famine years and subsequent emigration.

When the two branches of Methodism united in 1878, the Primitive building, which was situated in the present Barrack

Street, was sold.

The original church and especially the manse suffered the disadvantage of contiguity to the parish graveyard, leading to difficulties particularly for manse families. A new manse was ready by 1890 and the present church on Railway Street was built in 1900. Halls were added in 1911.

The most dramatic event to overtake the building occurred when it, along with so much of Strabane, suffered in the floods of 21 October 1987. Water rose six and a half feet, up to the level of the organ keyboard. The subsequent repairs and refurbishment was an opportunity to respond creatively to the tragedy and among other benefits has been provision of a screened section at the back of the church as a reception area.

Strabane, as a border town, suffered more than most during the 'Troubles' from frequent bombing and high unemployment, but in recent years significant investment in the town has resulted in renewed confidence. Among the areas most recently upgraded has been the pedestrian link between John Wesley Street and Castle Street. In all this the Methodist community has played its part, and continues to maintain a witness that stretches back to the earliest days of Methodism in this island.