

Squire Brackenbury

BY THE REV. FRANK BAKER

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This impetus to preach was confirmed and strengthened by the death of Brackenbury's young wife in 1782, after only a few months of marriage. The following year came the challenge to pioneer evangelism in the Channel Islands. Brackenbury offered himself gladly for the task, particularly as his precarious health necessitated long periods in the south. He was appointed by Wesley to act as what we should now call the superintendent minister, or even the Chairman of the District, even though he had never been officially received into the ministry by Conference, nor ever was. In this respect he was treated as almost on the same footing with the ordained Anglican clergy who in the early days sometimes served Methodism. While at first the spiritual needs of British soldiers quartered in the islands were chiefly in mind, Brackenbury had a bolder vision. He sought to perfect his French in order that he might evangelise the whole community. His stumbling efforts caused him some anxiety, but Wesley gave him sound Cromwellian advice: "Surely you need not be careful about accuracy. Trust God, and speak as well as you can."

A year later Wesley tried to restrain Brackenbury's mounting enthusiasm about the Methodist potentialities of the Channel Islands. "'Two or three years in Jersey?' I had almost said God forbid! Has He no more work for you to do in England?" Brackenbury had his way, however, and only when Methodism there was solidly on its feet did he leave it to the care of the regular itinerant preachers. Later Wesley agreed that he "did right in not being disobedient to the heavenly calling."

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service of the Church, even though he would become a considerable landowner upon his father's death. A strange mystical experience through which he passed as an undergraduate at Cambridge, however, made Robert Carr Brackenbury dissatisfied with conventional religion. A "long and close conversation" with one of Wesley's preachers convinced him that he must join the Methodists. Boldly he put his new faith to the test in his native Lincolnshire. He chose a more populous centre than Panton, however, moving east to Spilsby.

It is somewhat difficult to reconstruct his story, for Brackenbury was so self-effacing that he endeavoured to destroy all his tracks behind him, and asked that there should be neither biography nor even obituary notice of him. Yet a clue here and there enables us to follow something of his career. It was surely no mere coincidence that during the winter of 1775-6 a group of completely new Methodist societies sprang up into being around Spilsby. Spilsby itself was the most important, and here the early membership records leave no doubt at all. At the head of the list, as class leader, stands the name "Rob. Carr Brackenbury." He was only twenty-four, but it is obvious that the older men and women whom he had won for his Master felt happy to be under his wing. It was true that he was somewhat inclined to mystical introspection, so that in later years John Wesley warned that he was too much drawn to "a gloomy Religion, instead of the Cheerfulness of Faith." But he was all sincerity and humble love, a gracious influence throughout a very wide area, including Horn-castle. The area around Spilsby drew him more than any other, however, and in 1779 he commenced building a home for himself nearby, at Raithby. Henceforth Raithby Hall was the evangelical centre for East Lincolnshire, which Wesley dubbed "an earthly paradise." At the same time Brackenbury laid down the pattern that he was later to follow in other parts of the country. He built a chapel as well.

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where he interpreted for Wesley sentence by sentence as he preached. For a man of his ability and means, however, he was not very widely known in the pulpits of this country. A deep and sometimes disabling humility, combined with a necessary regard for his frail health, kept him well within his limitations. Generously he supported good causes by the score, but only a few areas knew him intimately. He refused to dissipate his energies by spreading them too thinly. He was a good squire in the things of the spirit, and felt it necessary to live alongside the people whom he was called to help. In three areas, Lincolnshire, Dorset, and the Channel Islands, he made his home for years at a time. In each he built a handful of chapels, and maintained annual visits and gifts after he had removed elsewhere.

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the 165 Residents in our 8 Homes, your heart would be so moved that you would desire to tell others and get their hearts and wills moved to support this gracious ministry by their gifts and prayers.

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Inquiries and Gifts will be gratefully acknowledged by me.

The Honorary General Secretary

THE REV. WILLIAM STOATE,

1, Central Buildings, Westminster, S.W.1

“Squire Brackenbury.” *Methodist Recorder* (May 1, 1952): 9.

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