

Methodism's Oldest Church

By FRANK BAKER



A disputed claim cleared up.

ALL PILGRIMS to Old St. George's Church in Philadelphia must acknowledge its great claims to the admiration and affection of Methodists the world over. It is the nearest approach to John Wesley's New Room in Bristol, England, that I personally know.

I hope that Old St. George's will gain a more honored place in the affection of World Methodism when its many genuine claims to distinction are no longer associated with one which has long been disproved. It has been stated that it has "been used for worship continuously longer than any other Methodist church in the world."

When, through the characteristic generosity of American Methodists,

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overseas delegates to the World Methodist Conference in 1956 were taken on an unforgettable tour of historic American shrines, many were greatly puzzled to be told time and time again that Old St. George's, Philadelphia, was "the oldest Methodist church in the world." Once again, an announcement in the *Methodist Recorder* says that Dr. Frederick E. Maser has been appointed to "Old St. George's Church, the oldest Methodist church in continuous service."

Under these circumstances it seems desirable that I should accede to requests from both sides of the Atlantic by setting out, after extensive research, the facts of the situation. John Wesley opened two "preaching houses" in 1739—the remodelled Foundry in London and the New Room in the Horse Fair, Bristol. The Foundry chapel fell into disuse and then decay toward

the end of the century, after it had been replaced in 1778 by Wesley's Chapel, City Road, London, the "Cathedral of World Methodism."

The historic West Street Chapel, episcopally consecrated and acquired by Wesley from the Huguenots in 1743, is no longer in use.

In 1748 the Bristol New Room was pulled down and rebuilt on a larger scale, only the present north wall remaining from the original building. This is acknowledged to be the oldest Methodist church in existence, and under its present name of John Wesley's Chapel, Broadmead, it is one of the most rewarding places of Methodist pilgrimage anywhere in the world.

The pre-eminence of John Wesley's Chapel, Broadmead, Bristol, however, must be modified by two facts. It has not always been in the possession of the parent body of Wesley's Methodist Societies, nor has it been in continuous use.

The building of St. George's was begun by Dutch Presbyterians in 1763, the shell bought by the Methodists in 1769, and the completed church dedicated for worship by Joseph Pilmoor on November 24 that year. The correct basis for any claim, therefore, is that this building has been used as a Methodist Church ever since 1769. The Philadelphia Methodist Society itself had already been in existence for two years, but had not worshiped in that building.

Even if we went back to 1763,

however, when the Presbyterians laid the first stone of Old St. George's, it would still be possible to point to a number of older Methodist churches in the United Kingdom. Indeed, this is surely to be expected in the birthplace of Methodism. Most of these buildings, however, are tiny country chapels well off the beaten track of the American or British tourist.

The oldest of them all seems to be that at Newbiggin in Teesdale, County Durham. This church was built in 1759, and has remained in full use throughout almost two centuries. A century ago it was enlarged by building an extension at one end, so that it does not present exactly the same appearance as it did when Wesley first preached there in 1761. A neighboring church, known as High House, Ireshopeburn, Weardale, was also built in 1759, but not officially conveyed to the Methodist Conference until 1760. The chapel at Osmotherley, Yorkshire, dates from 1760.

We rejoice that in the mother country of Methodism there still exists in much their original form many shrines in which Wesley himself conducted worship during the first half of his amazing ministry, and which have been in regular use for Methodist worship ever since. None of these can compare with Old St. George's, Philadelphia, on the score of important historic associations, but in the matter of age alone they do have precedence.

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