Methodist History, 26:3 (April 1988)

INVESTIGATING WESLEY FAMILY TRADITIONS

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Family traditions, like family ghosts, are awkward creatures for a historian to handle. The minds of certain people find it difficult to take incidents on trust, especially fascinating stories about important people, but will instinctively try to get behind the possible fiction to the actual facts. Lavish embellishments in secondhand narratives trigger immediate suspicion—the historian seeks the primary documents. John Wesley, although in personal relationships accused by his brother of being too gullible—"born for the benefit of knaves"[1]—always sought eye-witness accounts of events, especially what appeared to be supernatural occurrences. A good example is the Epworth ghost.

John's father consistently downplayed the family ghost, though two hundred years later it had become famous to the British Society of Physical Research, and was fully written up in *The Epworth Phenomena* (1917)[2]. It seemed incredible when J.B. Rhine, the founder of parapsychology, told me shortly after my arrival at Duke University in 1960 that he had never heard of the Epworth haunting. During the manifestations Jackie Wesley was a grown-boy in the Charterhouse School, London, and heard only snippets of the correspondence between the family and his elder brother Samuel, nearing appointment as the under-master at Westminster School.[3] When he returned home in the summer of 1720, however, en route to beginning his career at Oxford, he began his own researches. He had just turned seventeen.

Over sixty years later he reported: "I carefully inquired into the particulars. I spoke to each of the persons who were then in the house, and took down what each could testify of his or her own knowledge."[4] His narrative was entitled "An Account of the Disturbances in my Father's House." The vicar of Haxey, Rev. Joseph Hoole, informed him of a servant's words: "'Old Jeffries is coming'—that was the name of one that died in the house—'for I hear the signal.'"[5] John's sisters had found the ghost both helpful and entertaining. He was a good time-keeper, and began "a gentle tapping" between 9:00 p.m.

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[1]*Methodist History,* Vol. 12, No. 4 (July 1974), 195.
[2]*The Epworth Phenomena,* collated by Dudley Wright, (London, Rider, 1917).
[3]See *Original Letters by the Rev. John Wesley and his friends,* ed. Joseph Priestley, (Birmingham, Pearson, 1791), 119–66.
[4]John Wesley (ed), *Arminian Magazine,* Vol. VII (Oct.–Dec., 1784), 548–50, 606–8, 654–46.
[5]*Ibid.*, 607.

and 10:00 p.m., so that the older girls would say, "Jeffrey is coming; it is time to go to sleep." If he knocked during the day they would tell the youngest, "Hark, Kezzy! Jeffrey is knocking above," whereupon she ran upstairs and pursued the ghost from room to room, "saying she desired no better diversion."[6] John concluded his narrative by pointing out that the "disturbances" began on December 2, 1716, and continued until the end of January, 1717.[7] He attempted no scientific explanation and used no technical terminology; he simply tried to secure reliable accounts from eye-witnesses. It was left to the somewhat more skeptical scholars of the twentieth century to speak of a probable poltergeist associated with the late teenager Hetty Wesley. Modern research has also pointed out that the unhappy spirit of the lonely old man who had died in the rectory attic apparently belonged to Jeffrey (or Jeffery)[8] Fletcher, whose burial in the churchyard as Geriafius Fletcher the rector had recorded (in Latin) on August 26, 1716.[9]

The family ghost had to be acceptable, however it was explained, because its documentation was so full and explicit. The many mistaken family traditions were something else—lapses of memory, romantic imaginings, exaggerated half-truths, occasionally dismissed by later generations as mere legends, and very difficult either to confirm or rebut from primary documents. To one of these John Wesley had referred in his article about the "disturbances":

> As both my father and mother are now at rest, and incapable of being pained thereby, I think it my duty to furnish the serious reader with a key to this circumstance [the ghost's "thundering knock" attending the "Amen" after the rector had read "A Prayer for the King's Majesty"]. The year before King William died, my father observed my mother did not say "Amen" to the prayer for the King. She said she could not, for she did not believe the Prince of Orange was King. He [Samuel Wesley] vowed he would never cohabit with her till she did. He then took his horse and rode away, nor did she hear anything of him for a twelvemonth. He then came back, and lived with her as before. But I fear his vow was not forgotten before God.[10]

John gave no clear reason for referring to this fifteen-year-old incident in the middle of the ghost story—it was by no means obvious

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[6]*Ibid.*, 655.
[7]*Ibid.*, 656.
[8]It should be noted that we seem to have only one known firsthand holograph reference to the ghost, in a letter from Emily Wesley (See Wesley, *Letters,* Oxford/Bicentennial Edn. Vol. 25, 449, line 25, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980). Emily in fact used the spelling "Jeffery." It may well be that all the other references were editorially revised from this less familiar spelling, by John Wesley (or his editor) in 1784, by Priestley in 1791, 165, by Adam Clarke in 1823 (following Wesley), 195.
[9]A.F. Messiter, *Notes on Epworth Parish Life,* (London, Elliot Stock, 1912), 28–29. In his *Family Circle* (London, Epworth Press, 1949), Maldwyn Edwards devoted an interesting chapter to "The Family Ghost," 87–99.
[10]Wesley, *Arminian Magazine,* (1784), 607–8.

how it was "a key to this circumstance." It must surely have been because of the association in John's mind of strong Jacobite allusions in both incidents. In 1701 Susanna's non-juring convictions had reached absolute certainty that she could no longer acquiesce in King William's claim to the throne after the death of his Stuart consort in 1695, and could therefore no longer in good conscience say "Amen" to the official prayer for him as king. Reconciliation had come only with the accession of another Stuart, Queen Anne, in 1702. In 1714, with the death of Anne, she had been succeeded by a Hanoverian king, George I. Susanna's adverse reaction may be assumed, though in any case she was now well past any child-bearing. In 1716, however, the Jacobite spirit of Jeffrey Fletcher was apparently annoyed by the rector's support of the new king, and echoed Susanna's previous silent rebellion with unruly knockings to greet the official prayer made for him. All this must surely have been in John Wesley's mind in inserting that reminiscent paragraph.

In public print Wesley was circumspect and intentionally obscure. To his young preacher, Adam Clarke, however, he confided, "Were I to write my own life, I should begin it *before I was born,* merely for the purpose of mentioning a disagreement between my father and mother." He followed this with an expanded version of his memorandum in the *Arminian Magazine*.[11] Wesley could hardly have known that this political—and theological—difference provided Susanna with her longest period of freedom from child-bearing, culminating in her most fruitful birth, John himself. It is doubtful whether he saw any documentary proof of this marital estrangement, nor did solid evidence appear until the revelations by Robert Walmsley in the *Manchester Guardian* for July 1953.[12] Even these, however, are not quite primary sources, but credible early copies of four of Susanna Wesley's letters complaining that her husband had forsaken her bed, letters preserved in the manuscript remains of her spiritual confessor, the well-known non-juror, Dr. George Hickes.

Even more distressing, however, are the uncertainties and problems which have constantly arisen in the authentication of family dates. The Wesley family of Epworth still captures the interest of new readers every year, yet every year old but incorrect stories about them are repeated, family traditions which were amended many years ago. And still Wesley scholars are being asked—and even themselves asking—such questions as: "Does anybody know when and where Samuel and

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[11]Adam Clarke, *Memoirs of the Wesley Family,* (London, Kershaw, 1823), 94–95. (The enlarged 2nd edn in two volumes, 1836 and later, is in general preferable, but for this essay both have been checked, and the passages quoted remain the same.)

[12]*Proceedings* of the Wesley Historical Society (henceforth "WHS"), XXIX. 50–57 (Sept. 1753).

Susanna Wesley were married?"—"Is it true that Samuel Wesley gave his daughter Hetty to the first man who offered to marry her?"—"Wasn't John Wesley baptized a few hours after birth, and called John Benjamin?"—"Did Susanna Wesley really have nineteen children?" And of course there are questions galore about John and Charles themselves and their eventful careers, which need heavily documented books rather than articles.

I trust that I may now be forgiven for speaking in autobiographical vein. I began to investigate the traditional dating of Wesley family events, to search out the answers to my own questions about the Wesleys, fifty years ago. Ten years later I came to realize that John Wesley himself was misinformed by his family about many details of his own personal history, including that point about his baptism. As an officer of the Wesley Historical Society since 1943, and having established the bonafides of my scholarship, as a busy Methodist minister I used what "leisure" hours I could garner from a normal 120-hour work-week to study parish registers in different parts of England. Even before 1949, when I visited the ruins of the old Marylebone Parish Church before it was pulled down, and examined its records, I had discovered in Vol. 47 of the Harleian Society Registers the entry therein of the marriage of "Samuel Westley and Susanna Angly" [Annesley] on Nov. 12, 1688; I published the fact in 1951, in *A Methodist Pilgrim in England*.[13]

By 1948, indeed, my researches in Lincolnshire parish registers were sufficiently advanced that I was able to write a 12-page single-spaced reply to Dr. Maldwyn Edward's request for comments on his *Family Circle* in its proof stage. Many of the errors that I pointed out had been caused by undue reliance upon George J. Stevenson's lengthy but untrustworthy *Memorials of the Wesley Family* (1876), not a patch for reliability on Adam Clarke's *Memoirs of the Wesley Family* (1823), on which it was largely based. Maldwyn thanked me for my "marvellous letter," and corrected most of the minor errors, but felt unable to incorporate the fuller information that I was able to send him the following week. This concerned Hetty Wesley's vow "to accept the first proposal of marriage made to her." Until that time there had been no documented information available on the date or place of her marriage, nor on the birth of her children. On November 8, 1948, Edwards replied: "You have given me a shock in this letter. I had no idea that

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[13]In 1963 I gratefully acknowledged the offprint of Dr. H.A. Beecham's "Samuel Wesley Senior: new biographical evidence," from *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, VII. 78–101, though pointing out that some of the facts claimed as new I had already published, including the death of Samuel Wesley's father and his marriage to Susanna, in my "Puritan Ancestry of Wesley" (*LQR*, Vol. 187, 1962), 180–86, and *A Methodist Pilgrim* (1951), 52.

Hetty's marriage was forced. It would have created a minor disturbance had I included it in my book."

I had written to him on November 4, 1948: "I have now settled the matter of Hetty's marriage ... her marriage was certainly 'forced,' her vow made not on general grounds of thwarted love, but because she was pregnant. She was married at Haxey on Oct. 13, 1725, and on Feb. 18 1725/6 there was baptized at Louth 'Mehetabell d. of William Wright.' Whilst this is not *absolute* proof of identity—for there were undoubtedly two William Wrights at Louth whose wives were bearing children at this period—I think the unusual name settles the issue ... This little girl was probably born in January, about three months after their marriage. It lived for almost a year, being buried on Dec. 27th at Louth. The second child, another girl, was born very soon after the death of little Hetty, being baptized as Jane at Louth on March 3rd, and being buried on the 8th of the same month—year 1726/7. The next child was apparently not born at Louth, but in London, where Charles found Hetty in January 1727/8, and where she expected to be that summer. From the details in the Louth register it seems likely that the two of them settled down in London *immediately,* and not after Uncle Matthew's legacy came ... The burial of baby Jane in 1726/7, by the way, gives the father as 'William Wright, Plomer,' which distinguishes him from the other ['William Wright, carpenter'], so that we can identify [her] with some certainty as Hetty's baby." This information I later passed on also to Mrs. Rebecca Harmon for her delightful book *Susanna, Mother of the Wesleys.*

Clearly, some mistaken traditions were transmitted by his parents and sisters to John Wesley, just as "Brother Charles," in reply to his own queries about his birth-year, received no fewer than four different answers—all of them incorrect![14] John Wesley himself undoubtedly added to the general confusion by the fact that he was in his seventies and eighties when he began in earnest publicly to revisit his youth. In 1774 he softened his early assertion that until May 24, 1738, he had not been a Christian;[15] in 1776 he reminisced in the company of two of his preachers about teaching school in his bare feet as an example to uppity schoolboys;[16] in 1781 he published an analytical "Short History of the People called Methodists;"[17] in 1782 he romanticized the diary-proven facts of his Oxford conversion to early rising;[18] in 1783

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[14]WHS XXXI. 25–6 (June 1957).

[15]See Frank Baker, "Aldersgate and Wesley's Editors," *LQR,* Vol. 191, (Oct. 1966), 310–19.

[16]*Methodist History,* Vol. 23, 166 (April 1985).

[17]In the appendix to *A Concise Ecclesiastical History,* (London, Paramore, 4 vols, 1781), Vol. IV, 310–19; in this he described the three "rises" of Methodism, implying that its essence was group Christian fellowship.

he prepared for publication a revision of his and his mother's Locke-inspired theory of education;[19] in 1784 he wrote up his researches about "Old Jeffrey," and delved into the question of his parents' marital discord; in 1787 he wrote a carefully considered summary of his lifelong sacramental views and practice.[20] John's memory for detail was often faulty, especially during his closing years. Even then, however, his thought and reasoning remained clear, so that although the minutiae of these recollections of family traditions must be treated with some caution, they are pointed and penetrating, by no means the meanderings of senility.

One of the excuses for fuzzy family facts about the Wesley generation has been the blazing rectory. Young Jacky had been saved as "a brand plucked out of the burning," but the parish registers were lost.[21] When the Epworth rectory caught fire—or was set on fire—on February 9, 1709, Samuel Wesley was apparently keeping the current register in the doomed house instead of in the parish chest duly furnished for their preservation at least from 1538, and (after the Wesley gap) from 1710 onwards.[22] When the rector needed to supply evidence of John's baptism for his ordinations as deacon and priest he penned the details (incorrectly) from memory:

> "Epworth, Augt. 23, 1728. John Wesley, M.A., Fellow of Lincoln College, was twenty-five year old the 17th of June last, having bin baptiz'd a few hours after his birth, By mee, Saml. Wesley, Rector of Epworth."[23]

John was baptized, not "a few hours after his birth" on June 17, but on July 3, 1703. Eventually it has become possible to disprove Samuel Wesley's statements from a primary document signed by his own hand. It became clear to me forty years ago that there should have been one other major source of information which had never been tapped, neither by the rector himself, nor by John, nor by any of his biographers, nor by the historians of Methodism, who for the most part in this matter of the Wesley family have continued to repeat each other. This unused source, mysteriously forgotten by the man who had faithfully supplied it in accordance with ecclesiastical law throughout

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[18]*Methodist History,* Vol. 12, No. 4 (July 1974), 193–94.

[19]See Sermon 95, "On the Education of Children," Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, 3:346–60.

[20]See Sermon 101, "The Duty of Constant Communion," *ibid.*, 3:427–39.

[21]See Stevenson, *Memorials,* 64: "Owing to the destruction of the Epworth registers when the rectory was burnt down in 1709 the exact particulars of deaths are irrecoverably lost, and even the name of one of the nineteen children cannot now be known"—actually he did not know the names of *four* of the children (see p. 65 and the inserted genealogical table).

[22]Messiter, op. cit., 7–9; cf. W.E. Tate, *The Parish Chest,* (Cambridge University Press, 1946), 35–42.

[23]See Wesley, *Letters,* 25:180–1, 232.

his ministry, was the bundle of annual transcripts of his parish registers which the rector of Epworth had regularly prepared—or had had a curate prepare—and had duly deposited in the diocesan archives at Lincoln.

Which, if any, of the Epworth transcripts had in fact survived? This was the major question to which I sought a response when on September 18, 1947, I first wrote to the Lincoln Archivist, Mrs. Joan Varley, M.A. She responded promptly and helpfully, though because of my ministerial duties my first visit was delayed until October 1, 1948. I was soon able to speak with solid authority about many puzzling aspects of Wesley genealogy. In an article for *The Methodist Recorder* celebrating the 250th anniversary of John Wesley's birth in 1953 I was able to include "some facts never previously published, forgotten even by his own father, and never known to Wesley himself." For example, Jonathan Crowther, accepted into the Methodist itinerancy in the middle 1780s, had "heard [Wesley] say that he was baptized by the name of John Benjamin; that his mother had buried two sons, one called John, and the other Benjamin, and that she united their names in him; but he had never made use of the second name."[24] Such was family tradition, in this instance probably stemming from his mother, who perhaps ought to have known, but could as easily as anyone else confuse similar circumstances in such a large family. John was in fact baptized plain "John"—it was a previous sibling, twin to Anne, who had been the only child to receive two names, "John Benjamin," thus commemorating the previous deceased twins, John and Benjamin. What a relief at last to *know* and to be able to prove such points from primary documents, such as the authentic year (1957) when World Methodism should celebrate the 250th anniversary of Charles, which was causing some anxiety.[25]

Other points have arisen from time to time, and have received authoritative solutions from those transcripts, for although they are by no means complete, they do include the more significant years; missing are those for the years 1697/8, 1698/9, 1700/01, 1705/6, 1706/7, and 1709/10. From 1701 onwards those surviving are in the hand of the rector himself. Only a few weeks after the fire Samuel Wesley prepared: "A Copy of the Register of Epworth for the Year 1708 from Feb. 27. The former Register being burn'd." (This covered, of course, the ecclesiastical year, including January 1 to March 24, 1709.) By way of compensation for the missing Epworth records, the archives also holds transcripts from Samuel Wesley's previous parish, South Ormsby. In 1963 these transcripts were used to good effect in an article

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[24]Jonathan Crowther, *The Portraiture of Methodism*, (London, Edwards, 1915), 20.
[25]See n. 14 above.

on Samuel Wesley by Dr. H. A. Beecham,[26] and I also incorporated much of their information into my own article on the Wesley family for the *Encyclopedia of World Methodism*. Not previously published, however, though prepared many years ago, is a tabular summary of fuller details about the Wesley family of Epworth, supplemented from other resources in addition to those of the Lincoln Diocesan Archives.

It must be confessed from the outset, however, that this still leaves without a definitive answer the fourth of the sample questions posed earlier, "Did Susanna Wesley really have nineteen children?" We are nearer to an answer. We have solid, though not always incontrovertible, evidence about seventeen children, and the uncertain points are isolated for fuller examination. There seems no likelihood, however, that apart from some other new avenue of approach, or some documentary discovery, we shall ever know the answer for certain.

In the table below I have underlined the dates which are from contemporary parish registers or transcripts—the most reliable primary authorities. For simplicity in tabulating I have taken all dates which fell in the last quarter of the ecclesiastical year, and should have been represented by a double date, such as January 13, 1692/3, for Emilia's baptism, by its modern reckoning, January 13, 1693.

Much of the information, however, must be deduced from secondary sources such as edited family letters, occasionally ambiguous. We have no clear and direct testimony from Susanna Wesley about the size of her family, and her husband issued conflicting reports. In a long letter defending his household management against his somewhat caustic brother Matthew, apparently written 1734–35, Samuel Wesley stated that "his numerous offspring amounted . . . to eighteen or nineteen children," though later in the letter his figures became more precise: "eight children born and buried, . . . ten (thank God!) living, brought up, and educated!"[27] Speaking of the child with whom Susanna was pregnant on February 9, 1709, Samuel reverted to the traditional figure, writing, "I hope my wife will recover, and not miscarry, but God will give me my nineteenth child."[28] It may well have been an attempt by George J. Stevenson to manufacture this artificial figure that caused him to add the "unknown" child of (possibly) 1698. In fact two of Samuel's contemporary letters make this extremely doubtful. On Dec. 30, 1700, he wrote that he had had three children since coming to Epworth about three years earlier, which would probably imply Mehetabel and the twin boys—he made his last entry in the South Ormsby register

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[26]See n. 13 above.

[27]See Clarke, op. cit., 154–55.

[28]Thomas Jackson, *The Life of the Rev. Charles Wesley,* (London, Mason, 1841), 2 vols., II 497.

in May 1797.[29] In a letter of May 18, 1701, he announced another multiple birth, and added, "We have had four in two years and a day, three of which are still living."[30] If we rule out the 1698 "unknown" and accept Kezia as the "fire-child" of 1709—and the last—we are left with a certain total of seventeen rather than nineteen. If instead we accept Stevenson's "unknown" of 1698, the father's statement that the 1709 child was the nineteenth, and the possible implication of Samuel Wesley Junior's missing letter that it died, then the sometimes assumed additional birth of Kezia in 1710 would have made her the twentieth child![31] Because even a mistake-prone family tradition would surely have taken hold of such a round number, it seems clear that we must reject twenty as Susanna's score, but regard nineteen as at least a possibility, eighteen as perhaps more likely, and seventeen as a certain minimum.

THE WESLEY FAMILY OF EPWORTH (1662–1796)

name	Birth	Baptism	Place	Married	Spouse	Where	Death	Burial	At	Age
Sam. W., Sen.	?	17.xii.62	Winterb.	12.xi.88	Sus. Anny.	Marybone	25.iv.35	28.iv.35	Epworth	72
Sus. Anny.	20.i.69	?	London	12.xi.88	Sam. W. Sen	Marybone	23.vii.42	1.viii.42	London	73
Samuel, Jun	10.ii.90	?	London	c. 1724	Urs. Berry	Westm?	6.xi.39	?	Tiverton	49
Susanna	?	31.iii.92	S. Ormsby					17.iv.93	S. Ormsby	1
Emilia	31.xii.92?	13.i.93	S. Ormsby	c. 1735	Rob Harper	?	c. 1771	?	London?	79?
Annesley	?	3.xii.94	S. Ormsby				?	3.i.95	S. Ormsby	1m?
Jedidiah	?	3.xii.94	S. Ormsby				?	31.i.96	S. Ormsby	1
Susanna	c. 1695	?	S. Ormsby	c. 1719	Rd. Ellison	?	xii.64			69?
Mary	c. 1696	?	S. Ormsby	21.xii.33	J. Whitelamb	Epworth	?	1.xi.34	Wroot	38?
Mehetabel	c. 1697/8?	?	Epworth	13.x.25	Wm. Wright	Haxey	21.iii.50	London	53?	
[?unknown	c. 1698?	?	Epworth?				c. 1698?	?	Epworth?	?]
John	16.v.99	?	Epworth				c. 1700?	?	Epworth	?
Benjamin	16.v.99	?	Epworth				c. 1700?	?	Epworth?	?
John Benj.	17.v.01	31.v.01	Epworth				27.xii.?	30.xii.01	Epworth	6m
Anne	17.v.01	31.v.01	Epworth	2.xii.25	Jn. Lambert	Finningley	?	?	?	?
John	17.vi.03 [28.vi (NS)]	3.vii.03	Epworth	18.ii.51	M. Vazeille	London?	2.iii.91	9.iii.91	London	87
[son]	29.v.05?		Epworth				30.v.05	31.v.05	Epworth	1 dy.
Martha	c. 1706	?	Epworth	13?.ix.35	Westl. Hall	London	12.vii.91	19.vii.91	London	85
Charles	18.xii.07	29.xii.07	Epworth	8.iv.49	Sa. Gwynne	Garth. Mer.	29.iii.88	5.iv.88	London	80
[?unknown	iii, 1709?	?	Epworth?				iii, 1709?			]
Kezia	iii, 1709?	?	Epworth?				9.iii.41	?	London	30?

[Frank Baker—revised Nov. 17, 1987]

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[29]Clarke, op. cit., 89–90; for the delay in taking up residence in Epworth after his induction in 1695, see Beecham, op. cit., 89–91.

[30]Clarke, op. cit., 94. Two of the three still living were clearly John Benjamin, who died Dec. 30 that year, and Anne. But the twins John and Benjamin, who had been born in 1700, must both have died already for John Benjamin to have been given the double name, so that the third still living must surely have been Hetty, who may well have been born in 1698 rather than the assumed 1697—making even less likely Stevenson's "unknown" of 1698.

[31]Samuel Wesley Junior, a teenager living in Westminster, at the school, became almost frantic in his frustrated requests for details about the Epworth fire. Stevenson's *Memorials* (234) preserves a letter from him to his mother whose internal evidence attests to its general authenticity, though the original seems to have disappeared. It is dated June 9, 1709, and Stevenson transcribes thus two of the seven questions which people were asking: "What was the lost child, a boy or a girl? What was its name?" It seems quite possible that the phrase in the first sentence should actually have read "last child," even though the second does give some support to "lost." The Epworth transcript for 1709/10 is missing.