

# "The Cluster at Deptford"

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## In Wesley's Day

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had completed his knowledge of ship-building, and laid up here, as peep-show and naval inspiration, was Drake's *Golden Hind*, the first British ship to sail round the world. Though a prominent naval centre, its main interest for Methodists is its military contacts. At Deptford it was that John Haime, best known of all Methodists soldiers, heard John Cennick preach. And one of this very "cluster at Deptford" was another famous Methodist soldier, Sampson Staniforth.

Staniforth's regiment had been brought back post-haste from Flanders to help resist the Young Pretender's desperate bid for England. Marching north via Deptford, he and his comrades had received bodily and spiritual refreshment at the Methodist home of William Giles. And on Christmas Eve, 1745, the regiment returned to Deptford, being stationed there as a kind of insurance against a possible surprise roundabout attack on London. Staniforth and the other Methodist soldiers made straight for William Giles's. Besides meeting twice a day "in the old room at Deptford, to read the Scriptures, and to pray and praise God," Staniforth got permission to visit London twice a week, where he met John Wesley—and also his future wife, whom he married on June 12, 1746, after a lightning courtship, being recalled to embark for Holland on his wedding-day.

John Wesley's first visit to the little

Methodist society at Deptford had apparently been in 1739. In 1740 he was there eight times, in 1741—during which year his diary falls us—at least seven. To the end of his life most of his winters in London saw him visiting Deptford once or twice, usually on a Tuesday, often staying overnight. He had many homes there, William Giles's being one of them, while his friends the Blackwells lived not so far away, at Lewisham.

It was the soldier whom the Deptford Methodists had taken to their heart who was finally to provide them with a real "preaching-house." Sampson Staniforth, released from the army, settled down in that same Deptford public-house where he had first been billeted. (He turned it into a bakehouse, however!). Soon he was the mainstay of the society, "preacher, steward, visitor of the sick, and leader of the bands and classes," as well as serving his turn for the community as Parish Constable. Things began to look up. After asking Wesley's advice on the problem of accommodating the increasing congregations, he took the financial risk of building a preaching-house to seat six hundred, at a cost of £250. In six years the debt was paid off, and the lease handed over to John Wesley. Staniforth also built a chapel in Rotherhithe, saddling himself with an eight-years' debt.

The opening services of Staniforth's Deptford preaching-house were conducted by Charles Wesley on Tuesday, September 27, 1757, crowds assembling outside as well as within to hear his sermon. The spiritual health of the society continued to improve, and a revival followed. True, there was "some wildfire mixed with that holy and heavenly flame," as Wesley was to find in later years, when the Deptford Methodists were eager to break away from the Church of England. But the flame was there, springing from the spark kept alive by the little "cluster," now increased to about 500 members, the nucleus of a live Central Mission.

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[Frank Baker]