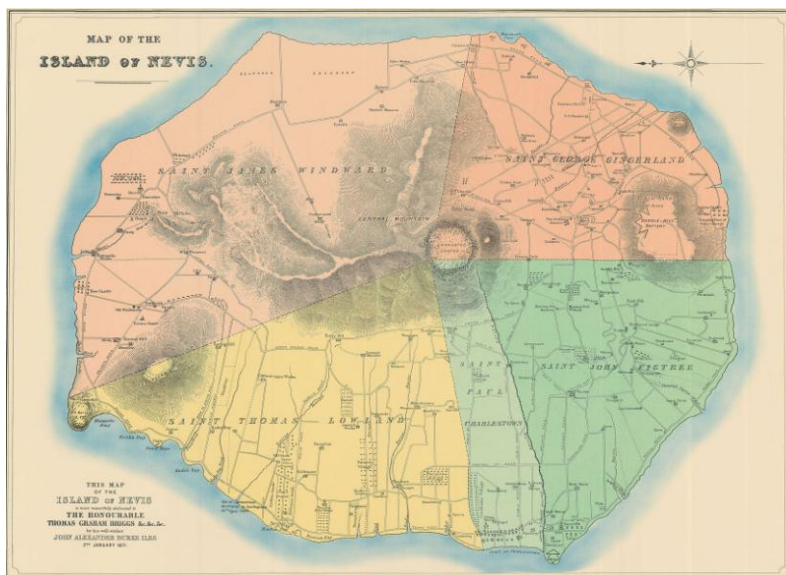


FROM THE ARCHIVES OF
UPPINGHAM METHODIST CHURCH



**MARY DRAKE AND THE
MISSIONARY**

A METHODIST FAMILY

The Drake family of stonemasons and builders was prominent in Uppingham Methodism throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Mary Drake was baptised in the Parish Church on 12 August 1815 and was the second child and first daughter of John Drake and his wife Mary, née Cattling.

Around this time, a Methodist ‘Society’ was formed in Uppingham. John Drake is said to have been converted in 1819, the year that the Chapel was built. The four children who came after Mary were all baptised in the Methodist chapel and John became a Class Leader, Trustee and Local Preacher, offices he was to hold until his death in 1870.

The Drake family owned cottages known as The Pitts at the bottom of Newtown Road. Mary may have been born there and was certainly living there by 1829. In about 1835 John Drake built a house in the town which was to be the family home for many generations.



The Drake family home in 2009

Very little is known of Mary's childhood. As was common at the time, several of her younger brothers and sisters did not survive infancy. But she did grow up with a brother a couple of years older and at least one younger sister. Mary's signature on her marriage certificate is clear and well written so it is assumed she had some education. Another founding member of the chapel, Charles Peach, was a schoolmaster so perhaps he taught her the 3 R's.

As both parents were prominent in the chapel, Mary presumably attended services or Sunday School from an early age. An important part of early Methodism was the 'Class' system. Classes met regularly under a Leader where a member's spiritual welfare was attended to and 'examined'. There were initially two Classes and a Mary Drake is listed in John Houghton's Class. This is probably Mary's mother, as from 1832, when there were three classes, two Mary Drakes are listed, presumably mother and daughter. The second Mary is listed each year as being in the 'Preacher's' Class, which is significant in view of later events.



Uppingham Methodist Church as it was in Mary Drake's time

The Methodist Church was active in missionary work from the late eighteenth century and chapels held special events to raise money as well as using collecting boxes. In 1827 the chapel spent £1 1s on printing bills and erecting a gallery for a missionary meeting. In 1831 'Mr Drake's' missionary box contained 11s ¾d but carriage of missionary boxes and stationery from London had cost 4s 4d. By 1832 six members had boxes – all but one were 'Miss' so they were probably the young women of the chapel. 'Miss Drake' is noted as one of them with 5s in her box in 1832, as is Miss Cunningham, probably Hannah Cunningham who was to be a witness at Mary's wedding.

A NEW MINISTER FOR UPPINGHAM

In 1837 a new Minister was appointed to the circuit – the Rev John Bell junior. He was probably housed in Oakham but it was the practice in country areas for the Minister to travel round the circuit either on horseback or on foot, preaching at services, taking Classes and staying away sometimes for several days at a time. Methodist families were expected to provide hospitality and it is noted in Mrs Mary Drake's obituary in *The Methodist Magazine* that:

'...Mr and Mrs Drake opened their house to the Circuit ministers during their visits to Uppingham: and many who have been entertained there, can still call to mind the unaffected kindness with which she ministered to their comfort...'

The combination of being Mary's Class Leader (where we must hope that Mr Bell kept his mind on spiritual matters) and almost certainly being given hospitality by her parents was probably the start of a romance, for on 11 October 1838 the couple were married in the Parish Church at Uppingham. Mary

was about twenty-three years old and John was about twenty-five. They were married by special permission of the Wesleyan Missionary Society.

John Bell had entered the ministry in 1836 and served for one year in Haslingden, Lancashire before coming to Oakham. Apart from chairing the Oakham branch of the Missionary Society where John Drake was on the Committee, John Bell's name hardly appears in the circuit records for the year 1837–8. It seems likely therefore that during this time he was being prepared for the mission field, for on 24 October 1838 he was ordained as a missionary at Great Queen Street Chapel in London by Jabez Bunting, the first Secretary of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society.

A MISSIONARY JOURNEY

On 31 October, just twenty days after their wedding, Mary and John embarked at Gravesend on the sailing ship 'Jamaica' en route to Antigua in the West Indies, with a Wesleyan missionary party.

The voyage would have been a dangerous undertaking – in *Missionary Notices*, a regular publication which went out to the churches, a column was headed 'Death, Shipwreck etc of Missionaries'. Added to the normal hazards was the fact that Mary was probably pregnant when she sailed or became so very soon afterwards.

In addition to John and Mary, the missionary party consisted of the Rev and Mrs Edward Fraser, the Rev Lancelot Railton and an unnamed servant. The ship arrived at Antigua on 19 December and Mr Fraser sent an account of the voyage to the Wesleyan Missionary Society Headquarters at Hatton Garden,

London (Mission House). Writing to ‘Rev Sirs’ on 31 December 1838 he reported that the ‘very trying’ voyage took seven weeks. The ship lay in the Downs until 11 November. They then encountered severe weather but ‘God whom the wind and seas obey heard our prayers’. From Madeira they caught the trade winds and in sixteen days they reached the harbour of St John’s in Antigua. Mr Fraser wrote that Mr and Mrs Bell ‘suffered much from the voyage’ although now troubled by mosquitoes. This letter was received in London on 18 February 1839. Presumably word would have been sent to Uppingham that the party had arrived safely. How anxious Mr and Mrs Drake, and the chapel, must have been.



A barque similar to the ‘Jamaica’

LETTER FROM NEVIS

John Bell’s first and only letter to Mission House was written by him from the island of Nevis on 8 April 1839 and received in London on 9 June. From this letter we learn a little more about the trials of the voyage. Although seasick (he more than his wife), they were kindly looked after by Mr Fraser and the

servant who was travelling back to Antigua. John Bell found he could do no more than read the Bible and examine himself spiritually. He felt no doubt that his calling was a true one.

Once on dry land, although his health was good, Mrs Bell, he wrote, suffered from the climate. She had consulted a Doctor Nicholson in Antigua, who prescribed some medicines which he notes caused him some expense as he had no medicine chest. This is perhaps a reference to Mary's pregnancy.

A personal touch at the end of the letter is the request to forward a box which was to have been sent to Mission House by 'our friends'. Perhaps an urgent request for baby clothes had been received in Uppingham. A note written sideways on the end of the letter states 'My wife writes with me in kind love to Mrs Alder and Miss Alder'. Dr Robert Alder was one of the secretaries of the Missionary Society at the time, so perhaps the family had assisted John and Mary in London before they set sail.

Tantalisingly there is no other information specifically about Mary in this letter: John Bell's task was to give an account of his work in the island, not to concern himself with 'women's matters'.

The letter continues with a long account of the difficult work of the missionary. It seems that John Bell was originally to have been stationed in Antigua, but because of the recent deaths of three missionaries, he was hurriedly moved to the Gingerland Parish on the small island of Nevis.

LIFE AND WORK ON NEVIS

The island of Nevis is seven miles long and five miles wide, with Nevis Peak at over three thousand feet being the highest point. It has a tropical marine climate.

John Bell worked on estates owned by George Webbe (known as His Honour), who, as we shall see, was supportive to the missionary cause; although he probably had a vested interest in maintaining a work force once the former slaves were free to leave the island. Methodism was strong on living an ordered and disciplined life, which in turn would have produced good workers.

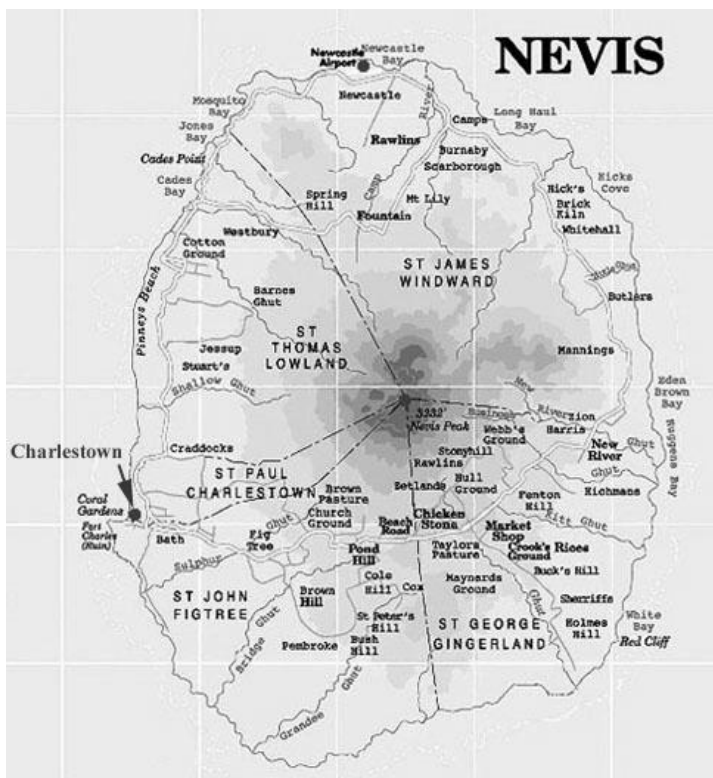
The slaves on Nevis had been emancipated in 1834 but were still subject to an apprenticeship system. In August 1838, less than a year before the Bells' arrival, they had been given their final freedom to great celebrations. Unfortunately the early missionaries did not feel comfortable with the exuberant worship enjoyed by the former African slaves, and John Bell writes of what he saw as the bad influence of one of their leaders, named Noah. Noah held services which combined Methodist practices and beliefs with loud exuberant singing and dancing 'until a late hour' attracting large numbers. He wrote of having to dismiss some members for following this leader.

The work was arduous – John had to ride across the island in extreme heat in order to visit all the various outposts. He wrote that the school was not doing well, and he pleaded (as did the Superintendent Minister, Rev Robert Hawkins) for another missionary to be sent.

In the Minutes of the West Indies Synod Meeting of February 1839 it is recorded that 'John Bell junior having but recently

arrived we can only say that we believe him to be a pious and zealous Minister of Jesus Christ.’

We do not know whether Mary took any part in the work. Perhaps she helped with the schoolchildren, but life must have been hard for her – pregnant, a difficult climate, and her husband working long hours. Mr Hawkins had a wife and family so perhaps they became friends, and in view of what was to transpire, it is possible that the estate owner befriended the couple at this time.



Modern map of Nevis

A LIFE CUT SHORT

Europeans had to have strong constitutions to survive both the climate and the mosquito-borne illnesses. In the year preceding John Bell's arrival in Nevis there had been two deaths of missionaries and also, as noted in a letter, the 'Gingerland schoolmaster'. However, Mary survived childbirth and John Henry Bell was born on 14 July 1839, only a few months after the couple's arrival on Nevis.

Sadly, John lived barely a month after the child's birth, dying of yellow fever on 16 August 1839 aged twenty-six. He was buried in the Wesleyan Burial Ground, Charlestown, next to the grave of the Rev Thomas Edwards who had died in November 1838 of the same illness.

The sad news of John's death was relayed to Mission House in a letter written by Mr Hawkins on 30 August. He wrote:

Dear Fathers,

I am compelled again to communicate melancholy tidings. God has seen fit in his mysterious movements to remove from this circuit by the cold hand of death my late excellent colleague the Rev Jno Bell junr. He was taken sick on the 8th and on the morning of the 16th about a quarter before seven he died in peace of malignant yellow fever. During his affliction his mind was kept at peace and as the closing time drew near his hope became [?very bright]. I have no doubt but what he is safe in that city where the inhabitants enjoy undisturbed rest and uninterrupted health and beauty. He was buried by the side of the late Rev Edwards and altho' the morning was very wet a goodly number of persons attended at the melancholy [?graveside].

A WIDOW AND CHILD

So, after surviving childbirth far from her home and family, in her twenty-fourth year poor Mary was left a widow with a young baby. In the same letter telling of John Bell's death, Mr Hawkins wrote:

I cannot at present say when Mrs Bell will leave for England. Her little boy is so sick that for her to leave immediately I fear it would prove fatal to the lad. Mrs Bell has been most generously supported under this [?severe] trial

The Society would have arranged Mary's passage home but there would be no widow's pension for a Minister's wife at that time. It is unlikely that John had any money. Thankfully Mary had a family in Uppingham to return to. They must have been devastated when the news of John's death reached Uppingham, which must have come shortly after receiving news of John Henry's safe arrival.

However, we learn from more letters that Mary was not entirely without help. In a second letter, probably written shortly afterwards, Mr Hawkins wrote:

Mrs Bell is rather unwell and her little boy is far from being in good health I fear she will not be able to get away on his account before next year. She is now with the Hon G Webbe true friend and I suppose she will remain there for a few weeks.

As noted above, John's 'station' had been in the Gingerland Parish, where two plantations, Stoney Hill and Bachelor's Hall, were owned by George Webbe. George Webbe was described as Chief Judge and was an important personage on the island. He had erected a Sunday School and a chapel on his estates and

handed them over to the Methodists. Later he was commended by the Missionary Society for his 'kindness...and unwavering friendship'. He and his wife Sarah had a young family in the 1830s. As he had spent most of his life on the island, George Webbe's local knowledge, especially with regard to the indigenous illnesses, must have been invaluable to the missionaries. In an account of Rev Thomas Edwards' death in 1838, written home by Mr Hawkins, he acknowledges the help of the Hon G. Webbe, who had Mr Edwards moved to his own house.

In October 1839, a letter was sent to Mission House by Rev Benjamin Tregaskis, who it appears was hurriedly redeployed to Nevis from the island of Tortola and immediately fell ill with yellow fever. Fortunately he survived, and he puts his survival largely down to the care he received from George Webbe:

As soon as His Honour was made acquainted with the fact of my illness he came to the Mission House and proposed that I should be removed to his residence . . . in the cool of the second day of my illness, His Honour came with his easy English-built carriage, and I soon found myself on the Bed from which one of my fellow passengers to the West Indies - our late dear Brother Edwards had so lately risen to the mansions of eternal joy . . . both the Judge and His Lady watched over me with all possible solicitude, securing to me the most minute attendance and ministering their own hands to alleviate my condition. My convalescence also, when it began was not at all retarded by the highly interesting and comprehensive conversation with which I was privileged . . .

This appears to be exemplary care and kindness beyond the call of duty, and this same attention seems to have been extended to Mary. In the same letter Mr Tregaskis wrote:

You have doubtless heard of the kindness shown to our dear sister Bell also, since the removal of her affectionate husband. I have seen the Judge here working with his own hands, arranging her boxes and otherwise assisting in her behalf. The dear infant is doing well through the kind attention of Mrs Webbe and the blessing of God.

HOME TO UPPINGHAM

It is good to know that Mary was befriended in her troubles. As boxes were being packed in October, it seems likely that Mary set sail soon after this for the long voyage home.

We do not know the date of her arrival but both mother and child survived the journey. Great must have been the rejoicing in Uppingham when they finally arrived home. She had travelled across the world, having probably hardly left Uppingham before, and now she was to live there, with her parents, in the house her father had built, for most of the rest of her life.

AFTERWARDS

Information about the rest of Mary's life is sparse. In the early censuses her occupation is given as straw bonnet maker, probably working at home where she was bringing up her young son.

Mary was obviously accorded some status in the chapel as she is referred to as 'Mrs Bell, Minister's widow'. She kept an interest in Mission work as she is noted as subscribing to various magazines including *Missionary Notices*.



An early photo of the interior of the chapel, probably as Mary would have known it in her later life

Being eventually the only daughter left at home, no doubt Mary became a carer for her parents. Her mother, Mary Drake, died in 1867, her obituary noting that it was after

' . . . some years . . . of much bodily weakness and affliction... '

Three years later, John Drake, Mary's father, died aged eighty-two. It was said he had never missed a service until the year of his death.

In the census of 1871 Mary was 'head of household' with two boarders and a lodger.

Perhaps Mary only felt free to remarry after the deaths of her parents. In 1872 at the age of fifty-seven she married John Field, a retired baker from Stamford, a widower about twenty years older than herself.

Although the couple were married in the Parish Church in Uppingham, they may have initially set up home in Stamford where they were living in 1881, in Bath Row. They were to have less than ten years of marriage and must have returned to Uppingham, as John died there in December 1881. He was buried in the South View Churchyard and has a gravestone next to those of the Drake family, to which Mary would be added in due course.

After John's death, and living again in the family home, 'Mrs Field' seems to have been active in the chapel once more. She would have seen it largely rebuilt and expanded in 1872 and in 1887 the Sunday School building was erected at the back.

Women were now able to hold office and Mary was a Class Leader from 1891 until 1899. She is noted as subscribing to the Twentieth Century Fund (a major Methodist Appeal to build Westminster Central Hall). She died in early 1901 aged eighty-five and is buried with her second husband.



The Field gravestone: in 2009 nearly illegible but a nicely ornamented memorial as befits the daughter of a stonemason. Underneath John Field's inscription and a text it simply reads:

**ALSO MARY HIS WIFE
PEACE PERFECT PEACE**

JOHN HENRY BELL

And what of the little boy born on Nevis? He would have had no memory of his first few months on Nevis although no doubt the story of his father's 'short life of service' was told to him many times. Undoubtedly he would have attended the chapel with his mother and grandparents but no records remain. In 1851 he is not on the census with his mother in Uppingham. There is a John Henry Bell on the roll of the Methodist School, Woodhouse Grove in Yorkshire at this time, which is likely to have been him, and perhaps he was being educated to follow in his father's footsteps and become a Methodist Minister.

However, John Henry obviously had other ideas as he became neither a Minister like his father, nor a stonemason and builder like his grandfather and uncle. Indeed he seems to have had a variety of occupations: draper, railway storekeeper, and in old age, a newspaper reporter.

He left Uppingham for about twenty years, marrying a Cheshire woman and producing a large family, but in 1891 was back living with his widowed mother in Uppingham, apparently living apart from his wife and family.

By the time of the 1911 census, John Henry had left the family home to live in Shields Yard and had added the post of Town Crier to his occupation of newspaper reporter. Perhaps, after all, he inherited a 'preaching voice' from his father!

John Henry died in late 1911 in Uppingham. No gravestone has been identified.

THE LEGACY OF THE DRAKE FAMILY

Although Mary's son did not appear to have had any prominent role in the chapel, her niece Mary Ann, daughter of her brother Henry, carried the family tradition of service into the twentieth century. Henry Drake, a noted and respected Methodist, became a wealthy builder in the town, and was said by his descendants to have made his money from the rebuilding of Uppingham School. For himself, he built Wisteria House, Ayston Road where Mary Ann lived. She never married and clearly gave all her time to the chapel. She is mentioned many times in the records and held many offices. She died in 1936.

The last member of the Drake family to be involved in the Uppingham Methodist Church (as it is now generally known) was Lily Drake, who would have been a great niece of the first Mary and is mentioned as being missionary secretary! She lived in Wisteria House and in 2009 was just about remembered by a few old people in the town. She died unmarried in the 1950s.

Lily must have known the story of her great aunt's life, and although the story is now unknown locally, Uppingham Methodist Church still has a good record of supporting the work of Methodist and other Missions.

Methodism on Nevis in the 21st century

Methodism flourishes on the island where there are seven congregations (one at Gingerland), over a thousand members and two or three Ministers.



Approaching Nevis by sea in 2008 courtesy Christine Eickelmann and David Small

Methodist World Mission in the 21st century

The term ‘missionary’ is no longer used. Nowadays, Methodists appoint Mission Partners to Partner Churches all around the world serving alongside local church leaders. The work is supported by The Methodist World Mission Fund to which proceeds from the sale of this book will be donated.

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Margaret Stacey 2010

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