Methodist Prosopography: Sources and Exemplars of Collective Biography in British Methodism

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Prosopography derives from the Greek word *prosopon*, initially denoting face or mask in a theatrical context, but later acquiring a technical theological meaning, translating as person. In historical research, it is the name given to the aggregate study of the lives of a group of individuals with common background characteristics, collective biography as many would understand it (or multiple career-line analysis, in social scientific jargon). It combines the techniques of genealogy, onomastics, and demography. There is a long tradition of prosopographical studies, especially in secondary works on ancient and medieval history, but the concept has especially caught on for early modern and modern history thanks to a seminal article written in 1971 by Lawrence Stone,¹ who had applied prosopographical techniques in his magisterial survey of the crisis of the English aristocracy, 1558-1641.² Another

major exponent of the approach was Gerald Aylmer, with his trilogy on the seventeenth-century civil service.\(^3\)

In Britain a *de facto* co-ordinating and dissemination function for prosopography during the 1990s and 2000s was discharged by the Prosopographical Centre at the University of Oxford’s Modern History Research Unit, with an extensive website\(^4\) and an impressive range of print publications, among them a newsletter (*Prosopon*) and a substantial handbook.\(^5\) Prosopography is increasingly synonymous with quantification and automation, particularly through the development of collective biographical databases. Once applied mainly to research into elites, prosopography has extended into a tool for investigating the lives of ordinary folk. Similarly, although many initial applications were in a politico-historical environment, exemplars in the ecclesiastical historical field have emerged in recent years, such as the *Clergy of the Church of England Database*\(^6\) and the *Who were the Nuns?* project.\(^7\)

At first glance, prosopography is not a concept which features much in the study of the history of British Methodism, but that is not to say that prosopographical techniques have been entirely absent, for they have sometimes been used without being explicitly described as such. In this essay two as-

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\(^4\) [http://prosopography.modhist.ox.ac.uk/](http://prosopography.modhist.ox.ac.uk/) [this, and all subsequent URLs, accessed 15 August 2012].


\(^6\) [http://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk/](http://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk/)

\(^7\) [http://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/wwtn/the_project.html](http://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/wwtn/the_project.html)
pects of the topic are considered. First, there is a survey of the range of primary resources which would support the prosopographical analysis of Methodism, as regards both ministry and laity, and including evidence which might be termed born-prosopographical as well as material which can be retrospectively assembled. Reference is also made to significant secondary studies which have deployed these resources. It must be stressed, however, that this is a more focused exercise than reviewing Methodist genealogical tools as a whole. Second, by way of case study, four illustrations are provided from the author’s own research of how quantitative collective biography can shed light on the history of British Methodism in the opening decades of the twentieth century.

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8 It should be noted that only the original edition of each work has been cited. In some cases, printed reprints or digital surrogates may be available, which can be traced through library union catalogues or search engines. Moreover, a large number of the out-of-copyright Methodist reference works cited were republished on microfiche as part of Clive Field (ed.), *The People Called Methodists: a Documentary History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain and Ireland on Microfiche* (Leiden: Inter Documentation Company, 1989-98). See the catalogue of this collection at http://www.idc.nl/pdf/151_titlelist.pdf

1 PROSOPOGRAPHICAL RESOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF METHODISM

We are relatively well-served with collective biographical information about the Methodist ministry, at three levels: a) minutes of Conference and derivative publications, sometimes augmented by obituaries in magazines and other sources; b) contemporary who’s who directories; and c) biographical reference works, often compiled after the event and selective in their coverage.

At the top level, the minutes of the annual Conferences of the various branches provide lists of preachers’ names, their year of entry to the ministry and their stations, although they do not constitute a complete record of those who desisted or were expelled from the Methodist itinerancy. The minutes also include obituaries from 1777, but, in the early days, these were often cursory, lacking in factual detail and majoring on the deceased’s piety, often in a rather stylized way. Wesleyan ministerial obituaries until 1840 were reprinted by Joseph Hall, but a second volume mooted for later years never appeared. From the minutes several scholars have undertaken quantitative analyses of the Methodist ministry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, often by means of randomly-drawn samples. The most accessible and, in terms of the evidence base, largest-scale work in this category is by Kenneth Brown, who investigated the origins, training, retention, and public and private lives of Wesleyans, Primitive Methodists and United Methodists entering their respective ministries during the period 1830-1930. Other examples include Clive

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10 Joseph Hall, Memorials of Wesleyan Methodist Ministers; or, the Yearly Death Roll from 1777 to 1840 (London: Haughton & Co., 1876).
Field, who studied the career patterns of 1,500 Wesleyan, Primitive and United Methodist ministers born between 1781 and 1900; and Timothy Allison, who examined issues of socio-economic status and lifespan in relation to four cohorts of Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist preachers born in the 1850s and 1880s.

From the Conference minutes a number of cumulative listings of ministers have been compiled. The earliest were by John Pawson (1795), William Myles (1799, 1801, 1803, 1813), Charles Atmore (1801), an anonymous writer


\[\text{John Pawson, A Chronological Catalogue of all the Travelling Preachers now in the Methodist Connexion (Liverpool: printed by J. M’Creery, 1795).}\]

\[\text{William Myles, A Chronological History of the People called Methodists (4th edn., London: printed at the Conference-Office by Thomas Cordeux, 1813), pp. 445-64. Lists of preachers also appeared in the second (1799) and third (1803) editions, as well as separately: Myles, A List of All the Methodist Preachers Who Have Laboured in Connexion with the Late Rev. John Wesley and with the Methodist Conference (Bristol: printed for the author by R. Edwards, [1801]).}\]

\[\text{Charles Atmore, The Methodist Memorial (Bristol: printed by Richard Edwards, 1801), pp. 43-512 (biographies of deceased ministers), 531-6 (ministers then itinerating). The list of preachers was also separately published as Atmore, A Chronological List of the Itinerant Preachers in the Connexion of the Late Rev. John Wesley (Manchester: printed at the Office of W. Shelmerdine & Co., 1801).}\]
(1814),\textsuperscript{18} Jonathan Crowther (1815),\textsuperscript{19} and James Holroyd (1819),\textsuperscript{20} Atmore additionally providing 199 biographical sketches of deceased preachers. Deficiencies in these records were subsequently made good by Kenneth Garlick\textsuperscript{21} and, even more authoritatively, by John Lenton, who significantly augmented the information contained in the Conference minutes. Lenton constructed a database of the eighteenth-century itinerant preachers and then subjected it to statistical interrogation, in order to establish a group profile, especially from the perspective of geographical, social class, educational, and religious backgrounds and of their family lives and careers in the ministry.\textsuperscript{22} Lenton is now undertaking a parallel project, building a database of the 2,000 or so men who left the Wesleyan ministry from 1791 to 1932.\textsuperscript{23}

The first edition of the work popularly known as ‘Hill’s arrangement’ (named after William Hill), which became \textit{Ministers and Probationers of the Methodist Church} after the 1932 reunion, appeared in 1819, with a further 31 editions

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{A Chronological and Alphabetical List of All the Itinerant Methodist Preachers in the Connexion of the Late Rev. John Wesley} (Exeter: printed by E. Woolmer for A. B. Seckerson, [1814]).

\textsuperscript{19} Jonathan Crowther, \textit{A Portraiture of Methodism} (2\textsuperscript{nd} edn., London: Richard Edwards, 1815), pp. 442-50 (ministers then itinerating), 451-54 (deceased), 454-56 (departed or expelled).

\textsuperscript{20} James Holroyd, \textit{A Chronological and Alphabetical List of All the Itinerant Preachers that Have Been and now Are in the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion} (Haslingden: J. Walton, 1819).


\textsuperscript{22} John Lenton, ‘\textit{My Sons in the Gospel}’: \textit{an Analysis of Wesley’s Itinerant Preachers} ([Wolverhampton]: Wesley Historical Society, 2000) and idem, \textit{John Wesley’s Preachers} (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009). A cut-down version of the database is available at http://www.gcah.org/site/c.ghKJlOPHloE/b.3945307/.

\textsuperscript{23} See John Lenton, ‘Men Who Left the Wesleyan Methodist Ministry, 1791-1932: a Database in Progress’ (Above, Chapter 5).
thereafter, until the last in 1968. This covers Wesleyan ministers before 1932 and Methodist ones thereafter. The appendix to the 1968 edition, detailing ministers and probationers who had died in the work to that point, is now available online. The only relevant publications to have appeared since 1968 are William Leary’s list of ministers who died between 1968 and 1989, Eric Edwards’s accounts of those who entered the Methodist itinerancy from Welsh districts since the commencement of Methodism, and Ian Henderson’s record of Irish Primitive Wesleyan preachers.

There was never any contemporary Primitive Methodist equivalent to ‘Hill’s arrangement’, but William Leary created one retrospectively in 1990-93. This has been elaborated by Dorothy Graham in respect of the female travelling preachers of early Primitive Methodism. Lists of Methodist New Connexion ministers and their circuits were prepared by William

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25 http://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/specialcollections/collections/methodist/using/indexofministers/.


Gunstone in 1896\textsuperscript{31} and William Townsend in 1899,\textsuperscript{32} while William Boyden and Edwin Askew were responsible for the equivalents for the United Methodist Free Churches in 1877, 1887 and 1899.\textsuperscript{33} Henry Smith, John Swallow and William Treffry compiled the record for the United Methodist Church between 1907 and 1932.\textsuperscript{34} All these United Methodist efforts were superseded by Oliver Beckerlegge in 1968, who brought in the Bible Christians and other smaller branches of the United Methodist family, as well as adding biographical notes derived from obituaries.\textsuperscript{35}

The importance of these variants of ‘Hill’s arrangement’, based upon Conference minutes and amplified by the obituaries therein, is that they cover the total universe of serving Methodist ministers and those who died in the work or as supernumeraries. They may sometimes be supplemented by biographical information contained in the membership registers of the various Methodist ministerial annuitant societies (a largely unexplored source)\textsuperscript{36} and in connexional magazines.

\textsuperscript{31} William Gunstone, \textit{Companion to the Minutes of Conference; Being an Alphabetical Arrangement of the Ministers of the Methodist New Connexion} (Dewsbury: Darley Terry, 1896).
\textsuperscript{33} Edwin Askew (ed.), \textit{Free Methodist Manual} (London: Andrew Crombie, 1899), pp. 76-117. Equivalent lists were included in the 1877 and 1887 editions, which were entitled \textit{Handbook of the United Methodist Free Churches} and authored by William Boyden.
\textsuperscript{34} Henry Smith, John Swallow and William Treffry, \textit{The Story of the United Methodist Church} (London: Henry Hooks, [1932]), pp. 230-308.
\textsuperscript{35} Oliver Beckerlegge, \textit{United Methodist Ministers and Their Circuits} (London: Epworth Press, 1968).
\textsuperscript{36} These are all held at the Methodist Archives and Research Centre, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester and relate to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They comprise the records of the Wesleyan Methodist Preachers Annuitant Society (accession number 2008/019, boxes 1 and 2); the Primitive Methodist Itinerant Preachers’ Friendly Society (accession number 1977/121, boxes 2 and 3); and the United Methodist Church Super-
and newspapers.\footnote{Methodist newspapers, like newspapers in general, are especially poorly indexed, if at all, making obituaries or biographies difficult to locate. Obituaries were also far less a feature of nineteenth-century Methodist newspapers than they were to become in the twentieth century. At present, only The Watchman newspaper is available online (on a payment basis) via \url{http://www.ukpressonline.co.uk}.} Although, as regards the latter, the principal printed indexes are to obituaries in the Arminian Magazine and Wesleyan Methodist Magazine between 1778 and 1839,\footnote{[Francis Marris Jackson], An Index to the Memoirs, Obituary Notices and Recent Deaths ... in the ‘Arminian Magazine’, 1778-1797, the ‘Methodist Magazine’, 1798-1821, and the ‘Wesleyan Methodist Magazine’, 1822-1839, Wesley Historical Society Proceedings, supplement to vol. 7 (1910).} and to writings about ministers in the Welsh Wesleyan magazine from 1809 to 1983,\footnote{Lionel Madden, \textit{Yr Eurgrawn (Wesleyaidd), 1809-1983: mynegai i ysgrifau am weinidogion} (Aberystwyth: Yr Eglwys Fethodistaidd, Cymdeithas Hanes Talaith Cymru, 2006).} several other unpublished indexes to 1932, compiled by William Leary and others, are available at the Methodist Archives in Manchester. These indexes naturally cover laity, not just ministers, but somewhat serendipitously, thereby falling well short of a scientific sample. Notwithstanding, some scholars have used biographical data in the magazines as the core evidence for investigating hybrid groups of ministers and laity, for instance, quantification of the spirituality of eighteenth-century Methodists by Tom Albin,\footnote{Thomas Albin, ‘An Empirical Study of Early Methodist Spirituality’, in Theodore Runyon (ed.), \textit{Wesleyan Theology Today} (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1985), pp. 275-90.} and of mid-nineteenth-century Wesleyans and Primitive Methodists by Linda Wilson.\footnote{Linda Wilson, \textit{Constrained by Zeal: Female Spirituality amongst Non-conformists, 1825-75} (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000).} Janet Kelly has also employed

\footnote{\textit{Constrained by Zeal: Female Spirituality amongst Non-conformists, 1825-75} (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000).}
them to investigate the lives of the wives of itinerant preachers between 1750 and 1880.⁴²

For Wesleyan Methodist missionaries there are additionally memorials, by William Moister, of all who died in the work to 1885.⁴³ A long-standing component of the Methodist Missionary Society History Project is the production of a register of all British Methodist missionaries from 1769 to 2003, which will cover non-Wesleyan besides Wesleyan missionaries and laity as well as ministers. The database is not yet available online, but preliminary printouts can be consulted.⁴⁴

A second tier of information, but only for Methodist ministers alive at the time of their compilation, is to be found in who’s who directories. The earliest of these was The ‘Christian World’ Year Book, published between 1883 and 1886, which comprised a single alphabetical listing of Nonconformist ministers from 21 denominations in Britain and Ireland, including Wesleyan, Primitive, Free, New Connexion, Bible Christian, and Wesleyan Reform Union Methodists. It was based upon the skeletal information which responding ministers had provided to enquiries from James Clarke, the publisher.⁴⁵ Rather better known is The Methodist Who’s Who, issued annually between 1910 and 1915 by the Wesleyan Methodist Book Room.⁴⁶ It covered all branches of British Methodism,

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⁴⁵ The ‘Christian World’ Year Book (London: James Clarke, 1883-86).
including the Wesleyan Reform Union and the Independent Methodist Church. Laymen (but virtually no women) were listed as well as ministers, in a merged alphabetical sequence, with the latter in a slight majority. Foreign missionaries were added from 1911, and Methodists from the colonies and the United States from 1912. The criteria for selection were not explained, other than that the biographees were ‘prominent’, nor was the response rate clarified. There were about 1,600 entries in the 1910 edition with a peak of 3,800 in both 1914 and 1915. The volume for 1915 also recorded the deaths of those included between 1910 and 1914. The First World War then put paid to the enterprise.47

*Who’s Who in Methodism* followed in 1933, as a celebration of Methodist reunion, and under the aegis of the *Methodist Times and Leader*.48 Its content was restricted to the Methodist Church in Great Britain and Ireland, and its foreign missions, with separate sections for ministers and laity. The number of ministers included, at 5,200, was very close to the actual total, but the information for some of them was fairly skeletal, probably derived from the minutes of Conference. ‘Later editions’ of *Who’s Who in Methodism* were promised but never materialized, and it was to be 18 years before another attempt was made to compile an alphabetical directory of British Methodism’s ministers and leading laity, in the Methodist part of *Who’s Who in the Free Churches* (1951).49

47 A small number of Methodists also appeared in the who’s who section introduced to the *Free Church Year Book* in 1911: *Free Church Year Book & Who’s Who, 1911* (London: National Council of Evangelical Free Churches, 1911), pp. 298-314. The section was only published for a few years, until 1916 (pp. 249-73), after which the *Year Book* was drastically reduced in length.


This contained about 4,500 Methodist entries, ministers and laity combined, but a large number of the ministerial ones were very brief, often confined to contact (address and telephone) information obtained from Church sources, denoting that the individuals concerned had failed to reply to the publisher’s enquiries. *Who’s Who in the Free Churches* was a commercial venture, which was four years in the planning and execution. Notwithstanding expectation of a ‘next edition’, it was never repeated, an ostensibly successor publication, the *Free Church Directory* (issued thrice between 1965 and 1970) simply reprinting the names and addresses of Methodist ministers from the minutes of Conference.\textsuperscript{50} Meanwhile, an American publisher had issued *Who’s Who in Methodism* in 1952, but, despite the volume’s professed international scope, its non-United States coverage was rather pitiful.\textsuperscript{51} Much more ambitious in the British and Irish context was Kenneth Garlick’s *Methodist Registry* of 1983, which included mini-biographies of 2,758 ministers, 78 per cent of the total at that time.\textsuperscript{52}

Although not as comprehensive as the ‘Hill’s arrangement’ type of listing, because they were dependent upon their subjects’ co-operation, these various who’s who compilations are still, so far as Methodist ministers are concerned, sufficiently broad and representative in coverage to be a suitable basis for prosopographical analysis. Other biographical reference tools, our third level of information, cannot be used in this way, being restricted to a tiny minority of the ministerial universe, and not even constituting a cross-section of it. Unlike the two other source genres, which mostly take the form of primary evidence, they may be only secondary or tertiary works. Nev-

\textsuperscript{50} *Free Church Directory* (Morden: Crown House Publications, 1965-70).

\textsuperscript{51} Elmer Clark (ed.), *Who’s Who in Methodism* (Chicago, IL: A. N. Marquis, 1952).

ertheless, they may still have value in fleshing out the detail for particular individuals cited in the primary literature.

Among the secular exemplars to feature Methodists, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*,53 *Who was Who* (covering those who died from 1897),54 and Frederic Boase’s *Modern English Biography* (restricted to persons dying between 1851 and 1900)55 are the best-known, but it is important not to overlook the *British Biographical Index*, which aggregates into a single sequence a large number of specialist topographical and/or professional who’s who volumes.56 Wales is served by a dedicated online resource,57 while there is a printed *Dictionary of Irish Biography*.58 Foremost of the modern religious collective biographies are the dictionaries of evangelicals edited by Donald Lewis in 199559 and Timothy Larsen in 2003.60

58 James McGuire and James Quinn (eds.), *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (9 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). The 78 Methodist-related entries are identified in *Wesley Historical Society in Ireland Archives & Study Centre Newsletter*, no. 6 (Spring, 2010), 7.
For Methodism alone, *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism* and, especially, *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland* (which has over 2,400 person entries) are indispensable general sources of biographical data, while the online *Methodist Archives Biographical Index* is also worth noting. More focused and recently-published Methodist collective biographies include those by Samuel Rogal on the eighteenth century and William Leary on Lincolnshire. Older compilations can sometimes have continuing value but, through authorial bias, may not always offer balanced perspectives. In Wesleyan Methodism *The Lives of Early Methodist Preachers*, which is mainly autobiographical, is much-quarried, with other accounts of ministers appearing in James Everett’s *Wesleyan Takings* (1840-51), Robert West’s

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Sketches of Wesleyan Preachers (1849),\textsuperscript{68} and Wesley and His Successors (1891),\textsuperscript{69} also in John Jones (1866)\textsuperscript{70} and John Davies (1884)\textsuperscript{71} on Welsh Wesleyanism.\textsuperscript{72}

The Primitive Methodist equivalents are by Edward Barrass (1853),\textsuperscript{73} George Herod (1855),\textsuperscript{74} F. H. Hurd (1872),\textsuperscript{75} Samuel Smith (1872),\textsuperscript{76} Joseph Pearce (1932-35),\textsuperscript{77} and Arthur Wilkes and Joseph Lovatt (1942),\textsuperscript{78} with a further volume of obituaries of ministers who died between the Conferences

\textsuperscript{69} Wesley and his Successors (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1891).
\textsuperscript{70} John Jones, Y Bywgraffydd Wesleyaid (Machynlleth: J. Williams, 1866).
\textsuperscript{71} John Davies, Pregethau yr Uwchrifiaid Wesleyaidd Cymreig yn 1881-82 (Machynlleth: Adam Evans, 1884). This comprises sermons by supernumeraries, preceded by short autobiographies.
\textsuperscript{72} It should be noted that sketches of only two Welsh Wesleyan ministers are included in John Vyrnwy Morgan (ed.), Welsh Religious Leaders in the Victorian Era (London: James Nisbet, 1905), at pp. 391-443.
\textsuperscript{73} Edward Barrass, A Gallery of Deceased Ministers (London: T. Holliday, 1853). Described as vol. 1, but no further volumes appear to have been published.
\textsuperscript{74} George Herod, Biographical Sketches of Some of those Preachers Whose Labours Contributed to the Origination and Early Extension of the Primitive Methodist Connexion (London: T. King, [1855]).
\textsuperscript{76} Samuel Smith, Anecdotes, Facts and Biographical Sketches Connected with the Great Revival of the Work of God in Raising up and Progressing the Primitive Methodist Connexion (Douglas, Isle of Man: Matthew Glover, 1872).
\textsuperscript{78} Arthur Wilkes and Joseph Lovatt, Mow Cop and the Camp Meeting Movement: Sketches of Primitive Methodism (Leominster: Orphans' Printing Press, [1942]).
of 1888 and 1889. For the various branches of United Methodism there was a *Ministerial Portrait Gallery of the United Methodist Free Churches* in 1860, Henry Smith’s sketches of Methodist New Connexion ministers (1893), and William Michell’s biographies of Bible Christian ministers and laymen (1906). The principal inter-Methodist enterprise was George Stevenson’s multi-volume *Methodist Worthies* (1884-86).

This three-fold typology of biographical data naturally does not hold good for the laity. Clearly, no single source, or set of sources, can offer a systematic inventory of all the millions of people who have been members of, or worshipped with, Methodism since its origins. While several of the biographical reference works, of the sort we have just mentioned in connection with the ministry, feature some lay Methodists, the number of entries is relatively few and usually restricted to those who played a role in connexional affairs, almost by definition excluding women until comparatively recent times. Other modern reference tools useful for following up Methodist laity who contributed to national life beyond Methodism...

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80 *Ministerial Portrait Gallery of the United Methodist Free Churches* (Manchester: John Heywood, [1860]).
84 There is, of course, quite an extensive modern secondary literature, by Paul Chilcote and others, on the contribution which a select band of women made to the formative years of Methodism. This is too voluminous to list here. The classic study is Zechariah Taft, *Biographical Sketches of the Lives and Public Ministry of Various Holy Women* (2 vols., London: published for the author, 1825-28).
comprise Dictionary of Labour Biography, Dictionary of British Temperance Biography, Who’s Who of British Members of Parliament, Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals, and Dictionary of Business Biography. David Jeremy, editor of the last-named project, has used it as the basis for prosopographical research into Methodist business leaders, while Geoffrey Milburn attempted a similar but


Who’s who-type publications reach a broader circle of Methodist laity, including many active in chapel and circuit affairs, but they still constitute something of an elite and are largely office-holders in some shape or form. Other than a survey in The Watchman of the first lay representatives to the Wesleyan Conference in 1878,\footnote{The Watchman and Wesleyan Advertiser, 24 July 1878, 241; 31 July 1878, 249; 7 August 1878, 253; 14 August 1878, 267.} nothing substantive appears to exist for the nineteenth century. For the early twentieth century The Methodist Who’s Who and, particularly, Who’s Who in Methodism (which lists about 4,000 ‘lay officers’)\footnote{Who’s Who in Methodism, 1933, pp. 259-433.} are invaluable. There was also The Methodist Local Preachers’ Who’s Who, 1934, a commercial venture.\footnote{The Methodist Local Preachers’ Who’s Who, 1934 (London: Shaw Publishing Co., 1934).} This volume purported to offer ‘a complete record of the lives and careers of Methodist local preachers’, although it actually contained the
names and particulars of the 21,100 local preachers (20,660 accredited and 440 on trial) who had eventually (after three reminders) taken the trouble to complete the publisher's postal questionnaire, a response rate of 57 per cent. Non-respondents appear to have disproportionately been ex-Primitive Methodists. As will be discussed later, the present author drew a 5 per cent random sample of entries to construct a prosopography of Methodist local preachers in the aftermath of the 1932 reunion, with special reference to occupation.98 John Lenton has also used it as a key source in tracing Wesleyan female preachers.99 Apart from two late-Victorian anthologies,100 and a few volumes of contemporary reminiscences,101 there is little else by way of collective biographies of local preachers, while circuit plans are mainly of use for the aggregative analysis of their deployment.102 For Methodist women there is a

101 For example, Angela Davis (ed.), Called to Preach: Local Preachers in Cornwall and their Testimonies (Truro: Southleigh Publications, 1995).
102 The only national listing, now out of date, is Alan Rose, A Register of Methodist Circuit Plans, 1777-1860 [with supplements to 1907] (6 vols., [Manchester]: Society of Cirplanologists, 1961-80). There are also a few county listings.
simple listing of all the Sisters of the National Children’s Home between 1875 and 1985, with year of ‘ordination’, 103 with Dorothy Graham’s directory of Methodist deaconesses a forthcoming Wesley Historical Society publication.

There are extensive records of chapel trustees, especially in the Chancery Close Rolls at The National Archives, 104 but, notwithstanding multiple instances of their use for the analysis of Methodist social status (such as by Rodney Ambler for Lincolnshire), 105 the nature of the functions and obligations of trustees means that they will not have been typical of ordinary chapelgoers. Much the same will have been true of lay signatories of Methodist returns in the 1851 religious census, recently examined by Kate Tiller for Berkshire. 106 They perhaps tell us something about the background of local Methodist leadership but cannot be taken as proxies for the rank-and-file. A similar limitation applies to nineteenth-century printed Methodist donation lists; 107 inevitably biased towards wealthier Methodists, they are generally less useful for prosopographical than genealogical purposes. The best-known of

these is the Wesleyan Twentieth Century Fund, some local sections of which are available in print, microfiche or CD-ROM. Registers of pupils at the various Methodist residential schools will be equally socially unrepresentative. Of course, this is not to deny the value of elite Methodist prosopography, in its own right, a striking example of which exists in David Jeremy’s group profiles of Vice-Presidents of the Primitive Methodist Church and the Methodist Church.

For collective investigation of the lives of ‘ordinary’ lay Methodists, we must look elsewhere. Until the 1830s membership registers are a major source, while not forgetting that members would have been heavily outnumbered at this time by non-member adherents. The present author has studied these early membership registers most systematically, from the point of view of gender, marital status and (until 1800, when this information ceases) occupation. Thereafter, far

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109 Online genealogy stores offer the best means of identifying the sections which have been transcribed, in particular http://www.genfair.co.uk/ and http://www.parishchest.com/
110 Some of these are published, in a variety of formats. For instance, the retrospective register of Kingswood School was originally printed in 1898, as a supplement to the history of the school by Arthur Hastling, Walter Addington and Walter Workman; further editions were then issued in 1910, 1923 and 1952 (taking the record to 1950). In the case of the Leys School, lists of Old Leysians are included in a *Handbook and Directory* which has appeared every few years since 1884, the latest in 2009. For other schools, the record may be embedded in the school’s published history, as with Josiah Slugg, *Woodhouse Grove School: Memorials and Reminiscences* (London: T. Woolmer, 1885), pp. 237-329.
fewer lists of members have survived, and alternative sources have to be explored, especially for social status. Baptismal registers fill the gap for the Wesleyans between the 1790s and 1837 (when the denomination introduced a new form of register, with no column for occupation) and, in the case of Primitive Methodism, often right up to Methodist reunion in 1932. In recent years, these manuscript documents have increasingly been transcribed through local efforts and made available in surrogate form, either in print, on microfiche or on CD-ROM.\(^\text{113}\) The occupational content of the pre-1837 Methodist registers for England and Wales has been comprehensively tabulated on a county basis by Michael Watts, for Wesleyan, Primitive Methodist, Methodist New Connexion, Bible Christian, and Methodist Unitarian traditions.\(^\text{114}\)

Occupational data are also recorded in Methodist marriage registers, which commence in some cases from 1837, although it was not until after the First World War that most Methodists married in chapel and the majority of Methodist chapels became licensed to conduct weddings. In part, this reflects a continuing tendency of, in particular, Wesleyan Methodists to look to the Church of England to provide the rites of passage. It is also the case that, in both baptismal and marriage registers, the strength of the parties’ affiliations with Methodism would have been variable. The later baptismal and marital evidence for Methodist social status has again been synthesized by Field.\(^\text{115}\) Despite deficiencies, this still represents a sounder and more cost-effective methodology for gauging Methodism’s occupational profile than the hugely

\(^{113}\) Again, online genealogy stores offer the best means of identifying the registers which have been transcribed. See n. 109.


\(^{115}\) Field, ‘Zion’s People’, pp. 293-300.
labour-intensive nominal linkage alternative, which involves the matching of names in Methodist sources with household schedules in the decennial population census. That said, the census naturally permits correlations with a potentially wider range of demographic factors than just occupation. Barry Biggs was one of the first Methodist historians to make use of the civil census (for 1841 and 1851) in building up his Methodist Personnel Index for North Nottinghamshire in the early nineteenth century.\footnote{Barry Biggs, ‘Methodism in a Rural Society: North Nottinghamshire, 1740-1851’ (PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 1975).}

Additional sources open up for the prosopography of the twentieth-century Methodist laity, including a Conference roll of honour of Wesleyan armed service deaths during the First World War.\footnote{Roll of Honour and Memorial Service for Methodist Sailors and Soldiers (4 vols., London: Methodist Publishing House, 1915-[20]). Cf. Clive Field, ‘Remembering Methodism’s Great War Dead’, 2012, \url{http://www.mymethodisthistory.org.uk/page_id__43_path__0p24p25p.aspx}} Life stories and oral history are naturally also important, and there has been significant (but frequently uncoordinated) effort since the 1970s to record the reminiscences of elderly Methodists, with much Methodist audio material now available at the British Library and in local audio-visual archives.\footnote{Regrettably, there is currently no national union catalogue of audio-visual material in the British Isles. However, the Religious Archives Group is planning to work with The British Library and The National Archives in carrying out a survey of religion-related oral history collections.} However, apart from the limitation of being generally confined to lifelong Methodists (as opposed to those whose attachment was more transitory), this evidence is mostly of a qualitative nature, and highly specific to the individual subject, making it an uncertain basis for producing corporate profiles. Some time ago, the present writer tried the alternative approach of using self-completion questionnaires to collect more structured information about Methodist home and congregational life between 1900 and 1932, from a broad (but
still not scientifically-drawn random or quota) sample of 33 ministers and 73 laity. Respondents were, in effect, asked to act as proxies for their peers, as well as providing information about themselves, and this permitted a degree of generalization and quantification, which we will explore further later.\textsuperscript{119}

This experiment has never really been built upon in an oral historical sense, but there have certainly been some social surveys undertaken among Methodists, which report results in an anonymized and aggregated fashion (data protection legislation obviously being a constraint in studying living individuals). Many of these have been of a local nature, since the numerical decline of Methodism has meant that, in most representative samples of the adult population, Methodists will be too few to warrant independent analysis. The principal exception to this has been a recent pooling of data from the British Social Attitudes Surveys for 1983-2008, which has permitted a group portrait of professing Methodist laity in respect of gender, age, marital status, ethnicity, education, social class, and housing tenure.\textsuperscript{120} The British Religion in Numbers source database\textsuperscript{121} is a useful initial guide to Methodist surveys, some of which deal with the Methodist laity (including a large-scale study of local preachers by John Sawkins in 2000)\textsuperscript{122} and others with the ministry (such as John Haley’s


\textsuperscript{121} \url{http://www.brin.ac.uk/sources/}

survey of 1997). A more contemporary example is the profile by gender, age, ethnicity, and disability of presbyterial and lay delegates to the 2010 Methodist Conference.

2 CASE STUDIES OF METHODIST PROSOPOGRAPHY

In the second half of this paper, an attempt will be made to demonstrate how prosopographical techniques can transform our understanding of British Methodist history. Four complementary case studies will be discussed, each relating to the opening decades of the twentieth century. Although these research projects were actually completed some considerable time ago, their findings have only been partially reported before.

Our first case study, which examines afresh the evidence about Methodism before the 1932 reunion provided by 106 elderly Methodists in the early 1970s, reveals the centrality of the chapel to everyday life. Sunday was a day generally kept apart for religious worship, with many secular activities taboo, especially games and sport (which were banned from 71 per cent of Methodist households). Most committed Methodists would have attended services each Sunday, with ‘twicing’ (attendance in both morning and evening) widespread. However, the size of congregations did vary somewhat week-by-week, the holiday season, bad weather and (in urban chapels) the planning of a local preacher usually causing decreases and visiting ministers or special services an in-

125 This section draws on the author’s unpublished tabulations and analyses which underpin Field, ‘A Sociological Profile of English Methodism, 1900-1932’, pp. 73-95.
crease. Sermons and hymns were the most popular components of worship, well ahead of prayer and scripture-reading. Many Methodists were additionally involved in teaching in Sunday school or attending prayer meetings, Bible classes or Pleasant Sunday Afternoon meetings, making Methodism a full-time Sunday occupation for a very large number.

During the week, there was a plethora of religious and social activities at the chapel, notwithstanding the progressive decline of the class meeting, whose slow demise commenced well before the First World War. It was a very common occurrence for Methodists to be at the chapel on two or three weekday evenings, and for most friendships, particularly for the young, to be based on the chapel circle. As one veteran recalled, it was ‘the pivot around which their life revolved’, secular alternatives (such as theatres, cinemas, dance-halls, and – of course – public houses) still being viewed with some suspicion. Attachment to the chapel was also far stronger than to the circuit, with connexional affairs attracting limited interest, sometimes regarded ‘as giving an opportunity to place seekers’. Fellowship, religious and social, was identified by this sample as by far the single most distinctive and attractive feature of Methodism.

Pre-union Methodism was thus ‘rather clannish’ in nature, as one Wesleyan minister expressed it. It was similarly quite ancestral. Although there were several recruitment pathways, the children of Methodist parents were the preponderant one, Sunday Schools suffering a high rate of leakage. Seven-tenths of respondents cited birth and upbringing as their principal reason for being Methodist. More than four-fifths of this sample and their parents were nurtured in Methodism, with a similar proportion marrying fellow Methodists. In roughly

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126 For an illustration of the centrality of Methodist chapel life during the inter-war period, see Lily Field, Lutonian Odyssey: Reminiscences of Lily Field for 1915-52, ed. Clive Field (Birmingham: the editor, 2008), pp. 46-56.
two cases in every three there was even continuity within the same pre-union branch of Methodism. While nine in ten had supported Methodist union, this was often for reasons of pragmatism or inevitability, rather than out of genuine enthusiasm, ‘somewhat apathetically with the head but hardly at all with the heart’, as one Primitive Methodist reminisced. Unsurprisingly, three-fifths reported some disillusionment with the outcomes of Methodist union.

Recruitment from other Christian denominations was confined to the Free Churches, usually in connection with removals, and the Church of England, but relations with the latter were not especially close, neutrality being the normative outlook on Anglicans. Some blamed this stand-off on Anglican arrogance: ‘Primitive Methodists were frowned on by the Church of England parson who used to say going to chapel was like going to heaven in a muck cart, but going to the Church of England was like going to heaven in a chariot’. At least this position was better than in the case of Roman Catholicism, where there were few signs of friendliness and more hostility than neutrality. Catholics were remembered by these elderly Methodists as beyond the pale, sometimes as not true Christians. Genuine converts from the outside world were very few indeed, apart from in some central missions, and could often fall away quite quickly.

This dependence upon autogenous growth (from children of the church), as distinct from allogenous or conversion growth, forms the link to our second case study, which is, in turn, a component of a preliminary investigation into Methodist demography.\(^\text{127}\) The subject has both intrinsic interest and relevance as a potential explanation for the numerical decline

\(^{127}\) This section draws upon the initial research by Field, ‘Methodism in Metropolitan London’, pp. 275-93 and upon subsequent extended research reported in the first two of the author’s trilogy of articles on ‘Demography and the Decline of British Methodism’, Wesley Historical Society Proceedings, vol. 58 (2012), 175-89, 200-15.
of British Methodism in the twentieth century. In circumstances where recruitment had become so internalized, it is naturally important to understand the extent to which Methodists got married and raised children, thus helping to perpetuate institutional Methodism. Evidence for this was sought by constructing a national sample of male Methodists (the sources used included insufficient women for study). This was necessarily an elite sample, of ministers and lay office-holders (in roughly equal numbers), and therefore cannot be claimed to be statistically representative of worshippers in the pews.

The sample comprised persons alive in 1913 (practically all entries in that year’s edition of The Methodist Who's Who), 1933 (all entries for surnames A-G inclusive in both ministerial and lay sections of Who’s Who in Methodism), and 1934 (a booster sample of 250 local preachers drawn from The Methodist Local Preachers’ Who’s Who). In all, data were manually processed for 3,660 individuals, mostly born between 1831 and 1890, with analysis by ecclesiastical status (ministers or laymen), pre-union Methodist denomination (Wesleyan, Primitive or United), and (for the laity) social class. Social class breakdowns had to be limited to Registrar General’s groups I-III, corresponding to non-manual and skilled manual workers, since the who’s whos listed only a handful of semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers (classes IV and V, respectively). However, since the backbone of Methodist congregations at this time was provided by classes II and III combined, this is not necessarily so great a drawback as might be imagined.

The data revealed that Methodists of these generations overwhelmingly got married. Just 3.0 per cent of ministers and 3.5 per cent of laymen appear not to have done so, about one-third of the figure for all males aged 45-54 in the civil censuses. United Methodists were more likely to stay single

128 Field, ‘Zion’s People’, pp. 294-300, 305.
than either Wesleyan or Primitive Methodists, while for min-
isters the proportion of unmarried rose somewhat between the
1831-50 and 1871-90 birth cohorts and for the laity it peaked
in social class I (professional and higher managerial staff, at
4.9 per cent). Of those Methodists who did marry, about one
in eight (12.3 per cent of ministers and 13.4 per cent of lay-
men) never had children, even taking account of children who
had pre-deceased their parents by 1913 and 1933-34. This was
a somewhat higher ratio than in society at large. There was no
obvious pattern by Methodist denomination, but among the
laity the figure was higher in social classes I and II than in III
(routine non-manual and skilled manual workers). Age cohort
also made a difference: for ministers the percentage of infe-
tile marriages rose from 8.5 in 1831-50 to 15.0 in 1871-90,
the increase for the laity being from 9.6 to 14.9 per cent.

Across the entire sample, mean Methodist family size gen-
erally halved between the 1831-40 birth cohort of fathers and
that for 1881-90, the last to be considered in the analysis (to
minimize the risk of distortion arising from the inclusion of
families which were still incomplete in 1913 and 1933-34).
For instance, ministers born in 1831-40 had an average of
4.38 children, but their successor cohort of 1881-90 had only
1.93. Similarly, lay Methodists born between 1831 and 1850
had 4.49 children each, and those born in the 1880s had 1.94.
This reduction in Methodist fertility was visible in each of the
denominations and all social classes. Among ministers Wes-
leyans had the most children and United Methodists the least,
but the gap closed over time, from 0.73 in 1831-50 to 0.34 for
the 1871-90 birth cohort. For laity, Primitive Methodists had
the most children throughout and United Methodists the few-
est until 1870 and the Wesleyans thereafter, the denomina-
tional gap reducing from 1.60 to 0.39 between 1831-50 and
1871-90. Primitive Methodist laymen consistently had larger
families than their ministers, but there was no such trend in
Wesleyanism. Family size fell in direct relationship to a rise
in occupational status. Methodists in class I had the fewest children and, in this sample (which excluded classes IV and V), class III the most, although the difference narrowed from 1.05 in the 1831-50 birth cohort to 0.43 in 1871-90.

This halving of Methodist family size in the space of sixty years largely mirrored what was happening in the population as a whole, so might be dismissed as unremarkable. On the other hand, Methodists in this particular sample always had fewer children than the national average, one less by the 1881-90 birth cohort and one and a half for laity born in the 1830s and 1840s. Nor is the variation explicable by the disproportionate concentration of Methodists in the higher classes of society by the early twentieth century and the relative absence of classes IV and V, which had the greatest fertility. Even within the same social class Methodists had smaller families than the norm. The cause is partly to be found in the pursuit of prudence and responsibility in Methodist family life. Perhaps in response to the Church’s informal social teaching, Methodists postponed marriage (as a separate analysis of marriage registers demonstrated) and delayed raising a family until they were economically able to support first a wife and then children. Contemporary calculations showed that family size was reduced by 0.25 to 0.33 children for each year that a marriage was postponed. However, there are also suspicions that Methodists may have increasingly been practising family limitation, whether by natural (including self-restraint) or artificial means, albeit the evidence is fragmentary. Certainly, by the 1930s there are clear signs of liberalizing attitudes in Methodism on the subject of birth control, fuelled in some measure by Leslie Weatherhead’s hugely successful book on *The Mastery of Sex* (1931). But, whatever the reasons, Methodists were clearly having fewer children, and this impacted negatively on their ability to sustain membership levels in the Methodist Church.
Our third case study focuses on Methodist local preachers, revisiting the 5 per cent random sample (corresponding to 1,055 individuals) from *The Methodist Local Preachers’ Who’s Who* (1934), to which reference has already been made. Although the occupational data have been printed in some detail, those for the twenty-one other variables which were recorded have remained unpublished, and a selection of results will help to give a better feel for the attributes of British Methodist local preachers in the 1930s.

Only 5 per cent of the sample were women, a fraction more than in the connexional return of local preachers for the year, despite the significant female majority in most Methodist congregations. Of those who gave their ages, 30 per cent were under forty, 34 per cent in their forties or fifties, and 36 per cent over sixty (including 16 per cent over seventy). The majority (84 per cent) was married or widowed and 16 per cent single. Of the married, 21 per cent had no children, 53 per cent between one and three, and 26 per cent four or over. Rather more than two-thirds (68 per cent) had only been educated to elementary level, with 16 per cent to secondary level, 8 per cent at college, 5 per cent at university, and 3 per cent privately. Social class background was more elevated than for the male population generally, with 83 per cent (21 per cent above the norm) belonging to Registrar General groups II and III, comprising intermediate and skilled occupations. Dealers or retailers (12 per cent) and farmers (8 per cent) particularly stood out. If telephone ownership was one mark of affluence, then the social advancement of Methodist local preachers still had some way to go: just 11 per cent were on the telephone in 1934.

Ninety-eight per cent of these local preachers were on full plan and 2 per cent on trial. Of the fully accredited, 12 per

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129 This section draws on the author’s unpublished tabulations and analyses which underpin Field, ‘The Methodist Local Preacher’, pp. 231-35, 240-42.
cent had been appointed in their teens, 59 per cent in their twenties, 19 per cent in their thirties, 7 per cent in their forties, and 4 per cent in later life. Twenty-four per cent had served for less than ten years, 21 per cent from 10 to 19 years, 17 per cent each for 20-29 or 30-39 years, 14 per cent for 40-49 years, and 8 per cent for 50 years or more. Virtually all had combined local preaching with one or more other church offices at some stage in their religious life, the positions most often cited being Sunday School teacher (49 per cent), trustee (31 per cent), class leader (23 per cent), society steward (22 per cent), Wesley Guild or Christian Endeavour leader (16 per cent), circuit steward (11 per cent), and chapel steward (8 per cent). Surprisingly, given this huge commitment of time and effort to local Methodism, one-quarter still found the energy for some form of public office, about half of these as a local government councillor, at parish, district, borough or county levels. Other common offices held were school governorships and justice of the peace. Information was also captured on leisure interests, with gardening, cricket, and reading being most frequently mentioned in a predictably varied list.

Six per cent of this 1934 sample of local preachers comprised teachers or lecturers, a proportion which, if anything, has grown since, partly in response to the rising number of female lay preachers.\(^{130}\) Through the Wesleyan tradition, Methodism has maintained its own schools and training colleges, and this prompted the present writer to investigate (as our fourth case study) the prosopographical potential of the registers of male Wesleyan schoolteachers trained at the Glasgow Normal Seminary and at Westminster College in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (women were excluded because the convention was for them to withdraw from the profession on marriage).\(^{131}\) This endeavour was not wholly

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\(^{130}\) Ibid., pp. 237-38.

\(^{131}\) Oxford, Oxford Centre for Methodism and Church History, Oxford Brookes University, Westminster College Archives [WCA], B/1.
satisfactory, since there are some gaps in the registers and, more importantly, the authorities of Westminster College had variable success in keeping track of their students’ careers subsequent to leaving college – a familiar problem in alumni management today. For example, one of the author’s aspirations had been to use this community of ‘graduands’ as a basis for analysing Methodist longevity, but this was frustrated by the almost total absence of birth dates (which could not have been guessed with sufficient accuracy, since students served pupil-teacher apprenticeships in elementary schools before going to college), and the minority recording of years of death (for example, in only 35 per cent of cases for entrants between 1841 and 1860). In the end, no useful conclusions could be reached about this aspect of Methodist demography from the available data, other than for the rather obvious mortality of former students arising from active service in the First World War, an aggregate 8 per cent of the intake between 1898 and 1916.\(^\text{133}\)

All was not lost, however, since a couple of discoveries were made. The first was about a progressive weakening of Westminster College’s links with Wesleyan schools. Whereas in the 1860s, 82 per cent of its students had been pupil-teachers at these schools, the proportion had fallen to 32 per cent in 1888-1902 and to 12 per cent in 1903-20, following implementation of the Education Act 1902, which established local education authorities. Similarly, on leaving college, diminishing numbers of students found appointments in Wesleyan schools, 23 per cent in 1891-1902 and 15 per cent in

\(^{132}\) The term is used loosely, since students were not awarded degrees for studying at the College at this time.

\(^{133}\) Westminster College Roll of Honour, 1914-19, WCA. This also gives details of the total number of staff and former students who served with the colours, recipients of medals or other distinctions, and those who were disabled or captured.
A second revelation was about leakage from the teaching profession of Wesleyan-trained students. Of men who completed the course at Glasgow between 1841 and 1851, 39 per cent later withdrew from teaching in the Wesleyan or (with school boards) public sectors (9 per cent on grounds of misconduct or incapacity), 6 per cent emigrated (some of whom would have been lost to teaching), and 15 per cent ended up in other, mostly private, schools. A further 8 per cent died within ten years of entering college and thus had truncated teaching careers. Far less evidence is extant for Westminster College entrants from 1851 to 1880, but at least 12 per cent eventually withdrew from teaching (including 3 per cent for religious ministry and 8 per cent for other secular employment), with 2 per cent emigrating and 1 per cent dying within ten years of college entry. The true losses (allowing for relatively weak tracking of former students) were, almost certainly, far higher than this.

It is salutary to end on a cautionary note. Prosopographical techniques are not the answer to every Methodist historian’s prayer. But the case studies do serve to illustrate how, through the application of prosopography, fresh light can often be shone on to old research questions and new agendas opened up. As the first half of this paper has shown, there is a wider range of prosopographical sources available for the study of British Methodist history than might be imagined, with their exploitation now rendered much easier through computer-based tools in general and databases in particular. Go to it!

\[134\] Calculated from lists in The Westminsterian, vols. 2-6 (1892-95) and 10-17 (1899-1907).
Clive D. Field, Methodist Prosopography