

## The Beginnings



ONE AUTUMN DAY in 1779 John Bredin, the Methodist Preacher at that time stationed in Cork City, rode into the principal street of Skibbereen. He probably came down High Street, which was then the main Cork road by Clonakilty. The journey had taken him several days.

He knew nobody in the town; but, on the authority of his Message, he sent to the magistrate for the Court House key, announcing the fact that he intended to hold a service. The sending for and getting the Court House key, and holding the first Methodist service under the sanction of the "powers that be," was very different to the usual custom of open-air preaching, but was characteristic of early Skibbereen Methodism.

In other towns the preachers were subject to attack, or at best ignored by those in authority. Even John Wesley suffered these things in Cork and Bandon on occasions.

There is no instance of opposition by Church or State in Skibbereen district. On the contrary, the local Town Hall was lent for the fortnightly services, and for nearly twenty years this was the Methodist meeting place in Skibbereen town.

In their capacity of evangelists within the Established Church, the preachers were well received by all the local rectors. Indeed, one pressed John Hamilton to visit his parish and to conduct, what we now call, a mission.

On another occasion when a preacher, as was the custom, was visiting a parish church for morning service, the rector conducted him to the reading desk, and requested him to preach, a task that was gladly complied with. As a result regular services were arranged in that parish.

Yet, though they were so well received and had good congregations in Skibbereen, the results of the preaching were very poor. Twenty years after the first service, there were only forty-eight members in a district that covered all West Cork.

The first Methodist home on the circuit was at Ardrally, that of Captain Evans, and even here it was his Methodist wife from Bandon, not the preacher's eloquence, who was the means of introducing the "cause." But the opening once made, the preachers used it to reach the western parts of the district.

About this time, 1783, the home of the Swantons at Gortnagrough became a Methodist preacher's stopping place. The first class was started in Skibbereen town as the result of special services in 1797; George Levis was the first leader, and his home the preacher's headquarters.

In 1798 it was decided by Conference that it was necessary to have a resident minister in the district, as the occasional visits of the Bandon preachers showed little lasting results.

The first resident preacher was John Hamilton. Next year, (1799), he was joined by Henry Deery. Between them a great district was covered, and as a result, Bantry, Ballydehob, Lissacaha and Schull appeared on the Methodist map. The

work grew by leaps and bounds. In 1799 the membership had risen to 160; the next year the number was 300, and by 1810 it had reached 320. God was using His servants.

This great increase of members in the Methodist societies necessitated the arranging for places of worship. While most of the services were held in private houses, at least three chapels were built at this period.

The first, in 1802, was in Skibbereen (not in Aughadown, as is usually stated); the church on Captain Evans' ground was built in 1803; and the third at Bantry in 1804. The early churches were replaced by new buildings, both in Skibbereen and Bantry, in 1821. About this time chapels were also built at Ballydehob and Schull (both about 1825), Four-mile-water (Durrus) 1828, and Lissacaha 1830.

Where are these buildings to-day? Aughadown fell into disuse in the 1860's, and became a complete ruin. The present church was opened on October 28, 1877, on a different site. Lissacaha was used until the erection of the new church in 1930; the old building is still standing, but is not now used for any religious purpose. Ballydehob has ceased to be used as a church since the new one was built in 1891, but it is in good repair and is the centre for the social life of the congregation. The old Schull church was taken down in 1882, and a new one built on the same site. (Bantry and Durrus were separated from the Skibbereen circuit in 1883.)

The Skibbereen churches were more difficult to locate. It is thought that the 1802 church was on the Quay, in a building now used as a store by Mr. W. Wood-Wolfe, and that the 1821 church was probably on the same site as the present church.

In 1816, and in the following years, there was a most disastrous dispute over the administration of the Sacrament. The majority of the Methodists of the Skibbereen circuit followed the ruling of Conference and stood by the preachers.

In 1821 a public meeting was held in the Town Hall for the purpose of erecting a church for the Primitive Wesleyan Methodists, as the seceders called themselves. As the result a chapel was built in North Street. The premises are now the garage of Mr. W. G. Wood. After this, for nearly twenty years, there was the strange spectacle of two Methodist churches in Skibbereen, each with its own resident minister.

In 1828 there was a revival in the Primitive Society. Congregations greatly increased, and the chapel had to be enlarged to twice its original size to hold the worshippers.

In 1833 a similar gracious experience was felt among the Wesleyans, as the followers of the Conference were called. This also resulted in a shortage of accommodation, and a new church was built, which, except for some alterations made in 1860 and 1897, is the building now in use.

Two other occurrences call for mention. Between 1830 and 1832 a terrible scourge of cholera swept over the country and thousands died. West Cork was badly affected. Skibbereen suffered much, and among the many victims two of the leaders of the Wesleyan Society received a sudden "Home Call."