

THE BIBLE CHRISTIANS OF NORTH DEVON

When I saw the June 2001 Devon Family History Society conference was to be held in Shebbear, North Devon, I knew I was going to miss an interesting and likely relevant conference. Unfortunately there was just no way I could attend. It was therefore with great interest I read, in the November 2001 issue of the Devon Family Historian, the printed version of the talk given at the conference by Dr. David Shorney.

The article was “James Thorn and The Bible Christians”. James Thorn was born in Shebbear in 1795, the third child of John & Mary (Ley) Thorn and was to become known as the founder of the Bible Christian denomination. John Thorn was born in Langtree, the home of the North Devon branch of the Whitlock family and the Whitlocks of this place and time were intimately involved with the beginnings of the Bible Christian denomination. They would have known James Thorn and would have heard him preach.

James Thorn is described as “A strong, large-limbed man with grey eyes that sparkle and dance when he preaches, a good-tempered face, hair cut short and combed straight over the forehead, and a voice that can be loud enough when he likes but is sometimes as soft as a woman’s”. He was also a well respected and successful farmer who had held many parish offices between 1789 and 1815. The family was very religious and prayer was a part of their daily routine. Their shunning of entertainment and social events, other than church tended to set them apart from other parishioners.

The weakness of the established Anglican system at this time, particularly absentee incumbents and the exacting of tithes meant this area of England was ripe for religious reform. This came in the guise of Daniel Evans a recent convert to evangelism. His arrival in 1812 was to for ever alter the Thorn family and many others in the community including the Whitlocks. By 1815 both James & Mary Thorn were members of a new society founded by William O’Bryan a charismatic Cornish evangelist and they invited many preachers to their home. The Thorn’s Lake Farm was a meeting place for the community and became to be regarded as the birthplace of what would become the Bible Christians.

The Bible Christians grew and spread across southern England to London and later to the northern counties. By 1831 it was agreed that some of the small number of full time preachers should follow the many families who had headed for Prince Edward Island and Ontario in Canada. One of these preachers was Jesse Whitlock of Langtree. On May 4, 1831 he set sail in the barque Bolina from Bideford, Devon with many local families and landed at Little York, PEI June 5. Jesse Whitlock established a Bible Christian ministry in PEI and spent many years circuit riding throughout the island. He died in Toronto in 1913.

In 1842 Thomas Whitlock and his wife Ann (nee Whitlock) also left Langtree for Ontario, landing at Darlington, a staging point for many Bible Christian families arriving in Ontario. The family eventually settled in St. Mary’s, Huron Co. Thomas was also a Bible Christian preacher and the Huron County area of Ontario became his circuit.

By the time of James Thorn’s death in January 1872 his new Bible Christian denomination was firmly established and lived on eventually amalgamating with the Methodist New Connection and the United Methodist Free Churches. In Canada by 1925 the Bible Christians were part of the United Church.

The part played by James Thorn and those early North Devon congregations in the beginnings of a new protestant denomination is largely forgotten but Dr. Shorney’s talk both brought those times back to life and also provided a new perspective on how the Whitlocks were motivated to leave North Devon for

Canada.