

# Lady Huntingdon's Chapel at Ashby

by Edwin Welch

Although the Hastings family had considerable estates in north-west Leicestershire, including Ashby de la Zouch, Lady Huntingdon (1707-91) never succeeded in establishing a permanent chapel for her Connexion in Ashby. The reasons for this can be found in contemporary religious controversies and the adverse effects caused by her attempts to improve the revenue her son drew from the family estates.

When Theophilus the ninth Earl of Huntingdon died in 1746, his widow Selina decided to retire to Ashby Place, the house built earlier by the family within the walls of the ruined castle at Ashby de la Zouch. At that point, overcome with grief at the death of her 'dear Creature', she intended to live her remaining years close by the parish church where she erected a magnificent memorial to his memory.<sup>1</sup> Since her sisters-in-law, the Lady Anne and the Lady Frances Hastings, were already living there, a number of alterations were made for her accommodation.<sup>2</sup> Her husband, however, had died intestate, her son Francis, the new Earl, was still a minor, and Lady Huntingdon was the sole administratrix, so her first two years of widowhood were divided between Ashby Place and the family home at Donington Park.<sup>3</sup> It was not long before her boundless energy had her travelling the country and resuming her interest in Methodism.

In 1748 there occurred one of the first changes which were to lead her towards the establishment of her own denomination and college. At her conversion to Methodism in July 1739 she had chosen to accept the Arminian doctrines of John Wesley, and had shown considerable distaste for the Calvinism of George Whitefield.<sup>4</sup> Charles Wesley became one of her closest friends and was to remain so for many years. However in 1748 she became convinced that Calvinism was the true doctrine of the Church of England. In September 1748 she appointed George Whitefield, who had just returned from America, one of her chaplains. This brought her into contact with the evangelical dissenters, who were all Calvinists, and led to the preaching of sermons by both Anglican clergy and Independent ministers in the house which she had rented at Chelsea.<sup>5</sup> In November 1749, during the course of one of his endless preaching tours,

1. For Ashby Place see T. H. Fosbrooke, *Ashby de la Zouch Castle*, plan 1. Lincoln, 1914. The Countess's intentions were announced in a letter to Lady Hertford printed in 'Report on the manuscripts of Mrs Frankland-Russell-Astley, of Chequers Court, Bucks.', *Royal Commission on Historical MSS.* 52, p. 209. London: HMSO, 1900. Unfortunately it is a poor transcript and the original cannot now be traced.
2. Countess of Huntingdon Connexion archives, Rayleigh, Essex, accounts for administration of late Earl's estates, 1746
3. Few of her letters have survived for 1746 and 1747, but she continued to be responsible for Donington Park even after her son came of age in March 1749/50
4. John Rylands University Library, Deansgate, Manchester [hereafter JRULM]: Methodist Archives, Huntingdon Letters
5. Lady Huntingdon to [John] Wesley, 19 Feb. 1742/3 5. JRULM: Rylands charter 722, Lady Huntingdon's appointment of Whitefield as chaplain, 1 Sep. 1748; G. F. Nuttall, 'Howell Harris and "the Grand Table"', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 39 (1988), pp. 531-44

Whitefield stayed at Ashby Place for a few days.<sup>6</sup> Although his letters make no mention of preaching at Ashby there can be little doubt that he did so. He returned for a longer stay and to recuperate in May 1750 and wrote to a friend: 'I preach daily at her Ladyship's, and this week, God willing, shall preach in one or two churches.'<sup>7</sup> A few days later he reported opposition from the inhabitants of the town:

The kind people of Ashby stirred up some of the baser sort to riot before her Ladyship's door, while the Gospel was preaching; and on Wednesday evening, some people in their return home, narrowly escaped being murdered. Her Ladyship has just received a message from the Justice, in order to bring the offenders before him.<sup>8</sup>

This was to be the first of several occasions on which the inhabitants of the town were to reject 'the many precious opportunities your Ladyship has afforded them'.<sup>9</sup> Since much of Ashby belonged to her son it surprised Whitefield's first biographer that opposition should be found 'where it might have been least expected'.<sup>10</sup> The discontent may well have been the result of the Countess's efforts to improve the revenue from the family estates for the benefit of her son. The opposition was not encouraged by the vicar, as it was in other towns at this period. He was Peter Cowper, who had been appointed by the late Earl more than 20 years earlier and was to remain at Ashby for a further 30.<sup>11</sup> However, he is not known to have favoured the Methodists, and therefore may possibly have opposed them.

Although Whitefield paid more visits to Lady Huntingdon she now spent less time at Ashby, and soon planned to move to a house at Clifton near Bristol with other congenial female Methodists. Nevertheless, at some date between 1750 and 1768 an attempt must have been made to establish a Methodist Society in Ashby. The only reference is in a letter of 1772 (when the Society was revived) which refers to the 'People who attended before'.<sup>12</sup> A probable date for its formation is 1761, when an Ashby merchant, Thomas Adams, was planning to build a Methodist meeting-house in Markfield on land belonging to the Earl.<sup>13</sup> The society had almost been discontinued by April 1768 when Adams's wife wrote to the Countess to say that there were fifty inhabitants of Ashby who were 'perishing with Hunger through a Famine of the Word' of God.<sup>14</sup> Even while Mrs Adams was writing, the Countess had taken steps which would enable her to relieve that hunger. On her birthday (24th August) in 1768 George Whitefield preached at the opening of her college for training evangelical ministers at Trevecka near Brecon.<sup>15</sup>

6. *A select collection of letters of the late Reverend George Whitefield ... from the year 1734 to 1770*, edited by [J. Gillies], 3 vols. 2, pp. 246, 288. London, 1772
7. *Select collection*, as n. 6, p. 349
8. *Select collection*, as n. 6, p. 350
9. *Extracts of the Journals of several ministers of the Gospel*, edited by T. Pentycross, p. 81. London, 1782
10. J. Gillies, *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. George Whitefield*, p. 185. London: E. & C. Dilly, 1772
11. [Edward Mammatt], *The history and description of Ashby-de-la-Zouch*, p. 82. Ashby: W. & J. Hextall, 1852
12. Cheshunt College archives (at Westminster College, Cambridge) [hereafter Cheshunt]: Cheshunt: F1/1579, T. Adams to Lady Huntingdon, 22 Jan. 1772
13. Huntington Library, San Marino, California [hereafter Hunt. Lib.]: Hastings papers, HAM box 53, 33. This Thomas Adams owned a number of stocking-frames, and should not be confused with his namesakes, the Methodist preacher of Rodborough (Gloucs) and the evangelical vicar of Wintringham (Lincs).
14. Cheshunt: F1/1417, M. Adams to Lady Huntingdon, 9 Apr. 1768
15. This college, which left Trevecka in 1791, should not be confused with a later (Welsh Calvinistic Methodist) training college at Trevecka from 1842 to 1965. For the Countess's college see G. F. Nuttall, *The Significance of Trevecca College, 1768-91*. Cheshunt College, Cambridge, Bicentenary Lecture. London: Epworth Press, 1969

The first president of the College was the Rev. John William Fletcher, the Methodist vicar of Madeley, Shropshire, and he recruited a promising young collier from his parish, James Glazebrook, as one of the first students. Three years later Glazebrook managed to get himself ordained deacon by the bishop of Lichfield despite some awkward questions about his education at Trevecka and Lady Huntingdon's religious views.<sup>16</sup> He was then sent by Lady Huntingdon to live at Ashby and preach to the inhabitants of the district.

It would appear that his title for orders was the nearby perpetual curacy of Smisby in Derbyshire. Smisby was a donative in the possession of the Hastings family. Its almost complete exemption from the bishop of Lichfield's jurisdiction had enabled her son to appoint a known Methodist, Walter Sellon, to Smisby in 1754.<sup>17</sup> Glazebrook arrived at Ashby just before Easter 1771, and preached his first sermon at Smisby on December 22. His plan was to preach at Smisby on Sunday mornings and at Ashby in the evenings, and he wrote to Lady Huntingdon on Christmas Eve to ask 'what you would have me do respecting the time of my Preaching, and whether your Ladyship should not chuse that I should read prayers in the Laundry'.<sup>18</sup> His concern about the time was related to the early Methodist practice of refraining from a service at the same time as that in the parish church. The laundry, a room in Ashby Place which was now unoccupied, was the former meeting-place of the Ashby Methodists. On the next day Thomas Adams wrote to Lady Huntingdon about the same room:

Your Ladyship is so kind to mention the Laundry's being fixed up as a Chappel, which Mr G. and I found yesterday wou'd be made large and commodious, out of Room that neither is, nor is likely wou'd be made any other Use of. A Door you may perhaps remember opens out of the Laundry to a large Room Lady Ann us'd as a sort of still Room; by opening another old Door-place or two, this wou'd make a considerable Addition ... Upon the whole I think it wou'd easily be made to hold 2000 People if that Room was wanted, of which I'm not without hope when the Days get out, and Roads better.<sup>19</sup>

Adams also requested permission to mend the door and windows, and to provide benches, a candlestick, a desk, bible and prayer book, and a surplice, but only received her permission to buy the last three items.

When Glazebrook did not receive an immediate answer from the Countess about preaching in Ashby, he wrote again complaining that he had been 'dumb' for too long and that Smisby did not provide him with sufficient income.<sup>20</sup> His proposal to return to College to discuss his future was, however, frustrated by a letter from her giving him permission to preach in the Laundry. His next letter revealed further difficulties. In 1770 John Wesley at his annual conference had produced a statement which attacked the doctrine of the Calvinists, and in the following year a group of Calvinistic Methodists, led by the Rev. Walter Shirley, Lady Huntingdon's nephew, attended his conference to draw attention to its apparent tendency to heresy.<sup>21</sup> The initial results of this conflict had been the dismissal of the schoolmaster at Trevecka, Joseph Benson, followed by the resignation of the president, John Fletcher. They, and Walter Sellon,

16. Cheshunt: F1/153, J. Glazebrook to Lady Huntingdon, 16 Dec. 1771

17. Hunt. Lib. : HAM box 63, 37

18. Cheshunt: F1/159, J. Glazebrook to Lady Huntingdon, 24 Dec. 1771

19. Cheshunt: F1/1558, T. Adams to Lady Huntingdon, 25 Dec. 1771

20. Cheshunt: F1/163, J. Glazebrook to Lady Huntingdon. , 6 Jan. 1772

21. *Minutes of some late Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others*. Bristol, 1770; W. Shirley, *A Narrative of the Principal Circumstances relative to the Rev. Mr. Wesley's Late Conference*. Bath: W. Gye, 1771

had chosen to follow John Wesley, and both Fletcher and Sellon became involved in the subsequent pamphlet-war between the two parties. The Methodist Society at Ashby included both Wesleyans and Calvinists, and as soon as Glazebrook arrived in the town he had been accused by Mr Olivers, a Wesleyan, of betraying John Fletcher.<sup>22</sup> When John Wesley preached at Ashby in March, Glazebrook thought that the sermon was particularly directed at himself. He was not, however, concerned and told Adams that he could not join with 'Mr Wesley's Preachers', but would 'go on as tho' there were no such men in the world.' Adams, who was a Calvinist himself, hoped that the Wesleyans would voluntarily withdraw from the society. He wrote to the Countess to assure her that he had no intention of joining the Wesleyans, who had been allowed to attend Society meetings (presumably in earlier years) 'by meer Necessity.'<sup>23</sup> He also enclosed an estimate for renovating the laundry:

	£	s	d
Whitewashing and mending the drawing about	1	0	0
Mending windows	1	0	0
2 Doors	0	15	0
A Lantern for the Passage	0	5	0
9 double iron Sconces about	1	2	6
2 Brass Candlesticks for Pulpit perhaps	1	1	0
12 Benches for middle	3	0	0
Side Benches	1	0	0
Desk and Pulpit	3	0	0
	12	3	6

The Countess continued to hesitate about authorising this work. She may have waited until more money was available, but she was also concerned that Glazebrook should not give offence to the Wesleyans by his opposition to their doctrine. Glazebrook also had his reasons for the delay. Before he could receive priest's orders he would have to produce a *testimonium* as to his good conduct from three neighbouring clergymen. A young curate who preached in other parishes without the consent of the incumbents would have difficulty in procuring the three signatures. Only Mr and Mrs Adams urged the importance of immediately beginning services at Ashby.<sup>24</sup> When another student from Trevecka, John Harris, visited Ashby in March 1772 he was able to preach there since he was not preparing for ordination in the Church of England. Mrs Adams described to the Countess Glazebrook's depression at being 'bound hand and foot' since he could not 'preach in an unregular manner.'<sup>25</sup> Lady Huntingdon's approval of public preaching at Ashby reached Glazebrook at the end of the month, and he was at last able to inform 'Mr Wesley's preachers' that he intended to preach every Sunday evening at six o'clock without reference to whatever time they might meet.<sup>26</sup> He was now full of enthusiasm and suggested that a student should be sent from the College to itinerate in the neighbouring parts of Staffordshire.

22. Cheshunt: F1/159 & 167, J. Glazebrook to Lady Huntingdon, 24 Dec. 1771 and 20 Feb. 1772. Mr Olivers was probably Thomas Olivers (1725-99), a Wesleyan preacher.

23. Cheshunt: F1/1579, T. Adams to Lady Huntingdon, 22 Jan. 1772 and F 1/176, J. Glazebrook to Lady Huntingdon, 28 Mar. 1772

24. Cheshunt: F1/1591, J. Glazebrook to Lady Huntingdon, 9 Mar. 1772

25. Cheshunt: F1/1592, M. Adams to Lady Huntingdon, 11 Mar. 1772

26. Cheshunt: F1/176, J. Glazebrook to Lady Huntingdon, 28 Mar. 1772

Now the opposition of local Anglicans was added to that of the local Wesleyans. The organist at the parish church tried to close the access to the laundry by placing 'stumps' in the courtyard. Glazebrook asked the Countess to write to her son's Ashby agent and steward to prevent this harassment, and nothing further is heard about it.<sup>27</sup>

By 11 May Glazebrook was able to write to the Countess that his sermons were well attended. 'Our great difficulty is the want of more room. The Chapel is so thronged, that people cannot get in, nor bear the heat when they are in, and people of a delicate constitution are shut out from the possibility of attending'.<sup>28</sup> The laundry had still not been repaired and he again raised the question of adding the adjoining rooms. Mr Adams had gone to London on business and had hoped to explain to Lady Huntingdon what was needed, but had not been able to see her. At her request Glazebrook now sent a plan of the property with their proposals for enlarging the chapel.

The still room stands on the right hand of the Pulpit, and the partition will be opened with little trouble being only Laths and Rails. We do not intend to take the partition down to the bottom, but so far as will be necessary for the sight of the pulpit and Desk ... The Platform of the still room does not correspond with the Draught, but is about half as big as the chapel, near 20 foot by 18 and the Chapel is 40 by 18.<sup>29</sup>

The work was done and the Society flourished, but Glazebrook had now become a popular preacher and received offers of curacies in Leicestershire and Somerset. In the following year he departed for Rowley Regis in Staffordshire. Here he became subject to the jurisdiction of the bishop of Worcester,

who, having heard of his connection with Lady Huntingdon, refused to ordain him, because he had not been at either of our Universities, and told him he must quit his Curacy, as he had brought no *bene decessit* from the Bishop in whose Diocese he lived.<sup>30</sup>

He was not to obtain priest's orders for another four years. He moved from Staffordshire to Warrington in Lancashire, but eventually received the living of Belton in Leicestershire belonging to the Hastings family.

The departure of Glazebrook meant that Ashby no longer had a resident minister and it had to depend on occasional visits from students. These were not very well planned. In March 1777 Mrs Adams wrote to explain why she had not answered Lady Huntingdon's letters.

Mr Pierce who brought the first ... told me the person [he] was going to releeve would return our Way by whom I intended to write but he never came. Mr Wilks who brought your last Favour said that a Mr Tylor would return our way but we saw nothing of him.<sup>31</sup>

The departure of Glazebrook also brought to an end the regular series of letters to the Countess about affairs at Ashby, but we know that the Society did not flourish.

27. Cheshunt: F1/177, J. Glazebrook to Lady Huntingdon, 15 Apr. 1772

28. Cheshunt: F1/178, J. Glazebrook to Lady Huntingdon, 11 May 1772

29. Cheshunt: F1/181, J. Glazebrook to Lady Huntingdon, 20 May 1772

30. Staffordshire Record Office: D(W) 1778/II/294, Rev. Edw. Stillingfleet to Lord Dartmouth, 21 Jun. 1773

31. Cheshunt: F1/1755, M. Adams to Lady Huntingdon, 14 Mar. 1777. In this letter Mr Wilks was Rev. Matthew Wilks (1746-1829), Mr Pierce was Samuel Tyler Pierce (1746-1829), and Mr Tyler was also a Trevecca student, William Eyles (1748-1808), who later obtained episcopal ordination. For details see G. F. Nuttall, 'The Students of Trevecca College, 1768-1791', *Trans. Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, Session 1967, (1968) pp. 249-77

On 23 July 1781 the Rev. Cradock Glascott, one of Lady Huntingdon's ministers, spent one day at Ashby, and preached in the evening to a small congregation of about fifty people.<sup>32</sup> He was met there by Joseph Griffiths, another student from Trevecka now settled at Melbourne in Derbyshire, and continued on to Castle Donington the next day. Mrs Adams sent 'the most dutiful remembrances' to Lady Huntingdon, so her husband had probably died before this time. Two years later Joseph Griffiths wrote to the Countess to suggest that she tried Ashby again 'by sending a Student to preach in the Chapel.'<sup>33</sup> Several inhabitants of the town had approached him about this and 'a very decent appearing woman' had offered to entertain any student or minister who might come there. According to Griffiths the problems were still as great as ever: 'Gospel Ministers are very scarce about us, and the truths of God are opposed as violently by professors as they are by the profane'. The chapel was reopened. In June 1789 when John Byng (later Lord Torrington) visited Ashby he saw

a long timber'd building, said (by a man near us) to have been built for the reception of the suite of K. James 1st when he visited here: part of the building is used as a concert room, and at another end is a Methodist Chapel, under the guidance of the Dowager Lady Huntingdon.<sup>34</sup>

From his description this may be the old laundry. It seems improbable that the small number of members could have renovated another building and there is no evidence that the Countess assisted them further to improve their accommodation. Byng's description is almost the last information about the Ashby chapel which survives. In 1790, shortly before her death Lady Huntingdon produced a plan for the continuation of her Connexion. According to this the chapels at Ashby de la Zouch and Ashbourne were to form district 16.<sup>35</sup> Leicester would undoubtedly have been added if her attempt to lease the Haymarket Assembly Rooms had been successful.<sup>36</sup> This plan met with opposition and was ignored by the two trustees who succeeded her, Lady Anne Erskine and the Rev. Thomas Haweis. It was finally adopted by the Connexion after Haweis's death in 1820, but by then the Ashby Society had disappeared.

The Countess was not a Leicestershire woman, but both her own family and that into which she married were closely associated with that part of Leicestershire which is centred on Ashby de la Zouch.<sup>37</sup> It is therefore surprising, as Glascott wrote in 1781, that her Connexion should have so little success there. The reasons appear to be both religious and secular. The doctrines of the Connexion were little different from those of the evangelical wing of the Church of England and also those of the Independent (Congregational) churches. The appointment of an evangelical incumbent or Independent minister to a local church would tend to attract members from a Connexion congregation. Ashby had an Independent chapel which was rebuilt about 1825, probably to provide extra accommodation brought about by evangelical preaching.<sup>38</sup> This may have been the cause of the extinction of Lady Huntingdon's

32. Pentycross 1782, as n. 9, p. 81. The original of Glascott's letter printed in this work is now Cheshunt: E4/11, 2

33. Cheshunt: F1/574, J. Griffiths to Lady Huntingdon, 18 Nov. 1783

34. *The Torrington diaries: a selection from the tours of the Hon. John Byng (later fifth Viscount Byng) between the years 1781 and 1794*, edited by C. B. Andrews, p. 194. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1954

35. 'Two Calvinistic Methodist chapels, 1743-1811: the London Tabernacle and Spa Fields chapel', edited by E. Welch. *London Record Society Publications*, 11, 1975, p. 93

36. Cheshunt: F1/2144 & 2148, Robert Hemington to Lady Huntingdon, 6 and 27 Sep. 1790

37. Her traditional birthplace is Astwell in Northamptonshire, but there is no contemporary evidence; she did not live in Leicestershire until after her father became Earl Ferrers in 1717

38. *History and description*, as n. 11, p. 86

congregation, although no records have survived for either chapel to prove this. On the secular side, as we have already suggested, the inhabitants of a thriving market town may well have resented her efforts to improve her son's income at their expense. When her husband died some of his rents had not been collected for several years, and the accounts of her administration of his estates as well as her letters show systematic efforts to collect arrears. The only evidence of a violent opposition to this comes in 1750 when there was a concerted attack on the family's warrens in Leicestershire and Derbyshire.<sup>39</sup> Whatever the reasons may be Lady Huntingdon's Connexion was never to have another chapel in Leicestershire.

### **Personal details**

Edwin Welch, M.A. , Ph.D. , F.S.A. ,  
Hon. Archivist, Cheshunt College, Cambridge.  
7487 Forest Turn, Lantzville, British Columbia, V0R 2H0, Canada

39. Methodist Archives Center, Drew University, Madison, New Jersey: Huntingdon Letters, A 64 and 65, 108 and 109, Lady Huntingdon to Eardley Wilmot, 1750