

# Communities of Dissent Phase 1 Profile

Bratton Clovelly, Devon

Kim Baldacchino, 18 September 2017

## 1. STUDY AREA

The study area is Bratton Clovelly, a parish in the Lifton Hundred of Devon just west of Dartmoor. Until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was a sprawling rural parish of over 8000 acres, with about a fifth of the population resident in Bratton Village surrounded by just over 50 farms spread across the rolling countryside. The workforce was almost completely agricultural or those who directly supported the farmers. The 'clay on clay' soil, moorlands in the north and rudimentary transport systems allowed few alternatives to the cattle and sheep farming which still feature in the local economy today. The village is within 9-13 miles of the market towns of Okehampton, Tavistock and Launceston, Cornwall.



Figure 1. Bratton Clovelly, Devon (Google maps)



Figure 2. Bratton Village (by author)



Figure 3. Eastlake Farm, Bratton Clovelly (by author)

Jurisdictions are complex and have changed often in this area of the country. The parish sat at the junction of the Okehampton, Holsworthy and Tavistock civil districts in the mid-1800s and historically consisted of two detached parts. The smaller western part of the parish was redistricted in the 1880s to the neighbouring Broadwoodwidge parish which became part of the Truro Cornwall ecclesiastical diocese. The rest of the parish remained in the Exeter diocese. Nonconformity further complicated the picture with part of the parish in circuits based in Devon and part in circuits based in Cornwall.



Figure 4. 1851 Civil Jurisdictions, Bratton Clovelly in blue (2 parts)  
(base map from familysearch.org)

Although the distinctions between ‘open’ and ‘close’ parishes feature in the historiography of English nonconformity, Bratton Clovelly does not fit neatly with characterisations of these types of communities. The earliest manor lords were non-resident and there was a sizeable number of freeholders. It appears that even leaseholders were conventional tenants in a predominantly economic relationship with the manor rather than the more familiar feudal copyholder relationship. The pattern of multiple landowners continued and farmsteads operated as relatively independent entities providing housing as needed for their labourers, virtually all of whom resided within the parish. Farms were on average 150 acres with a small number over 300 acres and a similar number of smallholdings.

Acreage	No of Farms
>500	2
400-499	1
300-399	2
200-299	11
100-199	18
50-99	7
10-49	6
1-9	6
Total	53

Table 1. Bratton Clovelly farms of at least 1 acre  
Source: 1845 Tithe Allocations, Devon Heritage Centre

Acres Owned	Resident	Absent
>1000		2
500-599	1	
400-499	1	
300-399	2	1
200-299	5	3
100-199	2	6
50-99	2	1
10-49	6	1
1-9	7	2
Total	26	16

Table 2. Bratton Clovelly resident and absent landowners  
Source: 1845 Tithe Allocations, Devon Heritage Centre

Historically, Bratton Clovelly was in one of the ‘healthy regions’ of England and had much continuity in its population size of about 300-400 people since early modern times. Growth was rapid from the 1780s to a peak population of 870 people in 1841 followed by just as rapid a decline back to 18<sup>th</sup> century levels through the latter 1800s, with emigration responsible for much of the population loss. The parish remains at about 400 people today with the high mobility that has been characteristic of this area for centuries. However land was a stabilising factor which has resulted in the present-day community feeling like the last few centuries of change have bypassed it. The farms still reflect the names and field patterns of medieval times and inhabitants still seem to pursue a relatively independent and rural lifestyle, an appealing setting for those seeking to ‘escape to the country’.

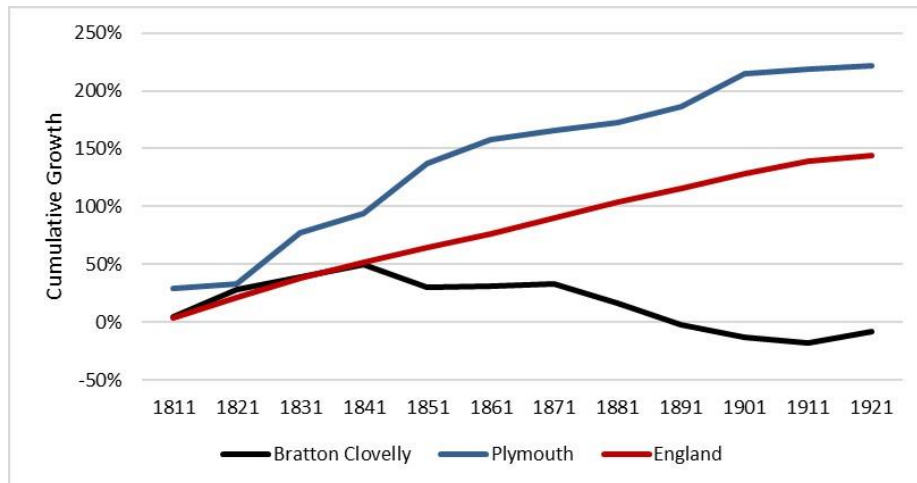


Figure 5. Population Change 1811-1921 (base data from histpop.org)

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Bratton Clovelly had been a parish of one religion, the Church of England. In the Compton Census of 1676, the Okehampton District registered over 3600 conformists compared with 21 nonconformists and 7 Papists, with Bratton failing to even report. However, new dissent did arrive and by the mid-1800s the parish was home to several Protestant denominations.

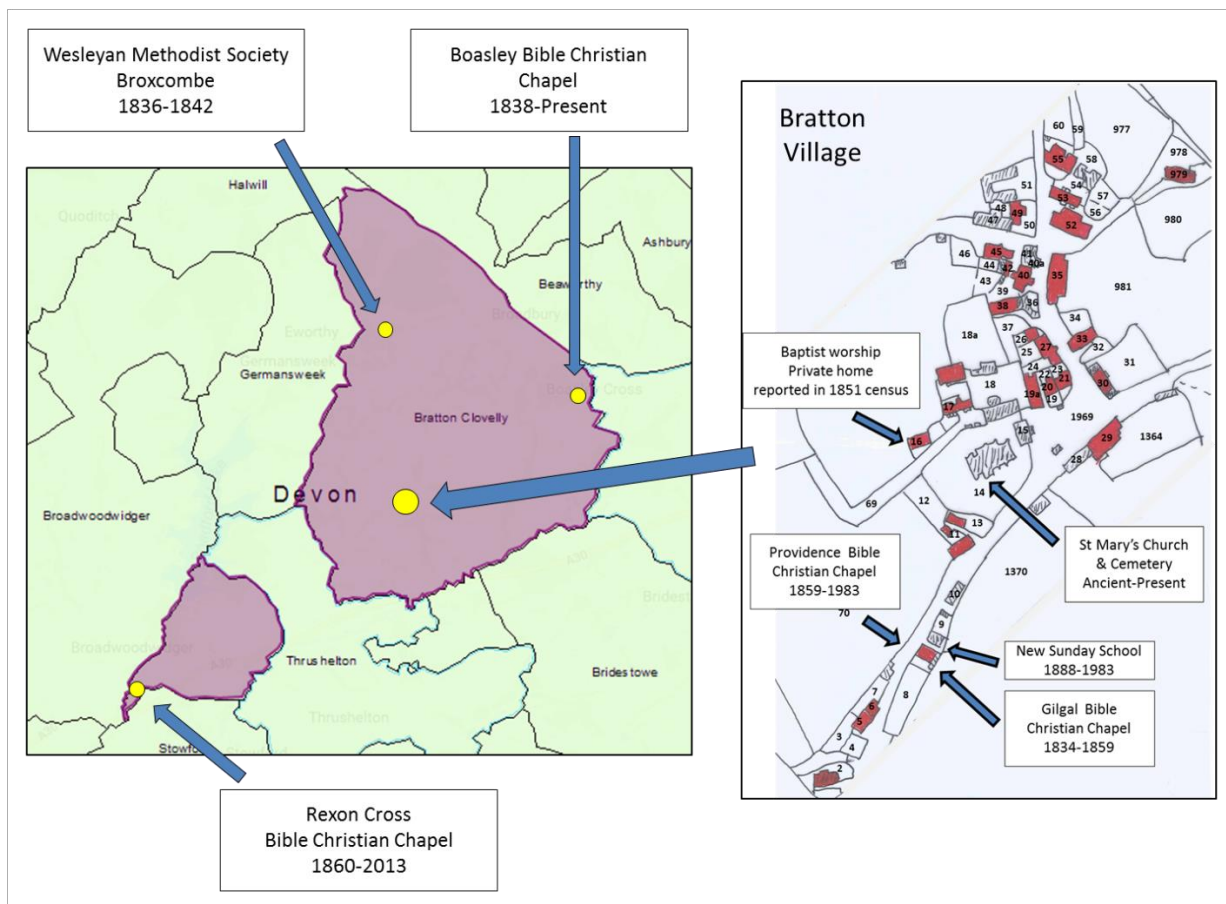


Figure 6. Bratton Clovelly Places of Worship  
 Base maps: 1851 jurisdictions at familysearch.org, 1845 Tithe Maps at Devon Heritage Centre

## Church of England

The Church of England is ancient and historically strong in Bratton Clovelly. Although the doorstep with Roman inscriptions indicates possibly earlier beginnings, documentation identifies that Bishop Grandisson acquired the patronage of St Mary's in 1335-6.

The Church overlooks the village, welcoming the visitor with a striking Norman baptismal font and 17<sup>th</sup> century wall paintings. St Mary's living was an attractive one and church leadership remained stable, with learned 19<sup>th</sup>-century incumbents serving on average 20 years. The Church functioned at the heart of the community, central to such initiatives as the opening of the first school in 1837.



Figure 7. Church of St Mary, Bratton Clovelly, Devon (by author)



## Bible Christians

So it is not surprising that dissent came late to Bratton Clovelly, the Episcopal Visitation Returns of 1779 reporting that 'We have not any reputed Papists, nor dissenting Congregations'. This appears to have continued into the early 1800s, probably first disrupted by the charismatic Cornish preacher William O'Bryan who founded Bible Christianity, an offshoot of Wesleyan Methodism. Seven members formed a Bible Christian Society in the parish in 1818, just a few years after the denomination originated and only ten miles south of its epicentre in Shebbear, Devon. Three Bible Christian chapels, actually four with one being replaced early on, were founded in the mid-1800s in the parish, beginnings which would provide the story of dissent in the parish to the present day. Time has been kind to the history of Bratton Clovelly and much can still be seen in situ.

Gilgal Chapel was registered with the Diocese of Exeter in 1834 as a Meeting House for 'Protestant Dissenters from the Church of England of the denomination of Arminian Bible Christians otherwise Bryanites'. It appears on the 1845 Tithe map owned by and next door to the longhouse of Thomas Roberts, the local blacksmith. It reported 60 attendees in the 1851 census.

Providence Chapel was built in 1859, across the lane from and as a replacement for Gilgal. Gilgal continued as a Sunday School until a new school was built in 1888 now called 'The Old Sunday School'. Providence Chapel was reunified with other branches of the United Methodist Church in 1907 and the Methodist Church in 1932. It was a place of worship until 1983 and is now a private residence.

In an 8,000 acre parish, it might be anticipated that other chapels would be needed to reach the scattered population. Boasley Chapel was erected on the eastern side of the parish in 1838 and remains an active Methodist Church today. Over 100 people attended services on 30 March 1851 including Sunday School scholars. It had been the intent of a local landowner, John Hatch, to accommodate the Bible Christians on his property, an intent carried out by his representatives following his decease, and according to the *Bible Christian Magazine* of 1867, his eight Hatch daughters of Boasley Farm had 'long been friends of our Body'.

In 1860, Raxon Cross Chapel opened in the southwest of the parish about four miles from Providence Chapel in the village and seven miles from Boasley. It was built in 1860 and a Sunday School building was added in 1868. This chapel was part of the Bible Christian Launceston Circuit while the other chapels in Bratton Clovelly were part of the Northlew Circuit. It closed its doors for worship in 2013 and is now part of Raxon Farm.



*Figure 8. Providence Chapel, Bratton Village replaced Gilgal Chapel in 1859, closed in 1983 (by author)*



*Figure 9. 'The Old Sunday School' built in 1888 adjoining the site of the original Bible Christian chapel in the parish, Gilgal built in 1834 (by author)*



*Figure 10. Boasley Methodist Chapel built in 1838 and re-built in 1904, still holding services today © Copyright Derek Harper, CCA*



*Figure 11. Rexon Cross Methodist Chapel & Sunday School opened in 1860, closed in 2013, recently renovated for private use (by author)*

## Wesleyan Methodists

**FIRST QUARTERLY SCHEDULE FOR THE YEAR 1842**

Showing the State of the **METHODIST SOCIETIES** in the **Circuit, at the VISITATION**  
of the **CLASSES**, for the Quarter ending at **Methodism, 1842**

N. B. Every Superintendent is to provide for himself, and for each of the following, every Session, two or more Copies of this Schedule, the Month in which they are to fill up, to continue in use during the year. These, containing the Classes under the Head of the Society to which they are respectively belong. The Schedule, thus filled up, is to be returned at the close of each Session, to the Superintendent, who, from these Statements, is to compile every Quarter an Account of the State of the Society in general, for the use of the Conference, taken collectively. For which purpose, also, he may occasionally use one of these printed Forms. These Annual Accounts should be presented when required, at the Annual Meeting, and at the Conference, the Minutes of 1841. Printed in G. B. 1841, Page 14.

Name of Society or of District.	Men	Women	Children	Members	Members	Members	Members	Members	Members	Members	Members	Members	Members	Members	Members	Members	Members	Members	Members	Members		
Okehampton																					51	4
Apulton																					26	
Chard																					48	
St. Stephen																					86	
Leal																					16	1
Humbly																						
Bulston																					9	
Humbly																					21	1
Broadwoodwidge																					38	2
Northwood																					28	
Broxcombe																					7	
Houston																					10	
Folly Gate																					3	
Apulton																						
Bredston																						
Milton																						
Southcott																						

Figure 12. Okehampton Circuit Schedule Book, 1842  
Cornwall Record Office

The Wesleyan Methodist denomination, providing the principles upon which Bible Christianity was based, had most of its impact in the nucleated mining villages of Cornwall and towns such as Okehampton. Sparsely populated West Devon was only lightly covered. However, Broxcombe Farm in Bratton Clovelly became a small public place of worship for the Wesleyans from 1836 to 1842. The handful of families in this Society lived on a few isolated farms near the moorlands to the north of the parish and most appear to have emigrated to Canada in the early 1840s. For the purposes of this study, this group will be considered alongside the Bible Christians.

## Baptists

A Baptist group also appears in the 1851 Ecclesiastical Census, having formed in 1843 and meeting in a private home at Barton Court in Bratton Village. On 30 March 1851, 28 attended the morning service and 34 in the afternoon. The 1851 return was signed by Thomas Rice who appears to have been an agricultural labourer sharing ownership of a freehold in Barton Court with John Knight, believed to be a Bible Christian minister since the early days of the denomination. In addition, Thomas shared tenancy of the house with James Knight, brother of John, who was one of the three signatories to the original Bible Christian Meeting House certificate for the parish in 1834. Although the members of the Baptist congregation are unknown, many of the heads of households and their spouses in Barton Court were elderly and died between 1841 and 1861. This group has not been further researched due to a complete lack of evidence apart from the religious census.

## Other Places of Worship

Due to the size of the parish, conformist and non-conformist residents especially in the north of the parish, and the detached western part, were worshipping in adjoining parishes, especially Broadwoodwidge, Germansweek and Beaworthy (see Figure 6). In addition, a large number of Bratton Clovelly residents had been born in other parishes often within 5-10 miles. The Church of England parish registers for these parishes are accessible online and many of their nonconformist places of worship are in the same Bible Christian and Wesleyan Circuit Books as Bratton Clovelly chapels, sources which will be considered in further research of the parish.

2a. CORE DATA: 1851 religious census returns

Name and Location of Place of Worship	Total Sittings	Total Attendance including Sunday School	Population	Index of Attendance (%)
Bratton Clovelly, St Mary's Parish Church, Bratton Village	263	290	696	42%
Bratton Clovelly, Providence Bible Christian Chapel, Bratton Village	60	60	696	9%
Bratton Clovelly, Salem Bible Christian Chapel, Boasley	90	103	696	15%
Bratton Clovelly, Baptist congregation, Bratton Village	40	62	696	9%

Table 3. 1851 Religious Census, Bratton Clovelly Indexes of Attendance

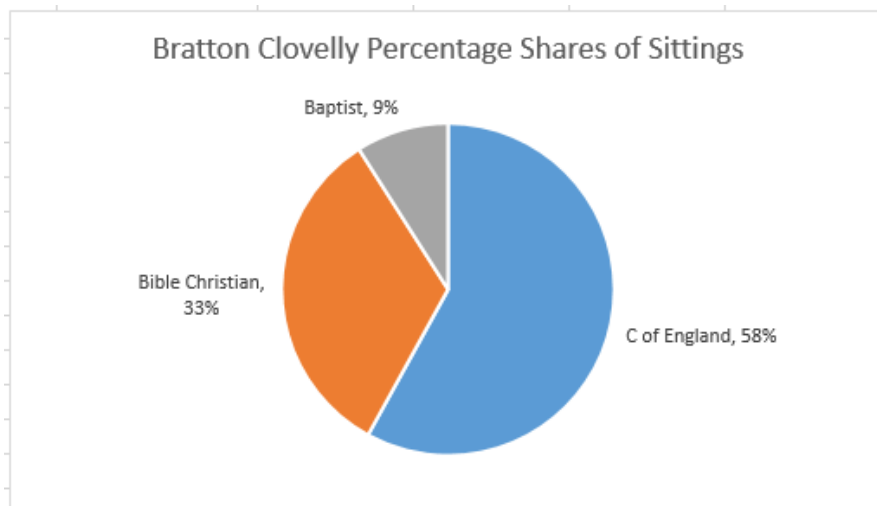


Figure 13. 1851 Religious Census, Bratton Clovelly Percentage Share of Sittings

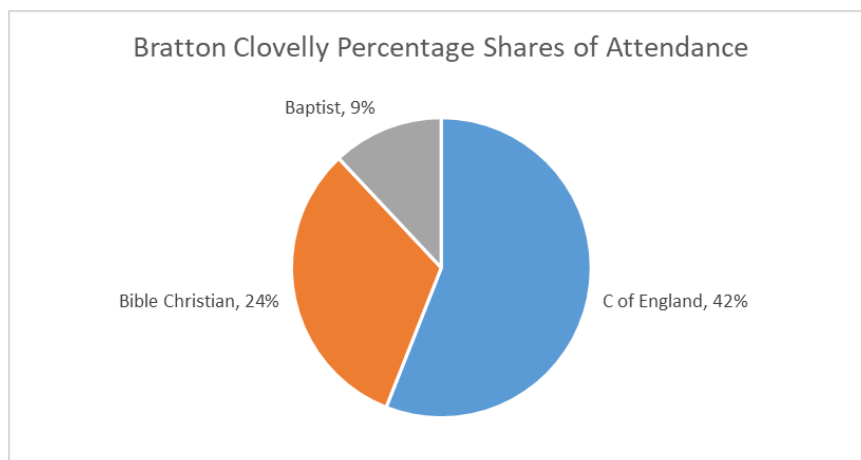


Figure 14. 1851 Religious Census, Bratton Clovelly Percentage Share of Attendance



## 2b. CORE DATA: Directory evidence

Place of Worship	1850	1866	1870	1883	1889	1893	1906	1910	1919	1930	1935	1939
St Mary's Parish Church	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Providence BC Chapel		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Salem BC Chapel		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Rexon Cross BC Chapel		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

*Table 4. Bratton Clovelly Religious Denominations in Directories  
Sources: Whites (1850), Post Office (1866), Morris' (1870), Kelly's (1883-1939)*

### Notes:

- BC = Bible Christian
- Although no Bible Christian chapels were listed in White's 1850 Directory, Providence and Salem had opened in the 1830s.
- Kelly's Directories of 1897 and 1902 listed the chapels as Wesleyan Methodist rather than Bible Christian, error corrected in 1906.
- Rexon Cross was redistricted to Broadwoodwidge in 1885 but the redistricting wasn't reflected in the Kelly directories until 1930; it has been included in 1930, 1935 and 1939 above since it continued to be reported in Broadwoodwidge.
- The Bible Christian chapels became United Methodist in 1907, reflected in the Kelly directories from 1910; they became Methodist in 1932 but continued to be reported as United Methodist in 1935 and 1939.

## 2c. CORE DATA: Buildings

Place of Worship	Built	Rebuilt	Major Renovation	Subsequent & Current Use	Comments
Gilgal BC Chapel, Bratton Village	1834			replaced by Providence Chapel in 1859, used as Sunday School room and eventually fell to ruins	meeting house certificate 1834 for 'Arminian Bible Christians otherwise Bryanites', debt £46 in 1846, paid off in 1858, freehold obtained 1858
Providence BC Chapel, Bratton Village	1859		1888	new Sunday School built 1888, United Methodist 1907, Methodist 1932, closed in 1983, private home	land acquired 1858 just across the lane from Gilgal, chapel cost £210 with £120 borrowed, debt cleared nlt 1878, new schoolroom building in 1888 cost £176, borrowed £65, debt cleared in 1898, £300 in hand at closure in 1983 most of which went to Boasley Chapel
Salem BC Chapel, Boasley	1838	1904	c 1865	new schoolroom built or enlarged c 1865, new chapel built on adjacent land 1904, cemetery of c 80 gravestones with earliest in 1890s, became United Methodist in 1907, Methodist in 1932, still in use as Methodist Church	land from representatives of the late John Hatch, debt £59 in 1845, debt cleared nlt 1865, £79 debt in 1879, debt cleared nlt 1893, adjoining land purchased 1901 for £30, debt £250 on new chapel, debt cleared in 1919
Rexon Cross BC Chapel, Rexon Cross	1860		1868	schoolroom built 1868, became United Methodist in 1907, Methodist in 1932, closed in 2013, private property renovated in 2017	debt £131 in 1862, increased to £164 in 1870 due to new schoolroom, paid off in 1892

*Table 5. Bratton Clovelly Nonconformist Places of Worship  
Sources: 1851 Religious Census, Souls for Your Hire by R K Parsons,  
Chapel Account records at Devon Heritage Centre and Cornwall Record Office*

### Thumbnails:



*Figure 15. Providence Chapel (right) and Sunday School (left), Google maps*



*Figure 16. Boasley Chapel, by Derek Harper, geograph.org.uk, Creative Commons Licence*



*Figure 17. Rexon Cross Chapel and Sunday School 2014, by author*

## 2c. CORE DATA: Maps

See Figure 6 for an overview map of Bratton Clovelly's places of worship. The maps below detail the individual chapels along with significant changes to their structure or location.

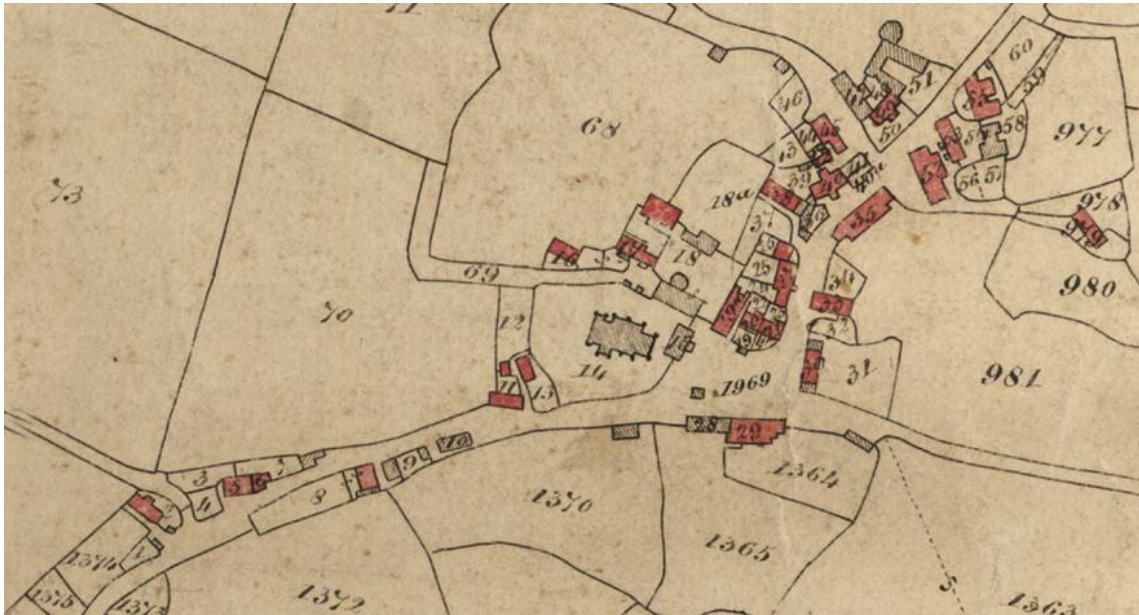


Figure 18. Gilgal Chapel, lot 8,  
Bratton Clovelly 1845 Tithe Map, Devon Heritage Centre

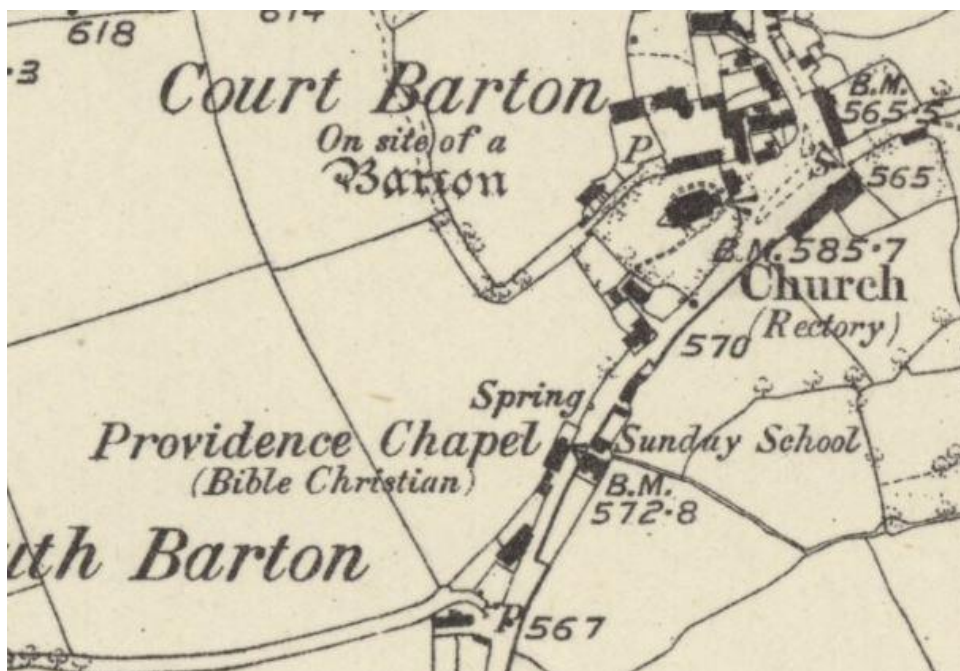


Figure 19. Providence Chapel and Sunday School,  
1884 Ordnance Survey Map, National Library of Scotland

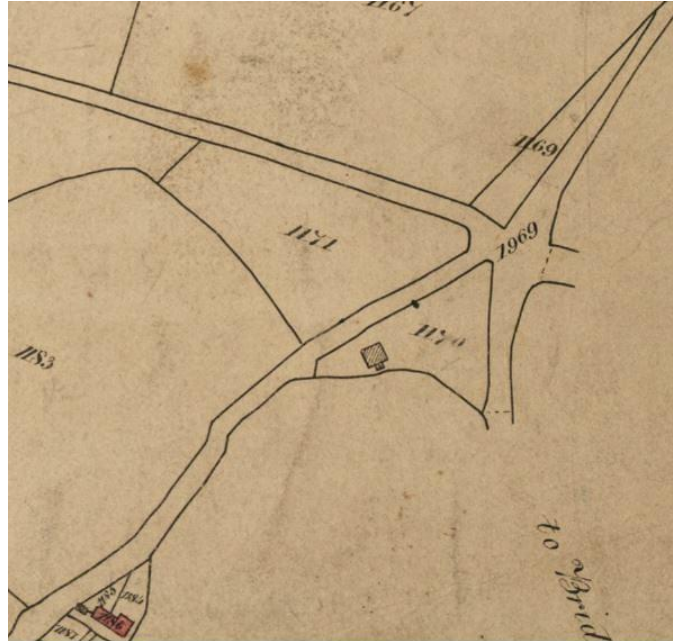


Figure 20. Boasley Chapel, lot 1170,  
 Bratton Clovelly 1845 Tithe Map, Devon Heritage Centre

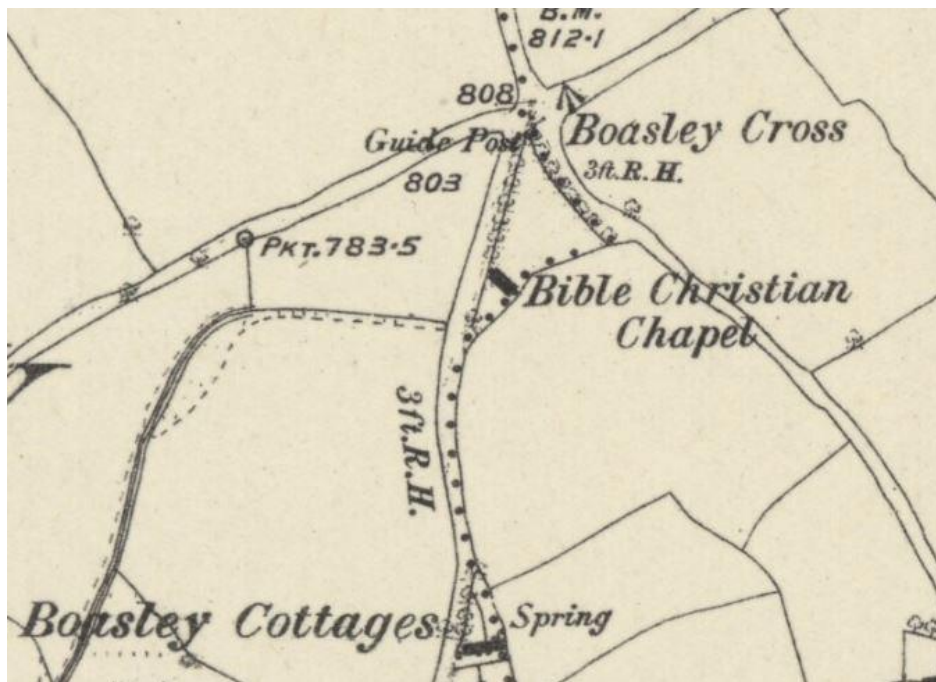


Figure 21. Boasley Chapel and new Sunday School,  
 1884 Ordnance Survey Map, National Library of Scotland



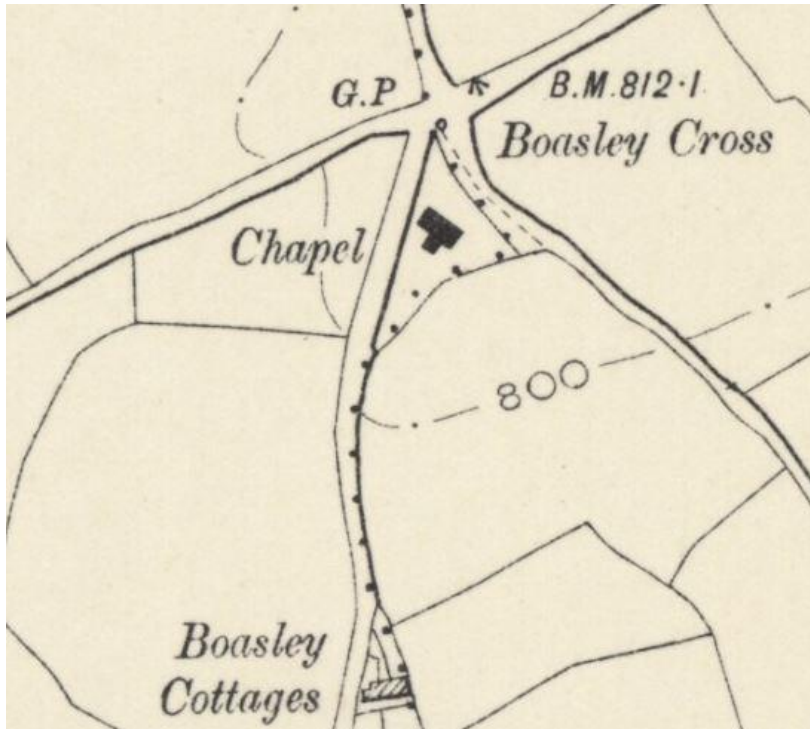


Figure 22. New Boasley Chapel,  
1907 Ordnance Survey Map, National Library of Scotland



Figure 23. Rixon Cross Chapel and Sunday School,  
1885 Ordnance Survey Map, National Library of Scotland

### 3. OTHER EVIDENCE AVAILABLE

<b>Newspapers</b>	
	Minor coverage of church and chapel events in <i>Western Times, Exeter and Plymouth Gazette, Western Morning News, North Devon Journal, Exeter Flying Post</i>
<b>Local Histories</b>	
	<i>A West Country Village: Ashworthy</i> by W M Williams (1963): extensive 1957 field study of neighbouring Northlew and Ashbury parishes with much insight into many aspects of the community including religion
	<i>Faith, Fish, Farm or Family? PhD dissertation</i> by Janet Few (2009): detailed study of three North Devon parishes including strong focus on Bible Christianity, kinship and emigration, high relevance to Bratton Clovelly
	<i>Unity and Variety: History of the Church in Devon and Cornwall</i> by Nicholas Orme (1991): excellent for putting local religious developments into surrounding context
	<i>Church and Society in Eighteenth Century Devon</i> by Arthur Warne (1973): helpful for understanding the state of the Church of England in the 18 <sup>th</sup> century and the beginnings of new dissent
	<i>Devon</i> by W G Hoskins (2011): excellent overview of the county
	<i>Farmers Devon to South Australia</i> by P Rundle, J Rundle and P Wake (2013): the story of a Bible Christian family from Bratton Clovelly who migrated to Australia in the 1860s, helpful for understanding the emigration experience amongst dissenters
	<i>A corner for the preacher: the story of the Bible Christians, their emigration from Devon and Cornwall and their immigration to Prince Edward Island and Ontario...</i> by Sherrell B Leetooze (2005): names and details of many Bible Christian emigrants
<b>Denominational histories and magazines</b>	
	<i>Souls for Your Hire: A History of the Northlew Circuit of the Methodist Church from 1811 to 1952</i> by R Keith Parsons (1972) (available on CD from Devon Family History Society): 'must have' for studying a community in this circuit, extensive detail on chapels and people
	<i>A History of Methodism in North Devon 1739 to 1898</i> by John Gould Hayman (available on CD from Devon Family History Society): helpful for understanding the broader Methodist picture (including Wesleyans) in this region
	<i>The Bible Christian Magazine, being a continuation of the Arminian Magazine</i> by Bible Christian Book Committee: denomination's magazine with obituaries, circuit and mission news, very informative source (some issues available online, many others at Cornwall and Methodist Libraries)
	<i>The Bible Christians: Their Origin and History 1815-1900</i> by F W Bourne (1905): extensive history of Bible Christianity written by a key leader of the denomination up to the time of union with the United Methodist Church, much insight into the strategies and challenges of leading, growing and funding the organisation
	<i>A Jubilee Memorial of Incidents in the Rise and Progress of the Bible Christian Connexion</i> by James Thorne (1866, available online): great detail on the early years of the denomination, many names and incidents
	numerous promising denominational histories to be reviewed (many available from Cornwall Libraries) e.g. <i>The chapel builders: the life and times of over 250 Bible Christian Chapels</i> (2004), <i>Brief Biographical Sketches of Bible Christian Ministers and Laymen</i> (2 vol, 1906), <i>United Methodist ministers and their circuits ... 1797-1932</i> (1968), <i>The West Country Preachers: a new history of the Bible Christian Church</i> (1987), <i>James Thorne of Shebbear: A Memoir Compiled from his Diaries and Letters</i> (1873)
<b>Local Nonconformist archival sources</b> (DHC = Devon Heritage Centre, CRO = Cornwall Record Office)	
	Baptism records for Northlew (DHC), Launceston (CRO) and Tavistock (DHC) Bible Christian Circuits: 1841 - 20th century
	Baptism records for Okehampton Wesleyan Methodist Circuit: 1837 – 20 <sup>th</sup> century (DHC)
	Account books for all Bratton Clovelly chapels: 1840s - 20th century (some years missing) (Rexon Cross CRO, others DHC)
	Gilgal Chapel Meeting House certificate, 1834 (DHC)

	Rexon Cross Chapel deeds: held privately, located but awaiting access
	Sunday School records for Rexon Cross Chapel: 1871 - 20th century (CRO)
	Band of Hope & Temperance Society records for Rexon Cross Chapel: 1880 - 20th century (CRO)
	Boasley Chapel gravestones, 1890s - present
<b>Contemporary sources external to Nonconformity</b>	
	England & Wales Religious Census, 1851, Documents Online, The National Archives
	England & Wales Census, 1841-1911: ancestry.co.uk, also overseas censuses for nonconformist emigration
	Devon Parish Baptisms, Marriages and Burials: findmypast.co.uk
	Cornwall Parish Baptisms, Marriages and Burials: cornwall-opc-database.org.uk
	Bratton Clovelly Wills & Probates, Devon Heritage Centre
	Bratton Clovelly Tithe Allocations, Devon Heritage Centre
	Bratton Clovelly Voter Lists, Devon Heritage Centre
	Bratton Clovelly School Log, Devon Heritage Centre: church and chapel events and school's relationship with church
<b>Photos</b>	
	Bratton Clovelly chapels, schoolrooms and cemeteries: by author, Creative Commons Licence and Google Street View
	Bible Christian chapel photos in <i>Souls for Your Hire</i> (see denominational histories)
<b>Context</b>	
	'Religion in Nineteenth-Century Britain' by Kate Tiller in <i>Communities and Families</i> ed John Golby (1994): useful introduction to sources and methods
	<i>The Dissenters</i> , Vol 2 (1995) and 3 (2015) by Michael R Wickes: excellent, much regional information on the religious census and national context
	<i>Religion and Society in England, 1850-1914</i> by Hugh McLeod (1996): helpful survey of the different denominations including specific coverage of evangelism
	<i>The Origins of Primitive Methodism</i> by Sandy Calder (2016): to be reviewed, for comparison and contrast with Bible Christianity
	<i>Religion and Rural Society, South Lindsey 1825-1875</i> by James Obelkevich (1976): to be reviewed, for comparison and contrast with other rural communities in this timeframe
	<i>The Nineteenth-Century Church and English Society</i> by Frances Knight (1999): helpful for understanding the evolution of the Church of England in this timeframe

Table 6. Bratton Clovelly Nonconformity, Selected Bibliography

#### 4. RESEARCHER'S CONCLUSION

To the east of Bratton Clovelly, the Church of England stronghold in the Exeter Diocese manifested itself in Exeter's 84.5% index of attendance in the 1851 religious census, topping the table of large towns with a 54.7% index of attendance for the Church of England<sup>1</sup>. To the west of the parish, the Wesleyan impact on the mining communities in the west of Cornwall manifested itself in a 43.8% index of attendance for Methodists<sup>2</sup>, the highest Methodist index of any English county. To the South, the impact of extraordinary growth on Plymouth manifested itself in a general lack of attendance, overshadowed by reports from the urban North but noteworthy in the Southwest.

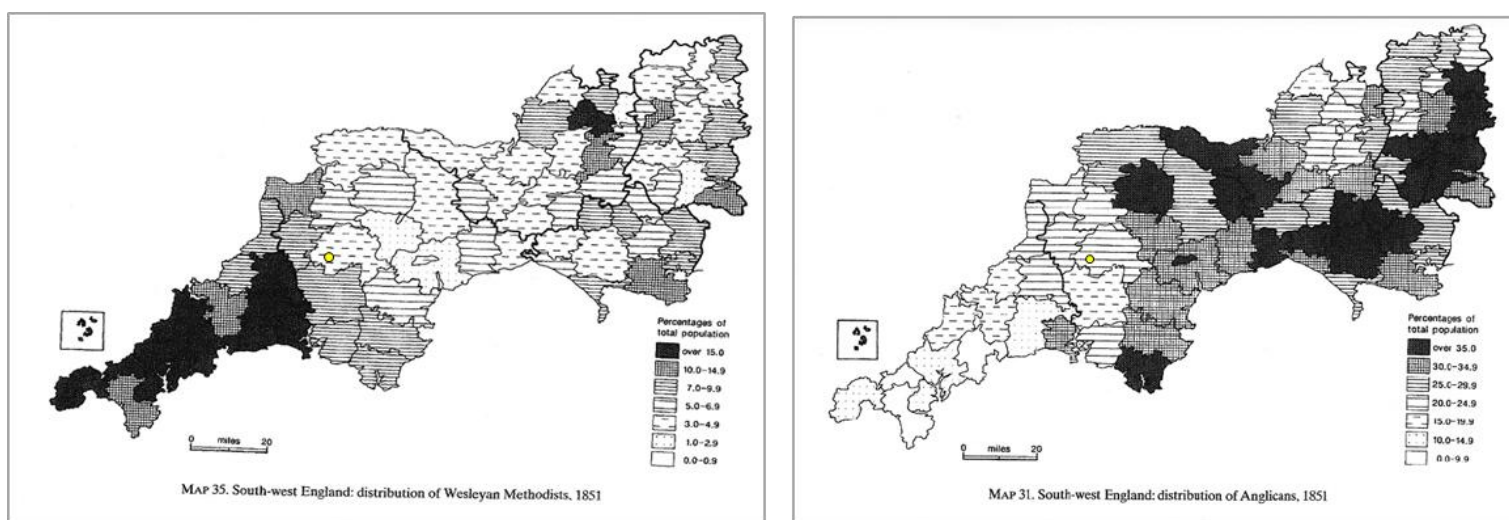


Figure 24. 1851 Religious Census, Wesleyan (left) and Anglican (right) distributions in South-west England  
 Source: M R Wickes, *The Dissenters*, Vol 2  
 (Bratton Clovelly in Okehampton District identified with yellow circle by author)

Remaining was the area in the middle including the West Devon parish of Bratton Clovelly. Surrounded by such powerful and contrasting influences, it is little wonder that both the Church of England and the Methodists would be substantially represented amongst the parish worshippers. In addition, the parish's history of a strong local church meant that the addition of a large group of chapelgoers to an already fairly robust community of churchgoers would result in an overall index of attendance that reflected a religious fervour able to sustain its institutions through the onslaught of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>1</sup> Kate Tiller, 'Religion in Nineteenth-Century Britain', table 8.3 in *Communities and Families* ed John Golby (1994)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, table 8.2.



Denomination	Bratton Clovelly			Devon	
	Attendances	IA	PS	IA	PS
Church of England	290	42%	56%	40%	57%
Dissenters					
Bible Christian (Gilgal)	60	9%	12%		
Bible Christian (Salem)	103	15%	20%		
Total Methodist	163	23%	32%	13%	19%
Baptist	62	9%	12%	5%	8%
Other				8%	12%
Total Dissenting	225	32%	44%	26%	38%
Total Bratton Clovelly	515	74%			
Total Devon				71%	

Figure 25. 1851 Religious Census, Indexes for Parish and County  
Source: Devon statistics from 'Religion in Nineteenth-Century Britain' by Kate Tiller  
in *Communities and Families* ed John Golby (1994), table 8.2

The different regions of religious influence in the Southwest, likened to the *pays* of Everitt<sup>3</sup>, emphasise the danger of generalisations without grounding in the local experience. Often, the Southwest of England is grouped into statistics overwhelmed by the Wesleyan miners, or the county of Devon is grouped into statistics overwhelmed by the Anglicanism of Exeter. Rural agricultural landscapes like Bratton Clovelly can escape notice but speak to the lives of many in the Victorian Southwest.

It was a small group of deeply committed local evangelists, the Bible Christians, who saw the opportunity in this part of West Devon and East Cornwall. Speaking of the area between Langtree and Brentor, stretching just 20 miles and including Bratton Clovelly, the spiritual leader of the Bible Christians James Thorne recollected in 1868:

‘The large tract of country between those places, before it was visited by Bible Christian ministers, was in a deplorable state of spiritual darkness.’<sup>4</sup> (*Jubilee, Thorne, p. 193*)

To the Bible Christians who had little interest in proselytizing, ‘spiritual darkness’ meant an absence of attention from dissenting groups. Their itinerant ministers pursued punishing schedules of travel through rugged countryside to reach isolated farmsteads where they worked to save souls one by one.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Everitt, ‘Country, County and Town: Patterns of Regional Evolution in England’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Volume 29 (Dec 1979), pp 79 – 108.

<sup>4</sup> James Thorne, *A Jubilee Memorial of Incidents in the Rise and Progress of the Bible Christian Connexion* (Shebbear, 1865).



Figure 26. The Bible Christian Impact (white squares) on the Southwest  
 Source: H McLeod, *Religion and Society in England, 1850-1914* (1996)

The small size, relative isolation and limited diversity of Bratton Clovelly, along with a plethora of accessible resources, now afford the opportunity to pinpoint many of the souls who were being saved. Were they the ‘poor and ignorant’ sometimes assumed to be those most attracted by evangelical revivals and dramatic conversions? Did they live on the fringes of their communities with their notions of temperate discipline? Did they live, marry, work or move together? Did their congregations rise and fall with the rise and fall of the parish, or were there other drivers?

Early indications are that an examination of Bratton Clovelly’s nonconformity at the level of individuals may challenge some of the more prominent generalisations regarding evangelistic congregations, patterns of kinship relations and patterns of migration in this timeframe. As Few found in her study of North Devon communities<sup>5</sup>, preliminary research on the parish points to a possibly intricate web of interrelated phenomena where nonconformity is a key component.

The following research questions are proposed for Phase 2:

- Who were Bratton Clovelly’s Methodist nonconformists and what were their characteristics?
- How did they compare to the others in the parish?
- What can they tell historians about the rise and decline of dissent in the parish?

The approach is to use record linkage to identify and analyse the Methodist nonconformists resident in the study area from 1841 to 1911. A prosopographic method similar to that described by Bradley<sup>6</sup>, coupled with a structured analysis derived from Pooley and Turnbull<sup>7</sup>, will be used to compare and contrast the nonconformists with others in the parish. The expected study population is about 3,000 unique residents.

Circuit baptism records are in hand, along with other chapel records such as accounts and Sunday School records, and a portion of the study population has been preliminarily linked based on earlier research. Areas of comparison minimally include occupation, social status, internal and overseas migration, marriage patterns and illiteracy. An attempt will be made to understand the persistence of nonconformity in families. There is also ample opportunity to place parish-level findings in broader

<sup>5</sup> J. M. Few., *Faith, Fish, Farm or Family? The Impact of Kinship Links and Communities on Migration Choices and Residential Persistence in North Devon 1841-1901*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Exeter (Sep 2009).

<sup>6</sup> J. Bradley and H. Short, ‘Texts into databases: the evolving field of new-style prosopography’, *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, 20, Supplement 1 (2005), pp. 3-24.

<sup>7</sup> C. G. Pooley and J. Turnbull, *Migration and mobility in Britain since the eighteenth century* (UCL Press, London, 1998).

contexts, aided by high levels of local movement, Parsons' history of the Northlew Circuit<sup>8</sup>, Williams' field study of the Northlew parish<sup>9</sup>, Few's work on North Devon<sup>10</sup> where significant commonalities have been found in preliminary research, substantial Bible Christian literature and Calder's exploration of Primitive Methodism<sup>11</sup>.

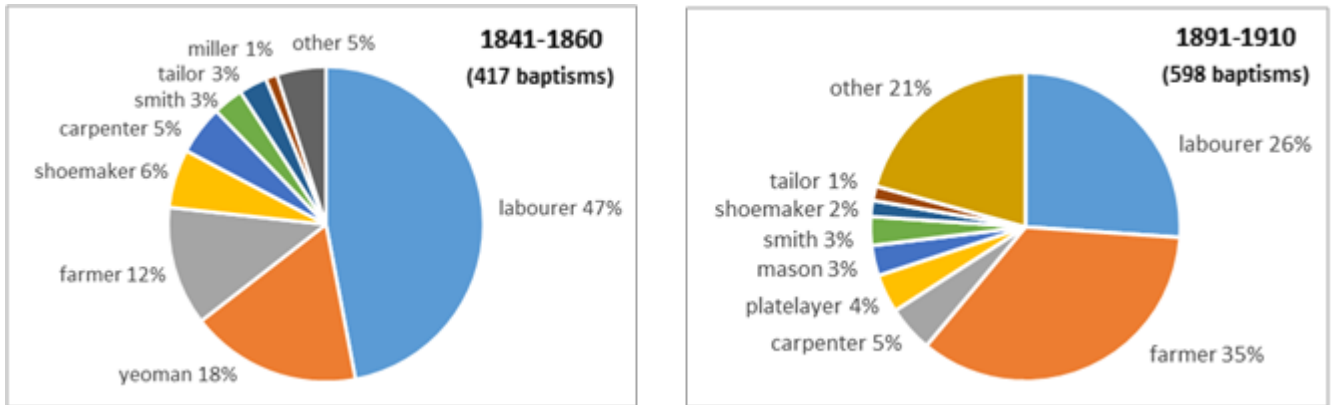


Figure 27. Poor and ignorant?  
 Father's occupations in Bible Christian Northlew Circuit baptism records (records held by Devon Heritage Centre)

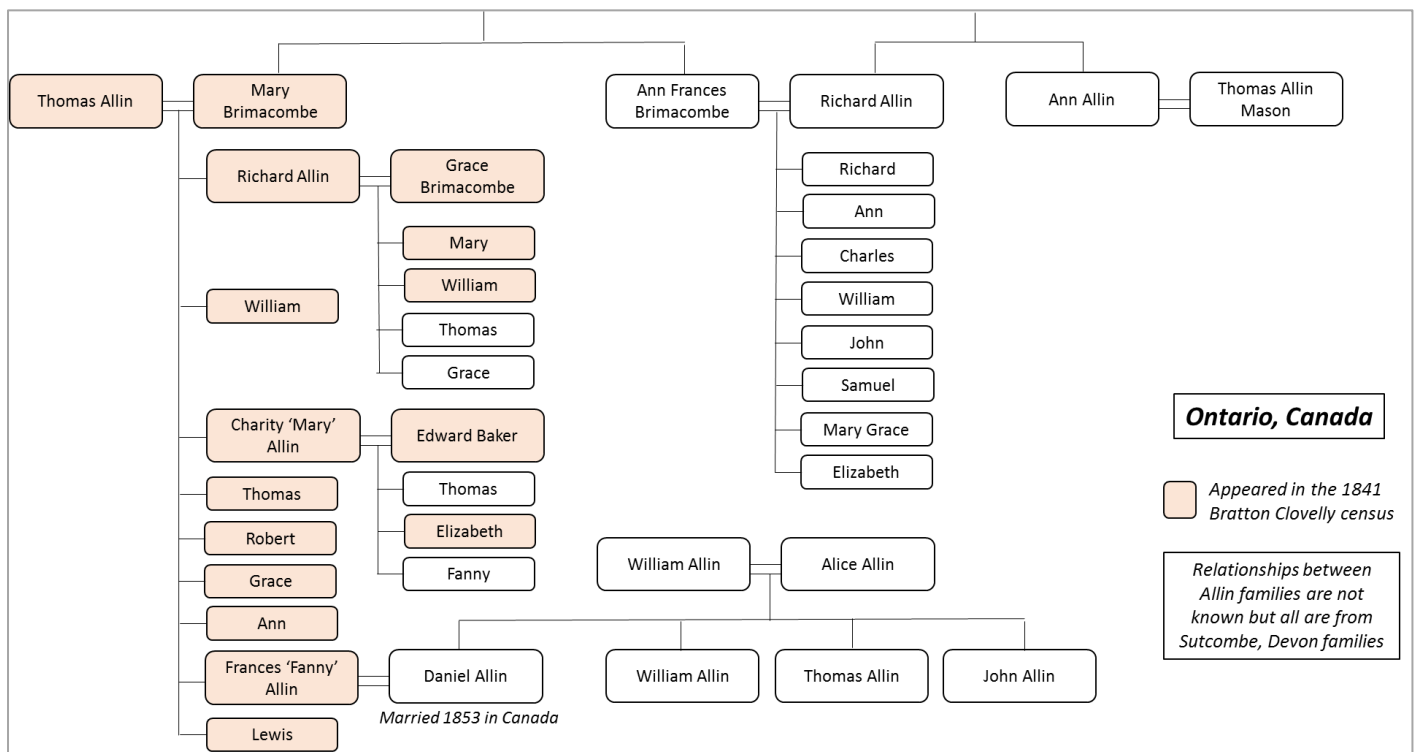


Figure 28. Kinship irrelevant in 19<sup>th</sup> century England?  
 Family group of Wesleyan and Bible Christian emigrants to Ontario in the mid-1800s  
 (base data: Census records and Family Trees, ancestry.co.uk)

<sup>8</sup>R. K. Parsons, *Souls for Your Hire: A History of the Northlew Circuit of the Methodist Church from 1811 to 1952* (1972), CD-ROM, Devon Family History Society (2015).

<sup>9</sup> W. M. Williams, *A West Country Village Ashworthy: Family, Kinship and Land* (Routledge, Abingdon, 1963).

<sup>10</sup> J. M. Few., op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Sandy Calder, *The Origins of Primitive Methodism* (The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2016).