

Wilford Woodruff's 1840 Inspiring Herefordshire Mission

Compiled by Glen W. Chapman-November 2001

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*Wilford Woodruff stands out as one of the most amazing missionaries of the Latter-Days. His experiences during his mission to England parallel those of the Sons of Mosiah. The following excerpt from his journal recounts his successful experience at Benbow's Farm, which is one of the most well known conversion stories in church history.*

"On the 3rd of March, 1840, in fulfillment of the word of the Lord to me, I took coach and rode to Wolverhampton, twenty-six miles, and spent the night there.

On the morning of the 4th I again took coach, and rode through Dudley, Stourbridge, Stourport and Worcester, and then walked a number of miles to Mr. John Benbow's Hill Farm, Castle Frome, Ledbury, Herefordshire. This was a farming country in the south of England, a region where no Elder of the Latter-day Saints had visited.

I presented myself to him as a missionary from America, an Elder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who had been sent to him by the commandment of God as a messenger of salvation, to preach the gospel of life unto him and his household, and the inhabitants of the land.

Mr. Benbow and his wife received with me glad hearts and thanksgiving. It was in the evening when I arrived, having traveled forty-eight miles by coach and on foot during the day, but after receiving refreshments we sat down together, and conversed until two o'clock in the morning.

Mr. Benbow and his wife rejoiced greatly at the glad tidings which I brought unto them of the fullness of the everlasting Gospel, which God had revealed through the mouth of His Prophet, Joseph Smith, in these last days.

I rejoiced greatly at the news that Mr. Benbow gave me, that there was a company of men and women—over six hundred in number—who had broken off from the Wesleyan Methodists, and taken the name of United Brethren. They had forty-five preachers among them, and had chapels and many houses that were licensed according to the law of the land for preaching in.

This body of United Brethren were searching for light and truth, but had gone as far as they could, and were continually calling upon the Lord to open the way before them, and send them light and knowledge that they might know the true way to be saved.

When I heard these things I could clearly see why the Lord had commanded me, while in the town of Hanley, to leave that place of labor and go to the south, for in Herefordshire there was a great harvest-field for gathering many Saints into the kingdom of God.

I retired to my bed with joy after offering my prayers and thanksgiving to God, and slept sweetly until the rising of the sun.

I arose on the morning of the 5th, took breakfast, and told Mr. Benbow I would like to commence my Master's business, by preaching the gospel to the people.

He had a large hall in his mansion which was licensed for preaching, and he sent word through the neighborhood that an American missionary would preach at his house that evening.

As the time drew nigh, many of the neighbors came in, and I preached my first gospel

sermon in the house. I also preached on the following evening at the same place, and baptized six persons, including Mr. John Benbow and his wife, and four preachers of the United Brethren.

I spent most of the following day in clearing out a pool of water, and preparing it for baptizing in, as I saw many to be baptized there. I afterwards baptized six hundred in that pool of water.

On Sunday, the 8th, I preached at Frome's Hill in the morning, at Standley Hill in the afternoon, and at John Benbow's Hill Farm, in the evening.

The parish church that stood in the neighborhood of Brother Benbow's, presided over by the rector of the parish, was attended during the day by only fifteen persons, while I had a large congregation, estimated to number a thousand, attend my meeting through the day and evening.

When I arose in the evening to speak at Brother Benbow's house, a man entered the door and informed me that he was a constable, and had been sent by the rector of the parish with a warrant to arrest me.

I asked him "For what crime?"

He said, "For preaching to the people."

I told him that I, as well as the rector, had a license for preaching the gospel to the people, and that if he would take a chair I would wait upon him after meeting.

He took my chair and sat beside me. I preached the first principles of the everlasting gospel for an hour and a quarter. The power of God rested upon me, the Spirit filled the house, and the people were convinced.

At the close of the meeting I opened a door for baptism, and seven offered themselves. Among the number were four preachers and the constable.

The latter arose and said, "Mr. Woodruff, I would like to be baptized."

I told him I would like to baptize him. I went down to the pool and baptized the seven. We then met together and I confirmed thirteen, and broke bread unto the Saints and we all rejoiced together.

The constable went to the rector and told him if he wanted Mr. Woodruff taken up for preaching the gospel, he must go himself and serve the writ, for he had heard him preach the only true gospel sermon he had ever listened to in his life.

The rector did not know what to make of it, so he sent two clerks of the Church of England as spies, to attend our meeting, and find out what we did preach.

But they were both pricked in their hearts and received the word of the Lord gladly, and were baptized and confirmed members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The rector became alarmed and did not dare to send anybody else.

The ministers and rectors of the South of England called a convention and sent a petition to the Archbishop of Canterbury, to request Parliament to pass a law prohibiting the "Mormons" from preaching in the British dominion.

In this petition the rector stated that one "Mormon" missionary had baptized fifteen hundred persons, mostly members of the English church, during the last seven months.

But the archbishop and council, knowing well that the laws of England gave free toleration

to all religions under the British flag, sent word to the petitioners that if they had the worth of souls at heart as much as they had the ground where hares, foxes and hounds ran, they would not lose so many of their flock. I continued to preach and baptize daily.

On the 21st day of March, I baptized Elder Thomas Kingston. He was the superintendent of both preachers and members of the United Brethren.

The first thirty days after my arrival in Herefordshire, I had baptized forty-five preachers and one hundred and sixty members of the United Brethren, who put into my hands one chapel and forty-five houses, which were licensed according to law to preach in.

This opened a wide field of labor, and enabled me to bring into the Church, through the blessing of God, over eight hundred souls during eight months, including all of the six hundred United Brethren except one person, also including some two hundred preachers of various denominations.

This field of labor embraced Herefordshire, Gloucestershire, and Worcestershire, and formed the conferences of Garway, Godfield Elm and Frome's Hill.

I was visited by President Young and Dr. Richards.

Brother Benbow furnished us with 300 pounds to print the first Book of Mormon that was published in England; and on the 20th of May, 1840, Brigham Young, Willard Richards and I held a council on the top of Malvern Hill, and there decided that Brigham Young go direct to Manchester and publish 3,000 copies of the Hymn Book and 3,000 copies of the Book of Mormon, this being the first publication of these books in England.

The power of God rested upon us and upon the mission.

The sick were healed, devils were cast out, and the lame were made to walk.

One case I will mention: Mary Pitt, who died in Nauvoo, sister of Wm. Pitt, who died in Salt Lake City, had not walked upon her feet for eleven years. We carried her into the water and I baptized her.

On the evening of the 18th of May, 1840, at Brother Kingston's house in Dymock, Elders Brigham Young, Willard Richards and I laid hands upon her head and confirmed her.

Brigham Young, being mouth, rebuked her lameness, and commanded her to arise and walk, in the name of the Lord. The lameness then left her, and she never afterwards used a staff or crutch.

She walked through the town of Dymock next day, which created a stir among the people; but the wicked did not feel to give God the glory.

The whole history of this Herefordshire mission shows the importance of listening to the still small voice of the Spirit of God and the revelations of the Holy Ghost.

The Lord had a people there prepared for the gospel. They were praying for light and truth, and the Lord sent me to them, and I declared the gospel of life and salvation unto them, and some eight hundred souls received it, and many of them have been gathered to Zion in these mountains. Many of them have also been called to officiate in the bishopric, and have done much good in Zion. But in all these things we should ever acknowledge the hand of God, and give Him the honor, praise and glory, forever and ever. Amen."

