

# Told by the Dial



## Mount Zion Background Information

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## Setting the scene

This booklet provides a short guide for teachers to the history of Mount Zion Heritage Chapel. In 1773 when the first Mount Zion chapel was built, King George III was on the British throne. In 1820, five years after the building of the second chapel, he died and was succeeded by his son George the IV. When George died, his younger brother William the IV became King. In 1837 on William's death, his niece Queen Victoria succeeded to the throne. Nationally and locally, this was a period of social and political unrest, campaigns for the right to vote, an end to slavery and religious reform. It saw the beginnings and escalation of the Industrial Revolution.

Particularly in areas such as Calderdale, the latter resulted in a change in lifestyle for many people and a move away from cottage industries and farming to factories and urban life. This was not always seen as positive and the result was agitation both against change (e.g., the use of mechanical looms) and for reform (e.g., workers' rights and the right to vote). Calderdale was a hot bed for rebels and reformers and clashes with the establishment, representatives of the state and national church (the Church of England), were commonplace.

## Methodism

Mount Zion Chapel was established by Christians known as Methodists. Methodism may be traced back to two brothers, John and Charles Wesley, sons of an Anglican (Church of England) vicar from Epworth in Lincolnshire. Both went to Oxford University. Here they met a group of like-minded friends. This 'Holy Club' of methodical, young Christian men met regularly to worship and support each other in 'good works'. They were given the nickname 'Methodists' by their peers.

The Wesley brothers spent time in America. On their return to England. John attended a prayer meeting, which changed his attitude to faith. His life and ministry were transformed. As a result, he began to travel around the country on horseback, preaching wherever he could, sometimes in churches, but often outside in public spaces. Through his ministry Methodism developed into a national movement, with members initially attending both Anglican services and Methodist meetings.

At the latter the Bible was read and debated. Ordinary people learnt how to speak in public and how to agitate for change and social justice. Over time Methodists (particularly the New Connexion and Primitive Methodists), became involved in campaigns for workers' rights, trade unions and against transatlantic slavery. They supported prison reform, women's rights and were innovators in education.

As the years passed, Methodist groups began to challenge the teaching and practices of the Church of England. Consequently, they were increasingly excluded from the parish churches, and Methodism gradually became a separate Christian denomination. John Wesley never wanted division. He remained an Anglican priest all his life. After Wesley's death in 1791, tensions intensified between those who wished to stay with the Anglicans and those who felt it right to be independent, leading to several separate Methodist denominations. All the different groups came together again in 1932 when the present Methodist Church was formed.

### Mount Zion – a special place



Methodism has a long history in Calderdale. John Wesley first preached in Halifax on the 22nd of August 1748. In the crowd was James Riley, a local man, who stated that '*Wesley disturbed my conscience and troubled my soul.*' Consequently, he instigated regular meetings in his house and others in the Anglican parish of Bradshaw.

Mount Zion (Sion), means God's dwelling place, or a beautiful, special, space where God should be worshipped. In the sunshine, Mount Zion looks well named, with its dramatic backdrop of moorland.

However, the existence of the Chapel is in part due to the area's inhospitable location and climate.

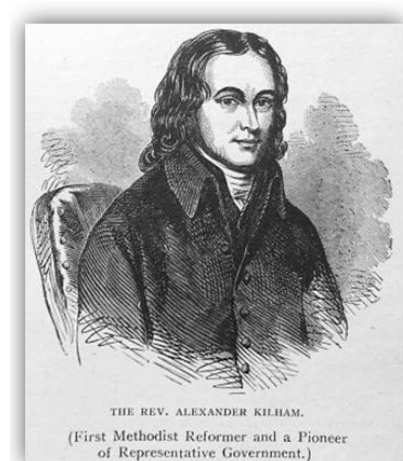
In 1772 a snowstorm resulted in impassable drifts, which left a visiting preacher stranded for a week at James Riley's house. Hearing he was stranded, local people struggled through the snow

to hear him preach on for four consecutive nights. It was this enthusiasm and the inclement weather, which prompted the building of Mount Zion in 1773, with accommodation for travelling preachers and a stable for their horses.

John Wesley first visited Mount Zion in 1774, he commented, not altogether favourably: *'I rode to Bradshaw House, standing alone in a dreary waste. But, although it was a cold and stormy day, the people flocked from all quarters'*. He also noted that the *'house afforded hospitality and shelter for man and beast'*. Wesley is recorded as staying in the sexton's cottage which still adjoins the Chapel in a small first floor room, now known as the 'Prophet's Chamber'. He made his last visit in 1790 aged eighty-seven.

### Rebels and reformers

After John Wesley's death in 1791 the community at Mount Zion, like other Methodist societies, debated the way forward. They were influenced by a man called Alexander Kilham (1762-1798), who argued for equality in the Methodist Church and in society. He was both a rebel and a reformer and, although he never visited Mount Zion, he played an important role in the history of the Chapel. Kilham set out new principles for Methodism.



These included the right: to hold public religious worship at convenient times, not only as appointed by the Church of England; to receive Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Communion/Eucharist) from the hands of their own ministers and in their own places of worship; for lay people (not just ministers) to be represented in all aspects of the government of the community, locally and nationally; to have a voice, in the acceptance and expulsion of members, the choice of local officers and in the 'calling' of the ministry.

The community at Mount Zion was very interested in Alexander Kilham's ideas. In 1796 his New Methodist Connexion became a separate group and in 1797 Mount Zion became a New Connexion chapel, making it the first in Calderdale and one of the oldest in the country. The Wesleyan Methodists were no longer allowed to worship in the chapel – they met in the barn (now



a house) opposite. Although the Methodist New Connexion was primarily a northern movement, its members were involved in campaigns and activism, which influenced political and social reform not just locally, but nationally.

### The building and grounds

The original Mount Zion chapel was demolished, and the present building opened its doors in 1815. All that remains of the 1773 chapel are the sundial on the front of the building and the foundation stone in the vestry. However, the original sexton's cottage provides evidence of the architectural style of the 1773 meeting house. The interior of the current Chapel was designed and installed in 1881. There was 170 ground floor and 180 gallery places. Worshippers paid 'a pew rent' to secure their seat. The original pew rent board may be seen in the vestry. The organ is Belgian. It was made by Charles Anneessens and was installed in 1892. It is believed to be one of only six of this type of organ, which survives.



Sabbath classes were held in the Chapel for local children and adults as early as 1784. In 1816 a purpose-built Sunday and day school opened its doors. Day classes for children were held, until the 1870 Education Act provided free elementary education for all. In 1887 a new Sunday school was built, which thrived well into the late twentieth century.

This building adjoins the monumental graveyard and is now a house.

The monumental graveyard contains over 6,000 graves. The first Methodist grave probably dates back to 1788 and is adjacent to the front of the Chapel. However, in 1877 a Bronze Age tomb was discovered, containing an urn and the remains of a woman and child, who were buried at Mount Zion approximately 3,400 years ago.

### More recent times

The original 1773 sundial was restored in 2012, and the Irene Cunliffe Memorial Peace Garden was opened in 2014. Although services are still held six times a year, regular worship at Mount

Zion ceased in 2014, when it was designated a Methodist heritage chapel. It now houses a growing collection of artefacts, Methodist memorabilia, and archive material.

One book in the archive, 'Told by the Dial', was written and published in 1901 by the Reverend William Walker. In this book the Dial recounts the comings and goings at Mount Zion over a period of 128 years, it tells 'tales' of Calderdale people and events, explaining the history of the building and Methodism. It was this book which was the inspiration for the 'Told by the Dial: Stories in Stone' project 2025.

## Visiting Mount Zion

Told by the Dial themed visits which explore key stories told by the building, grounds and artefacts at Mount Zion, are available for school groups. These sessions are particularly suitable for Key Stage 2 and 3, for more information see <https://cmch.org.uk/>. Click on Education and Resources on the menu at the top of the home page. Mount Zion also offers cross curricular visits, focusing on religion and world views and a range of themes and topics. These are led by the education team. Again, please visit the website for more information.

## Resources for the classroom

The Mount Zion website contains a selection of resources including possible Told by the Dial themed classroom activities, and a glossary of terms. These are all free to download and print for educational use. Please visit <https://cmch.org.uk/> and click on Education and Resources.