Wesley's Chapel
City Road, Islington
Anniversary Address 1993

by

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John Wesley's Chapel, in Islington, was built in 1777–8 as a replacement for a much altered and ruinous group of buildings which, for nearly forty years, had served as London Methodism's earliest and principal focus. The name of its architect remains a matter for conjecture, but its influence as forming an exemplar for other chapels in the denomination is pre-eminent. As a 'cathedral' or 'mother church' of Methodism it has been the recipient of many well-intentioned 'improvements', but it still retains the principal characteristics of the eighteenth-century church on which its design is based and to which its founder professed a continuing loyalty.

IN THE BEGINNING was the Big Bang! Moorfields trembled. The little houses in Hog Lane were shaken down to such poor foundations as they had; and the glorious dead in the burial-ground over the way in Bunhill Fields might be forgiven for supposing that the day of resurrection was at hand! Mr Bayley's foundry had exploded. The hand of God and the foolishness of man had set the scene and prepared a place for the first Methodist preaching-house in London.

In 1716, when this accident happened, John Wesley was a month short of his thirteenth birthday, a pupil at the Charterhouse half a mile away to the west. Well may we wonder whether, on that Thursday in May, his lessons were disturbed by the noise—though there can be little doubt what was the main topic of conversation amongst the boys once the terrible news was made known.

Bayley's foundry was a private concern, and the only place in England, so it is said, suitable at that time for the casting of brass cannon. During the Duke of Marlborough's campaigns against the French many weapons had been captured and quite a number of damaged cannon were stock-piled either at the foundry or in the grounds of the Honourable Artillery Company just to the south of Bunhill Fields.

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The government decided that the cannon should be recast and a day was appointed for the work. The process of casting was regarded as a public spectacle and for this particular event galleries had been erected at the foundry for the more favoured visitors. Amongst the visitors was a young man of twenty-four, Andrew Schalch,[1] who had some experience on the Continent of the casting of cannon and who was therefore allowed to inspect the preparations beforehand. What he saw caused him great concern. There were traces of dampness in some of the moulds. His fears were passed on to Colonel Armstrong, the Surveyor General of Ordnance, and the more wary of the spectators, sensing trouble, chose to make a timely and honourable retreat. The brass-founders, who must surely have been warned, were not to be told their business by this young upstart and were prepared to take the risk. The dampness, converted to steam by the hot metal, burst the moulds; the foundry was wrecked; seventeen people lost their lives, and many more suffered terrible injuries.

The first result of this tragedy was the setting up of the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich to which, very properly, Andrew Schalch was appointed Master Founder. But it may not be without significance, in view of his earlier experience, that Schalch is reported never to have suffered the furnaces at Woolwich to be opened until the workmen and spectators had joined him in prayer.

The second result of the Moorfields explosion was that Mr Bayley's foundry remained in ruins. The trade had gone elsewhere to safer hands, and for the next twenty-three years the building served no particular practical purpose. No one, it would seem, wanted a ruin on the edge of nowhere. No one, that is, except for a few homeless followers of the preachers derisively called 'Methodists'.

THE FOUNDERY[2]

This is not the place, and perhaps it is not necessary, to rehearse the history of the origins of Methodism in the Holy Club at Oxford where the brothers John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield and their other associates set an example of religious observance then unparalleled in the Established Church. But the Established Church had no love for enthusiasts who kept her rules most strictly when it suited, but broke them when restraint became irksome. Early in 1739 John Wesley and George Whitefield, both ordained ministers in the Church of England, began to find the pulpits of the churches in London and Bristol closed against them, and yet they refused to be silenced. Instead, they resorted, Whitefield with vigour and Wesley with great trepidation, to what was called field preaching: first in Bristol, where great crowds gathered on the common at Kingswood; then in London, where the open fields and pleasure grounds of Moorfields proved to be a popular location. What remains of the northern part of Moorfields is now Finsbury Square and just to the north of that, not more than a couple of hundred yards south of Wesley's Chapel, in the street at the back (formerly Windmill Street, now Tabernacle Street), is the site of the Foundery. Now Moorfields might have served well enough for large gatherings but in the winter some better provision needed to be made, and Wesley was begged, and ultimately agreed, to make use of such shelter as the ruins of the old foundry provided.

Sunday, 11 November 1739, seems to have been the first occasion on which Wesley preached there,[3] at eight o'clock in the morning and five o'clock in the evening,

to crowds which he estimated at five to six thousand and seven to eight thousand respectively—though these figures may be a trifle optimistic. At any rate the site seemed to serve its purpose and so Wesley was persuaded to purchase, for £115, the lease of what one writer called 'a vast uncouth heap of ruins'. Just what state the old foundry was in at that time it is hard to conjecture; the main impression given is that it was, at least in part, roofless, though the walls seem to have remained standing. Major repairs had to be carried out, the principal part of the building fitted up as a preaching-house with galleries, and other rooms contrived. Very soon this became the home of a regular Methodist society whose origins may be traced back to one which met in Fetter Lane but from which John Wesley's adherents removed themselves in July 1740 after doctrinal disputes with the Moravians.

The site on which the Foundery stood had a frontage of about 120 feet and a depth of about 100 feet. On this, after the repairs and alterations, stood a preaching-house facing the street, large enough to hold 1,500 people, with galleries but with very little seating accommodation on the ground floor other than forms (Fig. 1). Alongside the chapel, and entered through it, was a three-storied house to accommodate the assistant preachers and servants; at the rear was a large room, 80 feet by 20 feet, big enough to hold a congregation of 300 for early morning or weekday services and for meetings of the society; north of it was a school room and to the south a book-room for the sale of tracts and other publications. On top of these back premises, towering above the back of the chapel according to the only published engraving, was John Wesley's own apartment. How he seems to have liked the high places! In Bristol he had rooms above the New Room in the Horsefair, and in Newcastle at what was known as the Orphan House he had a little eyrie in the attics. At 'The Foundery', as the London building continued to be called, he was also able to accommodate his widowed mother, Susanna, who lived there until her death in 1742. Her grave is in Bunhill Fields and a later monument stands near the gates of the chapel.

Over the years the barely furnished Foundery was gradually improved and altered to suit the needs of an ever-growing society. The main changes took place in 1763 when very considerable repairs were in progress. On 2 February 1764, John Wesley wrote in his Journal 'I preached again in the Foundery, which had been repairing for several weeks. It is not only firm and safe (whereas before the main timbers were quite decayed) but clean and decent, and capable of receiving several hundreds more'.[4]

Little can be said, because little enough is known, of the structural details of the Foundery; it had plain seats, just a few with backs, simple galleries, a plain pulpit (soon replaced by another which is now preserved in the Museum of Methodism below the chapel) and chandeliers for lighting, two of which had been stolen in 1748.[5]

Much more could be written of the work which was carried on within those walls, the results of which spread far and wide. It housed the first free dispensary in London, established in 1746; it included an almshouse, set up in 1748, and a school in which two masters taught sixty children who were mostly educated and even clothed without charge—but the school regime would seem a rigorous one today. The scholars had all to be present at the early five o'clock service, lessons began at 6 a.m. and continued with only an hour's break at midday until five o'clock in the evening—and there were no holidays.

Fig. 1
The Foundery. John Wesley's first preaching-house in London, converted from the ruins of a former brass foundry, enlarged, repaired, altered, and ultimately superseded by the Chapel in City Road

Another innovation was a lending society, where small sums up to one pound (later increased to five pounds) could be borrowed by those in need. One of the beneficiaries of this was James Lackington whose loan helped him to found a very extensive and profitable business as a bookseller.

And so the work progressed, other chapels came into being, but the Foundery survived in use until the opening of the 'New Foundery', better known as Wesley's Chapel, in 1778. For a short time after that a few functions were still carried on in the old building, but the last we hear of it is reminiscent of its earlier condition. In November 1785 a visiting minister, the Revd James Creighton, was accommodated there, but he records that 'the rain was pouring through the roof', the ceiling of his room was in a state of collapse and 'this tottering fabric, with its mouldering walls' passed, without trace, into the annals of history.[6]

WESLEY'S CHAPEL

The first indication we have of a move away from the Foundery is in 1775 when the original lease was coming towards its end. On 17 October 1775 John Wesley wrote to his brother Charles of his intention 'to talk with the committee about building a new Foundery'.[7] This is succeeded by an entry in his Journal for 1 March 1776 saying 'As we cannot depend on having the Foundery long, we met to consult about building a new chapel'.[8] Then follows something familiar to all who have to deal with local authorities 'Our petition to the City for a piece of ground lies before their committee; but when we shall get any farther I know not . . .'.[9]

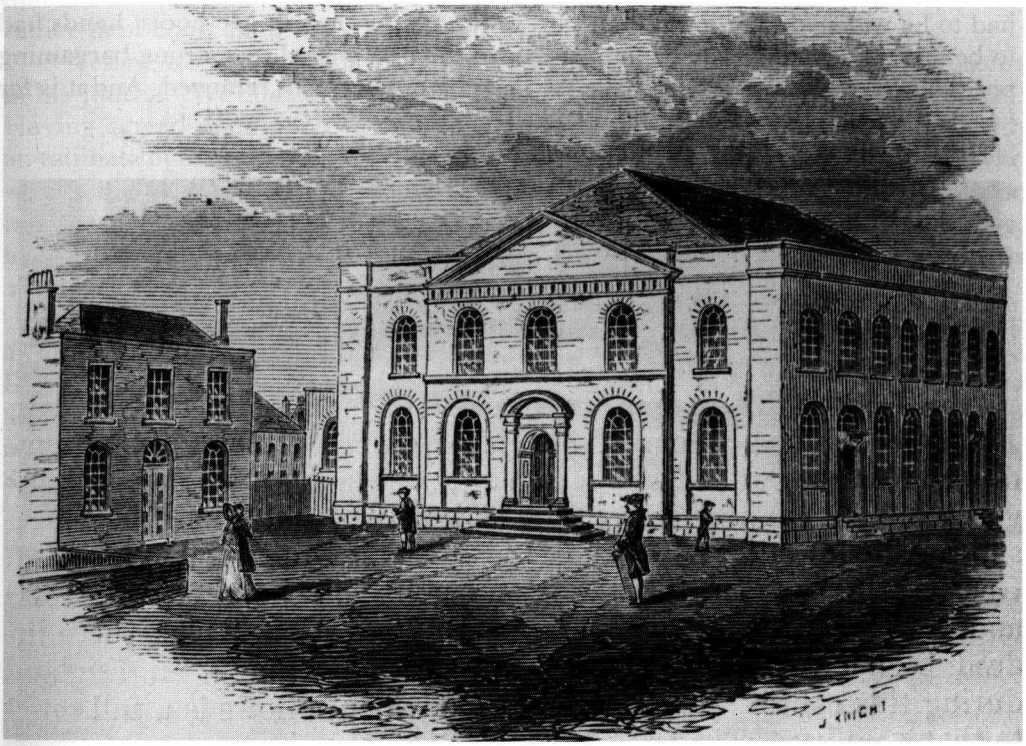

Fig. 2
Wesley's Chapel in 1780, after an engraving 'issued as the frontispiece to the second volume of the *Arminian Magazine*'. This shows the original doorcase with its segmental pediment

The piece of ground which was being sought, the present site, was the leasehold property of the City Corporation, while the freehold of the ground belonged to the church authorities as a prebend of St Paul's Cathedral. The site was part of a tract of boggy land filled with spoil from the foundations of Wren's cathedral and subsequently used as a tenter ground. It lay on the east side of the road which ran from Bedlam to the Lord Mayor's Dog House, or, in more polite terms, from the Moor Gate on London Wall to the Turnpike or Dog Bar on Old Street.

When the Corporation had duly digested the application for a site they announced their conclusions. They were minded, as current phraseology has it, to agree to the proposal for the sub-lease, but on certain conditions. They required the erection of a uniform row of houses on the east side of the street facing Bunhill Fields and had no desire for it to be interrupted by some nasty conventicle. So the nasty conventicle was to be set well back on its site and approached through an archway in the terrace. But Providence, as usual, came to the aid of John Wesley. The Corporation had a second piece of town planning in mind, and that was to improve the road which ran behind the site, past the front of the Foundery and in fact up to and beyond

Whitefield's Tabernacle which lay to the north. That road, now Tabernacle Street, had to be widened, and to do that, part of the site by then in Methodist hands had to be taken back. This placed the trustees of the new chapel in a strong bargaining position and they were able to have the original requirement removed. And it is for

Fig. 3
The early nineteenth-century Doric porch has roundels in the metopes with a dove motif also used on the frieze of the gallery fronts

that reason that there is an open courtyard in front of the chapel to the west revealing rather than concealing the chapel (Fig. 2).

Wesley was very anxious to start building, and on 29 November 1776 he records in his Journal 'We considered several plans which were offered for the new chapel. Having agreed upon one, we desired a surveyor to draw out the particulars, with an estimate of the expense. We then ordered proposals to be drawn up for those who were willing to undertake any part of the building'.[10] It would seem that all these contracts were taken up by a local builder, one Samuel Tooth, who, most conveniently, happened to be a local preacher in London and one who had also spent a year as a travelling Methodist preacher.

But who was the surveyor, and indeed who was the architect? Some years ago, an attempt was made using documents in the City records to put the case for George Dance the younger being the architect of the chapel.[11] While this cannot be fully accepted, there is no doubt about Dance's involvement in the general scheme of town improvement of which the development of this site was a part. He was, after all, Surveyor to the City Corporation and as such would be concerned with the scheme

Fig. 4

The forecourt in 1993. In the foreground is a monument to Susanna Wesley, erected in 1870, with John Wesley's house behind it to the right. On the extreme left is a statue of John Wesley by John Adams Acton erected in 1891. The front of the Chapel was altered in the late nineteenth century, the Georgian glazing-bars gave way to stained glass, and the upper windows were given stone surrounds in place of gauged brick arches

to line the east side of what was then called Dog Bar Road, with a fine terrace of houses. The site leased to the Methodists was, as already stated, to be fronted by a terrace of four stories, with two houses each side of a central carriage entrance, over which the terrace continued, the central bay being distinguished by a pediment.

This terrace was never built, but its elevation is drawn out in the margin of a lease dated 1779 and is signed 'George Dance'. So Dance set out the outlines of the intended appearance of the terrace. But what of the chapel? By the time this lease had been drawn up the 'Chapel or House of Worship commonly called Mr Wesley's Chapel' had already been built. It was not intended to be part of the street scene and therefore it need not have been of too great a concern for the busy City Surveyor. While it might be unwise to become too involved in stylistic deductions, it would seem that some drawings in the City archives do give credence to the belief that Dance may have had a hand in the process, but, as is so often the case, the necessary documents are missing or the facts were never thought worthy of record.

The only architect's name concerning the site which appears in any of John Wesley's writings, though in connection with his house, the only part of the intended terrace that was erected to Dance's elevation, is in a letter[12] to the builder, Samuel Tooth, dated 1 October 1778 in which he refers to 'the plan of the houses drawn by Mr Peacock' who was Dance's assistant. So we see the not uncommon scenario of the overall external design of the proposed terrace houses being set by one man while another is left to work out the plan; and doubtless the builder also had some hand in determining the smaller details. So perhaps this was the case also with the chapel.

CITY ROAD PLAN

The plan of the chapel follows that of many of the parish churches of its day, though Wesley would never have regarded it as other than a Chapel of Ease, if of a somewhat irregular kind, and he had no intention of competing with St Luke, Old Street, which he continued to regard as his parish church. We have a big galleried preaching space with a sanctuary or communion area behind the central pulpit just as, for example, St James's Piccadilly had before central pulpits were driven out, by the blind pursuit of some inappropriate mediaeval idea. The plan was well suited to the prayer-book services then in use and it was copied, with variations, for many other Methodist chapels. A smaller chapel in Bath, opened in 1779, followed the same pattern and in 1790 the Methodist Conference decreed that 'all preaching houses are to be built in future upon the same plan as the London or Bath chapel'. Most of the older Methodist chapels have now been altered in various ways, but it is still possible to see evidence of the popularity of the 'City Road plan' as it is known, even after central pulpits have been pushed aside or communion areas closed off and converted to vestries.

COMPLETION OF THE CHAPEL

The chapel took about eighteen months to erect, that is to say between Wesley laying the foundation stone on 21 April 1777 and holding his first service in the building on 1 November 1778. But it was still far from complete. As late as December 1785, seven years after the opening, Wesley records that he spent a whole week 'going

through the town, and begging for the poor men who had been employed in finishing the new chapel';[13] payments were still becoming due to Samuel Tooth, and furnishings were still being added as money became available.

When it was opened the chapel may have appeared bare and certainly very different from its appearance today. There were of course no monuments, there was no stained glass, the seating was less comfortable, and less extensive. In the gallery, then supported by the two columns now relegated to the back wall of the vestibule, there were only two rows of pews with a flat standing-area behind, the gallery fronts were taller, the back gallery was square and not rounded, and the pulpit, the gift of Mr Andrews of Hertford, was a three-decker of a good and proper height, not the cut-down and turned-about version which survives and comprises only the two upper sections of the real thing. So a great deal of imagination is needed to see the chapel as it was when John Wesley first entered the pulpit.

Before outlining some of these changes it should be remembered that the chapel was not the only building on the site. Against the north side stood the Morning Chapel, a much smaller building, used for those early morning services so common and so necessary in early Methodism for those who may have had to be at work as early as six o'clock in the morning. On the north side of the forecourt was a house, now rebuilt, which balanced Wesley's house on the other side, though a little later in date. Behind it was a smaller house which came to be used as the book room; this adjoined the Morning Chapel, beneath which was a warehouse for the stock of books. Behind the main chapel was sufficient space for a modest burial-ground in which in due course John Wesley and many other ministers and members were buried, though not Charles, who lies in the old churchyard at Marylebone.

CHAPEL 'IMPROVEMENTS'

When it was opened Wesley said of the chapel 'it is perfectly neat but not fine'.[14] But he was not long dead before the hands of the improvers were laid on, lightly or heavily, for reasons good or questionable, until the visitor must needs look hard to find an original piece of woodwork, an unaltered fitting, or some modest corner in which the lily has not been painted or overweening love has not irrevocably changed that which it professed to admire.

As early as 1800 the rear gallery was altered to give it a curved front and over the next few years further changes were made. The flat standing area at the back of the galleries gave way to raked seating, that in the back gallery rising, according to one writer, 'almost to the ceiling'. New mahogany window frames were put in above the communion table, while outside on the west front the central doorway which at first had a modest curved pediment on pilasters was dressed up with its present Doric portico (Figs 3 and 4).[15] Some of this work seems to have been the responsibility of the Methodist architect, the Revd William Jenkins. Under his supervision it is said that in lightening the load on the roof, which was proving a matter of some concern 'nearly as much timber was cut out . . . as would suffice to support another roof nearly as large.

The first really major alterations occurred about 1864.[16] This was the year in which the original lease of the site was due to expire, and only a few years prior to

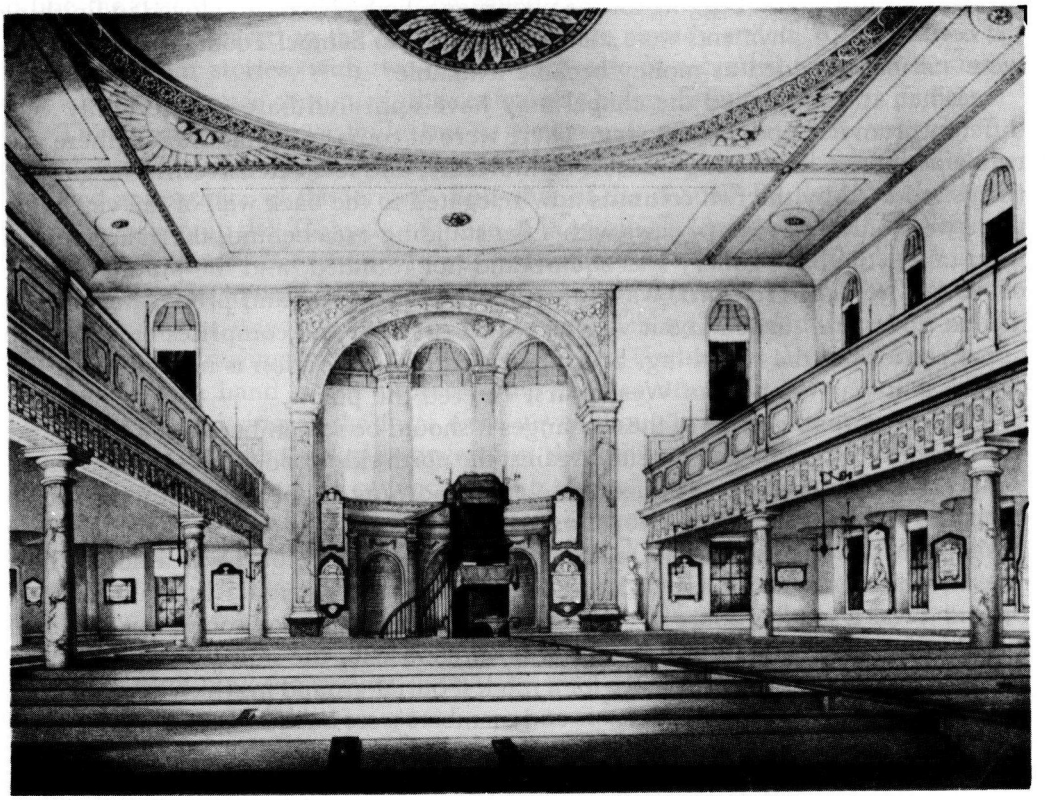

Fig. 5
The interior of the Chapel in the mid nineteenth century before the lowering of the pulpit and gallery fronts
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the date of expiry of the interests of the City as well, because the whole estate was due to revert to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. In these circumstances a great effort was made to secure the freehold. This done, a programme of repairs and alterations began to remedy past neglect and to make further improvements, all under the supervision of the Methodist architect, William Willmer Pocock. Totally new seating was put in to the lower floor, filling even the clear standing space which had been left in what is now the entrance lobby; new entrances and staircases were made for the galleries, but most questionable of all, five foot was lopped off John Wesley's pulpit which consequently also meant that the height of the gallery fronts had to be reduced in order that the galleries should not be rendered totally useless (Fig. 5).

Then disaster struck. In 1780 the chapel had been threatened by a fire in a nearby building, but Providence lent a hand, the wind changed, and the chapel was saved. In 1879 the worst occurred. Early on a foggy and freezing Sunday morning in December, flames were seen coming from the morning chapel on the north side. The fire engines were sent for, but then time was lost searching in the dense fog for a

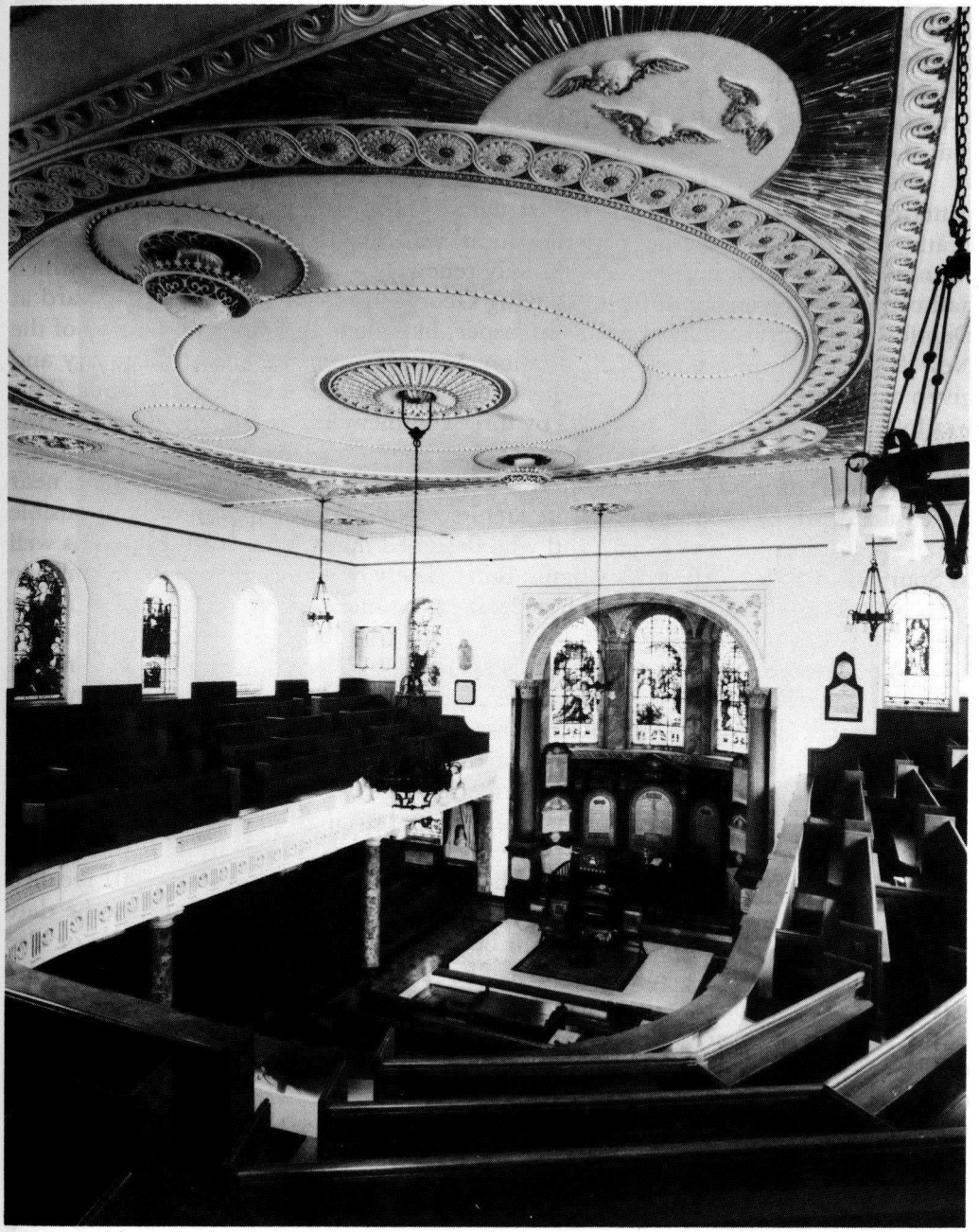

Fig. 6
The interior in 1990 with new communion table and chairs on a podium in front of the reduced pulpit. Additional communion rails have been erected since June 1993. The original communion space remains in the apse

hydrant; and when at last that was found it was frozen solid. And the flames continued their progress so that when the hydrant was opened and the fire eventually extinguished the damage to the chapel was terrific. The side gallery on the north was nearly destroyed, though the original wooden pillars below it were only singed, as were the pews on the opposite side; but the ceiling was entirely gone, and it may be supposed that the roof structure had not escaped unscathed.

Nevertheless repairs were put in hand and the ceiling restored using the original patterns. But mere restoration was not enough. In 1891, the centenary of John Wesley's death, a complete scheme of renovation was begun. The foundations were strengthened; the seating was again totally renewed; and the gallery columns which had come by gracious permission of King George III from the Royal Dockyard at Deptford were replaced by columns of jasper, like the foundations of the wall of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation, brought from some French quarry and given as memorials by various sections of the Methodist church in other lands. This was followed between 1891 and 1893 by three commemorative stained-glass windows in the apse, the first to appear in the chapel, though they were soon joined by many others (Fig. 6). One of particular interest is the window under the south gallery, near the east end, which commemorates the architect William Pocock who was responsible for the alterations of about 1864 and who designed many Wesleyan chapels as well as Spurgeon's Tabernacle at Newington Butts. There he stands dressed in the unlikely garb of a Roman Emperor—which at least says something about his status in the eyes of his fellow Methodists.

The work of repair and restoration is never ending. To come rapidly on to recent times—about 1971 the roof structure was again found to be dangerous and another anxious period followed until major repairs were carried out and the chapel reopened in 1978 with some modification to the arrangements in front of the pulpit and in the vestibule, but otherwise with little further change except behind the chapel where an office block now covers or oversails part of the burial ground. This is but the last of many encroachments or changes to the burial-grounds both in front of and behind the chapel. A writer in the 'Winter Number' of the *Methodist Recorder* in 1901 recalled that in 1843 the graveyard was 'much crowded with tombstones' but by the date he wrote 'these have nearly all of them been placed against the side walls, or else levelled to the ground'.[17] Even fewer survive today; some were relegated to become paving in the crypt only to disappear from sight as have the seven iron-doored vaults in the south-west corner, lost in the intricate web of Methodist history which is now displayed beneath the chapel in the Museum of Methodism. But there are monuments enough in the chapel itself to the great, the good and the munificent, and of course the monument at the back still stands above John Wesley's tomb (Fig. 7) and that of some of his brother ministers.

While one may have to look hard to find what may be original work inside the chapel, the same may in some degree be said of the exterior. The window glazing has been altered twice, first by substituting Venetian tracery for the original Georgian glazing-bars, then by introducing the scheme of stained glass. In front, apart from the early but added porch, the frieze has been extended right across the frontage and the brick arches of the upper windows replaced by thin moulded stone surrounds.

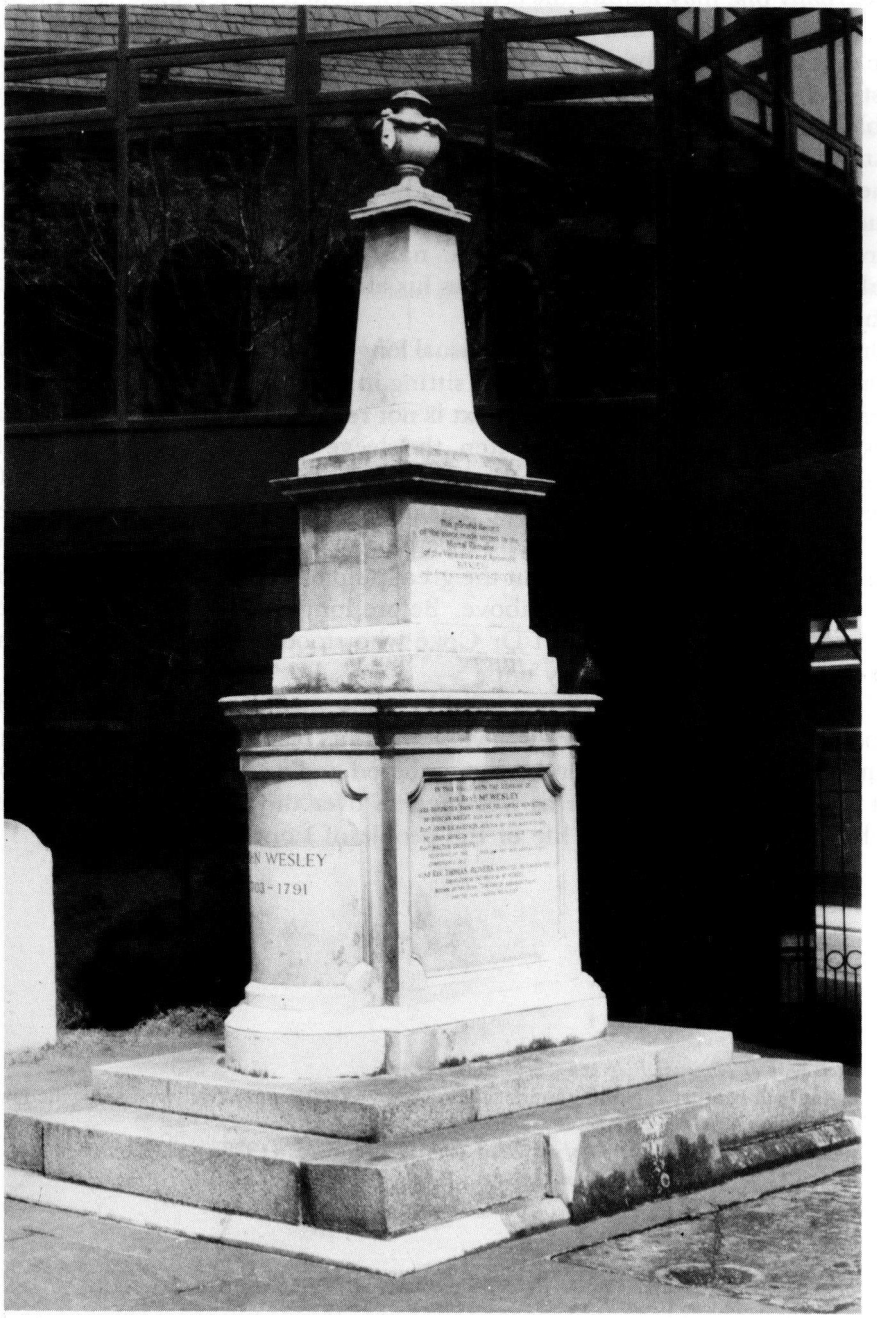

Fig. 7
John Wesley's tomb in the burial-ground at the rear of the Chapel; now seen against the dark glass wall of the modern office development

Internally one may admire the ceiling, even though it is a replica, but the earliest fittings of particular note are the reredos in the apse and the little communion table. But the original table has been so lovingly preserved that only the top remains visible—the rest is shrouded by a mahogony box leaving it impossible even to say whether the table still has a leg to stand on.

And of course there is what remains of the pulpit. In this pulpit have stood preachers and speakers of great renown and of them many stories have been told. One such refers, not to John Wesley, the greatest of them all, but his brother Charles. His preaching was of a very energetic nature. His sermons were pointed by gesticulation which increased in vigour as his enthusiasm waxed and the burden of his subject was expounded.

One Sunday morning attired in his usual long-sleeved preaching gown and bands, with Dr Coke, another worthy preacher sitting in the desk which then stood in front, Charles commenced his sermon. His text is not recorded, but he was soon so deeply into his subject that all else was forgotten, the sleeve of his gown caught on the hymn book resting on the pulpit ledge and over it went to land on the head of Dr Coke. But the sermon went on uninterrupted. The preacher remained oblivious to all except his text. Not so Dr Coke who sought no repetition of the incident. Looking up towards the preacher what did he next see but the great pulpit Bible itself already precariously balanced on the edge of the desk above. Before long that too was despatched, not on the head but into the hands of Dr Coke who stood ready to receive it, and yet the sermon continued to its very end.

Wesley's Chapel may be appreciated in many ways. Its influence on the design of chapels throughout the country was very great; its place in denominational history is unique; but above all it has to be remembered and respected for those who have used it whether as preachers or as worshippers over the centuries and for the vital part which it still plays in the life of the people of London.[18]

NOTES

1. See *Dictionary of National Biography,* s.v. Schalch.
2. The eighteenth-century spelling 'foundery' as used by Wesley is generally retained when referring to this building.
3. Curnock, N. (ed.), *The Journal of the Revd John Wesley, A.M.* (1938), vol. II, 319, note. Stevenson, G.J., *City Road Chapel, London, and its Associations* (1872), 20.
4. Curnock (n.3), vol. V, 45.
5. Stevenson (n.3), 43.
6. Stevenson (n.3), 68.
7. Telford, J. (ed.), *The Letters of the Revd John Wesley, A.M.* (1931), vol. VI, 179.
8. Curnock (n.3), vol. VI, 98.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid, vol. VI, 133.
11. Leslie Farmer, 'The Dances at Wesley's Chapel' *Bulletin* No. 30, *London & Home Counties Branch, Wesley Historical Society* (Autumn 1984), 9-13. Also in a subsequent (unpublished) paper.

12. Telford (n.3), vol. VI, 321.
13. Curnock (n.3), vol. VII, 129.
14. Ibid, vol. VI, 215.
15. Stevenson (n.3), 175.
16. Ibid, 227-32.
17. R. Denny Urlin, 'Early Recollections of Wesley's Chapel, City Road, London . . .', *Methodist Recorder,* Winter Number (1901), 28.
18. Besides the works quoted above reference should be made to:
    Dolbey, G.W., *The Architectural Expression of Methodism* (1964).
    McMurray, N., *The Stained Glass of Wesley's Chapel* (1988).
    Temple, P., *Islington Chapels* (1992), 27-33.
    Woodward, M., *One at London: Some Account of Mr Wesley's Chapel and London House* (1966).