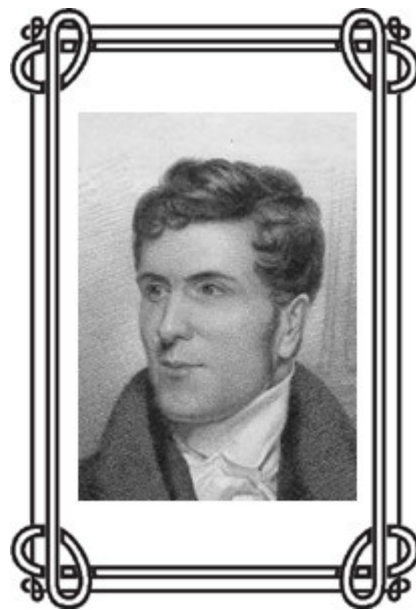


**A PORTRAIT OF  
ROBERT NEWSTEAD**



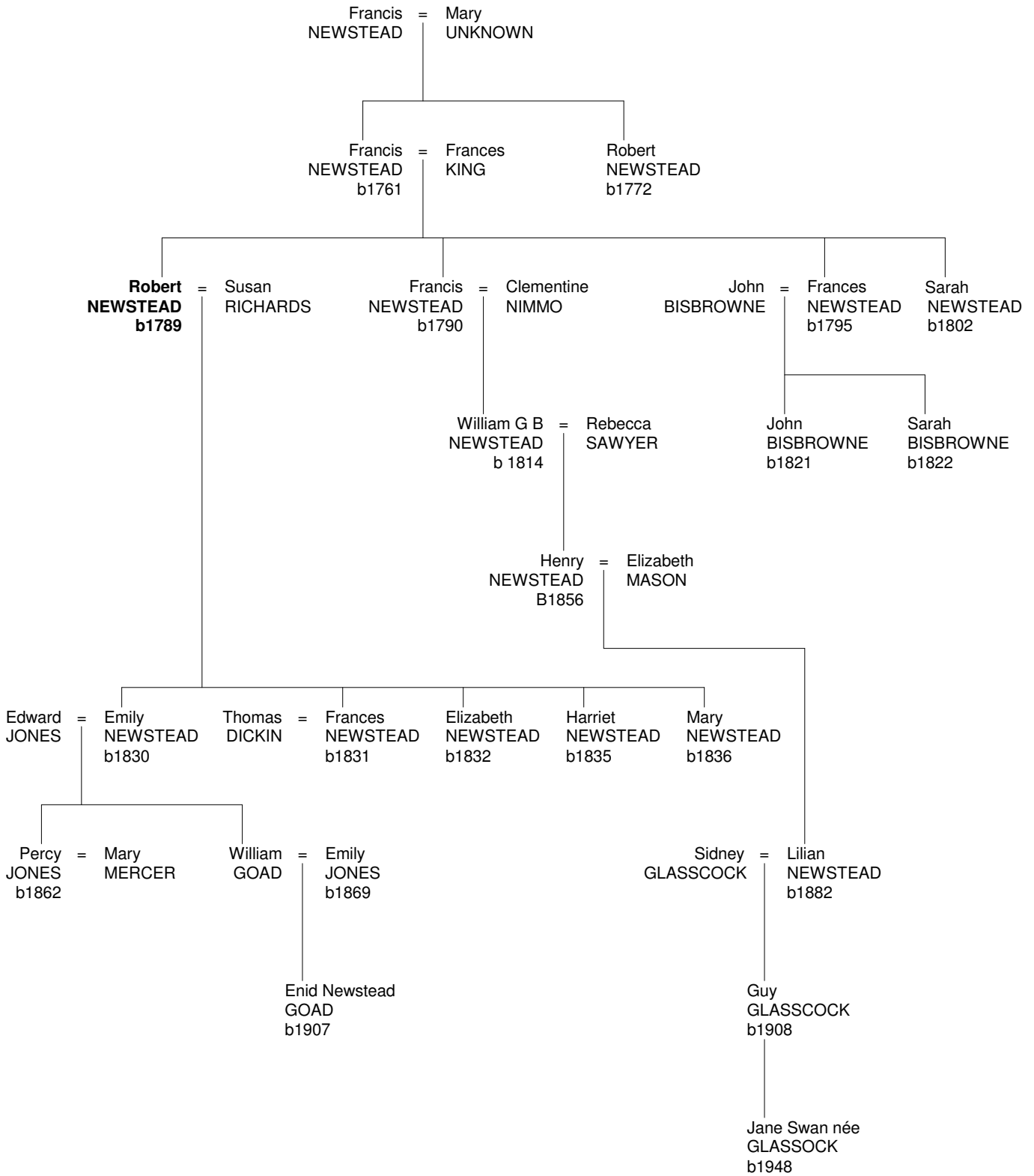
**One of Wesley's Missionaries**

Jane Swan

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# NEWSTEAD GENERATIONS



## Preface

A few years ago I inherited an old portrait that had hung on the stairs in my parents' home for as long as I could remember; I had been told that the subject of the engraving was a clergyman ancestor of my father, whose mother was a Newstead, but that was all I knew about the Revd R. Newstead.



Once the heirloom was in my possession, I decided to find out more about this ancestor, who had apparently been illustrious enough to have had his portrait painted. On removing the back of the engraving to examine it for clues, I was excited to find a faint inscription written on the reverse of the backing board in faded ink, which read:

*Wm. G. B. Newstead, the Plate of his Uncle,  
the Gift of his Affectionate Father, F.F. Newstead,  
on his being bound Apprentice.  
April 1827, Dursley, Gloucestershire.*

Delving into genealogical records, I discovered that William Gustavus Benningfield Newstead, the young recipient of the portrait, was my 3 x greatgrandfather, who became a master tailor in the East End of London, and that his father Francis Frederick Newstead was the younger brother of the Revd Robert Newstead, a Wesleyan missionary to Sri Lanka and subsequently a minister in the UK. The pages that follow are the story of Robert's life, pieced together from three years' detective work, following a trail that was to lead me to the archives of Norfolk, London and Manchester, to the streets of Cheltenham, Bath and Liverpool, and, finally, to a graveyard in North Yorkshire.

Jane Swan, January 2007.



## Beginnings in Norfolk



fig. 1. Hoveton St Peter's

Robert Newstead was born in Norfolk during the first quarter of 1789<sup>1</sup>, a year that was to see George Washington installed in New York as the first President of the United States on 30 April, and the rather more violent birthpangs of the French Republic with the storming of the Bastille in Paris on 4 July. In England King George III was recovering from his first bout of madness, the anti-monarchist and freethinker Thomas Paine was working on his treatise *The Rights of Man*, and an aged John Wesley was still preaching to the masses on his travels through the British Isles.

Robert was christened on 29 March 1789<sup>2</sup> at St Peter's (figure 1), a tiny redbrick church with a thatched roof of Norfolk reed, standing just outside the Broadlands village of Hoveton (figure 2). He

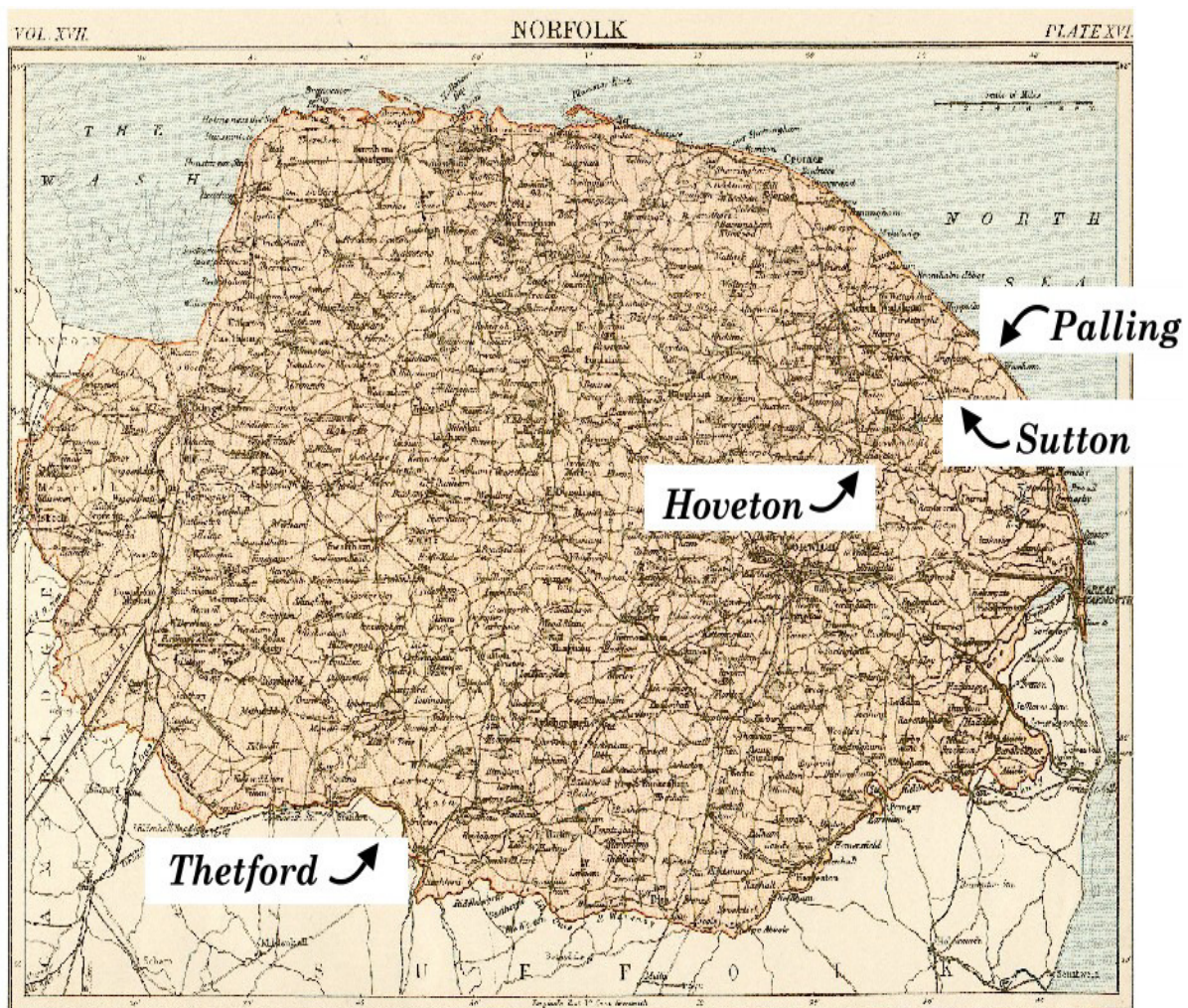


fig. 2. 1884 map of Norfolk

<sup>1</sup> Obituary of Robert Newstead 1865, *Minutes of Conference Vol XVI, 1864-66*, p.230-2, Methodist Archives and Research Centre at John Rylands University Library, Manchester.

<sup>2</sup> Hoveton St Peter baptismal register, Norfolk Record Office, PD 284/2(s).

was the first child of Francis Newstead, who had married Frances King<sup>3</sup> eighteen months previously at Thetford forty miles away on the Norfolk/Suffolk border (the birthplace as it happens of the republican writer Thomas Paine in 1737). It was an exceptionally cold winter at a time when Frost Fairs regularly took place on the Thames in London, and the severe weather brought misery and hunger in its wake all over England.

Francis White in his *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Norfolk of 1854* described Hoveton St Peter as "a small parish in the hundred of Tunstead, 9 miles NE by N of Norwich", with "122 souls, 27 houses, and 945 acres of land, the property of H.N. Burroughes, Esq., MP, and the Rev. Thos. C. Blofield".<sup>4</sup> The church where Robert was christened has stood since 1624 on the southwest corner of the Hoveton Hall estate on St Peter's Lane, one mile north of the village of Hoveton St John which, in turn, lies just across the River Bure from Wroxham, the self-styled "Capital of the Broads". Nowadays the Norfolk Broads are best known for boating holidays, but in the late 18th and early 19th centuries the waterways were the main thoroughfares for freight, transported by wherries from the ports of King's Lynn and Yarmouth.

Neither Hoveton nor Thetford, however, were the birthplace of Francis Newstead; the son of Francis and Mary Newstead, he hailed from Sutton, a village on the northern bounds of the Broads, where he was christened at St Michael's church (figure 3) on 5 April 1761<sup>5</sup>. Most of the couple's other children were born and baptised in Sea Palling, a fishing village on the coast north of Great Yarmouth, including a son named Robert who was born in 1772<sup>6</sup>; perhaps he was a young godfather to his little nephew, his namesake, in 1789?



fig. 3. Sutton St Michael's

Two of Francis Newstead's sisters were living in the Hoveton area around the time of Robert's christening:



fig. 4. Thetford St Peter's

Jane, who had married a local man, John Palmer<sup>7</sup>, (their son, another Robert, was also baptised at St Peter's in 1789<sup>8</sup>) and Elizabeth, the wife of a Hoveton labourer, John Knights. Francis Newstead, however, was unlikely to have been a farmworker like his brothers-in-law, for he had acquired enough education to be able to sign his name on the marriage register of St Peter's church in Thetford (figure 4) where he married Frances King on 16 October 1787.

So what was Francis's occupation? Perhaps he had served his apprenticeship as a miller; indeed, Sutton, his

<sup>3</sup> Thetford St Peter marriage register, NRO PD 167/7W.

<sup>4</sup> Francis White's *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Norfolk 1854*, p. 545.  
<http://www.historicaldirectories.org/hd/d.asp> [accessed 20 December 2006].

<sup>5</sup> Sutton St Michael's Baptismal register, NRO PD 520/2.

<sup>6</sup> Sea Palling Baptismal register, NRO Archdeacon's Transcripts fiche 1.

<sup>7</sup> Norfolk Transcription Archive, Neatishead marriages 1787,

[http://www.doun.org/transcriptions/surnames.php?doc\\_type=250&surname=PALMER](http://www.doun.org/transcriptions/surnames.php?doc_type=250&surname=PALMER), [accessed 26 Nov 2006].

<sup>8</sup> Hoveton St Peter Baptismal register, NRO.PD 284/2(s).

birthplace, is famous for its landmark, the tallest windmill in Norfolk (figure 5). He may have worked at the paper mill in Thetford. Or he could have been a waterman on the wherries that plied their trade along Norfolk's rivers. Alan Crosby in *A History of Thetford* writes, "Later in the 18th century manufactured goods were brought upstream to Thetford, especially when the expansion of the canal network gave direct links to the Midlands... The greatest export was grain, although wool, woollen goods, livestock and leather products were also sent down-river. ... Malted grain was more economical to transport and greater in value, and like many East Anglian towns Thetford developed a sizeable industry supplying local breweries."<sup>9</sup>



fig. 5. Sutton Mill

At all events Francis and Frances Newstead were still living in Thetford (figure 6) in their mid-eighties. The 1841 census<sup>10</sup> recorded their household on Water Lane in St Peter's parish close to the Little Ouse, together with a young man named John Bisbrowne, who had been born "in foreign



fig. 6. Plan of Thetford

<sup>9</sup> Alan Crosby, *A History of Thetford* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1986), p. 82-83.

<sup>10</sup> 1841 census Thetford, NRO HO 107 piece 792 folio 33 p. 19.

parts". Francis was described in the census as "of independent means", but his death certificate in 1844<sup>11</sup> gave his occupation as "labourer". He died on 25 November of that year at the ripe old age of 85, and Frances followed him three years later aged 86<sup>12</sup>.

But returning to the last decade of the 18th century, we find the Newsteads back in Thetford after Robert's christening. In 1790 another son was born and given his father's name. Because St Peter's, the Newsteads' own parish church on White Hart Street, was out of action for a couple of years while its tower was rebuilt<sup>13</sup>, little Francis was baptised at St Mary's (figure 7) on the Suffolk side of town on 5 December<sup>14</sup>.



fig. 7. Thetford St Mary's

In 1795 Frances gave birth to a daughter<sup>15</sup>, whom she named after herself, and on 21 June 1802 to another daughter, Sarah, who was christened on 14 July at St Peter's Thetford<sup>16</sup>; these were the sisters to whom Robert would refer in his journal fifteen years later on the other side of the world<sup>17</sup>. Sarah unfortunately met an untimely death at the age of 21 in Thetford<sup>18</sup>, where an expanding population living in overcrowded, insanitary conditions was often subject to serious epidemics. Her sister Frances also died in the town, in 1831<sup>19</sup>; she had married a painter named John Bisbrowne of Thetford on 11 May 1820 at St Stephen's Norwich<sup>20</sup>, whereupon the couple had travelled to Paris, and in 1821 Frances gave birth there to a son, John (the young man living with his Newstead grandparents in 1841) and the following year to a daughter, Frances<sup>21</sup>.

What was Thetford like at the end of the 18th century? Centuries previously the town had been poised to eclipse Norwich<sup>22</sup>, but opportunities were missed, and it stagnated until the 1750s when the population increased dramatically due both to a fall in the death rate and to the great social changes that were underway; the national economy was evolving from an agricultural to an industrial one, and domestic workshops were giving way to factory production, especially in the textile industry. Both the mechanisation of farmwork and the system of enclosure, whereby small tenant farmers were evicted from their land by landowners who were ambitious for the profits to be made from larger, better organised farms, meant that there was a steady drift of people from the rural areas into the towns. Thetford was no exception, and in 1801 the population stood at 11,462<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> General Register Office, Death Certificate, 1844 Dec Thetford 12 237.

<sup>12</sup> Freebmd Death record, 1847 Jun Thetford 13 230 <http://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/search.pl>. [accessed 22 Jul 2005].

<sup>13</sup> *Kelly's Directory for Cambridgeshire, Norfolk & Suffolk, 1883*, pp.518-22, (transcription by Paddy Apling) <http://apling.freesevers.com/Villages/Thetford.htm> [accessed 23 March 2006]

<sup>14</sup> Thetford St Mary's baptismal register, NRO PD 169/3.

<sup>15</sup> Birth of Frances Newstead from age at death, Thetford St Mary's burial register, NRO, PD 169/19(s).

<sup>16</sup> Thetford St Peter's baptismal register, NRO PD 167/3.

<sup>17</sup> School of Oriental and African Studies Main Library, University of London, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society *Missionary Notices January 1820. Vol I, 1816-18, Ceylon. Mr. Newstead's Journal for 1818* (actually 1817), p.194. (SCRR) MMSL X15.

<sup>18</sup> Thetford St Mary's Burial Register 1823, Norfolk Transcription Archive ([http://www.doun.org/transcriptions/surnames.php?doc\\_type=300&surname=NEWSTEAD](http://www.doun.org/transcriptions/surnames.php?doc_type=300&surname=NEWSTEAD)) [accessed 20 Dec 2006]

<sup>19</sup> Thetford St Mary's burial register, NRO PD 169/19(s) no.489.

<sup>20</sup> Norwich St Stephens marriage register, NRO, PD 484/15.

<sup>21</sup> Birth details of Frances Bisbrowne (Paris 1822) from 1861 census Bradford, PRO, RG09 Piece 3322 Folio 86 p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> *Thetford, A Brief History*, Thetford Grammar School, [http://www.thetgram.norfolk.sch.uk/Time\\_Team/Default.htm](http://www.thetgram.norfolk.sch.uk/Time_Team/Default.htm) [accessed 22 March 2006].

<sup>23</sup> *A Vision of Thetford, A Vision of Britain Through Time*, [http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit\\_page.jsp?u\\_id=10208531](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit_page.jsp?u_id=10208531) [accessed 20 Dec 2006]

Even for town dwellers, however, social conditions at the time were hard, the result of the Napoleonic wars and repeated poor harvests. A new corn law in 1791 raised the price of grain, and over the next decade a succession of cold wet summers and meagre crops meant further increases in the cost of bread, leading to civil unrest nationwide. Many feared that revolution would overtake Britain as had happened earlier in France, and the fact that this failed to materialise has been attributed in part to the Evangelical Awakening of the previous decades, in particular John Wesley's itinerant preaching which drew converts largely from the labouring classes. Arthur Bryant wrote in his history of England, "*Nothing did more than Methodism to unite Britain in face of the revolutionary peril. By convincing the more serious-minded workers of the validity of the Christian ethic, the great eighteenth-century rebel evangelists inoculated the English poor against the Jacobin fever that was sweeping the Continent.*"<sup>24</sup>



fig. 8. Thetford Grammar School

Whatever the economic circumstances in which the Newsteads found themselves at the close of the 18th century, their sons' education at least came free of charge at Thetford Grammar School (see figure 8). White's Directory of 1836<sup>25</sup> stated, "The Free Grammar School and Hospital, in St Mary's parish, on the Suffolk side of the river, were founded by Sir Richard Fulmerston, in 1566...The school is open to all the boys of the borough, free of expense." Dating back to Saxon times, the school is one of the town's oldest foundations<sup>26</sup>, with an unbroken record of headmasters from Dean Bund in the 12th century. Thomas Paine was a pupil between 1744 and 1749 (see figure 9).



fig..9. Thetford School Plaque

The Newstead brothers had probably learnt their three R's at Sunday School before entering the Grammar School around the age of eight; the curriculum around 1800 would have been a rather restricted one, confined to the study of the classics, i.e. Latin and Greek. Although the previous century had witnessed great advances in science and technology and the development of a rich vernacular literature, the grammar schools resisted pressure to widen their curriculum; indeed, in 1805 Lord Eldon's ruling made it illegal for Leeds Grammar School to use its endowment funds for teaching modern and commercial subjects<sup>27</sup>. In 1836 Thetford

<sup>24</sup> Arthur Bryant, *The Age of Elegance 1812-1822*, (London:Book Club Associates 1975) p. 273.

<sup>25</sup> Thetford Local Studies Collection, *White's Directory of Thetford 1836*, p. 722.

<sup>26</sup> *Thetford, A Brief History*, Thetford Grammar School website.

<sup>27</sup> Hadow Report 1923, *The History of the Curriculum for Boys' Schools*, [www.dg.dial.pipex.com/documents/hadow/2301.shtml](http://www.dg.dial.pipex.com/documents/hadow/2301.shtml). [accessed 12 Nov 2006].

School was still offering only "English and classics"; perhaps by then additional subjects could be studied for a fee.

Thetford had once had 22 churches<sup>28</sup>, but by the early 19th century only St Mary, St Peter and St Cuthbert remained. These churches were now experiencing competition from Wesleyan Methodists, who formed their first Society in Thetford in the 1780s. From 1797 the town had its own circuit, and William Timperley and John Cricket are named on the plans as the first ministers<sup>29</sup>. In 1804 one of the three preachers was a John Newton - could this be the former slave-trader who wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace"?

The founder of their Society was of course John Wesley, who persevered in spreading the gospel in the marketplace after he was banned from the parish pulpit. "Methodism" was a term first used in the 1720s to describe the "methodical" habits of the "holy club" formed by John Wesley's younger brother Charles and his friends at Oxford. John's own spiritual ardour had cooled until one evening in 1738 at a Moravian meeting in London when his heart was "*strangely warmed*" on hearing the preacher describe "*the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ*".<sup>30</sup> After this renewed assurance of salvation he led an extraordinarily active life of itinerant preaching, leaving small Societies of faithful converts in the care of responsible laymen whom he revisited frequently during the course of his life to review their progress. Where chapels were built, the emphasis was on preaching rather than the sacraments, but it remained a source of regret to him that he had been forced to separate from the Anglican Communion. Wesley died on 2 March 1791 in his 88th year<sup>31</sup>, vigorous to the end.

Robert Newstead's Obituary in the Methodist Minutes of Conference for 1865<sup>32</sup>, mentions his conversion at the age of eighteen. Perhaps he had become disillusioned with the established Church and had begun to attend the more evangelical Wesleyan chapel in Thetford, or had responded to the appeal of an open-air preacher; at all events it was a life-changing decision that led him to repent of his sins and devote his life to serving his Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, both at home and abroad.

Robert's spiritual awakening took place in 1808, the same year that James Fison arrived in town. Crosby<sup>33</sup> describes the Fison family as being socially on the fringes of the town, but the new business that James launched in 1809 soon made him one of the wealthiest and most influential citizens. He used the Navigation (the waterway linking Thetford with Kings Lynn and Great Yarmouth), to export wool, corn, seeds and malt, and to import cattle-cake and oil-seeds. (One of the by-products of this trade led to the development of the well-known fertiliser company.) The Fisons may well have been instrumental in shaping the careers of both Robert and Francis Newstead, the former in the ministry of the Wesleyan Methodist church, and the latter as a mariner in the East India Service.<sup>34</sup>

According to his Obituary<sup>35</sup>, Robert entered the Methodist ministry in 1815, a good seven years after he was converted. He would have spent the intervening period earning his living and serving

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<sup>28</sup> *Take a tour of Thetford's History* ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/norfolk/senseofplace/thetford\\_tour.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/norfolk/senseofplace/thetford_tour.shtml)) [accessed 10 Jan 2006]

<sup>29</sup> Lancashire Record Office, *Hills Circuits 1897*, p. 303.

<sup>30</sup> Rupert E. Davies, *Methodism*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd 1963), p. 58.

<sup>31</sup> *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, Vol 4*, Everyman Library Edition, (London: J.M. Dent & Co.).

<sup>32</sup> John Rylands University Library, Robert Newstead's Obituary 1865.

<sup>33</sup> Crosby, *A History of Thetford*, p. 82-83.

<sup>34</sup> St George in the East Stepney, Baptismal register, London Metropolitan Archives, X097/277, p.165.

<sup>35</sup> JRUL, Robert Newstead's Obituary 1865.

his apprenticeship as a junior preacher on the local circuits, as well as studying the Scriptures and devotional writings. His first full-time circuit was Ely<sup>36</sup> in Cambridgeshire, not far from Thetford, together with Samuel Ward and Thomas Osborne, but it was not until 1818 that Wesleyan ministers were permitted to use the title 'Reverend'<sup>37</sup>.

By now Robert Newstead was 25, a handsome young man with curly dark hair. Intelligent, well-educated and widely-read, he was totally committed to his faith and his calling but, as a sensitive, self-deprecating soul, prone to times of self-doubt and introspection. Not perhaps a natural orator, he was more gifted in pastoral work, and especially so in personal friendships with those whom he counselled and instructed in the Christian faith, as mentioned in his Obituary: "*In the work of pastoral visitation he excelled, not confining his attention to the members of the Society and congregation under his proper care, but with singular diligence and perseverance finding out the abodes of casual hearers, and inviting them to become regular in their attendance at public worship.*"<sup>38</sup>. Despite his humble origins, he was able to consort easily with his social superiors; the Cyclopaedia of Methodism describes Robert Newstead thus: "*his courtesy of manner, his general intelligence, and his unaffected piety, commanded the respect of all who knew him.*"<sup>39</sup>

Robert was also venturing into print, initially as the author of *Ideas for Infants*, subtitled *Answers in Verse to Scriptural Questions*. Designed for use in Methodist Sunday Schools, it was first published in London in 1816, but was revised in an amplified form in 1825, running to more than eight editions. In his preface to the 1838 edition, Robert wrote, "*It is universally admitted, that verse has a stronger tendency than prose, not only to attract the minds, but also to abide upon the memories, of children; and therefore to convey the great truths of the Christian religion to their understandings, in easy verse suited to their capacity, appears to be a practice sufficiently justified by experience.*"<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Lancashire Record Office, *Hill's Circuits 1897*, p. 102.

<sup>37</sup> Lancashire Record Office, *The New History of Methodism Vol II*, ed W.J. Townsend, (London, 1909) Vol i, The Middle Period.

<sup>38</sup> JRUL, Robert Newstead's Obituary 1865.

<sup>39</sup> Holiness Data Ministry, *Cyclopaedia of Methodism Letter N*, Nos. 1939-2057, Newstead, Robert, Item No. 2001, , <http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyctr/books/0101-0200/HDM0185.PDF> [accessed 10 Dec 2006].

<sup>40</sup> JRUL, Robert Newstead, *Ideas for Infants: or, Answers in verse to scriptural questions: adapted to.* - Eighth edition, 1838, Control No. m3965560.

## Foreign Missions in Ceylon

For almost a decade now Robert Newstead's interest in foreign missions had been growing, as he followed the progress of the evangelical visionary, Dr Thomas Coke, who had for many years been petitioning the Methodist Conference to raise subscriptions for pioneers to take the Gospel out to distant lands; in fact, it was back in 1784 that Coke first submitted his *Plan for the Society for the Establishment of Missions among the Heathen*, and two years later that he founded a mission for slaves and landowners in the British West Indies. By 1811 a mission to West Africa was established, but the land which Coke longed to evangelise remained frustratingly out of reach: India, the lucrative source of the Honourable East India Company's (HEIC) trade for generations, was forbidden territory to missionaries.

In 1802, however, the island of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) was ceded to the British Government, who were more sympathetic to missionary involvement, and the Charter Act of 1813 (also the year the Wesleyan Missionary Society was formed<sup>41</sup>) completed the process by depriving the HEIC of its monopoly of the Indian subcontinent. When Coke was eventually granted permission in 1813 to set sail for Ceylon, he penned these heartfelt words: "*I am now dead to Europe and alive to India. God himself has said to me, 'Go to Ceylon!'*"<sup>42</sup> At the age of 66 he mustered the support of seven younger men, and on 30 December they sailed from Portsmouth. Sadly, Coke died before the end of the voyage, but the remainder of the party landed safely at Bombay, from where they proceeded to Ceylon on 29 June 1814 and embarked on the task of introducing their Christian faith to the inhabitants, a mix of Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists, as well as lapsed Catholics and Lutherans from the days of Portuguese and Dutch rule.

The missionaries hoped and prayed for floods of new converts such as had been seen in Africa, but as Rupert E. Davies writes in his book *Methodism*, "*In Asia the progress was necessarily much slower. For the religions which there confronted the Christian missionary were as developed in their ideas as the one that was being imported, and had the additional advantage of symbolising the proud nationalism of the ancient peoples of the East ... The early attempts to reach the high-caste people had failed utterly, and it became a matter of policy to pursue evangelism by the indirect path of schools, colleges, and hospitals.*"<sup>43</sup>

William Martin Harvard, one of Coke's companions, wrote in his *Narrative of the Establishment and Progress of the Mission to Ceylon and India*, published on his return to England in 1823, "*Disappointed in the sanguine expectations we had first indulged, of extensive and rapid conversions of adult natives to the faith of Christ, Mr. Clough and myself regarded with feelings of peculiar pleasure, the desire manifested by them to place their children under our care ... We therefore digested a plan for the establishment of a regular chain of Native Mission Schools.*"<sup>44</sup>

Reinforcements from England were urgently required to plant more schools, and Harvard was cheered to learn in 1815 that four more missionaries had been appointed by the Methodist

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<sup>41</sup> Lancashire Record Office, *The New History of Methodism Vol II*, ed W.J. Townsend, (London, 1909), p.293.

<sup>42</sup> *History of Methodism in Sri Lanka*, Wesley College, [www.http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wesley\\_College,\\_Colombo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wesley_College,_Colombo) [accessed 17 Jan 2006].

<sup>43</sup> Davies, *Methodism*, p. 171.

<sup>44</sup> W.M. Harvard, *A Narrative of the Establishment and Progress of the Mission to Ceylon and India*, 1823, London. p. 303, [http://www.google.co.uk/books?vid=OCLC06372009&id=h-9JQjelUm8C&pg=RA6-PA368&lpg=RA6-PA368&dq=w++harvard+mission+ceylon&as\\_brr=1#PRA5-PA303,M1](http://www.google.co.uk/books?vid=OCLC06372009&id=h-9JQjelUm8C&pg=RA6-PA368&lpg=RA6-PA368&dq=w++harvard+mission+ceylon&as_brr=1#PRA5-PA303,M1) [accessed 1 July 2006].

Conference to join him in Ceylon<sup>45</sup>. One of these was Robert Newstead, who was spending the summer of 1816 learning Portuguese in London (probably from Catholic priests) in readiness for his departure for Asia (Figure 10). Eventually, on Wednesday 30 October 1816<sup>46</sup>, Robert embarked at Gravesend together with William B. Fox and Thomas Osborne on the *General Stuart*, an ex-HEIC ship captained by a Mr Robert Granger. The weather that autumn was unseasonably cold and stormy (in fact, 1816 was known as "the year without a summer"<sup>47</sup>) and they had to put in at Portsmouth until suitable conditions for sailing were forthcoming on Friday 22 November.



fig. 10. Stormy sea

William Fox, in a letter to the Missionary Committee mailed on the ship's arrival at Cape Town on 16 February 1817, wrote approvingly of their voyage thus far: *"Our passage has been long, but not unpleasant; for we have all enjoyed a good state of health, and from our kind captain have received every thing necessary to make us comfortable. Till near the Cape, our transit from the Bay of Biscay was more like an excursion on a canal than a voyage at sea; with the exception of a few short periods, when we were becalmed, and the vessel sometimes rolled about alarmingly, as the ship with empty sails was incapable of offering any resistance to remarkable swells, which were sometimes beyond the ordinary description."*<sup>48</sup>

Robert Newstead's memories of the long sea voyage were rather less agreeable than Fox's; in a letter he wrote to his friend Thomas Fison on his arrival in Ceylon, we find these comments: *"God has been peculiarly gracious to me since I left my Native Land, and has been unto me a Father, and an everlasting Friend, ever-present help in times of trouble, and indeed I have needed all His great mercy for there have been many trying times of need - tho' especially of parting with all I held dear on Earth - the impossibility of forgetting them - the Dangers of the Sea - the trials of a six months voyage - the temptations of Satan and my own evil heart with all the new and strange circumstances of a foreign land."*<sup>49</sup>

After a short period at the Cape of Good Hope for re-provisioning, allowing the missionaries to exchange news with their colleagues in South Africa, the *General Stuart* set sail for Ceylon on 19 February, landing at the port of Galle in the south of the island on 25 April 1817<sup>50</sup>. In his Journal for that day, printed in the Wesleyan Missionary Notices for 1819, Robert Newstead wrote, *"Brother Erskine came to the ship, and accompanied us on shore (Point de Galle), where we found brother and sister McKenny, who received us joyfully and affectionately. We*

<sup>45</sup> *Minutes of the Methodist Conference Vol IV 1818*, p. 212 (1816 Foreign Missions to Asia), [http://www.google.co.uk/books?vid=0Ys6\\_sy\\_bIOGP8KLTn\\_&id=URoRAAAIAAJ&pg=RA1-PA1&lpg=RA1-PA1&dq=wesleyan+methodist+conference+minutes&as\\_brr=1#PRA14-PA212,M1](http://www.google.co.uk/books?vid=0Ys6_sy_bIOGP8KLTn_&id=URoRAAAIAAJ&pg=RA1-PA1&lpg=RA1-PA1&dq=wesleyan+methodist+conference+minutes&as_brr=1#PRA14-PA212,M1) [accessed 16 Dec 2006].

<sup>46</sup> School of Oriental and African Studies, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Library, *Missionary Notices January 1820. Vol i 1816-18. Ceylon.* p 137.

<sup>47</sup> Willie Soon and Steven H. Yaskell, *Year Without a Summer*, Mercury May/June 2003, Astronomical Society of the Pacific [http://www.astrosociety.org/pubs/mercury/32\\_03/summer.html](http://www.astrosociety.org/pubs/mercury/32_03/summer.html) [accessed 16 Dec 2006].

<sup>48</sup> SOAS, *Missionary Notices January 1820. Vol i, 1816-18. Ceylon.* p 138.

<sup>49</sup> JRUL, Robert Newstead letter from Ceylon, dated 12 August 1817, to Mr. Thomas Fison, PLP/79-4/1.

<sup>50</sup> SOAS, *Missionary Notices January 1820. Vol I, 1816-18. Ceylon.* p 138.

have here a most delightful station; the house is very large and convenient, having within it a very neat chapel 60 feet long, which in the evening was partly filled, while brother Fox preached. My heart was much affected at being present in public worship on Asiatic ground, and it was particularly sweet to my soul to hear them sing, "For ever here my rest shall be."<sup>51</sup>

On the new missionaries' first Sunday on their station they attended the church in Galle (Figure 11). Later that day they had their first encounter with "Moorish" practices, when they witnessed a ceremony quite unlike anything they had ever seen. Robert wrote in his journal on 27 April: "It was uncommonly splendid in their way; a long procession formed of various grotesque figures, the most prominent of which was a priest, fantastically dressed with a very long white beard, preceding an immense machine formed of great and small pagodas, tinselled and illuminated all over, and constantly turning about; a great number of tom toms followed, with an immense drum, or something like it, making a hideous noise; the whole was lighted up by hundreds of fire balls suspended on sticks on men's shoulders; two or three men were twisting large canes or bamboos on fire at both ends, with astonishing rapidity and dexterity. A number of fire works were let off at intervals, and the whole attended by, I suppose thousands of men, women and children, making a dreadful noise and twisting themselves into all sorts of fantastic attitudes."<sup>52</sup> (Figure 12)

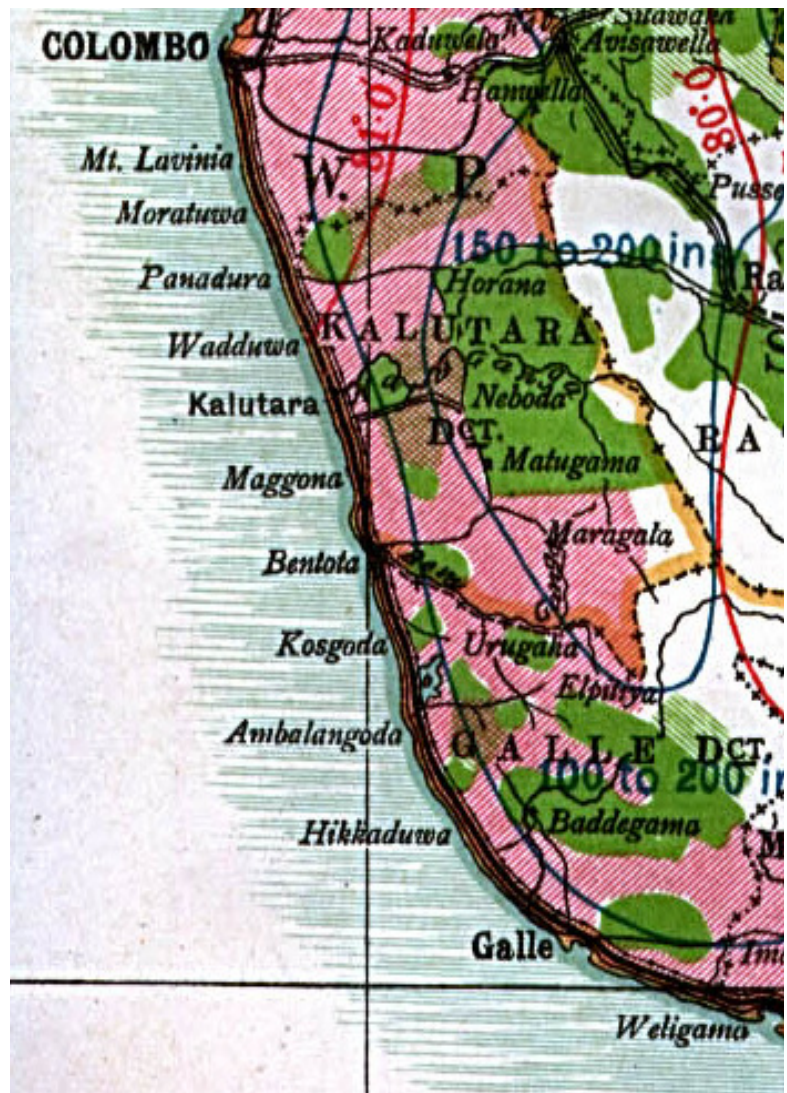


fig. 11. Colombo and Galle



fig. 12. Festival procession

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.* p. 163.

<sup>52</sup> SOAS, *Missionary Notices*. Vol ii, 1819-20. Ceylon. p. 163.

It was not only the religious customs that alarmed the newly-arrived missionaries: on 1 May Robert wrote: *"Last night there was a dreadful thunder-storm; such amazing peals of thunder I never heard; being between sleeping and waking it quite terrified me; it seemed so near, that I thought it would rend the rocks on either side, and bury the house; the lightning gleamed through the tiles, (for there are no ceilings here) and made the room light as the day."*<sup>53</sup>

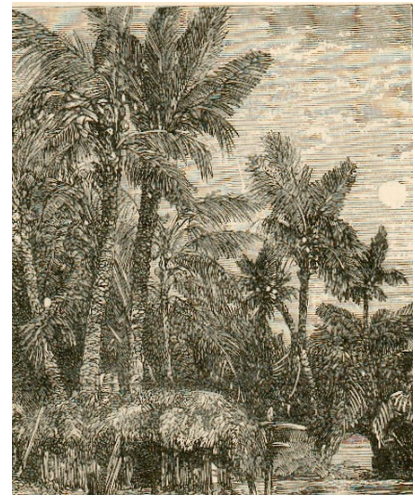


fig. 13. cocoa nuts

Fortunately, Robert also found much to commend on the island; he thought the countryside delightful, and its flora and fauna of much interest. On 5 May he wrote, *"It is almost astonishing to hear of the many virtues and uses of the cocoa nut tree (figure 13); it furnishes the natives with houses, bed, food and fire! The Modelier informs me, that they gather the fruit at least four times in the year, but that the trees always have young fruit upon them, so that they bear all the year round. It is said, that there is a kind of controversy between this and the other side of the island concerning which tree, the cocoa nut or the palmyra, (which chiefly grows on the other part of the island) is the most productive, and they number up the articles which the different trees produce in support of their claims. Among the productions of the cocoa nut tree, and what is made from it, are numbered - the fruit, toddy, arrack, vinegar, a kind of sugar, cables, olas for roofs, etc. beside the timber, which is not very good: in this the palmyra has a decided superiority. The nuts which hang in ponderous clusters round the very top, are always filled with delicious water, than which we can hardly conceive any thing more grateful in a tropical clime; and they are so very*

*plentiful, that I believe, two may sometimes be had for about a farthing."*<sup>54</sup>



fig. 14. Hindu priest

The local people, too, impressed Robert with their appearance and conduct: *"The natives of this country are generally very well-looking; some faces are very expressive, and even beautiful; I have seen some of the finest countenances under dark shades here, that I ever beheld; their manners are in general very harmless, simple and obliging; many of them are excellent mechanics and artificers."*<sup>55</sup> (figure 14).

The missionaries immediately set to work learning the local languages prior to translating the scriptures into Sinhalese and Indo-Portuguese; Robert Newstead had acquired the rudiments of European Portuguese in London before setting sail for Ceylon, but to his consternation found the local dialect rather foreign. By the end of June, however, he was able to preach a sermon in

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.* p. 164.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

Portuguese by reading out the message which he had previously translated from English, and was greatly encouraged by the words of an old gentleman who recognised that he had been familiar with the language before arriving in Ceylon.

Homesickness was a feature of the first few months: *"I journeyed to Matura to supply for brother Callaway, while he goes to reconnoitre at a new station. I have an almost unconquerable aversion to travelling in the usual mode here (in a palanquin) but being disappointed of a horse which was promised me, I was obliged to submit. The beauty of the road was indescribable, lined all the way with an almost endless variety of flowering shrubs, sheltered by cocoa-nut plantations, and cooled by the sea-breeze; amazing rocks and stupendous mountains, covered with trees and jungle, with fine rivers and fields, presented themselves. But there are no lovely villages of industrious peasantry, no refreshing views of spires and steeples, to tell us that this bounteous God of universal nature is known and adored! No 'sound of the church-going bell'. No cheering salutations from the guiltless lips of Christian friendship! The entire absence of all these, an English, but especially a Christian heart, painfully feels."*<sup>56</sup>

Robert had been assigned to the task of developing the mission schools in and around Negombo<sup>57</sup>, and after a few months acclimatisation in Galle, he made the journey by road to Colombo (figure 15) and then on by boat, arriving on 17 September 1817; in his journal that day he wrote: *"We arrived safely at Negombo. May the Lord make me useful here. The Bungalow is a pretty place, pleasantly situated close to the sea, and surrounded with cocoa-nut trees. It is very large and convenient for preaching."*<sup>58</sup> Harvard and Clough had a couple of years previously assessed the strategic importance of the town: *"The situation of Negombo (figure 16), from its commercial*



fig. 15. Galle Road, Colombo

*intercourse with the interior, rendered it a most desirable Missionary station. ... A bungalow, situated in a salubrious and eligible spot, being for sale, we purchased it for 1500 rix dollars."*<sup>59</sup> In September 1816 a school was established with the Rev. Don Daniel Pereira as the schoolmaster. A year later Robert, as the first resident minister of Negombo,<sup>60</sup> was sharing the mission house with Benjamin, who had been a Buddhist priest before his conversion to Christianity, and Abraham, a young Portuguese who had accompanied Robert from Galle and who made a profession of faith a few weeks later.



fig 16. Negombo Canal

<sup>56</sup> SOAS, *Missionary Notices Vol ii ,1819-20. Ceylon.* p. 177.

<sup>57</sup> Harvard, *Narrative of the Establishment and Progress of the Mission to Ceylon and India*, p. 306.

<sup>58</sup> SOAS, *Missionary Notices . Vol ii ,1819-20. Ceylon.* p. 193.

<sup>59</sup> Harvard, *Narrative of the Establishment and Progress of the Mission to Ceylon and India*, p.302.

<sup>60</sup> Newstead Girls College, Negombo, *More Beyond*, <http://www.newsteadcollege.net/index.htm> [accessed 24 Nov 2006].

On 9 October Robert preached at the native church, with the help of a Sinhalese interpreter; in his journal he wrote that evening, *"The congregation is large, and full half of them were very well-looking and decently dressed Cingalese women. Before I entered upon the sermon, believing it would interest them more, I spoke a few words about my coming to them, saying that I had heard of their destitute state as to religion, in my own land, that I was greatly affected by it, that as there were in my country so many padres (ministers) and in this land so few, I was moved with compassion to come over the sea, in order to teach them the way to heaven; but that I had left behind me a beloved father, and mother, and brother, and sisters, whom perhaps I should see no more till we met in another world, and with the hope of doing them good had come many thousands of miles, and should be amply repaid if now they would come and hear me, and try to learn the way to serve God, the great God of heaven and earth, about whom I was now going to tell them. While this was said, all was attention, and I saw some tears wiped off with their fingers; my own were with difficulty restrained. After the sermon, in which I was much blessed with strong feeling for the souls of the people, I told them my intention of establishing a school amongst them, to instruct their children, and pointed to Benjamin (the late priest) now habited as a Christian, as the intended Gooroonancy (teacher) of the school. They seemed well pleased and many brought their children forward. I hope to get a good school formed here."*<sup>61</sup>

On a Sunday evening later that month Robert made the following entry: *"A year is fled into eternity since we left our native shores. O how swiftly it has gone! ... This evening I made my first attempt at speaking extempore in Portuguese, by way of expounding the 3rd (chapter) of St John, and succeeded beyond my own expectations. I dare not, however, venture upon a whole sermon yet, without written helps."*<sup>62</sup> Despite these small encouragements, however, he saw little in the way of conversions to Christianity amongst the local people, and also had to contend with opposition from the Roman Catholic priests of Negombo, who regarded the Methodist missionaries as a possible threat to their flock. Isolated from European company, Robert struggled with loneliness, occasionally relieved in unexpected ways: *"December 18. The beautiful little striped squirrels run along the fence, just against my sleeping-room window, and the doves come round the houses in flocks: I am delighted with these innocent and unintrusive visitors."*<sup>63</sup>

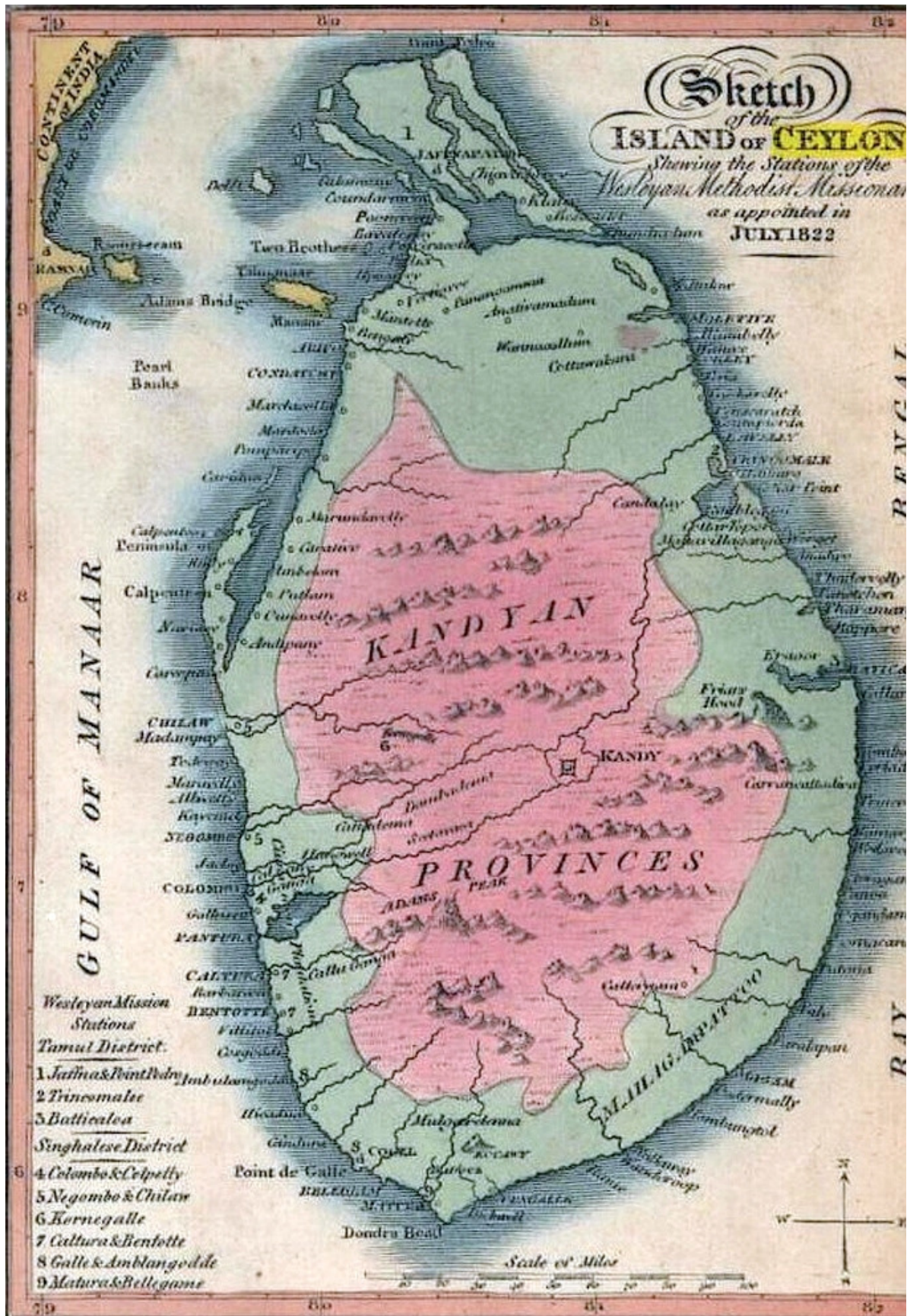
Robert was constantly frustrated by his failure to convince the local shopkeepers to give up Sunday trading, but in March 1818 he wrote in his journal, *"Afterwards went to the bazar. As soon as we entered at one end, I saw several boys running to give notice to some who were keeping open botiques (stalls); they were immediately down, before we could get round the corner, but we stopped under a Moorman's veranda, who was selling rice, and began to lecture a little in Tamul, on the duty of keeping holy the Sabbath-day, showing that God would not bless ill-gotten gain. We soon had a crowd on both sides, who were very attentive, and seemed not displeased to hear. They excused themselves by*

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<sup>61</sup> SOAS, *Missionary Notices*. Vol ii, 1819-20. Ceylon. p. 194.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.* p. 209.

<sup>63</sup> SOAS, *Missionary Notices* Vol ii, 1819-20. Ceylon. p. 225.



Map of Ceylon from A Narrative of the Establishment and Progress of the Mission to Ceylon and India: William Martin Harvard see footnote 44

intimating that they would not sell again on the Sabbath."<sup>64</sup> (figure 17).



fig. 17. Native shop

During his sojourn on the island Robert Newstead was engaged in translating the book of Genesis, the Psalms, and the whole of the New Testament, into Indo-Portuguese. On 31 March 1818 he wrote: *"To-day I finished my translation of the New Testament into the Indian Portuguese. It has been a work of some labour, though the language is not difficult, having written every word of it myself. It occupies about 950 large pages. I have often been very tired in the work, but never once tired of it, believing it to be a work for God. O may he deign, with all its imperfections, to approve it, and make it in some way useful! At least it will be very useful to myself, in ministering among that people."*<sup>65</sup>

He was also responsible for the compilation of a Portuguese hymnbook which Harvard praised for being *"less European in its style than Mr. Armour's translation"*<sup>66</sup>. In order to assist with the publication of these books, a printer named Daniel J Gogerly was sent out to Ceylon in 1818<sup>67</sup> to set up and man the new printing press which had been shipped over on the *General Stuart* with Robert Newstead and his companions, at a cost of £186 1s 9d<sup>68</sup>.

A year after arriving in Ceylon, Robert wrote in his journal: *"April 20. Having been, for some time, very weak and unwell, I set out this morning about three o'clock, in a boat, on a short visit to brother Fox at Caltura. (figure 18)*

*April 23. The country round Caltura is indeed beautiful; I think no description could do justice to it, especially near the river; but I cannot think the air better than that of Negombo; however, the little journey has already done me much good. Brother Fox is a very good counsellor, and a very good physician.*

*April 25. The anniversary of our landing in Ceylon. I had a long and interesting meditation on all the way in which the Lord has been pleased to lead me through the past year."*<sup>69</sup>



fig. 18. Ceylon coast

Robert's undefined illness continued to trouble him intermittently, and the oppressive heat did little to improve his health; in August 1818 he wrote, *"Exceedingly unwell and weakened very*

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid.* p. 241.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Harvard, *Narrative of the Establishment and Progress of the Mission to Ceylon and India*, p.294.

<sup>67</sup> *Cyclopaedia of Methodism Letter G*, Item No. 1174 at <http://wesley.nnu.edu/wesleyctr/books/0701-0800/HDM0767.PDF>.

<sup>68</sup> SOAS, *Missionary Notices Vol II, 1819-20. Ceylon*. Disbursements, from June 24, 1816 to June 24, 1817, p. 88-89.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.* p. 257.

*much, from almost incessant perspirations on the least exertion; this has continued some time, but I feel resigned to the will of God. I should be better with more society.*"<sup>70</sup> Despite his physical weakness, he soldiered on with his Sunday and mid-week preaching duties, his open-air evangelising in the Bazaar and the prison, and his visits to the Methodist schools, all the while only too aware of how much more he would be able to accomplish with reinforcements from England.



fig. 19. Kandy

His vision was to plant chapels and mission schools further up the coast at Chilaw and into the interior, the Kandian territories (figure 19). Since 1803 Britain had been trying to establish supremacy over the Kingdom of Kandy in three successive wars, and finally in 1818, after a brutal suppression of the Uva Rebellion, they succeeded in annexing the area as a British dependency.<sup>71</sup> The peasants were stripped of their lands, and by the mid 19th century the upland area was transformed into colonial tea, coffee and rubber estates. Eventually, in February 1821 Robert

heard that he had been appointed to the stations of Chilaw and Kornegalle in addition to Negombo. Still suffering from the effects of his "indisposition", which Harvard put down to the stresses and frustrations of his labours (*"Mr. Newstead's exertions and anxieties in his station had considerably impaired his health."*<sup>72</sup>) and still without the support he needed, he battled on bravely. He was only too aware of the smallpox and cholera epidemics sweeping the island at that time, but fortunately did not succumb. On 24 March he wrote in his journal: *"I hear of the death of two officers, and the sickness of a third nearly unto death, with whom I dined at Kornegalle, about three months since, all then in better health than myself. What a lesson on the uncertainty and brevity of life."*<sup>73</sup> By December he had made the gruelling journey to Kornegalle, where he wasted no time in setting out to visit two neighbouring Buddhist temples and making the acquaintance of the priests.



fig. 20. Kandyan chiefs

In the ensuing weeks he also explored the surrounding villages in an effort to persuade the Chiefs to allow him to plant Christian schools. In June 1822 he wrote in his journal, *"The chief sent me a guide, who took me off the high road five minutes after we left the house; about halfway he had sent his brother with a few attendants to meet me; and about two miles distant from his house, he met me himself, with about a dozen inferior Chiefs from*

*neighbouring villages. We passed seven or eight villages on our way to this one. He himself and all the people were dressed in their best attire, as a compliment, I presume, to their European visitor* (figure 20). *They really looked very interesting, winding round*

<sup>70</sup> SOAS, *Missionary Notices*. Vol ii, 1819-20. Ceylon. p. 281.

<sup>71</sup> *History of Sri Lanka*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Sri\\_Lanka](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Sri_Lanka) [accessed 22 Jun 2006].

<sup>72</sup> Harvard, *Narrative of the Establishment and Progress of the Mission to Ceylon and India*, p. 312.

<sup>73</sup> SOAS, *Missionary Notices* Vol iii, 1821-22. Ceylon. p. 180.

*the green banks of the paddy fields, with their white flowing robes. We passed a village of extraordinary beauty, at the foot of a mountain crowned with verdure to the very top. Round half the circle of the hill could be seen the little cottages of the natives, each in a separate garden of cocoas, arekas, plantains, and other trees and shrubs; and between the village and us, a long ridge of fields of rice, just grown sufficiently to cover the whole with a fine light green, which, intersected in every possible variety by the deep green of the banks, had a truly delightful appearance."*<sup>74</sup>

Robert Newstead remained in his post at Kornegalle until January 1824, when he sent a report entitled "*The State of the Kandian Mission*"<sup>75</sup>, describing the good progress of the six Christian schools and the establishment of permanent Mission premises. The hope was that their cause would bear fruit in years to come.

After leaving Kornegalle Robert Newstead was posted back to Negombo<sup>76</sup>, which was a thriving station. "*The Negombo Mission is in a very prosperous state. The Brethren have been greatly encouraged by the kind sanction of the Local Government... five commodious Chapels have been erected, free of all expense to our fund at home; 15 substantial School Houses, which in their turn serve for places of worship, have likewise been built. They have, according to the last returns, not less than 15-20 small congregations, to which the Brethren and their assistants are in the habit of regularly preaching the word of God.*"<sup>77</sup>



fig. 21. Colombo harbour

After a brief posting to the Colpetty and Morotto station<sup>78</sup>, near Colombo (figure 21), Robert embarked on a ship bound for England in 1825. Perhaps his health had deteriorated to the point where he, like Martin Harvard earlier in 1823, had to admit defeat and return home (figure 22). It



fig. 22. Ship passing the Needles

was, however, an honourable defeat. A Missionary Report written in 1826 paid tribute to his translating labours over the previous nine years: "*The whole of the New Testament has been translated into this... very useful dialect (Singalese) by Mr. Newstead, and is now printing in this country by the British and Foreign Bible Society.*"<sup>79</sup> Moreover, Robert's five years of missionary toil on the Negombo station won him many loyal friends - and the enduring epithet "*Newstead of Negombo*"<sup>80</sup>!

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.* p. 292.

<sup>75</sup> SOAS, *Missionary Notices. Vol IV, 1823-24. Ceylon.* p. 338.

<sup>76</sup> JRUL, *Hill's Arrangement 1861, The Wesleyan-Methodist Ministers on Trial in Great Britain and on the Foreign Stations,* p.85.

<sup>77</sup> SOAS, *Wesleyan Methodist Missionary reports Ceylon Mission 1824,* p. 8, vol ii 1821-1824.

<sup>78</sup> SOAS, *Wesleyan Methodist Missionary reports Ceylon Mission,* vol iii 1825-1827, 1) The Cingalese District.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.* p.12-13.

<sup>80</sup> LRO, *The New History of Methodism Vol ii,* ed W.J. Townsend, (London, 1909), *Methodist Foreign Missions* p. 295.

## Ministry on the Home Circuits

Now fully restored to health, Robert Newstead was appointed in 1826 to the post of Missionary Secretary<sup>81</sup> in London, near John Wesley's Chapel (figure 23) on City Road; there he had his portrait painted by William Poole and engraved by William Thomas Fry. His brother Francis presented a copy to his second son William Gustavus Benningfield Newstead in April 1827, on the occasion of the thirteen year old's apprenticeship to a Gloucestershire woollen merchant in Dursley.



fig. 23. Wesley's Chapel in London

About 25 miles away in Cheltenham, young William's Uncle Robert was the minister of the Wesleyan chapel in King Street<sup>82</sup>, now no longer a place of worship (figure 24).



fig. 24. Cheltenham Chapel

Another chapel once stood on St George's Street, just round the corner from Robert's living quarters at 8 St George's Square<sup>83</sup>. Only one quarter of the Square is still extant (figure 25), and unfortunately number 8 has been demolished, together with the other three sides of what must once have been elegant Georgian townhouses.

It was during his term on the Cheltenham circuit that Robert, now aged 39, at last found himself a wife. He married Susan Mitchell Richards on 23 July 1828 in Cornwall, at the church of St Gluvias in Penryn near Falmouth<sup>84</sup>.

A Wesleyan chapel had been built in Penryn in 1789, but the wedding took place at the parish church of St Gluvias; before 1837 all marriage services had by law to be performed in Anglican churches.



fig. 25. St Georges Square

Ten years younger than Robert, Susan was the daughter of an attorney-at-law, Mr. William Richards of The Square, Penryn<sup>85</sup>. Perhaps she had met Robert when his ship docked in Falmouth on his return from Ceylon? Certainly there is a mention of a Miss Richards in the Methodist Notices for Penryn in 1827<sup>86</sup>, by which time Methodism was well established in Cornwall, largely but not entirely confined to the working

<sup>81</sup> JRUL, *Hill's Arrangement 1861*, p. 85.

<sup>82</sup> *Minutes of the Methodist Conference Vol VI 1833*, p. 462 (The Bristol District, Cheltenham 1826) [http://www.google.co.uk/books?vid=OYzkhFlkKpuzgfQ\\_SAh&id=VxsRAAAAIAAJ&pg=RA7-PA385&lpg=RA7-PA385&dq=minutes+of+methodist+conference+cheltenham&as\\_brr=1#PRA8-PA462,M1](http://www.google.co.uk/books?vid=OYzkhFlkKpuzgfQ_SAh&id=VxsRAAAAIAAJ&pg=RA7-PA385&lpg=RA7-PA385&dq=minutes+of+methodist+conference+cheltenham&as_brr=1#PRA8-PA462,M1) [accessed 16 Dec 2006].

<sup>83</sup> *Pigot's Cheltenham Directory for 1830*, <http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/GLS/Cheltenham/Pigot1830.html>, [accessed 4 Jun 2004].

<sup>84</sup> St Gluvias Penryn marriage register entry for Robert Newstead and Susan Mitchell Richards, Cornwall Record Office, FP/72/1/9.

<sup>85</sup> *Penryn Directories*, [http://penryncornwall.com/bailey\\_1783.htm](http://penryncornwall.com/bailey_1783.htm); [http://penryncornwall.com/pigot\\_1823.htm](http://penryncornwall.com/pigot_1823.htm) [accessed 12 Feb 2006].

<sup>86</sup> SOAS *Methodist Missionary Notices Vol iv Falmouth Circuit 1827, Penryn*.

classes; Susan Richards, as a lawyer's daughter, would certainly have been a member of the professional middle classes.

Robert and Susan soon settled into married life in Cheltenham, where their first child, Emily Anne Richards Newstead, was born in 1830; she was baptised on 9 June at St Mary's, the parish church<sup>87</sup>, described by the vicar as the daughter of Robert Newstead, "a Minister of the Gospel". Shortly afterwards the family moved to Manchester<sup>88</sup>, where two further daughters, Frances Susan Richards Newstead and Elizabeth Townend Richards Newstead, were born on 1 July 1831 and 17 September 1832<sup>89</sup>; Robert himself baptised Frances on 31 July 1831 at Oxford Road Wesleyan Chapel<sup>90</sup>. He and his family lived at 229 Great Ancoats Street (figure 26) close to another of the three chapels on the Grosvenor Street circuit<sup>91</sup>. The poverty and squalor of industrial Ancoats must have been a shock to the Newsteads after three years in the comfortable surroundings of Cheltenham, but Robert was called, as John Wesley before him, to the outcasts of society as well as to the gentry.



fig. 26. Ancoats Mill

In 1833<sup>92</sup> an opportunity arose for another foreign posting for Robert Newstead, this time just across the Channel in France, a more manageable destination than Ceylon for a man with a young wife and three small daughters. He was given the prestigious task of launching the English Wesleyan

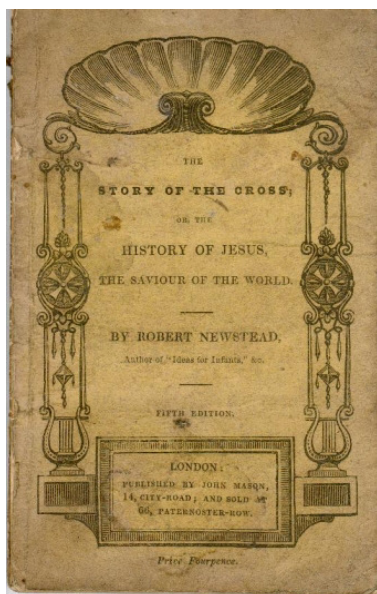


fig. 27. *The Story of the Cross*

Mission<sup>93</sup> in Paris. Here he wrote his *Essay on the Divine Origin and Perpetual Obligations of the Holy Sabbath* and *The Story of the Cross, or, The History of Jesus, the Saviour of the World*, a small volume designed as a Sunday School reward. (A copy of the fifth edition (figure 27), published in 1836 by John Mason of 14 City Road London, was awarded in 1843 to a young William Collihole, whose name was inscribed on the flyleaf) (figure 28).

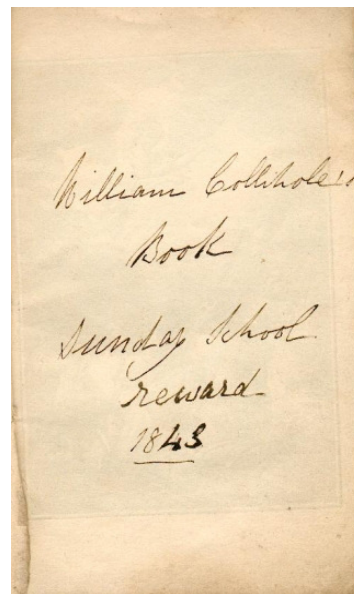


fig. 28. Flyleaf

According to George Smith's *History of Wesleyan Methodism*, Robert's four year term in Paris was well thought of; a 'Testimonial of Respect

<sup>87</sup> St Marys Cheltenham Baptismal register, Gloucestershire RO P78/1 IN 1/10,1/11.

<sup>88</sup> JRUL, *Hill's Arrangement 1861*, p. 85.

<sup>89</sup> Manchester Central Reference Library, Oxford Road Wesleyan Baptismal Register, PRO R.G.4/1464 (births 1831-1832).

<sup>90</sup> Central Ref, Oxford Road Wesleyan Baptismal Register, PRO R.G.4/1464, nos. 28 and 42.

<sup>91</sup> Lancashire Record Office, *Pigot's Manchester and Salford Directory 1833*.

<sup>92</sup> JRUL, *Hill's Arrangement 1861*, p.85.

<sup>93</sup> Abel Stevens, *The History of Methodism*, Vol ii, (London: Alexander Heylin, 1859), p.339.

<http://www.google.co.uk/books?vid=OCLC00551636&id=BhUFUSFXu0kC&pg=PA46&lpg=PA46&dq=history+of+methodism+volume+2+abel+stevens+paris#PPA339,M1>, [accessed 6 Dec 2006].

to the Rev. Robert Newstead' reads, "contemplating the speedy departure of their minister, whose ministrations had been blessed to the edification of many, some of Newstead's friends suggested the propriety of making him an appropriate present. Lord Granville placed his name at the head of the list and was followed by ... a great number of other distinguished persons. The result was the presentation to Mr. Newstead of a handsome silver salver, with a suitable inscription. The whole proceeding evinced the impression which Methodism had made in the French capital, and the high respect entertained for Mr. Newstead and his family."<sup>94</sup>

That family had now increased to a total of seven with the births in Paris of a further two daughters, Harriet Marris and Mary Watkins Newstead<sup>95</sup>. In 1837 the family returned to England, where they were to spend six years in London<sup>96</sup>.

At first they lived in temporary accommodation at 20 Copenhagen Street, Islington, during which time Robert wrote to his friend Rev. George Cubitt on 15 August 1837<sup>97</sup> that he must decline an invitation to preach owing to his obligations to his family to spend time settling them into their new surroundings (apparently they were experiencing problems with their lodgings and their neighbours!). By the beginning of 1838 they had moved south of the river to Camberwell<sup>98</sup>.

On 29 August 1840<sup>99</sup> Robert wrote to Jabez Bunting, the President of Conference, thanking him for his imminent appointment to the City Road Circuit. The family moved into 7 The Grove, Hackney, on the edge of Victoria Park, a convenient location for Robert's pastoral and preaching responsibilities at Pleasant Place Wesleyan Chapel. With the exception of eleven year old Emily, who was boarding at Edythe House School in Brixton<sup>100</sup>, the 1841 census<sup>101</sup> found the Newsteads living at The Grove, with two relatives (Ann Richards aged about thirty and a twenty year old Frances Bisbrowne) and a servant. Ann was probably one of Susan's Cornish sisters, whereas Frances was the orphaned daughter of Robert's sister Frances Bisbrowne and her husband John; we have already met their son John in Thetford, living with his elderly grandparents<sup>102</sup>.

After Hackney, the family was sent to Leeds, then to Manchester again for three more years on the Grosvenor Street circuit<sup>103</sup>, followed by twelve months in Woolwich<sup>104</sup> in South East London. In 1850 they were back in the north, this time in Liverpool<sup>105</sup>, living at 26 (now 64) Hope Street (figure 29 overleaf); Robert was 62, his wife 52, and their five daughters, Emily, Frances, Elizabeth, Harriet and Mary ranged in age from twenty down to fifteen.<sup>106</sup> Robert was part of the team ministry for the Wesleyan Chapel on Stanhope Street, on Liverpool's South Circuit<sup>107</sup>.

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<sup>94</sup> George Smith, *History of Wesleyan Methodism: Modern Methodism 1816-32, Part 3*, (US: Kessinger Publishing 2005), pp 339-341, [http://www.google.co.uk/books?vid=ISBN1417974273&id=jJ\\_DMuMcChUC&pg=RA4-PA341&lpg=RA4-PA341&ots=06ElhqalcA&dq=history+of+methodism+george+smith+paris+part+three&sig=T3hc6j6DnY\\_JELDwVjxBTMCu-K4#PRA4-PA341,M1](http://www.google.co.uk/books?vid=ISBN1417974273&id=jJ_DMuMcChUC&pg=RA4-PA341&lpg=RA4-PA341&ots=06ElhqalcA&dq=history+of+methodism+george+smith+paris+part+three&sig=T3hc6j6DnY_JELDwVjxBTMCu-K4#PRA4-PA341,M1). [accessed 6 Dec 2006].

<sup>95</sup> LRO, 1851 census Liverpool, Public Record Office HO 107/2182, p.419.

<sup>96</sup> JRUL, *Hill's Arrangement 1861*, p.85.

<sup>97</sup> JRUL, PLP 79-4/12 Robert Newstead Correspondence.

<sup>98</sup> JRUL, *Hill's Arrangement 1861*, p.85.

<sup>99</sup> JRUL, PLP 79-4/21 Robert Newstead Correspondence.

<sup>100</sup> Family Record Centre, 1841 census Lambeth, PRO HO 107/1054/6-F-24.

<sup>101</sup> FRC, 1841 census Hackney, PRO HO 107/0698/3/1-F-1.

<sup>102</sup> See note 10.

<sup>103</sup> JRUL, *Hill's Arrangement 1861*, p.85.

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> JRUL, *Hill's Arrangement 1861*, p.85.

<sup>106</sup> LRO, 1851 census Liverpool, Public Record Office HO 107/2182, p.419.

<sup>107</sup> LRO, *Hill's Circuits and Ministers 1897*, p. 168.

It was in 1851 that Robert Newstead, together with several other local clergymen who espoused the anti-slavery cause, befriended the runaway black American slave Sam Berry<sup>108</sup>, whose passage to England had been paid for by sympathisers in Liverpool, where he was the focus of public meetings "of a religious nature" before moving on to Manchester. James Watkins, as he was now called, had joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in Hartford Connecticut on escaping from his master in Maryland, but was forced to flee to England to escape the "Fugitive Slave Law".



fig. 29 Hope St., Liverpool



fig. 30. New King St., Bath

The Newsteads left Liverpool in 1853 for Bath<sup>109</sup>, where they settled into their lodgings, Cumberland House<sup>110</sup>, on New King Street (figure 30), next to the Methodist Chapel, which had been founded by John Wesley in 1779 (figure 31). The Georgian terrace has been beautifully preserved apart from, unfortunately, the Methodist chapel and its neighbouring houses, destroyed by a second World War bomb<sup>111</sup>.

Bath was to be the backdrop for the marriage of Robert Newstead's eldest daughter Emily on 10 July 1854<sup>112</sup> at St. Michael's Church on Broad Street. The bridegroom was

Edward William Jones, a widowed gunpowder merchant from Newport, Monmouthshire. He had married his first wife, Ellen Ward, in Liverpool, where their two daughters, Esther and Elizabeth, were born in 1839 and 1841<sup>113</sup>, but the family subsequently moved to Newport, where in 1851<sup>114</sup> they were living on Chepstow Road. Although Edward Jones had been a Wesleyan Methodist since his baptism in Oswestry, Shropshire, in 1813<sup>115</sup>, the wedding took place in an Anglican church.

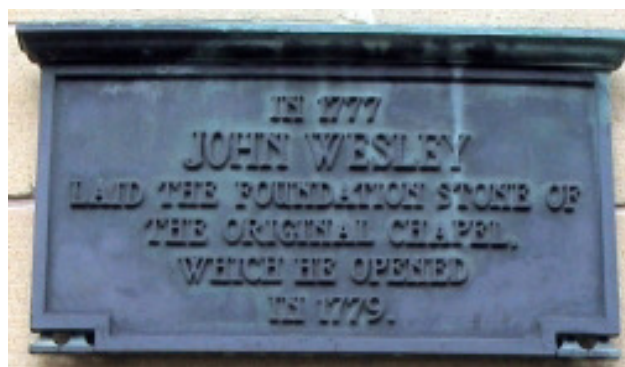


fig. 31. Chapel inscription

<sup>108</sup> *Narrative of the Life of James Watkins, Formerly a "Chattel" in Maryland, U. S.; Containing an Account of His Escape from Slavery, Together with an Appeal on Behalf of Three Millions of Such "Pieces of Property," Still Held Under the Standard of the Eagle.* (Bolton:Kenyon and Abbatt, Printers, Market Street 1852).

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/watkin52/watkin52.html> (University of North Carolina), [accessed 20 Dec 2006].

<sup>109</sup> JRUL, *Hill's Arrangement 1861*, p.85.

<sup>110</sup> *Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire with Bath and Bristol*, (London: Kelly & Co.1856), Bath p. 22.

<http://www.historicaldirectories.org/hd/d.asp> [accessed 13 Sep 2005].

<sup>111</sup> Fishponds Local History Society, *The Bath Blitz War Memorial, 1842*, <http://fishponds.org.uk/bathmem.html>. [accessed 28.5.2006].

<sup>112</sup> General Register Office, Marriage Certificate Jones/Newstead [1854 Sept qtr bath 5c 1013].

<sup>113</sup> IGI Individual Record, Family Search, Batch No. CO 19354. [accessed 13 Sep 2005].

[http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Search/frameset\\_search.asp?PAGE=igi/search\\_IGI.asp&clear\\_form=true](http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Search/frameset_search.asp?PAGE=igi/search_IGI.asp&clear_form=true).

<sup>114</sup> PRO, 1851 census Christchurch, Monmouth, HO 107/245, p. 21.

<sup>115</sup> IGI Individual Record, Family Search, Batch No. CO 2051 1812-1836, [accessed 11 Sep 2005].

[http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Search/frameset\\_search.asp?PAGE=igi/search\\_IGI.asp&clear\\_form=true](http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Search/frameset_search.asp?PAGE=igi/search_IGI.asp&clear_form=true).

Poor Emily had a long wait for a baby of her own; indeed seven years later in 1861<sup>116</sup>, by which time they were living in Salford, the couple were still childless. Edward was now employed as a bookkeeper, and his household at 27 Bank Street (figure 32), not far from the River Irwell, consisted of himself, his wife Emily, his daughter Elizabeth, his widowed sister Mary Lloyd, his sister-in-law Mary Newstead and a lodger.



fig. 32. Bank St., Salford

That same spring of 1861 Robert Newstead was far away across the Scottish border in Glasgow<sup>117</sup>. There, at 48 Whitevale Street, Susan had taken ill and died on 17 January 1861<sup>118</sup> (of peritonitis and a strangulated hernia). She was sixty years old. On 7 April the 1861 census<sup>119</sup>



fig. 33. Tadcaster Methodist Chapel

for Glasgow recorded a widowed Robert Newstead, aged 72, and two of his daughters, Fanny (Frances) and Harriet, both still unmarried at the ages of 29 and 26. A rather reduced family, sadly, compared with the one in Liverpool ten years earlier. Young Mary, as we have seen, was lodging with her married sister Emily's family in Salford in 1861 (where twelve months later<sup>120</sup> a joyful event was to occur - the arrival of a longed-for son, Percy Newstead Jones) while Elizabeth was living at Chapel Cottage in Tadcaster (figure 33), a market town in north Yorkshire<sup>121</sup>. She was working as a governess for the Jessops, who had three children aged between seven and fifteen; William Jessop was one of the Methodist ministers on the Tadcaster circuit, and knew Robert Newstead from their shared ministry on the Huddersfield 2nd circuit in 1856<sup>122</sup>.

<sup>116</sup> PRO, 1861 census Salford , RG 9/2909/43, p. 17.

<sup>117</sup> JRUL, *Hill's Arrangement 1861*, p.85.

<sup>118</sup> Scotlands People Death Record 1861 Glasgow High Church District GROS Data 644/02 0108 <http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/search/SearchResults.aspx> [accessed 12 Nov 2005].

<sup>119</sup> Scotlands People 1861 census Glasgow High Church District GROS Data 644/02 093/02 013, as above.

<sup>120</sup> Freebmd Rootsweb Births [1862 Mar qtr Salford 8d 29] <http://freebmd.rootsweb.com/cgi/search.pl>. [accessed 11 Sep 2005].

<sup>121</sup> PRO, 1861 census Tadcaster, RG 9/3541.

<sup>122</sup> *Minutes of the Methodist Conference Vol xiii 1859*, p. 235 The Halifax and Bradford District 1856

## Retirement in Yorkshire



fig. 34. Boston Spa Chapel



fig. 35. Riversdale House



fig. 36. Chapel interior

With Susan no longer at his side, and the prospect of increasing infirmity, Robert Newstead applied for superannuation in the Tadcaster area<sup>123</sup>; in 1861 he and his two daughters left Glasgow to settle in the pleasant village of Boston Spa. In 1847 a Wesleyan chapel (figure 34) had been built on Spa Lane close to the river Wharfe, but in the absence of a Manse<sup>124</sup>, Robert, Frances, Elizabeth and Harriet took lodgings with a Methodist family, possibly the Pearsons at Riversdale House on Main Street (figure 35).

More tragedy lay just ahead: Mary, the youngest Newstead daughter, made the journey from Salford to join her father and sisters in Boston Spa in the summer of 1861, but on 30 August she died, probably of diphtheria (an "ulcerated throat"<sup>125</sup>). She lies buried in the chapel's graveyard.

Robert settled into retirement, probably taking his turn on the preaching rotas when his energy allowed; as one of the earliest missionaries to Ceylon he would have been something of a celebrity. Money, however, was tight, and both Robert Newstead and a widowed Mrs. Dickin, whose husband Thomas had also been a Wesleyan minister<sup>126</sup>, were excused pew rents (figure 36) in 1863, saving them each 30 shillings a year, a generous measure when these fees typically raised half the annual trust income. The chapel had been struggling to make good a longstanding deficit, but fund-raising efforts had finally been successful, and the minute book for 1863 records the triumphant entry, "*Our Chapel is now free of debt!*".<sup>127</sup>

On 3 January 1865 Robert Newstead and Mrs Dickin had the pleasure of witnessing their offsprings' wedding<sup>128</sup>: Fanny was married at Boston Spa Chapel to Rev Thomas Dickin junior, a recent recruit to the Wesleyan ministry. Thomas was a local lad, born in Tadcaster in 1832<sup>129</sup>,

<sup>123</sup> JRUL, *Hill's Arrangement 1861*, p.85.

<sup>124</sup> Arthur W. Faulkner, *A Short History of Boston Spa Methodist Church 1847-1997* (Boston Spa: 1997), p. 16.

<sup>125</sup> General Register Office Death Certificate Mary Newstead [1861 Sept qtr Tadcaster 9c 328].

<sup>126</sup> Faulkner, *A Short History of Boston Spa Methodist Church*, p. 24.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>128</sup> General Register Office Marriage Certificate Newstead/Dickin [1865 Mar qtr Bramham 9c 783].

<sup>129</sup> IGI Individual Record, Family Search, Batch No. CO 87461. (Accessed 7 Sep 2005)

[http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Search/frameset\\_search.asp?PAGE=igi/search\\_IGI.asp&clear\\_form=true](http://www.familysearch.org/Eng/Search/frameset_search.asp?PAGE=igi/search_IGI.asp&clear_form=true).

and after a few years in Anglesey<sup>130</sup> he returned to Yorkshire; from 1866-67 he was in charge of Boston Spa Chapel, with Fanny by his side<sup>131</sup>.

Now aged 76, Robert was growing increasingly frail. His Obituary describes his last days as follows: *"It was observed by those about him that his zeal retained its full strength though his body was enfeebled by advancing age. In his last illness he found consolation in reading the word of God, and in uniting in the prayers of those who came to visit him. For several days before he died he spoke but little. His words expressed his assurance of the love of God, and his perfect confidence in the Atonement of Christ."*<sup>132</sup>

On 28 July 1865 Robert died "of old age"<sup>133</sup>, and was buried next to his youngest daughter Mary in the chapel graveyard. A flat stone slab marks his final resting place, bearing the inscription, *"The reverend Robert Newstead, who died July 28 1865 in the 77th year of his age and the 50th of his ministry."*

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<sup>130</sup> PRO, 1861 census Holyhead RG 9/4372 Folio 27, p.5.

<sup>131</sup> Faulkner, *A Short History of Boston Spa Methodist Church*, p.50.

<sup>132</sup> JRUL, Robert Newstead's Obituary 1865, Minutes of Conference Vol XVI, 1864-66, p.230-2.

<sup>133</sup> General Register Office Death Certificate Robert Newstead [1865 Sept qtr Bramham 9c 421].

## Postscripts

What legacy remains of Robert's life? He had no sons to carry his surname into the twentieth century, but it survived as the middle name of his daughter Emily's granddaughter Enid Newstead Goad, who was born in Camberwell in 1906.<sup>134</sup>

As for Robert's nine years on the mission fields of Ceylon, his loyal service is commemorated in the name of the Newstead Girls College of Negombo, called after "one of the founders of the school, Rev Robert Newstead, the first resident Minister of Negombo who was appointed on 17 September 1817."<sup>135</sup> Founded by the Wesleyan Missionary Society in 1815, Newstead College, one of the oldest existing public schools in Sri Lanka, is now "a family community with Sinhala, Muslim, Tamil and Burger children from Christian, Catholic, Buddhist & Hindu backgrounds, living together in the abiding reality that they constitute one human family".<sup>136</sup> It was one of 60 schools affected by the tsunami of December 2004 but fortunately only the computer lab was damaged.<sup>137</sup>

The Methodist Church in 21st century Sri Lanka is one of the larger denominations with 143 congregations and over 17,000 members, but Christians account for only 7.62% of the population; Buddhism is the state religion, with a massive 71.93% share. However, despite increasing anti-Christian feeling in the country, the churches are still experiencing annual growth of around 2%.<sup>138</sup>

Robert Newstead's Sri Lankan journals and letters form part of the SOAS collection of Methodist archives at the University of London; as for his home ministry, his letters, together with many of his published books and pamphlets, survive in the John Rylands University Library in Manchester.

At Boston Spa the only memorial to the Newstead family apart from their gravestones is the lamp post (figure 37) standing in front of the Chapel. After their father's death in 1865, Elizabeth and Harriet turned to teaching to make their living; by 1871<sup>139</sup> they were running Riversdale House as a boarding school for young ladies, continuing until Harriet died in 1907<sup>140</sup>. In appreciation of their long and dedicated service, the committee of the Newstead memorial installed "a handsome lamp in the middle of the grass plot immediately in front of the chapel",<sup>141</sup> bearing the inscription: *"This lamp has been erected by the pupils of Elizabeth Townend and Harriet Marris Newstead of Riversdale, Boston Spa, in token of the affection and esteem which they bore to their beloved Principals. October 1907."*



fig. 37. Newstead lamp

And of course his portrait still hangs on his greatgreatgreatgreatniece's wall.

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<sup>134</sup> Freebmd Rootsweb Birth Record Enid Newstead Goad [1906 Jun Qtr Camberwell 1d 867].  
<http://freebmd.rootsweb.com/cgi/search.pl>. [Accessed 18 Jan 2006].

<sup>135</sup> Newstead Girls College, Negombo, *More Beyond*, <http://www.newsteadcollege.net/index.htm> [accessed 24 Nov 2006].

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Details of Damage Caused by Tsunami to Schools in the Coastal Areas of Sri Lanka*,  
[http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/srilanka/infocentre/assessments/others/doc/MinEdu\\_MDG\\_Edu%20for%20all/Details%20of%20Damage%20Caused%20by%20Tsunami%20to%20Schools.pdf](http://www.humanitarianinfo.org/srilanka/infocentre/assessments/others/doc/MinEdu_MDG_Edu%20for%20all/Details%20of%20Damage%20Caused%20by%20Tsunami%20to%20Schools.pdf) (accessed 23 Dec 2006).

<sup>138</sup> *Christian Churches, Schools and Ministries in Sri Lanka*, <http://across.co.nz/SriLankaChristian.html> (accessed 23 Dec 2006).

<sup>139</sup> PRO, 1871 census Clifford-cum-Boston RG 10/4296, p. 4.

<sup>140</sup> HMCS Principal Probate Registry Letter of Administration for Harriet Marris Newstead, who died 16 May 1907.

<sup>141</sup> Faulkner, *A Short History of Boston Spa Methodist Church*, p. 17.



## Acknowledgments

Thanks to my husband Michael who took the photographs which form the majority of the illustrations. The remaining pictures were scanned from my collection of old postcards of Ceylon, apart from the 1880 map of Norfolk which was part of an old encyclopaedia, and the 1914 map of the Ceylon coast from Galle to Colombo which I borrowed from the University of Texas copyright-free website at [http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/ceylon\\_1914.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/ceylon_1914.jpg).

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Jane Swan  
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