

son. She had joined the local Methodist Society in 1796 and returned to Shropshire in March 1798 to work at Miss Luton's school in Shifnal. While there she visited Madeley at weekends becoming close to both Mary Fletcher and Sarah Lawrence. About 18 months later she moved to Madeley and took up residence in the vicarage. Mary Fletcher seems already to have viewed her as her successor and, as Mary Fletcher's health declined, she took on more responsibilities acting as a class leader and a preacher.

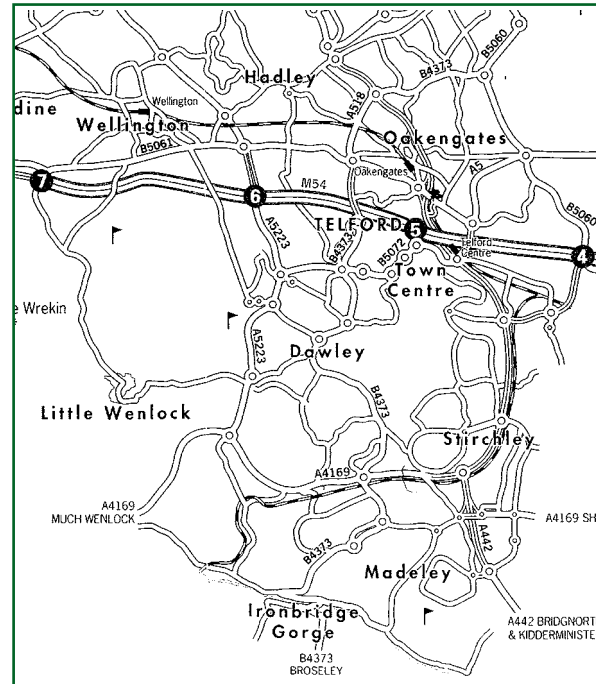
Even before Mary Fletcher's death the relationship between the mainstream Anglicans and the Methodists was beginning to break down and divisions began to appear within the local Methodist movement itself. In May 1816, under pressure from the then incumbent, she left the vicarage and moved into a nearby house where she reserved the upper room for public meetings¹. In 1831 the Vicarage barn was demolished and all Mary's activities became concentrated at her home. In 1833 the Wesleyans built a chapel close by (later home to the Madeley Infant School) and services there were timed to coincide with Mary Tooth's – so she changed the times of her services to allow attendance at both. In 1841 a new, larger Methodist Chapel (now the Fletcher Memorial Church) was built in Court Street but Mary Tooth's supporters continued to meet at her house until her death. Throughout her work she was supported by her sister Rosamund who had joined her in Madeley a few years prior to the death of Mary Fletcher and continued to assist until Rosamund's own death in the early 1830s.

Mary Tooth remained highly active into her 60s continuing to attend missionary, temperance and sewing meetings, visiting the sick and collecting for the poor. Towards the end of her life poor health prevented travel but she led three weekly classes with a total of nearly eighty members, in her home, until her death on 15th November 1843.

Mary Fletcher, Sally Lawrence and Mary Tooth became the leaders of a religious group drawn together by the charisma of John Fletcher and that group's influence extended far beyond the local. Mary Tooth played a key role in protecting and perpetuating the spiritual legacy of the Fletchers and acting as custodian of their memories as she established Madeley as a place of pilgrimage where she dispensed and displayed relics and kept alive the tradition initiated by them for a further three generations.

¹ Her house was later converted into a public house and is almost certainly the building on the corner of High Street and Station Road, now occupied by the Maharajah Indian Restaurant.

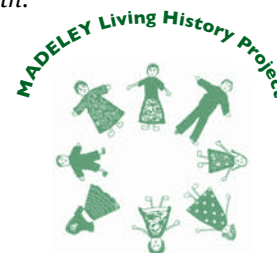
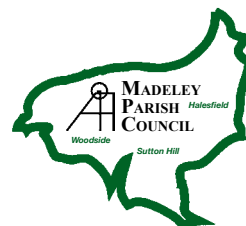
How to get to Madeley



Compiled by members of the Madeley Living History Group



The Fletcher tomb showing the dedication to Mary Tooth.



Parish People No. 7



Above: St Michael's Church, vicarage and vicarage barn (where Mary Fletcher preached)

Below: Site of former vicarage barn at junction of Church Street and Station Road.



Madeley's Pioneering Women Preachers

March 2012

Madeley's pioneering women preachers

Mary Bosanquet (1739-1815) was born on 12th September 1739 at Forest House, Leytonstone (Essex) the second of the four children of Samuel Bosanquet a wealthy Huguenot merchant who was also lord of the manor of Leytonstone. The family was involved in financial trading in the City and Mary's younger brother (also Samuel) became a director of the Bank of England.

From an early age, Mary displayed strong spiritual awareness, particularly influenced both by a devout family servant and by her grandmother. Despite the family's wealth her habits were frugal and, in 1760, she rejected her family's fashionable lifestyle, they parted by mutual consent and Mary left home to embrace Methodism. She joined the London Foundry Society (named after the disused Foundry building in which the first Methodist Society was formed in 1738) and was greatly influenced by the revival movement of 1761-1762.

In 1763, on receipt of a legacy from her grandmother and supported by her close friend Sarah Ryan, she established a Christian community which catered for needy children and adults. At the same time she began to give scripture readings at Methodist meetings. Between 1763 and 1768 around 34 adults and 35 children joined the community. Among the children was four-year-old Sarah (Sally) Lawrence, an orphaned niece of Sarah Ryan.

In June 1768, for financial reasons, the community left Leytonstone and moved to Cross Hall, Gildersome, (in Morley, near Leeds). Here, as well as receiving spiritual comfort, the residents were encouraged to develop practical skills which would benefit them in the future. Unfortunately, shortly after the move Sarah Ryan died leaving Mary to manage an orphanage, school, dairy farm and malt kilns

in addition to her expanding religious duties as she became in increasing demand as a preacher often travelling miles to address large crowds. At the same time she undertook responsibility for the upbringing of Sally Lawrence. Over the years the commune



Mary Fletcher
(© Leodis Archive)



Mary Fletcher
(© National Portrait Archive, London)

grew in size and her financial problems became seemingly insurmountable. However, in June 1781, she received a letter from John Fletcher.

Their paths had first crossed some twenty-five years earlier while she

was still a teenager but their lives had diverged although it is clear that they never forgot one another.

A few months later John and Mary were reunited and they married on 12th November at Batley Parish Church. She was 42 and he in his early 50s. Mary was able to arrange for Cross Hall to be taken over by local benefactors and for all of the occupants to be rehoused satisfactorily. She moved to Madeley taking Sally Lawrence with her, ostensibly as a domestic help and companion but *de facto* as her adopted daughter. John had spent much of the previous ten years away from his parish of Madeley recuperating from his respiratory problems in his native Switzerland. During this time he had been obliged to neglect some of his parochial duties and Mary quickly established an important role for herself, undertaking a wide range of pastoral commitments including conducting meetings, visiting the sick and infirm and dispensing natural remedies to them (of which she carefully recorded details in her notes). Sally Lawrence, too, began to undertake evangelistic work in the parish and preached in Coalport for several years. Sally had a particular gift with children and with the sick. John and Mary's marriage seems to have been remarkably happy. However, less than four years later John was dead. On his deathbed he is said to have called for Sally Lawrence to come and pray with him and comfort him.

His successor permitted Mary to remain in the vicarage and even to advise on the appointment of curates and she was allowed to use the adjacent barn for her religious meetings. Sally Lawrence remained with Mary until her death in 1800 after which Mary had a chapel built in



The Fletcher tomb in St Michael's graveyard, showing the dedication to Sarah Lawrence.

Coalport in Sally's memory. Shortly after Sally's death Mary Tooth joined Mary Fletcher in Madeley vicarage.

Mary Fletcher continued to run the Methodist Society at Madeley until her death – the only Methodist woman to exercise this kind of authority. She corresponded with, and encouraged, other women preachers, inviting them to Madeley, encouraging them to speak in the tithe barn then to go back to their homes inspired, prayed for and written to. Her talents were clearly recognised by John Wesley himself who tried, on several occasions after the death of John Fletcher, to persuade her to leave Madeley to live and minister nearer to his own base in London.

Until September 1814, at the age of 75, Mary Fletcher was still preaching five times a week and only preached her final sermon, shortly before her death, a year later. Towards the end of her life she developed a suspected tumour in her left breast but died on 9th December 1815 of a respiratory illness which caused her much suffering during her final weeks. In her last illness she was cared for by her friend, companion and executrix, Mary Tooth who would continue her work for almost thirty years after her death.

Mary Tooth (1778-1843) was born on the 30th May 1778 in St. Mary's row, Moseley (Worcestershire). She was one of nine children of whom only Mary and her sisters Rosamund and Elizabeth survived to adulthood. Her parents were, apparently, not religious and the Christian influences in her early life came from her pious grandparents.

In December 1795 she was offered a job, as a teacher and domestic servant, at a school in the Madeley area run by a Mrs Micklewright whom she had met through friends of her mother. She remained at the school for two years before being replaced by her sister Rosamund and returning to Birmingham as a consequence of an unwelcome marriage proposal from Mrs Micklewright's