

JAMES ROBINSON AND FINTONA'S PRIMITIVE WESLEYAN MEETING HOUSE

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The diaries of James Robinson, which are held in Australia,¹ provide a first-hand record of his involvement with the Primitive Wesleyan movement, and the building of their meeting-house in Fintona. He was born in Fintona, Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland, in 1779, the son of Hugh Robinson and Anne (*née* Rea) who were members of the Established Church. On the wall of the present Fintona Methodist Church hangs a marble plaque in his memory.

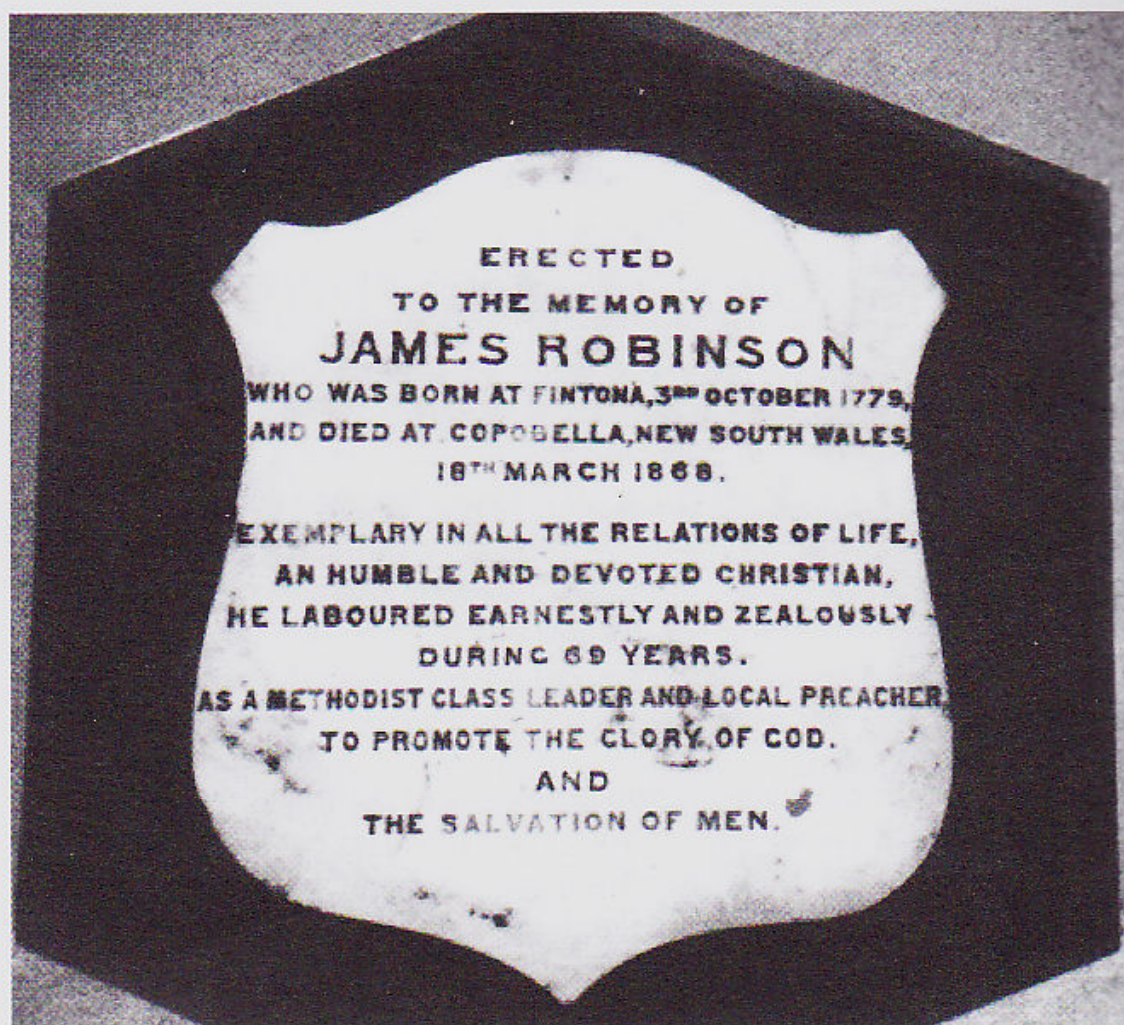
The Missionaries Gideon Ouseley² and Charles Graham³ visited Fintona in December 1799.⁴ James, although previously sceptical of Methodism was so impressed that he promised to Mr Ouseley that he would give up his sins and turn to God. After this he reasoned with his

¹ James Robinson, '*Papers, 1822-ca1868*', MLMSS 1533, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

² Gideon Ouseley (1762-1839; entered ministry 1799). He was appointed a General Missionary in 1799 with Charles Graham and James McQuigg. A fluent Irish speaker he was the longest-serving and most effective Irish evangelist of his day. [Norman W. Taggart, *Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, (London: Epworth, 2000) (*DMBI*)].

³ Charles Graham (1750-1824; entered ministry 1790). A native of Sligo and fluent Irish speaker, he was sent to Kerry in 1790 and subsequently acquired the name 'the apostle of Kerry'. He and Ouseley worked as a team from 1799 to 1804, which were particularly fruitful years. [Taggart, *DMBI*].

⁴ Charles Henry Crookshank, *History of Methodism in Ireland*, Vol. 2, (London: Woolmer, 1886), p. 173.



Memorial plaque to James Robinson in Fintona Methodist Church.

wife who immediately agreed to join him in becoming religious. Some time later Mr Joseph Morrison was sent to preach in Fintona and James and his wife attended his meetings.⁵ One night after he had preached, Mr Morrison requested that all who were determined to serve God should stay and the others withdraw. He proposed to form a class in town and called for people to have their names 'noted'. James, after some hesitation, was the first to give his name followed by others and about 16 names in all were noted.

⁵ Joseph Morrison, entered the itinerancy in 1800, having already been employed the pervious year as a lay missionary, supported by Mrs Gayer. During this period among many converted through his preaching were James Ritchie and William Caldwell of Kilwaughter, whose descendants considerably swelled the ranks of Methodism in Ireland and America. (Crookshank, Vol. 2, p. 179-80) After serving in Ireland for four years he was appointed to the West Indies where he died in 1807, it was said by his physician, of an illness by 'the too frequent use of the cold bath'.

For nearly two years after this, James was undecided about joining the Methodists. He resolved that he would have to first meet again with Mr Ouseley. To his great delight he heard that Mr Ouseley was returning north and would be attending a meeting about five miles from Fintona. In spite of having a number of men harvesting oats at the time, he insisted that he and his wife should attend the meeting. Mr Ouseley had not yet arrived, so they continued along the road till they met him on his way. Soon after talking to him, any doubts had been dispelled and although not yet a preacher, James started holding prayer meetings in his home. In 1802 he was appointed a Class leader and proceeded to preach widely in the Omagh district, sometimes twice in one day and riding from 9 to 17 miles every Sunday.

For some years the Fintona class, having no meeting-house of their own, met in private dwellings and from 1816 in small rented premises. James Robinson's promise to God was to build a Primitive Wesleyan preaching house in Fintona and in August of 1825, being occupied in the business of building houses, he wrote: 'I would this week rather be engaged in building a House for God to be worshipped in than for my self or family's profit but I cannot as yet procure ground for it.'

In October 1826, he wrote that, although for 20 years past he could not get a place to build the house, he could now get ground in two or three places. He spoke to Mr Eccles⁶ to whom the town belonged, who offered to assist him in selecting the best place and would let him have it free of charge.

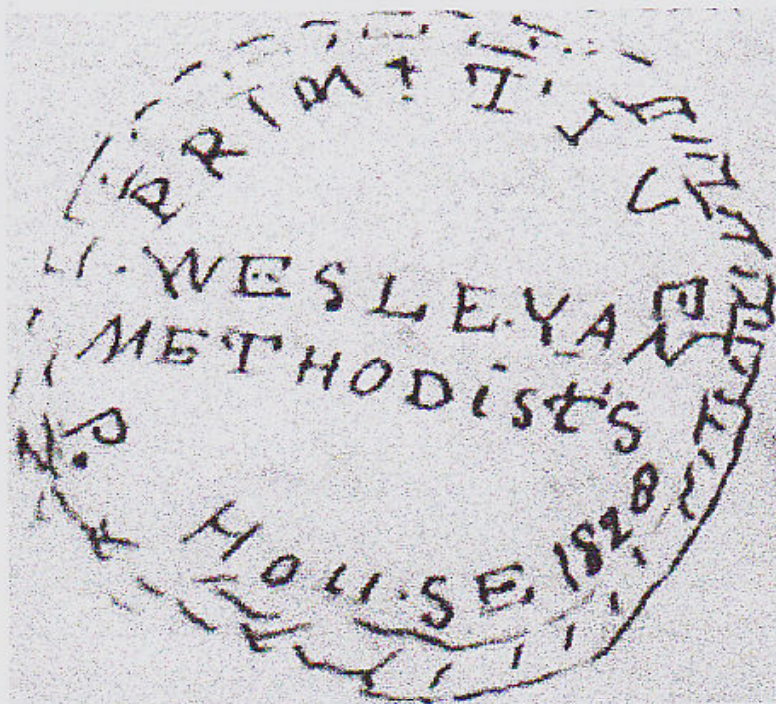
On 5th March 1828 James began purchasing materials with which to build the meeting-house, writing 'fearing the greater part of the expense of the house would fall upon me I am purchasing the several materials from time to time so that I will not feel the expense so great when I begin to build'. On 27 April 1828 Mr Eccles donated some cut stone, a door and a door frame that he had lately taken out of his house. 'They would have cost us £10 had we purchased them.'

James commenced building on 23 June 1828, and appointed a young stonemason, who had recently joined the Primitive Wesleyans, as foreman to conduct the business while he went to the annual Conference in

⁶ The Eccles were a Scottish plantation family who acquired the Manor at 'Fentanagh' in 1668.

Dublin.⁷ On his return he was surprised and delighted to see 'the house was built in 12 days and ready for the roof'. He estimated that it would be finished in four to six weeks. While in Dublin he purchased all the hinges and locks and a 6 branch chandelier and other materials for the pulpit etc.

By mid-August James wrote that the meeting-house was nearing completion. Below is his representation of the inscription placed in the front of the house. He was urged to also include his name, but instead he modestly had '*BUILT BY JAS ROBINSON*' placed on the back of the stone where it would never be seen unless it was taken down.



By the end of November his estimate of the cost was upward of £230, against which he had so far received subscriptions of less than £10. A subsequent walk through the town by James accompanied by three 'respectable' non-Primitive Wesleyan citizens collected £22.

He wrote to the Rev. Adam Averell⁸ who agreed to open the house on Tuesday 23 December. During the week ended 14 December the house was completed and notices of the opening were printed as under:

⁷ James Robinson was lay representative at the Primitive Wesleyan Methodist Conferences between 1822 and 1825 and also in 1828 and 1830.

⁸ Adam Averell (1754-1847), an ordained deacon of the Church of Ireland, who joined the Methodists in 1796 and served without pastoral charge and without salary as an evangelist at large until 1818 when he threw his commitment behind the Primitive Wesleyan Methodist Society and became their President until his death in 1847. [Taggart, *DMBI*].

The Primitive
Wesleyan Methodists
New
Preaching House
in Fintona
Will be opened on Tuesday the 23rd Inst at
12 O'clock by the Revd A Averell who will
preach a sermon on the occasion.

Dated 15th December 1828

The following passage of Scripture was printed in large letters across the gable inside the house:

'MINE HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED AN HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLE:
ISAIAH C56 V7'

On the Saturday evening before the opening James visited the new house and lit the candles to see how it would look. So many people flocked in that he was forced to put out the candles and leave the house. He wrote, 'O how I felt when I looked around me to see such a delightful place'. He preached the next evening to a meeting in the old house, in spite of being warned that the building would not be safe, and felt so attached to it he wrote, 'this is our last meeting here and since the year 1816 I witnessed upwards of 300 souls converted to God in it – at present the floor and roof is altogether decayed'.

Unfortunately the congregation at the opening was disappointingly small, due to a mistaken report having been circulated that only those who had subscribed would be admitted. Even so, a collection by Mr Eccles and the Rev. William Tomes,⁹ the Church curate, amounted to £54. Two days later, on Christmas day when the Rev. Mr Averell preached in the evening,

⁹ William Tomes, was born in Dublin and entered Trinity College, Dublin, in 1805 aged 19, obtaining his BA in 1811. It seems as if he was curate at Fintona (Donacarvey parish) by 1819 and remained such until 1838. [James B. Leslie, *Clogher Clergy and Parishes*, (Enniskillen: The Author, 1929), p. 169].

'the house barely held the congregation'.

During the following week James made a will leaving to the Primitive Wesleyan Methodist Society the preaching house on condition that they 'hold to their present principles and abide in union with the Protestant Church of England and Ireland'. It was otherwise to revert to his beneficiaries.

On 30 August 1838 he left Fintona for Liverpool from where he, together with his second wife Jane (*née* Wallace) and their children (seven daughters and one son) would sail to New South Wales. He first stopped in Omagh where he had a deed prepared by which he made the preaching house over 'to the Society for ever free of rent or renewal fine', and 'appointed as trustees for the time being Rev. Adam Averell, William Beatty,¹⁰ Thomas McGann¹¹ preachers and their successors as such, and Thomas Patton of Fintona, James R. Martin of Moy, Co. Tyrone,¹² and John Green of Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal,¹³ laymen members of the Society and their successors for ever'.

After James Robinson died at his home, 'Coppabella' in New South Wales, in 1868, the memorial plaque shown above, was erected in the preaching house, which continued to be used till 1878 when the two Methodist Conferences reunited. The plaque was then moved to the wall of the present Methodist Church which had been built in 1863.¹⁴

In 1982 two Omagh historians wrote of the primitive 'chapel' in Fintona, 'This church seated 120 but no trace of it now remains.'¹⁵

It should be noted that James Robinson continued his work for Methodism in Australia, introducing Wesleyan Methodism to the Wollongong district in New South Wales and planning and commencing

¹⁰ William Beatty (1793-1844, em 1819), Primitive Wesleyan preacher who was born in Ballinamallard and was one of the early recruits to the Primitive itinerancy. Frequently appointed Chairman of District he died comparatively young of a fever.

¹¹ Thomas McFann (1798-1864, em 1816), born in Belfast he came from a Presbyterian background to Methodism and became one of the important leaders of the Primitive Wesleyans, serving as Travelling Secretary from 1836-1842.

¹² Like James Robinson, James R. Martin of Charlemont was a regular lay representative at the Primitive Wesleyan Conferences. He was killed in a public caravan accident while descending from a vehicle in Dundalk on 9 January 1840.

¹³ Between 1822 and 1837 John Green was the Ballyshannon lay representative to Conference twelve times.

¹⁴ James Ritchie, 'Fintona Circuit', *The Christian Advocate*, 8 December 1909, p. 620.

¹⁵ Norman Johnstone and Desmond Preston, *Methodism in Omagh: A short history 1767-1982*, (Omagh: The Church, 1982) p. 13.

the building of a preaching house there. Unfortunately he had moved on to his property 'Coppabella' before it was completed by others. 'Coppabella' was truly a pioneering venture in 1842 at the age of 63, and he then found himself about 150 miles from the nearest church.

Further information about James Robinson is contained in a letter addressed to 'Brothers Simmons¹⁶ and Martin',¹⁷ published in the *Newry Telegraph*, Dungannon, October 1840; also in *The Morning Star*, Monaghan, December 1840, and quoted in an article by Theo McMahon.¹⁸

¹⁶ Richard Simmons, lay representative of the Charlemont (Moy) Circuit to the PWM Conference in 1824.

¹⁷ James R. Martin, lay representative of the Charlemont (Moy) Circuit to the PWM Conference in 1821, 1823, 1828, 1833 and 1837.

¹⁸ Theo McMahon, 'From Fintona to Wollongong, 1838', *Clogher Record*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1988): 116-125.