St Olave's Churchyard

The 'Polemic Divine'

The Life of Wesleyan Methodist Itinerant Minister
The Rev Daniel Isaac - 1780-1834



Written and researched by Helen Fields



The Reverend Daniel Isaac (only known portrait – an engraving owned by the Rev James Everett, biographer of Isaac

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Introduction

St Olave's Churchyard is a natural haven of peace and tranquility, yet it hosts a significant social history, both of York and nationally. Most will know of the most illustrious occupant of the churchyard, William Etty RA, the York born artist famed for his ability to reproduce the realistic flesh tones of his subjects; also Etty's campaigns to preserve the antiquities of York, including the Minster and the City Walls.

Few, however (apart from Methodist and non-conformist historians) will be aware the churchyard is also the final resting place of Daniel Isaac, a celebrated itinerant Wesleyan Minister. The forgotten history

of this remarkable man, whose life was punctuated by momentous political, social and world events (of which he had some personal experience), has recently come to light. It is intruiging that he should be interred in a Church of England burial ground. Why this is the case has not been discovered. Possibly he was interred at St Olave's because a Methodist burial ground did not exist in York at the time of his death. Much of his history originates from a comprehensive biography, written in 1838, by Daniel's friend, supporter and fellow Minister, Rev James Everett⁽¹⁾.



Reverend James Everett (1784-1872)

^{1.} Rev James Everett. The Polemic Divine: Memoirs of the Rev Daniel Isaac, 1838. London.

Birth, childhood and attraction to Methodism

Daniel Isaac was born in July 1780 in Caythorpe, a village about 18 miles from Lincoln, in the same county as the founders of Methodism, John and Charles Wesley. He was the tenth son of Bryan Isaac a farmer, and his wife Mary. His parents were God fearing established parish church goers, instructing their children in bible study and reading prayers with them at home each evening.



Caythorpe – St Vincent's Parish. Church.

Although strict, the couple were loving and caring towards their children. In the latter period of their lives they too became Wesleyan Methodists. Bryan died in 1797 and Mary in 1817.

In infancy, Daniel narrowly escaped death by accidentally falling into a fire grate. Severely burned, he bore the resulting scars, which were noticeable around his mouth, for the rest of his life. His elementary schooling took place at Caythorpe, where Daniel showed an early aptitude for reading and study. Bryan Isaac was convinced that his son should advance his education and sent him to a school in Marston, (five miles from Caythorpe). There he learned Latin and some Hebrew. After completing his education, Daniel began working at a post office in Grantham. He stayed only a short time leaving to take up a job as an usher (an apprentice schoolmaster) at an academy in Denton. His intellect, humour and kind demeanor endeared him to the children in his charge.

At the age of 19, Daniel left home for Nottingham to work in a bank, an occupation favoured by his father. He met a clergyman, Mr Thomas Jerram who, sympathetic to the Methodist movement, encouraged him to attend the local Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, which Daniel readily embraced. Daniel's early occupations revealed a young man unsettled about his future direction. After a couple of years he left Nottingham to take up a post in a Methodist school closer to home. Finding the children unruly, he decided to learn a trade as a linen weaver, returning again to teaching two months later. Despite this restlessness, Daniel was distinguised by his devotional spirit, often seen praying fervently and fasting. He grew ever closer to the Methodist movement and was received into the Methodist Society in 1797.

Career as Minister

From then on his course as a future Wesleyan Minister, which spanned the reigns of three Kings⁽²⁾, was set. Whilst still teaching, Daniel began to preach locally. He sometimes walked over 30 miles on a Sunday to give three or four sermons to different congregations, returning home frequently to Caythorpe to visit his recently widowed mother and his family. In 1801, he commenced a full role as an itinerant Minister, aged 21. That same year he was 'licenced as a Preacher of protestant subjects, dissenting from the Church of England, commonly called Methodists'. During his life, Daniel preached on a wide range of circuits in England, commencing in Gainsborough and Grimsby. Amongst other places, he covered circuits in Louth, Lynn and Yarmouth (in Norfolk), Leicester, Wetherby, Newcastle, South Shields, Hull, Leeds, Sheffield and York. York was a favourite posting. He was on the circuit here three times.

Before he had access to a horse or carriage, Daniel continued to walk miles to preach locally, carrying a heavy buden of clothes and provisions. An itinerant preacher required a robust constitution, illustrated in a letter from a fellow preacher, urging Daniel 'not to neglect his health' and to 'take a little port wine, if offered, to brace the system'.

His first period as a preacher on the York circuit in 1805, coincided with the early stages of Napoleon's campaigns and conquests in Europe and against the Russian Empire. In one of his sermons, Daniel compared Napoleon to 'the beast', pointing out that the name Napoleon Bonaparte, in arithmetical terms, equated to the number 666. His sermons were inventive, engaging and original. Usually written in skeletal form, they were delivered with a mixture of wit, frankness and piety. In the pulpit, Daniel could be outspoken and forthright. His reputation for reasoning and keen argument often courted controversy amongst fellow Methodists. When criticised, he was steadfast in defence of his views.

Marriage

Whilst undertaking his first York circuit posting, Daniel married Mary Patrick, at St Saviour's Church on 24th February 1808. According to Everett, they enjoyed a happy and fulfilling marriage. Mary brought

^{2.} George III, George IV and William IV.

to his life companionship, help and support. There are no records indicating that the couple had any children, however Mary's niece, Hannah Patrick, came to live with them until she died, tragically, of Consumption, aged 21 in 1828. Daniel's income (around £30 quarterly) was sufficient for the couple to employ a servant.

Personal anecdotes and effects of social, religious and political upheaval

An illustration of the popularity of his sermons relates to Daniel's attendance at the 1809 Manchester Methodist Society Conference, where he preached at the Swan Street Chapel. Many fellow ministers came to hear him and were seated in the gallery. Bending his eye down to the poor (who were occupying the free seats) Daniel glanced from left to right, pointed to the gallery and said:

'I come here **not** to preach to my brethren in the ministry, but to those of you who are poor – who require instruction- and are in earnest for the salvation of your souls'.

Another illustration relates to his pointed remarks about the Church of England and high-churchmen, 'If Methodism is what they say it

is, then the clergymen, who cannot stop it's progress, ought to be kicked out of the church and their gowns torn from their backs!'.

In the pulpit and out of it, his humour was often on display. Whilst preaching at a local chapel, a member of the congregation let out an audible (and obvious) yawn during his sermon, Daniel looked towards him and with affected pity said: 'so sorry I disturbed you'. In yet another, an elderly lady, visiting his home and seeing him relaxed and puffing on a clay pipe, remarked



Saint Saviour's Church, York.

with false affectation, holding her hands aloft: 'Aye, Mr Isaac, I see you are at your idol again?', 'Madam', he replied coolly (through a cloud of smoke, with a demure expression on his face), 'I am burning it'. There are several newspaper quotes of this witty anecdote, which became a well known quip, several years after his death.

Daniel was known for his tenderness towards the poor, regularly giving away his clothes and donating personal subscriptions for poor relief charities. His lack of pretence showed whilst on the Leicester circuit, where he had a small garden which delighted him. He is said to have enjoyed filling a wheelbarrow with manure and wheeling it to his 'little Eden'.

But he admitted that whilst gardening was beneficial to a 'person of sedentary habits, the risk of colds from violent perspiration is unfriendly to health'. He always enjoyed a walk. In the summer, Daniel would be seen walking on the road with his hat in his hand, his coat over his arm and his shirt unbuttoned as if he was a farmer going to market. He also liked cold bathing, even in the midst of winter, breaking the ice on the local river to do so.

A notable incident, cited by the *Shrewsbury News* of 1877 (and related four decades after his death) describes Daniel, whilst on the Sheffield circuit, passing a bookshop displaying a profane and hideous picture of the Trinity. The picture had a caption next to it asking for a portrait of the devil to hang alongside it. It caught Daniel's eye. He went to the opposite side of the street and bought a pen and paper. He scrawled a note to the bookseller stating: *'Sir, if you want a portrait of the devil, get your own taken, for 'who so like the father as the son' – D Isaac'*. The message was conveyed and noised abroad with crowds coming forward to mock the bookseller and repeat the message. The bookseller called in the police, which only served to increase the notoriety of the message. After two or three days, the bookseller decamped to another location, to avoid the *'torrent of contempt poured upon him'*.

Political events

In 1811, a parliamentary bill was brought forward by Lord Sidmouth regarding Methodist dissenters. The purpose was to allow exemption from military service only to Ministers who could be 'vouched for' by six householders. Ministers could not therefore speak or act in defence of their own position on the subject. There was widespread protest and the Earl of Stanhope opposed it passionately.

Daniel was one of the leading Methodist opposers, active in meetings, writing pamphlets and gaining respect for his stand, with colleagues. The bill was defeated and Everett suggested that 'Not little was due to the memory of Mr Isaac'.

Around the same time, the Combination Acts of 1799-1800, (passed initially by Pitt's Government), were being applied against Trades Union activity. The Acts were a response to fears that Trades Unions and associations could incite similar unrest in England as that wrought by the French Revolution. They allowed summary trial, prosecution and conviction for offenders and were not repealed until 1824.

Whilst engaged on the Shields circuit, two miners (members of an association called '*The Brotherhood*') with grievances against their pit owners, attacked Daniel on the road. They approached him because he was the leader of a group of ministers influencing the break up of their associations and trades unions. The ministers were viewed as supporting the state against the miner's aim of being released from employer bonds, preventing them bargaining for better wages and conditions. Preachers who opposed strikes, sedition and the taking of secret oaths were jeered and vilified. Although not unsympathetic to the pit men's cause, many Wesleyan Ministers, including Daniel, were implacably opposed to law breaking and violence. By contrast, the breakaway Primitive Methodists, largely supported the pit men and their approach.

The attackers rained blows down on Daniel with cudgels. He tried to fend them off with a stick, eventually taking to his heels and escaping. He was badly bruised and beaten. Afterwards, Daniel and the other ministers supporting his stance, continued to oppose what they deemed were conspiracies perpetrated by 'the sons of violence'. For his own safety, Daniel was subsequently advised to travel in company, but he refused. Everett noted this as an example of Daniel's fearlessness in carrying out his duties.

Book on 'Ecclesiastical Claims'

In 1814, following a bout of Typhus fever (which both he and Mary probably contracted after tending the poor and sick), Daniel finished a book entitled 'Ecclesiastical Claims' and sought its publication. It was printed in Scotland but not yet in England where it was the subject of criticism from the Methodist Society. Undaunted, in 1816, Daniel requested that his book be advertised for inclusion in the Methodist Magazine and to encourage sales and distribution. This was refused on the basis that some passages were heretical and blasphemous, others critical to fellow ministers. The Society stressed this was not a criticism

of Daniel himself nor his ministry, but they subsequently issued an interdict against his book.

When the decision was made, Daniel was not present. He was affronted that he was unable to argue against the criticism. Publishing a defence, he entered into a long dispute with the Methodist hierarchy which dragged on until 1824. In his defence, Daniel stated that the conference had: 'Thrashed the book in the fear of God and embraced the writer for the love of God'. He refuted and scorned his Society accusers, stating that: 'Every writer should be responsible for what he has written. If the book is heritical, then I am a heretic, if Jacobinical, then I am a Jacobite, if blasphemous then I am a blasphemer'. This comment was levelled at those who had condemned his book but not himself.

His book also contained informed analysis refuting and dismissing extravagant and contradictory claims about the scriptures, put forward by 'papists and espiscopalians'. He went so far as to question some of the scriptural views held by Wesley himself, which many of his shocked colleagues considered totally irreverant and indelicate. It is no wonder then, that Daniel's book was not accepted and promoted in England until 1841, when his works were edited and published by his friend and Minister, John Burdsall⁽³⁾.

His ideas gradually gained more favour and understanding in later years. Despite the criticism, Daniel never considered leaving the Methodist Church and was sustained by his friends who stood by him, including his biographer James Everett⁽⁴⁾. His next work was published whilst stationed at Leicester, entitled '*Baptism Discussed*'. Robert Hall⁽⁵⁾, a celebrated Baptist Minister, when urged to read it,

^{3.} John Burdsall was a Wesleyan Minister and native of York. He established a theological class for local preachers. A self-taught scholar, his sermons were fluent and balanced. He wrote theological texts and published the complete works of Daniel Isaac in 1841.

^{4.} James Everett was himself subject to criticism and eventual expulsion from the Methodist Conference (the highest legislative authority in the Methodist Church) in 1849. Expelled because he wrote critical pamphlets against the hierarchy, Everett continued his agitation, He became a prolific author and prime mover in the formation of a new sect in 1857, 'The United Methodist Free Church'. Everett died in 1872.

^{5.} Robert Hall (1794-1831) was an English Baptist Minister who acquired a reputation for fine, outspoken sermons. Considered to be the best preacher of his day, Hall was an advocate of freedom of the press. He spoke out against corruption in Government and defended the reformer, clergyman and scientist Joseph Priestley, who had criticised 'Institutional Christianity'.

remarked: 'If he has exposed our views of Baptism as he exposed the Episcopalians in his 'Ecclesiastical Claims', the Lord have mercy on us'

In the late 1820s, recovering from a number of illnesses and minor maladies, Daniel wrote to a friend confessing he felt old age creeping on:

'Age comes on gently and almost inperceptibly. How willing we are to think ourselves always young. I should look as young as ever if it were not for a few wrinkles. I could eat as well as ever if I had not lost a few teeth. I should be as active as ever if not for stiffness in my joints. Well my friend, it is the wise ordinance of providence, that these transitions are slow and gentle. I think I am as happy as I ever was however and my chief joy is derived from a heavenly source'.

Further political involvement

He continued to be controversial. Whilst on the Leeds (Holbeck) circuit, he remonstrated with men who had formed an unlawful union, urging that Christians should not take an unlawful oath, which was not authorised by the King. He told them that 'no good could come of secrecy which excites suspicion and does not have the support of public opinion'. He considered such disputes sowed discord and encouraged anarchy against the social order, ultimately harming working men and their families. Although rebellious against the Methodist hierarchy, Daniel was a supporter of peace and social harmony and would not countenance actions he felt 'were hindrances to the fruits of men's labours'.

Anti-Slavery

On the subject of slavery, Daniel was indignant, considering it to be a monstrous practice. In a letter to Everett in 1826, he mentioned: 'a public meeting, last Thursday, to petition parliament against the slavery of the West Indies. But as the petition neither prays for immediate abolition nor an end to the withdrawment of bounties and protecting duties from West Indian produce, I shall not sign it. I am no believer in the gradual abolition scheme'.

The petition he referred to was drawn up by the Anti-Slavery Society, a body which had long campaigned for abolition. The Society

reluctantly acknowledged that 'gradual' abolition had greater chances of success in the longer term. Daniel felt this had been tried for half a century and achieved little. He went on in his letter to say that: 'Short of total abolition from all British territories and colonies, cautious reform is useless'. He was convinced that 'an enlightened Christian nation should not continue to countenance such a sinful practice'. Everett wrote that it was Daniel's ardent prayer that the deep-dyed sin of slavery would 'only prosper on the ruins of Christianity' (6).

Instrumental music in church worship

Daniel was no less controversial in his views on the use of instrumental and organ music in places of worship, taking a minority stand against it. He considered violins as 'squeaky shoulder height things'. His preference was for unaccompanied singing, as the: 'only mode of music sanctioned by divine authority, reflecting purity, plainess and simplicity. Expressing his feelings at a Methodist Conference, he explained 'I object to organs and all other instruments of music in public worship because I think the Christian sacrifice of praise should be the fruit of our lips'. It is not without irony therefore that Daniel's grave is situated within close hearing of the strains of beautiful music heard weekly at St Olave's, yet it is hoped, even he, could not fail to be appreciative of it.

Factory reform

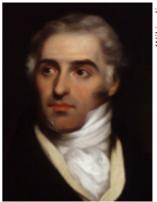
Daniel took active interest in, and support for, the Ten-Hour Rule bill eventually brought by Lord Ashley-Cooper (Earl of Shaftsbury) and resulting in the Factory Act of 1833. This landmark legislation was followed by subsequent reforms over the next decade. The ten-hour rule was designed to limit the working hours of children (and eventually adults) in factories, who were exploited and subjected to awful conditions, particularly the dangerous operation of power looms. Daniel was due to speak in favour of the bill at a public meeting in 1832,

6. The Abolition Movement had opposed slavery in Britain since the 1770s. Their protracted struggle sought to make the practice illegal by banning British ships from participating. John Newton, a former slaver who later wrote the hymn 'Amazing Grace' and William Wilberforce MP were the main leaders. Partial success came in 1807 with an Act introducing gradual abolition. The trade continued in the colonies and territories and for two decades little more was achieved, despite continued agitation. An act abolishing slavery throughout the Empire, finally achieved success in July 1833. Wilberforce died three days later. His task was completed. Daniel Isaac, an active supporter of abolition, as were most Methodists, lived to know that the practice he deplored, had ended.

Wikipedia

presided over by Michael Thomas Sadler, the Tory MP for Leeds. Sadler, originally a woollen cloth merchant from Yorkshire, was a leading proponent of factory reform and a prominent philanthropist. His approach to reform was considered a precursor to the Chartist movement.

Daniel told Sadler, (following his request for Daniel to speak at the meeting) that his interest in the bill was not as a Whig or Tory, but simply a 'question of humanity.' In the event, Daniel was unable to put his case because meeting proceedings were delayed and he had to leave to attend another engagement. Everett,



Michael Thomas Sadler MP for Leeds Factory reformer

subsequently found amongst his papers, the note Daniel had prepared for the meeting, stating the grounds for his support. His case was as follows:

- 1. God and nature agree that the labourer is worthy of his hire: is entitled to to an equitable remuneration for his work. Present practices fall short of this.
- 2. He ought not to be overworked. This not only extracts the sweat from his brow, but his flesh from his bones and the blood from his veins.
- 3. It is unjust to others who cannot get employment.
- 4. It is contrary to the law of God.
- 5. It is cruel. Felons only work 10 hours.
- 6. The cause of this state of things Machinary. Its chief benefit consists in lessening human toil. Its collaterals are extra production and cheapness. Instead of twelve hours, as formerly, if six would produce as much now, work nine hours and these benefits are realised. Work twelve or more now, and the evils which we witness follow.
- 7. Throws many out of employment, through over-production.
- 8. Reduces wages.
- 9. Impoverishes the country, by an increase of poor rates, which so much is given to the foreigner, as this exceeds the amount of duty on exported articles.

- 10. We cannot work for the whole world. When the balance of trade is in our favour, they are impoverished cannot pay for our goods a little money, for them, goes as far as much as us til they under-sell us or, if they will not work at all they have nothing to pay us with, and our trade with them will be ruined. The balance must be restored.
- 11. Money, like other articles in the market, gives much or little, according to the quantity in circulation. Multiplying the circulating medium increases prices and fetters trade by making goods expensive.
- 12. Corn Laws certainly increase the price of labour. If abolished, this would throw lands out of culture and increase agricultural distress. Would benefit manufacturers only a short time. The present system of factory labour would soon reduce the labourer to his present misery by throwing agricultural labourers into manufactouring districts and thus reduce wages to the lowest ebb.
- 13 National debt

Illness, death and burial

In April 1832, Daniel was observed to be in good health and spirits. But on May 19th, (when he was in Manchester to preach on behalf of the Sunday Schools there) at around 11pm, he was enjoying his pipe and relaxing. He suffered a stroke, resulting in loss of function in his left arm, unsteadiness, confusion and loss of memory. Everett, was present and summoned a doctor, who bled him. Fearing he was dying, Daniel said he would like to be 'spared a little longer' and was concerned for the welfare of his wife. The doctor prescribed complete rest and quiet.

Following a period of recuperation, Daniel returned to his ministry taking up his final post on his favourite York circuit. He suffered a second stroke, which his doctor blamed on returning to work too quickly. He rallied but then had yet another series of strokes, each resulting in further disability and deterioration. Visiting him in May 1833, Everett found him weak and confined to the house. He sobbed when his old friend entered the room and told Everett he had given up hope of recovery. A few moments later he said: 'All will be well, I have faith in Christ. I have no hope but in him, he is all to me'.

Daniel Isaac died at home in York on March 21st 1834. He was 54⁽⁷⁾.

^{7.} There is some confusion apparent about Daniel's age at death. His biographer indicates he was 56, yet he was born in 1780, so would have been 54.

Daniel's funeral and interrment at St Olave's Church was described by Everett:

The remains of this respected Minister, whose decease we noted in last weeks obituary were interred this afternoon in the churchyard of St Olave's Marygate, with every demonstration of respect. The procession consisted of a hearse, two mourning coaches and a coloured carriage, followed by the Wesleyan Ministers, now stationed in this City, the local preachers and a good number of friends connected with the Wesleyan Society, all in deep mourning and walking two by two.

The whole had a very imposing and solemn effect and may be regarded as strong proof of the esteem in which the deceased was held and the heartfelt regret experienced by the bereavement of one so useful as a Minister and so pious and consistent as a Christian.

The service was impressively read by The Rev Mr Raine. Of the deceased we may observe that he was, by all who knew him, highly esteemed, both as a Christian and a friend. Of his talents as a preacher, they were of a very high order, and both in his manner and style, he gave indications of originality and genius. As a writer too, he was greatly above the common rank. His most powerful work was the little volume entitled 'Ecclesistical Claims Investigated and the Liberty of the Pulpit Defended', which for close argument, and keen and biting satire, has not perhaps an equal. The eloquent and talented Robert Hall pronounced the book to be unanswerable. We understand that funeral sermons will be preached in the three Methodist Chapels in this City, next Sunday evening'.

Funeral sermons were reported in the local press. The *York Herald* of 5th April 1834 reported the following Sunday sermon in memory of Daniel, given in the New Street Chapel by Rev Calder, Superindendant of the York circuit. The congregation was large. Rev Calder detailed Daniel's characteristics. As a Minister, he was highly esteemed for his faithfulness and originality. His reasoning was argumentative, pointed and convincing. As a friend, Rev Calder said that the prominent faculties of his mind were benevolent and he sympathised deeply with those in distress, affording them 'pecuniary aid according to his means'. His works showed his profound acquaintance with the human heart, combining genius and piety. Rev Calder said Daniel's publications would constitute a 'noble monument to his memory'. Other

funeral sermons were held at York's Albion Square, St George's and Walmgate Chapels, again to large congregations.

A significant life

Daniel Isaac was clearly a distinctive, energetic and significant figure in the Methodist movement. He spent 37 productive years in the church, most as an active circuit Minister but also producing many written works. He remained true to his beliefs and principles, often in the face of strong criticism from colleagues and antagonists. His was certainly an action-packed life and career, during pivotal



New Street Wesleyan Chapel, York pre 1909.

changes in social, political and world history. It can be imagined that his wife, Mary, had to manage without him on many occasions, whilst he was away preaching or at meetings. Although he mentions Mary frequently in his letters, little is known of her. Daniel left the majority of his published and unpublished manuscripts and papers to her for her own benefit⁽⁸⁾. He also left his nephews and nieces significant bequests. Following his death Mary lived in Monkgate, York. She was living there in 1841 with her two brothers, both of whom were presumably widowers. Remaining at Monkgate, in 1851 she was living with her niece (by marriage) and a servant. She survived to old age, dying in York, June 1856, aged 90. This suggests Mary was around 15 years older than Daniel when they married. Mary left £1000 in her will. Her place of burial has not yet been discovered.

In the funeral sermon, at St George's Chapel, York, April 1834, Rev James Bromley said Daniel Isaac 'Lived and died with the good word of all'. He described him as a 'Minister of truth' and that 'under God, but for such men and their works, the world would be a wilderness, overgrown with ignorance and error'. A memorial plaque was erected to Daniel, in New Street Chapel, York. Closed in 1908, it was used as a variety theatre, a hostel for troops in WW1 and later re-fashioned as the

^{8.} Daniel Isaacs' last will was written in 1833 and proved November 1834. Borthwick Institute, York University.

ower Cinema. It was demolished in the 1960s. It is not known whether Daniel's plaque still exists or was moved to another chapel.

It has been a revelation to find we have such a remarkable, Godly and controversial man in our churchyard. It is fitting that he should once again be remembered, recognised and celebrated, over 180 years after his death.

Helen Fields - May 2019

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H. Fields



Daniel Isaac Grave: St Olave's Churchyard (Right side, South Door)