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**Becoming chapels and everyday congregations: how the repair and maintenance of London's Wesleyan chapels illustrates their communities' everyday practices and experiences (1851-1932)**

**Abstract**

This paper uses archival references to maintenance and repair to approach nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Wesleyan chapels and their material contents as 'becoming' things. Reflecting on the material changes that made the maintenance or repair of Wesleyan chapels necessary, or occurred because of these processes, it considers what these processes reveal about everyday practices and experiences within these communities. This paper's approach allows it to draw conclusions about individuals' personal and mundane engagements with Wesleyanism in London during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As such, it overcomes some of the problems that historians interested in the everyday have traditionally faced as a result of the shortage of surviving personal testimonies about the everyday nature of church attendance during this period. Using Wesleyan chapels from London's northern suburbs and East End as case studies, this paper particularly focuses on the repair and maintenance of organs and chapel interiors. It uses these examples to reflect on the practicalities of everyday life in Wesleyan communities, demonstrating how the consideration of moments of repair and maintenance highlight the (sometimes fraught) interrelationships between the spiritual, social and practical priorities of Wesleyan communities.

**Keywords**

Architecture, Material Culture, Everyday Life, Religion, Nineteenth Century

## Introduction

In 1851 a new Wesleyan Methodist chapel was opened on Stoke Newington High Street in north London (Figures 1 & 2). The second Wesleyan chapel to be constructed on the same site in thirty years, the new chapel was larger and grander than its predecessor which had been a rectangular brick building fronted by simple classical columns. Conforming to contemporary fashions expounded in F. J. Jobson's architectural treatise *Chapel and School Architecture* published in 1850, the chapel was built in the gothic style considered suitable for spaces of religious worship and its larger size was an explicit response to Stoke Newington's growing suburban population.<sup>1</sup> Many architectural historians have discussed buildings' style and size as a reflection of religious communities' theological beliefs and evangelical aims.<sup>2</sup> However, by shifting attention from the Stoke Newington Methodist Chapel's initial moment of construction to its subsequent material development, this paper will highlight how studying buildings' structure and contents can also reveal alternative stories about its religious communities' everyday practices.

In particular, throughout the chapel's archives there are continual references to acts of repair and maintenance that either altered the chapel's material fabric and contents, or responded to gradual and sudden changes to the chapel's structure and material assemblage. For example, in November 1881 vandals caused (unspecified) damage to the chapel's back wall. As a result, its trustees – an appointed body of men responsible for the chapel building's use and maintenance – employed Tyssen Architects Esq. to repair the chapel's external structure and erect a new periphery wall at the chapel's rear to prevent further damage.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in 1924, when vandals

once again marred the chapel by throwing stones through its stained glass windows, the chapel's trustees not only paid for the damaged windows to be fixed, but also purchased wire protectors so that the windows did not become the victim of future violent acts.<sup>4</sup>

These moments of maintenance and repair are illustrative of broader processes of material change within the Stoke Newington Chapel and, by diverting attention from motivations for the chapel's initial design, speak to its everyday uses. Most specifically, these examples suggest tensions between the chapel's financial situation and theological perspectives. In both instances, the trustees did not simply repair damage caused to their chapel, but also added a protective layer; a wall or wire mesh that shielded the building from further harm. The implementation of these extra material precautions were significant financial decisions for Stoke Newington Chapel's trustees. While they appreciated the benefits of mitigating the detrimental financial consequences of continual repair, they also explicitly noted that the wire protectors should only be 'fitted outside the windows, if not too expensive', highlighting the financial pressures the community felt.<sup>5</sup> Both the wall and mesh also had theological implications. While they protected the chapel from further material harm, they also segregated the chapel from its suburban environment, symbolically creating a barrier which undermined the building's openness and its ability to act as an evangelical tool in the conversion of Stoke Newington's 'unchurched' community.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the actions which resulted in these moments of maintenance and repair illustrate how this space was perceived by members of the local community, highlighting a lack of reverence for its spiritual character and little concern about enacting acts of vandalism. Therefore, consideration of the maintenance and repair

undertaken a Stoke Newington Chapel suggest this community was finding it difficult to implement their evangelical aims.

These opening examples are illustrative of this paper's methodology and how, by engaging with design historical, anthropological, and geographical debates, it will use the material alteration of Wesleyan chapels to contribute to growing scholarly considerations of everyday experiences of faith spaces.<sup>7</sup> Beginning with archival references to maintenance and repair within London's Wesleyan chapels, it will identify moments and processes of material change within these spaces and use these instances to gain insights into the everyday experiences and practices of the religious communities who used these spaces. Specifically, it will focus on the maintenance and repair of organs and chapel interiors, processes commonly referenced in chapels' minute books. These examples will provide insights into Wesleyan communities' everyday practices and will illustrate how they were a negotiation of - sometimes fraught - interrelationships between Wesleyan communities' spiritual, social and practical priorities.

### **London's Wesleyan Methodists 1851-1932**

Wesleyan Methodism was one of many nineteenth-century branches of the Methodist movement. Initially founded by the Anglican clergyman John Wesley as part of the early eighteenth-century Church of England, the Methodists gained their name in response to their methodical approach to spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, studying the Bible, worship and fasting.<sup>8</sup> After Wesley's death in 1791, the Methodist movement separated from the Church of England to become an independent denomination and during the nineteenth century split into various

factions in response to political and theological differences. The Wesleyan Church considered itself the original and most authentic Methodist denomination. However, as the nineteenth century progressed, Wesleyans increasingly pursued established Church status and dispensed with much of early Methodism's revivalist spirit and placed increasing importance on a hierarchical structure led by ordained ministers.<sup>9</sup>

The fundamentals of Wesleyan theology largely conformed to the beliefs held by the wider Methodist community. They believed that Jesus was the son of God and that by dying on the cross he had atoned for all humanity's sins and given them the gift of salvation. Therefore, assured that redemption was available through faith alone, they believed that anyone who proclaimed to believe in Jesus was saved. Wesleyans expressed these beliefs through three fundamental and equally prioritised practices – divine worship, Wesleyan fellowship and evangelism – resulting in congregation members combining social, political and charitable activities with sung worship, Bible study and prayer.<sup>10</sup> As a result, this paper's reflections on everyday Wesleyan practices in London's chapels will consider the particular ways in which Wesleyans (often simultaneously) engaged in worship, fellowship, evangelism, alongside the practicalities of material maintenance. It will reflect on the interrelationships between the intertwined – and often indistinguishable – acts of worships, evangelism, socialising and practically organising events and maintaining chapels that Wesleyan communities engaged in.

In contrast to the broadly Methodist nature of Wesleyan theology, the Wesleyan Church adopted a particularly structured and hierarchical organisation framework.<sup>11</sup> At the top of this hierarchy was the Conference, the Church's supreme legislative

body, which met once a year and was responsible for overseeing the Church's life and doctrine across the nation.<sup>12</sup> Below the Conference were district synods, local arms of the Conference in specific geographical areas that implemented the Conference's decisions and regulated Wesleyan practices in their geographical region between Conference meetings.<sup>13</sup> These districts were then arranged into circuits, groups of interdependent chapels in small geographical areas. These circuits were intended to function as collectives and rather than being responsible for a specific chapel, teams of ministers were assigned a circuit and collectively looked after its community's pastoral needs and service requirements; circulating through each chapel and preaching at a different one every Sunday.<sup>14</sup> As a result, although theological and liturgical decisions were imposed on individual chapels by the centralised structure of the Wesleyan Church, the day-to-day running of Wesleyan chapels was undertaken by lay trustees. They were responsible for chapels' material fabric, decided how chapels could be used, and how money raised through congregational contributions was spent. These structural specificities allow particular insights into the everyday practices of Wesleyan communities to be gained through consideration of their becoming material characteristics.

With very few exceptions, historians have either disregarded London's nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Methodist communities as useful case studies, or have specifically discussed how London's Methodist practices did not reflect broader trends within the contemporary Methodist movement.<sup>15</sup> However, scholars have also acknowledged that all nineteenth- and early twentieth-century (Wesleyan) Methodist practices were heavily geographically differentiated.<sup>16</sup> As a result, while London was not illustrative of national trends, it is difficult to say that any other location was.

However, while London does not provide a 'typical' example of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Wesleyanism, it does afford a well-documented case study due to the density of London's population and the high number of chapels built in relatively small geographical areas. This is particularly true of this paper's specific time period between the 1851 religious census – which shocked and disturbed contemporaries by suggesting significant declines in church attendance – and the reunification of most Methodist denominations in 1932. However, despite being such a well document moment of Methodist practice, this period has received relatively little scholarly attention, due to historical emphasis on the denomination's early development.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Methodist practices in London between 1851 and 1932 provide a fresh and interesting example with which to explore issues of everyday congregational experience.

Consideration of the many religious surveys conducted in London between 1851 and 1932 has directed both this paper's denominational focus and informed the specific chapel communities it will discuss.<sup>18</sup> First, these surveys demonstrate that Wesleyanism was the most numerous Methodist denomination in London during this period. Second, the surveys also illustrate geographical patterns of Wesleyanism growth and decline in particular areas of London between 1851 and 1932.<sup>19</sup> Especially interesting are the increasing number of chapels which were constructed in north London in response to suburbanisation during this period, and – like many contemporary Christian denominations – the Wesleyan Church's emphasis on providing chapels, mission halls, and central halls in poverty stricken areas of London's East End. As a result, this paper will discuss chapels from three circuits:



the Stoke Newington and Highgate Circuits in suburban north London and the Bow (later Poplar and Bow) Circuit in London's East End and the Isle of Dogs.<sup>20</sup>

While the chapels in these circuits had many differences - particularly in regard to the social status of their congregation members – they were all united by their continual financial tribulations. Consideration of the financial position of these circuit communities between 1851 and 1932 has demonstrated that, like many nineteenth-century Church communities, these chapels were either in debt – generally as a result of loans taken out to fund largescale building work – or were precariously balanced on the edge of debt – often at least partly due to the financial pressures of maintaining their buildings.<sup>21</sup> Although chapels could apply for loans from the Metropolitan Chapel Building Fund when building new chapels, and there is evidence that within circuits communities chapels shared their financial resources, chapels' finances were ultimately dependent on donations from their congregation members, fundraising activities and money raised by leasing their buildings to external users.<sup>22</sup> This financial context forms an important basis for this papers' exploration of what moments of maintenance and repair illustrate about everyday Methodist practices as negotiations of constantly shifting amalgamations of divine worship, evangelism, fellowship and practical organisation.

### **Material becoming and everyday religion**

While studies of contemporary religious communities have paid increasing attention to everyday practices and experiences over the past twenty years, exploring similar questions within a historical context has been frequently hindered by the scarcity of written reflections left by ordinary congregation members. However, material religion

approaches - spearheaded by the editors of the *Material Religion* journal - have demonstrated the potential of using material things to gain glimpses into the religious everyday. Arguing that a broad range of material things – well beyond sacred objects and texts - are fundamental components of religious practices, they demonstrate how thinking about the material practices, places and bodies involved in religion undermines conventional scholarly emphasis on religious thought and belief, and argue that it allows greater attention to be given to everyday religious practices.<sup>23</sup>

While not specifically developed for historical purposes, these material religion approaches have provided a useful framework for historical explorations of everyday experiences of religious communities. For example, historians Carmen Mangion and William Whyte have demonstrated how the materiality of purpose-built religious spaces influenced how religious practices were experienced in the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> However, existing studies have tended to focus on objects and buildings as containers of meaning created when they were designed, used or exchanged.<sup>25</sup> As a result, little attention has been paid to objects' material qualities, how they change over time, or the effect that these changing qualities have on human behaviour and experience. Furthermore - and maybe as a result - when material approaches have been used to discuss individuals' experiences of religious spaces, these explorations have almost exclusively focused on what objects reveal about individuals' spiritual engagements with a religious movement.<sup>26</sup> Congregants' engagements with mundane objects – such as cleaning equipment, tables, chairs or crockery - and their impact on congregants' everyday experiences of these spaces – including their social relationships or physical (dis)comfort – have been overlooked.

It is in order to overcome these difficulties that this paper focuses on moments of maintenance and repair in Wesleyan chapels. Engaging with the ideas of Jane Bennett, Tim Dant, Ian Hodder, Tim Ingold and Bjornar Olsen it positions these moments of maintenance and repair within broader discussions of material 'becoming'.<sup>27</sup> Bennett describes 'becoming' as a slow material change which happens so gradually that the material alternations are not immediately obvious. Often responding to a gradual deterioration in the material condition of Wesleyan spaces, moments of maintenance and repair are indicative of slow material changes that made them necessary. Therefore, although Wesleyan chapels 'became' in many ways, archival references to maintenance and repair are some of the very few illustrations of these processes historians have access to.<sup>28</sup>

A growing body of literature concerned with processes of maintenance and repair has already begun to demonstrate how consideration of these responses to material becoming are indicative of the everyday practices that make them necessary.<sup>29</sup> Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift have demonstrated how consideration of maintenance and repair bypasses analysis of designers' intentions by diverting attention from moments of material 'crisis' - i.e. the construction or destruction of objects and buildings – and focuses on everyday processes of small-scale material change. They argue that this then provides insights into individuals' day-to-day engagements with and experiences of the material world.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in their analysis of individuals' decisions about maintaining and repairing household objects, Nicky Gregson, Alan Metcalfe and Louise Crewe have shown how investigating maintenance and repair illustrates users' priorities, highlighting what they consider worth spending the time and effort to repair or maintain and what they do not.<sup>31</sup>

Despite these existing studies, to date there has been no attempt to use moments of maintenance and repair to analyse the implications of material becoming on the everyday lives of historical religious communities. In her analysis of the development of new maintenance legislation within the English Church during the thirteenth century, Carole Davidson Cragoe has paid much attention to the social implications of maintenance and repair.<sup>32</sup> However, primarily focussing on the political and economic reasons why the responsibility for maintaining the external fabric and internal contents of churches was split between rectors and parishioners, she has focused on the human decisions and political negotiations that informed the maintenance and repair of churches in the thirteenth century and has not fully considered the becoming materiality of these spaces and how they demanded repair and maintenance. In contrast, the geographer Tim Edensor has reflected on maintenance and repair as a consequence of churches' material becoming, but has not considered the impact of these material developments on church communities.<sup>33</sup> Taking St Ann's Church in Manchester as a case study, he considers how the material qualities of this building have changed over time as a result of their inherent characteristics and relationships with other human and non-human actors, such as air pollution, water, atmospheric temperature and algae. He then discusses the consequences of these processes and the ongoing development of St Ann's material qualities, specifically emphasising how they have required acts of maintenance and repair to be undertaken to stabilise the church and prevent it from falling down. However, apparently unconcerned that the building he has analysed is a space of religious worship and fellowship, this is where Edensor's analysis ends. His discussion includes no reflection on the people who undertook the necessary

maintenance and repair he identifies, the money required to undertake it, or the impact it would have had on the sensory experiences of those who use the church.

In response, this paper will draw together these two approaches to think about both the material implications of the becoming nature of Wesleyan chapels, demonstrated through moments of maintenance and repair, and the broader implications of these processes in relation to the chapel communities in which they occurred. It will think about how the material change of Wesleyan chapels and their contents affected congregations' sensory experiences and demanded human responses, as well as reflecting on the responses these communities made to these material challenges and what they suggest about communities' priorities. In particular, it will emphasise how congregations juggled the competing requirements of Wesleyan theology, the practicalities of maintaining a functioning building, and their financial pressures.

### **Organs: divine worship and financial requirements**

The importance of music and singing within Methodists' divine worship has been well documented. Organs were initially discouraged and (later) officially prohibited in Methodist chapels. Considered reminiscent of the soulless formal worship of Church of England services, John Wesley and the early founders of the Methodist movement were concerned that the music organs created distracted from hymns' lyrics.<sup>34</sup> However, in 1820 the Methodist Conference (begrudgingly) legitimised the use of organs in Wesleyan services and by the end of the nineteenth century these instruments were not only tools of divine worship, but also material statements of chapels' political intent.<sup>35</sup> Accompanying the many hymns written for Methodist communities as clear and concise expressions of the movement's theological beliefs,

organs provided musical emphasis for the tenants of the Wesleyan faith. At the same time, the erection of organs created large metal and wooden structures, which acted as impressive material expressions of Wesleyan communities' permanency and their shift from spiritual movement to official Church (Figure 3). Within this context, the development of organs' material properties within Wesleyan chapels - highlighted by the many references to their repair and maintenance - illustrates how these communities were constantly juggling the competing priorities of their theological beliefs, political status, financial positions, and everyday material practicalities.

Initially, consideration of how Wesleyan chapel organs were becoming things that changed over time, it is necessary to consider the amount of money that Wesleyan communities spent when installing them. The Jackson's Lane Chapel in north London set the budget for their planned organ at £800.0.0 in 1907 (the equivalent of nearly £63,000 in 2017), the Archway Road Chapel spent £394.0.0 on their new organ in 1877 (roughly £26,000 in 2017) and the Holly Park Chapel spent £600.0.0 on their new organ between 1882 and 1883 (nearly £40,000 in 2017).<sup>36</sup> These large sums of money suggest the importance these instruments were accorded within nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Wesleyan communities. However, while prepared to spend considerable sums when purchasing organs, these communities also commonly established spending limits when erecting organs, negotiating the relative importance of organ's theological and political importance and chapels' financial stability. For example when plans were made to install a new organ at the Old Ford Chapel in east London in 1887, the chapel's trustees made it clear that they did not want to proceed with the plans unless they could be sure that the venture would not put them in debt.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, despite the importance of organs, the expense

associated with them was so substantial that many chapels could not afford such an investment and decided to hire, buy second hand, or purchase an harmonium (an small organ without pipes) (Figure 4).<sup>38</sup>

As a result, it comes as no surprise that once organs were installed, many communities adopted a regular routine of tuning, cleaning and repairing to make sure that these organs effectively functioned as musical instruments and looked aesthetically impressive. For example, in 1890 in response to complaints made by the Holly Park Sunday School Committee that the school organ was out of tune, the chapel's trustees took the necessary steps to put the organ into good repair.<sup>39</sup> In 1897 the organ pipes and wall around Old Ford Chapel's organ were redecorated using £11.0.0 from the chapel's Bazaar Fund.<sup>40</sup> In addition to these regular processes of maintenance and repair, some chapels took precautions to prevent their organs from being misused or damaged in the first place.<sup>41</sup> For instance, in 1883 Holly Park Chapel's trustees stipulated that in order to protect their organ, the instrument should only be played by the organist and competent persons under the organist's direction.<sup>42</sup>

Such levels of care and maintenance were not implemented throughout London's Wesleyan communities. Some chapels did not carry out the necessary maintenance work to retain their organs in suitable working condition. Reflecting on his years at Bow Road Chapel in the early twentieth century, Mr C. P. Clifford explained that while he had initially attended this chapel's services because of their organ music, this chapel's organ - like many in the early twentieth century - regularly needed more care and attention to improve its condition and sound.<sup>43</sup> Illustrating this point, in 1921

J. W. Walker and Son Ltd. estimated that it would cost £64.18.0 (the equivalent of roughly £1800 in 2017) to clean and repair the organ at Jackson's Lane Chapel, because no repair or maintenance work had been undertaken on the organ since it was first erected in 1909.<sup>44</sup> However, it was not only negligence that resulted in the material deterioration of these instruments. As instruments within the semi-public space of Wesleyan chapels, organs were regularly (mis)used by many individuals. In the early twentieth century, the Muswell Hill Chapel charged small sums to allow people to practise on their organ.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in 1925 the Old Ford Chapel gave several young men permission to use their organ during the week. Interestingly, this decision was made despite the protests of the chapel's organist, Mr Baldock, who explicitly noted that he was concerned that this would result in the organ being damaged. Consequently, when they took the decision to prioritise the musical development of their young people over the organ's material quality, the chapel's trustees also released Mr Baldock from his responsibility of keeping the organ in pristine condition and therefore illustrated that some chapel communities were more concerned that their organs were used than maintained.<sup>46</sup>

The extent to which different chapels took steps to repair and maintain their organs' material, musical and aesthetic values highlights variations in their priorities. While some maintained both the visual quality and musical function of their organs in order to create grand chapel spaces filled with tuneful and impressive music, others took a much more pragmatic approach. Allowing congregation members to play the organ for a small fee financially helped the Muswell Hill Chapel while also giving congregation members use of their chapel space for personal pleasure and improvement outside of official chapel services and events. Forgoing regular



maintenance checks on organ's pipes allowed some Wesleyan chapels to reduce the financial burden of their organs, but it also detracted from the quality of the music they produced. Therefore, some chapels considered the price of material maintenance a cost worth paying to facilitate their spiritual practices, while others took the opinion that congregants' spiritual or auditory experiences were not sufficiently undermined by some level of material degeneration to warrant constant expenditure on maintenance and repair.

Acknowledging the important influence of financial pressures on the everyday practices of Wesleyan communities is important because, as Sarah Flew has illustrated, churches' financial records and the impact on their financial practices have been chronically under considered within the existing literature.<sup>47</sup> In this instance, consideration of chapels' financial records not only illustrate how decisions about the maintenance and repair of Wesleyan organs were made by chapels' trustees, they also demonstrate how these decisions directly affected all congregants' experiences of these spaces. As Mr Clifford's testimony attests, decisions to reduce the regularity with which organs were tuned and cleaned detracted from the quality and nature of the sounds that congregants heard when engaging in divine worship. Additionally, when trustees did decide to repair and maintain their organs, congregants often played an important role in raising the money to make this possible. For instance, in 1897 the Holly Park Chapel Choir undertook fundraising to pay for the improvements to the chapel's organ, in the same year the Old Ford Chapel organised a bazaar to raise money to paint their organ pipes, and in 1921 the Jackson's Lane Chapel's trustees invited members of their congregation to make subscription payments towards the repair of their organ.<sup>48</sup>

These fundraising practices were part of a broader culture of giving and raising money within Wesleyan communities. Often organised by female congregants, chapels regularly initiated special collections, subscription systems, bazaars and busy bee sales to raise money for particular causes both within and beyond their chapel.<sup>49</sup> While motivated by Wesleyan theological perspectives on the importance of giving and sharing funds, such practices involved a range of social interactions and material activities well beyond stereotypically 'Wesleyan' actions. Congregants used their social networks to ask for money and their material skills to make food, clothes, and crafts to sell at bazaars and busy bee sales. Therefore, considering the maintenance and repair of chapels' organs emphasises the intertwined nature of Wesleyans' spiritual, social and practical priorities, but also demonstrates how chapel trustees had to negotiate the competing demands of Wesleyan theology and the financial realities of practically maintaining the material qualities of their buildings. Much more than this, it illustrates some of the alternative ways in which ordinary congregation members experienced Wesleyan spaces as they took an active role in raising money to make these processes of maintenance and repair possible.

### **Interior repairs: fellowship and skill**

In addition to the specific material needs of Wesleyan organs, the becoming nature of Wesleyan chapels meant that their walls, furniture, windows, heating systems, ventilation systems etc. demanded regular cleaning, re-decoration and repair. This encompassed a variety of tasks, ranging from a coat of paint to more comprehensive renovation work. While some of these tasks required chapels to employ professionals with appropriate levels of skill, others were regularly undertaken by amateur members of Wesleyan communities. Although design historians have

regularly considered the creative skill of amateur interior designers or crafts people – often challenging the gendered distinctions between amateur and professional - there has been little consideration of the skill required to repair or maintain buildings and objects, or the relationship between amateurs and professionals in this process.<sup>50</sup> However, it is exactly these questions and consideration of when and why it was deemed acceptable for individuals' unable to evidence the required skills to undertake processes of maintenance and repair to undertake these tasks in Wesleyan chapels, that provide further insights into the day-to-day negotiations and practices that occurred within Wesleyan chapels.

The records of many of London chapels include references to professional workmen employed to undertake maintenance work that required specific knowledge and experience. For example, in 1897 the Holly Park Chapel paid Mr Woodman of 75 High Street Marylebone £185 to repair the chapel's drains, and in 1923 the Jackson's Lane Chapel paid J. Jeffries and Co. £22.11.4 for repairs to their heating apparatus.<sup>51</sup> These professional individuals were regularly employed on the recommendation of congregation members and trustees. For example, when the Old Ford Chapel expanded their school and vestry in 1895, trustee William Hunter - who was a professional builder - and his brother John undertook the work.<sup>52</sup> Although often known to these communities through personal ties, the individuals undertaking skilled maintenance and repair work within chapel spaces were generally employed at a competitive rate. Therefore, even though Wesleyan communities often employed individuals they knew to contribute to the maintenance and repair of their buildings, they were also were willing to pay the necessary fees to ensure that

complicated processes of repair and maintenance were undertaken in a professional manner.

Less specialised maintenance and repair tasks were often undertaken by congregation members at a reduced or waived fee. For instance, in 1909 Robert William Bacon, a member of the Poplar Chapel's congregation who was a builder by trade, was thanked for cleaning out the church's gutters at no expense to the trust.<sup>53</sup> While many of these voluntary acts of maintenance and repair were undertaken to a satisfactory standard, this was not always the case. In the beginning of 1889 Mr Godwin – a congregation member described as a commercial traveller and with no apparent professional experience to qualify him for maintenance repair work - designed and installed a new ventilation system in the Bow Road Chapel. However, only months later, Mrs Saunders - secretary of the Ladies' Sewing Meeting at Bow Road Wesleyan Chapel - complained that not only had Mr Godwin's system not improved the congregants' comfort, but it had actually increased the draughts in the chapel. Therefore, while Mr Godwin had attempted to serve his chapel by freely offering his services to solve a problem with its material fabric, it appears that his actions initially detracted from congregant's sensory experiences rather than improving them. Keen to solve this problem and improve the quality of congregational experience within their chapel, the trustees took immediate action. Urging Mr Godwin to quickly make effective repairs, they implied that if the problem was not satisfactorily and swiftly solved, they were prepared to hire professional help to deal with the issue.<sup>54</sup> Fortunately, Mr Godwin seems to have satisfied the trustees' demands and there are no further records of subsequent alterations to the chapel's ventilation system or congregational complaints about uncomfortable draughts.

Consequently, while Mr Godwin was clearly not entirely proficient in designing and implementing ventilation systems – resulting in temporary discomfort for some chapel members - his services would have been substantially cheaper than those of professional workman, potentially providing long term financial benefits worth the momentary inconvenience.

Wesleyan communities did not only engage congregation members to conduct actions of repair and maintenance because it saved them money. In many instances small and apparently simple processes of maintenance and repair were undertaken by individuals that Wesleyan communities knew were in need of financial support or material security. For example, in 1920 the mission hall at the Bow Common Chapel in east London needed to be redecorated. Mr Goodwin, one of the chapel's trustees, offered the services of his son, who although not trained as a painter or decorator was unemployed – potentially after recently returning from the First World War – and in the search of any potential work. It was suggested that the trustees pay the cost of the materials and a modest wage to Mr Goodwin's son, simultaneously reducing the cost of decorating their mission hall and providing the young man with modest employment.<sup>55</sup> By doing so, the trustees used the necessary maintenance and repair demanded by their chapel's material becoming as an opportunity to engage in an act of fellowship and support a member of their community.

Similarly, it is common to find references to chapels employing individuals they knew were in need as chapel keepers. Men and women specifically responsible for maintaining chapels' material condition and social order, chapel keepers were generally provided with residential accommodation on or near the chapel they were

responsible for. An advert for a new chapel keeper at the Poplar Chapel in 1886 demonstrates what these roles involved. It notes that the individual employed would be responsible for keeping all parts of the chapel clean at all times; carrying out a deep clean of the chapel in May and November; sweeping all parts of the chapel, including the pews, once a week and dusting it twice; operating and maintaining both the gas and lighting systems in the chapel; monitoring the chapel's drainage system; protecting the organ from unauthorised use; locking the chapel up after services; and make sure that all the necessary material items were ready for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Lovefeasts and Baptisms.<sup>56</sup> As a result, chapel keepers were important members of chapel communities and were principally responsible for their maintenance and repair.

However, because Wesleyan communities often used this role to provide a home and financial support for those in need, the individuals they appointed did not always have the necessary skills to identify, reverse, or prevent the material becoming of Wesleyan spaces. For example, in 1879 Mr Daily, the Poplar Chapel's keeper underwent a disciplinary hearing, was absolved of his misconduct, given a second chance, and placed on three months' probation. While the specific nature of his misconduct is not explicitly mentioned in the chapel's records, references to how 'his re-engagement shall depend on his general good conduct and attention to his duties' and that 'he [Mr Daily] had seen Mr Cravenock and signed the pledge', suggest that Mr Daily had had an unhealthy relationship with alcohol, which had been having a detrimental effect on his ability to maintain and organise the chapel space.<sup>57</sup> No further references to Mr Daily, attempts by the Poplar Chapel to appoint a new chapel keeper (until 1886), or unusual references to the need for urgent repair or

maintenance work to be carried out inside the chapel suggests that Mr Daily passed his three month review and began to undertake his responsibilities to a satisfactory standard. However, his initial misdemeanours illustrate how Wesleyan attempts to implement their theological beliefs in forgiveness and fellowship had the potential to detrimentally effect on the material quality of their chapel spaces.

Nevertheless, Wesleyan communities' kindness was not always misplaced. For example, throughout the 1890s Mrs Argent served as the Bow Road Chapel's chapel keeper.<sup>58</sup> A long-term member of the chapel, Mrs Argent was a widow whose son taught in the Bow Road's Sunday School. References to increases in her salary, the trustees' decision to give her bonuses to demonstrate their gratefulness for her 'efficient manner', and the chapel's decision to not charge her rent while building work was being carried out at the chapel in 1891, all suggest that the chapel's trustees not only treated Mrs Argent with respect, but also highly rated her skill.<sup>59</sup>

Therefore, many individuals with different levels of skill were involved in the maintenance and repair of Wesleyan chapels. While professionals were employed to undertake particularly complicated tasks, congregation members or permanent chapel keepers undertook more mundane jobs for little or no money. Although these appointments often saved chapels money, they also facilitated theologically inspired acts of forgiveness and fellowship. As a result, those employed to repair or maintain Wesleyan chapels did not always improve the material condition of the spaces, highlighting how Wesleyan communities who owned properties were constantly juggling the practicalities of responding to the becoming material condition of their chapels, the financial pressures this created, and their theological motivations.

## **Conclusions**

It is – of course – no surprise that Wesleyan chapels and the material things that circulated through them were in constant need of repair and maintenance. However, by approaching the need for and implementation of repair and maintenance as the result of chapel's material becoming, this paper has been able to highlight previously un(der)told stories about London's Wesleyan communities. First, it has illustrated the interrelationships between chapel communities' spiritual practices and practical actions. Whether it was a chapel's organ or interior fabric, communities rarely had sufficient money to maintain these material things to the standard they wished for theological purposes. As a result, chapel communities made compromises, only interfering with the material deterioration of their buildings and contents when they thought it was severely detracting from the theological purposes of these spaces. At times this resulted in congregants having unpleasant sensory experiences within Wesleyan spaces and often meant that congregants were required to engage in fundraising practices to financially support urgent material repairs.

Additionally, reflecting on references to maintenance and repair as illustrations of the material becoming of Wesleyan chapels has shown the variety of individuals and levels of skill involved in the repair and maintenance of Wesleyan spaces. Not always reflective of the skills required to undertake the various maintenance and repair work within Wesleyan spaces, the gap between the skill of the individual and the skills required for the job were often driven by communities' desire to provide work for members of the congregations who were in need. Therefore, they also demonstrate the everyday balances these communities made between the



pressures of maintaining the material fabric of their buildings, living within their financial needs, and acting out their theological beliefs.

These conclusions may seem mundane, but that does not make them unimportant. Indeed, the considerable effort that congregation members exerted to raise money for the necessary repair and maintenance of Wesleyan spaces suggests that chapels' material fabric, their impact on congregational experiences, and their contribution to the effectiveness of Wesleyan practices were essential. Furthermore, the volume of complaints within chapel archives illustrates the fervent feelings that drafts, leaks and badly heated or ventilated rooms sparked. Therefore, this article is not only intended as a statement of the importance of thinking about the becoming nature of buildings and material things, but is also an argument for the necessity of considering mundane aspects of religious practice. While it demonstrates how thinking about repair and maintenance can be used to draw specific conclusions about congregational experiences of Wesleyanism in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century London, the same approach could be applied to any institutional space to facilitate a broad range of historical insights into ordinary individuals' everyday experiences of institutional spaces. However, it is also wise to add a proviso. While instances of maintenance and repair are some of the most regular issues recorded in chapel archives, these references are normally short and sketchy. Therefore, using these sources requires a willingness for creative thought, a readiness to position oneself within the referenced material spaces and a preparedness to reflect on the sensory experiences that congregation members may have had in these contexts. Although the conclusions reached using this approach

can rarely be securely collaborated or triangulated, they do provide insights that would otherwise be completely overlooked.

### **Declarations/Acknowledgments**

I declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this paper.

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### **Figure Captions**

Fig. 1: Exterior of Stoke Newington Methodist Chapel, built 1851. © Stoke Newington High Street Church – images reproduced with permission.

Fig. 2: Interior of Stoke Newington Methodist Chapel, built 1851. © Stoke Newington High Street Church – images reproduced with permission.

Fig. 3: W. Whiffin, interior view of the Poplar Chapel, London, c.1920s. Built in 1848. W/PMC/7/4/3. © Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives.

Figure 4: Portable Harmonium c. 1900. Private collection. Photograph by author, 2019.

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<sup>1</sup> F. J. Jobson, *Chapel and School Architecture: As Appropriate to the Buildings of Nonconformists, Particularly to Those of the Wesleyan Methodists: With Practical Directions for the Erection of Chapels and School-Houses*. London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co, 1850, p.15; Stoke Newington High Street Wesleyan Chapel Trustees Minute Book 1816-1879, 26 August 1850, Stoke Newington Methodist Church (hereafter SNMC).

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<sup>3</sup> Stoke Newington High Street Wesleyan Chapel op. cit, 24 & 30 November 1881.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 21 November 1924.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> 'Unchurched' was a word used by Methodists during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to refer to people who did not regularly attend chapel or church services. For more see J. E. McCullagh, *The Open Church for the Unchurched*. New York: Fleming H. Revell Co, 1905.

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<sup>10</sup> Cracknell & White, op. cit., pp. 93, 98 & 137.

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<sup>12</sup> R. Davies (ed.), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, vol. 1, London: Epworth Press, 1965, pp. 242-51; Davies, George and Rupp, op. cit, pp. 67-70 & 547-52.

<sup>13</sup> J. S. Simon, *A Summary of Methodist Law and Discipline*. London: Methodist Publishing House, 1923, pp. 331-70.

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<sup>20</sup> The number and location of chapels within circuits regularly changed. Between 1851 and 1932 the following chapels were in these circuits (not all simultaneously). Stoke Newington Circuit: High Street Chapel, Green Lanes Chapel, Mildmay Park Chapel, Northwold Road Chapel, Kingsland Crossway and Matthias Road mission halls. Highgate Circuit: Hornsey Road Chapel, Archway Road Chapel, Holly Park Chapel, Middle Lane Chapel, Muswell Hill Chapel, Jackson's Lane Chapel. Bow (later Poplar and Bow) Circuit: Bow Road Chapel, Old Ford Chapel, Bow Common Chapel, Barking Road Chapel, Poplar Chapel, Millwall Chapel, Cubitt Town Chapel.

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For Holly Park Chapel: This is the estimate that was selected by the trustees. There is no record of exactly how much the organ cost. 'Holly Park Chapel Trustees Meeting Minute Book, 1881-1928', 18 March 1882, LMA/4009/HP/03/001, London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA); The National Archives Currency Converter: 1270-2017, <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter>, accessed 14 January 2019.

<sup>37</sup> 'Old Ford Chapel Trustees' Meetings Minute Book 1871-1915', 18 March 1887, ACC/1850/243, LMA.

<sup>38</sup> 'Jackson's Lane Wesleyan Chapel Treasurer's Account, 1895-1897', 7 September 1905 & 19 December 1905.

<sup>39</sup> 'Holly Park Chapel Trustees Meeting Minute Book, 1881-1928', 15 March 1890.

<sup>40</sup> 'Holly Park Chapel Choir Minute Book, 1895-1926', 1897 Choir Report, LMA/4009/HP/04/001, HP.

<sup>41</sup> 'Holly Park Chapel Trustees Meeting Minute Book, 1881-1928', 15 March 1890; 25 January 1900; 20 February 1900; 'Holly Park Chapel Choir Minute Book, 1895-1926', 1897 Choir Report; 'Archway Road Chapel Trustees Meeting Minutes, 1883-1903', 21 February 1898, LMA/4009/AR/03/002, LMA; 'Middle Lane Chapel Peace Thanksgiving Fund Accounts, 1920-1922', LMA/4009/ML/01/029, LMA; 'Archway Road Chapel Trustees Meeting Minutes, 1903-1923', 3 February 1922 & 2 March 1922, LMA/4009/AR/03/003.

<sup>42</sup> 'Holly Park Chapel Trustees Meeting Minute Book, 1881-1928', 17 April 1883.

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