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**Materiality and the extended geographies of religion: the institutional design
and everyday experiences of London's Wesleyan Methodist circuits, 1851 –
1932**

ABSTRACT

Using and adapting the ideas of material religion, this paper considers Wesleyan Methodist circuits: the organisation of chapels within specific geographical areas into co-dependent communities. Interested in circuits as an example of the extension of religious space beyond institutional contexts – the extended geographies of religion - it highlights the importance of thinking about such spaces as material things. Using two circuits in London (Bow and Highgate) as case studies, this paper focuses on representations of circuits and their visual and material qualities. It then explores how material approaches facilitate insights into the differences between how religious leaders designed these spaces and how individuals experienced them. Taking a material approach to congregational bodies, objects and (sub)urban landscapes, it simultaneously considers how material things gain meaning through their participation in humans' social networks and as a result of their inherent material properties. In particular, it argues that taking this material approach to the extended geographies of religious practice is an effective method of gaining insights into individuals' everyday experiences of religious spaces. Most specifically, it emphasises how the insights that material approaches provide into everyday religious practices are especially useful when studying individuals in the past, as their voices are generally unrepresented in the official archival documents of religious institutions that historical research into religious communities is often dependent on.

KEY WORDS

Materiality; material religion; congregational experience; Wesleyan Methodism; London.

On the 19th September 1905, the Jackson's Lane Wesleyan Methodist Chapel was opened with great anticipation in the north London suburb of Highgate (Fig. 1).¹ One of London's expanding Victorian suburbs, Highgate's residential density began to increase in the 1830s and by the second-half of the nineteenth century its Wesleyan residents were eagerly pursuing the potential of a new local chapel.² As early as 1881 suitable locations began to be considered, but many were rejected due to their insufficient prominence.³ Even once an appropriate location on the corner of Jackson's Lane and Archway Road had been chosen and purchased in 1895, it took a further ten years for suitable funds to be raised to finance the new build.⁴ Nevertheless, neither Highgate's Wesleyan community nor its 'unchurched' local residents were deprived of Wesleyan provision throughout this period of waiting.⁵ When Jackson's Lane Chapel finally opened, it was the last addition to a group of Wesleyan chapels in the local area, collectively referred to as the Highgate Circuit. Although no Wesleyan chapels, mission halls, or meeting houses existed in Highgate village before 1905, the circuit had been established in 1873 and its other physical locations and the activities organised between these spaces gave Highgate's residents consistent access to Wesleyan provision (Fig. 2).⁶

The Highgate example illustrates two important characteristics of nineteenth- and

early twentieth-century Wesleyan circuits. Firstly, circuits were specifically designed spaces that were intentionally created to develop bonds of fellowship within the Wesleyan Church and extended the evangelical influence of Wesleyanism beyond purpose-built chapels. This is demonstrated by the great care taken in finding a suitable location for Highgate's new chapel and how the links between pre-existing chapels in the area meant that Highgate was never without Wesleyan provision. Secondly, it also highlights how circuits had a significant effect on the everyday experiences of Wesleyan congregations. In this case, prior to 1905 Highgate's Wesleyans had had to make a two-mile round trip up and down a steep hill to attend services at the Archway Road Chapel, time and effort that was significantly reduced once Jackson's Lane Chapel was opened.⁷ Continuing to identify and explore these characteristics of Wesleyan circuits, this paper will take various material approaches to two of London's nineteenth- and early twentieth-century circuits - Highgate and Bow - to consider three principal questions. How did Methodist leaders design Wesleyan circuits? How were circuits experienced by ordinary congregation members? How and why do different material approaches provide alternative perspectives on these extended geographies of historical religious practice?

Circuits were (and are) a peculiarly Methodist organisational system. The Methodist movement was initially established as a branch of the Church of England in the early eighteenth century and gained its name from the methodical approach its followers took in their pursuit of holiness.⁸ During the movement's early years, a 'circuit' referred to the preaching cycles of peripatetic preachers who moved around and spoke in various - often geographically distant - locations. However, as Methodism became more established, particularly once it was a denomination outside of the

Church of England in the late eighteenth century, the term 'circuit' was reappropriated to refer to groups of purpose-built Methodist chapels and mission halls, located within particular geographical areas and overseen by a group of ministers who moved around and preached at a different one each week.⁹ Although the Methodist denomination split into several factions during the course of the nineteenth century, including the Wesleyans, Primitive Methodists, the Methodist New Connexion and Bible Christians, circuit structures were retained across the movement. Indeed, circuits are still a fundamental component of the contemporary British Methodist Church, which is an amalgamation of most of the nineteenth-century Methodist denominations which reunited in 1932.¹⁰

Focusing on Methodism in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century London, this paper will specifically concentrate on the Wesleyan Church, the most numerically significant Methodist denomination in the metropolis between the 1851 religious census and the reunification of the Methodist Church in 1932.¹¹ Wesleyanism largely shared broader Methodist theology, believing 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 salvation 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.¹² This had important implications for Wesleyan circuits, directly influencing official motivations for the extension of their geographical influence

beyond their chapels and the sort of material culture they used in these extended spaces.

While the combination of divine worship, fellowship and evangelism was not unique to the Wesleyan Church, nineteenth-century Wesleyanism did also differ from other Methodist denominations. Traditional narratives of Wesleyan history have argued that during the nineteenth century the denomination increasingly disregarded the revivalist principles of the original Methodist movement as it became more established and yearned for official recognition.¹³ Indeed, although recent scholarship has begun to challenge the accuracy of this interpretation, demonstrating the evangelical vigour of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Wesleyan Church, it is important to note that the Primitive Methodist Church and the Bible Christian movement both separated from the Wesleyan denomination due to its disregard for their revivalist and evangelical techniques.¹⁴ Furthermore, as the nineteenth century progressed the Wesleyan Church placed increasing emphasis on the importance of permanent and impressive chapels that made statements about the Church's permanence and established identity.¹⁵ These specifically 'Wesleyan' characteristics had significant implications for circuits, shaping the activities that happened in them and making their physical buildings particularly important.

Historians of the Wesleyan and Methodist Churches have long emphasised these denominations' extensive engagement with spaces beyond their chapels. Donald Soper discussed John Wesley's regular use of outdoor spaces, Clive Field has explored Methodist holiday agencies, and John Pritchard and Ellen Ross have considered Methodist missionary activity on a local, national and international

scale.¹⁶ More specifically, the (Wesleyan) Methodist Church and local historians have undertaken numerous studies into the development of the circuit system and specific circuit communities.¹⁷ However, while illustrating the variety of locations used for Methodist purposes, few of these studies have explored the spatial implications of Methodists' extended geographies. However, in their exploration of Methodist Sunday school parades and tea treats in west Cornwall between 1830 and 1930, David Harvey, Catherine Brace and Adrian Bailey have demonstrated the potential of thinking spatially about Methodism's extended geographies.¹⁸ Illustrating how these activities contributed to local Methodist identities, Harvey, Brace and Bailey also made an important contribution to the recent interest in both history and geography in an ever-broader range of spiritual practices and the vast variety of spaces beyond institutional locations in which they are practiced.¹⁹ Their research forms an important foundation block for the discussion that follows.

However, while Harvey, Brace and Bailey briefly reference some of the material things associated with Methodist parades and tea treats, they do not explore the implications of this material culture or its impact on extended geographies of Methodist practice.²⁰ Indeed, although both geographers and historians have long used material approaches to study institutional locations of religious practice, it is only relatively recently that they have begun to consider the materiality of the extended geographies of religion, faith and spirituality.²¹ This has involved work on the materiality of spirituality within contemporary domestic contexts and a growing body of literature exploring the embodied experiences of pilgrims and the importance of positioning spiritual pilgrimages within their physical and material contexts.²² However, little of this work on the material culture of extended religious geographies

has been historical. Veronica Della Dora has explored how nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox pilgrimage cards facilitated the extension of the sacred space of Mount Athos beyond its physical location, allowing it to be experienced by those unable to travel there. However, she does not discuss the materiality of the sites of pilgrimage or their impact on the pilgrims' bodies.²³ In response, this paper demonstrates the particular benefits of undertaking material analysis of the extended geographies of historical religious practices.

It will begin by using well-established visual approaches to religious communities, reading representations of Methodist circuits as texts to consider how their design, text, images and marks can be understood as illustrations of the meaning and purpose of circuits.²⁴ However, aware of the limitations of such approaches and drawing on geographical studies of the materiality of images and text, it will turn to alternative material methodologies to seek broader insights into circuit spaces.²⁵ Primarily, this draws on an interdisciplinary set of approaches referred to as 'material religion' that emphasise how thinking materially about religious practices and communities can challenge established narratives and provide insights into both the official organisation of religious spaces and how they were experienced by ordinary congregation members.²⁶

Firstly, material religion approaches argue that material things cannot simply be read as material manifestations of religious ideas, but should be considered as inextricable parts of religious networks that contribute to, and influence religion as much as theology or doctrine.²⁷ Thus, they emphasise the importance of material sources of information about religion – such as buildings, sacramental items,

religious books and ecclesiastical costumes – and legitimise the insights they provide. Secondly, material religion argues that academic interest should not be limited to things that facilitate religious practices, but should embrace the materiality of religious practices themselves: the spaces they happen in, the movement of religious adherents' bodies during them, and the interactions between bodies, spaces and objects throughout them. Therefore, this broader definition of materiality moves beyond the design of purpose-built religious spaces and theologically informed material things, and emphasises how there is a broad network of material spaces, objects and human bodies that create and created religious spaces. Finally, proponents of material religion suggest that thinking about the material practices, places and bodies involved in religion undermines conventional scholarly emphasis on religious thought, and religious belief and argue that it allows greater attention to be given to everyday religious practices.²⁸ Directly drawing on these ideas, this paper thinks broadly about the materiality of Wesleyan circuits in order to draw conclusions about historical individuals' everyday experiences of these spaces. However, when considering the material culture of Wesleyan circuits, this paper will also draw on the ideas of Tim Ingold and prioritise the material properties of the objects and landscapes of these circuit spaces, and how bodies interacted with them.²⁹ It will consider what these objects and spaces were made of; the qualities and characteristics of these materials; and how these qualities and characteristics developed with time and use. By doing so, it will not only discuss how objects gained meaning through participation in human relationships - the approach generally found in material religion studies - but also consider how their material characteristics contributed to this process.³⁰

Material religion's emphasis on everyday religious practices provides a particularly useful framework for this paper because, despite growing academic interest in everyday geographies and histories, historical explorations of everyday religious practices have consistently been hampered by the nature of surviving archives that generally focus on religious organisations' theological positions and political decisions.³¹ On the few occasions when archives do discuss the mundane processes of running religious communities, they often emphasise logistics rather than human engagements within these processes. As a result, many historians and historical geographers have avoided the subject of everyday congregational experiences. Harvey, Brace and Bailey explicitly noted that because the voices of the children who participated in the Sunday school parades and tea treats they discussed were not recorded in the archive, they were forced to focus on the intentions of the people organising these events, rather than the experiences of those attending them.³² In contrast, although material religion approaches were not specifically developed for historical research, their focus on religious practices as material networks provides a means of gaining insights into the everyday practices of religious communities. For example, Jeremy Morris, has observed that although the nature of the written archive means that historians face an almost insurmountable challenge when trying to understand how people in the past experienced religion on an everyday basis, historical material evidence can 'point to *something* [about individuals' everyday experiences] [original emphasis], even if what it points to, and how it does so, is elusive'.³³

Consequently, while acknowledging these limitations, various studies of historical religious practices have begun to analyse religious communities' material culture in

an attempt to gain insights into everyday experiences of religion. For example, historians Carmen Mangion and William Whyte have usefully demonstrated how the materiality of purpose-built religious spaces influenced how religious practices were experienced in the nineteenth century.³⁴ However, these approaches have not yet been applied to historical spaces of religious practice beyond institutional buildings. Therefore, this paper will examine the extended geographies of Wesleyan circuits as material things in order to demonstrate how such an approach can provide insights into congregational experiences of such spaces, even when the voices of ordinary congregation members have not been preserved in the vast, but almost exclusively official, paper trail left by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Wesleyan communities.³⁵

In what follows I will discuss three material things (or types of material things) used to represent nineteenth- and twentieth-century circuits: circuit plans, circuit schedules and *The Wesleyan Atlas*. First, I will read circuit plans as diagrams that illustrate how the Wesleyan Church wanted people to move around circuits and compare this to the material relationships that congregational bodies actually had with these spaces. Second, I will consider what circuit schedules suggest about how the Wesleyan Church wanted resources to move through circuits and compare this to the everyday practices of material exchange recorded in chapel trustees' minute books. Finally, I will discuss how *The Wesleyan Atlas* – a map of all the Wesleyan chapels in England and Wales in the 1870s - represented an ideal relationship between circuit communities and their local landscapes and the impact that the materiality of these landscapes had on individuals' lived experiences.³⁶ These material explorations will all be conducted in relation to the Highgate and Bow

circuits.

THE HIGHGATE AND BOW CIRCUITS

The Highgate Circuit developed in north London during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in a largely middle-class suburban area. Its first chapel was built in 1821 and by 1905 it had six chapels serving the area's increasing population (Fig. 2).³⁷ The Bow Circuit - established in 1861 - initially served a largely middle-class community in a relatively affluent area of east London. However, during the latter decades of the nineteenth century the demographic character of the area changed and the circuit grew to include seven chapels, which predominately engaged with under and unemployed members of the local working classes (Fig. 3).³⁸

Between 1851 and 1932, both the Highgate and Bow circuits engaged in processes of geographical spread and development. Some of the Highgate Circuit's chapels were initially part of the Islington Circuit, which encompassed most of north London. This was subdivided in 1873 to form separate Highgate and Islington circuits, designed to provide increased Wesleyan accommodation for north London's growing population.³⁹ Similarly, in 1869 the Bow Circuit was subdivided into the Bow and Barking circuits, reducing its geographical spread so that its ministers could focus on a more specific geographical area with an increasing population density. However, in 1900 the Bow and Poplar circuits were amalgamated to form the Poplar and Bow Circuit. Extending the circuit into the Isle of Dogs, this enabled a larger number of ministers to collectively respond to the physical and spiritual poverty identified in east London during this period.⁴⁰ Therefore, the Bow and Highgate circuits not only provide usefully contrasting examples of the varying urban and suburban contexts in

which nineteenth- and twentieth-century metropolitan circuits were located, but also demonstrate circuits' geographical variability, highlighting their flexibility and how their geographical location and size were regularly altered to better serve local communities. Furthermore, they are also circuits with extensive archival records.

While the Highgate and Bow circuits can provide representative examples of varying manifestations of Wesleyanism in London between 1851 and 1932, historians have regularly argued that London's Methodist practices were unrepresentative of broader national trends during this period.⁴¹ Indeed, Harvey, Brace and Bailey suggest that geographical variation was a characteristic of all nineteenth- and twentieth-century Methodist practices.⁴² Therefore, this paper does not claim to illustrate national patterns of Methodist practices or congregational experience. Instead it focuses on identifying methods that could be used to draw conclusions about everyday experiences of any extended geography of historical religious practice, even when archival records do not appear to yield such information. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that although this paper is based on a comprehensive study of the many surviving archives, publications and material things (objects and buildings) related to the Highgate and Bow circuits, like all Wesleyan communities from this period the voices of ordinary congregation members are almost entirely missing from the largely official written records.

CIRCUIT PLANS AND THE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Wesleyan circuits were regularly represented in circuit plans: ephemeral administrative grids created to

convey information about the chapels, services, and preachers in a circuit community.⁴³ Although circuit plans were not required, designed or centrally produced by the Wesleyan Church, surviving examples demonstrate that locally printed plans distributed by individual circuits generally conformed to a tried and tested format.⁴⁴ A Poplar and Bow Circuit Plan made in 1932 (Fig. 4), illustrates this design. Taking the form of a grid occupying most of a landscape rectangle, the far-left column of the plan records the circuit's chapels, mission halls and meeting places, the top row marks Sunday dates over a three-month period, and the cells in the grid record the preachers speaking in each location on each date. Further information was added to the grid by letters and symbols (explained in a key at the bottom of the page) that indicated where and when sacraments and special services were to be performed. Made from thin, light and cheap paper, these circuit plans could be easily transported, folded, and slipped inside Bibles or pockets and once the information they contained was out of date they were as easily disposed of.

Initially it is useful to approach these circuit plans as visual representations of how Church and circuit leaders wanted these spaces to function. Designed to be easy to read and carry around, circuit plans were intended to facilitate the effective administration of Wesleyan circuits and enable all congregation members to understand their chapel's location within an extended geography. Indeed, by representing circuits' locations, services and activities in a grid format, Wesleyan leaders communicated one particular aspect of their ideal vision of circuits as extended geographies. They presented circuits as a set of purpose-built locations held together by the movement of ministers, lay preachers and congregation members, who moved through these circuits with regularity and order. However, to

what extent did congregation members' everyday experiences of circuits reflect this ideal? In order to answer this question it is necessary to engage more fully with the material character of these circuit plans and the material bodies they aimed to control.

Firstly, did congregation members have their own circuit plans? In 1880 the Highgate Circuit distributed circuit plans to all their congregation members in exchange for one penny to cover printing costs.⁴⁵ By 1927 the Highgate Circuit's plans were free for all congregation members as the local printers Messrs Causton and Sons printed them at no cost in exchange for the inclusion of advertisements around the plan.⁴⁶ This suggests that the Highgate Circuit's leadership were keen to make circuit plans easily accessible and implies that they expected congregation members to have their own plan. Discussions of circuit plans recorded in circuit and chapel archives suggest that these expectations were met. For instance, in 1889 an announcement had to be made during the notices in the Highgate Circuit's chapels to correct a mistake in the plan that recorded Sunday evening prayer services at Middle Lane Chapel at 7.30pm rather than 7.00pm.⁴⁷ Additionally, in 1928 action had to be taken in the Poplar and Bow Circuit to prevent further problems with the distribution of circuit plans. Responding to complaints that circuit plans were not reaching congregation members in time for the start of new quarterly cycles, it was decided that 'new plans should be issued a month before the expiration of the current plan' in order to prevent congregation members being without plans and their invaluable information.⁴⁸ These complaints not only illustrate that congregation members had - or expected to have - access to circuit plans, but also imply that congregation

members relied on circuit plans to schedule their temporal and geographical engagements with their Wesleyan communities.

However, while clearly demonstrating that congregation members used circuit plans, these examples also suggest that these printed objects were not a simple tool that easily enabled Wesleyan leaders to control congregational engagements with circuits. Acknowledging that circuit plans were not just information, but were paper objects printed in permanent ink that needed to be physically distributed, highlights how the materiality of these plans could interrupt and undermine the effective dissemination of the information they contained. The mistakes in the Highgate Circuit Plan could have sent congregation members to the wrong place at the wrong time. While difficulties in distributing circuit plans in Poplar and Bow could have created chaos by leaving congregation members with no information about where they should be when. Therefore, in each instance the materiality of these plans might have prevented ordinary congregation members from effectively and successfully moving through their circuit. This emphasises the importance of thinking about the material characteristics of even the most text-like objects, as circuit plans' potential to disrupt leaders' ideal circuit designs were the result of the combination of the information they contained, the permanency of the ink in which they were printed, and the need to carry and deliver these physical objects to individuals' houses.

Additionally, congregational experiences of circuits were informed by members' embodied movements through these spaces. A small selection of memories about being part of London's Wesleyan communities before 1932, collected by Clive Field during the 1970s, suggest that individuals primarily engaged with events in one

chapel, rather than the various chapels within their circuit.⁴⁹ This is perhaps unsurprising given that until the 1920s Wesleyan chapels implemented a system of seat renting in their chapels, where congregation members were charged to rent the seats or pews they sat in during Sunday services.⁵⁰ Because congregation members had to pay for a seat in their local chapel, it is unlikely that they attended services in other chapels in their circuit. Nevertheless, this is not to say that congregation members did not move through their circuits and attend events at other chapels for special and specific occasions.⁵¹ For example, in 1907 the Highgate Circuit's Archway Road Chapel held an anniversary service to celebrate thirty-five years in its permanent building. Attended by the local mayor and the 1st Middlesex Battalion of the Girls' and Boys' Brigade, references to the service's vast congregation suggests that members of the circuit's other chapels attended as part of these specific celebrations.⁵² Similarly, in 1884 the Hornsey Chapel (in the same circuit) hosted its bazaar - a fair organised to raise money for their chapel funds - in the Holly Park Chapel's schoolroom.⁵³ This required members of the Hornsey Chapel travelling to Holly Park and engaging with an alternative location in their circuit. Furthermore, circuits also organised collective events that were hosted by one chapel. For example, in 1870 the Bow Circuit held a prayer meeting at the Bow Road Chapel, inviting all members of the circuit to attend.⁵⁴ While, in 1930 the Jackson's Lane Chapel hosted the Highgate Circuit's annual circuit-wide Eisteddfod, where young people performed in musical competitions and entered material things into various competitive categories - including leatherwork, raffia work and pen and ink sketches.⁵⁵ On this occasion, groups of young people from each chapel in the Highgate Circuit gathered in the Jackson's Lane Chapel with their creations and performances in an attempt to win the circuit's Eisteddfod shield.

Therefore, although it is unlikely that congregation members attended Sunday services in multiple locations across their circuit, they did have personal experiences of moving through spaces in their circuit. However, congregation members' movements between and through the physical locations in Wesleyan circuits rarely corresponded to the neat, ordered circulations represented in circuit plans. Their movements were more sporadic, happened occasionally and were largely motivated by specific - often special - events. Consequently, although not exactly reflecting the neatly integrated circuit designs represented on circuit plans, the movement of congregational bodies through circuits would have given them some experience of circuits as physical spaces of interrelated locations and communities.

CIRCUIT SCHEDULES AND THE EXCHANGE OF MATERIAL THINGS

Circuit schedules provide a second visual and material illustration of Wesleyan circuits as extended geographies of religious practice. Administrative tools created by the central Wesleyan Church, circuit schedules were pre-printed logbooks that provided labelled rows and columns to direct and regulate the information collected about chapels' finances and membership figures. Collated at circuits' quarterly meetings, this information was then presented at the Wesleyan Church's annual Conference - the meeting of its governing body. Fig. 5 shows a double page from the Bow Road Circuit Schedule dated 1861 to 1870, which illustrates the sorts of information that these books were designed to collect. The labelled columns record information about the number of members in each 'class' (small gatherings aimed at developing Wesleyan fellowship and fostering greater faith), how many new

members had joined each class, how many people had left each class, and why they had done so - removal to another circuit, death, 'backsliding' or conversion into another denomination. Schedule books also included space for information to be recorded about the amount of money collected through class membership subscriptions and donations to particular Church, circuit and chapel funds - including, the Wesleyan Theological Institution, the Home Mission and Contingent Fund, and general chapel funds.

Therefore, circuit schedules served two related administrative purposes. Firstly, they audited the number of members in circuits' classes in order to monitor relative conversion and retention rates. Secondly, they recorded the amount of money that congregation members contributed through class membership fees and subscriptions - a figure which directly correlated to the number of class members. Consequently, although the information these books contained almost entirely referred to individuals associated with particular chapels, it also effectively illustrated the mechanics of circuit organisation, as the financial donations recorded were all contributed to central circuit funds used to pay ministers' wages and maintain properties (such as ministers' homes) owned by circuits. As a result, schedule books, their pre-printed text and the specific information collected inside them, can be read as illustrations of resource collectives, in which the Wesleyan Church envisaged human resources and financial donations being shared between chapels to create self-sufficient circuits.

However, once again these schedule books were not simply visual, textual and numerical representations of circuits and consideration of their materiality challenges

the extent to which congregations experienced circuits in this way. Fig. 5 illustrates that although circuit schedules were pre-printed books with specifically labelled columns, users often made alternations to their content. In this instance, some columns were not used, their titles crossed through and a note added to say that the information they were meant to contain could be found elsewhere. Alternatively, some columns were relabelled and used to record other information. For example, the columns for 'quarterage [payments] received when the [class] tickets were renewed' and 'quarterage received since from absentees' were relabelled 'weekly' and 'tickets'. This indicates that the first column recorded money from weekly collections and the second the amount of money received through the renewal of class membership. These material engagements with the Bow Road Circuit's schedule book show Wesleyan communities rejecting these books' demands and altering them to better suit their administrative needs. Therefore, they imply that circuit communities were also likely to overlook the ideal circuit designs these documents presented.

Nevertheless, consideration of other material things which moved through circuits shows that these extended geographies of Methodist practice did often become resource collectives. For example, in 1904 and 1926 the Highgate Circuit's Local Preachers' Minute Book recorded that the circuit had a set of books that they encouraged local preachers to borrow to help them write sermons.⁵⁶ Similarly, when a tea party was organised to celebrate the opening of the Jackson's Lane Chapel in 1905, cups, saucers, cutlery, tables and chairs were borrowed from the Archway Road Chapel, because Jackson's Lane Chapel had not yet purchased their own set.⁵⁷ In these instances the exchange and circulation of material things illustrates

close relationships within the Highgate Circuit. Local preachers were given access to academic resources they might not have been able to personally afford and more established chapels supported new chapels by lending material resources they were yet to purchase. Indeed, closer consideration of the movement of the Archway Road Chapel's crockery to the Jackson's Lane Chapel emphasises the extent to which the circuit functioned as a cohesive whole. Moving so many fragile things up and down the steep Archway Road would have been physically hard work, full of potential for things to be broken. Therefore, focusing on how these objects were part of circuits' social relationships suggests that members of the Highgate Circuit experienced an open, easily navigable space in which members were willing to go out of their way to support each other.

However, paying greater attention to the material qualities of these circulating objects disrupts this impression and complicates interpretations of congregational experiences. For example, when the Bow Road Chapel was refurbished in 1893, the congregation decided that the material things they were replacing, including a carpet and a communion rail, should be donated to the Bow Common Chapel.⁵⁸ Similarly, in 1914 when the Old Ford Chapel (also in the Bow Circuit) purchased a new communion service, the Bow Common Chapel asked if they could have the discarded set as it was in much better condition than the one they were using.⁵⁹ In both instances the material things that the Bow Road and Old Ford Chapel were divesting themselves of still functioned, but it is implied – although the archives remain silent - that they were being replaced because their material condition had deteriorated with time and use. In contrast, the archives explicitly explain how the material condition of these objects was better than the material things in the Bow Common Chapel. Perhaps Bow Common had bare floorboards, no physical

communion rails for adherents to kneel at, and communion ware which was small, or made of poor quality metal that was easily dented, scratched and stained. Although there is no way of knowing for sure, whatever the situation, it seems likely that these material donations would have improved congregational experiences in the Bow Common Chapel, providing them with objects that were more materially suitable and provided more pleasurable sensory experiences. However, these donations would also have served as a physical illustration of the imbalance of money and influence within the circuit, highlighting the difference in wealth between its various chapels and implying that, as well as being a space of mutual exchange and support, it was also a hierarchical system of uneven power and control.

THE WESLEYAN ATLAS AND THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL LANDSCAPE IN WESLEYAN CIRCUITS

Finally, *The Wesleyan Atlas* provides a third visual representation of how the Wesleyan Church envisaged circuits as extended geographies.⁶⁰ Produced and published during the 1870s, the atlas marked the geographical location of every chapel in England and Wales using small red, yellow, blue or green dots (Fig. 6). These different colours were used to denote which circuit each chapel belonged to and therefore illustrated the distances between circuits' chapels and the peripheries of circuit boundaries. As a result, *The Wesleyan Atlas* presented circuits as physical landscapes with particular geographical regions of influence and responsibility. Reflecting on the practices of the Bow and Highgate Circuits, particularly their open-air services and appropriation of public spaces, this section will show that London's Wesleyan communities did utilise the landscapes in which their permanent buildings

were positioned. More specifically, by focusing on the material culture of these landscapes, it will consider why Wesleyans approached circuits as areas of influence, what they hoped this would achieve, and the extent to which these aspirations were reflected in ordinary individuals' everyday experiences of these spaces.

During the early years of the Methodist movement leaders like George Whitfield and John Wesley regularly dispensed with physical buildings and preached outside in order to effectively engage with large numbers of people.⁶¹ Continuing this tradition, although largely using street corners and parks rather than fields, open-air services were regularly organised and popularly attended in the Bow and Highgate circuits during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁶² Explicitly understood as evangelical events, some of these outdoor services were associated with specific chapels, while others were circuit-wide events organised by lay preachers. Nevertheless, all were located within their circuit's area of geographical influence and directly engaged with its physical landscape.⁶³ Similarly, the Bow and Highgate circuits also temporarily appropriated public buildings in their circuit's extended geographical area for Methodist events.⁶⁴

Much has been written about the material design of purpose-built Wesleyan chapels and mission halls and how they helped facilitate the Church's activities.⁶⁵ For example, in her discussion of Methodist the large Methodist Central Halls built in fashionable styles during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries as alternative locations for Methodist practices, Angela Connelly has demonstrated how they were designed to dispense with the visual and material symbolism attached to the

architectural design and arrangement of chapels in order to make them more attractive to 'unchurched' communities.⁶⁶ In contrast, little has been said about the role of the materiality of circuit landscapes in facilitating Wesleyan practices. Nevertheless, it is clear that Wesleyan communities were aware of how the physical qualities and social meanings of outdoor and appropriated spaces could facilitate their evangelical purposes. For instance, a photograph of an outdoor service hosted by the Highgate Circuit's Middle Lane Chapel Sunday school in the early twentieth century, demonstrates how Wesleyan communities chose locations for their outdoor services that were easily accessible, clearly noticeable and large in scale, so they could attract and accommodate large numbers of passers-by.⁶⁷ Indeed, it is likely that the Middle Lane Sunday School also chose this particular large and flat piece of land because it had no features that could obstruct the view of congregation members, making it easier for service leaders to engage with the gathered crowd. A similar process is identifiable in Wesleyans' temporary appropriation of public buildings. For instance, in 1930 the Middle Lane Chapel held a service in the Crouch End Hippodrome, a theatre on Tottenham Lane with the capacity to seat 1500. The Hippodrome was chosen because its large scale and reputation as a popular secular leisure destination meant that it was likely to attract local community members who did not want to go into a chapel building and because it could provide enough space for the large crowds the chapel hoped the event would draw.⁶⁸ Therefore, in both instances the Middle Lane Chapel chose locations within the Highgate Circuit's landscape because they believed their physical design and social meanings would effectively contribute to Wesleyan evangelical engagement with 'unchurched' members of the local community.

Furthermore, the demands of conducting Wesleyan practices beyond purpose-built chapels and mission halls resulted in various material distinctions between events held in Wesleyan chapels and circuit landscapes. Drawing on material religion ideas and the importance they place on the relationship between materiality and everyday experiences of religion, it is interesting to consider how these alternative material contexts contributed to variations in congregational experiences of Wesleyan events. The style and content of outdoor services were often very similar to those held in purpose-built chapels. For example, Reverend Lax - the minister of the Poplar Chapel from 1902 to his death in 1937 - described the open-air services he held on East India Road in the following way:

Three hymns were sung, prayer offered, a lesson read, announcements of future doing made, and then the address began.... The address rarely lasted less than an hour. There was explanation, enforcement, and finally appeal. Questions were invited, and for nearly another hour questions would be given.⁶⁹

However, in order to facilitate these practices outdoors, a number of different material things were required. For example, although the lectern used by the Middle Lane Chapel's Sunday school (Fig. 7) may have reminded congregation members of the pulpits characteristically found and used in Wesleyan chapels during regular Sunday services, this simple, portable lectern was distinctly different in design and material character to the large pulpits, often built into platform areas, found in early twentieth-century Wesleyan chapels. Most notably, while chapel lecterns generally elevated preachers so that all their congregation members could see them, the

example in this photograph simply provided a surface for the preacher to place his notes and Bible. This meant that congregation members were not looking up at the preacher, but were on a level with them and depending on their position in the crowd may have only been able to hear what they were saying. Therefore, this lectern resulted in congregation members hearing, seeing and positioning their bodies in different ways than when they were engaging with sermons in purpose-built chapels.

Similarly, although the violin and trumpet shown in Fig. 7 may also have been used inside Wesleyan chapels, the musical sounds of open-air services would have differed from those heard in indoor services as a result of the different qualities of open-air acoustics. Significantly, this photograph features a small harmonium, a practical alternative to immovable organs, which could be used at outdoor services. Indeed, it was common for congregations to purchase portable harmoniums, which were powered by the feet of the musician playing them, to help facilitate communal singing during open-air services.⁷⁰ For example, Lax's wife Mary used a 'little harmonium' during the services outside London's dockyards, and when the Holly Park Chapel choir went carol singing in December 1897 the organist carried an organ on his back.⁷¹ These small harmoniums made a particular sound, dramatically different to that of larger organs permanently installed in chapel buildings, which would have contributed to congregation members specific experiences while attending open-air services.

In addition to large organs, there were many other material things conspicuously missing when Wesleyan services were held in the open air. It is notable that the bodies gathered for the Middle Lane Sunday School service stood rather than sat in

pews. This resulted in open-air services demanding a particular physical strength from their attendants - Lax's account of his open-air services suggest that they could last for hours. In addition, the lack of seating also meant that congregational bodies were randomly arranged around the preacher, rather than strictly regulated in blocks of pews. Furthermore, while chapels' seats were specifically organised to prevent congregation members sitting behind the minister, Fig. 7 illustrates how the crowd encircled the preacher.⁷² Therefore, because the physical character of outdoor locations made it impractical to provide seating, congregational experiences of these events were informed by the physical demands placed on their bodies and the unprecedented freedom they had to arrange themselves and choose the position from which they partook in these events.

Finally, congregational experiences of circuit landscapes were also influenced by material aspects of these spaces beyond the control of Wesleyan leaders. For instance, although Lax carefully chose the entrance to the East India Docks for his outdoor services as an effective location for attracting the attention of many passers-by, the material features of this position imposed specific logistical requirements on these religious events. Close to a busy road, it soon became necessary for the police to control traffic near the dock during these services in order to prevent attendants from being run over.⁷³ These potential dangers and the additional actors needed to control and monitor congregational behaviour arguably reduced the effectiveness of these events.

In addition, the people within these spaces also affected the design of Wesleyan circuits and contributed to local communities' experiences of them. Because open-air

services were arranged to appeal to people who would not normally attend Wesleyan chapels, the crowds that gathered at these events could be both supportive of, and passionately opposed to, Wesleyan ideas. They certainly had the opportunity to disrupt the character of circuit spaces. For instance, Lax described encounters with unsupportive bystanders at his open-air services:

At one of our open-air meetings, a voluble woman began to heckle the speakers. As often as she was beaten in argument, she turned to the abuse of Poplar. It was a rotten place! She wouldn't stop another day in it! 'What's the matter with it, missis?' a man inquired. 'It's all wrong', she replied. 'It's cold and damp, and its full of Methodists!' 'Well then, missis,' said one supporter, 'go to 'ell! It'll just suit yer! It's warm and dry, and there ain't no Methodists there!'⁷⁴

In this instance the woman's heckles both disrupted and facilitated the evangelical purpose of Wesleyan circuits. While her words initially disturbed the open-air service by interrupting the preacher and, when changing the subject from theology to local geography, challenging Methodists' engagements with their local landscape. However, the response recorded from a member of the attending crowd suggests that for some this interruption did not act as a provocation to leave this space, but encouraged an ordinary congregation member to assert their faith and the importance of positioning it within the streets of Poplar. Therefore, this altercation suggests that outdoor services also gave ordinary congregation members the opportunity to informally proselytise in a way which would have been inappropriate in the more formal chapel context.

Overall, consideration of the Bow and Highgate Circuits' open-air services and temporary appropriation of public spaces highlights how Wesleyan communities did not simply approach circuits as amalgamations of purpose-built Wesleyan structures, but engaged with the physical landscape between these structures. Consideration of both the physical qualities and social meanings attached to these material landscapes, and the material things which circulated through them, has shown that Wesleyans considered these spaces effective evangelical tools. It has also illustrated that congregational experiences of these locations were altered by the different relationship they had with the minister, the different sounds they heard and the different embodied experiences they had when attending outdoor services. Furthermore, it has highlighted how the physical design of circuits' landscapes, and the human bodies and material things which were always moving through these spaces, had the potential to disrupt Wesleyan practices and introduce alternative elements into them.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has used material approaches to consider how extended geographies of religious practice were designed by church leaders and experienced by congregation members. Employing visual analysis, consideration of the social meanings gained by material things when integrated into human relationships, and the inherent material characteristics of material things, it has demonstrated how material approaches to the extended geographies of religious communities can reveal something about individuals' everyday experiences of these spaces in the past.

Firstly, by reading representations of circuits - circuit plans, circuit schedules and *The Wesleyan Atlas* - as texts and visual images, it has demonstrated how the Wesleyan Church conceived circuits as extended geographies of practice and influence. It has shown how they understood them as a network of purpose-built locations that congregation members should position themselves within and move between as they worshipped and attended fellowship events. It has illustrated how Church leaders wanted circuits to be spaces of exchange and mutual support, in which chapels could share resources to facilitate effective Wesleyan provision throughout a specific geographical area and develop bonds of friendship and trust. Finally, it has highlighted how they were conceived as landscapes of evangelical responsibility and potential. Therefore, textual and visual approaches to these objects present circuits as carefully designed theological spaces which facilitated the three key elements of Wesleyan practice: divine worship, fellowship and evangelism.

However, approaching circuit plans, circuit schedules, *The Wesleyan Atlas* and the circuits they represented as material things has provided alternative insights, particularly demonstrating how they were experienced by ordinary congregation members. Simultaneously considering circuit plans and the movement of the congregational bodies they represented as material things, has shown that although congregation members did move through circuits' physical locations, these movements were limited, irregular, and sometimes made more difficult by congregational reliance on material circuit plans that had to be printed and distributed to communicate information. Reflecting on the materiality of circuit schedules and the movement of material things through circuit spaces has

demonstrated that the relationships between circuits' chapels were not necessarily even, fair or equitable. Indeed, as a result of uneven affluence and power, the quality of material things in different circuit spaces varied greatly, leading to significant variations in congregation members' sensory experiences of Wesleyanism. Finally, consideration of the material culture of the landscape between purpose-built Wesleyan spaces has illustrated that circuits were envisaged as effective evangelical spaces that offered an alternative material context that could make Wesleyanism more appealing to 'unchurched' communities. The material design of these landscapes, the alternative material items used in these spaces, the movement of congregational bodies through these locations, and the influence of the other people using and engaging with circuits' landscapes all created a particular material context which contributed to alternative congregational experiences.

Therefore, by focusing on the material character of one particular extended geography of religion, this paper has demonstrated the alternative conclusions that can be drawn by using material approaches. Most particularly, it has emphasised the potential that some material approaches provide for understanding ordinary individuals' everyday experiences of religious spaces. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that many of these insights are fleeting glimpses, rather than detailed revelations. Nevertheless, even these hints are significant for historians and historical geographers who have consistently found it difficult to gain any access to individuals' everyday experiences of religion through more conventional approaches to existing archival texts.

As a result, this paper's approach suggests a number of further avenues for historical geographies of religion. Firstly, despite a growing interest in the material culture of religion, this paper has more specifically demonstrated the possibilities of thinking materially about extended geographies of historical religious and spiritual practices. Such explorations could be further developed by approaching other outdoor and peripatetic spaces of religious practice – such as homes, mission spaces, parade and pilgrim routes - as material things. Secondly, by considering buildings, bodies, objects and landscapes as visual and material things, this paper has emphasised the potential of material religion approaches to gain insights into both the official designs of religious spaces and individuals' everyday experiences of them. However, by focusing on the material qualities - as well as social meanings - of material things, it has also extended existing material religion approaches. Therefore, could historical geography approaches be further advanced, particularly in relation to growing interest in everyday geographies, by continuing to engage with and constructively developing material religion ideas?

¹ Highgate Circuit Meetings Minute Book, 1898-1907, London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter LMA) LMA/4009/HC/01/003, 19th September 1905.

² C.M. Gee, *Hampstead and Highgate; In Old Photographs, 1870-1918*, London, 1974, vii; A. Osborne, *A Portrait of Highgate*, London, 1988, 20 & 56; J. Schwitzer and K. Gay, *Highgate and Muswell Hill*, Trowbridge, 1995, 69; J. Richardson, *Highgate Past*, London, 2004, 39 & 87.

³ Highgate Circuit Minute Book 1873-1887, London Metropolitan Archives, LMA, LMA/4009/HC/01/001: 21st March 1881; 25th June 1883; 17th December 1883; 18th December 1893; 19th March 1894; 1st October 1894; 25th March 1895.

⁴ Highgate Circuit Minute Book, 1873-1887: 24th June 1895.

⁵ 'Unchurched' is a term used by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Methodists to refer to those who did not regularly attend chapel or church services. C. Field, *Methodism in metropolitan London, 1850-1920: a social and sociological study*, unpublished DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1974, 13; C. Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes*, Cardiff, 1999, 166.

⁶ Highgate Circuit Minute Book, 1873-1887: 17th February 1873.

⁷ Schwitzer and Gay, *Highgate and Muswell Hill*, 67.

⁸ K. Cracknell and S.J. White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, Cambridge, 2005.

⁹ Minutes from the 1746 Methodist Conference, *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, from the First Held in London, by The Late Rev. John Wesley, A.M., in the year 1744*, 5 vols, London, 1862, I, 33; Cracknell and White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, 118.

¹⁰ R. Davies, A.R. George and G. Rupp (Eds), *A History of the Methodist Church of Great Britain*, volume 4, London, 1988, 615, 634-41, 646-9.

¹¹ R. Slatter, A 'more-than-architectural' approach to Wesleyan space: how can material and spatial approaches to metropolitan Wesleyan Methodist practices provide insights into congregational experiences between 1851 and 1932?, unpublished PhD Thesis, University College London, 2017, 50-51.

¹² Cracknell and White, *An Introduction to World Methodism*, 93, 98, 137.

¹³ K.S. Inglis, *Churches and the working classes in Victorian England*, London, 1963, 85-100; H.D. Rack, 'Wesleyan Methodism, 1849-1902', in R. Davies, A.R. George and G. Rupp (Eds), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, volume 3, 123.

¹⁴ D.W. Bebbington, 'The mid-Victorian revolution in Wesleyan Methodist Home Mission', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (2018) 1-21.

¹⁵ This building trend is illustrated by consideration of the examples included in C. Stell, *Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses*, 4 volumes, London, 1991-2002.

¹⁶ D. Soper, 'Wesley the outdoor preacher', in J. Stacey (Ed.), *John Wesley: Contemporary Perspectives*, London, 1988, 183-89; C. Field, Fun, faith and fellowship: British Methodism and tourism in the twentieth century, *Journal of Tourism History* 7 (2015) 75-99; J. Pritchard, *Methodists and their Missionary Societies: 1900-1996*, Farnham, 2014; E. Ross, St Francis in Soho: Emmeline Pethick, Mary Neal, the west London Wesleyan Mission and the allure of 'simple living' in the 1860s, *Church History* 83 (2014) 843-883.

¹⁷ H.T. Galland, *Hall's Circuits and Ministers: An alphabetical list of the circuits in Great Britain with the names of the ministers' stations in each circuit together with*

the appointments to departments and other offices from 1786-1912, London, 1912; R. Aitchison, *A History of Normanton Methodist Circuit*, Peterborough, 2012. Much has also been said about the establishment of specifically 'missionary circuits' in nineteenth-century London. Although neither of this paper's case studies were established as missionary circuits, the politics behind the establishment of these missionary bodies does form a backdrop for this paper's study: Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes*.

¹⁸ D.C. Harvey, C. Brace and A. R. Bailey, Parading the Cornish subject: Methodist Sunday school in west Cornwall, c. 1830 -1930, *Journal of Historical Geography* 33 (2007) 24-44.

¹⁹ V. Della Dora (Ed.), Sacred Space Unbound, *Society and Space* Virtual Issue 13 (2015), <http://societyandspace.org/2015/06/12/virtual-issue-13-sacred-space-unbound/> last accessed 12 October 2017; R. Gale, Locating religion in urban planning: beyond 'race' and ethnicity?, *Planning, Practice and Research* 23 (2008) 19-39; J. Garnett and A. Harris, Faith in the home: spirituality and devotional materiality in east London, *Material Religion* 7 (2011) 299-302; J. Holloway, Enchanted space: The séance, affect and geographies of religion, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96 (2006) 182-187.

²⁰ Harvey et al. Parading the Cornish Subject, 25.

²¹ For geographical interest in the material culture of religion see: C. Brace, A.R. Bailey, S. Carter, D. Harvey, N. Thomas (Eds), *Emerging Geographies of Belief*, Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2011; D. Gilbert, L. Cuch, C. Dwyer, N. Ahmed, The sacred and the suburban: atmospherics, numinosity and 1930s interiors in Ealing, London, *Interiors* 6 (2015) 211-234. For consideration of the materiality of religious space outside of the institutional context see: R.L. Grimes, Sacred objects in museum spaces, *Studies in Religion* 21 (1992) 419-430; S. Kloß, *Fabrics of Indianness: The Exchange and Consumption of Clothing in Transnational Guyanese Hindu Communities*, Basingstoke, 2016; L. Kong, In search of permanent homes: Singapore's house churches and the politics of space, *Urban Studies* 39 (2002) 1573-86.

²² For explorations of religion in the home see: J. Holloway, Make-believe: spiritual practice, embodiment and sacred space, *Environment and Planning A* 35 (2003) 1961-1974; I. Daniels, "Dolls are scary": the locus of the spiritual in contemporary Japanese homes", in D. Morgan (Ed.), *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, Abingdon, 2010, 153-170. For considerations of religious pilgrimage see: A. Maddrell and R. Scriven, Celtic pilgrimage, past and present: from historical geography to contemporary embodied practices, *Social and Cultural Geography*, 17 (2016) 300-321.

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- ²⁹ T. Ingold, Materials against materiality, *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 (2007) 1-16.
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- ⁴⁷ Middle Lane Wesleyan Chapel Minute Book 1883-1897, 30th April 1889, LMA, LMA/4009/ML/01/001.
- ⁴⁸ Poplar and Bow Road Wesleyan Mission Circuit Quarterly Meeting Minute Book 1923-1961, 19th December 1928, LMA, ACC/1850/002.
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⁷³ Lax, *Lax*, 203.

⁷⁴ Lax, *Lax*, 181.