

# A good shepherd.

## The Rev. James Wilkinson and the regeneration of Victorian Keld

DUNCAN BYTHELL

### Introduction

The Rev. James Wilkinson, who ministered at the Independent/Congregational church at Keld – a tiny community of farmers and lead-miners at the head of Swaledale in north Yorkshire - between 1838 and his death in 1866, has no memorial tablet in the chapel and no gravestone in the burial ground there. Yet the physical evidence of his long and productive ministry survives in the neat group of public buildings in the centre of Keld village: the school and the Institute which he built, and the manse and the chapel which he enlarged and refurbished. Wilkinson's less tangible legacy has not survived as well as his buildings. Nevertheless, for almost a century after his death, during a period of almost continuous depopulation and economic decline, the institutions which occupied these premises - the day school, the Mutual Intellectual Improvement Society, and the church itself - sustained a culture which dominated the life of this small and isolated place.

Who was James Wilkinson? Fortunately, the Rev. George Waddington, who held the fort at Keld during Wilkinson's final illness and who stayed on for a year to deal with business left unfinished at his death, wrote a lengthy, affectionate, but not uncritical, memoir of his predecessor which he eventually published in Historical and Biographical Notices (Dewsbury, 1886). In writing this memoir, Waddington made full use of a substantial body of Wilkinson's personal papers - a collection now lost – and also drew on the memories of other leading Yorkshire Congregationalists who had worked with Wilkinson and known him personally. Any survey of Wilkinson's work at Keld must inevitably rely heavily on Waddington. However, archives still in the care of Keld United Reformed Church – notably the two 'Church Books' in which the minister recorded the decisions of Church meetings together with occasional reflections on the state of his congregation, and miscellaneous papers relating to both the day-school and the Institute - can supplement Waddington's biography. In addition, the local weekly newspaper, the Richmond and Ripon Chronicle, reported special events in Keld from time to time, and it is likely that Wilkinson himself acted as the paper's village correspondent for these purposes. Taken together, these sources provide a picture of a remarkable man, and help us to understand both what motivated Wilkinson to undertake to 'regenerate' Keld and also how he acquired the means to fund his various projects.

However, there remains much that we do not, and cannot, know about James Wilkinson. His achievements as a public figure are well documented: but without his letters or diaries, his personality and his private life remain obscure. No photograph of him is known to survive, and we have no physical description. Our understanding of his character and motivation depends almost entirely on the opinions of other Congregational ministers, who necessarily viewed him and his work as 'outsiders' and who judged him by their own peculiar standards. By contrast, the people of Keld - his pupils, his congregation, and his

neighbours, who came into regular contact with him in his daily work over many years – have left nothing in writing to tell us what they really thought about him. Readers of this biographical sketch need to be always aware that it provides at best a partial picture of this modest but dedicated man.

It is worth briefly setting James Wilkinson's life in the context of his times. Born in the year of Trafalgar, he arrived at Keld in the year of Queen Victoria's coronation, and died just after the end of the American Civil War. In domestic affairs, his lifetime saw the passing of the first Parliamentary Reform Act (1832), the repeal of the corn laws (1846), and the building of the railway network: internationally, it encompassed the European revolutions of 1848, the Californian and Australian gold-rushes, the Crimean war, and the Indian 'mutiny'; whilst his near-contemporaries included Charles Dickens, Richard Cobden, and John Stuart Mill. How far events, personalities, and ideas in the outside world impacted on the consciousness of a farmer's son whose entire life was spent within the mountainous area bounded by Kirkby Stephen, Tebay, Sedbergh, and Hawes, on the wild border between Yorkshire and Westmorland, is anybody's guess. Yet Wilkinson was very much a man of his time in his zeal for self-improvement by private study, in his promotion of popular education as a life-long and life-enhancing experience, and in his support for the temperance movement and for 'rational' recreation. He lived as far removed – geographically and culturally - from Dickens's London as it was possible for an Englishman to live; yet in his commitment to improving the condition of the people around him he was just as much a social reformer as was the great novelist. In his own lifetime, Wilkinson enjoyed at best a local celebrity; but he deserves to be remembered as one who achieved much of long-term significance in his own small sphere.

### Wilkinson's background

James Wilkinson, the second child of Thomas and Jane Wilkinson, was born on 26 May 1805 at Becksid farm in the hamlet of Howgill, three miles north of the small market town of Sedbergh (now in Cumbria, but then located in the West Riding of Yorkshire). The family farm stood on the east bank of the river Lune, which at that time marked the county boundary between Yorkshire and Westmorland, and included arable and meadowland on the low ground by the river and an extensive sheep pasture on the steep slopes of the Howgill fells. Unlike his brothers, who were destined to seek employment in urban trades, James was marked out early on as the son who would eventually take over the tenancy from his father. Consequently, whereas his siblings were given a decent schooling, James was required from a young age to help with farm work, with the result that his formal education was much interrupted. In a letter written shortly before his death in 1866, and quoted by Waddington [p.442], Wilkinson recalled that 'after I left school, for the space of eight or nine years, I scarcely ever looked at a book or took a pen in hand'. Instead he became accustomed to hard outdoor labour, and went 'many hundreds of times with bundles of hay on his head to feed the sheep in wintry and stormy weather' on the fells. When, some years later, he felt the urge to improve his mind, he had, in his own words, to 'begin anew' his acquaintance with books and letters.

Nominally, Wilkinson's family were Anglicans and worshipped in Howgill's tiny church, but Wilkinson found no satisfaction in the teachings and practices of the established Church. He later lamented that, during his childhood, 'the neighbourhood ... was wrapt in darkness, and those who were placed there to give light to the inhabitants were as a total eclipse to the Sun of Righteousness, so that instead of diffusing light they only increased the gloom'. But the district around Sedbergh had a rich tradition of religious non-conformity which stretched back to George Fox in the mid-seventeenth century, and in the late eighteenth century it was affected by the great awakening of English evangelicalism associated in particular with the Wesley brothers and with George Whitefield. By the 1820s, thanks partly to missionary visits by students from the dissenting academy at Idle (later Airedale College), a reviving Congregationalism began to flourish there. Cottage prayer meetings began in Sedbergh in 1821, a Sunday school opened in 1825, an Independent church was formed in 1826, and a chapel built in 1829. [T.Whitehead, History of the Dales Congregational Churches (Bradford, 1930), p.360 et seq.] Wilkinson, now in his twenties, became attracted, through the influence of friends, to the new sect. He attended his first service at Sedbergh chapel in February 1833, became a Sunday school teacher there in March, led 'public prayer' in May, and was elected a deacon two years later. He delivered his first sermon in January 1836, when the expected preacher failed to turn up, and quickly found himself in demand to lead worship at other chapels and meeting houses in the vicinity.

At some time around 1830, Wilkinson clearly underwent a deep spiritual experience, but in later years he had difficulty in explaining precisely when or how this came about. In a memorandum quoted by Waddington [p.442], he wrote:

Being surrounded with many temptations, I was often induced to run with the giddy multitude to do evil, but every cup of pleasure was embittered with a remorse of conscience, and while I endeavoured to ... seek happiness in carnal pleasure, the spirit of God arrested me in every pursuit ... I therefore determined to forsake my sinful course and seek happiness in another direction. I provided myself with a new pocket Bible, which I often read upon my knees and bedewed with tears ...

Once he had found God, Wilkinson's reading was not confined to the Bible, for he now made a sustained effort to educate himself. Waddington [pp.435-6] paints a touching picture of the bedroom at Beckside where the farmer's son 'read and wrote and studied, after a day's work on the farm, and often after attending religious services also at a considerable distance; and [w]here he would remain until midnight or later, without a fire or any other warmth except from the fire in the room beneath, .in order that he might if possible remedy the defects of his early training and improve his mind and heart'.

If the circumstances of Wilkinson's conversion are uncertain, the reasons for his abandoning the Church of England are not. Waddington - probably paraphrasing the text of Wilkinson's ordination statement - summarised them as follows [p.448-9]:

... the obvious unfitness of the [parochial] clergy ... to instruct and edify the people; also the doctrines of baptismal regeneration and priestly absolution from sin, and other doctrines and practices which he believed to be erroneous and unscriptural. The *human* origin of the State Church, the headship of any earthly Sovereign over the Church of Christ ... the arrogant claims of the clergy, the doctrine of apostolic

succession, the unscriptural nature of some portions of the Prayer Book, the want of suitable discipline, the too open nature of the communion service, and objectionable statements in some portions of the burial service, were ... additional reasons why he felt it to be his duty to dissent from the Established Church ...

By the late 1830s, it is clear that James Wilkinson felt called to work as a Minister of the Lord, and his original inclination was to offer himself for training as an overseas missionary. However, late in 1838, an unexpected opportunity arose much nearer home, in a small, remote Pennine community which he was particularly well-fitted by background and temperament to serve. The members of the tiny Independent church at Keld had quarrelled bitterly with their newly chosen minister, William Sedgwick, who had been a fellow officer in the church at Sedbergh. Wilkinson found himself invited to replace his old friend and try to repair the damage. Acutely aware of his own lack of formal theological training, Wilkinson nonetheless accepted the challenge, and embarked upon his remarkable 28-year ministry.

### The Independent church at Keld

When James Wilkinson first came to Keld, the Independent church there was some fifty years old. According to Wilkinson's own handwritten account, in the new 'Church Book' which he began to keep after the re-formation of the church in 1850 [Keld U.R.C Archives], it had been started by Edward Stillman, a charismatic young itinerant preacher who arrived in Keld in 1789. After holding services and prayer meetings in barns or in the open air, Stillman was persuaded to settle in the community and become its full-time minister. He then proceeded to rebuild a ruined chapel which stood in the centre of the village, and added to it a room for his own living-quarters and also a schoolroom. In later years, he was able to extend both the chapel and the manse from the proceeds of successful begging trips, on foot, to London, in the course of which he preached, prayed, sang, and solicited offerings wherever he happened to spend the night.

Stillman ministered at Keld until he died in March 1837, but as he sank into old age the church there languished. After the death of his wife in 1830, the village school which she had helped to run appears to have been discontinued, whilst failing health made it difficult for him to keep up his pastoral work or conduct regular services. At the time of his death, the church had been reduced to just seven members (although of course the congregation would also have included many more pew-holders and other 'adherents' who were not in formal membership). In June 1837, William Sedgwick, who had just completed his training for the ministry at Airedale College, visited Keld as a supply preacher and was shortly afterwards invited to become its new pastor. He immediately and enthusiastically embarked on a revivalist campaign which succeeded only in confusing and alienating some of the members and congregation. In order to overcome their opposition, Sedgwick decided in the spring of 1838 to re-form the Church. Eighteen members were admitted, the Church was reconstituted on 13 June by the Rev. J Harrison of Barnard Castle, and a new 'Church Book' was opened. [Keld URC Archives. Confusingly, this 'First Church Book' is labelled 'Grave Yard Book and Some Old Minutes'] The disgruntled old members threatened to disrupt Sedgwick's ordination service, but it went ahead without incident on 10 July. Waddington, whose description of this great falling-out is based largely on Wilkinson's account in the

second Church Book [Waddington, pp.482-4], is discreet as to its precise causes, beyond suggesting that

In his zeal and eagerness for progress, it is quite possible that the young and inexperienced minister did not sufficiently consider the views and opinions and prejudices of the people amongst whom he was called to labour, and would therefore perhaps be too impatient of their timidity, or of any discouragement, or obstruction, or opposition with which he might meet.

In the end, these months of passionate disagreements and violent recriminations proved too much for Sedgwick, who resigned his position in October 1838 and left Keld in despair. It is worth recording, however, that he must have learned his lesson, for he subsequently ministered successfully to nearby Congregational churches at Ravenstonedale and at Dent. [T.Whitehead, pp. 98-9 and 260]

At this critical juncture, the church at Keld turned to James Wilkinson. During his brief ministry, Sedgwick had on three occasions invited his old friend to come over and preach, and it seems likely that Wilkinson had tried, unsuccessfully, to bring about a reconciliation between the church and its young pastor. However, he must have created a good impression, because within a month of Sedgwick's departure he had 'received a unanimous invitation from the congregation, signed by seventy persons, inviting me for twelve months'. This probationary period proved satisfactory to both sides, and at the end of it, Wilkinson received a further invitation - this time bearing 130 signatures – asking him 'to make a final settlement among them' [Waddington, p.487]. He was offered the very modest stipend of £40 a year, the money to be raised from the rents of land belonging to the Church, pew rents, and quarterly collections: he also had the use of the manse and its garden, gratis. 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man': James Wilkinson accepted the call, and began his life's work. He was eventually ordained into the office of Minister of the Independent chapel, Keld, on 21 September 1841. Five other ministers took part in the ordination service, among them – somewhat surprisingly - the Rev. William Sedgwick, now the pastor at Ravenstonedale. Perhaps his presence was simply a personal gesture of friendship on Wilkinson's part; but perhaps it also signified that the troubles of 1838 had, hopefully, been laid to rest. [Keld URC Archives. Church Book I]

### Motives and priorities

Nevertheless, Wilkinson faced a daunting task when he became Keld's minister in 1838. Much of what Edward Stillman had achieved in the early years of his long ministry had unravelled during his final decade: the day school had probably ceased to function, and the church membership and congregation had dwindled. To these problems were now added the long-term effects of the divisions and the dissensions which had surfaced during William Sedgwick's brief but turbulent time at Keld. In addition, the village now had an alternative place of worship to which dissidents might defect: the Wesleyans, who had been well-established lower down Swaledale since the 1780s, had just created a new circuit based on Reeth, and they opened a chapel at Keld in 1841.

It is most unlikely that the new and inexperienced pastor arrived with a shopping-list of tasks to be accomplished, a timetable for achieving them, or a clear picture of the ways and means needed to carry them through. As one of Waddington's informants put it, when reviewing Wilkinson's achievements, 'all these things arose one out of another and were done as the necessity for them was seen and felt' [p.517]. At the beginning, he was clearly anxious not to reopen old wounds within the church, but he also sought to restore good order and discipline among the divided membership. He kept the church services going, and he built up the Sunday school which Sedgwick had founded. Beyond that, he probably devoted much of his time to private reading and study and to getting to know the community.

Importantly for his own domestic well-being, he also found himself a wife. Before his marriage, he had employed a resident domestic servant in the Manse [1841 Census]: but on 19 November 1844, at Salem Chapel in York, he married Scarborough-born Elizabeth Thompson, the daughter of a former Reeth schoolmaster. A month later, Mrs Wilkinson was admitted into membership of the Church at Keld. [Keld URC Archives. Church Book I]. The couple were to have two children: a daughter, Charlotte Elizabeth (born 7 December 1846), and a son, Thomas (born 1 August 1851), who continued to live in Keld with their mother for several years after James Wilkinson's death. [Keld URC Archives. Baptismal Register. 1871 Census returns]. The Wilkinsons' household still included a servant in 1851, but it no longer did so ten years later. [1851 and 1861 Census returns]

If Wilkinson trod carefully at first, he nonetheless developed a clear concept of his role as a pastor. Appropriately, for one who had spent many years tending sheep, the image of the good shepherd must have been central to his sense of purpose. In addition to Christ himself, he probably found his role model in the legendary Alsatian pastor J.F. Oberlin (1740 -1826), whose dedicated work as an educationalist and social reformer in the remoter parts of the Vosges mountains had earned him heroic status in the eyes of Protestants everywhere: indeed, even during his own lifetime, Wilkinson's admirers were calling him 'the Oberlin of the dales'. [Whitehead, p. 308] Essentially, Wilkinson saw his duty as being to minister to the spiritual and material needs of the whole of his scattered community, and not merely to those of the members and adherents of his little church. 'Inclusion' was his watchword. In effect, he regarded himself as a *quasi*-parish priest - albeit one who exerted himself more vigorously and conscientiously than did the average Anglican parson. Keld of course had a real parish priest in the Vicar of Muker: but his church and vicarage were a good three miles from the village, and it is unlikely, once Edward Stillman had arrived in Keld, that the Vicar of Muker had ever had much contact with this remote corner of his vast parish. Significantly, Keld Independent chapel became licensed for the solemnisation of marriages in 1844, and its burial ground was extended three years later. Thereafter, Wilkinson need fear no competition from the Vicar in fulfilling all the usual functions of a parish priest towards his flock: he baptised them, married them, and buried them, as required. Notionally, he had to share his territory with the Wesleyans: but Keld never acquired a full-time Methodist minister, and Wilkinson always went out of his way to collaborate with his dissenting neighbours, as we shall see. In all but name, after his ordination in 1841, the Rev. James Wilkinson was the resident *Vicar* of Keld.

## James Wilkinson's achievements in Keld, 1838 – 1866

### [1] The re-establishment of the village day school

Given his view of his mission, it is not surprising that Wilkinson made the re-establishment of the village school his first priority, and this led him to undertake the first of his building projects. A Church meeting on 31 October 1839 noted that it was 'the desire of the Congregation that Mr Wilkinson do keep a day school and teach reading, writing, and the plain rules of arithmetic': the same minute ruled that the fees should be fourpence a week for reading, and sixpence a week for writing and arithmetic. [Keld URC Archives. Church Book I] It is not difficult to understand this decision. How to improve the education of the people of England was one of the most pressing social questions of the day, and since the 1810s the different religious denominations had begun to set up day schools in association with their various churches and chapels. Anglican efforts in this direction were channelled through the National Schools Society, whilst the non-conformists worked through the smaller British and Foreign Schools Society. Initially, both societies collected donations and subscriptions from their wealthier supporters in order to build and run schools for the children of the poor, but from 1833 the government, in order to encourage their efforts, began to make additional modest grants from public funds. Wilkinson knew, from his own experience, the handicap which a limited schooling imposed on personal development, and he must have been acutely aware of the detrimental effects on the children of Keld of the decay of Stillman's school. Writing to George Waddington after Wilkinson's death, the Rev. William Hudswell, secretary of the West Riding Congregational Home Missionary Society, said:

Mr Wilkinson felt it was his duty to do all that in him lay to raise the people in general knowledge, as well as instructing them in the knowledge of the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ ... He saw that his great hope of success lay with the young; and, as no other mode could then be adopted, he determined himself to become their teacher, and commenced a day school ... He told me that, if he did not teach them, they would get no schooling at all ... [Waddington, p.516]

Wilkinson's enthusiasm for promoting education is unquestionable. At the same time, a well-run school, closely associated with the chapel, would greatly enhance his role and influence within the community. Furthermore, the weekly 'school pence' which parents paid towards their children's education would be a welcome addition to his modest income: in practice, the £40 stipend he had been promised could rarely be covered by the income-stream allocated to it. [Keld URC Archives. Church Book I]

A new school required a new, dedicated building, and in 1842 Wilkinson began to collect subscriptions locally for the purpose. As a result, a school room was run-up near the chapel with the help of voluntary labour on the site of a disused barn and pig-sty for a total cost of £84-12s-8d. The shortfall in meeting even this modest sum had to be covered by a donation of £10 from a Mrs Thompson, who may have been Wilkinson's prospective mother-in-law. It was officially opened with a tea party on 6 January 1843. Inevitably, having been built so cheaply, it was a plain, simple, one-roomed, single-storey structure, of no architectural merit: its only external adornment was a bell-turret, added in 1847. Nevertheless, besides doubling for most of the time as the Congregational Sunday school, it served the people of Keld as their village school for the next 130 years, and it was extended

only once. In 1897, on the threat of imminent closure by the school inspectors, the managers reluctantly added a small entrance porch-cum- cloakroom and attached some 'superior' earth closets onto the end of the building. In addition, the new school room quickly became the venue for village celebrations and social gatherings; and it remained so until it was gradually replaced, first in the 1860s by the Institute, and then in the 1920s by the Public Hall.

Unfortunately, we know little about how the school operated under Wilkinson's tutelage after 1842. The Rev Kenneth Wadsworth, who ministered at Keld at the time the school finally closed, published a brief history in The Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society, vol.1, no.4, 1974, pp.118-121: but some of the sources to which he must have had access have since vanished. Thus we cannot be sure when, or whether, the school became affiliated to the British and Foreign Schools Society, or began to receive (after inspection) an annual government grant. It appears that a teacher was hired to run the school when it first opened: but at a church meeting on 16 January 1845, Wilkinson agreed to 'take the school into my own care, and teach myself'. [Keld URC Archives. Church Book I] Perhaps the recent change in his domestic circumstances helped him to reach this decision, since it is highly likely that Mrs Wilkinson, a teacher's daughter, assisted in the school when she could. The additional income would doubtless be welcome to the newly-married pastor, but some parents struggled to raise the money for school fees. When they pleaded poverty, Wilkinson apparently accepted payment in goods such as eggs and potatoes. The important point, however, is that, until virtually the last two years of his life, the minister was also now the village schoolmaster: on top of all his other responsibilities - preparing sermons and conducting services, pastoral visiting, holding evening prayer meetings in more distant hamlets such as Angram and Stonesdale, to say nothing of private reading and reflection – Wilkinson was usually teaching school, morning and afternoon, five days a week (except, of course, during the school holidays). It was a punishing work-load.

## [2] The re-formation of the Church, 1850

The opening of a new village school demonstrated Wilkinson's commitment to 'inclusiveness': the school was intended for the whole community, and not merely for Congregationalists. But as his next task, he finally addressed the deep-seated divisions among the members of his own church which had rumbled on since William Sedgwick's brief pastorate. Although Wilkinson's early years had seen something of a spiritual revival in the church at Keld, it is clear, both from the minutes recorded in the old Church Book which he inherited from William Sedgwick and from the preamble to the new Church Book which he started in 1850 [Keld U.R.C. Archives] that the members remained quarrelsome and fractious throughout the 1840s. The cause of the trouble and the identity of the 'troublemakers' are not always clear, but part of the problem was that some of the new members hastily admitted by Sedgwick in 1838 were unfit to meet the exacting demands of the Christian life, as defined by Wilkinson.

In disciplining 'disorderly' church members, Wilkinson's ultimate sanction was to deny them communion and, if necessary, to expel them from the fellowship. As early as August 1840, he 'ejected' three of Sedgwick's new recruits: one, apparently, had only joined 'out of



goodwill to Mr Sedgwick', whilst the other two, previously Anglicans, had kept up their connexion with the parish church at Muker and had complained that Wilkinson 'had not done that honour to the Church Establishment which they thought I should have done'. On the same occasion, he suspended John Harper for being 'much addicted to drunkenness'; and two years later, Harper, along with his wife and mother-in-law, voluntarily left the church because the wife had been accused of 'a criminal connexion with a young man who lodged in the house'. The pastor's displeasure at the misconduct of some of the old members was still evident at the start of 1846, when he resolved 'no longer to administer the ordinance of the Lord's supper till the church be remodelled and a different state of things brought about'. At a subsequent members' meeting on 13 March, he publicly denounced 'four in particular with which I was dissatisfied'. One of the delinquents, Jane Taylor, 'at once rose up in a rebellion and gave a strong lecture at considerable length, and then in a rage walked out of the chapel'. The other members present voted for her immediate expulsion, and the pastor was able to record his satisfaction at being rid of 'one who had only been a plague to the minister and a disgrace to the church'. A month later, regular communion services were resumed, but the 'troubles' continued: too many members were absent from communion, and there was too much 'bad feeling' among them. Individuals continued to be 'disciplined' for their misconduct – particularly drunkenness and fornication: for example, Manual Peacock, who 'some time back left home to work at the railway' was excommunicated because he had been 'induced by bad company to forsake the ways of God and enter the ways of sin, in which he has gone to a great length'. More generally, in 1849 Wilkinson was troubled by the unsatisfactory state of the singing in chapel (which was apparently dominated by 'ungodly men') and by the 'want of piety' amongst the Sunday School teachers, many of whom were 'young and thoughtless'.

The pastor finally concluded that 'the evil was one which required means extraordinary to remove it: to break up the church and make a new beginning appeared the only effectual means'. Accordingly, a church meeting of twelve members plus the minister agreed unanimously on 15 July 1850 to dissolve their existing church and to re-form it as soon as practicable. Wilkinson's account continues:

Sermons were preached relative to Church fellowship for five successive Sunday afternoons after this: those who wished to become members were requested to make application to the Minister, meetings were held for conference and prayer. Necessary arrangement having been made, the candidates for membership met in the chapel on the 6<sup>th</sup> day of September 1850, when the Rev. Henry Robert Reynolds, Minister of East Parade Chapel, Leeds, formed them into a Congregational Church in the presence of the Rev. J W Rolls of Hawes, the Rev. C H Bateman of Hopton, and many other witnesses. The Church being formed, they again elected the Rev. James Wilkinson to be their Minister, the office being accepted, the union was again formed; with a desire that it might be long, prosperous, and happy.

Including Wilkinson and his wife, the new Church had 17 members, twelve of them women.

Wilkinson's hope that the re-formation of the Church would lead to a 'settled peace' seems to have been fulfilled. The new Church Book is remarkably free of cases of 'disorderly' conduct, and by February 1854, the pastor concluded that it would now be safe to appoint new deacons. James Alderson Clarkson, John Scott, and James Cherry were

accordingly chosen to hold that office. Twelve months later, Wilkinson recorded, 'with sincere gratitude to God', that 'peace and prosperity had attended all efforts of the past year'.

With these difficulties now behind him, Wilkinson could turn his attention to other issues which had no doubt been troubling his mind for some time; and the list of his achievements in the remaining twelve years of his ministry at Keld is a formidable one. But with his energies now directed elsewhere, it was later argued that he had been negligent in failing to increase the number of Church members: between 1850 and 1863, just 11 new members, seven of them women, were added - a number which George Waddington found distinctly unimpressive. In summarising Wilkinson's work in his published Memoir [pp. 522-3], he commented that 'if Mr. Wilkinson's success be judged by the number of persons admitted to Church-fellowship, the result will be disappointing ...' In his farewell entry in the Church Book, however, he was more scathing: 'the great want of this place', he wrote, 'is earnest spiritual work, and especially in reference to direct efforts for the conversion of sinners and the safe but speedy increase of the Church, which seems to me exceedingly small'. The Rev. Joseph Woolland, who ministered at Keld for four years after the Waddington inter-regnum, evidently took these words to heart: for between 1867 and 1871, he admitted no fewer than 30 new members, 17 of them women, and many of them worshipping in the new chapel down in Thwaite.

Did Wilkinson deserve Waddington's censure? Given the problems he had encountered with his church members throughout the 1840s, it is easy to see why he subsequently took pains to ensure that newcomers were admitted to church fellowship only after careful scrutiny. In preferring instead to form the minds of the school-children and the young men of the wider congregation through his educational work, and in leaving the rest to the inscrutable workings of Providence, Pastor Wilkinson was almost certainly acting prudently.

### [3] The Mutual Intellectual Improvement Society, 1854

Although critical of James Wilkinson's failure to increase significantly the number of Church members, Waddington nonetheless concluded that 'if the value and success of his ministry be estimated by the intellectual, moral, and spiritual improvement of the whole district ... then the judgement arrived at will not only be more generous, but it will be much more just. He was a successful pioneer and a diligent sower of the seed of the Kingdom of Christ'. [p.523] Wilkinson's establishment of a Mutual Intellectual Improvement Society four years after he re-formed the Church was perhaps the boldest and least expected of his pioneering ventures.

Continuing, or adult, education was seen as another worthy cause in the early Victorian era, and its advocates sought to encourage and enable young working men to build upon the foundations laid during their schooldays. Throughout the country, mechanics' institutes, village reading rooms, literary institutes, and mutual improvement societies were set up as a consequence: but whereas elementary schools were seen as an essential step towards achieving universal literacy, these higher institutions were an optional, although a highly desirable, extra. Government policy and public funding played no part in establishing

them, they were not promoted or coordinated by such organisations as the National Schools Society, and each separate institute was an independent body, having its own peculiar origins and developing along lines which suited its own particular members. By contrast with most elementary schools, literary institutes were usually secular, non-sectarian, and non-partisan bodies, open to all who wished to join, and providing a neutral meeting-place for churchmen and chapel-goers, Liberals and Tories, drinkers and teetotallers. In setting up such an institute in Keld, James Wilkinson was simply following a current fashion: but, for all that, his Mutual Intellectual Improvement Society was one of the very first to be started in Swaledale, and it was probably the only one to be associated with a particular church.

The history of Keld Institute is well documented in the minute books, membership registers, and miscellaneous financial records which survive in the Keld U.R.C Archives [currently kept in the Church safe, but intended to be deposited in the North Yorkshire County Record Office in due course]: but the best short account of its origins can be found in the Richmond and Ripon Chronicle of 21 June 1862, when it reported the formal opening of its new premises:

The Rev. James Wilkinson, who for nearly a quarter of a century has been the pastor of the Independent chapel, took the initiative in 1854 in establishing a Mutual Improvement Society. Thirteen young men, chiefly miners and farm labourers of the district, were induced to join. They received a gift of books from some friends connected with East Parade Chapel, Leeds, and a donation of 2s. 6d. from a friend in their own neighbourhood ... Mr Wilkinson allowing them the use of a room attached to his own house as a place of meeting.

Significantly, Wilkinson took advantage of a rebuilding of the manse to provide his infant society with its first home. It is not clear precisely what this 1854 rebuilding entailed, although its cost, at £55, was relatively modest: according to Wilkinson's entry in the second Church Book [Keld URC Archives], it included the addition of 'a Vestry and Reading Room' which could be accessed directly from the chapel. But it enabled the Society to make a good start. The newspaper report continues:

Since then, they have not only been able to make their Society self-supporting, but they have also increased their library to 400 volumes. Having rebuilt their chapel and improved their schoolhouse in 1860... they determined to try and provide more suitable accommodation for the Mutual Improvement Society. This they have now accomplished by erecting a neat but beautiful little building, containing two rooms, one to be used for library, reading and lectures, and the other as a classroom, at a cost of £119, towards which they have already raised £102.

Wilkinson set out his reasons for starting the Society in a paper which he read at the opening of the new building [Waddington, pp.498-502]. 'How can we expect young men to avoid places of evil resort', he asked, 'unless more suitable places be provided for them? Or how can we expect them to improve their leisure time, without suitable employment? ... The natural reply was 'What better than a comfortable room, with a good supply of interesting and instructive books, with slates, pencils, pens and ink, and other conveniences?' His paper also revealed something of the outside support which had helped start the project: the gift of books from friends in Leeds was actually 100 volumes, whilst 'friends at a

distance' also funded some of the newspapers taken. The original meeting room in his house soon proved too small, whilst the rebuilding of the chapel in 1860 had meant considerable disturbance. For a time, the Society tried to operate in the schoolroom, 'but here we did not find the comfort and convenience we had left': hence the decision 'to purchase an old, useless smithy and try to raise a new and more useful and ornamental building'. Rather than appeal again to those who had just paid for the renovation of the chapel, Wilkinson now sought new backers for the scheme. His biggest 'catch' was James Backhouse of York who, 'by the kindness of interested friends', sent £45, whilst Thomas Smith, the absentee Lord of the Manor of Muker, gave a further five guineas.

Given his own limited schooling, this ambitious venture into further education must have been very dear to Wilkinson's heart. He was obviously anxious that the good work begun in the village school should be carried on, and he would have been well aware of a generation of older men whose education had suffered during the 1830s, when Stillman's school had languished. Providing the members with access to wholesome and edifying reading matter and encouraging their zeal for self-improvement were probably the main objectives, but the fact that the lower room of the new building was originally designated a 'classroom' suggests that the pastor actually envisaged running evening classes there. The Society's very title – with its litany of 'mutual', 'intellectual', and 'improvement' – resonates with some of the dominant values of the mid-Victorian age, whilst its detailed rules and regulations underline the founder's serious intentions. The members' subscriptions – sixpence a month – were to be used 'only for the purchasing of books, newspapers, and periodicals, paying postage, etc, for the Society, cleaning, heating, and lighting the premises': 'proper order and becoming behaviour' were expected at all times; 'argument in the rooms, swearing, bad language, evil speaking, smoking tobacco, and the use of intoxicating liquors' were strictly forbidden; conversation and reading aloud were only permitted 'when it was agreeable to all who are present'; and even then, 'religious controversy and political debate' had to be avoided.

Despite the strict rules (and the monetary fines intended to enforce them), the Institute had no difficulty in attracting members at the outset: the original register suggests about 40 men enrolled in the early 1860s, and the new premises were quickly deemed to be inadequate. Consequently, Wilkinson was planning an extension at the time of his death in 1866. The completion of this work - which more than doubled the size of the building and added an assembly room on the first floor and a stable and gig-house (for the use of the minister of Keld chapel) below – was one of the principal tasks accomplished by George Waddington during his interim pastorate.

#### [4] Temperance and 'rational recreation'

As with elementary schooling and continuing education, the temperance movement was another 'progressive' cause which attracted growing support in early Victorian England. Alcohol was increasingly seen as a major factor behind poverty, crime, and moral depravity, and it is not surprising that James Wilkinson became a strenuous advocate of teetotalism. After all, his Mutual Improvement Society was designed to wean young men away from 'places of evil resort' - which in the context of Victorian Keld can only have meant the public

house. But this would only be achieved if young men could also be made aware of the problems caused by the 'demon drink' and could be persuaded to become abstainers.

Temperance rallies and demonstrations, with their attendant tea meetings, become increasingly common in the Yorkshire dales during the 1850s. It is not clear precisely when Wilkinson himself became an abstainer and began to campaign openly on behalf of the temperance movement: but it is perhaps significant that the Band of Hope – a national organisation whose main aim was to encourage children to 'sign the pledge' that they would never touch alcohol – started life in the year after the Keld Mutual Improvement Society was born. Waddington merely reports that:

In those dales, Mr Wilkinson found the great necessity of the Temperance movement, and he formed a temperance society which grew to considerable numbers, and with its annual tea gatherings accomplished much good. [p.517]

One later account refers to this 'society' as 'the Band of Hope', and claims that 'more than two-thirds of the inhabitants were enrolled' [Whitehead, p.308]; but contemporary newspapers talk of 'the West Swaledale Temperance Society', which suggests an independent, spontaneously-developed local body [see, for example, Richmond and Ripon Chronicle, 2 June 1860] This society's annual rally took place in Thwaite – a convenient location for supporters from elsewhere in upper Swaledale and from the Hawes district - and in 1860 the Keld contingent marched in procession down the dale, led by the Bainbridge Teetotal brass band, to the field where the meeting took place.

Espousing temperance meant incurring the hostility of the drinking part of the community, and the 1860 gathering at Thwaite was deliberately disrupted by men who tried to drown the principal speaker, Dr Lees, by setting their dogs barking. At the same time, however, it provided an opportunity to collaborate with other churches and congregations on an ecumenical basis – something Wilkinson was always glad to encourage. It is clear that Keld's Wesleyans were also keen abstainers, for on Good Friday 1863 they held their own tea festival, during the course of which they paraded round the village behind the Reeth Teetotal brass band: as a friendly gesture, the choir from Wilkinson's own chapel provided entertainment during tea. In fact, the pastor went out of his way to cultivate good relations with his Methodist neighbours: and he was particularly proud of the annual Christmas day tea party in the schoolroom, which a newspaper report (probably supplied by Wilkinson himself) could describe in 1863 as 'this long established social gathering'. [For a description of the Christmas day tea party, see the Appendix, below] As the report went on to explain, 'the tea party is conducted on the broadest principles of liberty and voluntaryism ... the whole of the children within a radius of more than two miles, without regard to sect or party, are welcomed to a gratuitous tea ... to which about 100 children assembled'. [Richmond and Ripon Chronicle, 2 January 1864]

Temperance advocates also recommended 'rational recreation' as an alternative to the culture of drink, and encouraged worthwhile and creative pastimes and hobbies among the young men whose support they were trying to win. Again, James Wilkinson was not backward in this respect. He himself was a keen gardener, and when in 1847 a plot of land was acquired and walled-off behind the chapel to extend the burial-ground, part of it was set aside to form a garden for the pastor's use. The beneficial consequences were described in

an article praising Wilkinson's 'moral' influence on Keld in the Bradford Observer of 18 July 1861:

When he commenced his ministry there was not a garden in the place, and potatoes were the only vegetable familiar to the inhabitants. By his efforts and his example he has induced his flock to cultivate many a piece of waste land, and at this moment there are in Keld several highly cultivated kitchen gardens which would not disgrace a Southern county. This garden culture is a fair symbol of the higher culture of mind and heart which has been carried on among the people of this sequestered spot during the last twenty years.

In addition, Wilkinson seems to have had a fondness for music - or at least, he appreciated its value as part of worship. When the chapel was rebuilt and refurbished in 1860, it acquired a harmonium – Mrs Wilkinson probably played it; and in the following year, a choir of young men (doubtless members of the Mutual Improvement Society) was formed 'to improve the congregational psalmody'. Was this perhaps the start of a local music-making tradition which lasted until the days of the celebrated Keld Singers, a small group of male vocalists whose close-harmony renderings of well-known hymns and ballads were still entertaining local audiences in the 1950s? Wilkinson did not persuade his young men to follow the example of several other Swaledale villages in the 1850s by starting a brass band. However, one was eventually formed in 1897, and although bandsmen were not generally abstainers, one would like to think that the pastor would have approved of this further instance of 'rational recreation'. Perhaps fittingly, in the 1930s, Keld band began to use the downstairs 'classroom' in Wilkinson's Institute as their practice room.

#### [5] The extension and renovation of Keld chapel, 1861

Acquiring a harmonium was merely one aspect of what was to be James Wilkinson's biggest building project: the enlargement and renovation of the chapel to make it a more fitting place of worship. At over £300, it was the costliest of his schemes: and, as with the rebuilding of the manse in 1854, it was largely funded by 'friends from a distance', in this case acting through the agency of the West Riding Home Missionary Society of the Congregational church. Established in 1819, this body actually predated the West Riding Congregational Union by more than thirty years, and served to channel funds from the wealthy congregations of Yorkshire's big industrial and commercial centres to small and struggling churches in the more rural areas. [Whitehead, pp. 36-7] Precisely when this Society first became aware of Wilkinson and his efforts to regenerate Keld, or when the pastor himself first asked for its help, is uncertain. But by the end of the 1840s, Keld had evidently begun to receive an annual subvention from the Home Missionary Society towards the minister's salary, whilst Wilkinson himself had built up personal contacts with some leading West Riding ministers, most notably with the Rev. Henry Robert Reynolds, of the East Parade Church in Leeds. It was Reynolds who travelled to Keld in 1850 to preside over the formal re-establishment of Wilkinson's new church, and it was from East Parade in 1854 that the Mutual Improvement Society received the handsome donation of books which formed the basis of its library.

It is unclear whether Wilkinson took the initiative in asking the Home Missionary Society for help in renovating the chapel, or whether Reynolds had been prompting him to do so for some time. But in July 1859, a pamphlet entitled 'The Keld Chapel Case' was published in the name of the Rev. William Hudswell, secretary to the Leeds district of the Home Missionary Society. With supporting testimonials from Reynolds and from the industrialist John Crossley of Halifax, it marked the launch of a public appeal for funds. [A copy of this pamphlet is pasted into the front of the second Church Book. Keld URC Archives.] Before issuing their appeal, the Society had sent a three-man deputation, led by Hudswell, to visit a number of Dales churches, including Keld. They reported:

. . . they found the pews old and very decayed, the floor of stone and very damp, the gallery flat and uncomfortable. In their judgement it is absolutely necessary immediately to put the chapel in proper repair. They recommend as the only satisfactory mode of doing this, the reconstruction of the gallery and re-pewing of the bottom of the chapel. The entire cost is estimated at about £120.

After praising Wilkinson's work, they concluded:

They were much pleased with the prosperous condition of this Home Mission Station, and have the fullest confidence in recommending the CHAPEL CASE of Keld to the friends of the Society throughout the West Riding.

Already by the time the pamphlet appeared, £44 had been subscribed and a further £36 promised, 'on condition that the entire sum required be raised before the work be commenced'.

In the event, the appeal must have produced more than the original estimate called for, because Wilkinson reported in the Church Book that the total cost on completion was £306-10s. Subscriptions prior to the re-opening had yielded £252-3s, and a further £25 had been promised by the Congregational Church Building Society: the balance of £29-7s. was covered by collections taken at the re-opening ceremony. This suggests that the renovation involved more work than had been envisaged - indeed, Wilkinson claimed that 'the chapel has been in great measure pulled down and rebuilt'. The additional expense may have been incurred because of problems which only became apparent once the work had started - Wilkinson mentions that the roof timbers, as well as the pews, were found to be decayed. But it is also likely that, as the money rolled in, extra items were added to the list of desirable improvements. The downstairs pews were certainly replaced, and the floor of the gallery was stepped: but it seems probable that the entrance porch and bell-tower was built at this time, and possible that the extension at the east end of the chapel, which contains an unusually grand pulpit, was added.

The building work, which had started in July 1860, was completed in the following November. The chapel began to be used in the spring of 1861, and was formally opened, with great ceremony, on 10 July. As reported in the Bradford Observer on 18 July, the proceedings began with a prayer meeting in the morning, followed by a service in the afternoon at which the Rev. Enoch Mellor of Halifax - one of Yorkshire's 'most forceful and brilliant men' [T Hooper, The Story of English Congregationalism (London 1907) p.129] - preached, and a public meeting in the evening at which John Crossley presided. The great

and the good of West Riding Congregationalism were present in force: whilst 'between the services ample refreshments hospitably provided by the people of the place were dispensed by the young females of the congregation, with a true Yorkshire welcome'.

#### [6] Wilkinson's final years

In his History of the Dales Congregational Churches, Thomas Whitehead was at pains to stress the mutuality of interest which, even as late as 1930, led the well-to-do congregations of Leeds, Bradford, and Halifax to support the small and struggling churches in the Dales [p.72].

Our village churches have been aptly described as the water springs, pure, sweet, wholesome, which feed the towns. The towns certainly cull many of the choicest 'flowers' of the Dales. Money laid out in our village pastorates is not merely money spent, but capital invested in the lives and character of physically healthy, sound manhood, which, migrating as it must into the town, revitalises and stabilises our city and national life.

This was the optimistic philosophy which led the Home Missionary Society of the West Riding Congregational Union to support rural ministers and fund the building of new village churches, and it explains why James Wilkinson, in particular, received such generous financial backing from the Society in his later years. Once wealthy nonconformists in the cities had learned to appreciate Wilkinson's character and special talents, it was as if he could do no wrong. There were, of course, drawbacks to this arrangement from Wilkinson's side, in that the Home Missionary Society tended to regard him as a dependent to be patronised. Every year in the early 1860s, the Society sent a delegation to report on the condition of Keld (and other Dales churches), and three years after Wilkinson's death they drew up a deed of settlement which ensured that the Trustees of all the church-owned buildings in Thwaite and Keld were leading West Riding Congregationalists, rather than local dalesmen. This was to create problems in the distant future: but as things stood in 1862, Wilkinson had only to ask, and the resources of industrial and commercial Yorkshire were open to him. This was indeed a far cry from the days of Edward Stillman and his 'begging expeditions' to London, and it says much about both the growing centralisation and the increasingly evangelical thrust of the English Congregational church in the mid-nineteenth century.

Nor was he slow in asking for more. With the chapel refurbished and the Literary Institute re-housed, the pastor embarked on his last great project: the 'colonisation' of the neighbouring village of Thwaite, two miles down-dale, where he hoped to repeat what he had just done at Keld. Thwaite had no place of worship of its own, but it fell clearly within the ambit of Muker, only a mile away. In 1862, Muker possessed both a parish church and a Methodist chapel, as well as an endowed village day-school, though it did not as yet have a Literary Institute; and the inhabitants of Thwaite were more likely to make use of these, than of any similar amenities up at Keld. However, Wilkinson's temperance society had already located its annual rally in Thwaite, and the pastor appears to have found sympathisers there - notably the brothers Thomas and Richard Clarke, the village



shopkeepers. Early in 1862, he decided that Thwaite needed its own Mutual Intellectual Improvement Society and also a 'preaching station' for his regular use, and he set about looking for suitable premises. It is unclear precisely what he found – perhaps he rented an empty cottage or more likely an unused room in a private house – but by the end of its first year his new society had recruited 21 members, had paid for fitting up its meeting place, and was also holding a weekly service there. [Richmond and Ripon Chronicle, 9 January 1864] The subsequent history of Thwaite's Mutual Improvement Society is shrouded in mystery. Unlike Keld, it seems never to have acquired purpose-built premises, and it may simply have withered away after Wilkinson's death: the fact that an unsectarian Literary Institute was successfully launched in nearby Muker in 1869 makes this highly likely. However, the 'preaching station' quickly materialised as a new, small, handsome stone-built chapel, which was to function as an outpost of Keld Congregational church for more than a hundred years.

The building of Thwaite chapel is less well documented than most of Wilkinson's other projects. No public appeal for funds, no list of subscribers, and no statement of costs has been found: yet this attractive building must surely have been architect-designed. And if the original Institute building in Keld had cost £120, then Thwaite chapel probably cost at least twice as much. Where did the money come from? It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the expense must have been almost wholly met by Wilkinson's West Riding 'friends', working through the agency of the Home Missionary Society. The foundation stone of the new chapel was laid on Friday 26 June 1863 by William Henry Conyers, of Leeds, in the presence of a distinguished gathering of leading Congregationalists, both ministerial and lay. A procession headed by the Reeth Temperance brass band marched from Keld to Thwaite to witness the event and to hear an address by the Rev. William Thomas (also of Leeds). After the stone had been laid, tea was served (at a cost of 8 pence a head) in a large marquee erected in a field next to the site: a public soiree followed, with addresses from other visiting worthies. It is interesting to note that James Wilkinson himself had only a supporting role in the proceedings - indeed, his name appears in the smallest possible type on the posters. In the following November, handbills were posted in the name of Thomas Clarke inviting tenders from 'masons, joiners, slaters, and plasterers' willing to undertake the work on the chapel and advising them that 'the drawings and specifications' could be inspected at his house in Thwaite. Work must have gone ahead over the winter, and on 24 June 1864, almost exactly a year after the foundation stone had been laid, the new chapel opened for worship. The Rev. William Thomas again preached, and afterwards 230 people took tea. [Waddington, p.497]

Having acquired his elegant new 'preaching station', Wilkinson quickly set to work organising regular services there. After leading morning and afternoon worship at Keld every Sunday, he walked down to Thwaite to take an evening service: he appears also to have started a Sunday school there. But 26 years of hard, unremitting physical and mental labour were starting to take their toll, and after he reached the age of sixty Wilkinson's health failed rapidly. In particular, the weekly walk to and from Thwaite soon became too much for him. Learning of this, his 'friends' came to the rescue. In Waddington's words,

... [they] provided him with a gig, and with the assistance of a neighbour's horse his Sabbath toil was lightened, and he was enabled to take distant journeys which he would not otherwise have accomplished. [p.503]

At about the same time, Wilkinson was persuaded to further reduce his work load by hiring an assistant to take over the day school: but his sickness was now so serious that in October 1866 he had to stop working altogether. His doctors advised three or four months of sea air, and his 'friends' again rallied round to make it possible for him to go on indefinite leave to the seaside. On Saturday 3 November, the church at Keld along with other local admirers presented the pastor with a written testimonial expressing their appreciation, together with a purse containing £61, to which his supporters in the West Riding added a further £130. [Richmond and Ripon Chronicle, 10 November 1866]. On the following Friday Mr and Mrs Wilkinson moved into furnished lodgings at Southport. At first there was some slight improvement in his condition, but on Monday 3 December – 'suddenly and unexpectedly', according to Waddington [p.508] – he suffered a massive stroke and died. James Wilkinson's body was buried three days later in Southport cemetery.

In the hope that he might recover and return to Keld, Wilkinson had already arranged for George Waddington, an admirer who had visited him earlier in the year and who had helped him in his final weeks as his health worsened, to look after the two churches during his absence: and he had also signed a twelve-month agreement with one of his ex-pupils, George Fawcett, of Angram, to take charge of the day school. After the pastor's sudden death, Waddington agreed to stay on at Keld for twelve months in order to deal with unfinished business, but he refused the congregation's request to take on the ministry permanently: Fawcett, on the other hand, proved to be an inspired choice, and remained Keld's schoolmaster for the next 32 years. As for Wilkinson's family, his daughter was staying with friends in Leeds when her father died, whilst his son was at school in Barnard Castle. Both children subsequently went back to live with their mother in Keld. The 1871 census records Elizabeth, now aged 57, as an 'annuitant' – had the Home Missionary Society again come to the rescue?; her daughter Charlotte, aged 24, as being of 'no occupation'; and her son Thomas, 19, as a 'grocer and draper' – had he perhaps been taken on as an assistant by the Clarke brothers at their village store in Thwaite? But after this, the Wilkinson family connection with Keld seems to have come to an end.

### James Wilkinson's reputation

Although Keld was a remote and relatively inaccessible place in early Victorian times, James Wilkinson did not minister there in total isolation. His work must be seen in the context of the momentous changes then taking place in the English Congregational church at large. The 'independent' churches which made up Congregationalism valued their individual freedom and were traditionally suspicious of anything which smacked of centralisation or external authority. Nevertheless, they were greatly affected by the Evangelical revival which began to sweep through English Protestantism in the late eighteenth century, and they had to accommodate themselves to the social and economic changes which marked the emergence of an increasingly urban and industrial society. The Sunday school movement, the growing zeal for overseas missionary work, and the anti-

slavery campaign all discouraged introspection and called for greater cooperation and co-ordination of effort between the independent churches, especially at county (as opposed to national) level. The result was the establishment of Colleges for the better training of ministers; the creation of Church Aid and Home Missionary Societies, whereby wealthy congregations in the great provincial cities could subsidise small and impoverished chapels in the villages; and a sustained effort to plant new churches and recruit many new members in communities where Congregationalism had hitherto been weak. Wilkinson's exemplary achievements at Keld were both inspired and facilitated by these important developments.

How, then, can we pass judgement on Wilkinson's pastorate? Twenty years after James Wilkinson's death, George Waddington's published *Memoir* was at pains to present both an accurate and a balanced assessment of 'the Oberlin of the Dales'. Not least, Waddington warned that the comparison with Oberlin should not be pressed too hard [p. 524]:

It is not pretended, even by his most attached friends, that he was equal to John Frederick Oberlin, either in his natural talents or learning, or in the extent, the comprehensiveness, and the variety of his achievements.

At the same time, there was 'a similarity in disposition, in aims, in plans and purposes, and especially in benevolent and self-sacrificing exertions for the welfare of others'. Waddington also did his best to scotch rumours that Wilkinson had used his West Riding connections to line his own pockets. Yes, they had regularly supplemented his stipend; they had bought him a gig in his declining years; they had subscribed generously to send him to Southport in his final weeks; they had probably paid his son's school fees; and they almost certainly provided his widow with an annuity. But Waddington insisted that the belief that Wilkinson had been able to enrich himself and make 'tolerable provision' for his family was 'utterly erroneous' [p.521]. On the contrary, 'he was poorer at the end of his ministry than at the commencement', and half the modest legacy he received on his father's death had been spent on improvements to the house and garden at Keld.

George Waddington and the fellow ministers who shared their memories of Wilkinson with him agreed as to the pastor's shortcomings: 'his natural talents were not of the highest order' [p.520], he was no intellectual, and, although fervent in prayer, he 'did not excel' as a preacher [p.519]. According to the Rev. William Hudswell, 'his speaking was rather monotonous, his manner was timid ... and never rose to bursts of enthusiasm': indeed, 'he was not at all cut out to be a popular preacher in the larger towns of the Riding'. At the same time, 'he was never mysterious, the people could always understand him': in short, he was 'the right man in the right place', and 'he did well to abide in his one sphere'. [ibid.] Wilkinson was also criticised, as we have seen, for his failure, whether through unwillingness or inability, to increase the membership of his small church by strenuous efforts to convert sinners; yet his personal character won him friends and admirers wherever he went, and his example spoke louder than his words. Among his many human qualities, Hudswell listed 'simplicity', 'openness', 'unselfishness', 'humility', 'prudence', and 'perseverance': 'what he said and what he did was straight-forward, truthful, and honest', he concluded.

On the credit side, Waddington and his correspondents particularly emphasised Wilkinson's sterling contribution to 'the cause of social and religious progress' in Swaledale.

In a tribute by the Rev. J H Morgan in the Congregational Register of the West Riding of Yorkshire for 1867, quoted by Waddington [p.511], he is described as 'a man in a thousand ... [who] ... had left the mark of his character on the population of the entire district where he laboured'. Morgan was especially impressed by Wilkinson's achievements on the educational front:

Long before his death, he was permitted to see great changes in the character and habits of the people. When he began his labours, such things as newspapers and magazines never entered the village; there were only a few useful books in the hands of the people; and the men... wasted their evenings in the public house or in idling away their time standing about the corners of the streets. Now, young men and old spend their leisure hours in their Literary Institute, whose reading table is covered with dailies, weeklies, monthlies, and quarterlies; and whose library shelves are filled with books on history, science, philosophy, and religion, which are extensively used and studied with pleasure and profit.

The picture may be overdrawn, but the conclusion is indicative of Wilkinson's reputation within Yorkshire Congregationalism after his death:

Thus is one of the most secluded villages in Yorkshire, far from town and city influences ... Mr Wilkinson, by the aid afforded to him by this [the Home Missionary] society supplemented by the help of many philanthropic friends, succeeded in cultivating a mental, a moral, and a spiritual waste until it has become a very 'garden of the Lord'.

Nor was James Wilkinson's work at Keld quickly forgotten. In Whitehead's 1930 account of the Dales Congregational churches, he was still being held up as a role model to rural pastors. In an introductory chapter entitled 'The Dales Pastor and his charge' [pp. 69-75], Whitehead enthused:

If I were a divinity student today, my heroes would be among former ministers in our area, such men as Batty of Dent, Stillman and James Wilkinson of Keld, Crombie of Keld and Newton ... [and others] ... who gave themselves unreservedly, during practically a whole lifetime, ignoring poverty, popularity, and social amenities, for the ministry of the dales, in the heart of whose people they became enshrined. [p.74]

Whitehead retold the story of Wilkinson's life and achievements, not only in the sections of his book dealing with Keld and Thwaite, but also in the chapter on the church at Sedbergh: and in listing the tasks of a village pastor in his introduction, he obviously had Wilkinson in mind:

As a 'doctor of souls', and not simply the souls of Congregationalists, he is out for the Kingdom of God, i.e. for anything that tends to the uplift of the people ... In the towns, our ministers may select from among the many social activities – in the country, our Congregational minister must energise and invigorate all. He is essential to the spiritual, moral, and social life of the whole community.

It is not surprising that James Wilkinson's name should still be remembered, more than two generations after he died, in the higher echelons of Yorkshire Congregationalism,

and especially among its ministers. But how was he remembered in Keld? Perhaps the last word should go to Richard A Scott, a farmer who had spent his whole life in upper Swaledale and who, on his death in November 1925 at the age of 94, was hailed as 'Swaledale's oldest resident' in a brief obituary in the Darlington and Stockton Times. His obituarist, after noting that 'Mr Scott was a man of boundless energy, his memory was wonderful, and he was a very interesting conversationalist', further reported:

He had a lifelong association with Keld Congregational Church, and was a Sunday school scholar from his earliest days, and attributed his conversion to the kindly interest a former Pastor, the Rev W [sic] Wilkinson took in the young men and women of the dale. Mr Wilkinson formed a Mutual Improvement Society in May 1854 ... and Mr Scott was the first member. [This last statement is confirmed by the Institute membership register which survives in the Keld URC Archives. Minutes of church members meetings thereafter also show that Scott, although never a Deacon, was a long-serving and active member of committees.]

A simple story from an old man's memory, perhaps: but Richard A Scott must have been typical of many who grew up in Keld between the 1830s and the 1860s, who knew Wilkinson personally, and whose lives were changed by him. Sixty years after the pastor's death, Scott was still paying grateful tribute to a driven and dedicated man.

## APPENDIX. The Keld Christmas Day Tea Party

A proper appreciation of the scale of the annual tea festival held at Keld Independent chapel on Christmas day in James Wilkinson's time can be gained from the following account of what was probably the first such event. The account also reveals the importance of the newly-opened school room as a venue for social and community gatherings.

### The Annual Tea Festival on Decr. 25<sup>th</sup> 1843

#### After the following order

At 7 o'clock in the morning a Prayer meeting in Chapel, after which the Sunday School Teachers sat down to Breakfast together, 33 in all Breakfasted in the morning. At half past 9 140 children were arraigned in order in front of the Chapel when Mr Boyd of Low Row made a speech powerful and impressive, after which a sacred peice was sung, with instrumental music playing by friends from Gunnerside. The children then proceed in procession to Angram where Mr Boyd delivered a second speech, and another piece of music was performed. They then returned to Keld, where Tea and cakes were provided for the children, when 154 children partook and thus concluded their morning enjoyment highly delighted. Dinner being provided, 30 sat down to dinner. At half past 1 o'clock a numerous congregation assembled in the Chapel when a Sermon was Preached by the Revd. Wm. Palmer of Hawes. After service, 87 sat down to Tea in the School. At half past 5 in the Evening commenced a Publick Tea Party when 160 were regild [regaled] with tea and spice loafs. The whole company that took tea in the School House during the Day was 401. Collection to meet the expenses were made at the Tables amounting to £7 – 3 – 10. At 7 o'clock there was a Publick meeting in the Chapel when addresses were delivered by Messrs. Boyd, Palmer, and Wilkinson. The Chapel was crowded to excess, perhaps on no former ocation were there more company and excitement at Keld. The day was fine and all past off with cheerfulness and satisfaction. May the Lord overrule the services of the day to glory of his name and the good of souls

[Source: Keld URC Archives, Church Book I. The original spelling has been retained]

Copyright of Duncan Bythell

August 2012