

# The Life and Works of John Newton

Churchman 56/2 1942

**Revd F. H. Durnford**

## PART II

### Residence at Liverpool

JOHN NEWTON was now 29 years of age. And the next ten years of his life are seen to be a time of preparation for his eventual work of a minister of religion. A good deal is known about these years . . . partly through his letters and largely through his diary, which he began in the month of December, 1751, on his return from that first voyage.

Josiah Bull, in his life of Newton, states that his biography is compiled largely from the Diary. Hence "Bull's life" is a first-hand source of information. The Diary is a folio of 577 pages. It is worthwhile quoting here the opening words of it under the date December 22nd, 1751.

"I dedicate unto Thee, most blessed God, this clean unsullied book and at the same time renew my tender of a foul, blotted, corrupt heart."

It is interesting to compare this diary with other eighteenth century journals such as that of the celebrated Parson Woodforde, 1758-1802. There is a very wide contrast between the respective diaries of these two eighteenth-century clergymen. Still greater is the contrast between the lives and characters of the men themselves. They both served God in their generation—even if Parson Woodforde did seem to be too greatly interested in the particular kind of food and drink he had each day for his meals. He was a very attractive character, and exceedingly kind to the poor.

During the years Newton resided at Liverpool he held the position of tide-surveyor. It was a well-paid post—and he had sixty people under his directions, "with a handsome six-oared boat and coxswain to row him about."

But—as in the preceding years—his real interests were bound up with religion—and we find him making contacts directly, or through letters, with many of the leading personages in the evangelical world of that day, such as Whitefield, Wesley, Romaine, Grimshaw of Haworth, Venn, Haweis and a number of lesser known men.

The two chapters in Bull's life, which are devoted to this period, are full of interesting extracts from his diary, and much light is thrown on contemporary church life in England in the mid-eighteenth century. For instance, he describes how, when in London, he visited Whitefield's Tabernacle on a certain Sunday in June where some thousand or more persons assembled for "The Ordinance" which took about three hours to be carried out, and he notes the many little intervals allowed for singing hymns. In the evening he relates again how "a prodigious multitude of people were present so that many hundreds were forced to go away."

Two days later he rises at 4 a.m. and at 5 a.m. hears Mr. Whitefield preach from Psalm 142 and is so much impressed that he has little relish for company or food all day.

His opinions on the revival caused by Whitefield's preaching are shrewd and to the point, when he writes, "it is a great blessing that God has raised up a man so adapted to water, to revive, to stir up, to call in, and then sends him from place to place for the general good." One could scarcely find a more apt description of the itinerant ministries of both Whitefield and John Wesley. They were both emphatically "*sent from place to place for the general good.*"

He met Whitefield again in Liverpool, when the evangelist visited that city, and had much personal intercourse with him, and refers to the fact that the wags of his acquaintance dubbed him Young Whitefield.

Methodism was still in its early stages—it was the year 1755, and it required real moral courage for men—not least ex-sailors in the government employ—openly to identify themselves with Methodist preachers.

When he was eventually ordained nine years later, Whitefield wrote him a particularly striking letter of congratulation.

He also records in his diary for 1755 how he was impressed "with the extraordinary work of grace which is carrying on in 'The Establishment' in Cornwall by Mr Walker, of Truro. I saw two of his letters written in a charming spirit, and as a member of the Established Church I ought to pray that the number of such faithful labourers may be increased. We shall hear a good deal more about his genuine affection and zeal for 'The Establishment.'"

Newton was not the only young Englishman in his thirties who was moved to thank God for the work of Walker of Truro in the eighteenth century. It was during these years (1757-1761) that he also made the acquaintance of John Wesley—though strangely enough Wesley did not seem to impress his heart quite so much as Whitefield. But he can write of Wesley's visit to Liverpool, "This is a golden harvest season. I hope I feel the good effects of his company amongst us." In another letter to Wesley himself, he refers to a visit he paid to Grimshaw, at Haworth, and how he was persuaded to preach in Mr Grimshaw's house to about 150 persons. But although he loves the people called Methodists and suffers the reproach of the world for being one himself, "yet he does not feel called upon to be an itinerant preacher."

On the other side it is interesting to read Wesley's opinion of Newton, which was of a high order.

In the Journal for March 20th, 1760, we find this entry "I had a good deal of conversation with Mr N—. His case is very peculiar. Our Church requires that clergymen should be of learning, and to this end have a University education. But how many have a University education and yet no learning at all! Yet these men are ordained. Meantime, one of eminent learning, as well as unblamable behaviour, cannot be ordained because he was not at the University. What a mere farce is this."

This most shrewd and apposite criticism by Wesley sums up well the difficulties which characters like Newton had to encounter in their desire to enter Holy Orders in "The Establishment" in 1760. And those difficulties have not entirely vanished in similar cases in 1940.

Wesley's words also help us to form a right judgment regarding Newton's attitude towards the Church of England. Several times he was nearly persuaded to take up a post in the Independent ministry—for instance, he was asked to go to a congregation at Warwick—but he always held back and felt he was called to work his work as a Christian minister in the Established Church; which was proved by subsequent facts, to turn out true.

Later in his life he wrote four letters to a “minister of an independent church” giving the reasons for exercising his ministry in the Church of England. The letters were written in 1784 and are still of real value; they are written in a most Christian and conciliatory spirit, and although they deal with times and an age very different from our own, they constitute a definite contribution to the cause of Christian Unity in the Churches.

He makes out a convincing case for forms of prayer being as real as prayers delivered extempore, and incidentally quotes the lines:

Crito freely will rehearse,  
Forms of prayer in praise in verse.  
Why should Crito then suppose  
Forms are sinful when in prose?  
Must my form be deem'd a crime,  
Merely for the want of rhyme?

He applied for ordination first in 1758 and again in 1759 to the then Archbishop of York, Dr Gilbert, who refused to ordain him.

He told Newton that he ought to be satisfied with the state of life into which God had called him—and even insinuated that he was a fool to contemplate leaving a good worldly position for an uncertain clerical prospect. Charles Abbey, in his well-known book on the eighteenth-century church, writes of Archbishop Gilbert, “He did no great honour to the Archiepiscopate.” Horace Walpole speaks of him as arrogant and ignorant, he was passionate as well as imperious. When Bishop of Salisbury he had a dispute with the mayor about the separate jurisdiction of the City and cathedral, and would not allow the mace to be carried before him in the cathedral precincts. His orders were not complied with and he had a personal scuffle with the mace-bearer. There was a humorous sequel to this. Baron Smythe, when the bishop was to dine with him at the circuit dinner, sent orders to the cook that there was to be no mace in the soup as his Lordship did not like mace. Bishop Gilbert introduced at confirmations the custom of simply laying his hand upon each candidate and pronouncing the words of prayer once only for all who knelt. One generation cannot answer for another in matters of taste or feeling. The clergy and laity of that day considered the custom impressive. A full account of this custom is in existence written by another Newton, Thomas Newton, who was the Archbishop's chaplain. The whole matter is fully discussed by Dr N Sykes in that indispensable book on the Eighteenth-Century Church, the Birkbeck lectures for 1931.

The reality of the Christianity in John Newton's character is revealed in the letter written to his wife on December 21st, after being refused ordination. “After being directed to Dr Newton, the chaplain, I on him waited this morning. He referred me to the Secretary—and from him I received the softest refusal imaginable. He had represented my affair to the Archbishop, but His Grace was inflexible in supporting the rules and canons of the Church.”

“Had my eye been raised no higher than his Grace of York, I should have been displeased and disconcerted, but I am in the hands of the great Lord of all. He has been pleased to prove me—whether my surrender to His will was sincere or not, and He has enabled me to stand the trial. As sure as our names are John and Mary you will find that the time and expense of this journey will not be thrown away. I am quite satisfied and easy.”

In February, 1759 (the year Charles Simeon was born) he again applied, but was refused as before.

The sincerity of John Newton was emphatically “proved by the Lord” he served and trusted so faithfully, when five years later he was ordained deacon on April 29th, 1764, by Bishop Green, of Lincoln. Again his letters written during this month reveal a truly Christian character, as well as putting on record the way ordination examinations and ordinations were conducted in the second half of the eighteenth century. Newton draws attention to the “candour and tenderness” of Bishop Green. The examination lasted about an hour. Newton determined not to be charged with dissimulation, and was constrained to dissent from his examiner on some points. The bishop was not offended and promised to ordain him. He was ordained priest on the Sunday, June 17th, apparently in the same year if the sequence of dates in Bull’s biography is correct. But Cecil writes plainly he was “ordained priest in June the following year.”

A further letter dated April 12th, 1764, should be read in this connection, where he reveals how another bishop nearly refused to sign his testimonials until he was shown a letter from Lord Dartmouth, which Newton said “put a full-stop to all enquiries, but what were agreeable; the bishop then became very sociable; kept me in chit-chat nearly an hour—and when I took my leave he wished me much success.”

This description of how Newton was eventually ordained is worth recording in view of the fact that April 29th, 1764, meant the fulfilment of a desire definitely entertained seven years before. Mr Bull tells of a small book that came into his keeping, giving the whole history of Newton’s procedure in the matter—in which he deliberately purposed for six weeks before the return of his birthday to consider the work of the ministry.

He did not become a minister in “the Established Church” by chance—and his patience and humility during the long years of waiting were little short of heroic. He was told in after years, that his mother had in her mind devoted him to the office of a minister. Her prayers were certainly answered.

It must not be supposed that all this time Newton in any way neglected his work as tide-surveyor—he seems to have been profoundly conscientious. It appears also that in spite of their evangelical sympathies both he and his wife were popular at Liverpool. “When we came away I think the bulk of the people of all ranks and parties were very sorry to part with us.” Let it be remembered here that Liverpool, with Bristol, was a port connected with the slave trade and Newton must have known many of the slave ship captains as they came and went on their grim business.

The years 1755-1764 were also times of outstanding events in the life of England. In 1756 came tidings of earthquakes in different parts of the world; Quebec fell in 1759 and a threat of invasion from the French was overcome. Let it here be said that adequately to understand Newton’s career, far more information should be inserted concerning the condition and

general background of eighteenth-century England. Such insertions would make this study too lengthy. The writer here would like to refer his readers to that most brilliant and satisfying volume, *Wesley's England*, by J. H. Whitely, Dr Lt., surely a modern standard work on the eighteenth century.

### PART III The Ministry at Olney

Newton opened his ministry at Olney in May, 1764, where he was to work until January, 1780.

Olney at that time was a fair-sized country town, and offered plenty of scope for an evangelical clergyman of "The Establishment." Some idea of Newton's activities can be gained by a perusal of the following timetable:

Sunday.—6 a.m. Prayer Meeting.

Morning, afternoon, evening, full service with sermon.

8 p.m., Meeting for prayer and hymn singing in the Vicarage.

Monday.—Evening, Men's Bible Class.

Tuesday.—5 a.m. Prayer Meeting (good average attendance).

Evening, Prayer Meeting (the largest meeting of the week).

Wednesday.—Classes for young people, and enquirers.

Thursday.—Afternoon, Children's meeting "to reason with them and to explain the Scriptures in their own little way."

Evening, Service in Church with sermon—attended by people from many of the villages round.

Friday.—Evening, Meeting for members of his society.

This list of an average week's activities (which Elliot Binns has reproduced in his book on *The Evangelical Movement*) may be to some readers partial and of local interest only.

But it is worth while recording, as it presents a somewhat different picture of eighteenth-century churchmanship than that usually accepted. In a limited study of this kind only the most brief account of these sixteen years at Olney can be given—and only those events will be discussed which throw most light on Newton's life and character.

As is so often the case, when a minister of outstanding and original character, after long years of patient and determined waiting has been ordained, and appointed to a cure, other enticing offers of what the world terms "preferment" came to Newton almost at once. And he is seen now at his very best. He rejected all of them, and practised in his own life the precept he wrote to a curate, "Preferment is not necessary either to our peace or our usefulness." He also wrote to his wife advising "to prefer the place where the Lord shall fix us to an overhasty prospect of great things." He was approached about a move to Hampstead and, later on, to America.

This latter suggestion was of much interest. Whitefield's orphan house in Georgia was to be converted into a seminary college or university. It was suggested that Newton should be president, holding with it the living of Savanna. Again Newton "desires to be preserved from listening to the sound of honour and profit."

Although Olney was a small place, the congregations became large enough to justify the erection of a gallery in the Parish Church, and when built “there seemed no more room in the body of the Church than before.” Newton also obtained from Lord Dartmouth the use of a building called “The Great House” which had a room capable of holding over 200 persons. Here he held weekly services especially for children and young people. This mansion had been erected by a certain William Johnson who settled at Olney in 1642. (There is an engraving of it in the *Sunday at Home* in a volume of 1857). Newton’s prayer meetings must have been a very real manifestation of evangelical religion.

We should note here his generous hospitality to the poor; people who came from a distance to the services—and we read of some walking ten miles—would be entertained at the vicarage and he always seems to have had guests. If it is asked how could a curate on £60 a year entertain in this way—the answer is given, by the generosity of John Thornton. This truly great Christian was so impressed by Newton’s power of doing good that he allowed him £200 a year for carrying on this kind of work. Newton’s attitude to life and his kindness and tenderness of heart is well revealed in one of his own sayings, “I see in this world two heaps of human happiness and misery; now if I can take but the smallest from one heap and add it to the other I carry a point. If, as I go home, a child has dropped a halfpenny, and by giving it another, I can wipe away its tears—I feel I have done something.” It is not surprising the poor in Olney and district came to the services.

During the years at Olney we find him forming friendships and contacts with various folk, some of them to become well known in the religious world of those days, such as Venn, Bull, Scott, the Milners, Berridge, and as we have stated he corresponds with John Wesley.

Thomas Scott, the commentator, was the writer who made so profound an impression on Cardinal Newman. Newman speaks of him “as the writer who made a deeper impression on my mind than any other, and to whom humanly speaking I almost owe my soul.” Scott, in his turn, humanly speaking owed much of his soul to Newton who by his gentle reasoning and tolerant understanding, and lack of harshness in theological argument, helped Scott to reject his Socinian views and become a Trinitarian.

But the principal friendship formed in those Olney years was that with the poet William Cowper. Which friendship produced for the Church the permanent legacy of the Olney hymns.

A great deal has been written in the different biographies and literary studies of Cowper about his friendship with Newton, by many different writers. Some of these writers have dealt most unfairly with Newton, and sadly misrepresented him. Let it be stated here that one could scarcely find a more fair and altogether illuminating book on this subject than “William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century,” by Gilbert Thomas.

Those who desire to pursue the subject further will find that author’s chapter on Newton convincing, and based on first-hand evidence. William Cowper settled at Olney in September, 1766. He deliberately went there to be near John Newton, not only because he was an evangelical clergyman who would be likely to help him in his ministry, but because he was attracted to him for his own sake. Between the two men there sprang up this famous friendship which has been so much discussed. It is not the purpose of this sketch to enter into

literary controversies—it is enough to say that Newton did all he could to help his friend in his most grievous infirmity.

It may be true that the religious work Cowper undertook sometimes at Olney at the prayer meetings, and the emphasis on the Doctrine of The Atonement that was always before him, may have stirred sometimes too profoundly his religious sensibilities. But it is a fallacy to imagine that Newton's influence brought on Cowper's malady; this had affected Cowper long before he had ever met Newton. A particularly attractive description of the friendship of these two men was given in an address delivered by the late Bishop Handley Moule at Olney on April 25th, 1907, during the Newton centenary celebrations.

It would be well if critics of Newton would read this most vivid and sympathetic memorial address by one who had more right than most men to present in its true light Newton's view of the Christian faith. Indeed, all the addresses in the Centenary Memorial Volume, by John Callis, should be read. "For thirteen years, from 1767 to 1780, they lived here side by side in continual intercourse, sometimes in sunshine, sometimes in the awful gloom within which Newton watched, praying and hoping over the terrible melancholia of the man he loved—and who loved him so well in return, and clung to him in his utmost darkness as almost to an angel of God."

Here in happy days they cared together for the poor, and worked hand in hand, parson and layman, for the souls of the enquiring and believing, and here they planned their hymn book.

The stories of famous friendships have always a peculiar attraction and cast their spell on those who study them. This is no exception. It was natural for the two men to understand and love one another. "Their differences were all on the surface. Beneath his reserve, his caution, and his feminine fastidiousness, Cowper hid an essential and in some respects a tough masculinity."

Newton externally may have been bluff, vigorous, and at times, stern. He needed to be at Olney; but his heart was tender as a child's. They certainly made a strange pair. The strong, homely ex-sailor clergyman, and the gentle, broken-hearted Templar, settling down together to do Christian work in a long-neglected country town.

"The Olney Hymns" were not published till 1779. But they were written many years before then. Cowper probably wrote all his between 1771 and 1773. This collection of hymns deserves more than a short reference, and the details are decidedly interesting. In all, there are 348, of which 280 are by Newton, and 68 by Cowper.

The most familiar of Cowper's verses are "Hark, my soul, it is the Lord," "Sometimes a light surprises," "God moves in a mysterious way," "Oh, for a closer walk with God," and the particularly beautiful hymn "Jesus, where'er Thy people meet." (This last hymn gains greatly in power and loveliness when sung to the eighteenth century melody composed by W. Knapp.) Some of the best known by Newton would be "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds," "Approach my soul, the mercy seat," "Begone unbelief," "Quiet, Lord, my froward heart," and the outstanding objective hymn of the collection "Glorious things of Thee are spoken."

Many of the 348 hymns are merely religious exercises and far from poetry. One wishes that Newton instead of reeling off so many religious rhymes could have concentrated on fewer

great hymns. But this should be remembered: “The Olney Hymns” were composed for a special purpose—for the use of the Olney parishioners at the varied evangelical services which Newton delighted to conduct. They would be sung not only in the Church but at “The Great House” and at cottage gatherings. For instance, Cowper wrote “Jesus, where’er Thy people meet” for use in what would be called a mission room. These hymns were exactly suited for their purpose. Yet a large number have passed into the Church’s permanent store of sacred song. Many years ago the R.T.S. selected “100 of the best hymns.” The number selected from the 348 Olney Hymns is exactly the same as that from the thousands of hymns of the two Wesleys and the 750 psalms and hymns of Isaac Watts. But a different selection could be made—and the genius of Charles Wesley—one of the greatest of hymn writers—stands in a different category to that of Newton. It may be noted here that when Charles Wesley died and was buried in the churchyard of St. Marylebone Church, Newton was one of the eight clergymen who carried the pall. Newton was in this year (1788) himself 63 and though unwell at the time—and though it was to be a walking funeral—in a bitter wind and the snow falling, felt it his duty to pay this mark of affection and respect to “Charles, the brother of John.”

One would much like to know how often these two hymn writers and evangelists met—and what they thought of each others hymns. They had a good deal in common, and both lived and worked in London.

The preface Newton wrote to the Olney Hymns when first they were published, is still worth reading. It brings out Newton’s humility and appreciation of the worth of his more gifted collaborator. He explains why the hymns were written, “to promote the faith and comfort of sincere Christians” and also to perpetuate the remembrance of an intimate and endeared friendship. He refers to the delay of publication caused by Cowper’s “long and affecting indisposition.”

The hymns are arranged in three books, “On select passages of Scripture,” on “Occasional subjects,” and “The rise, progress, changes and comforts of the spiritual life.”

J. H. Overton criticizes the hymn book for its neglect of the observance of Church seasons.

In the entire 348 there are only three celebrating Christmas; while thirty are allotted to the keeping of the New Year. Newton was certainly deficient in his sense of the value of the Church’s Year. The observance of The Church Year in hymnology was waiting the pens of Heber and Keble. But it is only fair to Newton to say that he catered for a Special New Year’s Young People’s Service held annually.

Olney, as Newton and Cowper knew it, has been described as “a parish of unsophisticated rustics who used speech not to hide their feelings but to express them.” Newton’s parishioners were surely provided with the right kind of speech with which to express their feelings in The Olney Hymns.

## **F. H. DURNFORD**