

Industrialist and Benefactor

William Lewis (c1710 -1768)

William Lewis was a good friend to early Methodists in Leicester, although he remained a Presbyterian all his life and attended the 'Great Meeting'. His exact birth date is uncertain but we know he was a hosier who worked in High Street, his wife was called Ann, and she had been widowed by 1768. There are, however, nonconformist baptism records linked to the Great Meeting, listing three children whose father was named as William Lewis. These are Benjamin, born 6



'During the period in which the Superintendent and other ministers resided in the House now occupied by the Chapel Keeper [No 12], this portrait hung in "The Parlour;" afterwards it was removed to the Minister's Vestry where it has remained ever since.' (Text written mid-20th century?)

Fowler's Map showing the centre of Leicester in 1828

- A. The Great Meeting, one of Leicester's oldest remaining non-conformist chapels.
- B. Butt Close, where John Wesley had preached in 1753.
- C. High Cross Street. (The location of the house is not known).
- D. Site of The Old Barn, later rebuilt as a Methodist chapel.
- E. Bishop Street Wesleyan Chapel, built 1815.



April 1730, William, born 31 October 1733 and John, born 27 April 1738. William Lewis seems to have invested in property, and after John Wesley's first visit to Leicester in 1753, Lewis gave the small group of Methodists a spacious room in a house in what was then High Street (now Highcross Street), where they could meet and which was licensed for Methodist worship. In 1753 William Lewis had bought a building called 'The Old Barn' in Millstone Lane for £81. In 1757, having converted the Barn to a place of religious worship, he gave it to the Methodists free of charge. John Wesley came and preached there the same year. After William Lewis died, it emerged that there was a flaw in the deed by which the Barn was given to the Methodist Society, and the property went to his son as heir who then left the barn to a friend. William Lewis's widow, however, wishing to ensure that her husband's wishes were carried out, repurchased the Barn at its original cost price of £81 and gave it by deed, completely legally this time, to 15 named Methodist trustees on 23 December 1768.

The Great Meeting, East Bond Street. Now a Unitarian Chapel, it was Presbyterian in Mr Lewis's Day. Built in 1708, its members have made significant contributions to the religious, political, economic and cultural life of Leicester throughout the last 300 years.