

BANNER OF THE GOSPEL



While serving as a missionary in Herefordshire, England, Wilford Woodruff preached to John Benbow, his family, and others from their church. Many of them were baptized in a pond at the John Benbow Hill Farm pictured above. (Courtesy of Brigham Young University.)

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WILFORD WOODRUFF: MISSIONARY IN HEREFORDSHIRE

WILFORD Woodruff was a great missionary wherever he served. He often related missionary work to fishing, and he linked the baptisms he had while sharing the gospel to dreams of successful fishing trips.¹ He spent over a year in the British Isles during his first mission there. One of his most significant areas of service was in the tricounty area in England, comprising Herefordshire, Worcestershire, and Gloucestershire. Wilford Woodruff's mission in this area is significant, in part because a large number of baptisms occurred within a few months of his arrival. He talked about this mission a number of times throughout his lifetime, using the experience to demonstrate how the Lord leads his servants to the honest in heart.² Woodruff's mission to

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these counties also showed how a faithful missionary can be an instrument in the Lord's hand to make great things happen.

This paper will briefly review the mission of the first elders who went to the British Isles in 1837, along with the apostolic mission of 1840–41. The greater part of the paper will look specifically at Woodruff's mission in the tricounty area and his effectiveness in sharing the gospel. This analysis will include a description of the preparation of the people who joined the Church through Woodruff's efforts, and the effect the gospel had on them.

APOSTOLIC MISSIONS TO THE BRITISH ISLES

The first group of missionaries to go to England for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints arrived in Liverpool in July 1837. They first focused their efforts in the Preston, Lancashire, area, later moving north and south. They were led by two Apostles, Heber C. Kimball and Orson Hyde, and were guided by the Spirit as they preached the gospel throughout the land. After many months, most of the first group of missionaries went back to their homes in America, leaving Joseph Fielding, Willard Richards, and William Clayton in charge of the missionary efforts in Britain. By that time, there were nearly 1,500 members of the Church in England. After Elders Kimball and Hyde left, the Saints in England did not have Apostles in their midst for nearly two more years.³

According to a revelation received by Joseph Smith in Far West, Missouri, on July 8, 1838, the members of the Quorum of the Twelve were called to serve missions in Britain. This revelation is found in Doctrine and Covenants 118:4–5: “And next spring let them depart to go over the great waters, and there

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promulgate my gospel, the fullness thereof, and bear record of my name. Let them take leave of my saints in the city of Far West, on the twenty-sixth day of April next, on the building spot of my house, saith the Lord.” In this same revelation, Wilford Woodruff was called as a new member of the Quorum of the Twelve, and thus he became a part of the group of missionaries called to go to Britain.

From the time of this revelation to the following April there were many events which could have discouraged the Church leaders from going on this mission. These experiences included the apostasy of some members of the Quorum of the Twelve, the extermination order issued by Governor Lilburn W. Boggs in Missouri, the imprisonment of Joseph Smith and other leaders in Liberty Jail, and the expulsion of the Saints from Missouri. However, Brigham Young and other members of the Quorum of the Twelve desired to fulfill every aspect of the calling they had been given. In spite of the danger of reentering the Far West area, “sometime before dawn on the morning of April 26th, Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, Orson Pratt, John E. Page, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, George A. Smith, and eighteen other Church members met at the designated spot.”²⁴ After conducting several matters of business and ordaining Woodruff and Smith to the apostleship, they quickly departed for Commerce, Illinois. It took most of the brethren several months to settle their families in Illinois before being able to leave for England.

In company with John Taylor and another missionary named Theodore Turley, Wilford Woodruff arrived in Liverpool on January 11, 1840. Without much ado, they began their missionary efforts. Elders Woodruff and Turley headed south toward Staffordshire, to the area known as the Potteries because its principal industry was pottery manufacturing. Missionary work had been

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going on before their arrival, and Elder Woodruff began preaching right away. He soon sent Elder Turley to the Birmingham area, while he remained in the Potteries with Elder Alfred Cordon.

In spite of the opposition of local clergy, Woodruff had a fair amount of success in Hanley, Staffordshire. Later, he described that on the morning of Sunday, March 1 (his birthday), "I went in secret before the Lord, and asked Him what was His will concerning me. The answer I received was that I should go to the south; for the Lord had a great work for me to perform there, as many souls were waiting for His word."⁵ Later, while he was preaching to a large congregation, he announced that he would be leaving the area, much to their surprise. Elder Woodruff discussed his plans with recent converts William and Ann Benbow of Hanley. William suggested that Elder Woodruff visit his brother John Benbow, who lived in Herefordshire, and offered to accompany him.⁶

Although the promptings Woodruff had received directed him to go south, it was through the instrumentality of another person, William Benbow, that he found the exact area where he needed to go. William's brother was part of a group of worshippers known as the United Brethren, and it so happened that these were the very people prepared to hear the restored gospel. Accordingly, on March 3, Wilford Woodruff and William Benbow, along with William's young son William, rode an omnibus for twenty-six miles to Wolverhampton. The next day they rode a coach for thirty-four miles to Worcester, then walked sixteen miles to John Benbow's farm in Castle Frome, Herefordshire.⁷

"IN A PREPARATION TO HEAR THE WORD"

To understand why Elder Woodruff had so much success in that area, we need to examine the United Brethren as a group to

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understand something about their beliefs and organization. In the Book of Mormon, Alma perceived that the Zoramites who were poor were “in a preparation to hear the word” (Alma 32:6), and so he was able to have success in preaching to those humble people. Similarly, Wilford Woodruff found a group of people in the Herefordshire area who, because of their socioeconomic condition and their religious beliefs, were prepared to hear the word of God as it had been restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith.

The United Brethren were a group of families and individuals who had previously belonged to the Primitive Methodist movement. These men and women had separated from the Primitive Methodist Connexion in the 1830s. The Primitive Methodist movement began in 1811, when two men broke away from mainstream Wesleyan Methodism, believing that the Wesleyans had strayed from the church established by Wesley. The Wesleyan Methodists were beginning to be more acceptable within the wider British society, moving toward a membership and a clergy that was of a higher, more respectable social class. They also utilized a more formalized form of worship. The Primitive Methodists, on the other hand, were less educated, plain in their speech and dress, and usually came from the more humble classes. In addition, they allowed both men and women to preach and participate in revivalist camp meetings and feast days.⁸

Thomas Kington, born in 1796, was a Methodist preacher who taught with great zeal and inspiration. He was affiliated with the Primitive Methodists, but he left them sometime in the early 1830s. Although he was no longer a part of the church, he zealously preached in the open air to the poor of Herefordshire, Gloucester, and Worcester. Many good men and women appreciated his words and opened their homes for his preaching. They banded together to form a new church, which they called the

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United Brethren. He helped them register their homes as licensed places of worship, and by 1836 the group built their own chapel at Gadfield Elm in the Parish of Eldersfield, Worcestershire. Kington became the superintendent over preaching circuits centered in Gadfield Elm and Frome's Hill and developed a schedule for the different preachers' routes as they taught various congregations. John Benbow, a respected tenant farmer in Frome's Hill, was a preacher for the United Brethren, and his house and barn at Hill Farm were licensed as places of worship.⁹

At the time of Wilford Woodruff's arrival at John Benbow's house in early March 1840, there were around five to six hundred people who had been meeting together and preaching the gospel of faith, repentance, baptism, and the remission of sins through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ In Job Smith's reminiscences about the United Brethren, he speaks of two preachers, Thomas Steed and Susan Brooks, who were conversing together the Sunday before Wilford Woodruff's arrival. One said to the other, "What are you going to preach today?" The reply was, "I don't know. I have preached all I know. What are you going to preach?" The other said, "I also have preached all I know. I hope the Lord will send us light."¹¹ The United Brethren were both prepared and eager to listen to a missionary from America preach the fullness of the gospel.

Wilford Woodruff described the United Brethren in a letter to the editor of the *Millennial Star*, dated July 9, 1840:

The United Brethren formerly belonged to the Primitive Methodists, but had separated themselves from the body, and chose the name of the United Brethren. They had from forty to fifty preachers and about the same number of established places of meeting, including two chapels. . . . This people almost

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universally appeared willing to give heed to the exhortation of Solomon, to hear a matter before they judged or condemned [it]. They opened their doors for me to preach, and searched the Scriptures daily to see if the things which I taught were true; and on finding that the word and spirit agreed and bore record of the truth of the fullness of the Everlasting Gospel, they embraced it with all their hearts.¹²

MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES
IN HEREFORDSHIRE

John and Jane Benbow invited Wilford Woodruff to preach the gospel at their home the day after he arrived. Woodruff preached that day, and on the second day the Benbows and four of their friends were baptized. Elder Woodruff said he spent the rest of the next day (Saturday) clearing out the pond near the Benbows' home for more baptisms, which were to take place on Sunday.¹³

By Sunday word of an American missionary had spread swiftly, and Elder Woodruff preached three sermons in three different locations to a total of nearly one thousand people. The local Anglican parish reported only fifteen attendees that same day. The rector, upset by the lack of attendance, sent a constable to arrest Wilford Woodruff as he preached his sermon at the Benbows' home. When the constable came forward with a warrant at the beginning of the meeting, Elder Woodruff pointed out that he had a license to preach, just like the rector, but would be willing to speak to the constable after the meeting. He recalled, "The power of God rested upon me, the spirit filled the house, and the people were convinced." At the end of the meeting, seven people

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presented themselves for baptism, including the constable who had planned to arrest Elder Woodruff.¹⁴

The parish rector did not give up easily. He sent two clerks to listen to the next sermon, hoping that they could find something that he could use against the Apostle to stop him from preaching. After listening to the sermon, they too believed the message and desired to be baptized. After these events, the rector did not send anyone else to listen to Elder Woodruff's preaching.

Several of the ministers in the area continued to complain about the missionaries, even going so far as to ask the archbishop of Canterbury to propose introducing a law in Parliament prohibiting the Mormons from preaching. The archbishop refused the request, stating, "If they [the ministers] had the worth of souls at heart as much as they valued the ground where hares, foxes, and hounds ran, they would not lose so many of their flock."¹⁵

Woodruff continued to have much success in preaching and baptizing, finding that there were more people interested in baptism than he could teach by himself. He traveled to many different congregations of the United Brethren, preaching in the homes of the people. Within a short time, John Benbow invited Thomas Kington to hear this new gospel message. If Kington, as the leader of the United Brethren, had refused to listen, it could have been difficult for the Latter-day Saints because he could have used his influence to instruct his entire congregation not to follow Woodruff. However, he agreed to listen to the message. Elder Woodruff later described the meeting with him: "Mr. Kington received my testimony and sayings with candor; and carried the case before the Lord, made it a subject of prayer, and asked the Father in the name of Jesus Christ, if these things were true; and the Lord Manifested the truth of it unto him, and he went forth and was baptized, he and all his household. I ordained him an

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Elder, and he went forth and began to preach the fullness of the Gospel.”¹⁶

With Kington’s baptism and his zeal for preaching and teaching the gospel, the work moved forward even more rapidly. He gave the United Brethren’s preachers’ plan to Wilford Woodruff, which showed a systematic method for preaching at their places of worship. By this time, many of the original preachers from the United Brethren had already been baptized and ordained priests and teachers by Elder Woodruff. The preachers followed the established United Brethren preachers’ plan to teach the restored gospel, and the work of preaching and baptizing went forth to various parts of the tricounty area.¹⁷ Woodruff traveled long distances each day to teach the established congregations, and he was constantly baptizing, confirming, and ordaining the brethren.

WHAT DID WOODRUFF PREACH?

One of the interesting things to note about missionary work at that time is that the Book of Mormon had not yet been printed in Great Britain. Only a few copies of the Book of Mormon had been brought to Great Britain by the missionaries. The question we might ask is, what did they preach? Elder Woodruff said that he “gave an account of the rise and progress of the Church . . . and bore testimony of the truth of the great work.”¹⁸ He also said, “The Spirit of God accompanied the preaching of the word to the hearts of men. Whole households, on hearing the word, have received it into good and honest hearts, and gone forth and received the ordinances of the Gospel.”¹⁹ Obviously, he taught by the Spirit, and the Spirit testified of the truthfulness of the restored gospel.

Job Taylor Smith, who was only eleven years old when he first met Wilford Woodruff, remembered:

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President Woodruff and Elder Kington arrived at father Bundy's house in the afternoon of April 8th, 1840. The usual weekly meeting of the United Brethren was on every Wednesday evening at one of the member's houses a short distance down the street. The member's name was William Simmons, and the name of the street or hamlet was called Haw Cross, in the parish of Redmarley, County of Worcester. At the usual hour the gentlemen above named with my uncle and aunt Bundy, and myself repaired to the meeting place. Reports had arrived previously of some new and strange things happening at Froom's Hill and other places in Herefordshire, and the advanced report succeeded in filling the large kitchen to over flowing, many being unable to gain admission. . . .

An anxious audience then listened with open ears and anxious hearts for two hours while the apostle explained the first principles of the gospel together with the manner in which it had been revealed through the ministering of angels to Joseph Smith, through whom a church had been organized with Apostles, elders, priests and teachers, with all the gifts, healings, and manifestations enjoyed by the ancient church of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, and other places in the days of the apostles whom Christ himself had ordained.²⁰

Apparently, in this instance, Wilford Woodruff focused his message on the restoration of the gospel through Joseph Smith, including the ministering of angels, the priesthood, and the miracles that take place with priesthood power, comparing the restored Church to the Church established at the time of Christ.

Job Taylor Smith described that after the meeting at the Simmons home, many people offered themselves for baptism. A pond being nearby, the group retired there for the baptisms. Due

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to mob activity, they postponed the ordinances until midnight, hoping the mobs would disperse, but they did not. Woodruff recorded, "I went down into the water and baptized 5 persons in the midst of a shower of stones flung at me by the mob, and while they were pelting my Body with stones one of which hit me in the top of my head which nearly knocked me down into the water with the man that I was Baptizing but the Lord saved me from falling and I continued until I had closed my baptizing and my mind was stayed on God."²¹ After this experience, Job Smith spoke with Elder Woodruff: "I . . . asked him if I was old enough to be baptized, which he answered in the affirmative, and when shaking hands with him I asked him if there were any of the apostles now in England, to which he replied, 'You have hold of one of their hands.' Subsequently the remainder of the members of the U. B. were baptized."²²

ARRIVAL OF BRIGHAM YOUNG AND
WILLARD RICHARDS IN HEREFORDSHIRE

On April 15, 1840, Wilford Woodruff left the Herefordshire area for a few days to go to Preston to attend a Church conference. There he was reunited with other members of the Quorum of the Twelve. During the conference, he shared his experience of meeting with the United Brethren and the great success he was having in that part of the country. He reported that within one month and five days of preaching in that area he had baptized Thomas Kington, the superintendent of the United Brethren, forty-eight of their preachers, and 112 members. Because this group of Saints had previously licensed their homes, along with the chapel at Gadfield Elm, all of these established places of worship were now available to the missionaries. He also petitioned

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for help from some of his brethren to return with him because there were so many people interested and ready to be baptized. Accordingly, Brigham Young accompanied Wilford Woodruff back to Herefordshire, and Willard Richards followed a short time later.²³

With the help of Brigham Young, Willard Richards, and the local elders and priests, the work moved forward at a rapid pace. On May 20, Young, Richards, and Woodruff climbed to the top of Herefordshire Beacon, one of the major hills in the Malvern range. Inspired by the view, the three Apostles counseled together and agreed that Brigham Young should leave immediately for Manchester to publish the Book of Mormon along with a new hymnal. This was made possible by money contributed by local Saints. The biggest donations came from John Benbow, who contributed £200, and Thomas Kington, who provided £100.²⁴ John Benbow's contribution was significant, considering that he had lost his home and farm soon after his baptism because the landowner heard that he had joined the Church. In addition, upon immigrating to Nauvoo in September 1840, Benbow paid for the passage of forty other British Saints.²⁵ His example of commitment and sacrifice demonstrates what many of the Herefordshire converts were willing to give for the gospel's sake.

The first Church conference in the tricounty area was held on June 14, 1840, at the Gadfield Elm Chapel, followed by a conference at Eldersfield, Worcestershire, on June 21, and then at Stanley Hill near Castle Frome, Herefordshire. At these conferences, the branches in the tricounty area were organized into two conferences: Bran Green and Gadfield Elm, and Frome's Hill. The Bran Green and Gadfield Elm Conference had twelve branches while the Frome's Hill Conference had nineteen.²⁶

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OTHER EVENTS OF INTEREST

Many spiritual experiences took place while Woodruff fulfilled his mission in the Herefordshire area. One significant experience took place in Dymock. On May 18, 1840, Elders Young, Woodruff, and Richards were with about a hundred people gathered in the afternoon at Kington's home for what had been a traditional feast day of the United Brethren. Here, those assembled witnessed the miraculous healing of Mary Pitt, who had been confined to her bed for six years and had not walked without crutches for several years prior to that. The three Apostles laid their hands on her, Brigham Young rebuked the infirmity, and she was healed.²⁷

However, all was not easy for the missionaries. In spite of their success they also experienced persecution from individuals in the local community. During one meeting in Dymock, Wilford Woodruff said that the "rowdies" made noise in the streets, hitting pots and pails together, trying to disrupt the meeting. They even threw stones, bricks, and rotten eggs at the home where they were meeting. Although the windows were shuttered, windows and roof tiles were broken. The "Saints all took it in stride . . . though after the mob drifted away, they had the task of clearing the rooms of the debris."²⁸ A *Hereford Times* article on November 14, 1840, reports on continued persecution: "The Dymock Lads' (as the male part of the population of that parish are generally called) and lasses too, have been amusing themselves very much of late by shooting, hanging, and burning effigies, which they dressed to represent some of the leaders of the 'latter day saints' of that neighbourhood."²⁹

Many of the people in the tricounty area were touched by the gospel message and remained strong and true to the faith. Herefordshire is still an agricultural area at this time, and was even

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more rural during the time of Wilford Woodruff's mission. The three largest communities in the area were the cities of Worcester, Hereford, and Gloucester, but Woodruff rarely mentioned going to these places; instead, he spent most of his time teaching and preaching in the smaller villages. Many of the converts would likely have been agricultural laborers without much money. However, unlike many early British Saints from the working classes in industrial communities, there were a few well-to-do farmers and artisans who joined the Church. Edward Ockey, a neighbor to John Benbow, was a prosperous farmer and donated money for Church publications. When he and his family emigrated to America, an advertisement announcing the sale of his possessions shows that he had been a very successful farmer.³⁰

Thomas Steed, a young man at the time he and his family met Wilford Woodruff, remembered hearing Elder Woodruff preach the gospel. He told of a time when one of the elders of the Church came to him and said, "My boy, if you will pray earnestly to the Lord, you will receive from Him a wonderful manifestation as a testimony of the truth of this divine work." Six weeks later, while meeting with the Saints at Jonathan Lucy's home in Colwall, the presiding elder stopped preaching and said, "The Spirit has left me and rests upon some one in the room. Will they please get up. If they will, we will have one of the greatest manifestations of the power of God that we ever had in this branch." Thomas said that the Spirit whispered to him that it was he. Somewhat shy, he wondered what he could possibly say. "All at once a power put me on my feet," he said, and "the Spirit of prophecy rested upon me and I foretold the gathering of the Saints of that Branch with the body of the Church then at Nauvoo, Illinois." He received the gift of tongues and spoke several more times about what would take place in the land of England. He said that the testimony of

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Christ and the Restoration of the gospel through Joseph Smith was given to him that day in a very powerful way. He continued, “I was fully satisfied with the testimony that the Lord had given me, according to his promise of Apostle Woodruff.”³¹

CONCLUSION

Wilford Woodruff traveled through the Herefordshire area a few more times during the remainder of his mission in England. He also labored in London, in the Potteries, and other places, but no experience in other areas matched the ones he had in and around Herefordshire. He was beloved by the people there, many of whom stayed true to the faith and eventually immigrated first to Nauvoo and later to Utah. Many years later he looked back on his work among the United Brethren and recalled, “They as a people were prepared for the word of the Lord, and I wanted to catch them in the gospel net.”³² Woodruff’s mission to the Herefordshire area shows that the Lord guides and directs his servants to the people who have been prepared to hear the gospel message. It also demonstrates Woodruff’s faithfulness in preaching the gospel with all his heart, fulfilling the calling of an Apostle to testify of the divinity of Jesus Christ. As a missionary, he influenced hundreds of people to join themselves to the Church in building up Zion.

NOTES

1. Thomas G. Alexander, *Things in Heaven and Earth: The Life and Times of Wilford Woodruff, a Mormon Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 94.
2. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–1886), 15:342–43; 18:124.
3. James B. Allen, Ronald K. Esplin, and David J. Whittaker, *Men with a Mission: The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in the British Isles, 1837–1841* (Salt

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- Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 53. More information about the first missionaries to Britain can be found in V. Ben Bloxham, James R. Moss, and Larry C. Porter, eds., *Truth Will Prevail: The Rise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the British Isles, 1837–1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
4. Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker, *Men with a Mission*, 57.
 5. Matthias Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff: His Life and Labors* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 116.
 6. Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker, *Men with a Mission*, 121.
 7. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal, 1833–1898, Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney, 9 vols. (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983–85): 1:423, March 3–4, 1840.
 8. Julia Stewart Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: Its Background and Early History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 54, 65, 83.
 9. Job Smith, “The United Brethren,” *Improvement Era*, July 1910, 819–20; Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker, *Men with a Mission*, 331–32, n. 36.
 10. James Palmer, *Reminiscences* (ca. 1884–98), 5, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.
 11. Smith, “The United Brethren,” 823.
 12. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1960), 4:151.
 13. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 1:424, March 7, 1840.
 14. Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker, *Men with a Mission*, 124–25.
 15. Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker, *Men with a Mission*, 125–26.
 16. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:151.
 17. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 1:488–89, August 2, 1840.
 18. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:151.
 19. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:152.
 20. Job Taylor Smith, *Autobiography* (ca. 1902), 1–2, Church History Library.
 21. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 1:433. Woodruff records this event as happening on April 9, Job Smith records the event as April 8.
 22. Smith, *Autobiography*, 2.

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23. *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 1:439–40.
24. Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker, *Men with a Mission*, 151; *Wilford Woodruff's Journal*, 1:449, 451.
25. V. Ben Bloxham, “The Apostolic Foundations, 1840–1841,” in *Truth Will Prevail*, 139–40.
26. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:134–35, 138–39. These branches closely parallel the locations where the United Brethren had established licensed places of worship, as found in their preachers’ plan.
27. Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker, *Men with a Mission*, 150–51.
28. Allen, Esplin, and Whittaker, *Men with a Mission*, 199.
29. “Proceedings at Dymock,” *Hereford Times*, November 14, 1840.
30. The advertisement of an auction of his farm implements and possessions shows that he had cattle, farming utensils, sacks of grain, and casks of cider (*Hereford Times*, March 27, 1841).
31. The Life of Thomas Steed from His Own Diary, 1826–1910, 4–6, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
32. David J. Whittaker, “Harvest in Herefordshire,” *Ensign*, January 1987, 51.