

From the *Transactions* of the  
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

**Methodism in Late 19th-Century Bristol: as exemplified by the  
life, preaching engagements and writings of Joseph Perry Distin  
(1844-98) (pp. 131-207).**

by M.J. Crossley Evans,  
2006, Vol. 124, 131-207

© The Society and the Author(s)

## Methodism in Late 19th-Century Bristol: as exemplified by the life, preaching engagements and writings of Joseph Perry Distin (1844–98)

By M.J. CROSSLEY EVANS

### *Introduction*

One of the problems that have beset studies of ecclesiastical history is the over-emphasis placed on the role of the clergy. Although this sacerdotal bias is often unconscious, it has had the unfortunate affect of diminishing the important, and often vital, contributions made to the progress of Christianity by a succession of laymen and laywomen throughout the centuries. The over-emphasis placed by Wesleyan Methodists on the work of the ordained ministry in the 19th century has been pointed out by Professor the Revd. John Kent.<sup>1</sup> This can be seen in the history of Ebenezer Wesleyan Methodist chapel, Bristol, which was attended by the subject of this paper.<sup>2</sup> It is also clearly stated in an article in the *Wesleyan Reformer* in 1851:

In the Wesleyan Methodist church the people are nothing, absolutely nothing – the following ‘trifles’ excepted: viz raising all the money and richly replenishing the funds, visiting the sick, carrying on prayer meetings (and) seeking and bringing back poor wanderers into the fold.<sup>3</sup>

Now it is possible, partly, to redress the balance in Bristol by looking at the life and work of a late 19th-century Methodist layman and local preacher, Joseph Perry Distin (1844–98). Distin (Fig. 1) was a product of his generation, a Liberal in politics and a supporter of social reform, the principle of Temperance, home mission and the work of the Wesleyan Missionary Society. However, what is laid bare in these pages is his tireless work for his Saviour, and his personal walk with Him, often sparsely and laconically recorded in his own written records. He clearly outlined his motivation and his self-assessment in his work. Looking back over 35 years of Christian work, Distin, in his valedictory address, expressed this thanks

for the precious testimony some of you have borne to the saving power, peace, light, comfort, joy, you have found in my Lord’s Word, as I have striven to declare it...My great desire is to testify to the glorious sufficiency of the Gospel of Christ, right to the end. It was a great joy, when as a

1. J. Kent, *The Age of Disunity* (1966), particularly the chapters on ‘Methodist Union’ and ‘The Doctrine of the ministry in Early Nineteenth-century Methodism’. Until 1877 the Conference was composed of ministers only, and it was only in that year that a system of lay representation was adopted, with effect from 1878. Until then local ministers, leaders, stewards and trustees were excluded from all share in its deliberations.
2. R. Burroughs, *Ebenezer 1795–1895: A Centenary History of Old King Street Wesleyan Chapel, Bristol* (Bristol, 1895). Distin attended the chapel with his parents until the age of five or six (1849/50).
3. Quoted in J.B. Edwards, ‘Milk Street and the United Methodist Churches of Bristol’ (lecture given to the Bristol Branch of the Wesley Historical Society, 9 Mar. 1985). This was one of the reasons behind the formation of the United Methodist Free Church.



Fig. 1. Joseph Perry Distin (1844–98) sitting at his writing desk c.1893 (a composite photograph made after his death).

business man, myself immersed in daily duty and care, I could bring to you, my brethren and sisters similarly placed, a message of comfort and strength from God's Word which I could often see, blessed you as it blessed me...A plain man, it was my duty to take the plain word of God and bring you the practical comfort and strength which is so abundant...I have given of the best I could to the Church of Christ for many years, in many ways. I have never allowed it to cost that Church anything for my services.<sup>4</sup>

In writing this sketch of Distin's life the author has been guided by the ideals of A.J.A. Symons in his essay 'Tradition in Biography': 'The supreme purpose of biography is...to reveal. To achieve that purpose the idea of completeness must be abandoned, for in any event it is unattainable, and in its place must be a conscious selection of the significant'.<sup>5</sup>

This study compliments the recently published autobiography of Thomas Buller Mitchell (1833–1909), a plumber and gas fitter of Narrow Wine Street, Bristol, who would have been well-

4. J.P. Distin, *A Farewell Letter From an Old Friend and Fellow-Worker, to the many who have been associated with him in Church, Sunday School, Bible Class, and Local Preacher's Work* (Bristol, 1898), pp. 4, 5, 9, 12.
5. The essay was printed in *Tradition and Experiment in Present-day Literature* (1929), quoted by N. Birkett in the preface to A.J.A. Symons, *The Quest for Corvo: An Experiment in Biography* (1952), p. xiv.

known to Distin through his bible class work at the United Methodist Free chapel at Redfield.<sup>6</sup> It is based on Distin's surviving papers, on conversations with his youngest daughter, Grace Paget (1894–1999), when in her 99th year and on various church documents. Most of Distin's papers came to light in a Bristol booksellers' catalogue and were purchased by the writer in 1992. Subsequently, it was possible in 2000 for him to acquire the manuscript of 'Michael the Miner', Distin's last literary work, written in 1897, which had been sold by private treaty prior to the disposal of the other papers. Together, these have allowed a detailed study of Distin's life and work, which would not have been possible otherwise.<sup>7</sup>

The late Victorian period was one where, for the first time, there was a large, and expanding, middle class which was literate and had a thirst for knowledge and varied literature. Numerous magazines circulated among the lower middle and middle classes, such as *Chatterbox*, *The Quiver*, *Titbits*, *Cassell's Magazine* and *The Illustrated London News*. All of them required articles, poems and illustrations, many of which were supplied by their readers such as Distin. In addition, the religious public was able to subscribe to a variety of denominational journals, such as the *United Methodist Free Church Magazine*<sup>8</sup> and the *Primitive Methodist Leader*. These, too, offered scope for the aspirant litterateur. The quality was variable. Some contributions were devoid of anything except the sincerity of intention and their literary pretension, made worse by deficient imitations of better-known and more skilled poets and writers. Distin was among the more accomplished. He wrote a number of short stories and poems, inspired partly by his experiences with the Kingswood colliers in the late 1840s and 1850s, and partly by the material that he read in religious and more popular secular journals of the day, which he then submitted both to popular magazines and his denominational paper. His literary work will be considered later in this article.

### *Distin's Family Background*

In the heartland of the ancient city of Bristol was St. Mary le Port Street, which, until it was erased by the Blitz, ran from High Street, behind the now ruined church of St. Mary le Port. The street was a remnant of medieval Bristol and was overhung by half-timbered shops and houses, which almost touched and blocked out the light. Just off the street was the butter and cheese market which traded on Wednesdays and Fridays and was established in 1787. The adjacent lanes and alleys were the homes of numerous men who were engaged in the wholesale provision business: cheese factors, bacon curers, pork butchers, butter merchants and provision merchants. The community was closely knit, by proximity of dwellings and by business dealings. In the middle of the 19th century, although many of these merchants were prosperous, few had yet moved to the more affluent suburbs. Most lived over the shop where they conducted their businesses.

6. I.S. Bishop, *Stories From St. Philip's* (Bristol, 2002), pp. 133–76. Mitchell took a bible class at: Russell Town c.1866–68; Castle Green Sunday school c.1868–70; Salem chapel, Baptist Mills c.1870; and Redfield c.1871–1907. Mitchell and his family lived at 33 Morley Terrace, Newtown, for more than 21 years between c.1871 and 1893. Their house was situated in the heart of Distin's area of missionary work in the late 1880s and early 1890s and was adjacent to Wesley Hall.
7. In 1993 the author lectured to the Bristol branch of our society on Distin.
8. John Wesley's chapel, Broadmead, has copies of volumes I (1858), VIII (1865) and XII (1869) of the *United Methodist Free Church Magazine*: letter from the librarian, C.J. Spittal, 1 Feb. 1994. Wesley College, Bristol, has copies of the volumes from 1892 to 1897: information from the librarian the late J. Farrell. Full copies of the magazine are held only at the John Rylands Library, Manchester, and the Bodleian.

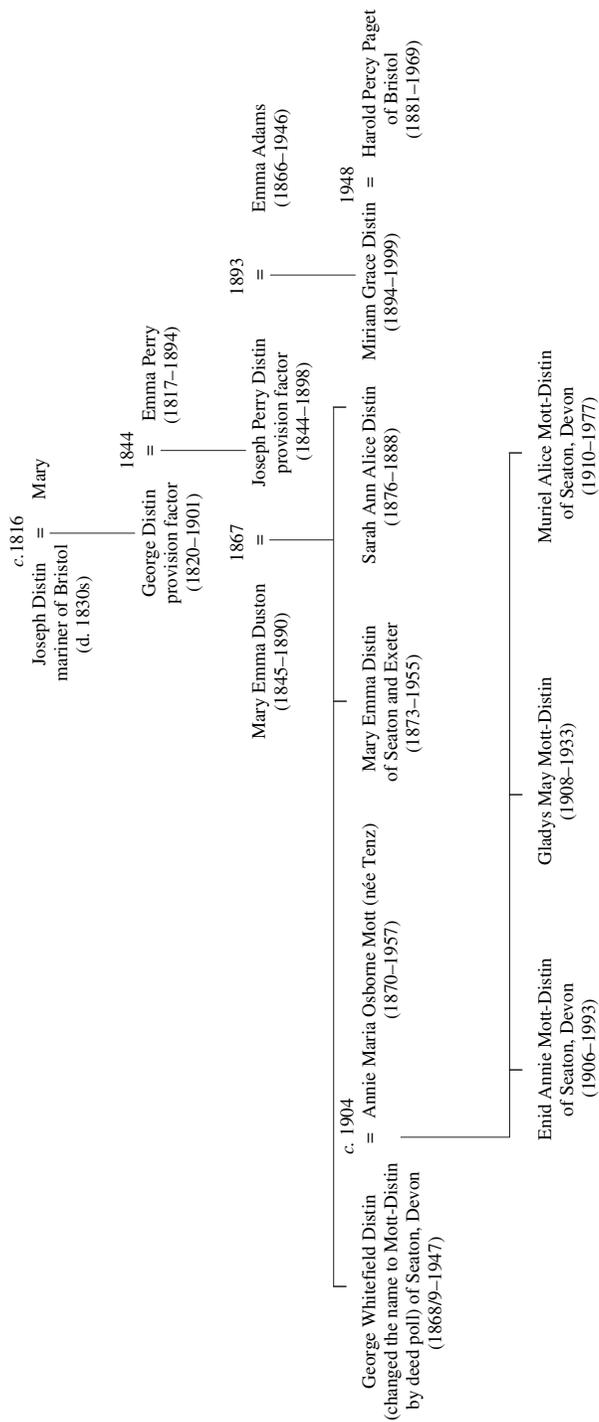


Fig. 2. Pedigree of Distin.

It was into this community that Joseph Perry Distin was born. His father, George Distin (1820–1901), was the son of a Bristol-based mariner, Joseph Distin, who had died in the early 1830s during an unspecified epidemic whilst on a voyage,<sup>9</sup> leaving a widow and a number of small children (Fig. 2). At the time of the Census, held on 14 June 1841, the family was living in Kilkenny Court, a slum property situated off Cheese Lane, in the part of the parish of St. Philip and St. Jacob which lay outside the walls of the old city. Joseph's widow, Mary, earned her living as a washerwoman. Her household consisted of three sons: William, a carpenter, George, a shopman, and Robert, a cooper; two daughters: Mary, a dressmaker, and Jane; and a lodger.<sup>10</sup>

Nothing is known of the Distin family's origins beyond this.<sup>11</sup> Although Joseph Perry Distin used a crest on the cover of his notebook, a unicorn's head couped, it has not been possible to show that he had any right to do so. Pretensions to gentility were common in the 19th century.<sup>12</sup> From what we know of Distin's character it seems certain that he must have believed that he had a genuine right to use this crest, and he may well have paid the then customary government tax on such usage.

George Distin had shown academic promise, but the need to help provide for his widowed mother and younger brother and sisters forced him to go into business at an early age.<sup>13</sup> According to his granddaughter, Grace Paget, the man for whom he worked was in the cheese, butter and bacon trade.<sup>14</sup> He was so impressed by George's devotion to his mother and family and the sacrifice that he had made in giving up his education, that he eventually passed the business to him either by sale or by gift. In time, by means of application, prudence, sobriety and industry, George made sufficient money to marry, which he did on 13 March 1844 at Holy Trinity, St. Philip's, Bristol, to Emma Perry (1817–94), a young woman who shared his religious enthusiasms and, in due course, his labours in the shop. She was a native of Walcot, Bath, and, having lost her parents when young, was brought up by an uncle, who later became bankrupt.<sup>15</sup> She became a Methodist through the influence of her nurse who took her to a Methodist Sunday school. Emma Distin was

9. According to Mrs. Paget, Joseph Distin ran away from home in mid Devon when a young man. He had six children. He is variously said to have died either of typhoid fever or small pox whilst in port at St. Ives.

10. National Archives (PRO), HO 107/378/10, ED 24, f.34.

11. It is possible that Joseph Perry Distin was related to William Joseph Distin (1845–80), the Bristol carpenter who murdered his common law wife, Mrs. Emily Eliza Daniels, and was hanged at Bristol on 22 Nov. 1880: *Western Daily Press*, 3, 12, 16, 22, 23 Nov. 1880. The only will for a Distin proved in Bristol prior to 1858 was that of Joseph Distin (c.1790–1847), brazier of 18 Dale Street, St. Paul's, who died without issue and left his property to his sister's children. This will is held in the Bristol Record Office.

12. This is confirmed by 'X', *The Right to Bear Arms* (1899), pp. xii, 2, 3.

13. Where the facts are sufficient I have been able to verify Mrs. Paget's information about the Distin family. I have not been able to find that George Distin was ever formally apprenticed.

14. George Distin's benefactor was probably Francis Adams (c.1800–80), an Anglican whose estate, in his will proved 13 September 1880, amounted to under £90,000. He was of Crete Hill House, Durdham Down, and is variously described as a bacon, cheese and butter factor in *Matthews's Annual Bristol Directory and Almanack* (1847), p. 279, at 5 Maryport Street. He grew in wealth and prosperity. In 1853, pp. 63, 306, he was also called a corn and provision merchant. Identification is difficult because the *Directory* lists two men called F. Adams in the same trade in 1846, 1847 and 1848. One is termed provision merchant of 6 Unity Street and Tontine Warehouse, Quay, the other, provision curer of 5 Maryport Street. The latter appears only in the *Directory* for these years. They were probably one and the same man.

15. According to Mrs. Paget, George Distin was one of the people to whom Emma Perry's uncle turned for help in the wake of his business failure. The uncle was not a Methodist and disapproved of Emma's commitment to the cause. When George and Emma Distin settled in retirement in Old Church Road, Clevedon, they called their home Walcot Villa, after Emma's birthplace.

a woman of direct manner and personal courage who was known as ‘quite a character’. Due to her uncle’s failure in business, she became a nurse at 35 Wilson Street, St. Paul’s, to the family of John Wesley May (1793–1874), a bread and ship biscuit baker and corn and flour factor with offices in Broad Weir. Emma remained in touch with the family and in later life one of her charges Tom, or Thomas Francis Christopher May (1831–1905), usually known as ‘T.F.C.’, became a leading member of the Wesleyan Methodist Society in Bristol, a wealthy timber merchant, and a friend of her son, Joseph Perry Distin.<sup>16</sup>

Joseph Perry Distin was the only surviving child of George and Emma Distin (Fig. 2).<sup>17</sup> He was born on 17 December 1844, over the shop at 5 St. Mary le Port Street, where his father worked as pork butcher. Number 5 was situated between two narrow alleys, Adam and Eve Lane and Crown Passage with its extension Guardhouse Passage, forming part of a small block of three houses on the north side of the street. These houses looked across to the half-timbered houses which fronted the parish church. Distin’s shop, which was believed to have been built in the 16th or early 17th century, backed onto 60 Wine Street.<sup>18</sup> George Distin appears at the same address in *Matthews’s Directory* as a pork butcher in 1849 and as a provision dealer, cheese, butter and bacon factor in 1862. By the time of his retirement in 1884 he had been at the address for at least 40 years.<sup>19</sup> In time the family was able to keep a resident domestic servant and shop assistant, Elizabeth Harvey, who was with them for over twenty years and was remembered by George Distin in his will.<sup>20</sup> His granddaughter recalled her as someone whose loyalty, hard work and efficiency were highly valued in the family.

It is not known where J.P. Distin was educated, but he was given a good grounding in English literature, and developed a taste for medieval architecture, sketching, amongst other buildings of note, the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey. He wrote swiftly with a flowing hand and was obviously a competent bookkeeper. He does not appear to have been apprenticed and after leaving school in the late 1850s he was employed as an agent by an insurance company.<sup>21</sup> He had a period as an agent for a Liverpool shipping company which provided passages for people from Bristol and the West Country, enabling them to travel from the port of Bristol to Liverpool and thence to America.<sup>22</sup>

16. *Matthews’s Directory* (1842), p.157; PRO, HO 107/374/3, ED 6, f. 31.

17. Distin had a younger brother, George Whitefield Distin, who died young. He was baptised at Milk Street chapel on 29 July 1855 and was alive at the time of the 1861 Census: Bristol Record Office (BRO), C40883/MS/1a1, no. 66; PRO, RG 9/1716, f.17.

18. R.H. Leech, *The Topography of Medieval and Early Modern Bristol* (Bristol Rec. Soc. 48, 1997), pp. xxiii, 100–1; L. Watts, and P. Rahtz, *Mary-le-Port, Bristol, Excavations 1962/3* (Bristol, 1985), pp. 47, 48, 50.

19. *Matthews’s Directory* (1849), p. 103; (1850), pp. 105, 254; (1862), p. 119. Mary le Port Street is not indexed in the 1851 Census but the family appears in the 1861, 1871 and 1881 Censuses: PRO, RG 9/1716, f. 17; RG 10/2523, f. 8; RG 11/2468, ED 11, f. 14.

20. Elizabeth Harvey was born in Stone, Staffordshire, in 1840/1. George Distin’s will was dated 8 Nov. 1898 and proved 9 May 1901. His effects were valued at £1,205 19s. 10d. He left £10 to ‘Miss Eliza Harvey of Kingswood Hill’.

21. No mention of Joseph Perry Distin appears in the post-1847 Apprentice Register for Bristol: BRO, 04356/21. He was possibly involved in marine insurance.

22. This information comes, in part, from Distin’s *Stray Leaves from my Scrapbook* (Bristol, 1883), In *Matthews’s Directory* (1876), p. 189; (1878), p. 203, he is listed as an insurance agent of 35 Claremont Street, Stapleton Road. In the 1881 Census (PRO, RG 11/2506, ED 1, f.13) he appears in Stapleton Road itself and is listed as a provision dealer; his children’s birthplaces from 1868/9 to 1876/7 are given as St. Philip’s. In *Matthews’s Directory* in 1884 he is called John [sic] P. Distin, insurance agent of Lorne House, Stapleton Road; in 1885 and 1886 provision factor of 5 Maryport Street; and in 1887 and 1888 grocer and provision dealer at the same address.



Fig. 3. The Revd. Frederick James Jobson (1812–81), D.D.

Distin's knowledge and enthusiasm for architecture was inspired by a book of reference written by the architect turned Wesleyan minister, the Revd. Dr. Frederick James Jobson (1812–81: Fig. 3), entitled *Chapel and School Architecture, as appropriate to the buildings of nonconformists, particularly to those of the Wesleyan Methodists: with practical directions for the erection of chapels and school houses*. The book, published in 1850, made an important contribution to the rejection of the classical style of architecture and to the increasing enthusiasm for the employment of the Gothic style in the design of numerous chapels and schools which were being built across the country at this time.<sup>23</sup> Distin used the theories and directions derived from Jobson's book, strengthened and augmented by his own study of Bristol's medieval buildings, when assisting in the designs of Eastville United Methodist Free Church chapel (1872) and assembly hall (1879) and of Wesley Hall, Barrow Lane (1887–9).

23. For Jobson, F. Boase, *Modern English Biography II* (Truro, 1897), p. 100; *Oxford DNB*; J. Munsey Turner, *Conflict and Reconciliation: Studies in Methodism and Ecumenism in England 1740–1982* (1985), p. 156.

*The Family's Religious Background*

Distin's parents had been Wesleyan Methodists in the 1830s. The 1820s and 1830s were a troubled time for Methodism<sup>24</sup> and there was a major schism in the church in 1849<sup>25</sup> following the expulsion of three ministers from the Wesleyan connexion who were believed to be responsible for a series of anonymous papers known as 'The Fly Sheets'. Between 1849 and 1853 nationally more than 100,000 members of the church seceded and subsequently formed part of the United Methodist Free Church (U.M.F.C.).<sup>26</sup> In Bristol the United Methodists became as strong and influential as the Wesleys.<sup>27</sup>

Distin's parents attended Old King Street Wesleyan chapel, known as Ebenezer, in the 1830s. In later life Joseph Distin recalled that his father attended his first covenant service there in 1834, and that his mother was present at her first society tea in the same place two years earlier. His parents made their faith the cornerstone of their lives and it is not surprising that they should have brought up their son in 'the fear and nurture of the Lord'.<sup>28</sup>

The effect of the agitation of 1849 on the Wesleyan congregations in Bristol cannot be underestimated. Bristol was 'singularly unfortunate in having as the chairman of their district one who...was utterly lacking in tact and the spirit of conciliation. The effects of the conflict upon Bristol Methodism was most disastrous'.<sup>29</sup> In January 1847 there were 2,060 members of the Bristol Wesleyan North circuit, but by the time of the quarterly meeting on 31 December 1850 membership was reduced to 930.<sup>30</sup> The diaspora of Wesleys from Old King Street chapel was largely caused by expulsions which left it 'dull, dismal and empty', and it was not until 1891 that the number of Wesleys in Bristol crept 'up to the figure at which they stood at the close of the first half of the century'.<sup>31</sup> The seriousness of the schism in Bristol is shown by the fact that between 1849 and 1851 three quarters of the members of the Kingswood Wesleyan circuit left the church

24. The Wesleys suffered schisms in 1827 and 1835: J. Hastings, J.A. Selbie and L.H. Gray, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* VIII (1915), pp. 604–9.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 604–9. See Edwards, 'Milk Street and the United Methodist Churches in Bristol'.

26. The Bristol situation is described in Burroughs, *Ebenezer 1795–1895*, pp. 66–7. A.J. Lambert, *The Chapel on the Hill* (Bristol, 1930), p. 89, states that Portland chapel was unaffected by the schism and in fact slightly increased in membership. See also J.A. Vickers (ed.), *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland* (2000), p. 361.

27. The increasing need for local preachers was also fuelled by the proliferation of places of worship. Successive Bristol directories give a comprehensive list of chapels, e.g. *Matthews's Directory* (1862), pp. 44–7, and its successor, *Wright's Bristol Directory* (1890), p. 543; (1895), p. 648; (1900), p. 733; (1904), p. 796. The United Methodist Free Church united with the Methodist New Connection and the Bible Christians (or Bryanites) in 1907, and was finally re-united with the Wesleys and the Primitive Methodists in September 1932, after a nineteen-year preparation for union.

28. 'The Development of Religious Life, delivered before the Men and Women's Bible Class at Ebenezer Chapel on 20 October 1895', ff. 3–4: MS in possession of the author. Distin resided with his parents until 1867 and they continued to play an important part in his spiritual life.

29. *Bristol Christian Leader (BCL)* 16 Apr. 1894, pp. 133–5. The chairman was the Revd. Corbett Cooke (1787–1866): *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences* XVI (1868), pp. 451–2.

30. BRO, 40304/C/II/1: on 4 July 1853 there were 887 members. The only surviving contemporary record for Old King Street Wesleyan chapel, the minute book of the leaders' meetings, records no meetings between April 1848 and 1860. In 1850 the Bristol circuits reported to Conference a communicant roll of 3,849. By 1854 it was reduced to 1,453: *BCL* 16 Apr. 1894, p. 133. For membership figures at Old King Street, see *BCL* 15 Jan. 1895, p. 55.

31. It was the same at Redfield. The membership stood at 143 in 1838, 66 in 1865 and 102 in 1875: A.H. Trotman, *A History of the Redfield Wesleyan Chapel, Bristol* (Bristol, 1930), pp. 17–18.

and formed what later became the Kingswood circuit of the U.M.F.C. The Revd. Joseph Wood (1796–1869), the superintendent of the Bristol North circuit until 1849, said of this period: ‘the very remembrance (of this time) is sickening and humiliating beyond expression...the dire hurricane of agitation...broke upon the circuit withering and scattering on all hands’.<sup>32</sup>

The Wesleyans who were driven from the church formed what by 1850 were known as the ‘Expelled Wesleyans’. Initially they met in the Public Rooms, Broadmead, and the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist chapel, Broadmead.<sup>33</sup> By 1851/2 the church had grown to include 12 stations, and had adopted the name ‘Reformed Wesleyans’.<sup>34</sup> The Wesleyan Reform Association grew in strength and confidence and by 1855 it had established its first circuit and employed its first minister.<sup>35</sup>

George and Emma Distin and their son Joseph, together with their friends, Charles Garlick, a master hatter of Castle Street, and his wife Lucy, formed part of the body of ‘Expelled Wesleyans’ who met in the Public Rooms between 1850 and 1854. Both families worked actively to build a chapel in Milk Street which opened in May 1854, and was held to be ‘the parent church of Free Methodists in this city’.<sup>36</sup> George Distin and Charles Garlick were active co-workers in bringing the Gospel to the people of St. Philip’s and founders of Morley Street U.M.F. chapel, Barton Hill (1869).<sup>37</sup> Garlick was a witness at J.P. Distin’s first wedding and his elder son, Frederick Charles Garlick, was one of Distin’s executors. George and Emma Distin remained members of Milk Street chapel until 1881 and Joseph Distin worshipped there until after his first marriage.

#### *The Formation of the United Methodist Free Church Circuits in Bristol 1857/8–1884*

As so much of Distin’s early career as a local preacher was spent in U.M.F. churches in Bristol it is worth briefly considering the formation and development of its circuits. In 1857/8 a union was effected nationally between the majority of the members of the Wesleyan Reform Association and another group, the Wesleyan Association founded in 1836, which did not have a Bristol presence. Between them they formed the United Methodist Free Church, which differed from the Wesleyans in asserting church independency and freedom of representation at the annual assembly or conference. This resulted in greater lay, as opposed to clerical, influence in the church. By 1889 the Wesleyans had 1,975 ministers and 514,790 members in Great Britain compared to the United Methodists’ 340 ministers and 74,103 members.<sup>38</sup>

32. H.W. Williams, *The Life of the Rev. Joseph Wood with extracts from His Diary* (1871), pp. 167, 170–1.

33. *Matthews’s Directory* (1851), p. 36; R.E. Davies, *The Church in Bristol: A Short History* (Bristol, 1960), pp. 85–6.

34. *Matthews’s Directory* (1852), p. 37; (1853), p. 37. The stations were Thomas Street; Limekiln Lane; the British School, Bedminster (later Hebron chapel); Pyle Hill chapel; Baptist Mills; Durdham Down; Tyler’s Fields; Jacob Street; Lawrence Hill; Barton Hill; York Street, St. Paul’s; and Broadmead: W.T. Saniger, *Leaves from a Barton Hill Notebook* (Bristol, 1954), pp. 13–14; Edwards, ‘Milk Street and the United Methodist Churches of Bristol’, pp. 6–8.

35. The Revd. Joseph Garside (1820–79), president 1874. His ministry in Bristol spanned the years 1853–7 and 1864–6. See *Matthews’s Directory* (1856), p. 41.

36. See BRO, FC40883/MS/1a7; *BCL* 15 Apr. 1893, p. 134; 15 Dec. 1894, p. 35.

37. Garlick established a hatter’s shop at 87 Castle Street in 1846. Following his retirement c.1883, his business was run by his sons. The premises were destroyed on 24 Nov. 1940: M. Byre, *Castle Park Before the Blitz* (Stroud, 2003), p. 48. Garlick was a trustee of Morley Street chapel: Saniger, *Leaves from a Barton Hill Notebook*, pp. 15–16.

38. Vickers (ed.), *Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, pp. 125, 361, 385, 386; *Chambers’s Encyclopaedia* VII (1891), p. 161.

The new U.M.F.C. continued to grow in Bristol. At the time of its formation in 1857/8 the Bristol circuit had two ministers and nine chapels: Salem, Baptist Mills (1853); The Mount of Olives, Durdham Down (1849), which was sold to the Wesleyans in 1894; Hebron, Bedminster (1854);<sup>39</sup> Jacob Street; Limekiln Lane (1854), later formed as Brandon chapel, St. George's Road (1862); Milk Street; Spring Place, Pyle Hill (1851); Thomas Street; and Trinity Road, Newtown (1855). In 1859 the congregation meeting at Thomas Street moved to Portwall Lane and that at Jacob Street to Tyler's Fields.

Expanding numbers resulted in the division of the circuit in 1863 with a South circuit formed and nucleated around Hebron chapel, Bedminster.<sup>40</sup> Initially the circuit consisted of Hebron and Spring Place chapel. In 1869 when the new chapel at Russell Town was added to the North circuit, Portwall Lane chapel was transferred to the South.<sup>41</sup> The new chapel at Oxford Street, Totterdown, was added in 1875/6.

The North circuit was also the parent of the East and West circuits.<sup>42</sup> The East circuit was created in 1875 from Baptist Mills, Eastville, Russell Town and Trinity Road, Newtown. The West circuit was formed of one chapel, Redland Grove, founded by members of Milk Street chapel in 1872 and granted its own chapel in 1879.<sup>43</sup> By 1877 there were seven U.M.F.C. ministers in Bristol, employed on the North (three), South (two) and East circuits (two).

#### *The Cholera Epidemic of 1849*

The year 1849 was a significant landmark in the life of J.P. Distin. His father's business activities, which had partly centred on the twice weekly cheese market off St. Mary le Port Street, moved with the market to new premises in Union Street<sup>44</sup> and 'King Cholera' held his court in the old city and the slums and foetid tenements of the out parishes. The first reported case of the disease was in June and the outbreak lasted for five months. Although Distin was only four and a half years old at the time, he retained vivid memories and impressions of the fear caused by the cholera amongst the residents of the narrow streets around his home. His older contemporary Thomas Buller Mitchell, more than half a century later, wrote a powerful and arresting account of the progress of the illness in the poorer parts of the city.<sup>45</sup> The Christian volunteers who worked amongst the poor at this time ran great risks. Henry Kingdon (1812–93), one of the Bristol city missionaries, was an early victim, but was more fortunate than many and recovered.<sup>46</sup> The superintendent of the Wesleyan North circuit extended his outdoor preaching 'especially in the most neglected spots, and where the plague was most prevalent'.<sup>47</sup>

39. See *BCL* 15 May 1893, p. 160, for its early history.

40. *BCL* 15 May 1893, pp. 160–1.

41. A new chapel in Southville was opened in January 1894 to supersede the premises in Portwall Lane: *BCL* 15 June 1894, p. 200.

42. *Matthews's Directory* (1881), p. 413.

43. *BCL* 15 Feb. 1894, pp. 81–3; 15 Dec. 1894, p. 35; *Matthews's Directory* (1862), pp. 46–7; (1865), pp. 35–6; (1867), pp. 41–2; (1868), p. 39; (1874), p. 342; (1876), pp. 370–6; (1878), p. 395. Redland Grove chapel was opened in January 1876.

44. *Matthews's Directory* (1850), p. 49. Markets were held on Wednesdays and Fridays. The provision markets in Union Street were on Wednesdays and Saturdays, the same days as those in High Street and Nicholas Street.

45. Bishop, *Stories From St. Philip's*, p. 141.

46. *BCL* 15 Apr. 1893, pp. 122–6.

47. Williams, *Life of Joseph Wood*, pp. 167–9.

During the epidemic Distin was sent with a servant to Kingswood whilst his mother tirelessly and voluntarily nursed the sick and comforted the bereaved in the poorest parts of the city in the parishes of St. Philip and St. Jacob and St. James.<sup>48</sup> Although he was under five years of age, having received a profound religious education, he put this to good use in the room of the cottage where he was staying. There he read chapters of the Bible to groups of illiterate miners, who were torn between their desire to learn more and their wish not to over-tax the strength of a young boy by the importunity of their demands. He used these incidents in his final short story, 'Michael the Miner', and distilled them into one incident in the narrative which will be discussed later in the text. His serious-minded attitude to religion and desire to teach those who had not received the benefits of education characterised his future career. His stay in Kingswood and life amongst the colliers made a deep and life-long impression upon him.

We have a pen portrait of Kingswood as it was at Whitsuntide 1849, a few weeks before the arrival of the young Distin. 'The beautiful valley of the Avon, and the undulating hills around Kingswood.....were clothed in soft rich green; the blooms of wild flowers; the new-mown hay was yielding its perfume; and all our best singing birds in the plantations were in full tune'.<sup>49</sup> After the oppressive fear of the disease-haunted city, Spring and Summer in the rural tranquillity of Kingswood added to the deep impressions that his residence there made on him.

*Distin's Sermons: his texts and their message*

The Methodist movement, from its inception, was dependent upon the work of laymen who preached the Gospel and strengthened the religious beliefs of many people without the benefits of a regular local clergyman. Most of them were itinerants and served a circuit of adjacent churches. Their importance to Methodism can be seen in the report of the First Ecumenical Methodist Conference in 1881 when in the whole of the United Kingdom there were just over 5,000 ministers, and 53,644 local preachers. This shows the degree to which the respective branches of the Methodist church were dependent upon their local preachers.

Distin was first appointed a local preacher by the U.M.F.C. in 1863, when he was 18 years old. Distin tells us in his 'Diary' that during his first 13 years as a preacher, until April 1876, he kept no record of his preaching appointments. For the period from April 1876 until the 10 February 1889 he kept a register of the places where, and dates when, he preached and the scriptural texts he used. Although his register breaks off abruptly, as a result of his first wife's terminal illness in 1889 and his own poor health, we know that he continued to preach until at least 1895.

According to his own account he preached an average of sixty sermons a year between 1863 and 1876. This excluded the numerous engagements that he had relating to Sunday school work and the bible class addresses that he gave on weekday evenings. His 'Diary' shows that between April 1876 and February 1889 he preached 828 sermons. This represents an immense investment of time and effort for a man already heavily committed to his business employments six days a week. It is probable that between 1863 and his death he preached more than 2,000 sermons.

48. J. Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century* (Bristol, 1887), pp. 313–15. The disease broke out in the city on 10 June and lasted until 16 October. There were 15,000 cases of sickness, of which 778 were of actual cholera, and 444 deaths. See *ibid.* p. 340 for the outbreak in October 1854. Mrs. Paget said that her grandmother was an active and practical Christian. Her nursing skills were again called upon at the time of the 1854 outbreak and again in 1864 when there was a 'devastating typhus epidemic' in St. Philip's: S.E. Kings, 'Elementary Education in St. Philip's, Bristol, During the Nineteenth Century' (University of Bristol M.Ed. thesis, 1986), p. 13.

49. W. Arthur, *The Successful Merchant: Sketches of the life of Mr. Samuel Budgett, late of Kingswood Hill* (1852), p. 279.

We are fortunate that the East circuit minutes of the U.M.F.C. in Bristol have survived from 1874/5.<sup>50</sup> At the time Distin was secretary. From the minutes of a general meeting held on 26 April 1875 we learn something of the qualifications required of a local preacher at the time. It was resolved that every candidate for the post of local preacher had to be a

recognised member of one of our churches or of some other Christian church (holding and teaching the same fundamental doctrine) for at least twelve months. He shall be reported at the Quarterly Meeting previous to being admitted on trial. His name shall appear upon the plan as on trial for at least four quarters and having the recommendation of the Preachers' Quarterly Meeting it shall be requisite that he have the vote of a subsequent Circuit Quarterly Meeting in order to his being received in full.

The local preachers of the East circuit were also responsible alternately for the Newtown schoolroom meetings held in Barrow Lane, St. Philip's, each Saturday evening. We know from Distin's 'Diary' that he was also engaged on many week-day evenings in bible class work.

Before considering Distin's sermons and texts it is appropriate to consider what help was available to local preachers such as Distin to enable them to acquire a thorough working knowledge of the Scriptures. The importance of the work of lay preachers was recognised in the middle of the 19th century by the wealth of literature which was produced to assist them. Although this is not the place to undertake a thorough survey of the literature that was available, it is worth noting some of the most important works which helped laymen to widen their reading and to prepare sermons. The *Local Preachers' Journal* (London, 1842) gave fifty sermon outlines, theological extracts, biblical notes and other miscellaneous literature. The period when most literature was available to the lay preacher was between 1866 and 1890 when a wide variety of homiletical journals and magazines was published: *The Pulpit Analyst* (continued as *The Preachers' Lantern*) 1866–74; *The Lay Preacher* 1869–86; *The Preachers' Analyst* 1877–86; *The Preachers' Monthly* 1881–85; and *The Local Preacher's Treasury* (continued as *The Preachers' Magazine*) 1884–90.

The wealth of nonconformist literature was augmented in the years after 1890 by books designed for use by the newly constituted lay readers of the Established Church. Many publications stressed the ecumenical nature of their contents, an example of which is to be found in the introduction to *The Lay Preacher's Handbook* (1894, 1903) by the Wesleyan minister, the Revd. Charles O. Eldridge (1839–1909),<sup>51</sup> who contributed and oversaw the homiletic section of *The Preacher's Magazine Union for Biblical and Homiletic Study* (founded in 1892). Eldridge endeavoured to reach as wide an audience as possible and 'avoided all purely denominational expressions', so that evangelical preachers of any church could gain help from his work.<sup>52</sup> Few evangelical ministers of the era could fail to have been influenced in some way by the widely acclaimed and imitated Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–92), the minister of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington Causeway, London, who published numerous sermon outlines.<sup>53</sup> Distin had great reverence for him, and in his *Farewell Letter*, written on his death bed, he refers to him as 'the sainted Spurgeon'.<sup>54</sup>

50. BRO, 35123/C1/M/1, unpaginated.

51. For Eldridge, *The Wesleyan Methodist Church: Minutes of Several Conversations at the 1909 Yearly Conference of the People Called Methodists* (1909), pp. 145–6.

52. C.O. Eldridge, *The Lay Preacher's Handbook: First Steps in Homiletics* (1903), p. vi.

53. For his work see C.H. Spurgeon: *The Early Years 1834–1859* (1967), and C.H. Spurgeon: *The Full Harvest 1860–1892* (1973) which are revised and abridged from the four volumes of his autobiography (1897–1900). See also his works such as *Lectures to my Students: a selection from Addresses Delivered to the Students of The Pastors' College, Metropolitan Tabernacle* (1877).

54. Distin, *Farewell Letter from an Old Friend and Fellow-Worker*, p. 14.



Fig. 4. Charles Richard Parsons (1841–1918).

Another work of this type with a particular Bristol connection was edited by Charles Richard Parsons (Fig. 4). It was entitled *David's Sling* and was first issued in January 1895 for use by members of the bible class movement. This was intended to be unsectarian; 'its chief aim will be to encourage Christian workers by whatsoever name they are called, and to inspire them in their crusade against the powers of darkness'.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to the homiletic literature available to local preachers in regular magazine publications, some ministers wrote books which dealt with specific parts of the bible. A typical example of this kind of literature is *Suggestive Thoughts for Busy Workers: Being Homiletic Hints on the Book of Jonah, and some of the Shorter Psalms* (1883), by the Bible Christian Methodist, the Revd. Dr. J. Osborne Keen (1846–1923).<sup>56</sup> This work was the result of a theological and homiletic class held for the young men of his church, which began in November 1876. These men wished to preach the gospel in adjacent villages, and the lectures they heard formed the basis of the book. Osborne Keen hoped that it would be of practical help for 'the week-night service, local preachers

55. *BCL* 15 Sept. 1894, p. 312; 15 Dec. 1894, pp. 25, 31.

56. O.A. Beckerlegge, *United Methodist Ministers and Their Circuits...1797–1932* (1968), p. 133.

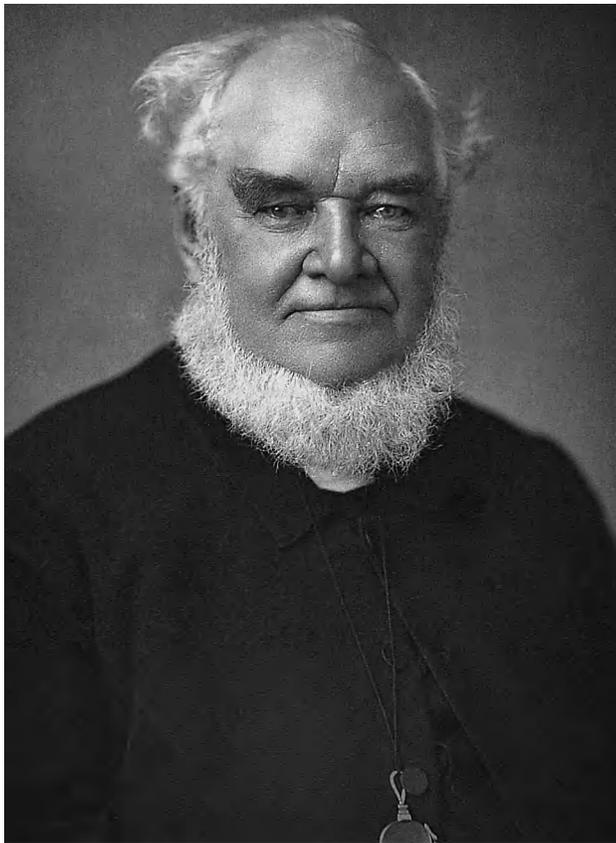


Fig. 5. The Revd. David Alfred Doudney (1811–93), D.D.

and Sunday school teachers'.<sup>57</sup> Distin is unlikely to have used the work; he never preached from the book of Jonah that we know of, and although he used eight texts from Psalms, not one of these Psalms was considered by Osborne Keen.

One of the most prolific Bristol-based authors and preachers of the period was the Revd. Dr. David Alfred Doudney (1811–93: Fig. 5).<sup>58</sup> Between 1859 and 1890 he served as vicar of St.

57. J. Osborne Keen, *Suggestive Thoughts for Busy Workers* (1883), preface. The Revd. John Osborne Keen, D.D., president of the Bible Christians' Conference (1888), was born in 1846. A 'boy preacher' he served at Holsworthy, Exeter, the Isle of Wight, Penzance, Chatham, Swansea, Torrington, Forest Hill, Cardiff, Jersey, Devonport and Kilburn. He was a prolific author, poet and hymn writer and wrote for the *Bible Christian Magazine*. See W.J. Michell, *Brief Biographical Sketches of Bible Christian Ministers and Laymen I* (Jersey, 1906), pp. 175–80.

58. *DNB Supplement*, pp. 572–3; there is no entry for him in the new *Oxford DNB*. A contemporary account of his preaching refers to his delivery which was described as being both eccentric and emotional: *Bristol Pulpit Sketches, Reprinted from the 'Magpie', containing a graphic description of the style of architecture, minister and service of thirty churches and chapels in Bristol and Clifton* (Bristol, c.1885), no. X, St. Luke's, Bedminster; *The Bristol Magpie* 3 Nov. 1883, pp. 8–9, Pulpit Sketches no. LXIV.

Luke's, Bedminster, where he established industrial and ragged schools. For half a century, between 1840 and 1890, he was the editor of *The Gospel Magazine*. He was also the author of numerous instructive and affecting tracts, books and pamphlets. Amongst them was one entitled 'Preachers and Preaching or Hearts in Fellowship' (undated, but 1884).<sup>59</sup> In it Doudney praises what he calls 'experimental preaching' by laymen (then frequently frowned upon in the Established Church) who 'endeavour to testify of the boundless love and rich distinguishing grace and mercy of a covenant God in Christ'. Doudney said of lay preachers that they represented 'the rebel pardoned, and not merely restored to former respect and responsibility, but taken into the favour and friendship of the sovereign to whom he had played the traitor. It is the drowning man speaking with gratitude and admiration of Him who had sacrificed His own life in order to save him'.<sup>60</sup> From the texts chosen by Distin for his sermons there is little doubt that he was endeavouring to communicate these same sentiments to his auditors week by week. It is also probable that Doudney's numerous half-penny tracts influenced both Distin's narrative style and his decision to use situations that occurred in daily life in his literary work and to opine upon their Divine message and the workings of Providence.<sup>61</sup>

From what section of society were these laymen drawn, who were eulogised by Dr. Doudney? Eldridge in his *Lay Preacher's Handbook* noted the 'strange unwillingness on the part of many Christians of ability and education to engage in' the work of a lay preacher.<sup>62</sup> He believed that God's work suffered because the preaching of the Gospel was often left to people who had neither social standing nor a superior education, which at least in the former respect might be said to be true of Distin. This was affirmed by the Revd. Mark Guy Pearse (1852–1930: Fig. 6) of Clifton writing in the 1870s. 'The thoughtful miner, the prayerful ploughman, the godly labourer, the working men of every class have always been amongst her most successful leaders and local preachers. In hundreds of towns and villages, men of the humblest position are doing the highest work of the church in the Sunday school, in the pulpit and in the society class'.<sup>63</sup> Such men were very valuable but they also caused problems. *The Bristol Christian Leader* in September 1893 opined: 'The needs of rural Methodism compel the acceptance of godly men who have little or no educational advantages. When such find their way to populous centres, many a superintendent is at his wits' end to know what to do with them, for while their character is everything that can be desired, they lack culture'.<sup>64</sup> There are numerous lamentations in the religious literature of the day that when local preachers conducted a service there was a diminution in the congregation.

Gradually, however, there was a change in the status and education of local preachers. By the early 1900s lay preachers could be found nationally amongst members of Parliament, army officers,

59. In it Doudney attacked the then novel services of harvest festival. He asked if when Hannah went up to the Temple 'in bitterness of soul', would 'the onions, the turnips, the carrots, bring joy and gladness to her agonized soul?' The only balm was the word of God. See *Bristol Magpie* 24 Nov. 1884, pp. 4–5, 'The Harvest Festival: A Religious Dissipation in Three Acts'.

60. D.A. Doudney, *Preachers and Preaching or Hearts in Fellowship* (Bristol, c.1884), pp. 7, 8, 28–30. This work should be distinguished from that of the Bristol Scripture Readers' Association, founded in 1845 to encourage laymen of the Church of England to read the scriptures from house to house and take bible classes and cottage and school room lectures. In 1891, it employed 16 agents: *Wright's Bristol and Clifton Directory* (1891), p. 594.

61. *BCL* 15 Jan. 1894, pp. 41–4. The leading Congregational minister in Bristol, U.R. Thomas, said of him that 'He was painstaking and generous, independent and conscientious; a Protestant of Protestants...his name became strangely a synonym at once for controversy and kindness'.

62. Eldridge, *Lay Preacher's Handbook*, pp. 3–4.

63. M.G. Pearse, *Daniel Quorm and His Religious Notions* (1st series, c.1877), preface.

64. *BCL* 15 Sept. 1893, p. 285.

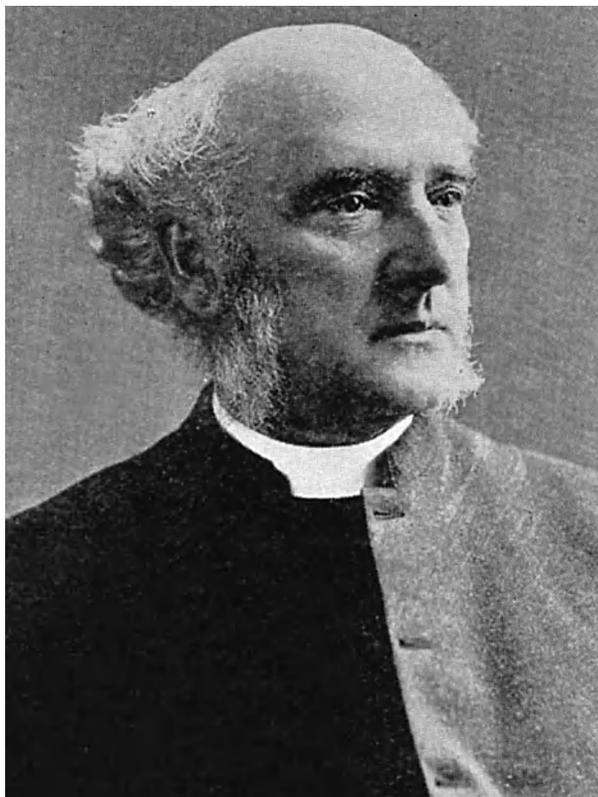


Fig. 6. The Revd. Mark Guy Pearse (1852–1930).

head masters and civic leaders, having attained a social standing that they were never again to enjoy.<sup>65</sup> The situation had already changed in Bristol by the last quarter of the 19th century. A number of the city's civic leaders in the 1880s, 1890s and 1900s, were active members of either the Wesleyan or the United Methodist Free churches as local preachers and Sunday school officers. Charles Edward Ley Gardner (1843–1932: Fig. 7), J.P., senior partner of Gardner, Thomas and Company, wholesale grocers of Nelson Street, was the lord mayor in 1901–2. He was a friend and contemporary of Distin and, like him, a local preacher and class leader on the Portland Street Wesleyan circuit.<sup>66</sup> Councillor George Bryant Britton (1857–1929), was superintendent of Zion United Free Methodist Sunday school in Kingswood for many years.<sup>67</sup> The school had between 1,100 and 1,200 scholars. Councillor William Henry Butler (1850–1931), J.P., was stated in 1898

65. See W.E. Skinner (ed.), *A Book of Lay Sermons by Some Representative Local Preachers* (1905).

66. Lambert, *The Chapel on the Hill*, pp. 78–90. See Skinner, *Book of Lay Sermons*, pp. 181–8, for Ald. Gardner's sermon 'Good in Everything'; W.T. Pike (ed.), *Bristol in 1898: Contemporary Biographies* (Brighton, 1898), I, p. 67; W.G. Neale, *At the Port of Bristol II* (Bristol, 1970), pp. 236–7.

67. George Bryant Britton was elected a councillor in 1897, served as lord mayor 1920–1 and became an alderman in 1921. He was Liberal M.P. for Bristol East 1918–22. See J. Lyes, *Bristol 1927–1933* (Bristol, 2004), p. 10.



Fig. 7. Councillor Charles Edward Ley Gardner (1843–1932), J.P.

to have completed 27 years as secretary of the same school.<sup>68</sup> Another friend of Distin was Councillor Alfred John Smith (1843–1920: Fig. 8), J.P.,<sup>69</sup> lord mayor from 1905 to 1907, a ship owner and coal factor, who was superintendent of the Oxford Street U.M.F.C. Sunday school for over 30 years.<sup>70</sup> All these men knew Distin through his work as a local preacher and a Sunday school superintendent, as well as through business.

68. William Henry Butler was the son of William Butler (see below, note 97), J.P. and turpentine, pitch and resin importer, who was actively involved in the U.M.F.C. and a friend of Distin.

69. *Programme of Arrangements for the Autumnal Meeting at Bristol of the Association of Chambers of Commerce of the United Kingdom* (Bristol, 1906), p. iii; Pike, *Bristol in 1898* I, p. 71; Neale, *At the Port of Bristol* I (Bristol, 1968), p. 158; II, pp. 273–4.

70. Smith was the founder of Oxford Street U.M.F. Church and the leading figure in the congregation. Distin preached there 27 times between 1876 and 1888. Smith was actively involved in the Sunday School Union, and was its president-elect in 1904: *Matthews's Directory* (1904), p. 808. See Anon., *Oxford Street United Methodist Sunday School 1872–1922*; Anon., *Short History of the Oxford Street Methodist Church, Totterdown, Bristol, Celebration of Jubilee 1875–1925 and Diamond Jubilee 1875–1935*; *Western Daily Press*, 20 Mar. 1920.

Table 1. The main texts used by J.P. Distin for his sermons preached between 1877 and 1889.

	1877	1878	1879	1880	1881	1882	1883	1884	1885	1886	1887	1888	1889	Total
1								12	3	8	10	3		36
2						13	5	2	9	1	4			34
3		23	4	1						1	1			30
4				16	3	1			1	7	1	1		30
5									7	18	5			30
6	1	17	8			1								27
7								15	4	5	2			26
8									23	2	2			25
9			19							3	3	1		23
10										9	9	12		21
11							5	8	8					21
12							15	2	1	1	1			20
13				6	10		1		1	1	1			19
14			16	1						2				19
15	6	10											3	19
16	16	2	1	10										19
17		8							1					19
18								1	17					18
19		17												17
20												15	1	16
21		6	9											15
22				5	8									13
23					12									12
24									8	3		1		12
25														11
26														11
27						7	4	5	6					11
28					5	5								11
	34	52	65	45	52	29	31	45	58	59	52	38	4	564



Fig. 8. Councillor Alfred John Smith (1843–1920), J.P.

Between January 1877 and February 1889 Distin preached 776 Sunday sermons for which we have a text. From a mere 30 texts he preached 580 sermons during this period, 28 of which were used as the basis for 10 or more sermons (Table 1). Five texts were used on over 30 occasions each, and many were used over many years. For example, Distin preached 23 sermons on Matthew 16:24 ('and Jesus said to His disciples, "if anyone will come after me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me" ') in 1879. He continued to use the text in 1880 and 1881 and preached one sermon on it in both 1886 and 1887. Given the multiplicity of his preaching and other engagements, it is only to be expected that he was unable to supply the demand with new sermons and so returned to texts and themes with which he was familiar and which he had prepared thoroughly. Generally between one and two new sermons were prepared each year and added to his growing collection.

How did he prepare his sermons? We do not actually know how this was done but it appears that he preached extempore or from a few notes. He did not write his sermons *in extenso* and consequently reconstructing them is impossible. The only sermon or address to have survived in whole is one entitled 'The Development of Religious Life' which he delivered before the men

and women's bible class at Ebenezer Old King Street Wesleyan chapel on 20 October 1895 on the occasion of the church's centenary celebrations. Even then the address is not in Distin's own hand but was taken from shorthand notes made at the time by one of his audience.<sup>71</sup> The problems of extemporary preaching by local preachers was one of the reasons why William Skinner, who in 1905 made a collection entitled *A Book of Lay Sermons by Some Representative Local Preachers*, found it so difficult to obtain sermons in a form which could be easily reproduced in his book.

The five texts used most frequently by Distin were Isaiah 26:4, 'Trust ye in the Lord for ever: for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength' (36 times between 1884 and 1888); 1 Peter 1:3, 'Blessed be the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead' (34 times between 1882 and 1887); Matthew 16:24, 'Then said Jesus unto his disciples, if any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me' (30 times between 1879 and 1887); John 20:28, 'And Thomas answered and said to him, my Lord and my God' (30 times between 1881 and 1888); and Psalm 34:8, 'Oh taste and see that the Lord is good, blessed is the man that trusted in him' (30 times between 1886 and 1888). From these five texts he preached 160 sermons.<sup>72</sup> It would be difficult to find texts with a more orthodox and evangelical Christian message than these. At present no circuit plan for either the Wesleyan or the U.M.F. church in Bristol for the period 1876 to 1889 has been located and so it is not possible to see if any of the prepared sermons fitted the text of Scripture set down to be read at services at the chapels where Distin preached.

In addition to the sermons and addresses based on a single text, which he delivered in chapels, Sunday schools and bible classes, there were occasions when he used a group of five texts. This group of texts (which are not known) had been originally compiled for the Eastville children's service on 3 August 1884 and was used on a further four occasions between 1884 and 1887. Other special addresses were on 'Original Sin' (1885), 'the last days of St. Paul' (1885), and 'looking glasses' (1887-8). Distin also gave Watch Night addresses on the last day of the old year (1882, 1888) and home mission and missionary addresses and juvenile missionary addresses (1888 and 1889).

What were the contents of Distin's sermons? All we have is the text that he chose to use as the basis of his exposition. A common misconception of Victorian preachers is that they were obsessed by Hell, eternal judgement, sin and suffering: or what a past-president of this Society characterised as 'the blood of fatlings and the oil on Aaron's beard'.<sup>73</sup> A survey of Distin's texts revealed him to have been orthodox and evangelical, emphasising the Christian pathway, the oneness of God and trust in the Lord. Other texts elucidated the sin of mankind, the nature of man's fall and our redemption by Jesus Christ, e.g. Isaiah 53:6 (26 times between 1883 and 1887) and 1 Corinthians 5:7 (20 times between 1883 and 1887). There are no eschatological sermons dealing with the last things. Even the texts that he used in Daniel 1:17 (seven sermons between 1882 and 1885) and 6:6 (one sermon in 1888) do not deal with these matters. He avoided the minor prophets altogether and the only two sermons from the Revelation of St. John were preached on 21:5 in 1877, and that text

71. The shorthand notes were taken by J. Berkeley Knight of Redfield.

72. J.P. Distin, MS. 'Diary' 1876-1889, in possession of the author.

73. Dr. Arthur Basil Cottle, F.S.A. (1917-94), reader in Medieval Studies at the University of Bristol. Some of this misconception derives from the work of men such as the mid 19th-century millenarian, the Revd. Dr. John Cumming (1807-81), minister of the National Scottish Church, Crown Court, Covent Garden, who became well-known for his books on the interpretation of prophecy. He believed that the 'last vial' of the Apocalypse was to be poured out between 1848 and 1867. Distin's hero Spurgeon was said to have been 'a straight hitter at such "twopenny-ha'penny divines"' as Dr. Cumming: *Vanity Fair*, 10 Dec. 1870, 'Men of the Day', no. 16.

will not allow an apocalyptic interpretation. The nearest he came to this, 2 Thessalonians 3:5, 'And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patient waiting for Christ' (18 times between 1879 and 1880 and once in 1886), simply reinforces the essence of the Christian message.

*Transport and the Local Preacher*

The question of transport is one which must be considered when looking at Distin's ministry as a local preacher. We cannot gauge his response to such vexed and emotionally-charged contemporary issues as the provision and use of Sunday trains.<sup>74</sup> Distin's preaching engagements were largely concentrated in and around Bristol. Between 1876 and 1889 he preached in 89 different churches and chapels and all but three of these were situated in Bristol, Gloucestershire or Somerset. Many of them were at a distance from the city itself. Each of the U.M.F.C. and Wesleyan Methodist circuits was responsible for a number of country chapels and Distin took his turn, with his fellow local preachers, in serving them. Some chapels, such as Claverham, Pilning, Olveston and Redwick, were situated about ten miles from Bristol. Walking great distances was a common feature of the age, but it was usual for Distin to preach morning and evening at the same chapel or at chapels which were situated closely together.

This was easy enough in Bristol itself; it was more difficult in the country. However between 1876 and 1881 when he preached in the afternoon at Winterbourne, in the morning he often preached in the nearby small hamlet of Kendleshire in Gloucestershire, two miles south-west of Chipping Sodbury. Very occasionally in bad weather Distin may have travelled from one chapel or mission room to another using a pony and trap or some such conveyance. Alternatively he may have been collected by friends or by a member of the congregation to whom he was to preach, but Distin's daughter stated that he was unhappy about using horses on a Sunday. He held that all dumb beasts, like their human masters, should enjoy a day of rest and adhered to both the spirit and letter of Exodus 20:9–11 and Deuteronomy 5:13–15. Although the circuits often had the use of a pony and trap, Distin avoided using them wherever possible and he usually went to his destination on foot, whatever the weather, even in snow, ice and torrential rain, sometimes leaving home as early as 5.00 a.m.

Distin's attitude to the matter can be best summarised by the following lines from the introduction to a poem called *The Itinerant; or, A contrast between a faithful and laborious evangelist and a fashionable preacher* (1815): 'A feeble, timorous, delicate, nervous, effeminate man, however wise, able, learned, pious, and popular...is unfit for an itinerant preacher...an itinerant must endure hard fare, hard weather, hard walking, hard labor (sic), hard usage...A man who cannot occasionally, walk twenty miles before dinner, but must have a horse, should not think nor be thought of, for this employment'. Furthermore 'an itinerant preacher should walk alone for the purpose of thought and reflection'.<sup>75</sup>

The question of travel to and from the country chapels was one which concerned all the nonconformist denominations in Bristol. The oldest organization involved in preaching the Gospel in the wilder parts of north-east Somerset and south Gloucestershire was the Congregational Bristol Itinerant Society, founded in 1811. In the winter months many of their local preachers

74. The question of Sunday trains generated many articles and pamphlets, both for and against. One of the most amusing, dealing with the controversy north of the border, is entitled 'Sunday Training versus Sunday Trains: A Word for the Scottish Sabbath' in D. Macrea, *Diogenes Among the D.D's: A Book of Burlesques, Illustrated with Cuts at Deserving Parties* (Glasgow, revised and enlarged, c.1870), pp. 45–57.

75. S. Deacon, *Barton Memorials II* (new edition, Bristol, 1889), pp. 5–6, 9–10.



Fig. 9. Peter Gabbitass (1822–95).

travelled between 10 and 16 miles there and back in terrible weather.<sup>76</sup> Similar difficulties were experienced by the local preachers attached to the Baptist Itinerant Society.

Not all local preachers were as hardy as Distin. The East circuit of the U.M.F.C. when discussing the possibility of opening mission work at Stoke Gifford (in December 1875) asked Distin as circuit secretary to enquire about obtaining a conveyance for the preacher each Sunday. However on 6 September 1876, at a time when Distin was involved in making arrangements to open a class at Kendleshire, the circuit couldn't agree to having a covered conveyance for the preacher.<sup>77</sup> Something was done subsequently, however, and on 29 May 1878 it was noted that the costs incurred on account of the conveyance were £4 a year to Frampton Cotterell, £3 a year to Winterbourne Down and £2 a year to Watley's End. In December 1889 the secretary of North

76. G.H. Wicks, *Bristol's Heathen Neighbours: The Story of the Bristol Itinerant Society 1811–1911* (Bristol, 1911), pp. 4–5. G. Thorne, *The Great Acceptance: The Life Story of F.N. Charrington* (1912), p. 52, tells of speakers at the Christian mission on the Mile End Road, in the East End of London in the 1880s, soldiers in the Guards, who walked to and from their West End barracks to preach, a distance of 10 miles.

77. BRO, 35123/C1/M/1.

circuit of the Wesleyan church was asked to write to the secretary of North circuit of the U.F.M.C. to see if a mutually convenient arrangement could be made for the use of a closed conveyance for the journey to Redwick during the winter months. It was not, however, until September 1893 that a suitable conveyance could be arranged. This left from the livery stables in Brunswick Square at 8.45 a.m. and was to be driven by another brother. This arrangement was of short duration and terminated in December 1894.<sup>78</sup>

Rushing to preaching engagements in poor weather could, and did, result in accidents. Peter Gabbitass (Fig. 9), a Bristol Wesleyan local preacher, recounts an incident which took place c.1874 on a rainy Sunday morning, hurrying over Kingsdown to meet the conveyance due to take him to his first engagement. He slipped and the accident made his left arm powerless for some time.<sup>79</sup>

Many of Distin's preaching engagements were situated in hamlets or chapels which were connected to Bristol by the Midland or the Great Western Railway. Bitton (1876), Congresbury (1879, 1881, 1884, 1885), Fishponds (1876–1889), Keynsham (1879–1888), Nailsea (1883), Patchway (1878, 1880), Pensford (1887), Pilning (1878, 1881) and Shirehampton (1887) all had rail links. Other villages, however, were without railway stations, for example, Chew Magna, Chew Stoke, Claverham, Compton Greenfield, Frampton Cotterell, Hanham Abbots and Littleton-on-Severn. It is possible that Distin travelled by railway on Saturday evenings after work and stayed overnight with a member of the congregation of the chapel to which he was engaged on the following day. He made occasional forays outside the Bristol circuits. His preaching engagements took in Hope United Methodist Free chapel at Lower Borough Wall in Bath (1876)<sup>80</sup> and Wellow near Radstock (1880). The latter place, some 4½ miles from Bath on the Somerset and Dorset Railway, had a chapel belonging to the Bath circuit of the U.M.F.C.

Following the retirement of his father from business in 1884, Distin had frequent occasion to visit his parents in Clevedon. At this time the town was a favoured watering place and winter resort for invalids, who were attracted by its hydropathic establishment, its beach, pier and esplanade. From 1885 Distin was a regular preacher at the newly opened Wesleyan chapel in Linden Road, and he probably accomplished the 15½ miles from Bristol on the Great Western Railway. In 1888 Distin began to preach in the Wesleyan chapel in Portishead, which was also growing in importance as a watering place, pleasantly situated amongst wooded hills. Although not then linked to Clevedon by rail, it had a direct link to Bristol.<sup>81</sup> It is, however, believed that he stayed with his parents in Clevedon on Saturday evenings and walked to Portishead on Sunday mornings. The invitation to preach at these and other chapels came from a variety of friends, church contacts and acquaintances.

Distin occasionally preached further afield during the period 1876 to 1889. We know that he preached twice in Liskeard and once in Mullion, both in Cornwall, in March 1879 when he was staying with his friend, the Revd. Thomas Lee (1840–87), who was then a minister in Liskeard.<sup>82</sup>

78. Ibid. R 1780/16 a–b: minute book of the local preachers of the Portland chapel circuit, pp. 63 (12 Dec. 1889), 94 (5 Sept. 1893), 108 (19 June 1895).

79. P. Gabbitass, *Heart Melodies for Storm and Sunshine* (Bristol, 1885), p. xxiii.

80. B. Crofts (ed.), *At Satan's Throne: The Story of Methodism in Bath over 250 years* (Bristol, 1990), p. 80. The chapel was purchased in 1844 at a cost of £650 from the Quakers and closed in 1913.

81. The Royal Assent to the Bill to extend the railway from Clevedon to Portishead was not granted until 9 August 1899: C. Redwood, *The Weston, Clevedon and Portishead Railway* (Weston-super-Mare, 1981), pp. 39–40.

82. *The Minutes of the Annual Assembly of the United Methodist Free Church* (1887), pp.17–18. Before entering the ministry Lee had been a grocer and local preacher. Distin came to know Lee when he was a minister in the Bristol North circuit of the U.M.F.C. (1871–3). Subsequently he served in Penzance (1875),

In August of the same year he preached once in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where he had an unnamed friend who was also a Methodist minister.<sup>83</sup> Only once in this period is there any record of a holiday. Distin noted in his 'Diary' that he was at the seaside for two successive Sabbath days in July 1877, but he does not specify the place, and he remains silent about holidays elsewhere during these years.

We know that C.R. Parsons, Distin's colleague in bible class work in the late 1880s and early 1890s, was a keen cyclist and that he travelled from Bristol to Evesham by this means. Although Distin's daughter made no mention of her father owning a bicycle, cycling is also a possible means of his reaching preaching engagements in the Bristol area.<sup>84</sup>

### *The Denominational Nature of Distin's Preaching Engagements 1876–89*

Something should be said of Distin's preaching engagements outside U.M.F. and Wesleyan chapels. On three occasions (1877, 1881, 1882) he preached for the City Mission at the Bethel Ship which was designed to minister to the transitory seafaring population of the city.<sup>85</sup> The Cumberland Street mission hall in the Dings, where he preached in 1882, was also connected with the City Mission. He preached at the Seamen's Mission (1888) and in the Congregational chapels at Frampton Cotterell (1877, 1880) and Kingsland Road, the Dings, St. Philip's (1883, 1884). For the Bible Christian Methodists he preached in their chapel in Gladstone Street, Stapleton Road (1878), and for the Primitive Methodists in Albany chapel, Montpelier (1882, 1886), and Orchard Street Ebenezer, Batch (1878, 1882, 1884, 1886). His closest association with a nonconformist church other than his own was with Tower Street Baptist chapel or mission hall in Temple parish,<sup>86</sup> where between 1876 and 1887 he preached either once or twice each year (excluding 1880). The fraternal association that he enjoyed with the Baptists was continued with the congregation of East Street Baptist chapel in Bedminster (1885, 1887). A breakdown of the denominations of the places where he preached shows that Distin's preaching engagements between 1876 and 1889 were largely in U.M.F. churches (Table 2). The detailed breakdown of his preaching engagements for the U.M.F.C. can be found in Table 3.

The situation began to change in the mid 1880s, at the time Distin left the U.M.F.C. and became a Wesleyan. His involvement in the foundation of the Wesley Hall, Barrow Lane, ensured that he preached there on a total of sixteen Sundays in 1888. He also preached regularly at the Wesleyan iron chapel, St. Philip's Marsh, where he did duty on 24 Sundays between 1885 and January 1889. These places of worship were attached to the Portland Street circuit to which he belonged (see

Liskeard (1877), St. Columb (1880), and Bristol South (1883). He took services for Distin at Eastville U.M.F.C. Sunday school. He should not be confused with the Revd. Thomas Lee (1855–1939), who entered the U.M.F.C. ministry in 1879 and served Bristol East between 1880 and 1882: Beckerlegge, *United Methodist Ministers and Their Circuits*, p. 143; *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church...1939* (1939), pp. 210–1.

83. Information from Distin's daughter, Mrs. Paget.

84. In the 1910s and 1920s cycling or walking were still the main means employed by local preachers in Bristol to reach their preaching engagements: A.E. Southon, *Ready-for-Anything: The Story of Edgar Bowden and the Bristol Mission* (Bath, 1948), p. 26.

85. For an account of the work of the Bethel Ship see M. J. Crossley Evans, 'Christian Missionary Work Among the Seamen and Dock Workers of Bristol 1820–1914', in J.H. Bettey (ed.), *Historic Churches and Church Life in Bristol* (Bristol, 2001), pp. 162–95. Charles Parsons later took a central role in the Seamen and Boatmen's Friend Society autumnal meeting in Bristol in 1908: *ibid.* pp. 185–6.

86. *Arrowsmith's Dictionary of Bristol* (1906 edn.), p. 47, states that the mission hall, which seated 120, was founded in 1878 in connection with Counterslip chapel.

Table 2. Distin's preaching engagements on Sundays between 1876 and 1889 by denomination.

<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Number of Sunday services</b>
United Methodist Free Church	477
Wesleyan Methodist	122
Primitive Methodist	28
Baptist	20
Congregational	5
Great James Street Non-Denominational Mission	4
City Mission (three services were at the Bethel Ship)	4
Bible Christian	1
Church of England (Mission to Seamen)	1
Independent Methodist Free Gospel Church	1
Unidentified*	26
<b>Total number of services</b>	<b>689</b>

\* When listing where he preached Distin occasionally omitted to note the denomination of the chapel. Identification has proved difficult in a number of places, particularly where two, and sometimes three, denominations had chapels, as at Kingswood: J. Spittal and D. Dawson, 'The Kingswood Chapel Survey', *Avon Past* 8 (1983), pp. 15–23; G. Eayrs, *Wesley and Kingswood and its Free Churches* (Bristol, 1911).

Table 4 and Appendix 1). As time progressed his work for the Wesleyans became more and more important, and when his obituary was written no mention whatever was made of his involvement with the U.M.F.C.<sup>87</sup>

The increase in the number of chapels and places of worship in Bristol between 1860 and 1910 resulted in added pressure on the laymen drafted into the ranks of the local preachers. Although the number of places varied as temporary places of worship were abandoned, the trend was steadily upwards. Excluding dependent country chapels, between 1862 and 1889 the number of Primitive Methodist meeting houses increased from 3 to 13; of Wesleyan places of worship from 9 to 18; and of United Methodist places from 9 to 17; a total increase from 21 to 48 places of Methodist worship in just over a quarter of a century. Part of this increase was due to the extension of the city boundaries, which embraced a number of chapels in the outlying districts.

#### *Wesleyan Extension and Retreat: Portishead and Clevedon in the 1880s*

There were rarely more than 25 or 30 local preachers per circuit. In assessing the preaching demands upon the local preachers on any particular circuit in Bristol, it is worth considering the added strain placed upon them by their successes. These led to the establishment of further chapels all of which needed to be served. The case of Wesley Hall, Barrow Lane, which developed from the bible class work of C.R. Parsons and others at Old Market Street chapel, is an example and will be discussed in greater detail later in this article.

From the minutes of the Bristol District Home Mission sub-committee, which survive for the years from 1880 to 1889, it is possible to look at the Wesleyan church's work in a number of places

87. *Western Daily Press*, 4 Apr. 1898, p. 8, c. 3.

Table 3. Distin's preaching engagements and addresses in the United Methodist Free Church circuits and their dependant chapels in Bristol and district between 1876 and 1889.

Circuits as at 1884	Number of services taken		
	1876–1881	1881–1889	
a) <i>Bristol North Circuit (two ministers)</i>			
1. Milk Street (1853)	7		
2. Horfield (1865)	12	9	1884–1887
3. Mount of Olives, Durdham Down (1849)	6		
4. Westbury (1869)	17	5	1883–1889
5. Tyler's Fields (1854)	5	1	1884
6. St. George's Road (1858)	9		
	56	15	
<i>Country chapels served by the North Circuit</i>			
1. Compton Greenfield	4	1	1882
2. Littleton-on-Severn	3	1	1887
3. Olveston	2	2	1885–1886
4. Patchway	3		
5. Pilning	2		
6. Redwick	10		
	24	4	
b) <i>Bristol South Circuit (two ministers)</i>			
1. Hebron, Bedminster (1854)	17	15	1882–1888
2. Portwall Lane (1859)	13	14	1882–1888
3. Spring Place, Pyle Hill (1851)	5	6	1883–1887
4. Ashton Gate (1875)	6	11	1883–1887
5. Oxford Street, Totterdown (1875)	13	14	1883–1888
	54	60	
<i>Country chapels served by the South Circuit</i>			
1. Chew Magna	1	2	1883–1884
2. Claverham	4	3	1883–1885
3. Keynsham	*	*	
4. Nailsea		1	1883
5. West Town		1	1885
	5	7	
c) <i>Bristol East Circuit (two ministers)</i>			
1. Salem, Baptist Mills (1853)	15	19	1882–1887
2. Eastville (1872)	25	30	1884–1889
3. Easton (1879)	15	1	1882
4. Morley Street, Russell Town (1869)	16	18	1882–1888
5. Trinity Road, Newtown (1855)	10	10	1882–1888
	81	78	

*Chapels served by the East Circuit*

1. Frampton Cotterell	11	10	1882–1888
2. Watley's End	5	5	1882–1884
3. Winterbourne	11	8	1882–1885
	27	23	

d) *Bristol West Circuit (one minister)*

1. Redland Grove, Fernbank Road (1876)	0	0	
	0	0	

**Total number of services** (being 434 out of 477 engagements in U.M.F. churches)      **247**      **187**

*Key*

Where known, the date of the foundation of the chapel has been put in brackets after the name. These have been largely compiled from G.F. Stone, *Bristol: As It Was And As It is: A Record of Fifty Years' Progress* (Bristol, 1909), p. 147.

\* It is not possible from the 'Diary' to divide the days on which Distin preached at the U.M.F. chapel from those on which he preached at the Wesleyan chapel in Keynsham.

Table 4. Distin's known preaching engagements and addresses on the Portland Street Wesleyan circuit between 1884 and 1889.

<b>Chapel</b>	<b>Number of engagements</b>
1. Portland Street, Kingsdown (1792)	7
2. Old Market Street (1817)	12
3. Iron Chapel, Victoria Road, St. Philip's Marsh (1883)	24
4. Wesley Hall, Barrow Lane (1888)	18
<i>Country chapel</i>	
Redwick	<u>18*</u>
<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>

\*Some of these may have been given in the U.M.F.C. in Redwick.

with which Distin became closely involved.<sup>88</sup> In 1880 the sub-committee looked at the condition of, and prospects for, missionary work in Portishead. Work had started there in the 1850s but the results were disappointing and the station was abandoned. The matter rested until March 1884 when the chairman of the District and the secretary (Distin's friend Charles Gardner) took it in hand. In May a house was rented for £8 a year and the young District missionary, the Revd. William E. Sellars (1859–1926),<sup>89</sup> began work. By 22 September there were 12 full members and several on trial. It was reported that the room was crowded every Sunday and the Sunday school had an attendance of between 50 and 60. By November 1885 a lease on a piece of land had been granted to trustees at £10 a year and an architect selected. The proposed church building was to seat 300 in the main body and a further 80 in the gallery, and the school would accommodate 250 children.

88. BRO, 37596/2, unfoliated.

89. For Sellars, *The Wesleyan Methodist Church: Minutes of Several Conversations at the 1926 Yearly Conference of the People Called Methodist* (1926), p. 166. He served the Bristol District from 1882–5, and was known as a 'powerful preacher, a great organiser, a wise and successful administrator and a gifted writer'.

The cost of the former was estimated at £1,800 and of the latter at £600. The foundation stone of the new building was laid on 28 September 1886. In September 1888 an all day collection was made in Old Market Street and Portland chapels for the new chapel.<sup>90</sup>

Whilst the signs from Portishead were encouraging, those from George and Emma Distin's new home, Clevedon, were not. The Wesleyan society there was founded in 1879 and Portland and Old Market Street chapels interested themselves in its work, having a special collection on its behalf in 1883.<sup>91</sup> In May 1887 it was noted that 57 members had left the Wesleyan chapel since 1885, and that in four years 117 members had moved to other circuits. In April 1889, whilst recording a further decrease in membership, the average congregation had improved and now numbered 150, but 'Methodism, as such, has not much hold upon Clevedon yet. The people do not understand our system of membership though worshipping with us'.<sup>92</sup> The records show that although J.P. Distin joined his father in Clevedon in 1895 and worshipped in the chapel there when he was well enough, he never became a member.<sup>93</sup>

*Distin's Sunday School Superintendency and Bible Class Work c.1878–84*

J.P. Distin moved to Eastville in 1869 following his marriage and set up home at 35 Claremont Street, off Stapleton Road, a street which was then in the process of construction. Distin lived at two addresses in Claremont Street adjacent to St. Simon's church, for the first ten years of his married life.<sup>94</sup> At the time Distin moved to Eastville the U.M.F. mission, which formed part of the North circuit, was in the process of building a chapel that was to open in 1872. He joined the congregation of what was known until recently as Eastville Park Methodist church, situated in the heart of a rapidly expanding suburb. Eastville's expansion was further encouraged when it was connected to the city by horse drawn trams in 1876.

Distin took an active part in the life of the young and expanding church, conducting 19 of the first 84 baptisms held between 1872 and 1884 and preaching at least three funeral sermons for leading members of the congregation.<sup>95</sup> His main work, however, was with the Sunday school. The chapel was enlarged in 1879 when a schoolroom, the present Lower (or Assembly) Hall of the church, was built at a cost of £500. The hall's entrances marked 'Boys' and 'Girls' can be seen on the Gloucester Street side of the building. It was designed by Distin, who had become one of the church's two Sunday school superintendents. The foundation stones of the new school were laid by the Rt. Hon. Lewis Fry (1832–1921)<sup>96</sup> and William Butler (1819–1900).<sup>97</sup> The building

90. BRO, 37979/4a, p. 123.

91. Ibid. p. 43.

92. Ibid. 37596/2, unfoliated. The Clevedon Wesleyan chapel minute book (ibid. 32678/C1/M/1) sheds no light on this. The foundation stone of the chapel was laid in September 1882: ibid. 32078/C/R/1, circuit schedule book 1880–1899; 32078/C1/H/14; 32078/C/M/1, quarterly meetings minutes 1880–1902.

93. Ibid. 32079/CI/R/1, membership list of Clevedon Wesleyan chapel, pp. 29, 51, 55. Against the name George Distin of Walcot Villa, Old Church Road, are the words 'died in the Lord.'

94. *Matthews's Directory* (1870), pp. 34, 139; by 1877 he had moved to no. 48, where he lived for about two years: ibid. (1879), pp. 62, 199.

95. BRO, FC40836/EP/1a1; Distin, 'Diary', sermons for Messrs. Burgess, 14 Sept. 1879, and Pope, 17 Dec. 1882, and Mrs. Smallcombe, 24 Oct. 1880.

96. Fry of Goldney House, Clifton, was a solicitor. He was councillor for Clifton 1866–72, for St. Philip and St. Jacob 1872–80, and for St. Philip's South 1880–84. He was M.P. for Bristol 1878–85 and for Bristol North 1885–92 and 1895–1901.

97. William Butler (1819–1900) of Clifton Grove, J.P. and turpentine, pitch and resin importer, was actively involved in the U.M.F.C. and a friend of Distin. He 'possessed great force of character, shrewdness and

was opened on 4 July 1880 with a service of song.<sup>98</sup> The records of the Sunday school teachers' meetings begin on 7 July 1880. Distin's generosity was recorded in the first entry which states that £25 was still owed to him 'on the old school and chapel account when acting as secretary and treasurer, the said amount to be paid to him, or his wife, as soon as convenient, the above mentioned sum to stand without interest'. The meeting was adjourned with prayer at 10.30 p.m. having agreed to hold a Sunday school outing and teachers' outing in the middle of August at the Distins' home, Rudgeway Lawn. From this time onwards the Sunday school outing became a regular feature of the school year. In 1882 the Distins provided tea for about 200 adults and children at their own expense, 'which was much enjoyed by all present, the weather being very favourable'. The minutes provide considerable evidence of the Distin's commitment to the Sunday school. When the teachers decided at their meeting on 20 July 1881 that a harmonium should be obtained for the use of the school and the band of hope, Distin 'offered to sell his harmonium to the school for £3 10s., just half of what it cost him'. In 1883 Distin privately published *Stray Leaves from My Scrap Book* to raise funds for the church and probably for the Sunday school as well.<sup>99</sup> This will be discussed in greater detail in the section dealing with Distin's literary work.

Under Distin's superintendency the Sunday school flourished. From 1882 it used the Sunday School Union's notes for guidance and in 1884 it became fully affiliated to the Union. The school anniversary regularly attracted preachers from all over the country<sup>100</sup> and local dignitaries. At the anniversary in 1883 the mayor, Joseph Dodge Weston (1822–95), took the chair.<sup>101</sup> The school included a weekly bible class for the older pupils.<sup>102</sup>

Poverty was a constant problem for the school. Distin served on the finance committee and did all that he could to improve its stability. The school organised for its anniversary in August 1882 a Temperance service of song entitled *Jessica's First Prayer*, at which Distin read the interspersed

large business capacity. He was also eminently a religious man'. He was first chairman of the Board of Directors of the Bristol Tramways company for 26 years, and Liberal councillor for St. Philip's South 1887–90. He was a generous benefactor to the U.M.F.C., and was particularly involved with Redland Grove chapel. He was at one time treasurer of the United Methodist Foreign Missionary Society. *Western Daily Press*, 8 Oct. 1900; MS. diary 1897–1933 of Charles Challenger, manager of the Bristol Tramways and Carriage Company from 1882 to 1919, f. 97, in possession of the author; Pike, *Bristol in 1898 I*, p. 64; T.H. Butler, *The History of William Butler & Co (Bristol), Ltd. 1843 to 1943* (1954), pp. 23–4; W.G. Neale, *At the Port of Bristol I*, pp. 61–2; II, p. 226. See also E. Liveing's article on the firm in the series entitled 'Bristol's Many Industries', printed between 1922 and 1923 in the *Bristol Times and Mirror*, no. 48, from the collected articles in the Bristol Reference Library; *The Ports of the Bristol Channel* (1893), p. 193.

98. BRO, 40836/EP/64: H.A. Bywater, 'History of Eastville Park Methodist Sunday School' (typescript, 1968), which contains many minor errors; *ibid.* 40836/EP/56, Sunday School register 1880–91 and minutes 1880–95.
99. Only one copy of this book has been found and this is in the possession of the author.
100. These included Distin's friend, the Revd. Thomas Lee (1840–87), who was then a minister at St. Columb, Cornwall.
101. Later Sir Joseph Weston of Dorset House, Clifton, M.P. for South Bristol 1885–86 and East Bristol 1890–95, and mayor 1880–84. He was an ironmaster, chairman of the Great Western Cotton Works, Barton Hill, and a founder of the Bristol Wagon and Carriage Company. He died in March 1895 and left an estate valued at £159,991 15s. *Western Daily Press*, 6 Mar., 30 Aug, 1895; Neale, *At the Port of Bristol I*, pp. 189–90.
102. I am indebted to Mr. John Edwards of Staple Hill for this information, which is contained in a letter to me dated 16 June 1993. Much of this information comes from pp. 6–12 of a history of the church produced in 1987 by Mr. Dennis Taylor (see below, note 107).

text. This was based on the novel by Hesba Stretton (1832–1911) which had been adapted as a musically illustrated service by H.C. Freeman and Charles Henry Purday in 1879.<sup>103</sup> The school and the band of hope combined their efforts in this project in order to raise £5, or part thereof, to pay one of their benefactors the interest money due to him. In 1883 we find Distin proposing a bazaar to raise money for the school and serving on the working committee. At the time he left the school he doubled his annual subscription from 10s. 6d. to one guinea.<sup>104</sup> Distin's continued commitment to the school's work can be seen as late as 1893 when he was still owed £95 on the new classroom account.<sup>105</sup> Outside financial support for the school's work, probably raised by Distin, came from William Butler, Joseph Dodge Weston and Sparke Evans, who were all local business men.<sup>106</sup>

Distin was the school's main officer until his departure in 1884, and he was well supported by a committed band of teachers. A study of the register shows that attendance in 1882 consisted of an average of three male teachers (and possibly one female) on Sunday mornings, together with between 30 and 50 pupils unevenly divided in favour of the girls. The afternoon classes in the same year had between 13 and 15 teachers and 150 and 190 pupils. Before February 1882 Distin rarely taught in the mornings, but for the next two years he served frequently as superintendent, both on Sunday mornings and afternoons. As the afternoon class grew in size it became too much for him to manage alone, and he shared his responsibilities from August 1882 with John Paul. From 1883 Distin and Paul shared the superintendency; Paul, the former secretary and the local sub-postmaster, generally took the Sunday morning classes, whilst Distin took those in the afternoon. Both men were actively supported by John Baker, who succeeded Paul as secretary. When Distin resigned, Paul took over his responsibilities.<sup>107</sup>

Special services were organised each year to mark the Sunday school and chapel anniversary, the Harvest Home celebration and the annual Whit Sunday and missionary services. The occasional services of song have already been referred to. On 8 January 1882 the Sunday school attended a service taken by the sensational Temperance Christian evangelist known as 'the Singing Pilgrim'. He was the Methodist Episcopal American missionary Philip Phillips (1834–95), who had sung to great acclaim before President Lincoln shortly before the latter was assassinated.<sup>108</sup>

103. The novel (1867) enjoyed great popularity and was published in French and Welsh in the 1870s and in Teluga as late as 1926. It went through many editions and was published by the Religious Tract Society. The musical editions included at least one in Tonic Sol-fa, published by the United Kingdom Band of Hope Union in 1894. I am indebted to Mr. Michael T. Richardson for this information.

104. BRO, 40836/EP/56, unfoliated

105. Ibid. 40836/EP/64: Bywater, 'History of Eastville Park Methodist Sunday School', p. 4, states that he agreed to take £75 on the debt, the remaining £20 being written off.

106. Peter Fabyan Sparke Evans was the proprietor of a tannery in St. Philip's. A deacon of Highbury Congregational chapel from 1864, an active member of Anvil Street Sunday school, St. Philip's, and a supporter of the Broad Plain Mission, he died in 1905: W.F. Ayres; 'The Highbury Story Part II' (unpublished typescript, 1964, in possession of the author), pp. 14–15; A.B. Beaven, *Bristol Lists: Municipal and Miscellaneous* (Bristol, 1899), p. 345.

107. D.T. Taylor, *The Story of Eastville Park Methodist Church, Bristol, 1837–1987* (Bristol, 1987), p. 20, only lists Distin as superintendent between 1880 and 1882. BRO, 40836/EP/56, unfoliated: Paul was relieved of all his duties on 3 July 1894 and the Sunday school teachers expressed hope that the 'time will come when lies and slander will cease and Mr. and Mrs. Paul will again live happily together as man and wife'.

108. He was a prolific author and composer of 'song sermons'. His books included *A selection of Music from the best American composers, designed for Sunday school and home use* (2nd edn., London, 1868); *The Colonial Singer...designed for prayer and revival meetings, Young Mens' Christian Associations, Sunday schools, religious*

The Revd. Lawrence Henry Byrnes (1822–1902), the pastor of Pembroke Congregational chapel, Oakfield Road, Clifton between 1869 and 1890, a convert from Roman Catholicism, saw and described him on a previous visit to Bristol. Phillips ‘comes in with a huge cloak and affects the air of a very pious man. Singing very inferior and vulgar. Something like a superior ballad singer. He proposes to sing (instead of preach) the Gospel as likely to attract many who will not even hear the Gospel’.<sup>109</sup> The service probably made a profound impression on the pupils in the audience.<sup>110</sup>

It is possible to reconstruct Distin’s Sunday engagements in detail from 11 July 1880 until 18 May 1884 owing to the survival of Distin’s personal list of preaching engagements from 1876 to 1889 and of the Sunday school teachers’ register of Eastville Park Methodist church from 1880 to 1891. The depth of commitment that Distin displayed was enormous, and this can be clearly demonstrated by studying Table 5 which tabulates the information from both sources for the five quarters from 2 January 1881 to 26 March 1882. During this time Distin did not take one Sunday off work through sickness. The table includes the texts of his sermons and the numbers of teachers (T) and pupils (P) at the Sunday school. Where only one sermon is listed in the ‘Diary’ it is assumed, in the absence of contrary information, that it was given in the morning.

Distin’s particular interests were bible class work (he began a separate class at Eastville in October 1883) and youth work. In January 1884 he proposed three months of Thursday evenings dedicated to ‘a service suitable for the young’. It was no coincidence that he nominated the Wesleyan minister Joseph Rhodes (1842–1901: Fig. 10),<sup>111</sup> as one of the speakers at the anniversary in May, as Rhodes’s ministry amongst the young had attracted much favourable comment.

Although Distin’s superintendency of the Eastville Sunday school ended in 1884 he remained in close touch with its work until he withdrew from Bristol. In 1886 he was considered as one of the preachers at the anniversary and in 1888 he was asked to take the Whit Sunday afternoon service. The same happened in 1890, when Distin and his friends T.F.C. May and C.E.L. Gardner were asked to preach. In April 1891 he was asked to preach morning and afternoon and to give one of the addresses at the anniversary, and again in 1892 Distin, May and Councillor George

*meetings, family worship, prayer meetings &c.* (Melbourne, c.1875); *A Descriptive Guide to Philip Phillips’ illuminated tours and illustrated songs, describing his personal tours around the world and throughout twenty countries...* (New York, 1888); *The Singing Pilgrim; or Pilgrim’s Progress illustrated in song for the family, Sabbath school, church and family* (c.1866); *Song Life. For Sunday school, etc. illustrating in song the journey of Christiana and her children to the celestial city...with extracts from Bunyan* (New York, 1872). *The National Union Catalogue Pre-1956 Imprints* 456 (1976), pp. 173 ff; *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (CCEL edn., 2000) 9, p. 38.

109. MS. diary of the Revd. L.H. Byrnes, I, unfoliated, 28 Nov. 1872, in possession of the author.

110. Moody, the great Christian revivalist, occasionally worked with Phillips in the 1860s: J.C. Pollock, *Moody without Sankey: A New Biographical Portrait* (1963), p. 75.

111. Rhodes was ordained into the Wesleyan ministry in 1863. He served the Old King Street Circuit from 1889 onwards and became superintendent in 1891. Later in the year ‘his health gave way’ and he left Bristol in 1892. Burroughs, *Ebenezer 1795–1895: A Centenary History of Old King Street Wesleyan Chapel, Bristol* (Bristol, 1895), pp. 87–8, paid tribute to his ministry, ‘his deep interest in the young’ and ‘his singing for Jesus’. C.R. Parsons, *Sunny Memories of a Long Life* (1914), p. 218 paid tribute to his work in the lad’s Sunday morning bible class. In 1881 he was minister in Clapham: PRO, RG 11/634, f.109, p. 16. By 1901 he was a supernumerary minister in Harrogate. He died at 89, Victoria Park Road, Hackney, on 29 Nov. 1901, aged 59. His will was proved 20 January 1902 and his estate valued at £612 12s. 1d. *The Wesleyan Methodist Church: Minutes of Several Conversations at the 1902 Yearly Conference of the People Called Methodists* (1902), pp.134–5.

Table 5. Distin's Sunday engagements for the five quarters from 2 January 1881 to 26 March 1882.

<b>1881</b>	<b>Morning</b>	<b>Afternoon</b>	<b>Evening</b>
2 January	Preach Congresbury, Phil. 3:13		Preach Congresbury, John 1:26
9 January	Preach Tower Street S.S.A., Phil. 3:13	Sunday School, Eastville, 13T, 165P	Preach St. George's Road, Phil. 3:13
16 January			
23 January	Preach Portwall Lane, Phil. 3:13	Sunday School, Eastville, 13T, 112P	Preach Eastville, John 1:26
30 January	Preach Horfield, Phil. 3:13	Sunday School, Eastville, 10T, 136P	
6 February	Preach Frampton, Phil. 3:13		Preach Frampton, John 1:26
13 February	Preach Westbury, John 1:26	Sunday School, Eastville, 9T, 143P	Preach Durdham Down, John 1:26
20 February	Preach Totterdown, Phil. 3:13	Sunday School, Eastville, 12T, 154P	
27 February	Preach Eastville, John 20:28	Sunday School, 13T, 155P	
6 March	Preach Redwick, Phil. 3:13		Preach Redwick, John 2:28
13 March	Preach Russell Town, John 20:28	Sunday School, 12T, 162P	
20 March	Eastville Missionary Services	Eastville Missionary Services	Eastville Missionary Services
27 March	Preach Baptist Mills, John 20:28	Sunday School, 15T, 134P	Preach Hebron, John 20:28
3 April	Preach Horfield, John 20:28	Sunday School, 12T, 152P	Preach Newtown, John 20:28
10 April		Special Service S.S., 17T, 187P	
17 April	Preach Portwall Lane, John 20:28	Sunday School Practice	
24 April	Preach Winterbourne, John 1:26	Sunday School Practice	Preach Kendleshire, Phil. 3:13
1 May	Preach Ashton Gate, John 20:28	Sunday School Practice	
8 May	Preach Bethel Ship, John 20:28		
15 May		S.S.A.	
22 May	Preach Milk Street, John 20:28		
29 May	Preach Tyler's Fields, John 20:28	Sunday School, 11T, 7P	
5 June	Preach Westbury S.S.A., Lam. 4:4, 29	Sunday School, 7T, 46P	Heavy Rains

12 June	Preach Tower Street, John 20:28	Sunday School, 12T, 169P	
19 June	Preach Totterdown S.S.A., Lam. 4:4, 29	Sunday School, 12T, 195P	
26 June	Preach Baptist Mills, Ps. 8:3-4	Sunday School, 10T, 175P	
3 July	Taught Eastville S.S.	Sunday School, 13T, 162P	
10 July	Preach Newtown, Ps. 8:3-4	Sunday School, 12T, 178P	
17 July	Preach Pilning, Phil. 3:13		Preach Pilning, John 1:26
24 July	Preach Eastville, Ps. 8:3-4	Sunday School, 15T, 177P	
31 July	Preach Ashton Gate, Ps. 8:3-4	Sunday School, 15T, 190P	
7 August		Special S.S., Commem. Service	
14 August	Preach Frampton, John 20:28		Preach Frampton, Ps. 8:3-4
21 August	Preach Russell Town, Ps. 8:3-4	Sunday School, 12T, 187P	
28 August	Preach Totterdown, Ps. 8:3-4	Sunday School, 18T, 169P	
4 September	Preach Horfield, Ps. 8:3-4	Sunday School, 16T, 179P	
11 September	Preach Winterbourne, Ps. 8:3-4		Preach Watley's End, John 1:26
18 September	Preach Eastville, Exod. 10:29; Prov. 29:1		
25 September	Sunday School Harvest Home Services and Chapel Anniversary, Eastville		17T
2 October	Preach Redwick, Ps. 8:3-4		Preach Redwick, Exod. 10:29; Prov. 29:1
9 October	Preach Portwall Lane, Ps. 8:3-4	Sunday School, 18T, 173P	
16 October	Preach Claverham, Ps. 8:3-4		Preach Claverham, Exod. 10:29; Prov. 29:1
23 October	Preach Portwall Lane, 1 Kings 19:12	Sunday School, 18T, 192P	Preach Eastville, 1 Kings 19:12
30 October	Preach Newfoundland Road, P.M., John 20:28	Sunday School, 14T, 184P	
6 November	Preach Eastville, P.M., Matthew 16:24	Sunday School, 14T, 173P	
13 November	Preach Hebron, 1 Kings 19:12	Sunday School, 14T, 165P	Preach Easton, Exod. 10:29; Prov. 29:1
20 November	Preach Baptist Mills, 1 Kings 19:12	Sunday School, 15T, 188P	

	<b>Morning</b>	<b>Afternoon</b>	<b>Evening</b>
<b>1881</b>			
27 November	Preach Russell Town, 1 Kings 19:12	Sunday School, 17T, 179P	
4 December	Took 2 classes in morning	Sunday School, 19T, 162P	
11 December	S.S. Eastville	Taught in Sunday School	
18 December		Sunday School, 17T, 140P	
25 December		Sunday School, 12T, 92P	
<b>1882</b>			
1 January	Preach Baptist Mills, James 4:14	Sunday School, 11T, 106P	
8 January	Preach Bethel Ship, 1 Kings 19:12-13	Special Services Singing Pilgrim Sunday School, 17T, 166P	Preach Eastville, James 4:14
15 January			
22 January	Preach Russell Town, James 4:14	Sunday School, 18T, 174P	Preach Cumberland Street, Dings, Exod. 10:29; Prov. 29:1
29 January	Preach Eastville, Acts 11:24	Sunday School, 19T, 167P	
5 February	Sunday School, 5T, 53P	Sunday School, 24T, 160P	
12 February	Sunday School, 4T, 55P	Sunday School, 20T, 167P	
19 February	Sunday School, 5T, 52P	Sunday School, 22T, 163P	
26 February	Preach Winterbourne, James 4:14		Preach Winterbourne, Exod. 10:29; Prov. 29:1
5 March	Sunday School, 4T, 56P	Sunday School, 21T, 178P	
12 March	Sunday School, 4T, 46P	Sunday School, 20T, 123P	
19 March	Sunday School, 4T, 49P	Sunday School, 17T, 150P	
26 March	Sunday School, 4T, 47P	Sunday School, 16T, 139P	Preach Albany Chapel, P.M., Exod. 10:29; Prov. 29:1

*Notes*

- In November 1881 Distin withdrew from preaching in the Northern U.M.F.C. circuit fully and partly from the South and East Circuits in support of his parents who had been alienated from the U.M.F.C. by preachers of the North circuit.
- Where the words 'Sunday School' are used in the table Distin acted as the superintendent; where he acting only as a teacher that is stated.
- The table does not include week night services and bible classes taken by Distin.

*Key*

P = pupils; P.M. = Primitive Methodist; S.S.A. = Sunday School anniversary; T = teachers.



Fig. 10. The Revd. Joseph Rhodes (1842–1901).

Bryant Britton<sup>112</sup> spoke at the anniversary.<sup>113</sup> The fact that Distin was so frequently considered as a preacher illustrates his reputation for reliability. That he was often not the teachers' first choice of preacher may be a reflection of the fact that those speakers with a higher profile in the city would have attracted larger congregations and been able to make more significant cash donations to the work of the school than he could. As Distin was well-known to the teachers, the delivery and the content of his addresses would have been equally familiar to them.

Distin's work as Sunday school superintendent at the Eastville U.M.F. church from before 1879 to 1884 prepared him for his next work. Upon taking control of his father's business in April 1884 he left the Eastville church and joined the Old Market Street Wesleyan chapel.

*St. Philip's Wesleyan Chapel, Old Market, and the Old Market Street Bible Class, 1880–95*

George and Emma Distin, after being members of Milk Street U.M.F.C. chapel since its foundation, left in the autumn of 1881 for reasons which will be discussed below. They rejoined the Wesleyans and rented a pew at St. Philip's chapel, Old Market.<sup>114</sup> They remained regular

112. Pike, *Bristol in 1898* I, p. 64.

113. In 1893 Distin was twice proposed as a possible preacher, once at the children's service and once at the Whit Sunday services. He was also the teachers' second choice at the annual prize giving.

114. BRO, 37329/3q, unfoliated. Their pew, number 35, cost them ten shillings a quarter.

attenders for the next four years, until George Distin retired from business and settled in Clevedon with his wife.

St. Philip's chapel, a large undistinguished building erected in 1817, was situated in a poor, but populous, part of the city. By 1881 the wealthier tradesmen were beginning to forsake their homes situated over their shops for the rapidly expanding suburbs. Many continued to worship at the chapel and in 1884 it is estimated that as many as 60% of the congregation commuted to the chapel on Sundays.<sup>115</sup> At the same time as wealthier people were leaving the environs of Old Market, many older residential properties were being demolished for the purpose of commercial redevelopment. The area was in transition, and the departure of the middle classes left the businesses and the poor in possession of the district.

In 1880 St. Philip's chapel was part of the Old King Street Wesleyan circuit, but between June and October a new circuit was created based on Portland chapel.<sup>116</sup> Leading lights in the new circuit included J.P. Distin's friend T.F.C. May<sup>117</sup> and his cousin Henry Charles Perry (1840–1924: Fig. 11), who became the new circuit's senior and junior stewards respectively. Perry, a wealthy stockbroker who was the senior partner of Bryant, Perry and Lowe of St. Stephen's Street,<sup>118</sup> was the Sunday school superintendent at St. Philip's chapel. Numbered amongst his pupils were Alderman Sir William Howell Davies (1851–1932), soon to become one of the city's leading Methodists,<sup>119</sup> and his own future partner Charles James Lowe (1850–1918).<sup>120</sup> Charles Gardner, whom Distin knew through business, was secretary of the circuit's Lay Mission and the Juvenile Home and Foreign Missionary Association. These three men, May, Perry and Gardner, formed a powerful driving force for Christian work on the circuit. Their efforts were ably and enthusiastically supported by their ministers.<sup>121</sup>

One of the additional attractions of the Portland Street circuit to Distin was its ministers. The ministry of the Revd. Dr. George Bowden (1829–1902: Fig. 12),<sup>122</sup> with his three years of superintendence and 'powerful pulpit ministrations', had seen an increase in membership of 255 in the circuit between 1880 and 1883.<sup>123</sup> In 1883 Bowden was succeeded as superintendent by the

115. C.J. Spittal, 'The History of Methodism in the Environs of Old Market Street, Bristol, 1739–1985', *The Wesley Historical Society Bristol Branch* (Bulletin **45**, 1986), p. 15.
116. BRO, 37979(4)a: Portland circuit minute book.
117. For T.F.C. May's character as a businessman see J.A. Lambert, *Reminiscences of a Financial Venturer* (1953), pp. 10–2.
118. PRO, Probate Henry Charles Perry, died 9 June, proved 17 July 1924, gross value of the estate £41,457 0s. 5d.; *Western Daily Press*, 10 June 1924, p. 4; 13 June 1924, p. 6; *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 13 June 1924, p. 5. He was for many years lay secretary of the British and Foreign Bible Society. He was the Liberal and Wesleyan candidate on the Bristol School Board 1882–7: Beaven, *Bristol Lists: Municipal and Miscellaneous*, pp. 110–11.
119. Leather merchant, J.P. 1894, mayor 1895–6, alderman 1897, and Liberal M.P. for South Bristol 1906–1922. He was president of the Bristol Free Church Union and the Bristol Band of Hope. See *Who Was Who 1929–1940* (2nd edn., 1967), p. 338; *The Pall Mall Gazette's Popular Guide to the House of Commons, elected between January 12 1906 and January 31 1908* (1908), p. 50.
120. Lord mayor of Bristol 1912–13, alderman 1913, and chairman of the Bristol Free Church Council. He was superintendent of Ashley Down Sunday school for 14 years and served for some years as the Liberal and Wesleyan candidate on the Bristol School Board. *BCL* 15 Jan. 1895, p. 64; Beaven, *Bristol Lists: Municipal and Miscellaneous*, pp. 112–13; *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 8 Oct. 1918, p. 2.
121. BRO, 37979/4a, pp. 39, 49, 64.
122. *The Wesleyan Methodist Church: Minutes of Several Conversations at the 1902 Yearly Conference*, pp. 156–8, pays tribute to his preaching and his children's ministry. Dr. Bowden was chairman of the Bristol District from 1880 to 1885 and 'exerted himself ceaselessly...for the better organisation of aggressive work and for the extension of Methodism'.
123. Mainly at the Iron Chapel, St. Philip's Marsh. The second minister was the Revd. William Hawken.

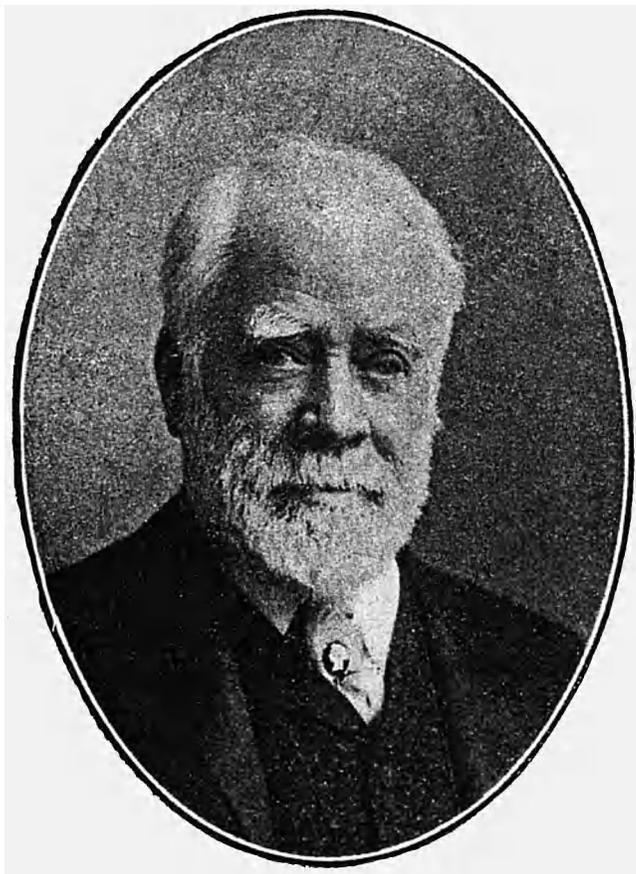


Fig. 11. Henry Charles Perry (1840–1924).

Revd. John Rhodes (1824–91),<sup>124</sup> who took oversight of St. Philip’s chapel, Old Market. The Revd. Mark Guy Pearse, an influential preacher and writer, was appointed second minister and took oversight of Portland chapel.<sup>125</sup> During their three years’ ministry on the circuit the Distin family came to know both men and to regard them as fast friends. Pearse, in particular, became an important influence on Distin’s life. A contemporary who heard Pearse preach recounted that: ‘his delivery is remarkable for trenchant vigour and clearness, and never-halting flow of good language supported by a fund of pictorial and anecdotal illustrations seldom equalled, perhaps rarely surpassed’.<sup>126</sup>

124. *The Wesleyan Methodist Church: Minutes of Several Conversations at the 1891 Yearly Conference of the People Called Methodists* (1891), p. 33.

125. BRO, 37979/4a, Portland circuit minute book, pp. 38–40.

126. *Bristol Pulpit Sketches* (Bristol, c.1885), no.24, Portland chapel. See J.G. Mantle, *Hugh Price Hughes: A Strenuous Life* (1903); D. Price Hughes, *The Life of Hugh Price Hughes, by his Daughter* (1904); various contributors, *Hugh Price Hughes as We Knew Him* (1902); P. Glass, ‘Hugh Price Hughes, and the West London Mission’, *Proc. Wesley Hist. Soc.* 45 (May 1986), pp. 129–46; C. Oldstone-Moore, *Hugh Price Hughes: Founder of New Methodism, Conscience of a New Nonconformity* (Cardiff, 1999).

The chapel and circuit's leaders were determined to bring the Gospel to their neighbours and in February 1884 they organised a week-long revival mission, with evening and mid-day meetings conducted by John Rhodes and Mark Guy Pearse. Another mission was held between 25 October and 7 November 1884, organised by the Revd. William Sellars, the District missionary.<sup>127</sup> An added attraction in October was the first visit of the Jubilee singers, a band of former slaves attached to Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, who combined missionary outreach, novelty value, and inspiring vibrant music.<sup>128</sup> The two missions of 1884 are said by the Methodist historian, C.J. Spittal, to have been a failure and to have left the chapel in debt and with a reduced congregation. On 30 March 1885 the membership of the circuit stood at 927, with 418 at St. Philip's, Old Market; 323 at Portland; 140 at St. Philip's Marsh; and 46 at Redwick.<sup>129</sup> Notwithstanding a brief recovery which saw the membership of the circuit reach 1,007 in September 1889, the overall decline through death and continued removal to the suburbs was irreversible and by March 1895 the membership of St. Philip's, Old Market, stood at 351,<sup>130</sup> more than 16% less than it was ten years earlier.

The influence of Mark Guy Pearse in Bristol was to continue long after his departure from the city. His active work in the West London Mission with the Revd. Hugh Price Hughes (1847–1902)<sup>131</sup> led to their championship of 'social purity', anti-gambling, and Christian ethics which were aggressively canvassed amongst the poor. Their work, much admired, inspired C.R. Parsons, Distin and their friends in the mission in Barrow Lane. Pearse was an active supporter of the Bristol Forward Movement, which looked to his work in London as its model and was inaugurated on 22 November 1891 at Langton Street Wesleyan chapel.<sup>132</sup> His views on social justice can be gauged by such comments as 'it is no use talking about a white suit up there when you have no coat on your back down here. The religion of Jesus Christ is the religion of the soup kitchen, of early breakfasts for children, and of penny dinners for the little ones'.<sup>133</sup> The child-centric nature of his work can be seen by his campaign to replace Sunday school with 'the children's church', 'the children's service', 'the children's worship', and 'the children's hour'.<sup>134</sup> After leaving Bristol he continued to preach and to lecture from time to time at the Old Market chapel.<sup>135</sup> The particular concerns and emphases of Pearse's ministry mirrored Distin's own. The links between the West London Mission and the work of Parsons and Distin in Bristol are further illustrated by the fact that Hugh Price Hughes addressed the Old Market Street bible class on a number of occasions.<sup>136</sup>

127. BRO, 37329/3b, Old Market Street chapel leaders' meeting minute book.

128. J.B.T. Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers; with Their Song* (1885); BRO, 37329/3b. The service of song was held on 22 Oct. 1884 and the funds raised were set aside for their university.

129. BRO, 37979/4a: Portland Street circuit minute book.

130. Ibid. 21780/26: Portland Street circuit schedule 1889–1894; *ibid.* 37979/4a, pp. 134–5.

131. *Who Was Who 1897–1916* (1920), pp. 358–9. He was president of the Wesleyan Conference 1898–9 and editor of the *Methodist Times*.

132. *BCL* 15 Dec. 1891, p. 4; 15 May 1892, pp. 180–1.

133. *Ibid.* 15 Dec. 1893, p. 29.

134. *Ibid.* 15 June 1894, p. 208.

135. *Ibid.* 15 Mar. 1894, p. 124. Pearse's sermon on 6 March 1894 was in aid of the chapel's trust fund and the crowds were expected to be so great that a short organ recital was given before the service: BRO 37329/3b, minute 28 Feb. 1894.

136. For example, C.R. Parsons, *The Story of the Old Market Street Bible Class* (Bristol, c.1900), p. 30.

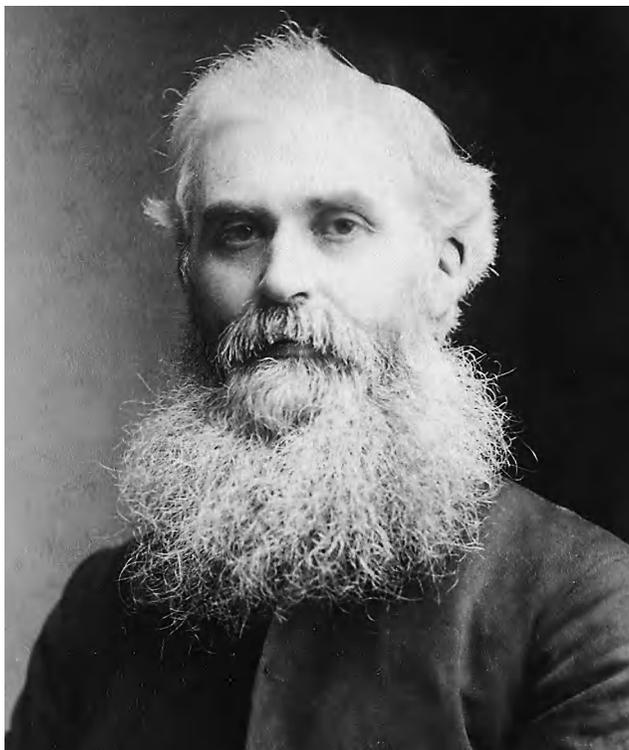


Fig. 12. The Revd. George Bowden (1829–1902), D.D.

In addition to the regular ministers St. Philip's chapel was able to call upon the services of a charismatic supernumerary, the Revd. Thomas Nightingale (1814–90) who was 'great at soul winning' and 'whose saintliness of character won the esteem and affection of all with whom he was brought into contact'. His widow described how 'he prayed for conversions on the Sabbath. How he lived and revelled in these and how when he failed, how he chided himself and his want of faith. This was the secret of his success'.<sup>137</sup>

George and Emma Distin were deeply committed to the work of their new spiritual home, whose practical Christianity coincided with their own views. The chapel was intent on making the pews in the gallery free to encourage attendance amongst the poor and it wished to become a great missionary centre, in which aim it was encouraged by its men's bible class.<sup>138</sup>

Many contrasts and parallels with St. Philip's can be found in the adjacent Wesleyan chapel Ebenezer, Old King Street, which in 1883 was in a declining state, its congregation poor and decreasing in number as families moved to the suburbs leaving the officers to report significant financial deficiencies each quarter. In the same year two ministers were appointed to the Old King

137. *BCL* 15 Mar. 1893, pp. 107–9, C.R. Parsons on the 'Old Market Street Chapel'; BRO, 37979/4a, pp. 152, 157–8. He was superintendent minister of the Old King Street circuit 1874–77, which then still included Old Market Street chapel. *The Wesleyan Methodist Church: Minutes of Several Conversations at the 1891 Yearly Conference*, pp. 19–20.

138. *BCL* 15 Mar. 1893, pp. 107–9.

Street circuit, the Revds. Josiah Banham (1839–1928: Fig. 13)<sup>139</sup> and John Smith Simon (1843–1933).<sup>140</sup> They provided charismatic leadership and the former was to play an important part in Distin's life. Almost immediately the congregation at Ebenezer increased and with it the income from the collections.<sup>141</sup> Membership of Ebenezer stood at 331 by 1886 when the Revds. George Latham (1838–1931),<sup>142</sup> Thomas Sanderson (1847–1919)<sup>143</sup> and Thomas Nightingale<sup>144</sup> were appointed to the circuit. Distin worked closely with them and with their predecessors. At a meeting of the Portland Street circuit on 29 March 1886 C.E.L. Gardner proposed that Banham become superintendent and Joseph Rhodes second minister of the circuit. The latter suggestion was warmly supported by the Revd. M.G. Pearse and T.F.C. May.

The ministry of Josiah Banham and Joseph Rhodes on the Portland circuit marked a new phase in J.P. Distin's life and missionary work which began with the Old Market men's bible class. By June 1884 the total number attending these classes was 416 with an average attendance of 251 and 35 teachers.<sup>145</sup> This was claimed by many to be the largest bible class in the world. Distin became a class leader at Old Market in the quarter ending September 1886 and had the pastoral and spiritual oversight initially of seven men, growing gradually until three years later it stood at thirteen.<sup>146</sup>

The story of the class is closely entwined with the name of Charles Richard Parsons (1841–1918: Fig. 4), a lay missionary attached to St. Philip's chapel. He began his bible class in August 1880 with 35 men and later estimated that within twenty years 10,000 men had passed through its doors. Prayer was the foundation and mainspring of his success.<sup>147</sup> In his early work Parsons was assisted by T.F.C. May, by then a wealthy timber and slate merchant of Park House, Cotham.<sup>148</sup> It was

139. A native of Cambridge, he was ordained a Wesleyan minister in 1862 and at the time of the 1881 Census he was a minister in Westminster. By the time of the 1901 Census he was living at the Chase, Clapham, Surrey: PRO, RG 13/461, f.17, p.26. He died at 28, Inglis Road, Ealing on 30 July 1928, aged 88. Probate was granted on 9 Oct. 1928, and his estate was valued at £9,338 5s. 6d.; *The Wesleyan Methodist Church: Minutes of Several Conversations at the 1928 Yearly Conference of the People called Methodists* (1928), p. 112.
140. For Simon, *The Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church* (1933), pp. 262–3. Once articulated to a Bristol solicitor, Simon served Old King Street from 1883 to 1886 and from 1898 to 1901, and Redland from 1895 to 1898. He was chairman of the Bristol District for two years, and president of Conference in 1907. He was a noted historian. *Bristol Pulpit Sketches* (Bristol, c.1885), no. 19, Cotham Wesleyan Chapel, gives the outline of one of his sermons there.
141. Burroughs, *Ebenezer 1795–1895*, pp. 82–3.
142. For Latham, *The Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church* (1931), pp. 108–9.
143. For Sanderson, *The Wesleyan Methodist Church: Minutes of Several Conversations at the 1919 Yearly Conference of the People Called Methodists* (1919), p. 109.
144. Revd. Thomas Nightingale was supernumerary. He was much beloved and his ministry 'very effective': Burroughs, *Ebenezer 1795–1895*, pp. 78–9.
145. BRO, 37979/4a, pp. 52–5, 64.
146. Ibid. 21780/25: Portland Street circuit schedule 1880–9.
147. See C.R. Parsons, *The Story of Old Market Street Bible Class* (Bristol, c.1900), p. 6, and more generally his *Sunny Memories of a Long Life* (1914), p. 255. By 1913 he estimated 13,000 men had been enrolled as members, some c.3,000 of whom were saved. Parsons was a native of Merriott, Somerset. In the 1881 Census for Bristol (PRO, RG 11/2473, f. 56, p. 54, 5 Davey Street) he is called 'Wesleyan missionary'. In the 1891 Census (ibid. RG 12/1971, f. 37, p. 30, 73 Ashley Road) he is called 'lay missionary', and in the 1901 Census (ibid. RG 13/2400, f. 20, p. 31, 83(sic) Ashley Road) the same. His death is registered in the June quarter 1918 in Bristol. There was no estate to administer. His money was reinvested in the production of his tracts and other publications.
148. Mrs. Paget was the source of the information on her father's friendship with May. May and his family were actively involved in the work and life of Portland Chapel: Lambert, *The Chapel on the Hill*,



Fig. 13. The Revd. Josiah Banham (1839–1928).

partly funded by a number of wealthy and middle-ranking business and professional men such as Charles Gardner and Henry Perry, who were committed to the work of St. Philip's chapel and to missionary outreach amongst the poor. The bible class was the means of bringing young men of various types and situations to salvation, and it strengthened and encouraged them in their Christian journey. Parsons and his fellow workers prayed, taught, exhorted, and preached men into the Kingdom with an earnest zeal for the welfare of their souls which was difficult to resist. Each man who attended was encouraged to bring to meetings his friends, his neighbours, his colleagues, and his family. Soon the class register recorded between 1,000 and 1,200 men who were regarded as reliable, and each year the roll was strictly revised in order that a true record should be given. Parsons, inflamed with spiritual fervour for the salvation of this groaning,

pp. 108–9, 144. May's firm, May and Hassell Ltd., had branches in Bristol, London, West Hartlepool, Poole and Manchester. By his will, dated 13 April and proved 30 September 1905, he left an estate valued at £56,340 4s. 1d. In 1864 he was one of the stewards of the North circuit and in 1878 he was one of the secretaries of the Bristol branch of the Wesleyan Missionary Society. In 1863 he became one of the first trustees of Victoria Methodist church, Clifton: P. Morley, *Victoria Methodist Church, Clifton 1863–1963* (Bristol, 1963), p. 18.

travailing race, tirelessly hunted men's souls so that he could bring them from darkness to enjoy a personal relationship with their Creator and their Saviour; to foster a love for the Scriptures; to create and reinforce the bonds of brotherly love by encouragement, teaching and exhortation; and to 'elevate and enrich the character for time and eternity'. Parsons, believed that it had been possible to save a thousand souls for Christ mainly through his bible class work. Through the class Parsons actively supported missionary work, established a colportage society for the distribution of bibles and religious literature, took a lead in awakening men for the need for social purity in their lives, and established a brass band, a male voice choir, and an orchestral band. Parsons also held a women's bible class and took an active part in temperance work.<sup>149</sup> There are many parallels between the work of Parsons in Bristol and Hugh Price Hughes in the West London Mission.

This was the society into whose work J.P. Distin entered so fully. One of his particular concerns was the establishment of Wesley Hall, Barton Hill. This was closely associated with a small group called the Pilgrim Band, which conducted evangelistic services inspiring the warm and active support of the two circuit ministers, Josiah Banham and Joseph Rhodes. On 3 January 1887 the circuit quarterly meeting heard and debated the resolution of the Local Preachers' Association 'in favour of securing certain premises...as a base for aggressive missionary work'.<sup>150</sup> In April Rhodes in addressing the class leaders at Old Market directed their attention 'to the necessity of forthwith providing suitable work for the active members of the bible class'.<sup>151</sup> The committee formed in January with Distin as convenor worked hard. Initial negotiations to find a suitable home proved abortive. According to Distin's daughter the final site of the hall, at the junction of Barrow Lane and Morley Terrace,<sup>152</sup> was identified by Distin and his friend J.H. Hunt. It had been a Mormon meeting house and formerly a dancing saloon attached to a public house. On 27 June 1887 Distin was able to report to the circuit quarterly meeting that these premises could be secured for £385. It was decided to leave £300 on the mortgage and to raise another £200 to put the building into a necessary state of repair. Rhodes agreed to visit 'a few friends with a view to raise £75 by private subscription' and Charles Parsons offered to raise an equivalent sum with the help of the Old Market Street bible class. Distin undertook the work of secretary and H.C. Perry acted as treasurer of the new venture.<sup>153</sup> The opening services were held on 22 January 1888.<sup>154</sup>

Distin threw himself wholeheartedly into the work at Barrow Lane and on 26 March 1888 was able to announce that the premises adjoining the hall had been conveyed to himself and his cousin H.C. Perry 'to secure their availability when the development of the mission shall require an extension of accommodation'.<sup>155</sup> The evening services were conducted by Charles Parsons, ably assisted by the converted men of the bible class, who helped in conducting praise, testimony and prayer and gave brief addresses. The morning services were conducted by local preachers and in the afternoon there was a Sunday school. Parsons noted that 'No sooner was the hall opened than we found it

149. For a tribute to C.R.Parsons, see 'Music, Its Influence upon Life and Character, And Memories of Early Days, together with a tribute to the Life and Work of the late C.R. Parsons' (an anonymous publication, privately printed c.1922, in possession of the author), pp. 98–105. The author was probably Gabriel Lloyd, 'an old Bristol chorister'.

150. BRO, 37979/4a, pp. 92–3.

151. Ibid. 37329/3b, unpaginated.

152. O.S. Map 1:1,250, ST 6073 (1951 edn.); *Kelly's Directory of Bristol* (1953), p. 30; D. Stephenson, A. Jones, D. Cheesley and E. Haste. *Images of England: Old Market, Newtown, Lawrence Hill and Moorfields* (Stroud, 2002), pp. 64–6.

153. BRO, 37979/4a, pp. 99–100, 103, 105, 107, 108, 112, 118–20, 125; 37329/3b, 21 Sept. 1887.

154. Ibid. 37329/3b, 11 Jan. 1888.

155. Ibid. 37979/4a, p. 115.

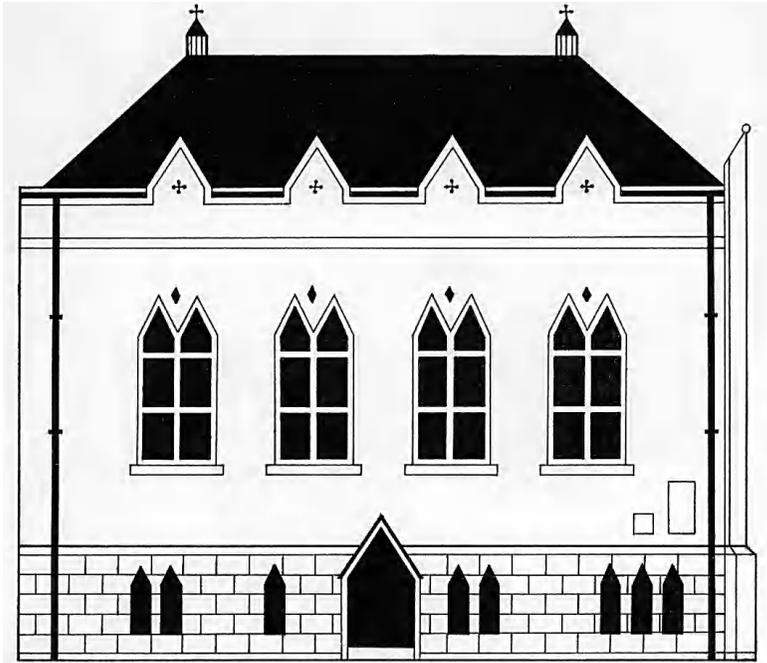


Fig. 14. Wesley Hall, Barrow Lane, c.1890 (from a drawing by A.C.B. Giles).

too small. Crowds were constantly turned away...Sunday by Sunday souls were won for the Saviour, and many that were first gathered into the fold are among our most earnest workers today'.<sup>156</sup>

The building was demolished, together with the adjoining properties and a new building, Wesley Hall (Fig. 14), was erected on the enlarged site in 1889 at a total cost estimated by Parsons at £3,000.<sup>157</sup> Using his experience in designing the assembly hall at Eastville, and the guidelines laid down by Dr. Jobson, Distin became the building's 'sole architect and clerk of works'.<sup>158</sup> The foundation stones of the new hall were laid by Banham, Rhodes, and Parsons.<sup>159</sup> The new hall cost about £1,600. In the basement there were a schoolroom able to seat 300 children and three classrooms and offices. The new hall on the upper floor could seat 500 and had a raised platform for the speakers and the choir. By the time that Parsons wrote his articles, outdoor services were

156. *BCL* 15 Mar. 1892, p. 100; 15 May 1892, pp. 180–2, entitled 'The Methodist Forward Movement in Bristol' by C.R. Parsons. For his recruitment work as a missionary, C.R. Parsons, 'An Old Leader and Its Youngest Member', *The Christmas Number of the Methodist Recorder* 33, no. 1830 (1892), pp. 64–6.

157. *Arrowsmith's Dictionary of Bristol* (1906), p. 60, states that it was erected in 1889, sat 400, cost £2,000 (*sic*), and employed the 'surplus energy of the large bible class meetings' at Old Market Street.

158. Mrs. Paget stated that after Distin's death her mother gave the hall his architectural drawings and plans of Wesley Hall and that for many years they were hung framed in one of the classrooms. Their present whereabouts are unknown.

159. Conversation with Mrs. Paget 5 Nov. 1993. C.R. Parsons, *These Forty Years 1878–1918* (Bristol, 1918), pp. 14–15; *idem*, *Story of the Old Market Street Bible Class*, pp. 52–4; *idem*, *Sunny Memories of a Long Life*, pp. 135–7. Banham preached at the opening. Parsons calls him 'our much-loved pastor' and relates on p. 254 that he frequently stated across the country that 'The Old Market Street Men's Bible-Class, Bristol is the finest bit of mission work I have ever seen or heard of'.

being conducted with the aid of a band, tracts were distributed, and there was a Sunday school, bible classes, band of hope, women's' bible classes, and a choir. Distin became one of the trustees of the new building and remained actively involved in its work. Parsons preached at Wesley Hall on Sunday evenings for twenty five years, increasing year on year upon the sixteen initial conversions which were made at the opening service.

The period 1887 to 1890 saw Distin heavily overcommitted. At the same time that he was involved in establishing the mission at Barrow Lane, he was keen to begin a mission in the vicinity of Queen Square and the Grove, particularly aimed at the spiritual needs of the transient seafaring population.<sup>160</sup> Distin was a member of the Circuit Home Missions' Committee between 1887 and 1896 and acted as its secretary. He also served on the committee formed to look at ways of enlarging the Old Market Street premises and of raising £4,000 for the extension; a further £2,000 to erect a mission hall to replace the recently opened premises at Barrow Lane; £500 for the newly proposed mission to seamen in the vicinity of Queen Square; and unspecified sums for two missions, one in the area between Old Market Street and Baptist Mills (at the Goodhind Estate) and the other close to the Great Western Cotton Factory, Barton Hill.<sup>161</sup>

When the Wesleyan Local Preachers' Association met the members of the Ministers' Meeting under the chairman of the District, the Revd. George Fletcher (1838–1916: Fig. 15),<sup>162</sup> on 20 January 1888 to look at ways of further evangelising the city, they formed a new committee under the *aegis* of the Wesleyan Methodist Extension Scheme. The members included Distin, Fletcher, Rhodes, Banham, Perry, Gardner, May and Howell Davies. It was committed to supporting lay agents (like Parsons); purchasing, erecting, enlarging and supporting mission premises; and securing sites for new chapels and schoolrooms. Distin was aflame with missionary zeal and, emboldened by the initial successes at Barrow Lane, he was determined to extend the work. He took a prominent part in many of the meetings and stated that the provision made by the Wesleyans for the religious needs of Bristol was seriously inadequate.<sup>163</sup>

In these circumstances it was not surprising that Distin's health broke down. In September 1889 he was sent a letter by the secretary of the Class Leaders' Meeting, 'in his personal affliction, expressing the fervent hope that...he may soon be restored to perfect health and be able to resume the active service in church work he has long cheerfully rendered'.<sup>164</sup> In July 1889 Distin had been elected the senior society steward at St. Philip's chapel, Old Market, but he was forced to ask to be relieved of the post in May 1890 because he was 'unable to give full attention to the duties of the office as his time was so fully occupied at Barrow Lane'. In October of the same year, 'family and personal affliction' compelled him to resign his leadership of the Tuesday evening class at Old Market, which he did not resume for more than a year.<sup>165</sup>

The year 1889 was the high-water mark of the Old Market Street chapel during the years of Distin's membership (1884–95). At the quarterly meeting on 24 June, the members expressed their

160. BRO, 37979/4a, pp. 92–3, 99–110, 112, 118–20, 125. The Bristol Sailors' Home was established in Queen Square in 1853. It is probable that the projected mission did not progress owing to the work of the Missions to Seamen in the area from the 1880s onwards. See J. Teague, *The Missions to Seamen Church and Institute* (undated).

161. BRO, 37979/4a, pp. 129, 132, 136, 168; 37329(7)a, p.19. By January 1889 the cost of the Mission Hall at the Grove was put at £1,000 and of the other two missions £500 apiece.

162. *The Wesleyan Methodist Church; Minutes of Several Conversations at the 1917 Yearly Conference of the People Called Methodists* (1917), pp. 153–4.

163. BRO, 37329/7a, minute book of the Bristol Wesleyan Methodist Extension Fund 1887–9, p. 13.

164. Ibid. 37979/4a, p. 140; for the vote of sympathy on the death of his wife see *ibid.* pp. 151–2.

165. Ibid. 37329/3b. Sydney H. Hunt took the class in his absence: *ibid.* 21780/26.

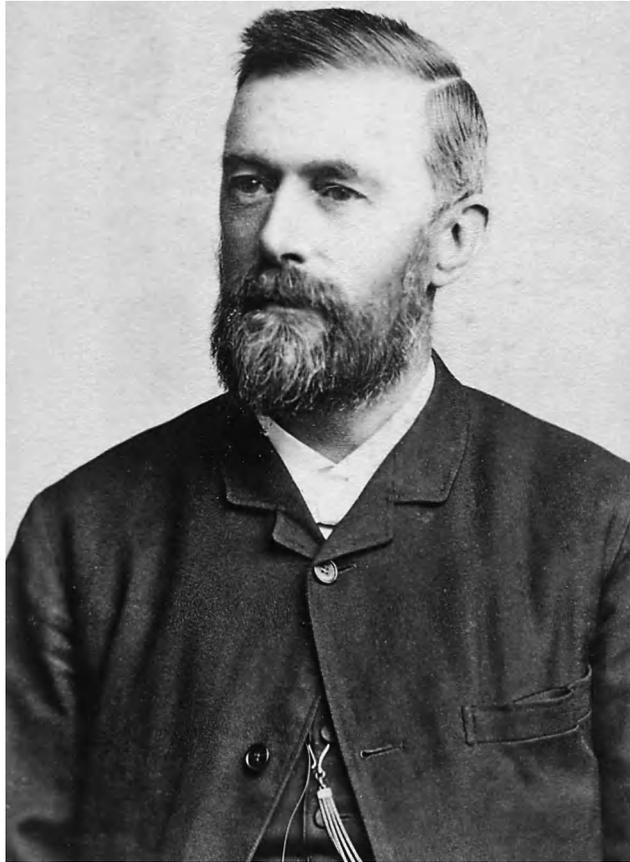


Fig. 15. The Revd. George Fletcher (1838–1916).

‘gratitude to Almighty God, and to his faithful servants, our beloved ministers and their co-workers for the unique fact that eleven quarterly meetings have rejoiced over a steady increase of members. It also earnestly prays that the Revds. Josiah Banham and Joseph Rhodes may realise a continuance of Divine Favor (*sic*) in their impending removal to other spheres of labor (*sic*)’.<sup>166</sup>

At the class leaders’ meeting on 18 November 1891, ‘Mr. Distin having come back to reside in Bristol his return among us was very heartily welcomed...and he was unanimously reappointed leader and permission given to him to hold the class meetings at his own residence, – Ashley Road’.<sup>167</sup> Very soon he was back into the full swing of his Christian work. On 13 January 1892 he was unanimously thanked for his service at Wesley Hall and was re-elected one of the society stewards and a member of the Old Market Sunday school committee. At this time although Distin had discontinued his ‘Diary’ his many activities can be, in part, reconstructed from the pages of the nondenominational nonconformist monthly newspaper, *The Bristol Christian Leader*.<sup>168</sup>

The Portland Street circuit schedules from the September quarter 1886 to March 1895 show that whilst his Tuesday evening class at Old Market began with seven members and rarely

166. *Ibid.* 37979/4a, pp. 136–7.

167. *Ibid.* 37329/3b.

168. e.g. *BCL* 15 Jan. 1892, p. 24; 15 Mar. 1892, p. 125.

numbered more than twelve, his Wesley Hall class which began in the June quarter of 1888 with ten men, rose to 48 in the September quarter of 1889, reached 71 in the March quarter of 1892 and thereafter never dropped below 60.<sup>169</sup>

By the time of the 14th anniversary of the Old Market Street bible class in 1894, the temporal work at Wesley Hall was flourishing with members, providing a thriving savings' bank and burial and medical societies.<sup>170</sup> Some of those who helped Distin and Parsons were involved in the establishment of the Bristol Wesleyan Methodist Mission Band Union, which was formed following a mission workers' convention in Old King Street chapel in 1891 or 1892. The Union organised conventions, promoted the establishment of mission bands, held open-air services, advanced the principles of temperance and established a registry for employers and employees.<sup>171</sup>

The importance which Distin placed on his involvement with the Old Market Street bible classes and Barrow Lane can be seen in the last piece he wrote, *A Farewell Letter from an Old Friend and Fellow-Worker to the many who have been associated with him in Church, Sunday School, Bible Class, and Local Preacher's Work* (Bristol, 1898). He assured his fellow workers of how hard he had always striven for his Master, in spite of his 'busy life which left little leisure amidst the long toil of hand and brain for that close study of His Word in which I delighted'. His letter is full of Christian hope and of his 'great joy in testifying that great affiliation brings us back to great simplicity in faith and love'. He tells his fellow workers that he greatly enjoyed modern theology, studied it carefully and used his studies to address the questions he received during his young men's bible class work, but he never troubled them with the details of what he read, mere 'stale echoes of mental conflicts'. This moving letter clearly outlines the reasons behind his Christian work, and his methods of instruction.

Between 1891 and 1895 Distin was the circuit secretary and from 1892 to 1895 he was a member of the Bristol and Kingswood Methodist Committee and served on a sub-committee formed to look at the circuit boundaries.<sup>172</sup> Although this was a period of growth for the circuit, financially it was a lean time, partly due to the greatly diminished income from leasehold property in Old Market and Red Cross Streets. The circuit stewards bore a heavy financial load with much of the shortfall being met by Gardner and Perry, and by T.F.C. May, who made himself responsible for the deficiencies in the collections for 1890.

Although the work at Wesley Hall continued to be a source of pleasure, the class leaders' meeting on 5 September 1894 recorded that 'it was generally felt that although our ministers were working hard and had proved most faithful to their church and congregation, the church herself was not in the spiritual state which those who were most deeply concerned would wish'.<sup>173</sup> This proved to be partly as a result of the weakness of the Methodist system, which required ministers to move chapel every three years, but here it was only a temporary setback in a work which continued to expand. Thirty years later the old chapel was demolished and replaced by Methodist Central Hall (between 1923 and 1924).

169. BRO, 21780/25-6. Distin's was the largest of three classes at Wesley Hall and he took great pains with and derived much pleasure from this work.

170. *BCL* 15 Oct. 1894, p. 348. The public meeting at the anniversary was presided over by H.C. Perry. All of these had been established as early as 1891 together with a Mutual Aid Society and a library of 830 volumes: *ibid.* 15 Mar. 1892, p. 100.

171. *Ibid.* 15 Mar. 1896, pp. 109-10. The Mission Band Union provided a valuable adjunct to the work at Wesley Hall.

172. BRO, 37979/4a, pp. 171, 185, 199, 206; see also pp. 207, 211, 214, 223, 224.

173. *Ibid.* 37329/3b.

*Relationships Between Nonconformist Denominations in Bristol in the Late 19th Century*

One of the striking features of Distin's 'Diary' is the number of services which he conducted for denominations other than his own (Table 2). Relations between members of the U.M.F.C. and the Wesleyans remain strained as a result of the events which led to the secession of the former, but this antagonism declined over time. The Baptists and Congregational churches were in general sympathy with each other;<sup>174</sup> for example the diary of the Revd. Lawrence Henry Byrnes, minister of Pembroke Congregational chapel, Oakfield Road, from 1869 to 1890, records his attendance at services at Buckingham Baptist chapel, Clifton, and the United Mission services based in the Victoria Rooms.<sup>175</sup> By the 1880s there was harmony amongst Bristol nonconformists of all denominations, and the leading Baptist minister in the city, Dr. Richard Glover (1838–1919), was an ardent champion of 'Christian Unity'.<sup>176</sup> As an example of the unity of the nonconformists in Bristol, when the new Congregational chapel in Totterdown was opened on 5 January 1886 it was the Wesleyan minister Mark Guy Pearse who preached the first sermon.<sup>177</sup> The increasing co-operation among Bristol nonconformists was marked by the launch of *The Bristol Christian Leader*, published monthly from 15 December 1891 for most of the decade.<sup>178</sup> The newspaper made 'its appearance at a time of unprecedented religious activity and vitality' in the city.

The most potent sign of local Christian unity was an exchange of pulpits on 17 January 1892, which embraced every major Protestant denomination except the Established Church and the Unitarians.<sup>179</sup> The success of this soon to be annual event helped the decision to create a 'Free Church Parish' out of the whole city in order to ensure that every street and house received regular visits from Christian workers.<sup>180</sup> The next logical development was an annual united communion service. The first was held in June 1894.<sup>181</sup> These developments mirrored those which were taking place nationally at this time.<sup>182</sup> The Revd. Urijah Rees Thomas (1839–1901), when addressing the Congregational Union of England and Wales in 1894, described some of the evils of competition amongst the Free Churches and urged cooperation and brotherhood instead of rivalry.<sup>183</sup> *The Bristol Mercury* was so impressed by these developments that following the first annual exchange of pulpits in January 1895 the editor wrote that 'it not only tends to a good understanding and to

174. This is also shown by looking at the membership roll of Buckingham Baptist chapel, Clifton, during the pastorate of the Revd. John Penny (1821–91) between 1860 and 1883 when Wesleyans, Bible Christians, United Free Methodists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists were admitted as members: M.J. Crossley Evans, *By God's Grace and to God's Glory: An Account of the Life and Times of Buckingham Chapel, Clifton, Bristol 1847–1997* (Bristol, 1997), p. 9.

175. *BCL* 15 Jan. 1894, p. 54; 15 Mar. 1894, pp. 116–18. The sermons of well-known visiting preachers, usually announced in the press, attracted large congregations composed of many denominations as for Jackson Wray at Clifton Down in August 1888 and Silas Hocking at Pembroke chapel in June 1898: MS diary of the Revd. L.H. Byrnes, II, 18 Aug. 1888, 26 June 1898.

176. He preached a series of important sermons on the subject, one of which was reported in *BCL* 15 Nov. 1893, pp. 329–36; 15 Dec. 1893, p. 21; and taken up by *The Christian World*. He attended the Grindelwald Reunion Conferences in Switzerland in 1893 and 1894.

177. *BCL* 15 Aug. 1893, pp. 245–9.

178. The latest copy held in the Bristol Reference Library is dated 15 Mar. 1896.

179. *BCL* 15 Feb. 1892, pp. 52–4.

180. *Ibid.* 15 Mar. 1892, pp. 110–11.

181. *Ibid.* 15 June 1894, p. 225; 14 July 1894, pp. 251–2.

182. J. Munsey Turner, *Conflict and Reconciliation: Studies in Methodism and Ecumenism in England 1740–1982* (1985), chapter 9, 'From Lunn to Flew – Methodism and the Wider Ecumenism 1890–1955', pp. 173–93.

183. *BCL* 15 Oct. 1894, p. 344; 15 Nov. 1894, pp. 355–8.

actual sympathy between the various branches of nonconformity, but it is also a convincing evidence of the real unity which underlies the outward differences of the Free Churches'. Moreover, 'in Bristol it can be said that the union which it implies amongst the Free Churches is not confined to nonconformity, but extends in a great measure to the members of the Established Church'.<sup>184</sup> The work culminated in the formation in February 1896 of the Bristol Free Church Council under the presidency of the mayor, W. Howell Davies. This was created to enable the nonconformist churches to take combined action on a wide range of issues.<sup>185</sup>

*Distin, Nonconformity and the Church of England in Bristol*

In an age when sectarian divisions were often tightly drawn, in Bristol the boundaries between the Established Church and nonconformity were not rigid and allowed interchange of ideas and fellowship, except with the growing Anglo-Catholic movement. This is clearly to be seen in the biography of Bristol's leading Wesleyan layman, Samuel Budgett (1794–1851) of Kingswood, who ran a large provision warehouse in the city in Nelson Street.<sup>186</sup> An example of the communion of Protestants of all shades in the city is the publication in 1860 of a single volume of sermons containing the works of ministers of numerous different Protestant denominations.<sup>187</sup> Contributors included Baptist, Independent, Wesleyan and United Methodist, Presbyterian, and Brethren ministers. Amongst the Anglicans were the dean of Bristol Dr. Gilbert Elliot (1800–91), Dr. David Alfred Doudney (Fig. 5) and the latter's close friend the Revd. Samuel Abraham Walker (1804–79).<sup>188</sup> Walker held the living of St. Mary le Port from 1857 until his death, and was well-liked and respected by the Distin family. He published many tracts, a few books and even a novel.<sup>189</sup> His strong belief in the mission of the Church and his Evangelical views led him to organise an annual conference in Clifton of Christians without regard to denomination. This enjoyed great popularity and support. His death was mourned throughout the city, and at Broadmead Baptist chapel the minister 'blessed God for the life of usefulness that had just been closed [and which]...could ill be spared'.<sup>190</sup> Walker was succeeded as rector of St. Mary le Port by James

184. Quoted in *ibid.* 15 Feb. 1895, p. 69.

185. *Ibid.* 15 Mar. 1896, p. 89. Its first meeting was held on 17 February 1896. The secretary, John, later Sir John, Swaish (c.1850–1931), was a pawnbroker, a deacon of Broadmead Baptist chapel and served as lord mayor between 1913 and 1915. A good example of this cooperation is shown at Buckingham Baptist chapel, Clifton, during the pastorate of Revd. Thomas Roberts Williams (1866–1953) between 1893 and 1901: M.J. Crossley Evans, *By God's Grace and to God's Glory*, p. 13.

186. W. Arthur, *The Successful Merchant* (1852), pp. 301–3, contains a testimony from Mr. Gaskin, the incumbent of Kingswood, to Budgett's 'co-operation of the most cordial and liberal kind'.

187. *Twenty-Five Sermons by Twenty-Five Bristol Ministers of various Christian Denominations, originally published as 'The Bristol Pulpit', in Twenty-Five Numbers* (Bristol, 1860). See H.E. Meller, *Leisure and the Changing City, 1870–1914* (1976), pp. 77–84. Many nonconformists contributed to the restoration and building programme at the cathedral in the 1880s.

188. Walker's sermon in the collection entitled 'The World's Obligation to God's Saints' was preached on 1 May 1859, the day appointed for General Thanksgiving for the Suppression of the Indian Mutiny.

189. *From the Curate to the Convent*: it pointed out the perils of the Roman Catholic church.

190. *Western Daily Press*, 1 Dec. 1879. A further example of Walker's ecumenical attitude is his co-secretaryship of the Turkish Missions' Aid Society with the Revd. Lawrence Henry Byrnes (1822–1902), the minister of Pembroke Congregational chapel, Oakfield Road: *Wright's Bristol Directory* (1878), p. 403. For appreciations of Walker's ministry, see J.B. Taylor, *Arno's Vale* (Bristol, c.1885), pp. 22–3; D.A. Doudney, *Retracings and Renewings; or Gleanings from a Journal Extending over nearly Half-a-Century* (4th edn., c.1883), pp. 518, 523, 528–33; *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 5, 8 Dec. 1879. Doudney conducted the funeral and gave a funerary oration to a huge gathering in the Colston Hall: *Wright's Bristol Directory* (1880), p. 437.

Ormiston (1838–1916) of Dudley, editor of *The British Protestant*, a man of similar views and a respected theological author.<sup>191</sup> The warm mutual regard between successive rectors of St. Mary le Port and the Distin family was sustained notwithstanding their denominational differences. Ormiston continued Walker's work. Both Ormiston and Doudney were contributors to *The 'Calvinistic Pulpit', containing sermons by able ministers of the Gospel...Both Church and Dissent* (1891, 1892)<sup>192</sup> and Ormiston was the honorary secretary of the United Bristol Mission 'for uniting all orthodox Christians without denominational distinction in an effort to carry the Gospel into the abodes of the most necessitous people in Bristol, who systematically absent themselves from the public means of grace'.<sup>193</sup> This work was close to Distin's heart and elicited his financial and personal support. Consequently, it is not surprising that Ormiston should have asked Distin, as a mark of his friendship and personal regard, to serve as the rector's warden of the parish church. Although it must have been highly unusual for an active Wesleyan local preacher to hold such an office, Distin served as churchwarden between the Easter vestry meetings in 1893 and 1894.<sup>194</sup> According to Distin's daughter, her father was both humbled and honoured by this distinction. During his year in office he regularly attended Sunday services at St. Mary le Port and sat with his young wife in the churchwarden's pew at the front of the church. He continued to attend occasional services at the parish church until he left Bristol for Clevedon.

Distin's warm and friendly relationships with many within the Church of England were mirrored by those of his chief, C. R. Parsons, who as a young man had been invited to take holy orders in the Established Church. In *Sunny Memories of a Long Life* (1914), Parsons stated that in the work of the Old Market men's bible class 'in the happiest manner we have worked side by side with our Anglican friends'. Many Anglican clergymen had addressed the class, he had spoken from Anglican pulpits, and 'the clergy have visited me in sickness, come to me for counsel, and (we) have often knelt together in prayer'.<sup>195</sup> Neither Distin nor Parsons was alone among Bristol's Wesleyan local preachers and leading laymen in recording their regard for local evangelical Anglican clergy.<sup>196</sup>

C.R. Parsons expressed his ecumenical vision in his novel *The Little Woman in Grey: Scenes and Incidents in Home Mission Work*. The heroine, Miss Betsey Vivian, 'the Little Woman in Grey' of the story, believed 'the ecclesiastical partitions which separated the different sects in that large and populous parish she looked upon as only paper walls, which would be immediately burned up when the day of judgement came'. The parish in which she worked, St. Timothy's, was based on

191. Ormiston had the reputation of being a Protestant firebrand. *The Bristol Times and Mirror*, 7 Apr. 1883, p. 6, gives an account of a public meeting held at the Bristol Athenaeum to protest at the new stone reredos erected in Christ Church with St. Ewen's, Broad Street. Ormiston quoting the 35th Article of the Church of England stated that even in Popish countries 'he never saw anything more offensive than this half life sized effigy of a dead man' – the crucified Christ. The rector of Christ Church, Revd. Edward P. Cole, called Ormiston (to laughter) 'a religious agitator – something like a dynamite clock, wound up to blow up somebody'. Ormiston died at 3 Berkeley Square, Clifton, on 30 September 1916, aged 78. Ormiston's *The Satan of Scripture* (1876) was re-issued in an abridged form as *The Lawlessness of the Age*, as late as 1929 by the Sovereign Grace Union, of which he had been a vice-president.
192. *The 'Calvinistic Pulpit'* I, pp. 41–4; II, pp. 16–19, 41–3.
193. *Wright's Bristol Directory* (1904), p. 808. The Mission employed four missionaries.
194. The records of the church were destroyed during the Blitz, The University of Bristol's copy of *Wright's Bristol Directory* (1894), presented to the Bristol Medico-Chirurgical Society on 9 January 1894, enables (p. 632) the period of Distin's church wardenship to be established.
195. Parsons, *Sunny Memories of a Long Life*, pp. 174–7.
196. Peter Gabbitass, 'the Clifton poet' and Wesleyan local preacher, paid tribute to the support and encouragement that he had received from the vicar of Christ Church, Clifton. D.A. Doudney and Mrs. H.O. Adams, *Memoir of the Rev. D.A. Doudney, D.D.* (1893), pp. 265–6 for the friendship between Doudney and Spurgeon.

Parsons's own field of work, the parishes of SS. Philip and Jacob and St. James, Bristol. Half-way through the book we are introduced to a Methodist local preacher, Jonah Wakefield, who moves to the city to live with his sister and rents a pew in the local Methodist chapel 'but occasionally his place was vacant and he was to be seen worshipping in the parish church'. In the novel Jonah says: 'I have a great respect for the vicar, because he preaches Christ and not himself. Then I am hoping the time will come round when the different lots of religious folks hereabouts will be drawn closer together'. In due course 'the vicar consulted him and elected him as his churchwarden: the Methodists looked up to him as a prince in Israel'. Here Parsons anticipated by two or three years Distin's appointment as one of the churchwardens of St. Mary le Port. Many other features of the book capture the religious feelings of the age in which it was written, not least in the description of the Revival at which the services were conducted by the vicar, the Methodist and the Baptist pastors and others.<sup>197</sup>

Distin's personal regard for the lives and the witness of many ministers of the Established Church was borne out both by his daughter's comments and by his own recorded tribute to the writings of the Revd. Dr. Arthur Stanley (1815–81), dean of Westminster. Dean Stanley, whom Distin quoted in a valedictory letter to his fellow workers at Old Market Street Wesleyan chapel,<sup>198</sup> endeared himself to nonconformists by wishing to make the Established Church more comprehensive, adopting a conciliatory and positive stance towards Protestant dissenters and, like Ormiston, by attacking ritualists.<sup>199</sup> He particularly distinguished himself in supporting the movement which culminated in the Burial Act of 1880 (bitterly opposed by many Anglican clergy), which allowed burial services other than those of the Church of England to be used in the churchyards and cemeteries of the Established Church. This was a charged subject between the 1870s and 1890s,<sup>200</sup> and *The Christian World*, which is believed to have been read by Distin, was particularly concerned with the issue.<sup>201</sup>

In addition to the close personal relationships between individuals, there were a number of occasions in Bristol in the 1880s and 1890s when the Anglican clergy demonstrated their support for their nonconformist brethren and *vice versa*. The positive attitude which developed between most of the Anglican clergy of the city and the nonconformists was clearly shown in 1882 when the Congregational Union of England and Wales held its autumnal assembly in the largest nonconformist chapel in the city, Broadmead Baptist. The dean, Dr. Elliot; the senior canon, the Revd. Edward Girdlestone; and more than thirty parochial clergymen in the city formed a deputation of welcome and presented greetings on behalf of a total of sixty of their number to the assembled ministers and delegates.<sup>202</sup>

197. C.R. Parsons, *The Little Woman in Grey: Scenes and Incidents in Home Mission Work* (c.1891), pp. 13, 126, 133, 220–1, 262.

198. The Dean of Windsor and H. Bolitho (eds.), *A Victorian Dean: A Memoir of Arthur Stanley, Dean of Westminster with many new and unpublished letters* (1930); P. Hammond, *Dean Stanley of Westminster: a Life* (1987), see especially pp. 168–70, 186, 206–7.

199. R.E. Prothero, *The Life and Correspondence of Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, D.D., late Dean of Westminster* (3rd. edn., 2 vols., 1894). It is of interest to note that Dr. Stanley addressed the students at University College, Bristol, on 'The Education of After-Life' on 27 October 1877: *ibid.* II, p. 506.

200. The hostile attitude of the parson of Whitchurch to the burial of nonconformists in his churchyard led to questions being asked in the House: *BCL* 15 July 1893, pp. 225, 236. Another well-publicised case took place at Caldicot, near Chepstow: *ibid.* 16 Apr. 1894, pp. 129–30.

201. R. Fletcher, *The Akenham Burial Case* (1974), outlines one of the most notorious cases (1878); p. 233 notes that the *Christian World* had a list of subscribers, including persons from Bristol, who helped to defray the legal costs of the editor who first brought the case to the notice of the public.

202. D.M. Thomas, *Urijah Rees Thomas* (1902), pp. 216–32. The respect and affection that many nonconformists felt for the dean and Canon Girdlestone can be seen by the attendance of nonconformist ministers at their funerals: e.g. MS. diary of the Revd. L.H. Byrnes, II, 9 Dec. 1884, 14 Aug. 1891.

In 1884 Bishop Ellicott formed a committee to look at the welfare of the poor in the city. Amongst those invited to serve on it was the Revd. H. Arnold Thomas (1848–1924), minister of Highbury chapel. In 1899, during Arnold Thomas's chairmanship, the Congregational Union of England and Wales again met in Bristol and was welcomed by the new bishop, Dr. Forrest Browne, in a similar manner to that given by Dean Elliot seventeen years before.<sup>203</sup>

Elliot's successor as dean, Dr. Francis Pigou (1832–1916), although not in sympathy with nonconformity, was none-the-less praised in the pages of *The Bristol Christian Leader* for his piety, energy and breadth of thought. The Anglo-Catholic vicar of St. Jude's, Henry John Wilkins (1865–1940), was praised for his Christian work amongst the transient population of the lodging and doss houses of his slum parish.<sup>204</sup> The Revd. L.H. Byrnes has left in his diary a delightful vignette of the personal cordiality which existed between the Anglican and nonconformist ministers in the city. On 16 May 1892 he notes that he went to the county ground to watch Australia play Gloucester at cricket and 'sat by the Dean of Bristol and had some talk with him and he pressed me to share some of his lunch'.<sup>205</sup> In 1893 the Revd. Samuel Augustus Barnett (1844–1913),<sup>206</sup> warden and co-founder of Toynbee Hall, Whitechapel, an ardent socialist who made repeated and compelling calls for social reform and worked tirelessly in the slums of the East End, was made a canon of Bristol cathedral. The senior nonconformist minister in the city, Urijah Rees Thomas of Redland Park Congregational chapel, held in Barnett's honour a welcome breakfast which was attended by clerical representatives of the Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians in the city as well as by many ministers of the Established Church from the poorer parts of Bristol.<sup>207</sup> By the 1890s lectures on secular subjects by ministers of the Establishment to nonconformists and vice versa were wholly accepted.<sup>208</sup>

Another feature of the sympathy which existed between many nonconformists and members of the Church of England can be seen in Bristol by the number of churches which were erected with monies donated by members of a different denomination. Examples are numerous. In the years 1859–61 Mr. Holmes 'a large-hearted Dissenter of the city' gave £3,000 towards the erection of St. Luke's, Bedminster, situated in a poor and populous part of the city, on the understanding that the trustees of the new church appointed Dr. Doudney as their incumbent, a provision which was accepted.<sup>209</sup>

203. In 1903 the Church Congress met in Bristol and Arnold Thomas made a speech of welcome to the delegates on behalf of the Free Churches: N. Micklem, *Arnold Thomas of Bristol: Collected Papers and Addresses* (1925), p. 54. The bishop makes no mention of this in his autobiography: G.F. Browne, *The Recollections of a Bishop* (2nd edn., 1915). I am indebted to Arnold Thomas's cousin, Mr. Julian Matthews, for providing me with a copy of a cutting entitled 'Men of Mark in the West' and dated 10 April 1905 taken from an unidentified newspaper. For the mission of the Established church and the nonconformists to the poor, see Meller, *Leisure and the Changing City*, pp. 77–84, 130–4, 161–205.
204. *BCL* 15 June 1892, p. 199; 15 Nov. 1892, pp. 349–50. Wilkins was curate of St. Jude's 1890–4 and vicar 1894–1900, and rector of Westbury and minister of Redland chapel 1900–40. He took an active interest in the better housing of the poor and wrote a tract on the subject in 1893: Pike (ed.), *Bristol in 1898: Contemporary Biographies*, I, p. 117.
205. MS Diary of the Revd. L.H. Byrnes, II, 16 May 1892.
206. Canon Barnett, together with the principal of University College, Bristol, Dr. John Percival, bishop of Hereford, became one of the reviled 'pro-Boers', who opposed the British imperialism which led to the outbreak of war in 1899: G. Neville, *Edward Lee Hicks, Bishop of Lincoln 1910–1919* (Lincoln, 1994), p. 8.
207. *BCL* 15 Jan. 1894, pp. 34–5; Meller, *Leisure and the Changing City*, pp. 203–4.
208. e.g. the dean, Dr. Pigou, talking to the Congregational Broad Plain Mission on his enthusiasm for using a microscope and the Revd. F.W. Brown, minister of Hope chapel, Hotwells, talking at St. Bartholomew's parish rooms on 'Alfred the Great'. For the latter, *BCL* 15 Feb. 1895, p. 97.
209. D.A. Doudney, *Try and Try Again; Being An Outline of Two Youths who Became Clergymen of the Church of England* (c.1885), pp. 240–2; Doudney and Adams, *Memoir of the Rev. D.A. Doudney*, pp. 178–81. Other examples include Grenville Place Methodist chapel, Hotwells, which was largely built with monies from an Anglican benefactor.

*Church Attendance in Bristol in 1881*

When considering the attendance at the services conducted by Distin we are greatly helped by the results of a survey which was taken in every place of worship in Bristol on Sunday 30 October 1881 and published in the pages of the *Western Daily Press*. This showed that about 40% of the population attended church or chapel compared with Liverpool's 19.9%.<sup>210</sup> Of a total church attendance of 109,452 people in the borough, the main Protestant denominations (Anglican, Baptist, Congregational, Wesleyan and U.M.F.C.) accounted for almost 70%<sup>211</sup> (see Tables 6, 7 and 8). The survey was undertaken with the help of a large number of clergymen and ministers and 600 enumerators.

From Distin's 'Diary' we know that on the morning of 30 October 1881 he preached at Mount Tabor Primitive Methodist chapel, Newfoundland Road, on the text John 20:28 and from the census returns that he had a congregation of 89. The same sources reveal that in the evening he preached at Spring Place U.M.F.C., Pyle Hill, Totterdown, on Exodus 10:29 and Proverbs 29:1 to a congregation of 92.

One of the smallest places of worship where services were taken by Distin was Tower Street Baptist Chapel (Table 7). At the other end of the spectrum, Oxford Street U.M.F.C. chapel, where he was a regular preacher during the period, may have had regularly morning and evening congregations in excess of 200 (Table 8).

Table 6. Attendance at the main Protestant churches in Bristol on 30 October 1881.

Denomination	Number of churches/chapels	Attendance
Church of England	69	45,518
Congregational	25	11,588
Baptist	17	9,127
Wesleyan Methodist	14	8,116
U.M.F. Methodist	12	4,203
Christian Brethren	8	4,422
Primitive Methodist	5	1,452
Salvation Army	4	10,146
Bible Christian	3	1,592
	<b>157</b>	<b>96,164</b>

*Distin's Withdrawal From the United Methodist Free Church and his Involvement with the Portland Street Circuit Local Preachers*

A major change in Distin's religious life took place in 1881 when his parents became 'alienated' and withdrew from the U.M.F.C. owing to 'the influence of the preachers of the North circuit'.<sup>212</sup>

210. Meller, *Leisure and the Changing City*, pp. 79–80. Surveys were taken of religious affiliation in 1841 by the Bristol statistical survey and in the 1851 Census.

211. W. and F. Morgan, *Religious Census of Bristol, Reprinted from the Western Daily Press* (Bristol, 1881), pp. 9–14. The total attendance includes small Protestant groups such as the Unitarians, Swedenborgians, Moravians, Christadelphians, and Quakers, together with the Red, White and Blue Temperance Army and the Bedminster White Ribbon Temperance Army.

212. 'The preachers' mentioned are not believed to have been the Revds. William Morley Hunter, William Lock Smith, and T.F. Cock but the local preachers. Morley Hunter (1823–87) was president of the U.M.F.C. Assembly in 1880 and served the Bristol North circuit between 1879 and 1883: Beckerlegge, *United Methodist Ministers and Their Circuits*, p. 123.

Table 7. Adult attendance on 30 October 1881 at some chapels other than those belonging to the U.M.F.C. where Distin preached between 1876 and 1889.

Denomination	Attendance		
	Morning	Evening	Total
<i>(a) Within the Borough</i>			
<u>Baptist</u>			
Tower Street	29	55	84
<u>Wesleyan Methodist</u>			
Ebenezer, Old King Street	343	309	652
Iron Chapel, Grafton Street, St. Philip's Marsh	87	301	388
Langton Street	299	309	608
Bedminster	153	252	405
Rose Street		98	98
Portland Street, Kingsdown	338	323	661
Old Market Street	340	490	830
Baptist Mills	712	882	1,594
<u>Bible Christian Methodist</u>			
Gladstone Street, Stapleton Road	171	239	410
<u>City Mission</u>			
Cumberland Street	202	326	528
<u>Primitive Methodist</u>			
Ebenezer, Orchard Street, Batch	106	195	301
Eastville Mission Room, Mina Road	40	120	160
Mount Tabor, Newfoundland Street	89	112	201
<u>Congregational</u>			
Kingsland Road, The Dings, St. Philip's	157	246	403
<i>(b) Outside the Borough</i>			
<u>Wesleyan</u>			
Ashley Down	94	114	208
<u>Primitive Methodist</u>			
Fishponds	103	140	243
Rose Green	96	52	148
<u>United Methodist Free Church</u>			
Horfield	180	147	327
Russell Town	85	132	217
Eastville	145	103	248
Easton	98	151	249

Exactly what the reasons were, personal or doctrinal, we do not know. In November 1881 Distin withdrew from preaching on the North circuit fully and from the South and East circuits partially. Many of the northern chapels had been visited by Distin regularly. In 1882 he preached fewer sermons, concentrating his efforts on his bible class work and on his Sunday school superintendency at Eastville.<sup>213</sup> He also began to preach more regularly in various Primitive Methodist chapels in Bristol.

213. Distin, 'Diary', unfoliated.

Table 8. Attendance at the U.M.F. chapels in Bristol on 30 October 1881.

Chapel	Attendance		Total
	Morning	Evening	
Milk Street	148	217	365
Tyler's Fields'	125	140	265
St. George's Road	21	50	71
Hebron, Bedminster	470	522	992
Portwall Lane	70	140	210
Spring Place, Pyle Hill	45	92	147
Ashton Gate	79	148	217
Oxford Street, Totterdown	240	241	481
Trinity Road, Newtown	210	329	539
Baptist Mills	135	150	285
Redland Grove	242	219	461
Mount of Olives Chapel, Durdham Down	60	110	170

*Note*

A number, unspecified, will have attended chapel both morning and evening.

The dissatisfaction which George and Emma Distin felt with the local preachers on the North circuit was deeply held. They were not alone in their feelings, although many other people remained in the church and the circuit. Dissatisfaction and anger mounted. Although the exact reason for these feelings has been lost, the sentiments they inspired were real. Ten years later the superintendent minister, the Revd. William Yates (1847–1934),<sup>214</sup> stated that the circuit had carried 'a great burden for years'. The departure of the Distins had anticipated the crisis which successive ministers failed to address. The abscess finally burst when Yates confronted the issues. Four local preachers were variously described as being expelled or 'dropped' by the North circuit quarterly meeting in June 1892. Yates found that having 'sown the wind' he was to 'reap the whirlwind'. Four country chapels withdrew from the circuit; there was a haemorrhage of members to other denominations and widespread and adverse publicity in the pages of *The Bristol Mercury*, *The Bristol Christian Leader* and *The Christian World*. Yates made many mistakes. The dispute escalated with 'the unconstitutional removal of over 30 preachers from the plan'. Almost 50 'accredited preachers' memorialised the Annual Assembly of the U.M.F.C., and hopes were expressed 'that an amicable conclusion may be brought to what has long since become a public disgrace to Free Methodism'.<sup>215</sup> Peter Gabbitass came to the aid of the North circuit and became a local preacher on the plan after the removal or resignation of the majority of local preachers from the circuit, and it is quite probable that J.P. Distin added his name to the plan of his old circuit in the light of his views, and the views of his parents, on the subject of the preachers on the circuit. When the dispute was at its height it was said that the whole membership of the North circuit could fit into Milk Street chapel which had seating for 900 people.<sup>216</sup> Although the dispute was resolved, the

214. Yates, who had been a missionary in Ribo, East Africa, served Bristol North between 1889 and 1896: Beckerlegge, *United Methodist Ministers and their Circuits*, p. 267.

215. *BCL* 15 July 1892, pp. 230–1; 15 Aug. 1892, pp. 286–7; 15 Sept. 1892, pp. 317–9; 15 Jan. 1893, p. 36; 15 Feb. 1893, p. 65; 15 Mar. 1893, p. 109; 15 May 1893, p. 147; 15 June 1893, pp. 178–9; 15 July 1893, p. 224; 15 Aug. 1893, p. 234.

216. *Arrowsmith's Dictionary of Bristol* (1906 edn.), p. 57.

damage inflicted on the circuit and on Milk Street chapel in particular was profound. At the time of the 40th anniversary of the opening of the chapel in December 1894, the combined membership of Milk Street and its mission to Tyler's Fields stood at 152.<sup>217</sup> No wonder *The Bristol Christian Leader* spoke of the 'former glories of Milk Street'.<sup>218</sup>

According to the 1881 national census Distin had by this time abandoned his work as an insurance agent. He is described as a provision dealer and was working with his father.<sup>219</sup> In April 1884 his father retired and Distin succeeded him in business as a grocer and cheese, bacon and butter factor. Ties of loyalty and affection had kept Distin within the U.M.F.C. and actively involved in the work of Eastville chapel, even after his parents' withdrawal from the church, but the decision to take over his father's business led him to make a clean break. He left the chapel at Eastville<sup>220</sup> and joined St. Philip's Wesleyan chapel, Old Market, on the Portland Street circuit.

He attended his first Portland Street circuit local preachers' meeting on 3 November 1884. It was reported that Brother Distin had been recommended by their brethren in the Methodist Free Church, and the minutes of the meeting record that he 'was very cordially received on the plan as a fully accredited local preacher'.<sup>221</sup> He steadily grew in the esteem and regard of the Wesleyans and by September 1889 we find him listed together with Councillor Charles E.L. Gardner (of whom we have already written) as one of the trustees of Wesley Hall, Barrow Lane, and also as one of the trustees of St. Philip's chapel.<sup>222</sup>

Until his illness in 1889 Distin was a regular attender at the meetings of the local preachers attached to the Portland Street circuit, where such topics as the 'Authenticity of Scripture', 'the Sabbath Question' and 'Modern Infidelity' were discussed.<sup>223</sup> In February 1886 we find Distin suggesting the extension of the circuit towards Lawrence Hill and offering land on 'loan for the erection of a Mission Room'.

In September 1886 Distin was proposed to serve on the recently formed Bristol Wesleyan Methodist lay preachers' association. At the same meeting he was asked to join with the Revds. Josiah Banham and Joseph Rhodes and Brother Redwood to 'report on the desirability of opening a preaching station' in the Newtown area of Barton Hill. The report was favourable, but at the meeting on 6 March 1887 a letter from Distin was read in which he reported that the negotiations to obtain a suitable preaching place were at a standstill because too much money was being demanded. These difficulties were soon overcome and, as mentioned above, the meeting place was first opened in 1888. The minutes of the meeting on 3 September 1888 record that 'very encouraging accounts were given by Bro. Distin and others of progress made at Barrow Lane'.<sup>224</sup> In addition Brothers Distin, Redwood and Gardner were keen to 'open new ground' between Old

217. *BCL* 15 Dec. 1894, p. 35. Tyler's Fields closed in 1920.

218. *Ibid.* 15 Mar, 1896, p. 112. See Edwards, 'Milk Street and the United Methodist Churches of Bristol', pp. 1–12.

219. PRO, RG 11/ 2506, ED 1, f. 13.

220. Distin, 'Diary'.

221. BRO, R 1780/16a–b, minute book of the local preachers of the Portland Street circuit, p. 26.

222. *Ibid.* 21780/26, the circuit schedule 1889–1895, p. 47, lists both C.E.L. Gardner and J. P. Distin amongst the trustees of Wesley Hall, Barrow Lane.

223. Portland Street circuit was served by two ministers and two supernumeraries. It comprised Portland chapel; Old Market Street; St. Philip's Marsh (the Iron chapel); Redwick; and, after 1889, Wesley Hall. The King Street circuit was also served by two ministers and two supernumeraries and consisted of Ebenezer, Old King Street; Cotham chapel, Redland Road; Ashley Down; and Filton. There were three other circuits; Langton Street (south of the river), Clifton, and Wesley.

224. BRO, R 1780/16a–b, pp. 35, 38, 39, 41, 48.

Market Street chapel and the boundary of the circuit, in the direction of Baptist Mills. Distin's involvement in the project was, however, curtailed firstly by his own serious illness (June 1889) and then by the illness and death of his wife.<sup>225</sup>

Distin took an active interest in ensuring the suitability of new local preachers on the circuit. On 2 March 1889 he warned the meeting about the dangers of admitting substitute preachers and 'as an instance of the danger of employing unknown substitutes...passed some severe strictures upon a sermon at Barrow Lane by an unnamed young man, on the subject of the woman taken in adultery'. At the same meeting he reported on the trial sermon of Arthur Derham Baskerville (1867–1940), whose manner, earnestness, and 'evident deep toned piety' pleased him. However, he reported that Baskerville's prayer 'lacked force'; it was 'a communing with God, very profitable to one's self but not having sufficient "grip" upon a mixed congregation. The reading of the lesson was good and intelligent, but too quiet'. The 'sermon was, strictly speaking, no sermon at all, but a running commentary on the 23rd Psalm and perhaps would have been more acceptable to a circle of lads in a Sunday school, Mr Baskerville very wisely drew his illustrations from Thomson's *Land and the Book*'.<sup>226</sup> After a few other remarks Distin concluded by again expressing his great pleasure at the 'deep toned piety manifested throughout the service'. Brother Baskerville was accepted on the plan in April 1889, unanimously recommended as a candidate for the ministry by the circuit in March 1891, and subsequently went to study at Richmond College in September 1891, prior to ordination.<sup>227</sup>

Distin's health and personal circumstances meant that his attendance at meetings from the end of 1889 to the beginning of 1893 was irregular. In June 1895 he was not present when his friend Alderman Gardner's sister, Alice, was accepted on trial as the first woman local preacher on the circuit. In the following June we learn from the minutes that although he had moved to the Clevedon circuit, he would occasionally take services on his old circuit.<sup>228</sup> Distin did not wholly abandon the U.M.F.C. after 1884. He continued to request auxiliary preaching work from the church, although from 1884 until 1895, when he retired to Clevedon, he was a committed member of the Old Market Street Wesleyan congregation.

The interruptions in Distin's bible class, Sunday school, and preaching work were few. For a month between November and December 1880 his daughters Mary Emma (then aged 6/7) and Alice (aged 3/4) were seriously ill with an unspecified illness. Alice, in particular was affected. Distin suspended all work during this period. On 7 March 1888 he notes that his 'darling Alice died... aged 11 years and four months; Public duty suspended for two or three weeks by this great private

225. Ibid. pp. 54–6, 61–2; Distin, 'Diary'.

226. *The Land and the Book: or Biblical illustrations drawn from the manners and customs, the scenes and scenery of the Holy Land*, by William McClure Thomson (1806–94), first published in two volumes in London and New York in 1859, went through many editions in the 1870s and 1880s and was reprinted as recently as 1950 and 1985. I am grateful to Mr. M.T. Richardson for this information.

227. BRO, R 1780/16a–b, pp. 62, 67, 70, 78, 81, 98; 37979/4a, p. 161, 23 Mar. 1891. *The Methodist Book-Almanack* (1933), p. 33, states that Baskerville was ordained in 1894. In 1933 he lived in the manse at Helmsley, Yorkshire. He retired in 1936 after four years there and became supernumerary. By 1937 he had returned to Bristol and was living at 31 Cromwell Road, St. Andrew's: *The Methodist Manual and Almanack* (1937), p. 75. He died on 15 June 1940, aged 73, and probate was granted on 14 August 1940. His effects were valued at £522 11s. 8d: *The Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church* (1940), p. 183. Distin had almost certainly known him since he arrived in Bristol at the age of 17 (c.1884) and began to worship at Portland chapel. He was said to be patient, diligent, and cheerful, with a 'strong and simple faith'. In retirement he was an active member of Cotham church.

228. BRO, R 1780/16a–b. pp. 102, 108, 118, 120. Miss Alice Gardner subsequently became Mrs. Cook and moved to Rochester in the summer of 1896. By March 1898 there were 20 fully accredited local preachers on the plan. The minutes contain no record of Distin's death.

sorrow'.<sup>229</sup> The suspension and final termination of his 'Diary' in February 1889 was caused by his increasingly heavy burden of church work, by his own ill health and by the rapid advance in his wife's illness, phthisis pulmonatis, which resulted in her death almost eighteen months later.

*Distin's Mission to the Young*

We know from the records of Eastville U.M.F.C. Sunday school and from Grace Paget that Distin felt drawn especially to minister to the young. His early experiences in Kingswood at the age of five, the story of God calling the young Samuel (1 Samuel 3), and his belief in his own early call and setting aside for the Lord's work made him acutely sensitive to the intense spiritual perception and awareness that can be found in children. Consequently he was keen to focus his personal mission into one which awakened, fostered, developed and guided the young. His child-centric mission mirrored that of Dr. Doudney, many of whose written works were designed specifically with children in mind and printed in large type to be used by those who were learning to read.<sup>230</sup>

Two friendships helped to hone Distin's work with the young. The first was with Joseph Rhodes. We do not know when they first met, but it is likely to have been in 1883, and within a short time Distin had secured Rhodes as one of the speakers for his last Sunday school anniversary at Eastville. From 1884 until 1891 they worked together in close harmony and as fast friends in a wide variety of initiatives among the young, including juvenile missionary associations, which Distin pioneered at Eastville. Rhodes, a bluff Yorkshireman, was 'greatly beloved as a pastor, preacher, and friend. His preaching was simple, fervent, attractive, overflowing with devout affection, bright with anecdote and quotation, and was blessed to the conversion of many. He frequently said, "there is no joy under the stars like the pointing of a seeking soul to the Saviour". He delighted in prayer-meetings, and class-meetings...Few men have won more affection from those to whom he ministered. His naturally happy disposition made him a welcome visitor, his simple, cheerful piety deeply impressed all who knew him. He had a passionate love for the songs of Zion, and sang with heart and voice in the sanctuary and in the home'.<sup>231</sup> *The Bristol Christian Leader* in 1895 spoke of him as 'the sweet singer of Methodism'.<sup>232</sup>

The second friendship which strengthened Distin's ministry was that with Josiah Banham. Again the date of its commencement is not known but the friendship must have begun about the same time, c.1883/4 in the first year of Banham's ministry at Old King Street chapel. Banham is described in his obituary as 'buoyant in temperament and with an unaffected interest in his fellows, he attracted to himself all classes and conditions of people, who became bound to him as with hooks of steel. The young were always his friends...His preaching was in style simple, in spirit evangelical, in tone practical. Perhaps his deepest interest was with the young men who entered the ministry'.<sup>233</sup>

229. Distin, 'Diary'. BRO, 37979/4a, p. 138, 30 Dec. 1889, mentions his 'personal affliction' and the hope that he would soon be restored to perfect health; p. 150, 23 June 1890, refers to the death of his wife; and p. 207, 24 Sept. 1894, the death of his mother.

230. e.g., all undated, *The Gospel Preached to Babes; or a Mother's Little Talks about Jesus; Old Jonathan's Walks and Talks with his Grandchildren; Evenings with Jesus; or, Longing for the Beloved; Victory through the Blood of the Lamb; Walks and Talks with Jesus; or, Great Sinners and a Gracious Saviour Meeting and Greeting*.

231. *The Wesleyan Methodist Church, Minutes of Several Conversations at the 1902 Yearly Conference of the People called Methodists* (1902), pp. 134-5. Rhodes died on 29 November 1901 in the evening 'as he sat in the family circle singing favourite hymns'.

232. *BCL* 15 Jan. 1895, p. 55.

233. *The Wesleyan Methodist Church: Minutes of Several Conversations at the 1928 Yearly Conference of the People Called Methodists* (1928), p. 112. Banham was actively involved in Richmond College, and served as the secretary of its executive for many years. Out of his sixteen appointments eleven were in London and two in Bristol.

A particularly poignant example of Distin's mission to children survives in the text of the farewell letter written to his young daughter when on his deathbed. It is also noteworthy that on 20 October 1895, at a time when Distin's doctor had 'advised that (he) was, on no account, to take two services on one day' and he was engaged to deliver an address before the men and women's bible class at Ebenezer chapel, Old King Street, in the afternoon during their centenary celebrations, Distin and his wife had 'a divergence of opinion...(and) she reminded me that I had not business here this afternoon'. This was because he had conducted 'a hearty and a very pleasant children's service', an appointment he felt bound to keep, at Victoria Road chapel, Bedminster, that morning.<sup>234</sup>

### *Distin and Temperance*

Little is known in detail about Distin's views of Temperance, except that he, like the Wesleyan local preacher and poet, Peter Gabbitass, eagerly espoused its cause. His links with the bands of hope which were attached to the chapels and Sunday schools with which he was involved are unknown, but his work at Eastville had a strong Temperance message. We believe that a photograph of him taken in the 1880s shows him sporting the distinctive ribbon of the White Ribbon Gospel Temperance Army in the lapel of his jacket.<sup>235</sup>

The army was founded by Sarah Maria Terrett (1836–89) of Bedminster. Sarah Maria, with her husband Councillor, later Alderman, William Terrett (1836–1916), were active members of the Bible Christian Methodist church and founded Redcliffe Crescent chapel in 1877.<sup>236</sup> Mrs. Terrett began to preach the Gospel in the 1860s and she took an active part in circuit, chapel, Sunday school and connexion activities, before beginning the White Ribbon Gospel Temperance Army in November 1878. Her work soon attracted important supporters in Bristol including Sir Joseph Weston, M.P.; Mark Whitwell Senior; and the ministers Urijah Rees Thomas (Redland Park Congregational chapel), Mark Guy Pearse (Portland Street Wesleyan chapel), Dr. Richard Glover (Tyndall Baptist church) and Dr. David Alfred Doudney (St. Luke's, Bedminster). The army grew in strength and influence until Mrs. Terrett's death, 'on the platform of a White Ribbon Gospel Temperance Army meeting...while engaged in her best loved work of rescuing the perishing from drunkenness and sin', robbed the movement of its main impetus.<sup>237</sup>

### *Distin's Business Premises in St. Mary le Port Street 1884–97*

St. Mary le Port Street was in a state of transition by the time that Distin took over his father's business in April 1884. John Wright's *Bristol and Clifton Directory* for 1885, compiled in the previous year, showed that the late Victorian department stores in Wine Street had already begun to change its character. Guardhouse Passage, the extension of Crown Passage between numbers 6 and 8 St. Mary le Port Street, opened on to Wine Street. It had been closed as early as 1880 to allow the expansion of Jones and Company's premises, which by 1895 included numbers 56 to 64 Wine

234. J.P. Distin, 'The Development of Religious Life' (MS. address, in possession of the author).

235. It is possible that this ribbon denoted membership of one of the other temperance organisations, such as the Blue Ribbon Temperance Army, which his friend, Mark Guy Pearse joined in 1879: Mrs. G. Unwin and J. Telford, *Mark Guy Pearse, Preacher, Author, Artist* (1930), p. 59.

236. S.M. Terrett, *An Address Delivered by Mrs. W. Terrett, of Church House, Bedminster, Bristol, on the occasion of her laying one of the Memorial Stones of the above Chapel, on the 22nd October 1877* (probably Bristol, 1877); F.W. Bourne, *Ready in Life and Death: Brief memorials of Mrs. S.M. Terrett, founder of the White Ribbon Gospel Temperance Army* (1893); J. Lyes, *Bristol 1914–1919* (Bristol, 2003), p. 18. The chapel was the headquarters of the movement. See *BCL* 15 Apr. 1892, pp. 148–50; 15 Sept. 1893, pp. 269–74.

237. Bourne, *Ready in Life and Death: Brief Memorials of Mrs. Terrett*, p. 150: the quotation is taken from the inscription on her tombstone.

Street. By 1884 Baker, Baker and Company's Manchester warehouse had absorbed the old cheese market site and all the shops in St. Mary le Port Street from numbers 8 to 15. By 1890 they had also taken over number 7. The old small businesses which characterised the medieval city were in retreat and the centre was beginning to take on a modern aspect.

Distin's premises, number 5, were situated in a block of three houses between 'the Eagle' beer-house at number 4 and Stevens Brothers, provision dealers, at number 6. The block was between Adam and Eve and Crown Passages to the west and east. At some time between December 1892 and December 1893 Jones and Company acquired the leases of numbers 4 and 5, and between December 1893 and December 1894 they acquired number 6 as well. The firm then transformed the block of three houses into an extension of its existing Wine Street premises.

Following the loss of his lease in 1893 Distin moved to number 19 St. Mary le Port Street where he re-established his business. The house was briefly occupied by an auctioneer in the previous year but had been otherwise unoccupied since 1889. The house formed part of the church lands of St. Peter's parish and like number 5 was situated on the north side of the street. It was described by Mrs. Paget as a four-storeyed, half-timbered Elizabethan house with cellars. Distin partly withdrew from business and Bristol in the autumn of 1895 and he subsequently completely transferred the business to his son George Whitefield Distin in 1897. By that time many of the remaining provision merchants had disappeared from the area and the character of St. Mary le Port Street was very different from that which George Distin found when he settled there in the early 1840s. When G.W. Distin retired in 1903 the lease of number 19 was taken over by George Henry Hodder, the provision factor and bacon curer at number 20. In the 1930s Hodders turned numbers 18, 19, and 20 into one shop.<sup>238</sup>

#### *Distin's Literary Work*

One aspect of J.P. Distin's life has still to be considered; his literary endeavours; poems, hymns and short stories. Of seventeen poems and hymns known to have been written over a period of 30 years, eleven were privately printed in his short pamphlet *Stray Leaves from my Scrap Book* (1883). In the preface to this work he stated that the contents had 'no pretence to literary merit...written as they were at odd times, in a very fragmentary fashion during the brief intervals of leisure in a busy life'. Some of the pieces in *Stray Leaves* had previously appeared in the *United Methodist Free Church Magazine* and other unspecified papers, and through their circulation and favourable reception Distin was encouraged to collect them together, print them and sell copies at 6d. each for the benefit of Eastville Free Methodist chapel. Their quality is variable. The mixture of sentimentality and religion is not to modern tastes. A catalogue of his writings is given at the end of this article (Appendix 2).

#### *Poetry and Hymns*

Distin knew both the Bristol-based Wesleyan local preacher and journeyman carpenter Peter Gabbitass (1822–95: Fig. 9) and his poetical work. Gabbitass, 'the Clifton Poet', settled in Bristol c.1862, and from the 1870s onwards kept a stall near the suspension bridge where he sold his poems and acrostics.<sup>239</sup> He is best known for his collection entitled *Heart Melodies for Storm and Sunshine*

238. Leech, *The Topography of Medieval and Early Modern Bristol* (Bristol Rec. Soc. 48, 1997), p. 104; M. Bye, *Castle Park Before the Blitz* (Stroud, 2003), pp. 79–82; Watts and Rahtz, *Mary-le-Port: Excavations 1962/3*, pp. 47, 48, 50; *Wright's Bristol and Clifton Directory* (1884 to 1904).

239. *BCL* 15 Jan. 1894, p. 62, states that he was also on the plan of the North circuit of the U.M.F.C.

from *Cliftonia the Beautiful* (Bristol, 1885).<sup>240</sup> Although both men were friendly with William Butler (1819–1900) of Clifton Grove it is unlikely, because of the differences in the subject matter and the style of their work, that Distin was influenced by Gabbitass.<sup>241</sup>

Distin's only specifically designated hymn was written for the festival anniversary of Eastville United Methodist Free Church c.1883, but it is probable that a number of his poems were also designed to be set to music. Distin was not unique amongst Bristol Methodist laymen of the period in writing hymns. His friend Alderman Alfred Smith published privately *Hymns for Home, Church and Sunday School* in the 1890s or early 1900s.<sup>242</sup> Smith's hymns were used in Oxford Street U.M.F.C. Sunday school and elsewhere well into the 1930s. Smith and Distin were musical. Both played the harmonium and the piano, accompanying themselves while singing hymns. While Smith's musical knowledge did not permit him to compose the finished musical accompaniment to his hymns we know that he often composed tunes that were subsequently harmonised by men more talented than himself, including the former organist of Bristol cathedral George Riseley (1845–1932), who composed the music for his most popular hymn 'Recognition in Heaven!'.<sup>243</sup> Smith was president of the Society of Bristol Glee-men and a member of the Royal Orpheus Glee Society, of which Riseley was director.<sup>244</sup> Smith's other composers included 'W.P.P.', P. Rees, F.C. Maker, Arthur N. Price and his son Alfred Sidney Livingstone Smith (1874–1943), who succeeded him as Sunday school superintendent at Oxford Street U.M.F.C. in 1906 and served in that capacity for over 30 years.

Music played an important part in the Bristol Forward Movement. It was much used by Hugh Price Hughes and Mark Guy Pearse in their missionary work, and all denominations were agreed

240. This work was dedicated to William Butler of Clifton Grove. Other poems by Gabbitass appeared in publications such as *The White Ribbon Army Temperance Gazette*. He was an advanced Liberal, an admirer of Gladstone and Bright, calling his youngest son, William Ewart, after the former, and received ecumenical support from the Revd. W. Chapman, vicar of Christ Church, Clifton, and the Revd. Arthur Hall, Congregational minister of Clifton Down. See Gabbitass, *Heart Melodies for Storm and Sunshine*, pp. ix–liii. Gabbitass conducted a number of baptisms at Eastville U.M.F.C. chapel and his signature occurs below Distin's in the register in 1880, BRO, FC40836/EP/1a1, nos. 15, 61, 62. Distin conducted no. 63. His will in the National Archives, dated 23 January 1892 and proved 12 March 1898 with personal effects worth £11 6s. 0d., mentions two other unpublished volumes of poems, namely 'Lays Harmonic, Pathetic and Intrinsic' and 'Musings Poetical from the Diary of Miss Chameleon Circumstances and Other Poems'.
241. M. Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse* (1974), in her introduction shows that many members of the artisan class wrote and published poetry, frequently with assistance from middle class benefactors.
242. These were sold from his office, 9 Queen Square, collectively and individually and included, in numerical order, 'How precious are thy thoughts'; 'Harvest'; 'Infant's Hymn'; 'Peace be Still'; 'A Messenger of Love'; 'Thy Spirit breathe upon us'; 'Thou knowest all about me'; 'Thou God of Truth and Love'; 'They that wait upon the Lord'; 'Blessed Saviour: Infant's Hymn'; 'What Shall I Render?'; 'Suffer Little Children'; nos. 13 and 14 have not been traced; 'The Day is Closing'; 'Recognition in Heaven', 'The Golden Rule'; 'How sweet to know that I am thine'; and 'Coronwich'. Ald. Smith's friend, Ald. Henry Fuller Morris, a Methodist local preacher and sometime mayor of Bermondsey, wrote words to the hymn 'We Long to be of Service'.
243. This was sung at the funeral of Smith's daughter, Jessie Kate (1868–1937), the wife of the Revd. Leonard William Parry (1872–1955), *quondam* missionary of the Seamen's and Boatmen's Friend Society, Hotwells.
244. Lyes, *Bristol 1927–1933*, p. 24; Pike, *Bristol in 1898 I*, p. 136. Riseley dominated musical life in Bristol for over 50 years. He was organist of the Colston Hall, conductor of the Bristol Choral Society, served as sheriff of Bristol between 1909 and 1910 and as professor of the organ at the Royal Academy of Music.

with the main strands of argument advanced by George Riseley in his paper 'Music as a Means of Drawing People to the House of God' (1892).<sup>245</sup> Joseph Storrs Fry (1826–1913),<sup>246</sup> the Bristol Quaker philanthropist, edited *A Selection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (1894) for use in Sunday schools and missions.<sup>247</sup> *The Bristol Christian Leader* regularly contained both hymns written by its printer Frederick G. Warne, a Bristol bookseller, and a 'poets' corner'. The Revd. Frederick William Brown, minister of Hope chapel, Hotwells, between 1882 and 1899, composed special hymns for his Sunday school and published poems for the pages of *The Leader*.<sup>248</sup> Another prolific clerical poet-cum-hymn writer of the period was Richard Richard, pastor of Cotham Grove Baptist chapel.<sup>249</sup> Dr. Doudney of St. Luke's, Bedminster, wrote a hymn especially for the use of children entitled 'Why Jesus came from Heaven to Die',<sup>250</sup> and other Bristol clergymen must have turned their pens to similar compositions which have not survived.

Bristol in the second half of the 19th century was the home of many hymn writers such as William Chatterton Dix (1837–98), Anna Laetitia Waring (1820–1910) and Jemima Luke (1813–1906), widow of a former minister of Hope chapel; of translators such as Catherine Winkworth (1820–78), author of *Lyra Germanica*;<sup>251</sup> and of Alfred Stone (1840–78), successively organist of St. Paul's, Clifton; Arley and Highbury chapels; Christ Church, Clifton, and the lord mayor's chapel, and Frederick Morgan (1824–93), of Counterslip Baptist chapel, the compilers of the famous *Bristol Tune Book and Supplement*.<sup>252</sup>

The writing and composition of hymns was also part of the Methodist clerical tradition in Bristol of this period. The Revd. James Patchett Burt (1859–1939), pastor of Oxford Street U.M.F.C., Totterdown, between 1894 and 1898, privately published a number of Vesper and Christmas hymns which were widely used<sup>253</sup> and formed a Tonic Sol-fa juvenile singing class at Oxford Street.<sup>254</sup> On the occasion of his 80th birthday, it was stated as well as being a poet and hymn writer he 'was noted as a singer in his younger days'.<sup>255</sup>

245. *BCL* 15 Apr. 1892, pp. 134–5. For the importance of music making in the city in the late 19th century, see Meller, *Leisure and the Changing City*, pp. 219–24.

246. For Joseph Storrs Fry as a Christian philanthropist, see T.A.B. Corley, 'How Quakers coped with business success: Quaker industrialists 1860–1914', in D.J. Jeremy (ed.), *Business and Religion in Britain* (Aldershot, 1988), p. 173; S. Diaper, 'J.S. Fry & Sons; Growth and Decline in the Chocolate Industry, 1753–1918', in C.E. Harvey and J. Press (eds.), *Studies in the Business History of Bristol* (Bristol, 1988), pp. 46–9.

247. *BCL* 15 Feb. 1894, p. 65.

248. *Ibid.* 15 Nov. 1893, p. 349; 15 Sept. 1894, p. 311.

249. *Ibid.* 15 May 1894, pp. 167–170; 15 Oct. 1894, pp. 342–3.

250. This was printed both as a sheet and as a twelve page pamphlet.

251. R.M. Moorsom, *A Historical Companion to Hymns Ancient and Modern* (2nd edn., 1903), pp. 301, 339; P. Skrine, *Susanna and Catherine Winkworth: Clifton, Manchester, and the German connection* (The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland, Occasional Paper second series 2, 1992), pp. 1–14.

252. *The Bristol Royal Orpheus Glee Society* (Bristol, 1911), pp. 19–20; *BCL* 15 May 1893, pp. 161–3. The companion to the *Bristol Tune Book* was *The Bristol Chant, Anthem and Service Book*, edited by F. Morgan and N. Elliot Britton.

253. The Revd. James Patchett Burt was ordained in 1882 and served as superintendent of the Bristol United Methodist East circuit between 1915 and 1921, as chaplain of the Beaufort War Hospital, and as minister of Ebenezer chapel, Fishponds, between 1926 and 1932. At Oxford Street he extended the Sunday school accommodation, founded a Christian Endeavour Society, and wrote a book entitled *Old Proverbs Illustrated*. In 1898 he went to Manchester, and subsequently served the Revd. Silas Hocking's church at Duke Street, Southport.

254. *BCL* 15 Nov. 1894, p. 378.

255. MS. notes written in 1939 by Alfred Leonard Parry (1901–83), in possession of the author.

The use of hymns and sacred music in churches and Sunday schools of the period was greatly facilitated by the teaching of the Tonic Sol-fa method, developed by the Congregational minister, the Revd. John Curwen (1810–80). Alderman Smith whose hymns were printed both with conventional musical and Tonic Sol-fa notation<sup>256</sup> often wrote poems celebrating the year-end and private events such as his wedding anniversary. These were printed on card and circulated amongst his family and close friends. However the majority of his work, like Distin's, was used in the Sunday school, to be committed to memory by the pupils and recited publicly on occasions such as the annual Sunday school anniversary.

*'Religious Fiction' and Short Stories*

In the introduction to this article reference has been made to the numerous magazines and denominational papers in the second half of the 19th century which required literary contributors. Other areas which needed new, exciting, and challenging religious literature were the Sunday schools and the men and women's bible classes many of whose members enjoyed only the bare rudiments of literacy. The resultant books were frequently of a type called 'religious fiction' and were used by superintendents, class leaders and teachers to inculcate and reinforce moral principles. Huge numbers of such books and short stories were given away at the annual prize giving of bible classes and Sunday schools throughout the country. The work of the Revd. Silas Kitto Hocking (1850–1935) was of this type. *The Manchester Courier* commenting on his *Chips: A story of Manchester Life* stated that it was 'well adapted for circulation amongst Sunday school children'. His popularity was incontestable. When *Gripped* was published in 1902, *The Daily Mail* reported that his 33 novels 'have now reached a point where they represent a total sale of over a million copies. His stories are always refreshingly wholesome; and more than all they are distinguished for their depth of human feeling, their naturalness, and their strong narrative interest'.

Distin owes much in his style, and in the narrative and content of his writings to Hocking, minister of Duke Street chapel, Southport, Lancashire, between 1883 and 1896, and to his brother the Revd. Joseph Hocking (1860–1937). Natives of Cornwall, the Hockings were both U.M.F.C. ministers.<sup>257</sup> The former enjoyed considerable popularity as the author of such works as *Alec Green* (1878) and *Her Benny* (1879) and as editor of the *Family Circle* from 1894 and the *Temple Magazine* from 1896. It was said of him that his success came from writing 'of what he knew for people he understood'. Two of Distin's narrative tales, 'Tom Wilson's Wish' and 'A Daughter of Cain', were much the same in scope and object, if not in length, as the work of the brothers Hocking. All three men saw fiction, and Sunday reading matter in particular, as playing similar roles to that of Our Lord's parables, conveying moral precepts and the Christian message in a way that was powerful, dramatic and compelling. A selection of the titles of Joseph Hocking's 53 novels will at once catch the eye, entice the reader, and convey the essence of their story: *A Flame of Fire*, *The Scarlet Woman*,

256. See J. Spencer Curwen, *Memorials of John Curwen* (1882); M.J. Crossley Evans 'Christian Missionary Work Among the Seamen and Dock Workers of Bristol 1820–1914', pp. 184–5. For Tonic Sol-fa, see R. Dunstan, *A Cyclopaedic Dictionary of Music* (3rd edn., 1919), p. 438; L.J. de Bekker, *Stokes' Cyclopaedia of Music and Musicians* (1911), p. 676; P.A. Scholes, *The Mirror of Music 1844–1944: A Century of Musical Life in Britain* I (1947), pp. 13–19 and ff. On the increase in singing societies aided by Tonic Sol-fa and other developments from the 1840s onwards, see J.W. Dodds, *The Age of Paradox; A Biography of England 1841–1851* (1953), p. 269; F. Hullah, *Life of John Hullah, LL.D.* (1886), pp. 26 and ff; H.C. Colles (ed.), *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (3rd edn.) II (1927), pp. 678–9 for Hullah; V (1928), pp. 358–62 for Tonic Sol-fa.

257. *Oxford DNB* (2004) 27, p. 446; *Who Was Who 1929–1940* (2nd edn., 1967), pp. 648–9 for both brothers. One of Joseph Hocking's most compelling stories, *The Woman of Babylon*, was serialised in *The Quiver* between 1905 and 1906.

and *The Purple Robe*. Many appeared in serials such as *The British Weekly*, and like Distin's 'A Daughter of Cain' they were often set in Cornwall, which was a county well-known and much beloved by all three men.

If suspense was used to good effect by Silas and Joseph Hocking, it was used no less effectively by Distin. As Distin contributed to the *U.M.F.C. Magazine*, there is little doubt that both the Hockings would have read his work. The works of the brothers Hocking are worthy of serious academic study. This, when completed, will allow us to detect more minutely the parallels between them and Distin's unpublished short stories, and bring them within the wider context of religious fiction. The stylist influences on Distin's 'A Daughter of Cain' included the writings of the Revd. Mark Guy Pearse as well as those of the Hockings. It is probable that in addition to knowing Pearse, Distin knew both brothers. Whilst circuit secretary of the U.M.F.C. in Bristol he was instructed in January 1875 to write to Silas Hocking to enquire if the latter could recommend a young man to be one of the circuit ministers.<sup>258</sup> As we have seen, Pearse was known to Distin through his influential and immensely popular ministry in Bristol, between 1881 and 1886.<sup>259</sup> He was another Cornish man and often used illustrations from Cornish life and settings in his novels, as Distin did in 'A Daughter of Cain'.<sup>260</sup> We know that Distin was at Mullion in March 1879 and Mullion Cove, some five and a half miles north of the Lizard Head, has a remarkably fine cave which was probably used by Distin as the setting for this attractive and effective short story.

It is not surprising that Distin should have been encouraged to write short stories for the use of his bible class. His principal works may well have followed his earlier works into print were it not for the fact that they were written in those brief moments when he was free from pain during his last illness.

Among other men who provided models for Distin's longer literary and religious pieces of fiction was Charles Parsons, his colleague in the work of the Old Market bible class and Wesley Hall. Parsons's literary work included full scale novels such as *The Man with the White Hat; or, The Story of an unknown Mission*, which by 1900 had sold 24,000 copies; *The Little Woman in Grey: Scenes and Incidents in Home Mission Work*, a book which the influential Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon pronounced to be 'delightful'; *Roger Wentworth's Bible*; *The Vicar of Berrybridge*; and *Amos Truelove: A Story of the Last Generation*. Tracts written by Parsons were produced in huge numbers, with print runs between 5,000 and 100,000, and included *Love, Courtship and Matrimony*; *Unfailing Trust*;

258. BRO, 35123/C1/M/1, 20 Jan. 1875.

259. Lambert, *The Chapel on the Hill*, pp. 100–3. Pearse was one of the ministers of Victoria chapel, Clifton, in 1881. He was away from the city at the time of the Ecclesiastical Census of that year, which might have accounted for the lower than expected attendance there that Sunday: W. and F. Morgan, *Religious Census of Bristol*, p. 9. Morley, *Victoria Methodist Church, Clifton, 1863–1963*, pp. 8–9, attests to his popularity and states that his 'Bible Class expositions...packed the school room on Wednesday evenings', but does not list him amongst the church's ministers. Pearse was in Bristol between 1881 and 1886. Pearse is listed as one of the ministers on the Clifton circuit in 1884: *Arrowsmith's Dictionary of Bristol* (1884 edn.), p. 40. Lambert tells that Pearse gave one of the lectures at the Portland centenary celebrations in 1891 in the Victoria Rooms. During his ministry at Portland 'the church became so crowded that it was found necessary to fix tip-up seats to the ends of the pews to make accommodation in the aisle for worshippers': Unwin and Telford, *Mark Guy Pearse: Preacher, Author, Artist*, pp. 56–68. Pearse, in *Hugh Price Hughes as We Knew Him* (1902), p. 23, states he left Bristol in January 1886 'in the hope of settling with Dr. Bowden in Cornwall, and devoting the rest of my life to the interests of Cornish Methodism'.

260. Pearse prefaced his *Thoughts on Holiness* (undated but c.1886) 'to my friends at Clifton' He is best known for his books *John Treganoweth His Mark: A Cornish Story* (c.1877), and *Daniel Quorm and His Religious Notions* which appeared in a first and a second series (1879). He also wrote numerous half-penny and one penny tracts.

*Unfailing Prayer*; and *Laura Gaywood: A Youthful Biography*. By 1900 it was estimated that nearly three millions of his books and tracts had been distributed.<sup>261</sup> At the time of the golden anniversary of his conversion in 1908 the figure had grown to 5,700,000.<sup>262</sup> Many of his books were issued as Sunday school prizes, and his tracts were often purchased by business men to distribute to their employees.<sup>263</sup>

Another writer of this type was the layman, J. Jackson Wray, whose *The Man with the Knapsack; or, The Miller of Burnham Lee* (1887) is typical. Although the story need not concern us here, the fate of the miller's son whose life was touched by the man with the knapsack is worthy of mention. He became 'the lay pastor of a little church of believers who worship in a neat commodious mission hall...and, whatever time he can spare from the work of the mill is devoted to his "Master's business"'.<sup>264</sup> Here we have a description of Distin himself. Such stories and their message are encapsulated by the title of Eleanor C. Price's *High Aims; or Romantic Stories of Christian Endeavour* (c.1885), which was greeted by a series of enthusiastic reviews when it appeared.

Distin is known to have written at least seven short stories. Four were written between December 1871 and c.1880 and subsequently appeared in *Stray Leaves*. The other three, 'A Daughter of Cain; or Caught by the Tide', 'Michael the Miner' and 'Tom Wilson's Wish: a Story for New Year's Day' were written between c.1895 and c.1897. There are two full copies and a part copy of the last story in existence, indicating that they were circulated in manuscript form amongst friends and family. The synopsis of four of the seven will suffice to give readers an insight into this genre. The first two are short works based on actual incidents.

The earliest story is entitled 'Found After Many Days'. It bears the date December 1871 on the manuscript and was written when Distin was aged 27. It recounts the story of a young man of 18 who booked a passage to New York. When news of the loss of the emigrant ship upon which he was to have sailed reached Bristol it was assumed that he was amongst those who had drowned. Distin was surprised to see the youth the following Sunday at the prayer meeting in his own church in Bristol. From the youth Distin learned that the former had boarded his ship in Liverpool but disembarked before it sailed, feeling certain that his dead mother was discouraging him from sailing. This revelation of God's providence and mercy had brought the man back to his Saviour. Although it is a simple and unadorned tale it must have made a powerful impression upon the children in his Sunday school.

The next story, entitled 'Our Ghost, A strange but true chapter from our domestic history', was written in January 1872 and recalls an incident which took place when Distin's son was three months old (i.e. 1868/9) and the family was living in Claremont Street, Lawrence Hill. The family employed a domestic servant of fifteen years of age. She came from a respectable family and had regularly attended a Sunday school. Undetected for two months, the girl terrorised the Distin family, shaking door and window frames and even smashing a window. This latter act betrayed her. Distin discharged the girl and returned her to the care of her parents. A subsequent medical

261. Meller, *Leisure and the Changing City*, pp. 132, 198.

262. Parsons, *Sunny Memories of a Long Life*, p. 240. Some of his books were translated for sale abroad.

263. Spittal, 'The History of Methodism in the Environs of Old Market Street', p. 19, states that his tract 'The Good Time Coming' was ordered (50 copies) by Samuel Budgett, the provision dealer, and that Capper Pass of Bedminster obtained copies 'for our men'. Distin's brother-in-law, John Brooks, who attended Old Market Street chapel, took one copy of the *Methodist Magazine* on behalf of his firm Messrs. Rowe, Brooks, and Rowe, for the benefit of its small workforce: BRO, 21780/26, p. 56.

264. J. Jackson Wray, *The Man with the Knapsack: or The Miller of Burnham Lee* (1887), p. 96. Another example of this literature is his novel *Nestleton Magna: A Story of Yorkshire Methodism* (undated c.1875), the preface of which states that it is a faithful picture of village Methodism.

examination shewed the maid to be ‘a dangerous monomaniac’, and, although Distin is quiet about her later history, it is possible that she was subsequently entrusted to the care of one of Bristol’s asylums.

The two stories which follow, ‘Tom Wilson’s Wish’ and ‘A Daughter of Cain’, neither relate to, nor are based upon, the known personal experience of either Distin or his friends. They are of the type known as ‘religious fiction’. In both stories Distin’s heroes are devout Methodists, and the tales display God’s Omnipotence and His Mercy to those who love and trust in Him. In ‘Tom Wilson’s Wish: A Story for New Year’s Day’ there are parallels in subject matter, but not in treatment, to ‘Found after many Days’. ‘A Daughter of Cain; or Caught by the Tide’ is an altogether more racy tale, set on the Cornish coast. The heroine Elsie Wharton, the daughter of a Methodist minister, and her rival, an attractive, but warped, beauty, love the same man, young Mr. Trevethan. The beauty is his cousin and their union will unite their adjoining properties, but Trevethan loves Elsie. The ‘daughter of Cain’ determines to remove both her rival and her cousin. Encouraging Elsie to sketch the interior of a large cave, she watches at the top of the cliffs until the tide begins to lap its mouth. On her way home, she meets her cousin and taunts him about Elsie’s peril. He rushes down into the cave to rescue her. Unfortunately by the time she is located the tide has made escape impossible, and the gathering crowds are certain that the lovers will be drowned. However, the evil intentions of the ‘daughter of Cain’, so carefully planned and executed, are brought to nothing.

Coal miners, as at Kingswood, and copper and tin miners, as in Cornwall, played an important rôle in Methodism. One of the heroes of the Methodist movement in Cornwall was William Trewartha Bray (1794–1868). A drunken miner, Bray was converted in 1823 and became an active and influential Bible Christian local preacher. His life story would have been well-known to Distin, firstly through Bray’s biography, published in 1871 by the Revd. Frederick William Bourne (1830–1905), who was a friend of Distin’s acquaintances Councillor and Mrs. William Terrett of Bedminster,<sup>265</sup> and secondly through the preaching and writing of Mark Guy Pearse.<sup>266</sup> We know that Pearse spoke about Bray during his time in Bristol.<sup>267</sup> It is quite possible that Bray’s life helped to crystallise Distin’s recollections of the stories that he had heard in Kingswood, and encouraged him to use them in his final literary piece, which had a long gestation.

‘Michael the Miner’ first comes to life in one of Distin’s early works, a poem entitled ‘My Hero: the Story of Moses Brain, a Kingswood Collier’, which he published in *Stray Leaves* in 1883. Given the setting and the information that it contains, the story appears to have been associated with an actual incident which occurred in the Kingswood pits at some time between the 1790s and the 1850s. There are a number of parallels between Moses Brain and Billy Bray, not least of all in their origins. We are told that Brain, ‘one of the common herd’,

Like many another of collier race,  
He heard and received the word of grace  
As it fell from Wesley’s lips.

265. F.W. Bourne, *The King’s Son: or a Memoir of Billy Bray* (23rd edn., 1884). Bourne was connectional treasurer of the Bible Christians from 1866 to 1904, book steward and editor from 1869 to 1888, and president of conference in 1867, 1875, and 1891: Vickers (ed.), *Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland* (2000), pp. 38, 41. Bourne’s biography of Bray was paraphrased in contemporary periodicals, e.g. by Revd. J. Telford, *The Tract Magazine* (New Series, 1889), pp. 12–16.

266. M.G. Pearse, *Short Stories and Other Papers* (1886); C. Wright, *Billy Bray in His Own Words* (2004), p. 261. Lambert, *The Chapel on the Hill*, p. 100, mentions Pearse lecturing at the Portland centenary celebrations in the Victoria Rooms in 1891 and speaking of the Cornish tin miners.

267. Unwin and Telford, *Mark Guy Pearse, Preacher, Author, Artist*, p. 59.

Bray's grandfather was an early convert to Methodism at the time when Wesley began his ministry in Cornwall. Distin's poem begins by describing the appearance and the character of his hero:

His face was dark with labour's stain,  
Furrowed with toil, and care, and pain;  
But many felt his power,  
For his work was wise with holy thought,  
And his counsel reformation wrought,  
Or cheered in sorrow's hour.

The poem concludes with a description of his hero's death:

Deep in the workings underground  
With one assistant he is found  
Where serious dangers lurk.  
This youth our hero oft had striven  
To lead in the purer road to Heaven,  
But vain had been his work

A cord that one alone would bear  
Was the slender road to the open-air  
When they had need to fly.  
So when to blast, the match was trained,  
One of the men alone remained,  
The final touch to apply.

To-day a fatal slip is made,  
The youth the fire has heedless laid,  
While both remain below,  
One dreadful look of blank dismay  
One thought – who now death shall stay?  
Then said – our hero – 'go!'

'Thou, John, the Saviour hast not found,  
Go thou then to the upper ground  
And make thy peace with God'  
Our hero staid to face the blast,  
And when its fearful breath was past,  
Heaven's golden street he trod!

This is a plain and moving account of 'my hero', who 'gave his life, a soul to save'. Although the name Moses Brain may have been a pseudonym, Brain is a local Kingswood surname.<sup>268</sup>

The story was told to Distin on one of his visits to Kingswood which took place from 1849 onwards. 'John', the man whose life Brain's act of self-sacrifice saved, was not only physically preserved but led to Christ. The miner became a preacher and, like Billy Bray, the means of salvation for many others. Brain's decision 'to lay down his life for his friend' profoundly influenced Distin, and whilst suffering from cancer he reworked his narrative poem into a larger work, adding artistic verisimilitude to flesh out the text and blending his recollections of conversations with his elders when young with at least one vignette of himself at this time.

268. P. and J. Willmott, *Through The Years: A Pictorial History of Kingswood And The Surrounding Area II* (undated c.1990), p. 45.

Distin prefaces 'Michael the Miner', with a few sentences in which he places the story in its context.

Old Kingswood is vanishing away: its old people, houses, habits, dialects, defects, and not a few virtues, are going or gone. New trades and new populations have overwhelmed the district, new ideas and social conditions have produced much material and mental progress, much ground for satisfaction, and some for anxiety. The writer, who, as a little child long ago, learned to love their quaint ways, and reverence their simple faith, offers this sketch as a tribute to those old memories. It is a picture, not a history, yet the men and women were real, personally or traditionally well known to him.

Distin sets the narrative during the Napoleonic wars, following a poor harvest, in the severe winter of 1797. The pits were idle because the weather made the roads impassable and famine was etched in the faces of the inhabitants. A wagon full of sacks of flour belonging to the squire is about to be plundered by the starving pit wives. 'Mother' Mary, who once sat at the feet of Wesley, takes charge of the situation. She insists that the women purchase rather than steal the flour. She is the sister of the hero, Michael. The narrative follows the same outline as the poem, until chapter four.

The setting is Aunt Betsey's cottage on meeting night. Christian Brothers and Sisters sit in different parts of the room. The evening begins with one of Charles Wesley's hymns followed by prayer. Here Distin tells us something about his own spiritual outlook when he comments that 'there was the deep reverence which marked these early Methodist meetings, but which is painfully absent in some of the modern developments of religious life'. At this point a Bible is brought out, but no one present is able to read it well. Here Distin introduces part of his own life story and tells the reader of his call and setting apart for the work of the Lord. ' "At last" one said "there is a little city lad here, whom Betsey Britton hath to nurse, who can read to us"; and a shy, weakly child of five years was coaxed to the front'. Encouraged by the promise of 'wonderfully toothsome peppermints', the boy reads to the meeting the first three chapters of St. John's Gospel. The meeting concludes with Betsey Britton praying publicly with power and fervour for the child: 'Oh! Angel of the Covenant, bless the lad! Oh, God of Samuel and David and Josiah and Timothy bless the lad! Make him in days to come a preacher of Thy Kingdom and a helper of Thy people'. Distin tells us the result of that evening's prayer meeting was 'that for a long and busy life of service afterwards, that lad never forgot that night...and a deep rolling "Amen" from all, seemed to make it an "anointing", an ordination service far truer and more spiritual than many a stately form'.

Michael was the most experienced man working in the pits and in chapter eight we are told of his employment, sinking to a greater depth the existing shaft where he was working. On the morning on which this difficult and dangerous work is to be undertaken Michael finds that the manager has assigned Fred to be his companion. Not only is Fred inexperienced but he is suffering from the effects of the previous evening's over-indulgence. In this state Fred lights the fuse by accident. The only means of escape is by a slender rope carrying a bucket and worked by a windlass. The bucket is unable to take more than one person at a time. Fred urges Michael to escape, but Michael refuses and in turn urges Fred to escape. Fred's last view of Michael is his white head bowed in prayer. In minutes the ground shakes and Michael is engulfed by the explosion. When Michael is found his body is crushed. His dying but unconscious words are a prayer for Fred's salvation. Following Michael's death a memorial service was held at Old Kingswood Tabernacle at which the sermon was preached upon the text 'Greater love hath no man than this that he lay down his life for his friend'. At the end the preacher says 'I call on you who are his spiritual children to rise and testify to his memory!' The scene which ensued baffles all description. Strong men rise to tell how they, the wild leaders of mad revelry and vice, had been won by 'Father Michael', and that God had spoken repentance and forgiveness to them. Women tell of paths of sorrow, sin and

shame from which His hand had gently drawn them back; that his influence had been the means used by God to lift them out of the ‘horrible pit and the miry clay’. At that moment Fred, who was hidden from general view under the pulpit, emerged from his place of concealment, his emotions clearly written on his face, and collapses. At last he begins to pray in agonized entreaty, in which all present join. In time the despair and grief in his tone turns to ecstatic joy as Fred realises that his sins, his blindness, and his hardness of heart are pardoned by God.

Distin then relates that ‘after this a strange thing happened, for a great hush fell on the place, and there was heard the sound of music of unearthly sweetness, – this is no touch of fiction, for there are men and women still living whose parents were present, and heard that melody (not quite in the order as now told, – but with the certainly of assured testimony)’. The conclusion of the story is told in a brief paragraph. Many years later an old Wesleyan missionary and his wife returned to Kingswood where they spent hours at Michael’s grave, filled with memories and thankful prayer.

Distin has a fine natural, narrative style, which captures his readers’ interest and draws them along with him. His technique is still commonly employed by evangelical preachers and Sunday school superintendents. His writings and their message are both period pieces and yet highly contemporary, embodying perceptions of God and of his relationship with his creatures which have preoccupied men and women from the time of Christ to the present day.

### *Distin’s Family Life*

Little is known of Distin’s home life with his first wife, which was largely spent in a succession of houses in Eastville. He was married on his 23rd birthday to Mary Emma Duston the daughter of John Duston,<sup>269</sup> who had held the post of the city pitcher and was responsible for issuing contracts and overseeing the tarmacadamisation of the roads within the city of Bristol. According to Distin’s will she brought her husband property, which at the time of his death was valued at £1,350. We know that Mary fully involved herself with the life of the Methodist Church. For example, on 25 June 1877 she was serving on a ladies’ committee at Eastville U.M.F. chapel to prepare for a sale of work,<sup>270</sup> and we know that she actively supported her husband’s Sunday school work. She died at their home, 9 Arley Hill, on 12 June 1890, aged 45. Joseph and Mary Emma had three children who survived infancy; Mary Emma, Sarah Ann Alice, and George Whitefield. The son was named after Distin’s brother, who died young, and the renowned George Whitefield, whose ministry in Kingswood was particularly admired by Distin. Alice died young and Mary remained unmarried. G.W. Distin (1868/9–1947) retired from business life in 1903 to embark on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Jordan and the Dead Sea.<sup>271</sup> He resided for some years in Beirut in the Levant, before returning to Clevedon, and finally settled in Seaton, Devon. He married well, adopted the surname Mott-Distin and had the time to take extended holidays to places such as Scotland and Switzerland, something never contemplated by his father. G.W. Distin’s wife bore him three daughters, all of whom died unmarried (Fig. 2).

J.P. Distin remained a widower for three years and immersed himself in his business and church work. His health was poor and in 1893, when he was 48, he was seriously ill with asthma. Distin came to know his second wife Emma Adams, a young woman of 26, through St. Philip’s chapel,

269. Their marriage certificate records that the ceremony took place on 17 Dec. 1867 at the United Methodist Free chapel, Milk Street, St. Paul’s. The witnesses were Henry Woodgate and his father’s friend, Charles Garlick. Henry Woodgate, a boot and shoemaker of 6 Milk Street, was the chapel’s sexton. He died c.1874. See *Matthews’s Directory* (1867), p. 327.

270. Information supplied by Mr. John Edwards of Staple Hill.

271. Typescript of letters written in February 1904 in possession of the author.

Old Market Street. She was the daughter of Alfred Adams, a plumber and painter of Street in Somerset, and had come to Bristol to live with her older sister, Ann Amelia Brooks,<sup>272</sup> in Cobourg House, 57 Cobourg Road, Montpelier. Her brothers-in-law, John Brooks and Henry Rowe,<sup>273</sup> were partners in the boot and shoe making firm of Rowe, Brooks, and Rowe in Portland Square.<sup>274</sup> John Brooks, a trustee of St. Philip's chapel and Wesley Hall, Barrow Lane, was also an active class leader at St. Philip's.<sup>275</sup> In due course, Miss Adams was employed by her brother-in-law as a bookkeeper and began to attend St. Philip's chapel regularly. She became secretary of the women's meeting, the chairman of which, Mrs. H.C. Perry (Fig. 16),<sup>276</sup> was married to Distin's cousin. Mrs. Perry presented the couple with a handsome silver salver on the occasion of their marriage, which took place on 4 February 1893 at the Wesleyan chapel, Street. Thereafter Mrs. Distin entered into her husband's church work and on 10 January 1894 was elected a class leader, having helped to run a class during the previous quarter to familiarise herself with the duties and responsibilities required of her. She undertook the duties for almost a year until motherhood made it impossible for her to continue.<sup>277</sup>

We know that the new Mrs. Distin found life lonely living in the suburbs after her marriage. Her husband was frequently away on preaching engagements and was actively involved in his business. In March 1894 she found that she was pregnant and she urged her husband to alter the premises above the shop at number 19 St. Mary le Port Street, which had not been lived in for many years. The shop was at the front of the house with the office at the back. The upper floors were reached by a very narrow staircase, which led to a landing from which the living rooms could be entered. The main living room was altered in such a way that Mrs. Distin could look into the shop where her husband worked and be with him in spirit when he was engaged with his customers. The room was made more comfortable and a kitchen was installed.<sup>278</sup> She left behind the comfort of Westbury Villa, 93 Ashley Road, for these cramped and old-fashioned quarters six months before the birth of her child, and it was here that Miriam Grace Distin (later Mrs. Paget) was born on 19 December 1894. The family continued to live over the shop intermittently until 1897, but went to live regularly in Clevedon in the autumn of 1895. The daughter remembered the heat of the rooms in St. Mary le Port Street in the summer, the scented air from the shop, redolent of bacon, ham and cheese,

272. She was born in 1850.

273. Henry Rowe married Kezia Adams, who was born in 1854.

274. The firm took over the house at 13 Portland Square, next to St. Paul and Wilson Streets, in 1885/6 and remained there until 1901. The site was unoccupied in 1902 and John Brooks had either died or moved from Cobourg House by 1903: *Wright's Bristol Directory* (1886), p. 84; (1901), p. 188; (1902), p. 197. See B. Burke, *Cinderella Square: A History of Portland Square* (Bristol, 2004), pp. 59–64, on the boot and shoe trade in the square.

275. BRO, 37329/3b. At one time he was secretary to the leaders' meeting. He served on the Sunday school committee, was poor steward between 1888 and 1893, and was appointed society steward in 1893.

276. At the golden anniversary celebration of the conversion of C.R. Parsons on 10 Sept. 1908, the chairman of the meeting, William Strange, was supported by J.S. Fry, Joel Cadbury of Birmingham, H.C. Perry and others: Parsons, *Sunny Memories of a Long Life*, p. 240. Mrs. Perry was secretary of the committee of the Bristol Women's Liberal Association: Bourne, *Ready in Life and Death: Brief Memorials of Mrs. Terrett*, p. 129. She was also founder and leader of the women's bible class: Parsons, *The Story of the Old Market Street Bible Class*, p. 37. Before her marriage Mrs. Perry was Emma Rouch. The marriage was childless.

277. BRO, 37329/3b, see 23 Jan. 1895; 21780/26, circuit schedule 1889–94.

278. The alterations could only have been of a slight kind as when she was five years of age Mrs. Paget could remember the metal hangings attached to the roof and the walls upstairs for curing meat. At the time her half brother, who was running the business, was listed as a supply factor: Watts and Rahtz, *Mary-le-Port: Excavations 1962/3*, p. 48.

filling them, and the sound of the hurdy gurdies in the street. Distin's second marriage was a love match and his wife encouraged him to take greater care of his health and was very protective of him. She had a natural charm, kindness and warmth of heart which endeared her to her step-children. Because of the closeness in their ages they became fast friends and Mrs. Paget described her mother's relationship with her half brother and sister as being more like that of siblings.

The year 1894 was a difficult one for Distin. In January his much-loved mother was diagnosed as suffering from terminal carcinoma of the ventris (cancer of the stomach), and he travelled to Clevedon regularly to see her. She died on 16 November. In August 1895 Distin himself was diagnosed as suffering from carcinoma of the colon. His wife encouraged him to take urgent steps to relieve his work load and we find him writing to the circuit quarterly meeting informing it that he was 'now in the act of removing from Ashley Road to Clevedon' (23 September 1895).<sup>279</sup> The church was anxious not to lose him and one of the ministers, the Revd. D. Ledger Pawson (1862–1934),<sup>280</sup> endeavoured to persuade him not to resign his class leaderships at Wesley Hall and St. Philip's, but was unsuccessful. The secretary of the leaders' meeting wrote to Distin expressing their regret at his decision and appreciation of his work.<sup>281</sup> During the following two years he disengaged himself from his work with the church and transferred his business to his son. He settled at some time before June 1896 with his wife and young daughter into Homedale, 15 Queen's Road, Clevedon, which enabled him to be closer to his father. The cancer continued to make slow progress and in or about November 1896 he required an operation to bypass an obstruction of the bowels, which was probably performed in Bristol. The colo-colostomy joined the bowel proximal to the obstructing cancer to the section of the colon distal to the obstruction.<sup>282</sup> In his final illness Distin talked of the joy that he received in the word of God and in his growing knowledge of Jesus. He recounted that a delightful alleviation of the tedium and suffering of the sick-room had been the discovery of the wealth of Divine love hidden in human hearts.

Surely nothing else could so transform them, as we see them now in this new light; those we have known and mixed with through long years of business life, cold, almost repellent, have grown suddenly warm, tender, and sympathetic. There have been kisses laid on my suffering brow by strong men's lips, which have almost broken my heart with joy, who was I that such tender affection should be shown to me? Then the wonderful gratitude shewn where you least expected it! Work done for Christ long years ago, in places where you think your very name is forgotten, but now...listening to the daily roll of calls, or messages, or tokens of friendly regards flowing in, I begin feel in the still quiet of my sick-room, surely I am breathing the atmosphere of Heaven already...Farewell!...I know not how long it will be ere the brighter shore is clearly mine, and the pain, toil and weakness be over for ever, I only long to be where my beloved Lord is.<sup>283</sup>

In his printed farewell letter he appealed for financial aid for the Wesleyan Local Preachers' Mutual Aid Association,<sup>284</sup> saying that he is no longer in a position to offer it financial support,<sup>285</sup>

279. BRO, 37979/4a, p. 223. He resigned as circuit secretary.

280. *The Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church* (1934), p. 212.

281. BRO, 37329/3b, 4, 18 Sept. 1895, and a copy of Distin's letter in reply dated 20 Sept. 1895.

282. I am grateful to Mr. A.J. Webb, formerly senior surgeon at the Bristol Royal Infirmary, and Mr. A.R. Baker, senior vascular surgeon at Frenchay, for the clinical diagnoses based on J.P. Distin's death certificate.

283. Distin, *Farewell Letter From an Old Friend and Fellow-Worker* (Bristol, 1898).

284. This was founded in 1849, and was designed to save local preachers from the indignities of receiving parish relief, living in a workhouse and being buried in a pauper's grave.

285. Distin followed the biblical system of offering a tithe or tenth of his annual income to God. He is believed to have frequently exceeded this. His generosity to the Methodist cause has been noted. He



Fig. 16. Mrs. H.C. Perry (formerly Miss Emma Rouch).

and paid tribute to the work of the Wesleyan missionary the Revd. David Hill (1840–96)<sup>286</sup> in China and to that of Catherine (1829–90), the wife of General Booth of the Salvation Army.<sup>287</sup>

Privately he was concerned for the welfare his young wife and three-year old daughter. His daughter could remember him in November 1897, when he was very ill and not expected to live, as a white-haired man sitting in bed in a narrow room with a goldfish bowl by his bed. Shortly after a brief recovery he wrote a farewell letter to his daughter which included a series of pen and

was, however, also open-handed with charities which were not strictly speaking attached to any denomination. *The Report and Statement of the Bristol General Hospital for 1885* (Bristol, 1886), pp. 30, 58, lists him subscribing two guineas, the same sum as many wealthier men and companies. He gave a further ten shillings as a Christmas gift.

286. For a more recent assessment of Hill's work and his influence on Methodist congregations, see H.B. Rattenbury, *David Hill, Friend of China: A Modern Portrait* (1949).

287. Distin, *Farewell Letter from an Old Friend and Fellow-Worker*, pp. 1–20; Vickers (ed.), *Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, pp. 37, 157–8.

ink sketches. He wrote

you must try to learn to love God who loves you and has given you a good home (drawn) and good clothes, and when you are hungry, then good bread and cheese, or (sic) almost any thing else that is really good for you. Always remember and use your little prayer however big you may grow – ‘Oh God bless Gracie and make her a good girl for Christ’s sake, Amen’, We want you to grow quite wise and able to read God’s Holy Bible first of all and then to draw (picture) and to do 2/2 and how to sew (machine drawn). Take care of his little (letter drawn) which your own darling mother was anxious I should write to you and then when you are older you will value it because father’s hand can write no more. Whether seen or unseen, present or absent I shall always be your affectionate loving father, Joseph Perry Distin.<sup>288</sup>

By 19 December 1897 he was a little better and able to write her a very moving card on her third birthday which ended:

But whilst you have *so much*, try and think, many poor little boys and girls are not strong and well like you, but must keep, like dadda, to their little beds.

Distin made his will on the 22 January 1898 in the presence of his father and the maid and died on 2 April 1898 aged 53, leaving effects valued at £2,323.<sup>289</sup> He was buried in Clevedon cemetery, following a short service at the Wesleyan chapel, where he had preached so often in the past.<sup>290</sup>

No better estimate of Distin’s life and work can be given than that contained in a poem which he wrote in an uncertain hand shortly before his end, entitled ‘My Life’:

A winter’s day of mingled light and shade,  
A burdened day, for sunset’s early fade,  
A busy time of toil, life’s plain demand,  
A time of full employ, for heart and hand.

A happy day, made bright by love divine  
A guided day, the hand O Lord was Thine.  
A day with mercies crowned, new ever new  
A day of peace with God, the wise and true.

A day of sorrow keen, which smote full sore  
A day of trials deep, which more and more  
Led on to God, until, the fiercest over past.  
A day of triumph, closed, with ‘Home at Last’.<sup>291</sup>

Distin’s work for the Wesleyan Methodist church was enumerated in his obituary notice in the *Western Daily Press*, but the real record of his work is to be found in the pages of his ‘Diary’ which carefully records his devotion to the teachings of the Gospel. His early death deprived the Church of a faithful worker who had made an important contribution to its life.

Distin’s widow and young daughter returned to Bristol shortly after his death, and finally settled at 38 Sommerville Road, Bishopston. His widow did not remarry and died there in May 1946 at

288. Copied in Mrs. Paget’s room from the original in Dec. 1993. Although then 99 years of age, she had continually followed her father’s advice.

289. Probate was granted on 2 August 1898.

290. *Western Daily Press*, 4, 7 Apr. 1898. On 6 April 1898 the secretary of the class leaders’ meeting at Old Market sent Mrs. Distin a letter of sympathy on her husband’s death: BRO, 37329/3b. Amongst those who attended Distin’s interment was H.C. Perry. One of the ministers who conducted the service was the Revd. D. Ledger Pawson, of St. Philip’s chapel, Old Market Street.

291. MS. in possession of the author.

the age of eighty. Two years later her daughter Miriam Grace Distin, then a spinster in her early 50s, married a widower. She continued to live in Bristol until her death in 1999 aged 104, and with her passing the direct line of George Distin (1820–1901) became extinct (Fig. 2).

### *Epilogue*

The decline in the city's nonconformist chapels in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was due to three factors, one internal and two external. The chapels were financed and sustained by a relatively small and committed business and professional élite who dedicated their lives and their money to the Lord's work. Due to the movement of the chapel-going middle classes to the suburbs, the loyalty of their children was usually not retained by their parents' places of worship. When the older generation passed away there were then insufficient people to take their places, and the membership and financial viability of the chapels entered a steep decline.

The first external factor affecting the nonconformist chapels was the rise of socialism, as distinct from Christian socialism. The Bristol Socialist Society was founded in 1885 and the first socialist councillor was elected for St. Paul's ward in 1887. Between 1887 and 1914 the socialists and the new Labour party made modest inroads into the political life of the city, holding between them eight seats in 1907. The Bristol Socialist Society rejected the work of the Christian Sunday school movement, and in the 1890s established its own regular meetings, where the tenets of socialism were inculcated and secular christening ceremonies took place. Although those who attended numbered only a few hundred, the trend clearly demonstrated how Christianity was beginning to lose its hold amongst the poor. Even Christian socialists found the responses of the congregations of the city chapels to the social and industrial problems of the day inadequate. It was for similar reasons that John William Henry Wall (1855–1915), a Bristol shoemaker, socialist, poet, and founder of the Bristol co-operative movement who saw socialism as a 'practical form of Christianity', became alienated from his church, Old King Street Baptist chapel.<sup>292</sup>

The work of Parsons and Distin in the teaming courts and slum tenements of the parishes of SS. Philip and Jacob and St. James was hampered in some measure by the work of the Bristol Socialist Society. We have already seen how 'Modern Infidelity' features as a topic of discussion in at least one meeting of the local preachers on the Portland Street circuit. Parsons in his history of the Old Market Street bible class recounts that the infidels had upset a Church of England bible class in the parish with the result that the vicar threatened to send for the police. Subsequently, one Sunday afternoon, emboldened by their success they swooped down upon one of Parsons's classes, using similar arguments to the radical atheist M.P., Charles Bradlaugh, to claim that the bible was an indecent book. This incident, which took place in the late 1880s, had an unexpected sequel when the leader of the infidels was converted after reading Parsons's novel *The Man in the White Hat*. Parsons described the man and the scene in *The Little Woman in Grey: Scenes and Incidents in Home Mission Work*, which he wrote in or before 1892. Here 'Atheist Ben', who calls his son after Tom Paine, and is a member of an infidel club held in the evenings in a tavern when a bible is burned each week, attends the bible class, listens to the testimony of the converted Christian 'Infidel Joe' and is finally converted himself. In the circumstances the change of heart of the chairman of the 'secularist club' appears to have drawn the serpent's tooth and Parsons and his bible class were subsequently troubled by them no longer.<sup>293</sup>

292. S. Mullen, 'The Bristol Socialist Society and John Wall, the shoemaker poet 1885–1914', in *Bristol's Other History* (Bristol, 1983), pp. 36–67.

293. Parsons, *The Little Woman in Grey*, pp. 234–57.

Industrial unrest also played a part in the alienation of many of the poor from the church. Many nonconformist chapels were attended by the city's employers. Industrial unrest marked the period 1889 to 1892. Numerous strikes took place, mainly among non-craft workers, gas workers, women in the cotton factories and dock workers. The employers in turn organised lockouts and dismissed staff, causing acute economic and social hardship. In November 1892 Highbury chapel in Cotham was the scene of demonstrations on successive Sundays, because the owner of a strike-bound factory in Bedminster attended services there. Subsequently, many of the leading ministers in Bristol became involved on one side or another of the dispute, with some being mired by their association with the employers.<sup>294</sup> In due course the fortunes of the nonconformist chapels in Bristol echoed those of the Liberal party to which they were frequently linked.

The second factor was the change to the city centre. Mention has already been made of the growth of department stores from the 1870s onwards, squeezing many small retailers out of business. Elsewhere large tracts of medieval and Elizabethan housing, such as the Pithay, were demolished to make way for the factories of the Frys and other large employers. The Pithay was then 'a network of lanes and streets containing lodging and tramhouses, and many other houses of the dirtiest description affording shelter for many hundreds of the very poorest'. It fell within the parish of Christ Church with St. Ewen, Broad Street, and in 1884 the rector, the Revd. Edward Pattinson Cole (1844-1926), formed the Fraternity of St. Michael to further Christian work in the area and to provide practical relief. The work continued until the period 1896 to 1901 when 'the old Pithay ceased to exist and there was no need to continue work there'.<sup>295</sup> These changes were compounded by the removal of tenements, courts and cottages in slum clearances, particularly in the parishes of St. Paul, SS. Philip and SS. Jacob, St. James and St. Jude. This affected most of those who had remained in the city centre after the diaspora of the middle and lower middle classes to the suburbs in the second half of the 19th century. The poor were re-housed on the fringes of the city, and those who attended chapel often found a new place of worship closer to their new homes.<sup>296</sup>

Of the buildings most closely associated with Distin's life and work little remains. By 1937 Jones and Company, drapers, occupied numbers 2 to 8 St. Mary le Port Street. Their department store was in the process of being extensively redeveloped in Art Deco style. Distin's birthplace, number 5, was probably unrecognisable. Both number 5 and number 19, his last home and business premises, were destroyed by enemy bombing on the night of Sunday 24 November 1940.<sup>297</sup> Distin's first married home, 35 Claremont Street, Eastville, was demolished in the late 1960s.<sup>298</sup>

Milk Street chapel never recovered from the controversy with the local preachers in the North circuit of the U.M.F.C. The congregation anticipated Methodist reunion, accepted the invitation from the congregation of Ebenezer, Old King Street, to worship with them and held their last

294. W.F. Ayres, *The Highbury Story, Highbury Chapel, Bristol: The First Fifty Years* (1963), pp. 66-71; K. Kelly and M. Richardson, 'The Shaping of the Bristol Labour Movement 1885-1985', in M. Dresser and P. Ollerenshaw (eds.), *The Making of Modern Bristol* (Tiverton, 1996), pp. 212-18.

295. J.G. Griffiths, *Fraternity of St. Michael; Christ Church with St. Ewen, Bristol* (Bristol, 1915), pp. 2-4. E.P. Cole was rector from 1880 to 1903 and an honorary canon of the cathedral.

296. See H.J. Wilkins, *What Can I Do to Promote The Better Housing of the Poor in Bristol?* (Bristol, 1893); M. Dresser, 'People's Housing in Bristol 1870-1939', in *Bristol's Other History* (1983), pp. 129-60; *The Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes II* (1885).

297. Watts and Rahtz, *Mary-le-Port: Excavations 1962/3*, p. 48; Bye, *Castle Park Before the Blitz*, pp. 80, 108-9, 116.

298. *Kelly's Bristol Directory* shows that the house was unoccupied in 1964 and 1966 and had gone by 1968/9. The 2005 electoral register for Lawrence Hill shows that no. 48, his second home, is still standing. A visit in April 2006 revealed that a block of houses, nos. 28 to 68, remained in place.

service on 1 September 1929, selling the site to the Gospel Temple.<sup>299</sup> The building was demolished in 1954.<sup>300</sup>

The Eastville Park U.M.F. chapel that Distin designed was rebuilt and enlarged in 1903 to seat 600.<sup>301</sup> The Sunday school was enlarged and rebuilt in 1893 although it is believed that part of the assembly hall designed by him survives.<sup>302</sup> By the 1990s the new church building was increasingly expensive to maintain by its dwindling congregation, which left the building in 2001 and divided, some leaving for the Church of England and others for smaller premises.<sup>303</sup> Wesley Hall, Barrow Lane, became part of the Bristol Mission in 1909, and continued to provide a focus for the local community throughout the 1930s and 1940s. It survived the Blitz and housed a thriving Sunday school and boys' and girls' brigades well into the 1950s. Its central place in the local community was halted by the 'redevelopment' of Newtown, and the Hall was closed on the first Sunday in January 1961 and demolished before 1969.<sup>304</sup> Ebenezer Methodist chapel, Old King Street, was closed on 11 April 1954, prior to demolition and the redevelopment of that part of Broadmead.<sup>305</sup> St. Philip's chapel, Old Market, was demolished and the burying ground cleared in 1923 prior to the erection of the new Methodist Central Hall which was opened on the site on 29 April 1924.<sup>306</sup> The Central Hall was closed in the 1980s, demolished save for the façade, and the site was used for housing. Portland Street chapel was closed in 1970 or 1971, the churchyard being cleared shortly afterwards without thought of the part its sleeping residents played in Methodist history, and in the name of progress the building was demolished.<sup>307</sup> The iron chapel in St. Philip's Marsh was torn down and replaced by a brick structure in Victoria Road in 1904. This was completely destroyed by a land mine in December 1940,<sup>308</sup> and the subsequent mission closed on 26 June 1960 owing to the depopulation of the area following house clearance.<sup>309</sup>

In this article, I hope that I have been able to tell something of the life, the industry, and the dedication of Joseph Perry Distin, and to have set them into their context. He contributed to the rich and varied spiritual life of the city in the late 19th century, through converting the lost, exhorting the back-sliders, encouraging the faithful and challenging the lives and faiths of the

299. BRO, 34706/M/1b.

300. R. Winstone, *Bristol as it Was 1953–1956* (Bristol, 1979), nos. 26, 27, 30, 52.

301. *Arrowsmith's Dictionary of Bristol* (1906 edn.), p. 57.

302. *BCL* 15 Sept. 1893, p. 263. The alterations were made necessary by the growth of the Sunday school to 400.

303. The church was taken over by the City Pentecostal Mission. Those members of the Methodist church who decided to continue to meet as a congregation formed 'The New Place' on Fishponds Road, which serves as a church-cum-drop in centre, based in a former corner shop. I am grateful to Mrs. Susan J. Britton of Thingwall Park, Fishponds, for this information.

304. R. Hoar (ed.), *A Good Ideal: the story of The Central Hall, Bristol, Headquarters of the Bristol Methodist Mission 1923–1924 to 1973–1974* (1974), pp. 56, 57. Stephenson *et al.* *Images of England: Old Market, Newtown, Lawrence Hill and Moorfields*, pp. 64–5.

305. D. Male and J. Cook, *A Short History of Old King Street (Ebenezer) Methodist Church, Bristol* (Bristol, 1954).

306. BRO, 37329/3t. The human remains were reburied at Arno's Vale cemetery: J. and D. Fisher & M. and F. Ford, *Bristol on Old Postcards* (Nottingham, 1983), p. 25. J. Arthur Rank donated £25,000 towards the cost. See a collection of pamphlets held in John Wesley's New Room entitled *The Romance of a Modern Methodist Mission in the City of Bristol, 1922–1929*.

307. *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in Central England: Gloucestershire* (1986), p. 70.

308. S.P. Shipley and H Rankin, *Bristol's Bombed Churches* (Bristol, 1945), p. 63; *St. Philip's Marsh; The story of an island and its people* (Bristol, c.1985), pp. 20–1.

309. Hoar (ed.), *Good Ideal: the story of the Central Hall, Bristol*, p. 57.

Pharisees and the formalists. Thus, after the lapse of over a century, Distin through his writings opens to our scrutiny both his message and his life. 'He being dead, yet speaketh' (Hebrews 11:4).

### *Acknowledgements*

I dedicate this work with gratitude and affection to my pastors, the Revd. David Clark Johnson, sometime vicar of Bishopsworth, Bristol, and Ronald Clarke, formerly of Buckingham Baptist chapel, Clifton, and to the memories of my cousin Nigel Blythe Coward (1902–84) and his wife Maisie Isabella (1904–91) of Henleaze, and of our friend Kathleen Joyce Beer (1904–93). I would like to thank the late Mrs. Paget for her help and encouragement with this paper; the Revd. Professor John H.S. Kent, Emeritus Professor of Theology at the University of Bristol, for reading and commenting on this text; Dr. Arthur Basil Cottle (1917–94), Reader in Medieval Studies, for his comments on earlier drafts of this paper; Dr. John Juřica, for his work in editing; Michael T. Richardson, Special Collections' Librarian of the University of Bristol, for his bibliographic advice; A. John Webb, quondam senior surgeon at the Bristol Royal Infirmary, and Anthony R. Baker, senior vascular surgeon at Frenchay, for their advice on the nature of J.P. Distin's final illness; Anthony C.B. Giles for the provision of the illustration of Wesley Hall; Ann Pethers for the photographs; my friends Lee Yew Tong, Kian Foh Wilson Wong, Toby J. Steward, J.J. Winnie Wong and Patricia Grinter for preparing this text from the manuscript; and C. Jeffrey Spittal, the librarian of the New Room, the late John Farrell, the librarian of Wesley College, John B. Edwards, John Williams, Alison Brown, Anne Bradley and the staff of the Bristol Record Office, Jane Bradley and the staff of the Bristol Reference Library, the late Alan W. Rolfe (1908–2005), Lesley Aitchison and Peter Bennett, for patiently and courteously answering my many questions.

## APPENDIX 1

### The Wesleyan Circuits in 1884

In 1884 The Wesleyans had five circuits in Bristol, each named after its principal chapel. The Portland circuit of which Joseph Distin became a member was a recent creation. It was formed in 1880 out of the Old King Street circuit, which was based around Ebenezer chapel (1795). The establishment of Cotham chapel, Redland Road (1878), was the impetus for the division. The new circuit consisted of Portland Street chapel, Old Market Street chapel and the recently erected iron chapel in St. Philip's Marsh. In 1888 Wesley Hall, Barrow Lane, was added to the circuit.<sup>310</sup> The Langton Street circuit extended south of the River Avon and included the Wesleyan chapels in Bedminster and its environs. The Clifton circuit included country chapels in Pill, Lawrence Weston, Westbury-on-Trym, Shirehampton and Failand to the north and west of the city. The Wesley circuit centred on Baptist Mills and stretched to the north and east, including Crew's Hole, Redfield, and Stapleton.<sup>311</sup> On average Distin preached just over twice a year on the Langton Street circuit between 1884 and 1889, less frequently on the King Street and Clifton circuits and not at all on the Wesley circuit. Before returning to the Wesleyan fold in 1884 Distin is known to have preached only once in a Wesleyan chapel in Bristol. This may well reflect the strength of feelings on both sides following the diaspora from the Wesleyans between 1849 and 1854.

310. Spittal, 'The History of Methodism in the Environs of Old Market Street', p. 19.

311. The Wesley circuit was also formed in 1880, when 'the Baptist Mills Society was transferred from Old King Street, and joined to the Redfield Society, which was separated from the Kingswood circuit': Trotman, *History of Redfield Wesleyan Church* (1930), p. 19.

## APPENDIX 2

## J.P. Distin's Literary Work

\*Printed in J.P. Distin, *Stray Leaves from My Scrap Book* (Bristol, 1883)

Poems & Hymns

The Battle Song. Undated (On the manuscript he wrote 'My first attempt at poetry').

Lines on a Poem by 'Annie'. December 1870.

\*A Grey haired Reverie, written after reading 'Twilight Thought' by Annie M.B. March 1871.

\*Our soul waiteth for the Lord—Psalm XXX. 20 November 1871.

Preface to an Album (an Acrostic). December 1871.

\*A Living Sacrifice—Romans, XII:1. December 1871.

\*Dennis The Bugler—Founded on a short story printed in *the Quiver* 1865 (printed as *Dennis the Drummer Boy*). November 1871.

Care. December 1871.

\*Charlie's Grave. Undated (in the printed version Distin adds the words 'written by request for a friend').

\*Master where Dwellest Thou, From John 1:38. June 1874.

\*My Hero: The Story of Moses Brain, a Kingswood Collier. July 1874.

\*Sleeping only Sleeping. November 1875.

\*The Shadow of the Cross—Matthew XVI: 21–24. Undated.

\*Your Grandchildren's' Greeting: Lines for the children to send their Grandparents on the 36th anniversary of their wedding day. 1880.

\*Thanksgiving Hymn (written for the Festival Anniversary, Eastville). c.1883.

Plum Pudding (A Try for a *Titbits* Prize). 1891.

My Life. c.1897.

Short Stories

\*Found after Many Days. December 1871.

\*Our Ghost: A Strange, but True Chapter from our Domestic History. January 1872.

\*For Life, or for Death. August 1874.

\*My First Tiger Hunt: A Leaf from a Non-commissioned Officer's Indian Diary (printed as *Our First Tiger Hunt*). Undated, c.1880.

A Daughter of Cain (the earlier title was 'Caught by the Tide'). Undated, c.1895.

Tom Wilson's Wish: A story for New Year's Day (three copies in manuscript, one of which is called 'Tom Wilson's wish: on Christmas Day and New Year's Eve'). 1897.

Michael The Miner: A Story of Kingswood 100 years Ago. 1897.