

JOHN WESLEY IN LEITH

John Wesley first visited Leith in 1763, lodging on his way from Aberdeen to Edinburgh after a "pleasant passage" on the ferry from Kinghorn. The first record of him preaching in Leith is on 28th May 1766 after he had spent several days at the Church of Scotland General Assembly where he was "extremely shocked at the behaviour of many of the members". Of the first Leith sermon, he writes, "I...spoke exceeding plain. A few received the truth in the love thereof".

He was in Leith again in 1772 where on 13th May he preached in "the most horrid, dreary room I have seen in the kingdom. But the next day I found another kind of room - airy, cheerful and lightsome; which Mr. Parker undertook to fit up for the purpose without any delay". On 18th May, he was diagnosed as suffering from hydrocele (a tumour with a collection of fluid) and was advised to return to London. Yet, on that evening, in spite of a severe storm, he "preached in the new house at Leith to a lovely audience on 'Narrow is the way that leadeth unto life'. Many were present again at five in the morning. How long have we toiled here almost in vain. Yet I cannot but hope God will at length have a people even in this place".

Only two further visits to Leith are mentioned, but it is likely that Wesley preached in Leith on more often than recorded in his Journal. On 19th May 1786, he passed through Leith to board the 5.45am ferry. Eight days later, he returned to Leith from Arbroath, arriving at 12.45pm. He spent two hours working on the "Arminian Magazine", before preaching at 6pm on Galatians 6 v.14. "After preaching, I walked to my lovely lodging at Coates [the residence of Lady Maxwell], and found rest was sweet".

The story of John Wesley's visit to Leith is also told by William Hutchison in his "Tales, Traditions and Antiquities of Leith". On one occasion, Wesley preached at "The Ark" which was situated between Cables Wynd and King Street. Following King James' 1687 proclamation of "liberty of conscience", "The Ark" was built in 1688 by Presbyterians who were excluded from the then Episcopal dominated South Leith Parish Church. It was subsequently used by Episcopalians (who were turned out of the parish church in 1692) and then the Anti-Burghers, being known as "The Meeting-house" and "John Knox's Kirk". It passed into secular use in the 1780s variously as a coopers, fish-curers and whiskey shop. According to Hutchison, the crowds who came to hear Wesley in the 1760s filled both the meeting-house and Meeting-house Green. The window frame was removed and Wesley preached from the window-sill addressing audiences both inside and outside simultaneously. (A photograph of "The Ark" can be found in John Russell's "The Story of Leith", p.361).