

How the Brethren grew from a conference in Ireland to a worldwide cult

What then? The Plymouth Brethren, who would today be known as a cult or a sect, began in Ireland in the late 1820s. Essentially, they were a new wave of evangelists who wanted to see change in the 'stagnant' established religions and to prepare their followers for Christ's Second Coming which they believed was imminent. Plymouth was incorporated into the name because that was where they found the greatest welcome on the mainland. The Reynolds family, with a long history of non-conformity and prolific in both Ireland, the Cotswolds and the South-West, were among the earliest converts. And as the numbers grew, they featured in the burgeoning movement at a senior level for the next five generations.

What next? From those early beginnings, the Brethren community grew nationally and internationally as leaders 'spread the word' to America and missionary-style parties set off for Africa, Asia and the Far East. Splits and schisms in the movement saw a major rift in 1848 when John Darby led a split between the Exclusives who believed they would become 'the chosen ones' at Christ's Return, and the Open or less-radical Brethren. Significant differences also emerged between the USA and UK after the leadership crossed the Atlantic in the 20th century. Exclusives must follow rigid rules. If they break them or leave they will be 'shut up' and isolated from family and friends. It leads to many broken families and stories of despair.

What now? With worldwide numbers of churchgoing evangelicals shrinking, many smaller congregations are now calling themselves Christian Brethren or simply Brethren, or amalgamating several styles of worship. Despite losing over 8000 members because of the James Taylor scandal, the Exclusives remain well-funded by gifts and legacies. They also own extensive business premises and schools. Since 2002 the Vessel Elect has been Bruce Hales, an Australian businessman. Estimates today¹ put the number of Open and Exclusive PB members at anything up to 1 million with about 120,000 in North America. The Exclusives alone are thought to number about 90,000 globally with around 40 percent in the UK.

1. Source: Project Gutenberg

The Reynolds were part of inner circle

There was enormous pressure for change in the 1830s. Within a decade the British public would be called upon to absorb the Great Reform Bill, final throes of the Abolition of Slavery, significant strides towards Catholic Emancipation and the climax of what would become known as the Industrial Revolution.

Naturally, each had an impact upon the Reynolds – but it was in matters of faith where arguably the most profound effects were felt, casting a long shadow over the family for the next 100 years.

Given their traditional persona as Protestants, Puritans and non-conformists across all branches from Devon to the Cotswolds, and from Suffolk to Ireland, it was no surprise that they would throw themselves into the waters of a powerful new stream of evangelism.

In the period from about 1825–1850, when the Catholic Apostolic Church and the Plymouth Brethren emerged as sects who believed in radical new ways of worship including the central belief of a 'Second Coming', the Reynolds family plunged in with total vigour and with their ideal DNA, geographical spread and social background, they soon found themselves in demand for senior positions.

In 19th century Britain, where the population still clearly remembered what had gone on in the French Revolution, the CAC and the PBs appealed to middle and upper class citizens who remained ashamed of the bloated, bigoted and prejudiced ways of the Hanoverian elite.

Both sets were heavily influenced by the messianic preaching of a large number of disaffected clergymen praying for salvation and, for the so-called 'Exclusives' of the PBs, they were (and still are, in fact) anticipating special status when the Lord returns or the glorious rapture as they refer to it.

Catholic Apostolic Church/ Irvingites

First to gather up a sizeable following was the CAC. Their chief benefactor, a wealthy banker and MP named Henry Drummond (1786–1860) hosted a series of conferences between 1826–30 at his Albury Estate in Surrey, during which the charismatic Scottish preacher Edward Irving emerged as leader – and gave the movement its alternative title of *Irvingites*.

Early on, this church – which appointed its main advocates as Angels, Apostles and Prophets – had a significant following in the Oxford area and it eventually continued until the 1980s when the assembly hall at Eynsham was one of the last to close.

Reynolds family members or close companions who became involved with the Irvingite/CAC group included –

Rev Robert Daly, confidant and close friend of the Wingfields at Powerscourt and the Vesleys (Viscounts deVesci) at Abbeyleix

John (Stuckey) Reynolds, (1791–1874) a former Government economist who became one of the sect's greatest supporters and helped finance its newspaper *The Record* over many years

Isabella Reynolds (1829–1892), eldest daughter of Thomas Reynolds Reynolds, progenitor of the family's current generations, who spent 40 years at a Training School for Protestant Ministers at Cheltenham founded by the Irvingite Rev Francis Close

James Hatley Frere, (1779–1866) an early 'Prophet' with the SAC. His family shared relations and lifelong friendships with our Reynolds branches in Suffolk, Devon and the Cotswolds

Other Irvingites of note included **Henry Bellenden Bulteel** (1800–1866), a highly effective preacher and Oxford graduate whose family were neighbours of Sir Joshua Reynolds in Devon, and whose congregations regularly topped 800 during his advocacy of the CAC. He would later transfer his faith to the PBs.

There was also **Rev Robert Reynolds** (1825–1896) a possible relative, who was President of Lady Huntingdon's College for training dissenting churchmen at Cheshunt and editor of *The Evangelical Magazine* from 1877–82.

The Plymouth Brethren

Meanwhile, the Brethren movement flourished initially in Ireland where its chief instigators were again disaffected churchmen or descendants of the so-called Protestant Ascendancy, or both, and an Anglo-Irish family with a history like the Reynolds's was an exemplar.

Again, it grew from the genesis of a series of annual conferences – in this case held at the Wingfield's Powerscourt estate outside Dublin from 1831 to 1833 – attended by a disenchanted mixture of Baptist, Protestant and Anglican clergymen including some who switched sides from Irvingites to Brethren and vice versa. At length, a caucus



Photo collage courtesy of the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester

Lady W's tragic tale of love and devotion

Society beauty Lady Theodosia Wingfield (née Howard) was a central figure in the birth of the Brethren. Several initial conferences were held at her Powerscourt estate near Dublin – the first two organised by local rector Rev Robert Daly and the others by herself with help from our Reynolds relation Anna Jane Elwood. Lady Theodosia, who was described as 'attractive and intelligent tho' a little shy', converted to the Brethren creed herself and it was rumoured she fell in love with John Darby, most significant of the founders. Unfortunately, hers was a short and desperately sad life. She was widowed at 23 after only a year of marriage, lost her infant baby in tragic circumstances, and found Darby turned away from her by supporters who feared he would be diverted from his work. She died on New Years Eve 1836, still in her 30s, from what some declared a broken heart.

1. John Nelson Darby: Prophetic Pioneer by Marion Field (Chapter Two Pub., 2008) also confirmed in Gathering to His Name, Tim Grass (Paternoster, 2006)

of John Darby, seceded Anglican priest and future first leader, Anthony Groves, dentist; Edward Cronin, medical student; John Gifford Bellett, lawyer; and Francis Hutchinson, an archdeacon's son, emerged from the Irish side, swiftly followed by converts in England in and around Oxford and, most especially in the West Country (hence the addition of *Plymouth* to the Brethren name).

Voices from the Reynolds family on both sides of the Irish Sea were soon in evidence... and would continue to be heard among the Brethren hierarchy for another five generations.

With its unorthodox history and controversial rules – chiefly among the so-called 'Exclusives' section – records of those who joined the sect and even those who belong today, despite these far more liberal days, are not widely known. Indeed, as part of their Code, the 'exclusive' PBs believe other mortals (aka *Earthlies*) exist in an evil world from which they wish to live separate lives. The Open Brethren were somewhat less radical.

Our Reynolds, who appear to have wrestled with the depth of their devotion to the Brethren on many occasions, would include the following among friends and family in Ireland who supported the movement –

In Ireland

Lady Theodosia Wingfield – see panel

Robert and James Elwood – the Elwoods of Roscommon and Co. Mayo were Exclusive Brethren and lifelong friends and relatives of the Reynolds. Their PB daughters included –

Mary Frances Elwood – married in 1838 to James Butler Stoney (1814–1897), a future leader of the Exclusives. Also her sister –

Grace Trevor Elwood (1831–1867), mother of Gertrude deVesi Reynolds (née Jones).

James Vesey Parnell (1805–1883) – Lord Congleton, an Open PB and neighbour of the Vesleys.

George V. Wigram (1805–1879) – known as 'Darby's lieutenant', a wealthy go-between who bought property for assembly halls in Ireland and the UK.

John Syng (1788–1845) – described as a 'virtual godfather to the Brethren' and a neighbour at Powerscourt. His grandson was the noted playwright John Millington Syng.

Other Reynolds – more of our relatives in Ireland who congregated most thickly in Counties Leitrim and Roscommon were undoubtedly PBs. Indeed, there is a local *cromlech* (large flat stone) which, it is said, was the altar where the last of the Leitrim Reynolds sacrificed the family name to John Darby.

In England

In England – or the Cotswolds to be more precise – the first Reynolds to convert to the Brethren's new

From beloved Brethren Sex scandal of 'Big Jim' shakes 8,000 out of sect

Publicity-shy elders of the Exclusive Brethren in Scotland found themselves in the centre of a media storm in the summer of 1970 when American Jim Taylor, global leader of the sect, was accused of sleeping with another man's wife at the annual conference.

Front page stories in the *Scottish Daily Express* said 'Big Jim', as he was known, had bedded Mrs Madeline Ker, a mother-of-four and wife of senior PB Alan Ker, who was hosting Mr Taylor at the weekend conference in Aberdeen.

Colleagues of the Kers said Madeline was found naked in bed with their 70-year-old leader, but when traced later in New York he claimed she was only massaging his feet after a tiring journey. He strongly denied anything improper had taken place and said the newspaper stories were all "lies, lies, lies".

In the resulting *brouhaha* an estimated 8000 Exclusive Brethren quit the sect despite threats of being 'shut-out' by its members.

It was all especially embarrassing for Mr Taylor who had only recently imposed strict new rules on followers including not being able to live or eat with non-members, no TVs or radios, no pets and no wedding receptions or honeymoons.

Charismatic priest knew all the main characters

A dynamic and persuasive preacher named Robert Daly was thoroughly familiar with our Reynolds and their Vesey relatives in Ireland and was a prominent character in the birth of the Brethren there. Indeed, their chief originator John Darby once served as his curate. Known cynically as 'The Protestant Pope', Rev Daly (1783–1872) became rector of the Powerscourt parish and was chairman of the PB's conferences there in 1831 and 1832. After Lady Wingfield died he published her *Letters and Papers* in 1839 but, unlike her, he decided against joining the Brethren. In earlier days he had become a fan of the Pestalozzian methods of teaching and was a master and governor at a school on the Vesey's estate at Abbeyleix where he was a personal friend of the deVesi family. Rev Daly was appointed a Church of Ireland Bishop. A critic of the Irish national schools system, Daly wrote extensively and owned a significant library which was sold for charity. He was never married.

References: *The Silence of Barbara Syng* and ODNB (BH Blacker rev. Kenneth Milne)



Front Page from the Scottish Daily Express in August 1970

Mr Taylor, who was said to be a recovering alcoholic, allowed drink to be brought into his conference sessions. He died from a heart attack less than a year after the Aberdeen incident and was followed as leader by James Harvey Symington, a pig farmer from North Dakota.

• Norman Adams, the reporter who broke the story, wrote a book about the affair called *Goodbye, Beloved Brethren*. It was published in 1972 by Impulse (ISBN 090131138). Brethren officials are rumoured to have bought virtually the entire print run and pulped it. Mr Adams died in 2011.

Credits/thanks

Special thanks for help with this scroll go to Professor Timothy Stunt, author of *From Awakening to Secession*; Tim Grass, author of *Gathering to His Name*; to Rylands Library at the University of Manchester for the picture collage, and the late Rev John Stewart Reynolds, author of *Evangelicals at Oxford, 1735–1871*. Also to Moira Adams, widow of the Scottish Daily Express reporter, for her extraordinary fortitude.

Disclaimer: The author's use of the possessive 'Our' in connection with the Reynolds in this article, is intended to identify only those of that name who share, or most probably share, a blood / familial relationship as distinct from all other Reynolds of that name who do not.



An advert for the factory



The starch works at Battersea

Orlando Jones helps with starch and bread

In food, our highlight falls on a family who enriched the Reynolds with their multi-faceted evangelical zeal.

Orlando Jones, son of Edward, a colliery owner from South Wales,¹ and an early pioneer of accountancy, built a major business in London in the mid-19th century through a patented method of manufacturing starch from rice. He also developed other products as varied as wheat flour specially formulated to strengthen children's teeth to cheap

insurance for protecting small businesses from fire.

The whole Jones family became devoted members of the Plymouth Brethren movement.

One son, Theodore Brooke Jones, was a founder member of the Institute of Accountants. Another, Alfred Orlando Jones jnr (1836–1896) joined their multi-talented family to ours through his first marriage to Grace Trevor Elwood and their child Gertrude Anna, the future wife of Dr Austin Reynolds, a figure within the living memory of present generations.

This AOJ married for a second time, Hon Frederica Kinnaird, daughter of the social reformer Mary Jane Hoare and her banker husband Arthur Fitzgerald, 10th Lord Kinnaird.

With others, her parents formed a formidable pressure group working first out of Hyde Park Gardens and then Pall Mall, campaigning for nurses and young women in London.

AOJ himself became a homeopathic doctor, practising in Bromley.

Food



● Recipe with children in mind

IRISH REYNOLDS: THE SQUIRES OF LEITRIM

– continues from 7

Fortunately, by being in the right place at the right time, erstwhile Anglo-Irish colonists like our Vesey-Reynolds combination were able to accumulate land and property rapidly, and during those acquisitive days of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Vesey family seat – consisting of a whole village of homes, carpet factory, church and school with historic Abbyleix House at its core – stretched across 15,000 acres⁴ of Queens County (today: Co. Laois).

Thanks to the Archbishop, who educated his sons at Oxford and whose grand-children like Elizabeth were equally at home in London or Ireland, the status of the family was raised to a level where they frequently had property and positions of authority on both sides of the Irish Sea. Socially too, like Elizabeth and her distant relative the celebrity artist Joshua Reynolds, they were favourites among the Regency's fashionable *beau monde* in London, Dublin and Bath.

As to the indigenous Reynolds, there emerged George Nugent Reynolds aka the "Squire of South Leitrim" who, before his most unfortunate demise had accumulated estates of 'the most productive' 10,000 acres in Leitrim by the late 18th century plus extending the family seat at Letterfyan near Drumshanbo town.

There was also the Elwood family from Knockadoo in neighbouring Co. Roscommon who became closely linked with us from the 19th century.

This Elwood family came from gentrified Irish stock with several thousand acres and other homes in Co. Mayo and Galway. Over time, they introduced the Reynolds to the Jones's, a family of noted accountants with great wealth from food additive manufacturing, who shared a common attraction for the then nascent Plymouth Brethren movement which would shape so many destinies.

Perversely, after those earlier years of Irish success, the Reynolds' roller-coaster now went into full reverse. By design rather than accident, family devotion to the PB's messianic messages of the 19th and 20th centuries saw members divest themselves of considerable property and possessions.

At Lough Rhynn, scene of the Catholic Reynolds' departure for Dublin where they flourished for a time as silk manufacturers and traders, their old lakeside mansion passed into other hands and went through several incarnations before conversion into a luxury castle hotel⁵ and leisure complex.

Of the Protestant Reynolds, John Reynolds Peyton RN was thought to be last of the tree when he died in 1918, tragically just one week before the end of World War I.

Then, in present times at Lough Scur, where the Reynolds once built a castle and maintained an island prison on behalf of the Crown, the forlorn and ivy-covered ruin was sold at auction in 2007.

Even Abbyleix passed out of Vesey family ownership – being sold in 1995 to Sir David Davies, an international businessman and banker. Most notably however, this was not before the family had made a Royal connection when Susan Armstrong-Jones, sister of the late Lord Snowdon, married the 6th Viscount de Vesci and Diana Spencer, 7x gt. granddaughter of Archbishop John Vesey married Prince Charles.

Footnotes:

1. Catalogue of State papers 1623 ref 1120 Sir Thomas Phillips memoir – 'miserable mountainous woods', 'boggy ways', 'dangerous rivers'.

2. Which of the Reynolds/Vesey successors first went to Ireland is open to question. Elrington Ball and Debretts indicate William Vesey from the family at Hintlesham Priory was the pioneer; others claim he was from among their relatives at Bampton Nr Burford; others still that he was from Yorkshire or Cumberland.

3. One of most major figures in Irish history - PRONI

4. NUI Landed Estates. ie – Vesey database id 626

5. A colony of Reynolds arrived in Faringdon in the late 17th century. Whether they originated from Ireland is thought unlikely. They lived alongside our known Protestant Reynolds but worshipped as Quakers. The two sides did not apparently inter-marry but anecdotal evidence suggests they may have traded as mercers and drapers of fine silks and drapery in the Cotswolds area with their Protestant 'cousins' – see Scrolls 11 and 12.

to new 'angels' of reform



Top: Young Bertie, Prince of Wales

Left: The school at Roundwood

John Syng, a relative of our Vesey family in Ireland, set the Reynolds along the path of reform in education.

This Syng, a late convert to the PBs, was apparently the first to visit the educationalist Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) at his academy near Geneva, Switzerland.

So impressed was he with the success of Pestalozzi's principles of holistic teaching, individual tuition, and 'harmonising' mind and body that he convinced the Viscount de Vesci to open a special school back home on the Abbyleix estate in 1817/18.

Children of all denominations were welcome and with results spectacularly

In education

good, Lord Vesey (John, the 2nd Viscount) soon made his friend Rev Robert Daly the school superintendent.

Word spread and after Syng started a similar school on his Roundwood estate (see pic) news³ crossed the Irish Sea to Oxford where the educationalist Rev Charles Mayo was a fellow at St Johns.

This Dr Mayo (1792–1846) and his sister Elizabeth now took three years in Geneva to study the system and were so convinced of its benefits they set about persuading willing teachers to take up Pestalozzian principles on the Mainland.

To the Reynolds – whose family history includes founding free grammar schools in

the Cotswolds (Burford & Bampton), and Alcester (Warwicks), plus Southampton and Bury St Edmunds (*extant*), – the challenge was picked up with alacrity.

John (Stuckey) Reynolds, originally of our Devon branch and a former Treasury expert who turned evangelist, established Pestalozzian infant schools across London and elsewhere and started the 'Home & Colonial School Society' to train teachers in the Swiss innovator's methods.

Pestalozzian maths teacher Charles Reiner from the Mayo's School at Cheam was a private tutor to Bertie, Prince of Wales (later Edward VII).⁴ The alumni at Cheam includes the present Duke of Edinburgh and Prince Charles.

● The extended Reynolds family was involved in female education and self-advancement in the last quarter of the 18th century led by Elizabeth Vesey's bluestockings Hannah More, Anna Barbauld and Mary Wollstonecraft. Before them, there was also royal tutor Bathshea Makin (née Reynolds) who opened a 'school for gentlewomen' in Tottenham in the 17th century.

1. *The Priesthood of Industry* by Derek Matthews & others (1998)

2. Unpublished report XXXII John Jones Dec 2011

3. John Syng AKA 'Pestalozzi John' had a personal printing press to disseminate material – *Silence of Barbara Syng* by W.J.McCormack (MUP, 2003)

4. Genealogists Magazine vol V pp.130–133, 162–167

5. Martin Luther, his wife Katharina and the Reformation in Torgau (Torgau Info Centre, Germany, 2017)

6. See extensive *Crystalflower* and *Avilian* websites of homeopath writer and historian Sue Young

editing and hymn-writing. Sold the family's brewery and donated the proceeds to have all Burford residents supplied with gas.

Dr Edward RB Reynolds (1835–abt 1900) – originally an Open PB who qualified in medicine; moved to North London and joined efforts to help nurses, orphans and teachers.

Howard DuPuy Reynolds (1844–1930) – emigrated as a PB to New Zealand and Australia; became a land-owner and successful in business there.

In the next generation – for the children of Dr Edward RB Reynolds growing up in the second half of the 19th century – they found a hugely progressive time for the Brethren with members using their place in the community to campaign for economic and societal reform and missionaries setting off to spread the word to all corners of the world.

At first all was a celebration as ERBR's daughter Mary Elizabeth married Edward, the eldest son of Frederick Raven, Darby's protégé and new leader of the Exclusives.

It was a union that prompted the family's relocation to London (where affairs of central concern were now dealt with by a faction in Park Street, Islington). But after

Raven's death in 1903 when leadership transferred to the USA, it also brought a dramatic tightening of the rules for Exclusive Brethren like ours.

Besides Mary Elizabeth (b.1875), those of the next Reynolds generation who were brought up under this new era were –

Dr Austin Reynolds (1867–1935) – became a specialist eye surgeon

Henry Thomas Reynolds born 1868 – emigrated to Tasmania, Australia, and set up a market garden business

Dr Bryan Reynolds (1871–1927) – became a specialist ear, nose & throat surgeon

Dr Howard Reynolds born 1878 – became a specialist radiographer and emigrated to South Africa

Their regime called for attending Brethren schools, joining prayer readings every day and visiting the assembly rooms several times on Sundays, not being allowed to mix with 'worldlies' and restrictions on dress, sport and entertainment.

It resulted in increasing soul-searching by the faithful – and in many cases, a period of confusion and despair. But the greatest challenge of all came with the advent of two World Wars which questioned the family's devotion to Brethrenism like never before.

Homeopathy appeals to mood for changing times

The challenge to find better methods of treatment in medicine took its cue from the theories of Samuel Hahnemann, a little known physician in Germany.

Hahnemann (1755–1843), son of a designer of porcelain, was the unlikely exponent of homeopathy – the theory that *like cures like* – who wrote up his thesis in Wittenberg, a town made ever-famous by the Protestant reformer Martin Luther.⁵

Evangelists in the UK – and the newly-formed Plymouth Brethren in particular – who were exploring ways to change virtually every aspect of life, were alerted to Hahnemann's work by a young medical student in Ireland.

The student was Edward Cronin, one of a small caucus of disenchanted young reformers in Dublin who were emerging as leaders of the new Brethren movement.

Events moved rapidly in the late 1830s after Cronin (1801–1882) went on missionary expeditions to Asia and the Middle East with Brethren colleagues John Vesey Parnell, Francis Newman and Anthony Groves, and treated sufferers of cholera and typhoid with apparent success.

Back in London it is thought he was one of only a handful of practitioners to introduce homeopathic methods, but as word

In medicine

spread among the burgeoning Brethren membership, interest grew dramatically.

Records⁶ show a striking correlation between Brethren and those activists supporting the new alternative medicine, with the Reynolds family, plus their friends and relatives, in the lead.

Dr Edward RB Reynolds (1835–1900), an early PB convert from the Faringdon (Cotswold) Reynolds, certainly advocated Hahnemann's ways; as did Dr Henry Reynolds (1808–1890), his probable uncle, who became a founding member of the ambitious London Homeopathic Hospital which was built by a torrent of cash from the great and good, including royalty, in 1850. There were also our relatives the Jones family (see 'Starch and bread' above).

Other donors familiar to the Reynolds were Arthur Grattan Guinness from the Irish brewers, George Keppel the 6th Earl of Albermarle, whose ancestor had supported a young Joshua Reynolds, and Arthur Fitzgerald, the 10th Lord Kinnaird.

This last, with his wife Mary Jane Hoare, (*the step-parents of my gt-grandmother Gertrude de Vesci Jones, writes RM*) were proving to be champion evangelists of deserving causes on an heroic scale – with or without those Brethren Reynolds.

Lady Kinnaird, a niece of Rev Baptist Wriothesley Noel, the leading evangelist, campaigned for Florence Nightingale's Crimean nurses, the orphans of Dr Barnardo, homeless girls needing (what became) the YWCA, and many more worthy causes.

Lady Bountiful – see 14

The Reynolds move to Highgate and Barnet: p.14