

# William Carey: 250 years of mission

William Carey is known as the father of modern missions, and his 250th anniversary is observed this year. But he was inspired and helped by others, less known but still vital parts of the story, writes **Roger Hayden**

AT THE end of the 18th century most Baptists did not look beyond Europe as far as mission was concerned. The apostolic mandate to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth was addressed, as they argued, to the apostolic age, when it had been duly fulfilled.

It was against this kind of background that the modern missionary movement in Protestant churches began. Some Baptist ministers in the 1770s and 1780s first challenged their churches about their objectives in prayer, then about their understanding of the gospel, and finally posed the need for all Christians to be actively in partnership with God on his mission.

Three of them were John Sutcliff, Andrew Fuller – and William Carey. These ministers needed each other. One was a man of prayer, one a man with theological insight, the third a man with a determination to put a vision into practice.

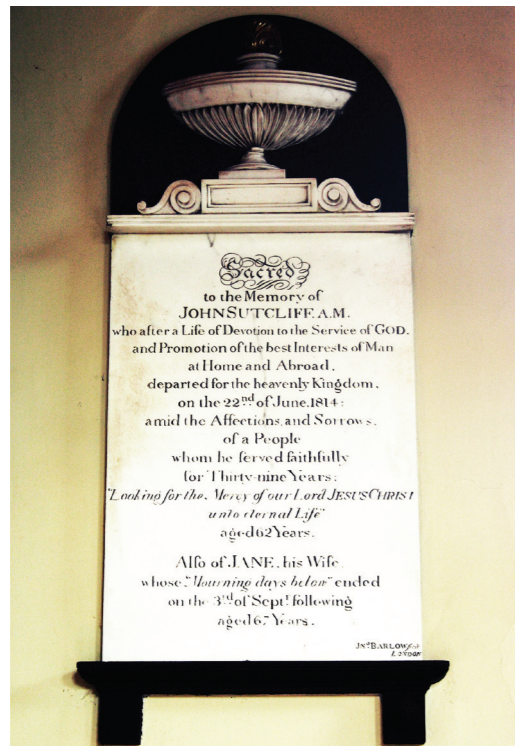
John Sutcliff was born in Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire, on August 9, 1752, and went to the Wainsgate Baptist Church. In February 1772 he made his way to Bristol Academy to be trained for the ministry by Hugh and Caleb Evans, having walked all the way from Yorkshire so that the money saved could be spent on books for further study.

After training he moved to Olney in 1775. In 1784 he introduced the idea of a regular prayer meeting for the revival of religion, at home and abroad, into the Northamptonshire Baptist Association meeting. This idea came from a book by the great revivalist Jonathan Edwards, who had pleaded for a regular hour every month to be given to prayers for the revival of religion.

After preaching at the Northamptonshire Baptist Association meeting in 1784 he proposed the Association churches should have prayer meetings to pray for revival on a monthly basis. This was a root which eventually flowered in the decision to form the Baptist Missionary Society.

Carey became a member at Olney Baptist Church from July 1785 until November 1787, so that Sutcliff and his church might test Carey's gift for Baptist ministry. At first Olney were not prepared to commend him, so he received further training from Sutcliff who taught him the basics of Greek, Hebrew and Latin. Carey began as pastor at Moulton in 1787, with John Sutcliff and Andrew Fuller preaching at his ordination on August 1, 1787.

The Baptist Missionary Society was founded after long discussions among the Northamptonshire Association ministers, who included Andrew Fuller. In his book *The Gospel Worth of All Acceptation, or the Duty of Sinners to believe in Jesus Christ*, (1785), Fuller challenged the extreme Calvinism of John Gill, which had resulted in dry, non-invitation preaching in the churches. Fuller stated it was the duty of all who hear the Gospel to trust in Christ with faith, placing



their personal trust in Christ's promises. 'I believe it is the duty of every minister of Christ,' he wrote, 'plainly and faithfully to preach the Gospel to all who will hear it ... I therefore believe free and solemn addresses, invitations, calls and warnings to be not only consistent, but directly adapted, as means, in the hand of the Spirit of God to bring them to Christ.'

Fuller went to the Association Meeting at Olney on June 5, 1782. The meetings were well attended, for the fire of revival was smouldering in many hearts. A window had to be taken out of the Meeting House, and an improvised pulpit placed within the chapel.

Hackleton Meeting House, where the young William Carey worshipped



so that the crowds who gathered might hear. Looking at Fuller from the yard as he preached, was the young William Carey.

His grandson and biographer Pearce Carey tells the story thus:

'No leader knew him, nor gave him a thought. He was one of the least of the concourse thronging the Olney meeting-house and yard... Carey had never seen Fuller before and would fain have thanked him. He had never witnessed such a day's religious zeal. With not a penny in his pocket he could buy no food, and except for a glass of wine at a friend of Mr Chater's, he fasted. But his mind and spirit had a feast. He would have been amazed had he foreseen how fiery a chariot this Association was to become, with himself its charioteer.'

Carey was a poverty-stricken shoemaker, employed by one of Fuller's deacons, Thomas Gotch. One day Gotch met Carey as he came to collect some shoe-leather and uppers to work on the next week. Gotch asked Carey how much he earned from his shoe-making, each week. Carey replied it was about 10 shillings a week. 'Well now,' said Gotch, with a twinkle in his eyes, 'I don't mean you to spoil any more of my leather, but get on as fast as you can with your Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and I'll allow you ten shillings a week from my private purse!'

Fuller had told Gotch of Carey's proposal for a discussion at the ministers' meeting on 'Whether the command given to the apostles to teach all the nations was not binding on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world.' Fuller notes that Carey constantly raised this issue, but his fellow ministers, 'mostly regarded it as a wild impracticable scheme and gave him no encouragement. Yet he would not give it up, but talked with us one by one, till he had made some impression.'

When the Northamptonshire ministers met in Clipstone, at Easter 1791, Fuller preached on a striking text from Haggai 1:2, 'This people say, the time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built'.

At this ministers meeting Carey demanded action from his colleagues, but they remained cautious. He moved that something should be done that day, 'relative to the formation of a Society for the propagation of the Gospel among the heathen'.

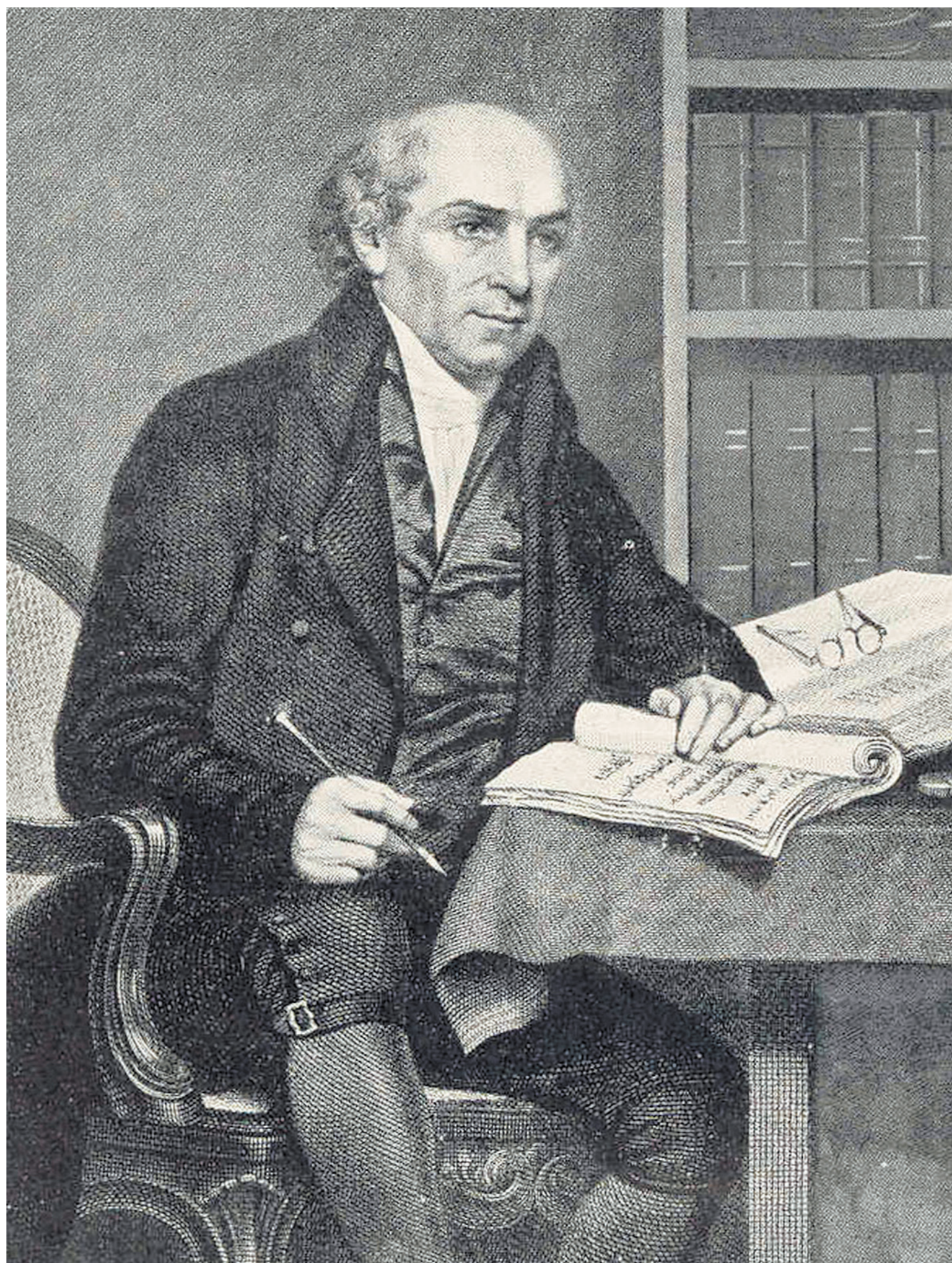
The other ministers had been compelled to consider such action, because Carey had constantly advocated it. To gain time and to satisfy Carey, they urged him to revise a manuscript he had prepared on the subject and put it into print.

Carey suggested the formation of a Society, with a competent committee to administer it. But there was still reluctance. In despair Carey grabbed hold of Fuller's arm and cried out: 'Is nothing again to be done?'

Fuller was deeply moved. It was agreed that the plan for such a Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Heathen be prepared for the October meeting at Kettering. Carey preached his 'deathless sermon' at Nottingham, 'Expect great things FROM God, attempt great things FOR God', and the rest is history: as Carey willingly translated his vision into action by sailing with Dr John Thomas in 1793, for India, never to return to these shores.

Many things can be learned from this part of our Baptist story, but for me it is important because it reveals what in the present could be called 'a Baptist spirituality', which is useful for to-day. It illustrates our interdependence as Baptist Christians. These ministers needed each other. Coming together to find the mind of Christ, each brought a vital gift and shared it with their friends, so God's will could be known and done.

• The Revd Dr Roger Hayden is a retired Baptist minister



## Carey in brief

BORN in 1761 on August 17, Carey was a shoemaker who struggled to make ends meet. He married Dorothy Plackett in 1781; she was illiterate, but he was naturally gifted at languages, teaching himself Latin, Hebrew, Italian, Dutch and French.

In 1785 he became the schoolmaster at Moulton, taking on the pastorate of the Baptist church the following year. He was increasingly concerned with the preaching of the gospel throughout the whole world, and in 1792 his efforts resulted in the founding of

the Baptist Missionary Society. The following year he and his family left for Calcutta with John Thomas, a medical doctor.

Funds were scarce, and for six years William managed an indigo factory to support them, working on a Bengali New Testament at the same time. His son Peter died of dysentery during this period, and Dorothy had a breakdown from which she never recovered.

In 1800 Carey moved to the Danish colony of Serampore, where with Joshua Marshman (right) and William Ward (left) his most fruitful work was done, particularly

through the mission's printing press: in Carey's lifetime the Bible in whole or part was printed in 44 languages and dialects.

The mission founded Serampore College, in 1818; the Trio campaigned against suttee, the Hindu practice of burning widows alive on their husband's pyre; they made a crucial break with the caste system for their converts; they promoted agricultural, social and medical reform, and Carey was highly regarded as a botanist.

In later years his relationship with the Society broke down. His original supporters died and were replaced by others; new missionaries were sent to join him, who were often unsuitable for the task. But today his is one of the most honoured names in Baptist history.

## Facing a task unfinished

Carey's story is remarkable, writes **Mark Craig** – but there's work still to be done

EDMUND and Elizabeth Carey's first child was born in 1761, in the tiny Northamptonshire village of Paulerspury. At the time, there was no reason to suppose that the child, William, would go on to change the world.

Raised in the Church of England, he'd been able to go to school, where he'd shown an early interest in languages. He'd then become an apprentice shoemaker, where he came across a dissenter, John Warr. Curiously, for a man who by then had taught himself some Latin and Greek, his wife Dorothy was illiterate – she signed her entry in the marriage register with a simple cross. In 1783, he was baptised in the nearby River Nene, and in 1785 felt called to work for God.

Carey was ordained in 1787 as a Baptist minister, and published his famous *Enquiry* four years later, promoting that revolutionary missionary thinking in his famous 'deathless sermon' in Northampton in 1792.

And in 1793, William found himself on a Danish boat, sailing for India with his family, with the sole intention of evangelising the national population of that country. He never came back.

Instead, William took on the prospect of reaching the population of India with the gospel. Of course, to do that,

he had to get the gospel into a version the people could understand. So he set about translating the entire Bible into local languages – from scratch!

Remarkably, he produced the first Bengali Bible, eventually translating the whole Bible into six languages. He also translated at least one book of the scriptures into another 29, many of which had never been printed before, becoming in the process one of the greatest linguists of all time. That principle of making the gospel known in local languages was key to his success.

Just for good measure, he also developed his interest in botany, studying and cataloguing the local flora and fauna, and developing a reputation for excellence in this field which is still intact today.

More than 200 years later, the Baptist Missionary Society continues, under the name BMS World Mission. Mission work in India via BMS also continues, with a new mission boat having been launched last year, to enable local partners to reach remote villages in the Sunderbans region with the gospel.

There's perhaps a sombre note in that, though. For those who have read his dramatic first journal (featured in the new BMS DVD *William Carey – Journal Extracts*), there's a sense that Carey would have been devastated to know that, despite all that time, there are still communities near to where he lived who still have not heard the gospel.

The great work is not yet complete, but Carey's contribution to it will stand for all time as one of the towering achievements of Christian mission.

• Mark Craig is head of communications for BMS World Mission

You can order the new DVD *William Carey – Journal Extracts* by emailing [resources@bmsworldmission.org](mailto:resources@bmsworldmission.org) or by calling 01235 517617. Copies are £5 plus P&P

## Carey's Bengal legacy

**Edward Williams** on how he's remembered today

TRAVEL by train in West Bengal, and someone who speaks English may well engage you in conversation. You will probably find that this person knows and honours the name of William Carey for his great contribution to India in many spheres, above all as a key figure in the rise of Bengali to be one of the world's great literary languages.

Get off the train at Serampore, and you will emerge through a recently-constructed entrance hall of which one entire wall is a memorial to Carey – it is not only in Christian circles that the name is honoured. Conspicuous at the top of the wall are his famous words: 'Attempt Great Things for God – Expect Great Things from God.'

Take a rickshaw to the College, and you will pass alongside the river on what used to be called Strand Road. After Independence, when English names were replaced by those of Indian heroes such as Mahatma Gandhi, Strand Road was renamed after the person of whom Serampore is so proud: William Carey Road.

You will then reach the fine buildings and grounds of Serampore College. It is the local college, where 3,000 young people study for Calcutta University degrees in Arts, Science and Commerce, including some at post-graduate level. In government assessments of all colleges in W Bengal, Serampore regularly features in the top half-dozen.

It is also a theological college with nearly 150 students up to doctoral level from across India, speaking many languages and from almost all the major denominations of the Indian church. Moreover, thanks to the foresight of Carey and his



colleagues in obtaining a university charter for their new college in 1818, Serampore provides the framework for degrees up to doctoral level for a family of 50 theological colleges throughout India, including those of the ancient churches which claim the apostle Thomas as their founder.

Attend the annual Convocation of this family, held in different institutions each year, and you will find 400 or more graduates receiving their degrees in person, out of a total each year of about 1,200 students destined for Christian ministry – what a legacy from Carey's vision! During the Convocation there will be frequent references to him, and a sermon linked in some way to his work. You will discover that in the Indian churches 'Serampore and William Carey' are spoken of in the same way that we in Britain speak of 'Iona and St Columba'.

Go finally to the town of Serampore once more and stand by Carey's grave. You will be humbled and inspired by the words that this 'awestruck, surrendered person' chose for his epitaph: 'A wretched, poor and helpless worm./ On thy kind arms I fall.'

• To learn more and to support the College, please go to [www.friendsoserampore.org.uk/](http://www.friendsoserampore.org.uk/), or contact Dr & Mrs E H B Williams, 12 Penny Lane, Guariford, Malvern, WR13 6PG

## Resources

BMS is inviting churches to celebrate 'Carey Sunday' on August 21.

All-age materials are available in the latest edition of FACE, or as a free download from [www.bmsworldmission.org/face](http://www.bmsworldmission.org/face) or by calling BMS on 01235 517617

There's also a DVD, *William Carey - Journal Extracts*, which tells Carey's story in his own words. This is available at £5 + £2.50 p&p from [www.bmsworldmission.org/resources](http://www.bmsworldmission.org/resources) or by calling the number above.

The Carey Experience offers the chance to visit places in the Northamptonshire area connected with Carey's life and work, including his cottage at Moulton and the chapel at Olney. Visit [www.thecareyexperience.co.uk](http://www.thecareyexperience.co.uk), or telephone 01604 719187 for details.

For pictures of Serampore see [www.virtualserampore.org](http://www.virtualserampore.org)

