

Bible Society history timeline

1804 British & Foreign Bible Society formed

Laying the foundations

At a meeting of the Religious Tract Society in London on 7 December 1802 it was proposed to provide Bibles at reduced prices for Welsh speakers. Revd Joseph Hughes asked, 'If for Wales, why not for the kingdom? And if for the kingdom, why not for the world?'

This led to the formation of the British and Foreign Bible Society the following year. The Society was launched on 7 March 1804, in the London Tavern, Bishopsgate, with around 300 people present.

The story of Mary Jones

A 15-year-old Welsh girl, Mary Jones, walked bare foot over 25 miles of mountain paths when she heard copies of the Bible were available in a nearby town. Stories of people like Mary Jones helped inspire the formation of Bible Society.

William Wilberforce and other members of the Clapham sect were instrumental in founding Bible Society in 1804

In 1787, seven years after he became an MP, William Wilberforce wrote in his diary: 'God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the slave trade and the Reformation of Manners'. What Wilberforce intended was to make 'goodness fashionable' and to cause people to fall in love with the Bible – the inspiration for that goodness.

Wilberforce was associated with many societies and campaigning groups including the *British and Foreign Bible Society*.

1816 purchase of the first Bible House, 10 Earl Street, Blackfriars

International growth

Bible Society auxiliaries – local support groups – and other independent national Bible Societies formed to conduct Bible work throughout the world. In many cases they had the active encouragement and financial backing of the British and Foreign Bible Society.

A network of agents

A network of agents began to emerge, reinforced by permanent depots and travelling salesmen – called 'colporteurs' – who sold Bibles all around the world.

Using reindeer, sledges, camels, boats and horses to reach the most remote places, the colporteurs were often at great personal risk and braved fever, rejection, abuse and even imprisonment as a spy.

The Scriptures were sold, not given away. But as some couldn't afford them, a barter system was adopted – instead of money, some colporteurs finished a day's sale, clutching eggs, rabbits, fans, chopsticks and even monkeys.

A Spanish Bible-seller reported how he met a group of men on his travels, but before he could speak, one of them said, 'Of course, you bring the Bible, is that not so? I have never met you before but I know who you are by your pleasant manners. When on the road or staying in inns, I soon note the presence of the colporteur, for he is not only of a different behaviour to others, but he brings quite a different atmosphere to the place. That is one reason why the gospel is winning such triumphs in Spain.'

One of the group accompanied the colporteur as he went through the village and recommended his friends to buy the Scriptures so that many copies were sold.

A growing Christian Church

1850 to 1914 – a time of phenomenal expansion for the Christian Church worldwide. Missionaries of many Societies began pioneering translation work, editing, publishing, and distributing Scriptures.

1868 new home for Bible Society

In the 1860s Bible Society needed to find new premises and commissioned a building on Queen Victoria Street in London. The then Prince of Wales, who was to become Edward VII, laid the foundation stone. This building was Bible Society's home for 117 years, from 1868 to 1985.

Early 1900s courageous colporteur travels by donkey across the Gobi desert

Courageous colporteur Mildred Cable several times travelled by donkey, all the way across the Gobi desert in Mongolia, China. With her companions, Francesca and Evangeline French, she distributed Scriptures and set up a school.

At that time, Chinese girls were only classed as beautiful if they had tiny feet, so their feet were bound to stop them growing. To counter this, Mildred Cable and the two sisters would not allow girls into their school unless their feet were unbound.

When they returned home to England, Mildred began working with Bible Society. She was particularly involved in the support given by women, an activity that was still separate at that time.

1904 centenary celebrations

By the centenary celebrations, in 1904, Bible Society had distributed nearly 181 million copies of the Scriptures worldwide. A royal service marked the centenary in a crowded St Paul's Cathedral, London. Though illness prevented the King from coming, his consort Queen Alexander attended, along with the Prince and Princess of Wales. The Archbishop of Canterbury spoke to the congregation.

1914–1918 First World War, but Bible work continues

Circulation

Translation

Newspaper reports

Circulation

Some 1,500 colporteurs continued their work in countries outside the main areas of battle during World War I. In 1916 a quarter, and in 1917 a third, of Bible Society's total circulation was achieved in China, where three million copies of the Bible were circulated.

Translation

Despite all the hazards associated with travelling and delays in communication during the war, thirty-four new languages were added to Bible Society's Bible translation lists, an average of one for every seven weeks of the war.

Newspaper reports

An article in the *Daily Telegraph* early in 1918 remarked, 'Few indeed realise how great have been the activities of this learned and uncontroversial [Bible] Society since the first days of the war.'

1923 braving a business trip by air

Mr Haig appears to have been the first member of staff to travel by air on Bible Society business was a Mr Haig but the new technology wasn't entirely reliable.

His flight from Berlin to London began on 31 August 1923. Mr Haig stated, 'The trip was in a biplane with an open cockpit and I was therefore provided with flying clothes. The trip should have taken about eight hours. We followed the Elbe but near Hamburg the engine spluttered to a halt and the pilot had to hastily select the largest field in sight, where he landed safely. We were taken by car to the nearest aerodrome and another plane took me to Schipol (near Amsterdam) where I stayed the night, as no night flying was allowed at the time. The next morning I left in a Dutch plane with a postal official and the mail, reaching Croydon at 11.30 am.'

1939–45 Second World War

Staff at Bible House continued their work amid falling bombs and fires during *World War II*. A report at the time comments, 'Needless to say the Society will continue to carry on its work from headquarters. Our windows will have to be boarded up as a temporary measure, but the electric light is still available and there is not the slightest reason why our activities should be curtailed.'

In 1943, Nazi authorities closed the Bible Depot in Prague and the circulation of Scriptures was prohibited. However, the Superintendent, Revd B Cernohorsky, continued to organise the production of Bibles in Prague despite the official ban. He found printers who were willing to take the risk and a binder who was at the same time officially employed by a notorious Nazi General on Government publications!

1946 formation of the United Bible Societies

The growing number of national Bible Societies could see the value of having a central coordinating body that improved their efficiency and effectiveness. As a result, the United Bible Societies was formed.

1948 a meeting of the Privy Council authorised a Royal Charter for Bible Society

The Royal Charter governing the Bible Society's work was originally granted by King George VI on 27 November 1948. It details how the Society should operate and includes 'Bye-laws' relating to the aims of the Society, the appointment of the Board of Trustees and the accounts. The current Royal Charter, recognising the changing role of the Society was granted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1984. The Society regards its recognition as a charter body as being a real privilege.

1954 the Queen and Enid Blyton

The Queen Mother visited Bible House on 4 May and the Queen sent a special message to greet Bible Society on its 150th anniversary. In the same year, Enid Blyton wrote a children's book about Bible Society, entitled *The Greatest Book in the World*, in honour of our 150th anniversary. This was published in March 1954. *Punch* marked the anniversary with a drawing by Fougasse, symbolising the Society's work.

1976 Good News Bible published

This was a ground-breaking piece of publishing and soon became the most popular translation to date.

1977 beginnings of Bible a Month

The idea was simple – to invite supporters to make regular gifts so that, every month someone new receives the Bible. The idea has gone round the world.

1982 new bible house in Swindon

The Internationally renowned evangelist, Billy Graham, opened the first part of the new Bible House in Swindon in 1982, and in 1986 the Queen Mother officially opened the completed new building, finalising our historic move from London to Wiltshire.

1986 opening of historic scripture collection

Prince Philip opened Bible Society's historic Scripture collection. The earliest piece in the collection is a 4th century manuscript. It also includes Tyndale, Wycliffe and Luther Bibles. There are Bibles with embroidered, jewel encrusted and wood carved covers, Bibles no bigger than a man's thumbnail and even a Bible in Pittman shorthand.

1987 Chinese Bibles roll off the presses

Throughout the Cultural Revolution in China (1966–76) it was impossible to make the Bible available. However, in the 1980s, there were the first signs of a new openness. An understanding was reached between the Amity Foundation, (a Chinese Christian initiative), and the United Bible Societies, to establish a printing press for the production of Bibles and New Testaments.

The first Bibles rolled off the press in 1987. Since then over 40 million copies have been printed and distributed.

1990s Communism crumbles

As Communism in Eastern Europe crumbled, Bible Society was quick to respond by helping fund the supply of Bibles to countries that had been without them for two generations. In the closing decade of the last millennium Bible Societies were set up or re-established in Russia, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

1995 Launch of the Faith Comes By Hearing scripture cassette programme

This programme made it possible for churches to have their members all listen to through the whole New Testament over a forty-day period.

1998 the Open Book project

The Archbishop of Canterbury's idea for a *Year of the Bible* took shape when Bible Society and Churches Together in England launched *The Open Book* project. The aim was to open the book – the Bible – for today's generation through the arts, media, politics and education, using an array of methods from drama to debate and storytelling to music.

2001 gearing up for the challenges of the 21st century

Bible Society faced up to the reality of the way attitudes to the Bible had changed. When the Society had been founded the Bible was prized and trusted central to life. But this was no longer true.

Months of heart-searching led to a mission programme that would also address the need for the Bible to again be seen as relevant in the public square – with an emphasis on the influential areas of the media, education, politics and the arts.

This was also when the British and Foreign Bible Society became more simply known as Bible Society.

2003 first campaign to culture – Nottingham

Bible Society's first major campaign to culture took place in Nottinghamshire. The campaign used billboards, bus shelter posters and radio adverts, to make connections between TV soaps and themes first dealt with in the Bible. In order to encourage people to take a fresh look at the biblical story.

2004 celebrating our bicentenary

Our celebrations for 200 years of Bible endeavour included a service at St Paul's Cathedral on 8 March 2004, an international day of prayer and an exhibition of Bible Society Scriptures at the Guildhall in London.

2005 Bristol campaign to culture

In order to get the general public to notice the media campaign and engage with it, we chose to use an approach that is both familiar and of interest to most people, and one which stands a chance of getting people's attention ... something which is already a major part of daily life ... soap operas.

2006 campaigning against Bible poverty

Recognising that the churches in England and Wales no longer understood how many still waited for the Bible's life-changing message, a campaign was launched to wake them up to 'Bible poverty'.

The campaign stressed the number of languages still waiting for even one verse of the Bible, the languages still without Braille scriptures, the billion of non-readers without the Bible in audio and the billion more too poor to buy a Bible for themselves.

This emphasis – and the message that Bible poverty is as much a scandal as global poverty – became the heart of Bible Society communications. It directly led to a major re-engagement with churches and a renewal of their financial support.

2007 Greater Manchester campaign to culture

In May and June 2007, Bible Society unleashed *The Riddle of Life* campaign across the whole of Greater Manchester.

Working in partnership with over 250 churches in the area Bible Society helped people re-engage with the Bible in a positive way.

The *Riddle of Life* competition was based on solving seven biblical riddles. Each riddle featured the headline of a biblical story – but also contained a missing word to solve.