

**WILLIAM  
CARVOSSO**

**Ponsanooth**

**Evangelist and Teacher**

**(1750-1834)**



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## **WILLIAM CARVOSSO (1750-1834)**

### **Evangelist and Teacher**

This account of the life of William Carvosso is taken from his autobiography, "A Memoir of William Carvosso." (*This book is in the case on the left wall of the chapel – key on side*) His book is largely taken from the Journal he kept.

Carvosso was born March 11th 1750 near Mousehole, a small port in the south west of Cornwall. He lived in a time of revival and experienced many different ones during his lifetime; some very local, others that spread further afield over west Cornwall.

He barely knew his father, because he was press ganged into the navy and served on a man of war until he died in Greenwich Hospital. His mother was a Christian who taught her four boys and one daughter to read, but she did not teach William to write. At the age of ten he went to live with a farmer to whom he was later indentured as an apprentice for ten years. Although the farmer died after three years, Carvosso remained with the family for eleven years as they treated him with great kindness.

Carvosso regularly attended the parish church, but that did not prevent him from getting involved with cock-fighting, wrestling, card playing and Sabbath-breaking. He recounts that the Lord protected him in the days before he became a Christian, as he very nearly drowned twice and nearly died from falling off a horse.

In 1771 he went to see his mother. There he found his sister,

who had become a Christian, praying with his mother and the rest of the family. In his own words he says, “she soon began to enquire what preparation I was making for eternity. I was quite at a loss for an answer. She then asked if I attended the preaching of the Methodists. I told her I did not. Upon this she particularly requested me to go that night. “And be sure,” she said “you hear for yourself.” By this time Methodism had become well established in western Cornwall as John Wesley had visited the area nineteen times by 1771. On the 28th August 1770 Wesley preached at Newlyn (only a mile or so from Mousehole), so Carvosso’s sister may well have heard him speak there and this may have been the cause of her conversion.

Returning to Carvosso’s account, “As the evening drew on I felt a very strong urge to go to the preaching. It was at Newlyn on the Maddern side of the river. As soon as I entered the place I steadfastly fixed my eyes on the preacher, Mr Thomas Hanson, His text was “We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.” The Word quickly reached my heart. The scales fell off from my eyes. I saw and felt I was in ‘the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.’ I had such a sight of the damning nature of sin and what I had done against God that I was afraid the earth would have opened and swallowed me up. I then made a solemn promise to the Lord that if he would spare me I would serve him all my days.”

He then immediately gave up his old sins and his old friends and set himself towards finding God. Satan was very real to him at this time of struggle. He wrote, “Satan appeared as if he was by me and laboured to terrify me with his presence.” He suffered a lot for many days in his struggle to find mercy. He was on his own; no one helped him by pointing the way to Christ, but he finally had the breakthrough he was fighting for. “In the midst of the conflict, I said, in answer to the powerful suggestions of the devil, ‘I am determined, whether I am saved or lost, that while I have breath, I will never cease crying for

mercy.' The very moment I formed this resolution in my heart, Christ appeared within, and God pardoned all my sins and set my soul at liberty. The Spirit itself bore witness with my spirit that I was a child of God."

Carvosso remained in a happy state for three months until he began to be attacked again by Satan as he was searching for full salvation. He was appalled that his inward nature appeared so black and sinful. "What I now wanted was "inward holiness" and for this I prayed and searched the scriptures. Among the number of promises I found in the Bible that gave me to see it was my privilege to be saved from all sin, my mind was particularly directed to Ezekiel 36:25-27. 'then will I sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart also I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh and I will give you a heart of flesh and you shall keep my judgements and do them.'" This is the great and precious promise of the eternal Jehovah. I laid hold of it, determined not to stop short of my privilege; for I saw clearly that the will of God was my sanctification. The more I examined the Scriptures, the more I was convinced that without holiness there could be no heaven. He kept searching for sanctification, but struggled greatly with unbelief; listening to the words of Satan instead of looking to Jesus and believing on Him for the blessing. "At length one evening, while engaged in a prayer meeting, the great deliverance came. I began to exercise faith by believing "I shall have the blessing now." Just at that moment a heavenly influence filled the room and a refining fire went "through my heart, illuminated my soul, scattered its life through every part and sanctified the whole." I cried out, 'this is what I wanted! I have now got a new heart.'" I was emptied of self and sin and filled with God." This process took almost eight months.

In Methodism each area, normally a town and its surrounds, had a society and each society was split into classes; much like home groups today. This was one of the brilliant

innovations of Wesley that helped the effectiveness of building up members in the faith. When Carvosso gave his life to Jesus there was only one small class in his town, but three years later he was asked to lead a small class of his own.

When he was about 29 the Lord directed him to marry. At the same time he took a small farm and fished in the summer during the pilchard season. Pilchards were a major source of income for those in west Cornwall as they exported any catches that were surplus to home requirements. He was not happy on the sea, so when the opportunity arose at the end of 1788 he moved twenty six miles to a farm at Gluvias, near Ponsanooth. Here there were no chapels, just a class meeting once a fortnight at a nearby farm. The class had no leader and could not even hold a prayer meeting, so he took up the reins and led the class. He did this for 'some years', with little success. However he then felt the Lord pushing him to give words of exhortation, "I saw sinners perishing without repentance and the Lord seemed to say to me, 'their blood will I require at thy hands.' With fear and trembling I opened my mouth to beseech them to flee from the wrath to come. And soon after, to our great joy, it pleased the Lord to convince and convert a few souls and add them to our little number."

It is interesting that the Lord waited until Carvosso was about 44 before he released him into the important work that he was to be involved with for the rest of his life. This was now the beginning of the revival period that went on until about 1862. Perhaps the Lord waited to release him until the spiritual atmosphere was right in the area. He speaks of labouring "for some years" which is more than "a few", so it would not be unreasonable to suppose that it was about five years, taking us to 1794. In that year Joseph Benson, a prominent Methodist preacher, did a tour of Cornwall. This tour brought the first signs of revival to Cornwall. Benson spoke three times at Redruth, about six miles from Ponsanooth. He also spoke twice at Gwenap to crowds of 10,000, only two miles from Carvosso's farm; and at Penryn, only about three miles from

his home. The whole spiritual atmosphere in the area would have changed at this time, so it is not surprising that Carvosso began to see fruit from his ministry.

At this time he was convicted that he had not done enough to see his children converted, so he began to pray earnestly for their salvation. After two weeks of praying he came in from the fields one day to find his daughter Grace crying out to God for mercy. She told him that she had been feeling the load of her sin for about a fortnight and he led her to the Lord. His eldest son William soon followed his sister and a little later his other son, Benjamin, also became a Christian.

More people gave their lives to the Lord until Carvosso was leading two large classes and having to preach twice a week. The place where they were meeting became too small, so with great effort they built themselves a chapel, funding it by going around the neighbourhood asking for the money that they could not raise from within the society.

The congregation grew even more, so the chapel was no longer big enough. They tore it down and raised up a larger one on the same site. In 1813 Carvosso's dear wife died and she was the first person buried in the Ponsanooth chapel's new burial ground.

At the beginning of 1814 west Cornwall was hit by what is known there as the 'great revival'. "A great and glorious revival broke out at Redruth and spread to various parts of Cornwall. It was such a revival as my eyes never saw before. I call it 'a glorious revival,' for such it proved to my own soul. My faith was so increased to see the mighty power of God displayed in convincing and converting such vast multitudes." The society grew to about 200 members split into eleven classes; Carvosso led three and his son Benjamin, who was now a local preacher, led another.

With his older children married, Carvosso was now alone on the farm and was praying about whether he should give it up.

One evening when he was sitting alone, thinking about what he should do, the words came to him "Behold I have set before thee an open door." From that moment he decided to give up the farm and work full time for the Lord. He gave up the farm, moving in with his daughter who lived three miles away at Dowstall. Remember that he was 64 or 65 at this time (a significant age in those days), setting off on a new career for his Master. Assistants were put in charge of his three classes; from now on he would travel around the county, preaching anywhere he was asked.

It was about this time that he decided to learn to write. Up to 1817 the account of his life is from memory, but from that time he started a journal which he maintained until he died. He also became a prolific letter writer. Even today you will not find many people changing their lives so much at 65; in the early part of the nineteenth century it was pretty extraordinary.

Carvosso used to go house to house to speak to people about Jesus or he would just stop someone in the street. The following is a typical example of his evangelism. "Returning one Sabbath day from worship, I happened to look behind me and saw a neighbour of mine coming. It was immediately pressed upon my mind that I must speak to him about his soul. So I stopped until he came up with me. I then spoke freely to him about his future state; but I soon found death and eternity were subjects he had thought little about, for he was asleep in his sins. I began to preach the law to him, and often, while speaking, lifted up my heart to God to bless what I said. I asked him if he was willing to die in his present state. He acknowledged he was not. As he was labouring under an illness, I earnestly requested him that as soon as he should reach his house he would go into his room, fall down upon his knees and implore that mercy of which he stood so much in need." He did.

Towards the end of 1815 Carvosso came to a toll gate while travelling to a meeting. A girl of about 18 came out to take the

toll. "the moment I saw her I felt such a love for her soul and such a concern for her salvation that I thought I could have died for her, if that were to bring her to the Lord and be the means of saving her soul". Although wanting to speak to her, he had no opportunity as she immediately went back inside. He realised that he would see her again on the return trip, so he carried on. The whole of the next 11 days he could not get her out of his mind when he was in prayer. On his return he was able to talk to her for a while, but her mother came out and the young woman went inside before he was able to finish what he wanted to say. He got off his horse and followed her inside to find her crying bitterly. Soon Carvosso was in tears as well. Her father turned out to be a class leader and the class was meeting that evening, so he persuaded the woman to go along with her father. He then asked the young woman's sister if she would go to the meeting as well; she said she would. Four months later he was passing through the gate again. As soon as the woman (Jane) saw him she said "You were sent here to save my soul". Then her sister ran out to greet him "with Heaven sparkling in her eyes and shouting aloud the praises of the Most High." Eighteen months later Jane died. When Carvosso visited the family, he told Jane's older brother Robert that he needed to follow her example. As he said this, her younger brother Jonathan burst into tears and gave his life to the Lord. Jonathan died three years later. A year after that Carvosso visited the family again and found Robert still unsaved. He spoke to him again and soon after he received salvation; five years later he too died. In those days many died at quite a young age.

Carvosso's journal that begins on January 10th 1817 is full of stories similar to those above and of his relationship with Christ. Here are a few excerpts.

June 1817 "At a meeting one night at Breage, the power of God descended on us as a mighty rushing wind; and one person present was filled with the Spirit in a very remarkable manner."

Feb 1818 “I proceeded to Mousehole where I rejoiced to see the mighty works of God displayed in convincing and converting sinners. I intended to stay only a week (he was there seven weeks) but the work of the Lord broke out among them and the friends would not let me go. In my usual way I went preaching from house to house and I believe God never blessed my feeble efforts more than at this time. There was gracious work in the Sunday school. None but those who have witnessed such a revival can form any idea of it.”

April 1822 ‘the next Sunday several of the Camborne friends made an appointment to go to Kehelland to hold a prayer meeting. The news of our coming excited some curiosity among the people, so that the house was crowded within and without. The power of God descended and many sinners were pricked in the heart. This was the drop before the shower. (He then describes several instances of salvations.) I might relate many other instances of a similar nature. I believe the Lord never condescended to own my feeble endeavours more than He has in my visit to Camborne this time. Great good was done in the class meetings, especially in Captain Lean’s, in which it was not uncommon for two or three to find peace in an evening. In this class the people so crowded for some weeks that it could not be regularly met at all. Probably as many as 500 have been at one prayer meeting. I continued with them for four weeks. I was then obliged to leave them because the exertion was too great for my bodily strength (he was 72.) Never did I wonder more at the universal love and affection of the people toward me. To Jesus alone be all the praise.

Aug 1822 ‘this is a morning without a cloud. All is calm and joy, and peace – nothing of rapture, but solid, unutterable bliss! I cannot express what I feel. It is “joy unspeakable and full of glory;” a sinking into nothing at the feet of Christ; a feeling that He is “all in all.”

Dec 1823 “Hearing that God had very wonderfully visited

Ponsanooth, I hastened thither and found some of the distressed souls in the chapel who had been there several days and nights , struggling in prayer and crying for mercy. At Mr Lovey's factory the Spirit of conviction was operating so powerfully that many who had been triflers were falling down on their knees to pray in the midst of their work. Indeed, for many days nothing else was done but attending to those who were deeply agonizing with God for their souls" salvation. Multitudes were the subjects of a gracious change. But not only at Ponsanooth has this glorious work broken out – it has gone forth into all the societies and congregations round about to a great extent. Thousands of sinners are said to be awakened."

March 1825 'the more I meditate on divine things, the more my soul is lost in the immensity of redeeming love. This has an influence so wonderfully attractive that it draws all the powers of my heart and mind into it.

Oct 1828 He visited Mousehole where things were very quiet, but they soon changed. "After this meeting in the chapel a general concern took place in the minds of the people. The prayer meetings were crowded by hundreds of attendants, and all the enquiry was, "What must I do to be saved?" This extraordinary visitation from above continued four months and the "revival at Mousehole" resounded far and near. During the four months I was with them there were very few houses in Mousehole that I did not visit. It was astonishing to all the friends, as well as to myself, how the Lord supported my strength. (He was 79) Day and night I was employed in visiting, instructing, exhorting and in praying with the distressed. (This is much abridged.)

July 1832 "After a tour of nineteen weeks the Lord has once more brought me in safety to my own home, for which I praise His Holy Name. I spent seven weeks in Mousehole where I had again the pleasure of seeing many sinners brought to God"

The journals show that Carvosso is always trying to live a more pure and holy life, is wondering at the love of Jesus and hungering to see just one more person saved. Just as he went around Cornwall teaching the different classes how to get closer to God; through his journal he continues to teach these things almost two hundred years later.

On October 13th 1834 William Carvosso died of a bladder infection after spending about 10 weeks in great pain. He was a man who had a wonderfully close relationship with God and who profited from this through his ministry. He had little or no education, coming from lowly stock; yet he shines like a burning light – an example to us all. He would say that he was a teacher and not a preacher, although he would sometimes fill in for an absent preacher. His gifting lay as a class leader; teaching and encouraging his people in the ways of God. He was a man who spent many hours interceding before his Lord for the souls of family, friends and those he was yet to meet. He was a very gifted prayer leader, excelling at one-on-one evangelism; be it in the street, going around house to house, or by letter. He was a prolific letter writer, using them mainly to encourage people to press on towards the prize.

It is difficult to give an idea of such a man in so few pages, so I encourage you to read the book. I will finish with an account from a man who benefited from Carvosso's ministry. This is just one man from thousands who were blessed by him, but it shows how the Lord used His servant.

“On one occasion, after I had been out three days and nights on a drinking bout at Falmouth, my wife came on a Sunday morning to seek for me and take me home. Returning with her, and another person, while passing through Ponsanooth in a state of intoxication, there were some persons coming out of a meeting. Your father, whose name I got to know some years afterward, was among the number. Seeing my state, he came up to me and laying his hand upon my shoulder, said, ‘Young

man, do you know where you are going?' As well as I was able to answer him I told him I was trying to make the best of my way home. 'this is not what I mean,' he said. 'Do you know that you are now in the road to hell and if you do not stop you will soon be there?'"

Such was the effect of this reproof upon my mind, that in less than two minutes after he left me I was as entirely freed from the effects of liquor as I had ever been in my life. Before I had walked a mile, my soul became so filled and burdened with a sense of my guilt and sin that I was constrained to seek an opportunity to turn aside into a solitary place in a field and there fall down upon my knees and cry to God for mercy. Nor could I leave the spot for some hours. I got home with my burden in the evening and after a severe struggle of some months" continuance, I found peace with God."

This biography was taken from 'A Memoir of William Carvosso', published by Harvey and Tait in 1996.



William Carvosso's grave at the back of the chapel. His wife was the first person buried in the cemetery



