

Overton: The First LDS Branch in Wales

Overton is a parish and village in what was formerly the county of Flintshire (specifically South Flintshire, as the two parts of Flintshire were separated by a part of Denbighshire) on the border with England. It now lies within the boundaries of the county borough of Wrexham. The hamlet of Overton Bridge is approx. 1.5 miles to the northwest of Overton village, and where the bridge itself spans the river Dee

Ron Dennis in *Truth Will Prevail* states:

The first official Church missionary to Wales... was Elder Henry Royle, who was called at a conference in Manchester on 6 October 1840 to go 'to Cly (sic), in Flintshire'. (Millennial Star 1:168) 'Cly' is no doubt 'Cloy', located about 2 miles from Overton. Cloy was hardly more than a string of farmhouses situated on the outskirts of Overton. And Overton itself consisted of fewer than 2000 inhabitants.

Whatever the reason for the choice of area, Royle and Cook met with immediate success upon their arrival in Flintshire. Elder Royle reported that by the 30th of October a branch with 32 members had been established in Overton, certainly an impressive beginning for just 3 weeks' work. (MS 1:192)



Overton in 2018 (Photograph: Jill Morgan)

Cloy Lane is to the southwest of Overton and – as in Henry Royle's time – has only scattered farmhouses and cottages along its length, rather than an identifiable hamlet. There was a Primitive Methodist chapel at Cloy (built in 1832, which has since been converted to a family home). As was often the case in the 19th century, Henry Royle may have selected Cloy for his missionary efforts because of the presence of a non-

conformist congregation, as they were generally more receptive to preachers from other denominations than Church of England congregations. Alternatively he may have had family in the area.

Frederick Cook, who was called to work with Henry Royle, recorded in his journal:

Elder Henry Royal and my self by the directions of Confrence of Manchester went on a mision to Wales [to] preach the gospel we arived in Wales on the sixteenth of October in the year one thousand eight Hundred and and [sic] Fortey in a villeg in the County of Flintshire Cloy Overton at the House of John Thomas and on the eighteenth of the same month we commenced Batizing [sic] there in the River Rue [?] Dee we Continued Preaching and Batizing untill we had batized eighty Souls and then I went Home to see my Wife and Familey at Manchester.

Ron Dennis further states in *Truth will prevail* that Royle and Cook were shortly joined by Elder James Burnham, who reports to the *Millennial Star* that the number of converts was rising but that opposition was increasing. A month later, Burnham reported the number of converts as 100 in the region and that

'he had been 'stoned' twice, 'only once receiving harm'. He also said that some of the local priests had followed the missionaries around and tried to disturb their meetings. 'They call us robbers and infidels, declaring that we rob other churches. If the opposition continues to increase, as it has done for some time past, we shall perhaps loose(sic) our heads soon.'(MS 1:238-9)

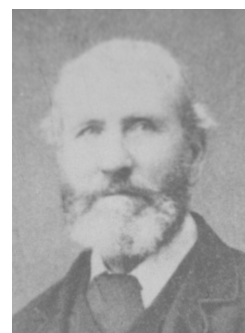
Burnham's third and final letter to appear in the Millennial Star was dated 10 February 1841, about 4 months after Royle and Cook had received their assignment. Burnham reported that if they held their meetings at any private house that had not been licensed, the priests would enter a complaint and have the home owner fined. He also wrote, 'I have organized two branches of the church, consisting of about 150 members.' (MS 1:284)

He also added: "we are continually baptizing whether it be cold or hot there is great opposition."

In 1841 the Liverpool conference [district] was formed, with Overton branch included in that conference. In 1845, Overton was one of thirteen branches in the Liverpool conference.

Individuals associated with the place:

Robert WILSON (1819-1895). Robert Wilson was born in Overton, and according to a brief history written by his granddaughter, Laura Berg, he and his brother Richard were baptised 18 October 1840 by Henry Royle and were therefore among the very first converts in



North Wales. His grand-daughter also reports that he emigrated to America in 1841, although he didn't arrive in the Salt Lake Valley until 1849. In 1856, along with Henry Woolley and many others, he participated in the rescue of two handcart companies which were stranded due to early snowstorms in Wyoming, almost 200 miles from Salt Lake City.

He eventually settled in Oakley, Idaho, where he died in 1895. More details of his life can be found at: www.familysearch.org/tree/person/memories/KWNJ-2T1

Robert's father William was a master builder and helped to build Overton Bridge, to the northwest of Overton, and where the early baptisms may well have taken place.



Overton Bridge 2018 (Photograph: Jill Morgan)

James BURNHAM. James Burnham is noted as the Elder who reports on the progress of missionary work in the Overton area in 1841. He was born in Vermont (USA) in 1790 and was initially an independent Christian preacher. When he was introduced to the restored gospel however, he acknowledged that he had no priesthood authority and was subsequently baptised. His mission to Britain was from 1840 to 1842, and in February 1842 he is listed as the leader of a group of 270 saints emigrating from Liverpool to New Orleans on the ship *Hope*. Early in 1843 he was called on another mission, this time to the Eastern United States. There he unfortunately died within months of his arrival from the combined effects of exposure to severe weather conditions and sheer hard work.

William and Ann CROSS and family. William Cross, his wife Ann and their four sons (Samuel, George, John and William) were living in Lightwood Green, a hamlet within the parish of Overton, in 1841 according to the census. Church meetings were evidently held at the Cross family home (see 'Stories' below), but by 1842 the family had left the

area, also emigrating from Liverpool on the *Hope*. The family only travelled as far as Missouri, where William died and Ann appears to have re-married, within the LDS faith.

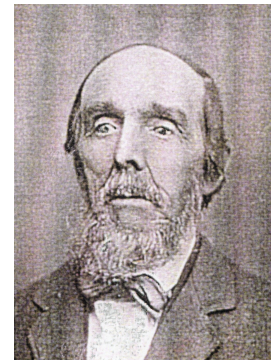
Richard and Elizabeth (nee Hughes) ASHLEY. Richard and Elizabeth Ashley had 9 children, 6 of whom survived into adulthood. The 1841 census shows the family living on 'The Hill' between Overton and Lightwood Green – the parents and 4 children, with Richard listed as an agricultural labourer. LDS church membership record indexes show (no Overton branch records have survived) that the Ashley family converted to the church in Overton between October 1840 and February 1842.

A history of the family written by a descendant of daughter Mary - Cherryl Lynn Waite Kennington - suggests that the family accounted for twelve of the original Overton branch of 32 members. Certainly there are 13 passengers with the surname Ashley listed on the *Hope* in 1842 when the large group of new converts left Liverpool under James Burnham's leadership. This included Richard and Elizabeth, 7 of their children, a daughter-in-law and two young grandchildren. Very few of the family reached the Salt Lake valley however. According to the same history, Elizabeth, son William, his wife and two daughters were buried somewhere along the banks of the Mississippi, and Richard died in Nauvoo, as did two of the younger children. These deaths were almost certainly due to cholera. One of the sons (John) appears to have married and remained in Illinois; the last son (Thomas) died of cholera on the Elkhorn River in Nebraska. The remaining three daughters (Elizabeth, Mary and Margaret) all eventually travelled to Utah Territory where they settled and raised their families in Millard County, in central Utah.

William Ellis JONES. W.E. Jones was born in Mold, Flintshire (some 20 miles north of Overton) but was also among the early members of Overton branch. In relation to his baptism, in 1882 he wrote to President Wilford Woodruff:

Dear Brother,

I take the liberty to write a few lines to you to correct an error that I believe has gone into Church history. I have understood recently that a brother by the name of William R. Davis, formerly bishop of Harmony, considered himself the first Welshman baptized in Wales. But I believe that I claim that honor if there is honor in it. I was baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the River Dee, Flintshire, North Wales, by James Burnham formerly of Ramos, Hancock Co., Illinois, June 27, 1841. I immigrated to Nauvoo in 1842. Bro. Davis was baptized some time after I came to America. If he claims only that he was the first Welshman in South Wales that may be correct, but in Wales I claim priority.



If, as he states, he was baptised in 1841, then his claim to be the first member of the church in North Wales is to be disputed as Henry Royle reported baptising the

first members of the Overton branch in October 1840. W.E. Jones did however emigrate with the group on the ship *Hope* in 1842 and crossed the plains in 1861. He settled in Washington county in southwest Utah.

Ron Dennis (in *Truth will prevail*) quotes from the journal of Elder James Burgess, who labored as a missionary in Overton for a short time:

"At night we went to a preaching and a very rough meeting. We had some men come and (they) tied the door and smoked some sulphur through the keyhole and when we came out they followed us and rung old cans and hinges after us. But we were not afraid of them." (Burgess, 8 Jan 1841.)

Dennis continues:

About a year later, Elder Charles Smith, a convert from Ellesmere, was in Lightwood Green, about a mile from Overton, and in his journal on 27 January 1842 he recorded the fracas which had taken place that evening during a meeting held at the home of Brother William Cross. While Elder Smith was speaking, a handful of townspeople sneered at what he was saying. When Cross's son-in-law 'collared one of them to put him out of doors (the) rest began striking the brethren'. Finally Cross's son-in-law fired a gun to disperse the mob. They retreated but threatened revenge. (Charles Smith, 27 Jan 1842)

And in relation to the fate of the Overton branch, Dennis again quotes Elder Charles Smith:

'I went...to meet with the brethren and sisters (in the Overton area), the greatest part of them being about to start for America.'(ibid)

It would appear that Overton branch – like so many of the early branches of the church – was a victim of its own success. As new converts heeded the counsel of church leaders and emigrated *en masse* the branch ceased to exist and no mention of it has been found after 1845, when it was listed as being part of the Liverpool conference.



Sources for this historical information:

'The Welsh and the Gospel' a chapter by Ronald D. Dennis in: *Truth Will Prevail*. The chapter can be found at welshmormon.byu.edu under *Resources*

The Latter Day Saint Millennial Star – available online at: <https://archive.org/> using the search term *Millennial Star*

www.familysearch.org for information about the various individuals connected with Overton

www.genuki.org.uk/big/wal/FLN/Overton for information on Overton parish

Latter Day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia (for information on James Burnham)

<https://mormonmigration.lib.byu.edu/> (for information on the ship *Hope* and its passengers)

<https://history.lds.org/missionary/> (for information on James Burnham)

www.peoplescollection.wales/items/2167 (for an early image of Overton Bridge)

<https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/memories/LCJ2-3N6> for the history of the Ashley family by Cherryl Lynn Waite Kennington

Jill Morgan
October 2018