

Skenfrith Bridge, Monmouthshire: The first LDS baptism in South Wales

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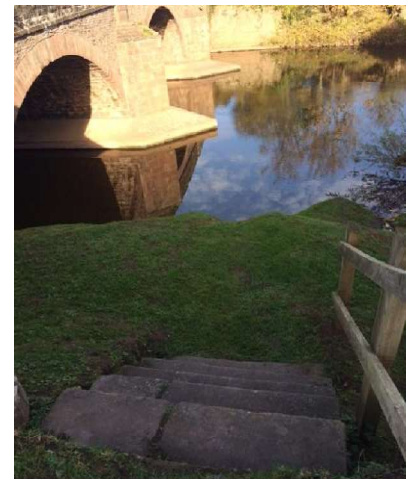
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Situated on a left hand bend opposite the Bell Inn at Skenfrith near Abergavenny is a bridge spanning the river Monnow which flows through the town. Although likely to be 17th century originally, as are other buildings in the locality, the bridge is well maintained and modern in appearance today. A double arched bridge with centre support, it is about 20 metres wide.



The river is quite deep in places and appears to be accessible from both sides of the bridge.

The right hand side, looking from the Bell Inn, has steps leading down to the river.

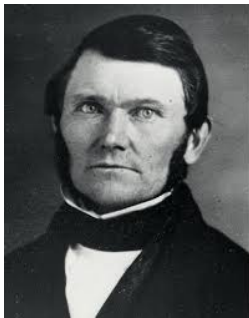


This is the place where the first recorded baptism in South Wales, of James Weaver Palmer, took place on 13 April 1840 by Wilford Woodruff of the Twelve Apostles.

James Weaver Palmer, recently ordained elder, served a mission in the Autumn following his baptism. Later he emigrated to Zion where he resided in Salt Lake City but returned to

serve a further mission in Britain, January 1857 – June 1858. He was now married and a member of the Seventy.

This framed photograph of the bridge hangs in the foyer of the Bell Inn and was taken around the 1920s.



An apostle of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Wilford Woodruff, came as a missionary to England in 1840 where he baptised hundreds of converts to the Church. Among his great successes were the United Brethren in Herefordshire where it is said he baptised all but one of the 600 congregation. His travels brought him to Skenfrith, Monmouthshire, Wales, about 20 miles from Gadfield Elm where the United Brethren met.

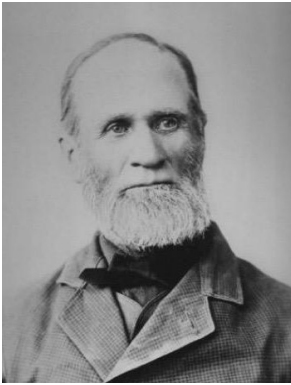
Wilford Woodruff later became the fourth President of the Church following Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and John Taylor.

In the 1950's the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints announced that a temple would be built in London, England. At the same time the Church commissioned artists to provide paintings for the new temple. These paintings were to depict the history of the Church in the areas of the temple district. One of these paintings is a landscape of Skenfrith, Monmouthshire, Wales. This large painting has been on display continuously since the London temple was dedicated in 1958.

As workers and patrons climb the steps to the London temple they enter through two sets of double doors. Immediately ahead of them is the recommend desk. Because we show our temple recommends at this point and then move on into the main part of the temple, few look to the right of the desk and note the painting there. The scene shows a row of buildings in the distance with a bridge in the foreground. The stone bridge crosses the river Monnow and is the way into the little castle town of Skenfrith.

In 1840 when Wilford Woodruff experienced his amazing success in Herefordshire, with the United Brethren, he was only twenty miles away from the borders of Wales. One of his baptisms was a James Weaver Palmer who was baptised on 13th April 1840. He was ordained an Elder a short time later and began doing missionary work.

The missionary journals of Elder Palmer include the following entry in November 1840



"I preached at Skenfrith. Was opposed by a Roman Catholic." Soon after, he wrote that he and Elder Littlewood "visited Skenfrith again". Between this second visit and the next visit new missionaries arrived to help the work. His journal entry reads " We now visited Skenfrith again with our reinforcements of young troops. On the Monday following, I baptized John Preece and William Williams in the river Monnow".

Photograph: James Weaver Palmer

The first official church missionary work in Wales was undertaken by Elder Henry Royle who was called to labour in Flintshire at the Manchester conference on 6th October 1840. He had immediate success there and established a branch on 30th October 1840 with thirty five members. Regrettably, the records of names and dates and other details of baptisms etc. have never been confirmed. This leaves the first recorded and confirmed details of the introduction of the restored Church and the first baptisms in South Wales to be those in Skenfrith.



Sources for this historical information:

1. 'Truth Will Prevail' (Copyright 1987, LDS Church). See Chap. eight "*The Welsh and the Gospel*" by Professor Ronald D. Dennis. Online at: http://welshmormon.byu.edu/Resource_Info.aspx?id=2618
2. Early Missionary Database. Online at: <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/landing/missionary-database?lang=eng>
3. www.familysearch.org

Photographs by Freda Entwistle October 2017.