

Llanelli, Carmarthenshire: Site of the First Latter Day Saint Chapel in South Wales

Jill Morgan



This blue plaque marks the site of the first purpose-built chapel for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [*'Mormon'* or *LDS church*] outside America in the nineteenth century.

The original building no longer exists, having been demolished as part of a road-widening scheme in 1995. However the commemorative plaque was installed

by *Llanelli Community Heritage* in 2016. It can be found outside the Eastgate shopping centre, on Stepney Place. As the plaque and photograph below show, the chapel subsequently became the property of Elim Pentecostal Church. The building was just one storey with a pitched roof, and a central front door flanked by large windows.

An 1880 map of the centre of Llanelli clearly shows a '*Chapel - Latter Day Saint*' on Island Place, near its junction with William Street. An earlier map (1852) shows a '*Mormon chapel*' in the same position. By 1881 the chapel had reportedly been sold to the '*Josephites*' (a break-off group from the original LDS church,



[Photograph: Ron Dennis]

who believed that succession in church leadership should be hereditary – i.e. follow down through Joseph Smith's family rather than through the First Presidency and Quorum of Twelve Apostles;

believers in the latter were known as 'Brighamites,' after Brigham Young, Joseph Smith's successor).

'Mormon' missionaries first preached in Llanelli in 1845 and found fertile ground – as they did in other industrial areas of South Wales. By early January 1849 missionary Dan Jones reported that there were 55 branches of the LDS church in Wales with a total membership of 3,603, and 1,939 individuals baptized in the past year. Some three years later there were 12 organised branches and a membership of about 400 in the Llanelli area alone.

The LDS church currently has a purpose-built meetinghouse in the Morfa area of Llanelli, approximately 1.5 miles to the south of this original building.

Dan Jones (1810-1862) was a native of Halkyn, North Wales but converted to the LDS church when he was working as a steamboat captain on the Mississippi. There he met the LDS church leader and prophet Joseph Smith. He is considered to be the subject and recipient of the last prophecy made by Joseph Smith. Jones had visited Smith in Carthage Jail in Illinois, on the night before Smith would be killed by a mob. Smith asked Dan Jones if he were afraid to die, and Jones asked '*Has it come to that?*' He was reassured by Joseph Smith that he would live to preach the gospel in his beloved Wales, and this prophecy was fulfilled in 1845. His success as a missionary was phenomenal and is attributed not only to his faith, diligence and gift for oratory, but also to his extensive writings on the subject of the LDS church in Welsh.



The story of Dan Jones' conversion to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints can be found in his individual record (ID No. KWJJ-Y86) on www.familysearch.org. Dan Jones dedicated Llanelli's *Capel y Seintiau* on the 28th January 1849.

When Dan Jones left Wales in February 1849 at the end of his proselyting mission, the following was printed in the *Millennial Star*:

Resolved that the Saints [members of the LDS Church] in Wales desire to manifest their high approbation of, and do testify of, the faithful discharge of our beloved brother and President Captain D. Jones' labourious, important and responsible duties under all circumstances; and we humbly confess that we know of no words by which we can describe the respect, the love and unlimited confidence that we have in him, nor how highly we appreciate his inestimable services while among us; and we shall ever pray that the God of Heaven will reward him for no one else can compensate him as we would wish.

Dan Jones would return to Wales in 1852 to again engage in missionary work. At the conclusion of each of his missions to Wales he returned to America accompanied by a large group of Welsh converts.

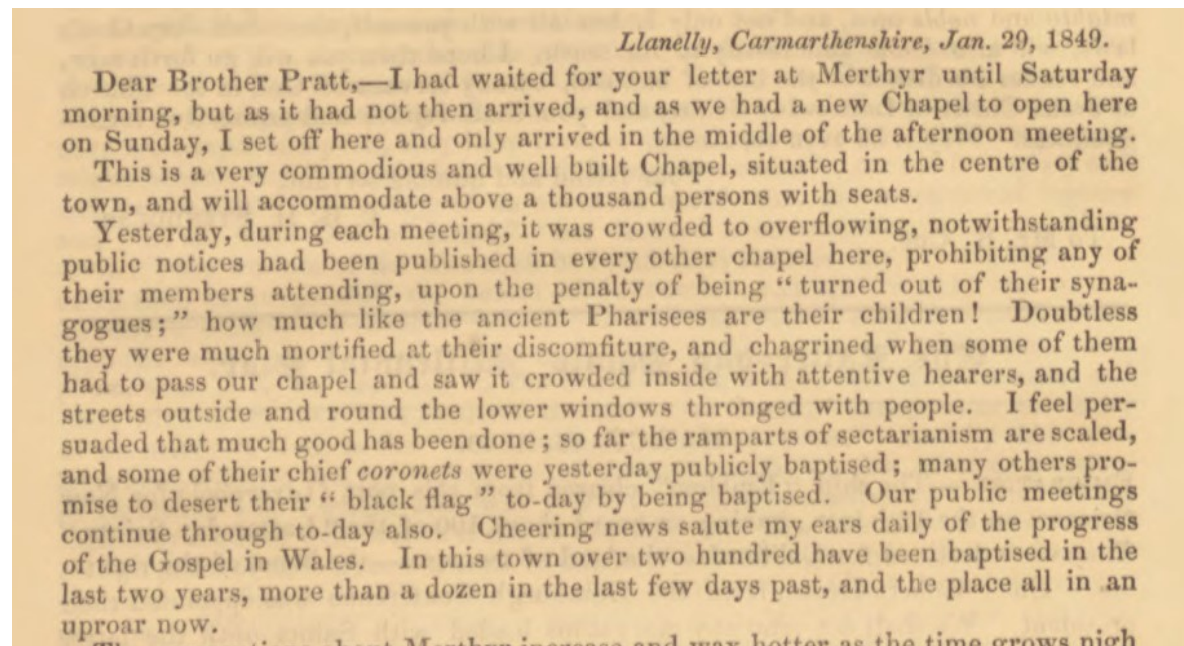
Ronald D. Dennis. A retired Professor of Modern Languages at Brigham Young University (Provo, Utah, USA), Ron Dennis is the great-great-grandson of Dan Jones and has devoted enormous time and resources to documenting the history of the LDS church in nineteenth-century Wales, particularly in the early years after the LDS gospel was first taken to Britain. His website <http://welshmormon.byu.edu/> offers extensive information on early Welsh converts as well as a wide range of documents, including copies of his own publications and translations of Dan Jones' Welsh-language publications.

In 2018, *Llanelli Community Heritage* invited Ron Dennis to perform the unveiling ceremony for the commemorative blue plaque. This was appropriate on two counts – first, because his great-great-grandfather had dedicated the original building; and second, because Ron Dennis had been honoured at the National Eisteddfod as a Bard, in recognition of his work in preserving an important aspect of Welsh history (i.e. the history of the Latter Day Saints). The photograph shows him (second from the right) with community leaders, including (far left) Lyn John of *Llanelli Community Heritage*. The event took place 25 August 2018.



[Photograph: Grant Vaughan]

In 1849, this extract of a letter from Dan Jones appeared in the *Millennial Star*, the weekly UK publication of the LDS church, 1840-1970.



The reference to the building accommodating '*above a thousand persons with seats*' has led to speculation that there may have been a previous, larger building than the one pictured above on Island Place. However it seems unlikely that two buildings be erected in a short space of time and in close proximity, with the first larger building so quickly abandoned.

One possible explanation for the statement about capacity is a tendency to overstatement, common in Victorian times and frequently evident in Dan Jones' writings. Another is that there may at one time have been an upper level to the building (he refers to '*lower windows*' in the letter), typical of non-conformist chapels of the time. The most likely explanation is that an upper level was planned, but could not possibly be added in the short time in which the building was completed, without compromising the long-term integrity of the structure. The atypical shape of the roof supports this suggestion.

Dan Jones was also due to leave Wales in February 1849, and it's possible that local church members – and Jones himself – wanted to see this building completed and dedicated before he left. There may have been an intention to add the second storey, but large-scale emigration of converts in subsequent years decimated local branches, making the extra seating capacity unnecessary.

The following appeared in *Udgorn Seion (Zion's Trumpet)* – a Welsh language publication of the church.

Chapel of the Saints, Llanelli

The foregoing chapel was opened for the service of the Saints in Llanelli, Carmarthenshire, on the 28th and 29th of last January. It was built because there was no other convenient place in the town, where the Saints could meet together, and where they could invite their friends of the world to hear their doctrine. On the above occasion, Capt. Jones, Wm. Phillips, and others, spoke on the various subjects of their beliefs. Considerable commotion was shown Sunday night, when Capt. Jones invited his brothers and sisters to come out of Babylon, according to the call of God in this age, and when he portrayed who was Babylon of the latter days. The commotion was outside only; inside everyone was listening attentively..... A platform, not a pulpit, as other chapels of the country have, is what is in this chapel and there is space on it for many preachers to sit, and a higher place for the speaker.

An article in the *Llanelli Star* of 21 August 1987 tells how descendants of early Llanelli convert Thomas Dee proposed de-constructing the Llanelli chapel and re-building it elsewhere to prevent its being demolished. Unfortunately this project never came to fruition.

Ron Dennis tells of visiting the old Llanelli chapel before it was demolished and when it was still in the possession of Elim Pentecostal church. He arranged for someone to meet him there with a key so that he could see inside. The individual arrived with a lawyer, thinking that Ron Dennis had come with the intention of re-possessing the building on behalf of the LDS church!

Sources for this historical information:

Millennial Star Vol. 11 p.92 available online at:

<https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/MStar/id/1510>

Udgorn Seion Vol. 1 pp. 42-43 available at: <http://welshmormon.byu.edu/>

Llanelli Community Heritage, online at: <https://www.llanellich.org.uk/>

Ron Dennis and website <http://welshmormon.byu.edu>

Hugh Jones, former LDS Church Branch President for Llanelli