

Gwawr Baptist Chapel, Aberaman: Briefly occupied by the ‘Mormons’

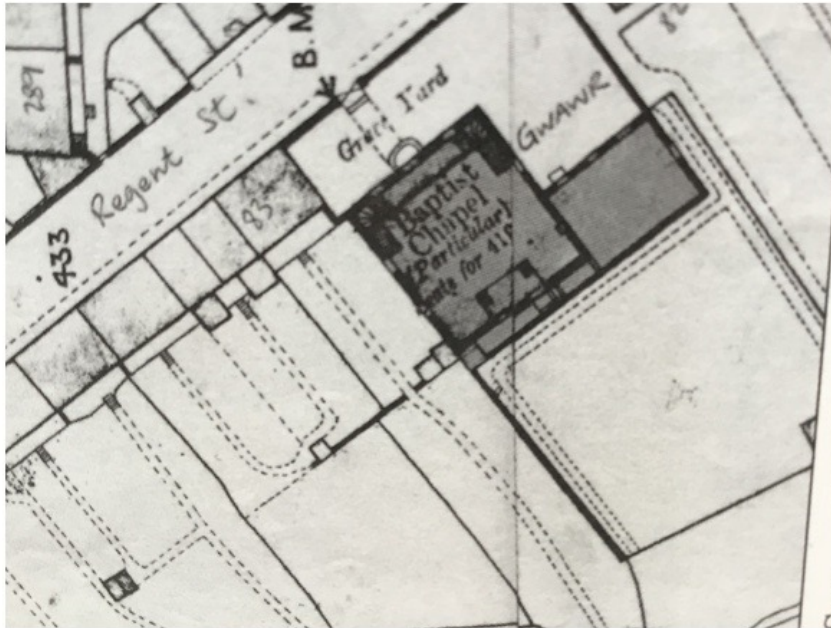
Helen Davies and Freda Entwistle

A row of three terraced houses now occupies the site of the former Gwawr Baptist chapel in Regent Street, Aberaman. Completed in 1849, the chapel was decommissioned and demolished around 1970. It was built as a Welsh Baptist Chapel, but for a brief period in 1851 – from April 23rd to November 4th - the building was used by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [‘Mormons’], as then Minister David Bevan Jones, (known as Dewi Elfed), had converted to the Latter Day Saint faith, along with some of his congregation.



The chapel had already been constituted separately from its “mother church”, Carmel Aberdare, on June 14th 1848. Dewi Elfed became minister and raised funds to complete the building upon his arrival between autumn 1848 and spring 1849. In order to allow the building to be completed, the names of Thomas Price and John Davies were removed from the lease and the names of Dewi Elfed and David

Richards were inserted.



Site map of Gwawr Chapel Aberaman, Aberdare

By early 1850 the Welsh Baptist Church were in conflict with Dewi Elfed as he was preaching “Mormon” doctrine to his congregation. In December 1850 he and his congregation were expelled from the Welsh Baptist Church. Dewi Elfed contacted President William Phillips, who was then President of the Welsh Latter Day Saint Mission, in March 1851, asking for baptism for himself and around 50 to 60 of his congregation. Dewi Elfed also stated that the landlord was happy to change the wording of the lease for it to become a Latter-day Saint chapel. On April 20th 1851 Dewi Elfed locked the doors of the chapel, and the first LDS meeting there was held on 23rd April 1851, conducted by William Phillips. On Sunday 27th April Dewi Elfed, David Rees and three others were baptised. At 2 pm that afternoon they were ordained as Priests in Gwawr Chapel.

William Phillips’ account of the events was published in the LDS publication, the *Millennial Star* of April 1st 1851:

LETTER FROM PRESIDENT WILLIAM PHILLIPS, OF THE WELSH PRINCIPALITY.

CONVERSION OF A BAPTIST MINISTER AND HIS WHOLE FLOCK.—TRANSFER OF THEIR CHAPEL TO THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS.

14, Castle Street, Merthyr Tidal, March 11th, 1851.

Dear President Richards,—The work of the Lord in Wales is going forward rapidly, in baptizing, and every thing that is good. I receive letters now and then from the presidents of conferences, and they testify that everything is going on well; that the Spirit of God is amongst them; and that there are better prospects than ever for hundreds of the honest in heart to receive and obey the Gospel. The people in this principality are very religious, and are brought up from their cradle in tradition, which causes

a great deal of patient labor to make them believe the gospel, like the Pharisees of old.

Several ministers of nearly every denomination have been lecturing, writing, and doing as much as is in their power to put us down; but all in vain, and while they were engaged studying what to say, the honest in heart were coming from their midst—but now all is silent! and they have more than they can do to keep peace amongst their several flocks. If they have been kicking against us, their flocks kick against them now, and serve them right.

One who wishes evil to another, to himself it will happen.

We cannot see one standing up publicly to say a word against "Mormonism," but all they do now, is done secretly.

We distribute thousands of Welsh tracts every quarter, containing the first principles of the gospel, and some hundreds of English also, amongst the gentlemen and the nobles, which does a great deal of good. One branch in this town distributed 1500 of Welsh tracts, besides English, in one quarter. We are going on and opening new rooms and chapels continually. We took one chapel for three years, at £6 6s. per year, it is full of seats, has a large gallery and pulpit. We opened it last Sunday week, (1st of March), and there were hundreds present from round about the country. There was preaching all day in Welsh and English. There is a Baptist minister not far from here, who has been excommunicated for preaching our principles to his flock, until they all believed them. Every one he baptized he baptized for remission of sins, and laid hands on them, telling them to pray for the Holy Ghost, and taught inasmuch as the gift of the Holy Ghost followed in the days of the apostles, why not now? and inasmuch

as they were blessed with revelations anciently, why not now? and inasmuch as angels administered then, why not now? and all other blessings as well. This flock have been praying day and night for the above blessings, until at length the Baptist association called a council, and cut him and his flock off from their church. Last week the minister sent for me, and I went to him. He wanted us to take the chapel, as it was his, or rather he had a lease of it. I found therein a clause, stating that the Baptist doctrines were to be preached in it during the course of every year. We went to the landlord and talked with him about the clause; he said he would take his pen and strike that clause out, put Latter-day Saints doctrine in its stead, or renew the lease. To-day we are going to ask a counsel's advice, and if we can purchase it with safety we will do so. I expect, after settling about the chapel, to baptize the minister and his flock, they number about 50 or 60. And we have faith that the future news will be similar to the above. Dear President, I ask an interest in your prayers, that I may do a great work.

Your brother in the Gospel,
WM. PHILLIPS.

Price wrote letters to *Yr Amserau* and Dewi Elfed replied in the *Udgorn Seion* (an LDS periodical). The Welsh Baptists took the battle for possession of Gwawr Chapel to the Glamorgan Summer Assizes on July 12th 1851. No records of the case or newspaper reports of this survive, but evidently the court found in favour of the Baptists, as Thomas Price plus sixteen trustees were assigned care of the chapel.

On 4 November 1851 Price arrived with a crowd (allegedly 2000 strong), and the sheriff of Glamorgan. The door to the chapel was bolted, with Dewi Elfed and one other inside. The sheriff said that he had no authority to break down the door of a place of worship. Price instructed a mason and carpenter to force open a window. Dewi and the other Saint were thrown out of the building, which reopened as a Welsh Baptist Chapel on Sunday November 9th 1851.

Ever a controversial figure, Dewi Elfed went on to write poetry in Welsh and 57 of the 575 hymns in the Latter Day Saint Hymnal published by John Davies in November 1852. Dewi Elfed emigrated to Salt Lake City in 1860 and died at Logan in the northern part of Utah, in 1863.

Sources for this historical information:

Truth Will Prevail, Chapter 8 in *The Welsh and the Gospel*, Ronald D. Dennis

Mormons in Early Victorian Britain, Chapter 8, from a *Seion of Lands to the Land of Zion: The life of David Bevan Jones*, by D.L.Davies

Chapels of The Cynon Valley, Alan Vernon Jones.

Extracts from *The Millennial Star* 1 April 1851 (No. 7) - a letter from William Phillips, who presided over the Wales Conference, to Franklin D. Richards, who presided over the British Mission.