

19th Century Baptisms in the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal at Llanfoist

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The Brecon & Abergavenny Canal at Llanfoist Wharf

A newspaper of 16 April 1847 reported, “*The Mormons [sic.] at Llanfoist recently baptized a woman in the canal, out of whom they say three devils were cast.*”¹ While there are no extant records of a branch in Llanfoist of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), often referred to as “Mormons” or in the nineteenth century as “Mormonites,” there are early British missionary journals that mention baptisms in Llanfoist by November 1841.² No other account of the reported 1847 baptism has yet been identified.

John Needham (1819-1901), a Lancashire draper’s apprentice, joined the LDS Church in 1838. In 1840 he was sent on a mission to Herefordshire and finding that the people over the border in Monmouthshire understood English as well as Welsh, he was one of the first missionaries to

preach in South Wales. In 1842 he travelled to America to join with the LDS people in Nauvoo, Illinois. In 1851, he travelled to the Great Salt Lake Valley with a pioneer wagon company where he became a successful retail merchant, later turning over much of his business interests to an LDS co-operative institution. LDS President Brigham Young sent him on a second mission to Britain that lasted five years. After returning to Utah, he relocated to Logan in Cache Valley.³

Elder John Needham recorded baptisms in Llanfoist for 1841 and 1842 as follows:

26 November 1841, Elizabeth Davies⁴

17 December 1841, Elinor Vaun [Vaughan], Elizabeth Davies, Catherine Davies⁵

2 February 1842, “Sister” Vaun [Vaughan, likely Elinor’s daughter, 19-year-old Catherine, or possibly Jane at age 12.]⁶

6 March 1842, James Davies, “Sister” Edwards⁷

James Davies (1794-1847) and his wife, Elizabeth Sykes Davies (1797-1855), and children, James, Jr. (1826-1865), Elizabeth (1829-1851), and Mary (1829-188) emigrated to the United States 3 September 1843 sailing on the *Metoka* from Liverpool bound for New Orleans. They travelled up the Mississippi and settled in the Latter-Day Saint city of Nauvoo, Illinois. The religious community faced much opposition from within and without leading to the forced evacuation of Nauvoo in 1846. The Davies Family travelled across Iowa to the Missouri River where James died at Winter Quarters, Nebraska Territory, during the winter of 1846-47.

Elizabeth and her daughters travelled to the Great Salt Lake Valley with the Mormon Pioneers arriving on 29 September 1847.⁸ In 1846, James Jr. enlisted in the Mormon Battalion of the United States, recruited for the war between the United States and Mexico. He marched from Iowa to Santa Fe, New Mexico then to Pueblo in modern-day Colorado arriving in the Great Salt Lake Valley on 27 July 1847, just a few weeks ahead of his mother and sisters.⁹

Elinor Vaughan (1789-1861) remained in Llanfoist for some years living across the street on the Cutting from where the Davies family lived. There is no evidence that her husband, John, was baptized in the LDS Church. John died in 1851 and is buried in Llanfoist churchyard. In 1856, Elinor emigrated to the United States on the *Enoch Train* sailing from Liverpool on 23 March.

Arriving in Boston, she traveled by train to Iowa City where she joined with the family of her married daughter, Jane Vaughan Lewis. They traveled in the Ellsworth Handcart Company, the first of its kind, arriving at Salt Lake City on 26 September 1856. Elinor and Jane then resettled in Jacks Valley in present-day Nevada by 1860. Elinor died circa 1861 and Jane re-married, to Abednego Johns, and resided in Jacks Valley until her death in 1890.¹⁰

There are five women with the surname Edwards in the 1841 Census for Llanfoist and there is no further evidence as to which one may have been the “Sister” Edwards baptized by Elder Needham.

LDS baptism is by immersion,¹¹ and early LDS missionaries had to find locations to baptize that allowed the person to be baptized to enter water deep enough that they could be immersed by the priest or elder performing the baptism.¹² The first LDS baptisms in the United Kingdom were performed in the River Ribble at Preston, Lancashire.¹³ In 1840, there were baptisms in Benbow’s pond at Hill Farm near Castle Frome, Herefordshire.¹⁴ While the River Usk flows by Llanfoist, it is not always easy to find a convenient pool of still water along a river bank. The Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal conveniently on the other side of the village against the Bloreng Mountain would be a preferred location.

The portion of the Brecon & Abergavenny Canal from Govilon just west of Llanfoist to Pontymoile at Pontypool linking with the Monmouthshire Canal was completed in 1812. The Monmouthshire Canal Co. eventually bought out the other and the name became the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal. There has not been significant restoration work in the portion of the canal near Llanfoist¹⁵ so we can assume that the basic structure is the same as it was in the 1840s. The canal is now used principally for holiday recreation.

The wharf at Llanfoist where the canal met the incline to Hill’s Tramroad was a busy place with the loading and unloading of coal, steel, limestone, and other commodities on the eastern edge of the South Wales industrial landscape.¹⁶ This activity at the wharf would have detracted from the sacredness of a religious ceremony. The LDS missionaries would have attempted to avoid attention, looking for a place that provided some privacy and easy access into the canal. There is

a set of steps into the canal just under a half of a mile along the towpath south of Llanfoist Wharf. There is another set about the same distance north. If the Elders, Church members, and those to be baptised were to approach across the farm lanes to the steps south of the wharf, they would have had much easier access to the canal still at a distance away from the wharf. Access to the steps on the north would be more difficult where there is on a much steeper slope near the Tŷ Mawr or Llanfoist House estate.¹⁷

This, then, is the likely spot of baptisms performed by missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Llanfoist during the 1840s.



Steps into the canal south of Llanfoist Wharf



Another view of the steps into the canal



The author immersing only his feet, March 2018

¹ *The Pembrokehire Herald and General Advertiser*, Vol. IV, No. 172, p. 3 (16 April 1847).

² *Levi Richards papers, 1837-1867, Diaries, Vol. 1, 1840 October 4-1842 January 22*, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, MS p. 109; *John Needham autobiography and journal, 1840 August-1842 December*, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, MS-4221, pp. 152.

³ *John Needham, Personal History*, https://www.familysearch.org/photos/artifacts/111657791?cid=mem_copy

⁴ *John Needham autobiography and journal, 1840 August-1842 December*, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, MS-4221, at 149, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/739b6a97-8fe0-4d99-85a2-6bff7a637652/0/160>

⁵ *Id.*, at 152, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/739b6a97-8fe0-4d99-85a2-6bff7a637652/0/163>

⁶ *Id.*, at 164, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/739b6a97-8fe0-4d99-85a2-6bff7a637652/0/175>

⁷ *Id.*, at 169, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/739b6a97-8fe0-4d99-85a2-6bff7a637652/0/180>

⁸ *James Davis and Elizabeth Sykes Davis*, <https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/tree/13956440/person/173614032/media/1?pgnum=1&pg=0&pgpl=pid%7cpgNum>

⁹ *James Davis, Jr.*, https://www.familysearch.org/photos/artifacts/18454400?cid=mem_copy

¹⁰ *Elinor Jenkins Vaughan, Life History*, LDS CHL MS 29129,

https://www.familysearch.org/photos/artifacts/18993710?cid=mem_copyhttps://www.familysearch.org/photos/artifacts/18993710?cid=mem_copy

¹¹ *Articles of Faith*, 4, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,

<http://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/pgp/a-of-f/1?lang=eng>, accessed, 21 May 2022.

¹² Doctrine and Covenants 20: 73-74, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,

<https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/dc-testament/dc/20?lang=eng>, accessed, 21 May 2022.

¹³ *Truth Will Prevail: The Rise of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the British Isles 1837-1987*, V. Ben Bloxham, James R. Moss, Larry C. Porter, eds., (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1987), p. 78.

¹⁴ *Id.* At 137

¹⁵ *The Brecon & Abergavenny Section of the Monmouthshire & Brecon Canal*, John Norris (1994), pp. 7-9.

¹⁶ *Hill's Tramroad: Blaenavon World Heritage Site*, Chris Barber (Amberley Publishing, Stroud, Gloucestershire, 2019) pp. 86-87.

¹⁷ Welsh Tithe Maps, National Library of Wales. Llanfoist Parish (1843), https://places.library.wales/search/51.792/-3.067/12?alt=&page=1&refine=&query=llanfoist&order=desc&sort=score&rows=100&leaflet-base-layers_94=on accessed, 22 May 2022.