

## Latter Day Saint families in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Ffestiniog

### Alan Davies

Missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints ['Mormons'] established the first branch of the church in north Wales at Overton in 1840, but it would be 1846 before the first recorded converts were made in Ffestiniog. Four families were at the core of the branch when it was first established: the Roberts, Peters, Eames and Owens.

David Roberts was the first to be baptised by immersion in the river Pandy, near his father's home in Gelli Cornwydydd, Llanfrothen. David (1814-1858), his wife Catherine (nee Richards, 1808-1892) and their children lived in Ffestiniog and he worked in the slate mines.



*A 1938 photograph of Gelli Cornwydydd, where the David Roberts family lived.*

David's brother Edward had a shoe shop where David often went to discuss

religion, something he evidently enjoyed doing. Also working in the shop was a Robert Evans who had previously been a lay preacher with the Campbellites. Having heard a little about 'Mormonism,' David asked Robert to travel south to Merthyr Tydfil where the LDS church was already well established, to find out more about the new religion. This Robert did and he duly reported back about his meeting with missionary Captain Dan Jones and his own baptism into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints while there. After a second visit to South Wales, where Robert was ordained a priest, Robert returned and further taught David, who was then baptised by Robert on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1846.

*Catherine Roberts with her children as adults*



David's son Robert recalled that while his father was being baptised a number of neighbours visited the home to say it was strange that his father, being such an intelligent man, was joining a people who had many bad things said about them in the newspapers. Robert said,

*"When father came home I watched him. He appeared to me to be sweeter and cleaner than I had ever seen him. His face beamed with light, and his whole person seemed changed, and there was a peace in his presence that was soothing, and I came to the conclusion that father had done no wrong and that what he had done was right."*

From his entry into the church David was the mainstay in the area for the next ten years. He recorded in his history:

*A branch of the Church of Jesus Christ, called the Festiniog Branch was entrusted to my care. I had the privilege of lodging in my house many of the servants of Jesus Christ as well as helping them with food and clothing and money to build up the Kingdom of Jesus Christ my Lord.*



Just one month later on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1846, two other converts were baptised: David Peters (1810-1898) and his wife Laura (nee Davis, 1817-1899). These baptisms took place in a stream at Rhydysarn, a few miles west of Ffestiniog. The stream ran past the Peters family home where they operated a woollen mill. The building still stands today but is now a private residence.

*Stream at the side of Rhydysarn where baptisms took place.*

David and Laura can be seen with their baby daughter Sarah on the 1841 census in the 'Factory' in Ffestiniog, David being listed as a *Manufacturer*.

Upon being baptised David Peters was ready to sell his property and emigrate to America immediately, as early converts were encouraged to do. Laura had a different disposition and insisted upon a time of reflection and preparation. She also prayed constantly regarding the matter to have confirmation about the decisions they needed to make. Her granddaughter wrote that Laura had an answer to her prayers saying,

*“she had fallen asleep; suddenly she awoke and saw three personages surrounded by a beautiful light; the one in the centre was taller than the other two, and all were dressed in white robes. The one in the centre spoke, saying “it is right you should go, and you will arrive in safety”. They then disappeared. With her prayer answered Laura was now ready to make the journey.”*

The Ffestiniog branch grew steadily and when Catherine Roberts was baptised a year after her husband David she was the seventeenth person to join the church in the area. Her baptism was performed by David Peters.

Farmer Nathaniel Eames (1789-1849) and his second wife Sarah (nee Jones, 1806-1849) were also converts who lived in Llanfrothen. Nathaniel can be seen in the 1841 census at Glanywern with his first wife Catherine and five children.

William Owens (1798-1849) and his wife Eleanor (nee Evans, 1799-1849) were baptized into the Ffestiniog branch in 1848, along with nine of their children. In 1841 they are living at Llyndyucha in Beddgelert, with seven children, William being a farmer. Four of their children – John, James, Magdalena and Catherine - would die in infancy.

The Ffestiniog branch had grown to thirty-three members by the spring of 1849. But on the 21<sup>st</sup> February of that year seventeen baptised members (half the branch) plus several small children left Ffestiniog to travel to Liverpool. These included: David and Laura Peters with 2 young children; William and Eleanor Owens and their seven living children; Nathaniel and Sarah Eames with their two young children, plus 13-year old Nathaniel from the first marriage; Owen Roberts; Ann Jones Owens; Hugh Jones; and Peter Edwards (David Peters' nephew). David Rowland Eames would emigrate the following year. David and Catherine Roberts would emigrate in 1856 with six children – Robert, Thomas, Daniel, Ann, Elizabeth and Jane – further depleting the congregation.

The 1849 group of emigrants met with other members from across Wales in Liverpool, and became part of the first all Welsh group to emigrate, under the direction of the charismatic Captain Dan Jones. As the emigration party numbered 326 it was not possible to accommodate all of them on the *Buena Vista*; they had to be divided and a further ship chartered. The *Buena Vista* sailed on 26<sup>th</sup> February with 249 members aboard. After lodging some days in Liverpool, the remainder, including members from the Ffestiniog branch left on the *Hartley*. Both companies sailed for several weeks before arriving in New Orleans, having enjoyed a good sea crossing. However, several members of the group would succumb to cholera along the way. This included the majority of the Owens family and all of the Eames except teenager Nathaniel.

David and Laura Peters would make the journey safely to Salt Lake City and settle in Brigham City, some 50 miles to the north. They would have a further six children, and both live into their 80s.

*David and Laura Peters in later life*



In a letter from Brigham City, Utah, dated June 18, 1913, John D. Peters, son of David and Laura, wrote the following to Jane Owens in Willard, Utah. She was the wife of Owen, who was only 13 when the family left Wales. The information was partly based on John Peters' own recollections and partly on a 'little memoranda book' which his father had kept.

*I have heard my father and mother say that the coming to Utah was an experience which few people were be able to comprehend. That very few of the Welsh Company could speak or understand the English language. My mother lived until she was eighty-four years old and never made an effort to learn. But, the part I wanted to mention is, I have heard my mother say that William Owens and his wife were a splendid type of humanity. That Elenor, as mother called her, was a woman of wonderful character and will power.*

*When we stop to reflect, it does not need any testimony to proclaim her bravery when we recall that she started out with an invalid husband and seven children to this far western land where every thing was undeveloped and she was unable to speak the language of the people among whom she expected to live. I have no way of expressing it better than to say that she must have been a mighty brave woman.*

He notes the deaths of Magdalene and Catherine Owens in Wales on the same day - Friday 15<sup>th</sup> December 1848 – and their burial in the same grave on the Monday. He then goes on to note:

*On May 7, 1849, Jane, the daughter of William and Ellenor Owens died and was buried on the banks of the Mississippi River. Also William, son of the said and Alice their daughter died and were buried on May 8, 1849. Also Ellenor Owens, the mother of the above named children died on May 9, 1849. Also William Owens, the father of the above named children, died on May 12, 1849, and they were buried on the banks of the Mississippi River. Also Richard Owens, son of the above William and Ellenor Owens died on May 18, 1849.*

Thus over the course of just five days, five members of the Owen family died – all of cholera – followed by another of the children a week later. The remaining three siblings – Cadwallader, Margaret and Owen - continued their journey to Utah Territory and settled there.

From 1846 to 1849 the branch met at the Peters' home in Rhydysarn, with Robert Evans presiding over the congregation. When the Peters sold their property and emigrated, the branch met at the home of David and Catherine Roberts in Ffestiniog until they emigrated in 1856.

Ffestiniog LDS branch is not shown on the 1851 Religious Census. This is not surprising as the census is known to be incomplete, with several pages showing "no returns". The Ffestiniog District return states "All the returns for this District are missing". Also, as with many of the smaller early LDS congregations in rural Wales, when a large proportion of the branch emigrated, it was often difficult to maintain a presence in the vicinity.

However, the following interesting note can be found on the front of the Ffestiniog branch record book held at the Church History Library in Salt Lake City, suggesting that the record of these families and their conversion to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was miraculously preserved.

#### A STORY ABOUT THIS RECORD BOOK

*This, the Record of the Festiniog Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was left with someone in Festinog, Meirionethshire, Wales, by Elder David Roberts, the President of the Branch, on April 10, 1856, when he emigrated to Zion. His son Thomas D. Roberts found the Record in the possession of Someone (not a member of the Church) while on his mission in Wales and purchased it on November 15, 1892 from the possessor, for three shillings, as indicated on the title page of this Record. He brought it to his home in Logan, Utah and kept it there until his death which occurred on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1918, after which the record was thrown into a heap of trash to be burned. The record was observed in the trash by Miss Annie Martin who, at that time, was in the employ of the Thomas D. Roberts family. She took the Record and kept it until May, 1934 when she delivered it to Hugh Roberts of Rupert, Idaho, a nephew of Thomas D. Roberts. Hugh Roberts mailed it to David R. Roberts, his brother at Ogden, Utah (keeper of the David Roberts family records) in June 1934, who in turn delivered it, on July 18, 1934 to the Church Historian where it properly belonged.*

**Sources for this historical information:**

[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

Ffestiniog Branch records 1846 – 1856. Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

*Indefatigable Veteran. History and Biography of Abel Evans.* Ronald Dennis. Rhydybont Press. 1994.

*Welsh Saints on the Mormon Trail.* Wil Aaron. Y Lolfa. 2019.

<http://welshmormon.byu.edu>

Roberts Family Book of Remembrance.