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Mormonism in Merthyr Tydfil

By EIRA M. SMITH

To many people Mormonism suggests two young men neatly dressed in navy blue suits, attempting to bring the message of the faith into their homes. Once these missionaries have gained access and a willing ear, they will call regularly, answering queries, and in time you will be converted. To others these persistent young men are a nuisance, disturbing afternoon slumbers or enjoyable television programmes. There could be two charming young ladies offering the same Mormon Religion, but nothing will sway the unbeliever. These young people are expected to converse in the language of the country where they are serving their mission.

Discovering how or why these young adults came to Merthyr Tydfil helps to discover this town one hundred and fifty years ago. Nowadays these missionaries come not only from America but from Sweden or even from Yorkshire. Likewise, the two wards at Merthyr Tydfil have missionaries serving in Italy and Canada. A young man serves for two years and a young lady for eighteen months. Both are financed by themselves, aided by their families and the church members if necessary. The early missionaries to Merthyr Tydfil were obliged to finance their own mission. It is reported in the **History of the Church** by Joseph Smith that on 19 February 1843 Elder William Henshaw from America baptised William Rees Davies, his wife and two of his sons at Penydarren. William Henshaw supported himself by working in the coalmines nearby. The Davies home was used for “cottage meetings”, and on 25 March 1843 the Penydarren Branch was organised, the first in this area. In the Merthyr Tydfil Register the first convert at that Branch was William Phillips, a miner. He was baptised by Thomas Jones on 17 December 1843 and was confirmed by William Henshaw a few days later. Elder W. Henshaw continued to proselytise, assisted by several missionaries and converts, as his sermons needed translating for the monoglot Welsh. Branches were organised into a district called the “Merthyr Tydfil Conference”, and William Henshaw became its first President. Meetings were held in the open air or in large rooms in local inns, and the baptisms took place in ponds, streams or local rivers.

When Captain Dan Jones arrived here in 1845 he found an established District at Merthyr Tydfil. He has been credited with

founding the faith in Merthyr Tydfil, but in fact he was responsible for establishing the Welsh Mission, and the exodus of many Saints from Wales. Dan Jones was an educated man, born in Flintshire, North Wales, on 4 April 1811, and he emigrated to America. He sailed a small river steamer named the "Maid of Iowa", and while transporting emigrating Mormons up the Mississippi River to Nauvoo to the Mormon Settlements he eventually met the Prophet Joseph Smith, the leader and first President of the Church of Latter Day Saints: the same Joseph Smith who received a heavenly messenger named Moroni in a vision and was then responsible for producing the Book of Mormon, leading to the foundation of that faith. On 26 June 1844, the evening prior to the murder of Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum in Carthage Jail, Illinois, Dan Jones was told by the Prophet, "you will yet see Wales, and fulfil the mission appointed you before you die." Joseph Smith had first been a business partner in the steamer venture and then eventually purchased it from Dan Jones. In the meantime, Dan Jones had been converted to the faith, and so financing himself and his family he returned to Wales, settling in Merthyr Tydfil in 1845. Apart from preaching and writing in Welsh, he was now able to publish the teachings of the Prophet in that language, the first time in any language except English.

Dan Jones laboured on, although his health suffered as a consequence. His fiery zeal, energy and great oratory won him many converts to the faith, and so Merthyr Tydfil became the "Mother Branch" of Great Britain with 700 members, as it was reported in the **Millennial Star**, 30 March 1848. However, success did not come without its criticism, and it had been previously reported in the **Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian**, 21 August 1847:

"STREET ORATORY

Public lectures are getting frequent; and crowds of people are often seen in the neighbourhoods of Market Square and Georgetown, listening to open-air orators upon Teetotalism, and upon the truths and errors of Mormonism – subjects upon which the speakers get impassioned and sometimes quarrelsome".

The chief critics were the Reverend William Robert Davies, minister of Caersalem Welsh Baptist Church, Dowlais, and his friend the Reverend Edwards Roberts of Rhymney. Since his arrival from Eglwysrwrw, Pembrokeshire in 1839, the Rev. W.R. Davies had striven and succeeded in retaining the membership of the Baptists in Dowlais. A fluent and eloquent preacher, he had also established Elim Chapel, Penydarren, and Hebron in Caeharris, Dowlais, and was also associated with the development and success of the first **Gymanfa Morgannwg** held in Dowlais amongst many other nonconformist activities. In his volatile criticism he was said to have called the Mormons "Chartists." This upset Captain Dan Jones, and he in turn called the Rev. Davies an "Old Windbag", believing also that he was the "Chartist" as he could have been contributing to their pamphlets. The "Chartists" believed in six points: manhood suffrage; vote by ballot; annual parliaments; payment for members of parliament; equal electoral districts; the abolition of the property qualification for M.P.s. By these means it was hoped the working class, the overwhelming majority of the nation, would obtain the control of Parliament, enabling them to amend the laws pressing heavily upon them. Chartism was feared by the ruling

class and not fully understood by the working class. This was the period known as the “Hungry Forties”, brought about by trade recession and the enclosure acts which forced agricultural workers into the industrial towns. Economic conditions were at a low ebb, and non-conformity supported the social reform necessary in Merthyr Tydfil as elsewhere in Wales. Chartism was not encouraged by the non-conformists, as they feared this would lead to riots and violence and hence more suffering and distress. Although North Wales and especially Ireland suffered greater distress, it was in Merthyr Tydfil that Mormonism became more prevalent, and it was eventually to become one of the three main centres, together with Liverpool and Manchester.

“Mormonism” was not political but religious. The Saints of the Latter Day church of Christ believed in: God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost; in baptisms by immersion; the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, the gift of tongues, prophecy, revelation and spiritual healing; that the Bible is the word of God so far as it is translated correctly, and that the **Book of Mormon** is also the word of God; that Zion will be built in America, and that Christ will reign personally upon an earth made new and like Paradise. For these beliefs Captain Dan Jones was accused of being a thief and swindler. Fingers of scorn were pointed at him and people said, “There is the man who is taking all the property of the Latter-Day Devils, and is going to sell them as slaves.” However, he proved he had borne his own and his family’s expenses and did not accept one night’s lodging or a meal without paying for them. He was charged with blasphemy, infidelity and slavery but successfully defended himself and his beliefs before the magistrates and townspeople of Merthyr Tydfil as reported in the **Millenial Star**, 8 July 1847.

The Rev. Edward Roberts of Rhymney was giving sermons on the “Deceit of Mormonism” and articles were published. He gave one talk in Caersalem, Dowlais on 2 September 1847 and the next day in Bethania, Dowlais. Captain Dan Jones issued a pamphlet referring to these sermons published by John Jones of Rhydybont, who was at that time publishing all Dan Jones’s writings. He never failed to answer his accusers in his monthly magazines, published in Welsh and known as **Prophwyd y Jubili** or **Seren y Saint**. These magazines were obtainable for a few pence from his home in Wellington Street, Merthyr Tydfil (now part of the main shopping precinct). During his mission he published forty-five different pamphlets and sustained twelve missionaries at a time. The nonconformist ministers did not believe in the Mormon power of healing, and letters were published on many subjects; one concerned an eleven-year-old boy crushed between two trams in the Cyfarthfa Works. He resided with his parents at 45, Cyfarthfa Row in Georgetown, Merthyr Tydfil, and they were named Thomas and Margaret Rees. The boy had broken his leg in two places, as witnessed by the Works’ doctor, and splints had been put on the injured leg. A Mormon Elder had then attended him, and the splints were removed. The doctor could not believe the progress of the boy since he was out playing when he next called! David and Mary John also bore witness to his miraculous recovery, and it was fully reported in the April issue of **Prophwyd y Jubili**, 1848.

The bitterness between Captain Jones and the Rev. Davies was more obvious when Jones claimed he had converted Davies’ right-hand man at Caersalem, Dowlais. Rees Price had listened to the quarrels

of these men and had decided the Mormon faith was the one true faith for him. There is no evidence to prove that he had been a trustee and secretary of Caersalem as Jones had claimed, but he had been a faithful member there for nine years. Davies on the other hand had called him an ignorant, uneducated man and was glad to be rid of him. It seems Jones was successful on this occasion and made much of his conquest; the Testimony of Rees Price was published in the September issue, 1848, of **Prophwyd y Jubili**. Articles were also being published in the same magazine on the emigration to Zion as the Mormon Settlement in America was then being called. Money was collected for this purpose by the Mormon Elders from their converts, and £1 deposit was required for each person intending to make the journey except children. The average wages for the Merthyr Tydfil area were published in the **Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian**, 1 May 1847:

“Colliers earned £3 to £5.10s. per month, averaging £4 per month or £1 per week. Miners on average received 18s. per week, whilst the men in the Blast Furnaces, as furnacemen received £1 to £1.10s. per week. Finers from £1.5s. to £1.15s., Puddlers the same wage, but the Rollers seldom earned less than £1.15s. and could earn as much as £5 per week. This made the general average £2.10s. per week.”

Dan Jones had changed his publishers and was now using John Davis of Carmarthen who then came and settled at Nantygwenith Street, Merthyr Tydfil. He published in Welsh registers of the converts. For genealogists seeking information on certain families, these records are fruitful as they provide the following information: name; occupation; area of residence; sometimes age; date of baptism and confirmation – naming the initiators; ordination to elder, teacher, etc.; transfers to or from which district; removals – giving reasons, e.g. disobedience, adultery, drunkenness, etc.; date of death; emigration. This John Davis was known as the poet “Brychan” and was in 1852 to publish the **Book of Mormon** in Welsh, the first time it had been published in a foreign language other than English.

Warnings were given in the Mormon pamphlets of the cholera epidemic now sweeping the continent in 1848, and Jones entreated the converts to sail with him. He sailed from Liverpool on the “Buena Vista” on 26 February 1849 with 249 Welsh Saints aboard. Amongst those from Merthyr Tydfil were William Morgan, Edward Edwards and Thomas Giles. They crossed the American Plains in twenty-five wagons led by Dan Jones, eventually settling in the 15th and 16th Wards of Salt Lake. Later, Dan Jones was elected Mayor on 7 April 1851 at Manti, Sanpete county. He also ran a threshing machine and took part in all kinds of pioneer work there. Meanwhile in Merthyr Tydfil conditions had worsened for the remaining Saints, as 1849 was the year of the cholera epidemic. The hot summer and the insanitary conditions together with the lack of pure water and the prevalence of open drains caused 1,467 deaths from cholera amongst the high density of population in Merthyr Tydfil and Dowlais between May and September that year. Elder John Davis wrote to the President of the British Mission, Orson Pratt: “In this town and its neighbourhood we baptise now-a-days as many as we like. The cholera that rages here at present assists us greatly. The Saints are all alive, except when they think the cholera takes hold of them. The meetings are all crowded but not more so than our dwelling where the half-sick Saints gather in crowds. I have visited several Saints with the cholera

and succeeded with God to restore many". In Dowlais the Rev. W. R. Davies felt the strain and over-work of his ministry. Many sought to be baptised because of the epidemic, seeking solace from him. Regardless of the risk of infection, he carried on visiting the sick, and then his thirteen-year-old daughter died of Cholera on 4 August 1849. He was to follow her one month later on 1 September after a few hours' illness. During his ministry the membership of Caersalem had risen so that at his death there were 380 members. Of his friend the Rev. Edward Roberts of Rhymney little is known, except that he was excommunicated from his church but continued to write to journals and newspapers and published several booklets. He died in Rhyl on 18 February 1867 and was buried at Llansannan, Denbighshire where he was born.

Although so many people had emigrated, the faith was still strong in Merthyr Tydfil and although they never built a church of their own here the Mormons used the following buildings as shown in the Religious Census for 30 March 1851:

Bute Arms, Horse Street, Dowlais – building not used exclusively as place of worship, but temporary room. Total Membership 332, including scholars.

Latter Day Saints, Penydarren – building not used exclusively as place of worship. Total Membership 80, including scholars. Remark: the room where meetings held is adjoining the Mason's Arms which is also the Club Room. This room was in the care of Mr. Thomas Griffiths, Baker of Gellifaelog Bridge.

New Inn Room, High Street, Penydarren. Total 123, including scholars.

Cymreigyddion Hall or **White Lion Inn Hall**, Mill Street, Merthyr Tydfil. Total Membership 200, including scholars. Remark: space for 1,000

The latter building together with the Railway Inn, now called the Railway and Locomotive Inn, High Street, Merthyr Tydfil, were used for many years for the special conferences. The White Lion, Mill Street, was to become the Rechabite headquarters. Other buildings used for conferences and branch meetings were the Cross Keys Inn, Cross Keys Street and the Alfred Arms in Georgetown opposite the Ship Inn. Although most of the converts were monoglot Welsh, it had also become necessary for the English speaking population to have a branch of their own.

In September 1849 President Brigham Young, now leader of the new Mormons in Utah, and his counsellors proposed the creation of a revolving fund for the purpose of helping the poor members to reach Salt Lake City. The money obtained from the wagon trains going to the goldfields in California and the Mormon Battalion working in California was put into the fund, and this helped bring the Saints to Zion as they believed Salt Lake City to be. At first farmers were required to grow the food necessary to maintain the people already there as well as for the later emigrants. Certain skills were required – builders, blacksmiths, tanners, weavers, shoemakers, etc., and so the Perpetual Emigration Fund was established. This fund consisted of three different plans:

- (i) Those unable to pay anything so received credit;
- (ii) those able to pay £10 which, with careful management could be the full cost between Liverpool and Salt Lake City;

(iii) those able to pay the full amount.

It lasted for thirty years, assisting 100,000 persons to emigrate, surely the greatest emigration programme that ever existed. The shipping agent in this country announced the sailings through the Mormon pamphlet published in English, the **Millenial Star**, and requested “Applications to be accompanied by name, age, occupation, nationality, and deposit of one pound. Parties will provide own bedding, cooking utensils, etc.”

Captain Dan Jones by his first mission to Wales had introduced the Welsh blood and influence into the Church, and so he returned here in August 1852. His publication, **Prophwyd y Jubili**, had been renamed **Udgorn Seion** prior to his first departure, and so he continued to publish it on his return from the new address at 14 Castle Street, Merthyr Tydfil until he moved to 10 College Street, Swansea. By October 1854 an **Udgorn Seion** office had been established in Swansea. He published letters from emigrants, and one was from Samuel Evans of Bedwranfach, Merthyr Tydfil (situated behind Snow’s Garage, Lower High Street). Samuel Evans was born in Llandovery and worked as a blacksmith before working as a coal miner in Merthyr Tydfil. The Census Record for 1851 for Merthyr Tydfil shows the following persons living in the same house at Pedwranfach:

Samuel Evans, coal miner, aged 50 years; his wife Ann, aged 51 years; his sons David, 16 years, Samuel, 11 years, James, 8 years; together with his widower stepson, John Price, aged 24 years, a coal miner; and his baby Mary Price, aged 3 years.

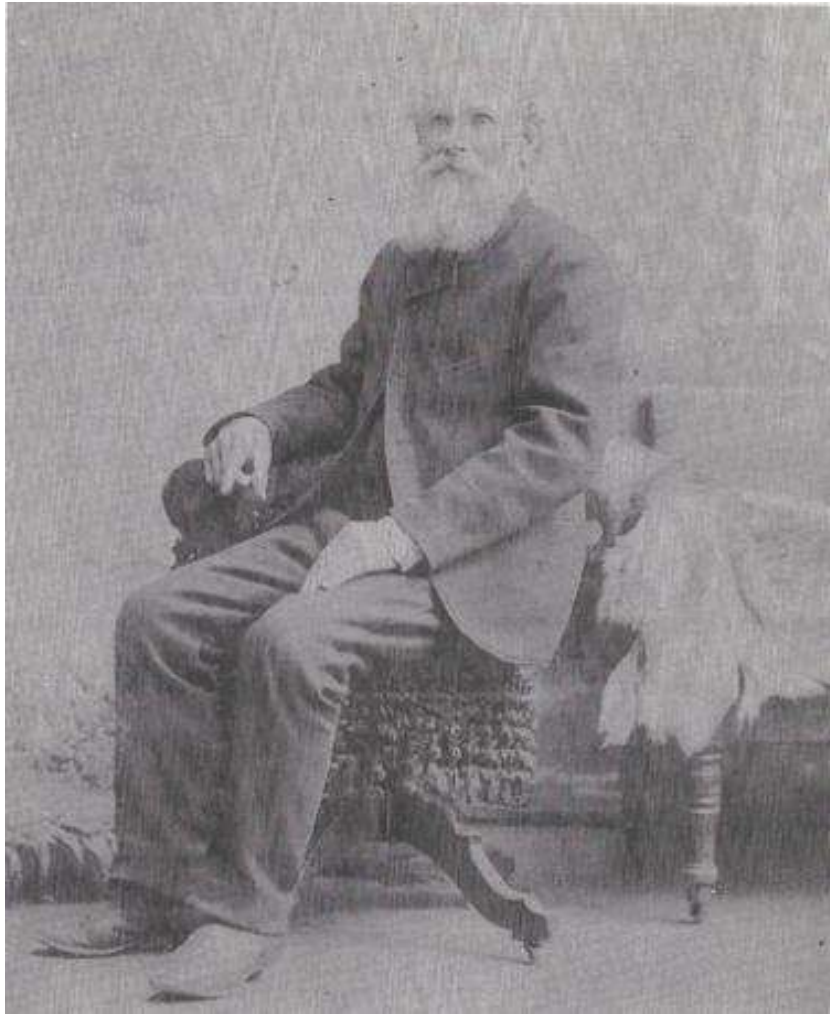
The letter from Samuel Evans, dated 26 September 1854 reads as follows:

“We crossed the sea and rivers safely. We started from Kansas on 3rd June, 1853, and crossed the Plains successfully. About 25 miles from Salt Lake City, President Young sent us beef and everybody had their fill of meat. He brought his counsellors and various others to meet us in their conveyances, and on horses. They brought from the city samples of the fruit and vegetables which are produced in the valley, as well as the brass band, who played before us, from the entrance of emigration, bringing us to the city where we stayed for six weeks. I was advised by President Young to go to Philmore, and I took his advice. God has blessed me in consequence. We were in the debt of the Emigration Society, owning nothing. Now I own two yolks of oxen, a wagon, 4 cows, 4 yearling calves and 4 new born calves, 4 sheep, 8 pigs, and nearly one hundred hens.

We grew on our land 111 bushels of wheat and I earn from 5 to 6 dollars a day generally. John Price and myself earned 12 dollars a day last summer herding cattle. We have from 20 – 40 bushels of Indian Corn, 100 bushels of potatoes and two wagon loads of squashes and pumpkins.

We live in our own house. We have made 400-500 cheeses this year as well as butter, so you see I am blessed beyond all my dreams, but no one is blessed without believing the advice of God. This place is developing rapidly in trade and culture. I wish to be remembered to all the Saints of Merthyr, especially those who live in Bedwranfach, as well as all who know me.”

When Captain Dan Jones returned from his second mission he sailed from Liverpool on 6 July 1856 on the “Samuel Curling” with 703 Saints aboard. He had written to



A MORMON ELDER

William Harman, born Merthyr Tydfil, 22nd November 1820

Resided Upper Glynmil.

Emigrated 26th July, 1871 to America

Died Salt Lake City 31st December 1900

President S. W. Richards on 26 October, 1854; his letter was published in the **Millenial Star**:

“Baptisms have not been as numerous as we expect them to be shortly, although a few individuals are still being baptised everywhere. I will merely recite one out of many instances – even in Merthyr Tydfil, the place where the very stones might have denounced a gospel-hardened race, the seed is sprouting like a tulip bed after a summer shower – seventeen baptised and twenty back-sliders returning to one branch in one week. That most popular of preachers – the cholera, which has swept off hundreds in that vicinity of late, may have contributed some to accomplish the above, but I am glad to learn that out

of the many attacked by that King of Terror, no saints have died there and only two or three have I heard of elsewhere – the ordinance being their only antidote.”

Dan Jones navigated the Great Salt Lake in the “Timely Gull”, and then coal was discovered in Wales, Sanpete Valley. He later went to Provo and died there on 3 January 1861. He will always be known as the “father of the Welsh Mission.”

The cost of transporting emigrants from Great Britain to Salt Lake Valley rose so rapidly that the Perpetual Emigration Fund found great difficulty in meeting the costs. A new experiment with handcarts was proposed, whereby a light cart made entirely of wood was pushed or pulled by hand across the plains. Edmund Ellsworth led the first company from Iowa City on 9 June 1856. Amongst the first who walked across the plains was William Harman, a 52-year-old miner. He had sailed on the “Enoch Train” on 22 March, 1856 from Liverpool, leaving his home near Abersychan. In later years his cousins, born in Merthyr Tydfil, followed the same route when trains were established and the journey took less time.

Plural marriages within the Church of the Latter Day Saints had been condemned by the nonconformist ministers for many years. In 1855 Mr. B. A. Hepburn gave lectures at the Temperance Hall, Merthyr Tydfil, on polygamy, but women were not admitted because of the “scandalous information” contained in these lectures. However, more women emigrated than men, more men died through the hardships they suffered in America and consequently for survival it became necessary to support and maintain these women. Many found they could not support the practice of their leaders very easily but gradually some accepted. They first had to obtain the sanction of the President of their Church and the support of the first wife. It was the doctrine of the Church at that time, and about two percent of the Mormons followed the practice of plural marriage. There were different ways of practising plural marriage, both in and outside the Mormon faith. It was reported in the **Glamorgan, Monmouth, Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian**, 24 December 1833, that John Vaughan, an engine tender of Dowlais, was brought before the Merthyr Tydfil magistrates on a charge of publicly selling his wife, Ann Vaughan, to Thomas Wickley for 15s.1d. it seems on the evidence of James and Mary Jones that the sale had been offered in their home behind closed doors. The magistrates dismissed the charge but severely reprimanded all the parties concerned.

Conditions in Merthyr Tydfil deteriorated over a period of several years, and gradually families moved to other mining valleys in South Wales, especially to the Rhondda Valley as this was the new coalfield. They took their Mormon religion with them, but even some of these in time emigrated to Salt Lake and to Pennsylvania. Families were separated, some for a short time but others never met again, especially when the wives refused to join their husband in the new land. After a few years these men remarried, and this was another form of plural marriage. Gradually, owing to the exodus from Merthyr Tydfil, Mormonism declined here, and on Sunday, 3 March 1878 Counsellor Edmund Harman reported that the Merthyr Branch was in a “very middling condition”. He was to die a few weeks later. In the **Millenial Star** the “Fearful distress in South Wales” was reported:

“At Merthyr, the distress is more intense, and covers a wider area

than it did during the strike and lock-out of 1873. Of the three iron-works in the district, one only is in work, and of the twenty colliers (sic) none work more than three days a week. The rector has organised a soup kitchen, and arrangements are being made to give 5,000 to 6,000 children daily one meal. Soup will also be given to the adults. At Aberdare, there is also a great amount of destitution, whilst hundreds of the Merthyr poor come over the mountain begging.”

Missionaries continued to visit Merthyr Tydfil and hold services in the homes of converts. There was a general decline in the religion owing to the emigration and deaths of the Saints here. It was not until January 1932, after a period of many years, that baptisms once more took place. Moses Jones, a weaver of Bryantsfield (Walk District), Merthyr Tydfil, emigrated to Salt Lake in May 1869; it was to his descendants these missionaries called. Elder Evan Arthur baptised four of them on a cold, wintry day on 10 January 1932 in the river under the Cefn Coed Viaduct. These new converts were Walter Ernest Pulman, later to become Branch President, his son, Hubert, daughter, Florence, and nephew, Tom Price. The Saints at Merthyr Tydfil now held their meetings at the Pulman home at 93, Plymouth Street and at the Price home in Fothergill Street, Penyard. Later as the number grew a larger hall was used at the bottom of Trevethick Street (Lewis’s Garage). Their first chapel, a small hut on Penyard Hill, was dedicated by President Heber J. Grant. Of the members of the Church of Latter Day Saints in Merthyr Tydfil today, approximately twenty-five per cent are descendants of Moses Jones. In 1960 the Mormons purchased a plot of land at the junction of the Swansea Road and Cyfarthfa Works. On 25 August 1963 the miracle happened in Merthyr Tydfil when President David O. McKay dedicated the present Merthyr Tydfil Church, reputed to have cost £200,000. This project was supported by many church members and also by their friends. President McKay had been leader of the Mormons since 1951, and his administration saw a period of world-wide growth in the Church. President McKay’s “Roots” were partly in Merthyr Tydfil. His mother, Jennette Evelyn Evans, was born at 69 Clwydyfagwr and emigrated with her parents on 22 May 1856. Her third son, David Oman McKay, was to become the ninth President of the Church of Latter Day Saints. When President Heber J. Grant established the Church Welfare Plan, David O. McKay had been his second counsellor. This programme was founded as “a System under which the curse of idleness would be done away with, the evils of a dole abolished, and independence, industry, thrift, and self respect be once more established amongst our people. The aim of the Church is to help people to help themselves. Work is to be re-enthroned as the ruling principle of the lives of our church membership”. President Brigham Young had previously explained, “My experience has taught me, and it has become a principle with me, that it is never any benefit to give, out and out, to man or woman, money, food, clothing or anything else, if they are able-bodied, and can work and earn what they need, when there is anything on the earth for them to do.”

Today members are requested to store food, clothing and fuel to sustain their families for at least one year, should there be a crisis. They have already planned to conserve fuel by holding their religious meetings during a three hour programme each Sunday. This will conserve the fuel needed for heating the building. Certain non-religious activities, however, will be held during the week. Emigration is not

encouraged today. For those residing within the Merthyr Tydfil Stake this has become their Zion. They have their own Welfare Programme at the Deseret Nursery, Ynysfach, where they grow salad crops for the poor and needy. There are approximately 400 members in the Church's two Wards here. What of the future? Could there be an endowment temple? There is already one outside London, but with the growth here and sufficient support and usage perhaps this could be the site of the first endowment temple in Wales.

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Note added by contributor of this item to *People's Collection Wales*:

Mrs Eira Smith, a native of Merthyr Tydfil, passed away in 2008, age 82. A former police woman and then secretary at Cyfarthfa High School, she was an avid local historian and expert genealogist, helping many people trace their roots back to Merthyr Tydfil. This included many whose ancestors had emigrated from the area as members of the 'Mormon' church, and she herself had connections to that church in her ancestry. In a tribute to her work the local press described her as "*one of Merthyr's most committed historians... and a proud chronicler of the town's checkered history.*"

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