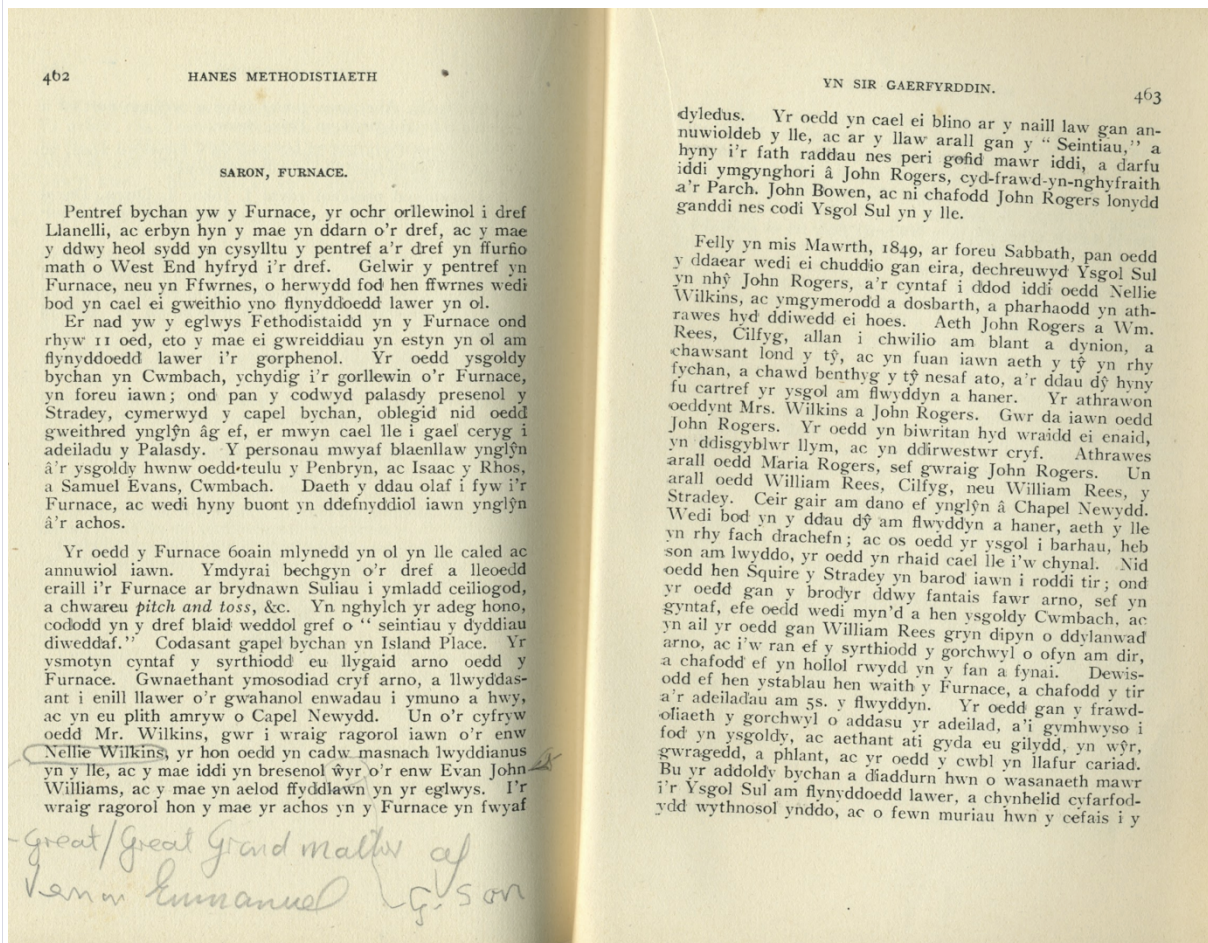


Saron Chapel Furnace

The Story of Nellie Wilkins

This excerpt is sourced from "Hanes Methodistiaeth Saron Furnace," delving into the life and impact of Nellie Wilkins, also known as Eleanor Charles, born in 1806. Nellie, my GGG Grandmother, entered matrimony with John Wilkins on 17 November 1826. The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of Furnace, a small village on the southwestern side of Llanelli, capturing Nellie's influential role in shaping the history of the Saron Chapel.



Nellie Wilkins, born Eleanor Charles in 1806 and later known affectionately as Nellie, played a pivotal role in shaping the religious landscape of Furnace, a quaint village nestled on the southwestern side of Llanelli. This narrative draws from the pages of "Hanes Methodistiaeth Saron Furnace," providing insight into the life and influence of a woman who transcended the societal norms of her time.

Furnace, now an integral part of Llanelli, was once a village with a tumultuous history, marked by an old furnace that had operated there for many years. Despite the village's rich history, the moral fabric of Furnace was marred by its reputation as a challenging and immoral place some sixty years ago.

During this societal turmoil, a transformative movement, the "saints of the last days," emerged in the town. Seeking to bring about change, they constructed a small chapel in Island Place, with Furnace as their primary target. Among those who joined this movement was Mr. Wilkins, the husband of the remarkable Nellie Wilkins, a woman of excellence engaged in a successful business in the area.

Nellie, witnessing both the immorality of Furnace and the influence of the "Saints," found herself deeply distressed. Seeking guidance, she consulted with John Rogers, brother-in-law to the Reverend John Bowen. This consultation led to the establishment of a Sunday School, marking the beginning of a transformative journey for Furnace.

In March 1849, on a snowy Sabbath morning, Sunday School commenced at John Rogers' house. Nellie Wilkins, demonstrating her commitment, took charge of the class and served as the teacher until the end of her life. John Rogers, a man of Christian virtue, scholarship, and discipline, was another instrumental figure in this endeavour.

As the Sunday School rapidly outgrew its initial space, the determined group borrowed a neighbouring house, sustaining their mission for a year and a half. Facing the need for a more permanent home, the Wilkins brothers, armed with determination and community support, secured land for free from the reluctant old Squire of Stradey. They converted the old stables of Furnace into a charming chapel, a testament to the collective effort of men, women, and children working together with love.

This small yet adorned chapel became a sanctuary for the Sunday School, hosting weekly meetings that fostered spiritual growth within its walls. In the heart of this transformation stood Nellie Wilkins, a woman whose dedication and influence left an indelible mark on the religious history of Furnace, ensuring its legacy endured for many years to come.

Furnace is a small village on the southwestern side of the town of Llanelli, and by now, it has become a part of the town, and the two streets connecting the village and the town form a kind of delightful West End for the town. The village is called Furnace or Ffwrnes because an old furnace had been operated there many years ago.

Although the Methodist church in Furnace is only about 11 years old, its roots extend back many years into the past. There was a small schoolroom in Cwmbach, just west of Furnace, very early on; but when the current mansion of Stradey was built, the small chapel was taken over because it was not in use, to make room for the stones to build the mansion. The leading figures in connection with this schoolroom were the Penbryn family, Isaac of Rhos, and Samuel Evans of Cwmbach. The latter two came to live in Furnace, and after that, they were very useful in the cause.

Sixty years ago, Furnace was a very hard and immoral place. Boys from the town and other places used to come to Furnace on Sunday afternoons to fight roosters and play pitch and toss, etc. Around that time, a fairly strong movement of "saints of the last days" arose in the town. They built a small chapel in Island Place. The first victim of their attack was Furnace. They made a strong assault, and they succeeded in getting many of the different

denominations to join them, including several from Capel Newydd. One of these was Mr. Wilkins, a husband to a very excellent woman named Nellie Wilkins, who was conducting a successful business in the area, and she currently has grandsons named Evan John Williams, and he is a faithful member of the church. To this excellent woman, the cause in Furnace is most indebted. She was disgusted on the one hand by the immorality of the place and on the other by the "Saints," to such an extent that it caused her great distress, and she consulted with John Rogers, a brother-in-law to the Rev. John Bowen, and John Rogers did not find peace until a Sunday School was established in the place.

So, in March 1849, on a snowy Sabbath morning, Sunday School began at John Rogers' house, and the first to come to it was Nellie Wilkins, and she took charge of the class and continued as the teacher until the end of her life. John Rogers and Wm. Rees, Cilfyg, went out to look for children and men, and the house was soon filled, and very soon the house became too small, and the neighbouring house was borrowed, and both houses served as the school's home for a year and a half. The teachers were Mrs. Wilkins and John Rogers. John Rogers was a very good man. He was a true Christian, a sharp scholar, and a strong disciplinarian. Another teacher was Maria Rogers, the wife of John Rogers. Another was William Rees, Cilfyg, or William Rees of Stradey. There is a word about him regarding Chapel Newydd. After being in both houses for a year and a half, the place became too small again, and if the school was to continue, without mentioning success, a place had to be found to sustain it. The old Squire of Stradey was not very willing to give land, but the two brothers had a great advantage over him, firstly, he had to take an old schoolhouse in Cwmbach, and secondly, William Rees had a lot of influence on him, and for his part, he undertook the task of asking for land, and he obtained it entirely for free where he wanted it. He chose the old stables of the Furnace, and he got the land and the buildings for 5s. a year. The brothers had the task of adapting the building and converting it into a school, and they set about it together, men, women, and children, and everyone worked with love. This small and adorned chapel was of great service to the Sunday School for many years, and a weekly meeting was held in it, and within these walls,

Nellie and her husband, John Wilkins, find their final resting place at Capel Newydd Cemetery on Felinfoel Road. I take great pride in acknowledging their noteworthy accomplishments, particularly as my 3rd Great Grandparents on my father's side of the family.