Lle par o geffyle: Signs of affluence for a Latter-day Saint family

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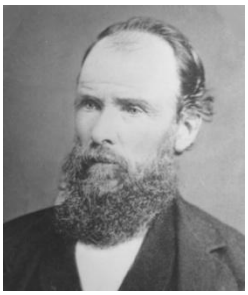
Thousands of Welsh left their homeland in the 19th century, seeking a better life in different parts of the world. Many of them left Liverpool for America, and a large number of those were converts to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (often known as 'Mormons').

Brothers Benjamin and John Isaac (below and left, respectively) became 'Latter-day Saints' in 1848 and then left Carmarthenshire for Utah Territory in 1856. Some of what we know of their lives in Utah is attributable to the letters they wrote home to their parents, Rees and Margaret, in Trefechan on the Carmarthenshire-Pembrokeshire border. The brothers arrived in Utah Territory in 1860, having spent the intervening years in Pennsylvania, earning money for the onward journey and for land in Utah. John and his wife Rachel settled in Salt Lake City; Benjamin, his wife Phoebe and four children settled further south in a town called Spanish Fork, where many other Welsh converts would also settle.



Benjamin and John both had a trade – they were stone masons like their father – but Utah in the 1860s was still in many ways a rural, farming economy. Even those who lived in the towns lived close to the soil, having their own gardens or acreage, and being surrounded by others in similar situations. In 1869, less than ten years after arriving, John wrote home to his mother:

I have 12 acres of fertile land, 2 horses and a wagon, 4 cows, plenty of butter and milk and everything to make us feel comfortable.

David Jenkins, in his 1971 book on the agricultural communities of southwest Wales,[1] describes the social and economic networks in the area in the nineteenth century, and the interdependencies of the local inhabitants, especially the labouring classes. The majority of residents would have been tenants rather than owners. Properties ranged in size from small cottages with gardens to farms of 150 acres or more. A property of 30-35 acres could generally sustain a couple and their livestock. Small-holders would generally keep a cow for what Jenkins calls *milk and butter sustenance.* Those who were simply cottagers, without the space to keep a cow, had to make do with other people's buttermilk - which otherwise was used to fatten the pigs!

Renters of smaller properties had to supplement their means, and the ability to do this was often based on the ownership of a horse. Properties in the area were typically described in terms of horse ownership: *lle ceffyl* (horse place, denoting just one horse); *lle par o geffyle* (two-horse place); etc.. This designation not only provided a statement of how many horses were kept on the property, but also of the tenant's ability to earn. Those with a horse could offer their services as a haulier – a very important consideration in the days before motorized transport, when lime, manure, field crops, market produce, building materials, etc. were constantly being moved around. Horses could also be hired out for ploughing.

Payment for services such as haulage generally took the form of labour or goods rather than money. A couple could hardly work 15 or 20 acres by themselves, and no small-holding was likely to be given over entirely to pasture for cattle, as those cattle also needed winter feed and the family needed their own food crops. So there was always ploughing, digging and dunging as well as harvesting to be done. The necessary labour could be acquired in the appropriate season as a form of 'work debt' (*dyled gwaith*), incurred as the couple provided haulage, for example, to other small-holders, who then repaid them in work hours when they needed it. No small-holder ever became rich on this system, but with luck and hard work they could defeat the vagaries of weather and crop disease, and support life for themselves and their families.

In the light of this type of social network in rural south Wales, Rees and Margaret Isaac would have understood the significance of the statements made in their sons' letters. By 1869 John *owned* his twelve fertile acres – too small in Wales for self-sufficiency, but this is in addition to the income from his trade. Many of his family may never have owned land in Wales. His property was a *lle o par geffyle,* so he had the means of at least making himself useful to others, and if necessary earning additional income by offering haulage or ploughing. He not only has one cow, which would supply ample butter and milk for

[1] *The Agricultural Community in South-West Wales at the Turn of the Twentieth Century.* David Jenkins. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. 1971.

family use (he and Rachel had no children), but four cows, again potentially providing additional income, or goods for trading around the community. And this is purely speculation, but his comment *everything to make us feel comfortable* suggests a sense of security in their situation. They have more than a sufficiency; they have enough and to spare. In the same letter John adds, *I have a good house built of first class material, 30 apple trees bearing fruit and many other varieties.* Late nineteenth-century photographs of Salt Lake City where John and Rachel lived show many such properties: modest houses with large gardens, interspersed with small orchards.

The Isaac brothers left Trefechan because of their new faith, but they became far more prosperous materially in Utah than would have been possible in Wales. They even offered to return and accompany their elderly parents on the journey back to Utah. Old Mother Isaac was promised that she would want for nothing and could *live like a lady.* The parents never did make the journey – father Rees died in 1868 and Margaret in 1869 – but they could rest assured that their posterity were prospering in their new home. The Isaac brothers took their culture of hard work and faith across the Atlantic with them, along with their language. And although they would become acculturated as Utahns – a great mix of many nations and customs – they clearly retained the ability to communicate in ways which would have reassured and delighted the elderly parents they left behind.

Notes:

1. Photograph of working horses [copyright free, but to be credited as: "Boy with a pitchfork on a haymow on a horse-drawn cart, Q / Garçon muni d'une fourche dans un tas de foin, sur une charrette tirée par des chevaux, Québec" by BiblioArchives / LibraryArchives is licensed under CC BY 2.0.]
2. Photograph of John Isaac taken from:"Utah, Pioneers and Prominent Men of Utah, 1847-1868." Database with images. *FamilySearch*. http://FamilySearch.org : 14 June 2024. Excerpted from Esshom, Frank. *Pioneers and Prominent Men of Utah: Comprising Photographs, Genealogies, Biographies*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Utah Pioneers Books, 1913.
3. Photograph of an older Benjamin Isaac from www.familysearch.org