

Abergele: Site of the First Latter Day Saint Chapel in North Wales

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Attached to the side of the Bull Hotel in Chapel Street, Abergele, is this single storey stone building. It's actually older than the hotel, although it now belongs to it, having been erected in 1849.



Photograph courtesy of <http://welshmormon.byu.edu>

In its lifetime the building has served a number of purposes, but in its origins, it was the first purpose-built chapel in North Wales for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints ['Mormon' or LDS church].

It was quite possibly only the second purpose-built LDS building outside the continental United States, the first being in Llanelli (Carmarthenshire) in January of the same year. In the 1851 census of places of worship in England and Wales, this small chapel is reported to accommodate 100 people, and to have had an average attendance of between 40 and 55 for the three meetings held each Sunday. It must have been quite a squeeze!

The *Coflein* entry for this building states:

Hen Gapel-Y-Seintiau Mormon Chapel was built in 1849 and taken over by the Baptists in 1856. The chapel then closed in 1863 and was

converted for use as a warehouse, a cottage, a spirits store, and finally part of the Bull Hotel next door.

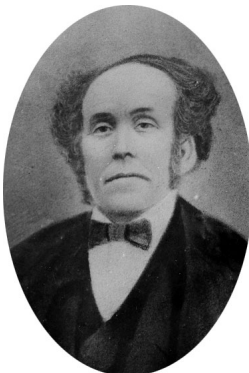


The former Abergele chapel, now attached to the Bull Hotel, can be seen in bottom right of this photograph (date estimated as 1930s)

Photograph courtesy of www.britainfromabove.org.uk (authorized use)

It should be noted that, according to <http://historypoints.org>, the current Bull Hotel was only built in 1861, but the LDS chapel was built next to an older tavern of the same name.

The Spring 2000 newsletter of *Capel*, the *Chapels Heritage Society* (<http://www.capeli.org.uk/newsletters.php>) contains an article by Fred Roberts about the chapel, and the Parry family who were instrumental in bringing the 'Mormon' gospel to the area as well as constructing the building. Reference to Edward Lloyd Parry in that article should be replaced by reference to his brother John Parry¹.



John Parry (1817 – 1882) was born in Trelawnyd, Flintshire. His father was a Stone Mason and also taught John this trade. John had obviously heard of the Mormon church by the time he was in his mid-twenties, because he records in his journal that when someone told him the news that the prophet 'Joe Smith' was killed (1844), *'something whispered to [him] and said that he was a servant of God.'* In 1842 John had been

¹ From personal communication with Ron Dennis, author of <http://welshmormon.byu.edu> website

baptised as a Campbellite², along with others of his family, and – wishing to be closer to a Campbellite group – in 1846 they moved to Birkenhead. Shortly afterwards they were invited to a ‘Mormon’ meeting and John recalls that as he entered the hall, *‘as I first went in, I said that this was my eternal home, and felt such a heavenly influence.’* As one of the missionaries gave testimony of the prophet Joseph Smith, John Parry records, *‘I believed him with all my heart, and with great joy and satisfaction.’* After the meeting, he and his father asked to be baptised into the LDS faith – the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

John Parry and his family remained in Birkenhead until 1848 and then he was called to work as a missionary in North Wales. After some months of preaching, he was offered work as a stone mason in Abergele, where he also began to preach. By 1849 there were enough members of the new church to form an organised branch, and so he reports: *‘we built a strong branch in Abergele, in spite of considerable persecution.’*

On May 20th 1852, John Parry wrote a letter to the editor of *Udgorn Seion* [*Zion’s Trumpet* – a Welsh language publication of the ‘Mormon’ church]. Sent from St George, Denbighshire, it reported on the local members [referred to as *Saints*]:

They were preaching out during the last fortnight near Wrexham; and the Methodists went there to sing to forestall them; and irreligious people went there also with rotten eggs to throw at the Saints. And upon throwing the rotten eggs, one of them struck the forehead of one of the Methodists, who took the others to court because of it. After going to the court, the Methodist was asked by the judge why he was disturbing the Saints. He added that it served him right to be hit by the egg, as the Saints had authority to preach and have peace as well as any other sect.

The statistical report of the LDS Church for 1855 lists John Parry, Jr as President of the district covering Flintshire, Denbighshire, Dyffryn Conwy and Merionethshire, with his father John Parry as President of the Denbighshire Conference within that district. There were 5 branches of the church in Flintshire and 5 in Denbighshire, with 6 each in Dyffryn Conwy and Merionethshire at the time, consisting of some 500 members. Franklin D. Richards was then President

² The Campbellites were so called because early leaders of the movement were Scottish-born father and son Thomas and Alexander Campbell (1788 – 1866), who were part of the 19th century *Restoration Movement* in America – which also spread in the UK. Adherents of this movement believed – among other things - that the ‘true’ gospel had been lost as the Christian church disappeared in the first century BC; that the Millennium would be ushered in during their lifetime; and that baptism was essential for salvation. They did not regard themselves as Protestants, but simply Christians. Early LDS church leaders, such as Sidney Rigdon, Oliver Cowdery, Orson Hyde and Parley P. Pratt, had been Campbellite preachers before they joined the LDS church. In the UK, there are many documented instances of individuals who first joined the Campbellites, and then converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

of the British Mission; Dan Jones was President of the LDS church in Wales, with Thomas Jeremy and Daniel Daniels as his Counsellors.

As Fred Roberts points out in his article titled *The Latter-Day Saints in Nineteenth Century Abergele*,³ the success of the church in the area was also the cause of its disappearing, as the majority of converts emigrated, leaving no branch or local leadership. John Parry emigrated in April 1856 on the ship *Samuel Curling*. He was subsequently one of the master masons on the Logan, Utah temple some 80 miles to the north of Salt Lake City, although he died there before the building was completed.



In 1990, descendants of the Parry family placed this plaque in the old chapel to commemorate 150 years of Mormonism in the Wales.

Photograph courtesy of <http://welshmormon.byu.edu>



Elias Morris (1825 – 1898) was also a stone mason and bricklayer, born in Abergele. In 1849 when John Parry came to Abergele to preach, Elias Morris' mother invited him in to tea. When Elias heard of it he was angry with his mother for entertaining '*such deluders.*' However, not long after that, he went to hear John Parry preach for himself and records in his journal that just two days later "*I believed his testimony and offered myself a candidate for Baptizem.*" He was baptised in the sea near Point of Ayr lighthouse, some 12 miles from Abergele at the mouth of the Dee estuary. He became a member of the New Market (Trelawnyd) branch, between Abergele and Point of Ayr. In his journal he records his expectation that all his family and friends would rejoice and join him in his new found faith, but sadly they all seemed to regard him as being deluded. However he records:

³ Available at: http://welshmormon.byu.edu/Resource_Info.aspx?id=18717

"On the night 31st of March about 2 o'clock in the Morning (as I had made it a Matter of prayer that night for a definite testimony). The Spirit of God fill'd the room untill I was over whelm, fully satisfied by the influence of the Spirit that rested upon me in answer to my prayers that God was no respecter of person in this dispensation, but is willing for all those that will do his will, to come to the knowledge of the truth of the doctrine of Christ."

It was Elias Morris who, in April 1849 and as required by law, submitted an application for the Abergele chapel to be registered as a place of worship for 'a congregation of Protestants called the Latter-Day Saints.' He emigrated in 1852 on the *Rockaway* and became a successful businessman in Salt Lake City, Utah Territory, where he died in 1898.

There are now LDS chapels in Colwyn Bay, Gaerwen, Porthmadog, Rhyl and Wrexham, as well as in mid and south Wales. But the little chapel in Abergele was the first to bear witness of the presence of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the north of the Principality.

Sources of information:

<http://www.capeli.org.uk/newsletters.php> for the Spring 2000 newsletter which includes Fred Roberts' article on the old Abergele chapel

Coflein website: <http://www.coflein.gov.uk/en/site/7437/details/hen-gapel-y-seintiau-mormonsaints-chapel-chapel-street-abergele>

John Parry's journals and photograph can be found at:

http://welshmormon.byu.edu/Resource_Info.aspx?id=2924