

Lives Lost and Found: Latter Day Saints
and the
Dyffryn Colliery Disaster of May 1852

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The burial record for St Johns, Aberdare, gives some indication of the effects of the explosion at Middle Dyffryn colliery, that occurred on 10th May 1852. There are more than four pages of entries - a total of 36 men and boys – all buried in that one cemetery on the 12th May. It's hard to imagine the depth of grief experienced by the local community, let alone the practicalities of so many burials on the same day.

All of the 36 were bread-winners for themselves or their families, the majority living in Cwmbach where the disaster occurred. But thirteen of those buried at St Johns were also members of a local church congregation: the Cwmbach branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (often referred to as 'Mormons'). And a further six victims who were LDS branch members were buried elsewhere. Early Latter Day Saint congregations were often not large, so with nineteen fatalities the effects of the disaster must have been acutely felt. More than half of the Latter Day Saint victims also held leadership positions in the small congregation. This included Ebenezer Morris who was president (minister) of the branch.

This one disaster created five new widows (and there were of course already miners' widows in the branch, as there were wherever coal mining was prominent), and more than twenty children and young people in the branch lost a father overnight. There were also a number of young people among the dead – eight of them, age 16 or less. Sadly this included the two youngest sons of Ebenezer Morris who were not employed in the colliery but, according to family lore, taking their father his lunch when the explosion occurred.

The names of those buried in St Johns, Aberdare are:

Ebenezer Morris (age 32), with sons David (10) and John (11)

Edward Davies (34) and his son David (14)

Daniel Mathews (18) from Treboeth, Swansea

David Jenkins (36)

Jenkin Rosser (age 22)

Thomas Evans (41)

Thomas Phillips (30)

Thomas Pritchard (37)

Thomas Rees (29)

Charles Marks (11)

William Samuel (16)

Other victims, buried elsewhere were:

Lewis Jones (42) and his sons William (16) and John (14)

Rees Hopkin (age 43) and son John (17)

Jenkin Rosser (22).

The loss was reported in the *Millennial Star*, a weekly publication of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the British Isles.¹ William Phillips was a local leader in nearby Merthyr Tydfil; his letter (below) to the president of the British Mission was printed in the *Star* for the 5th June 1852.

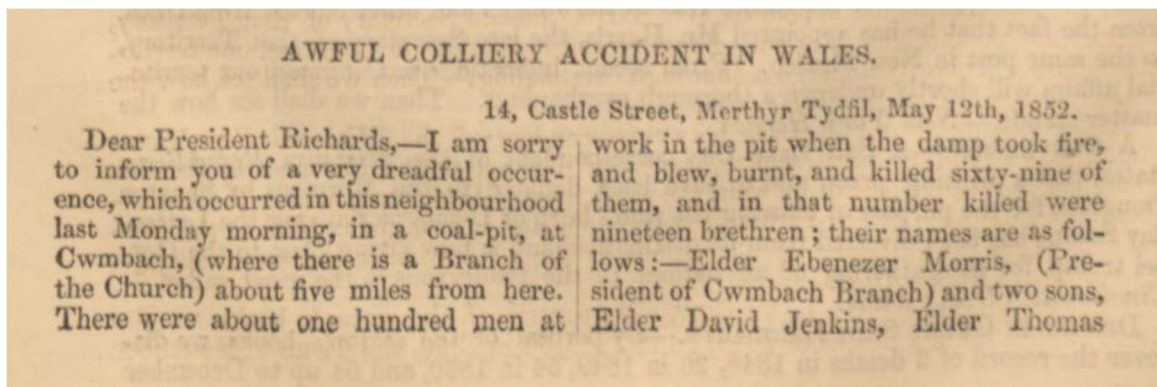


Image: Extract from the *Millennial Star*, 5 June 1852: Letter from William Phillips

Latter Day Saint missionary Thomas Roberts, serving in Swansea at the time of the disaster, later wrote in his Memorandum Book:

May 10 [1852], a very bad explosion took place in a coal mine at Cwmbach, near Aberdare, where 67 lost their lives. 19 of these were Latter Day Saints. Daniel Mathews, brother of Joseph Mathews was one of them.

The Matthews were early members of the LDS church in the Swansea area, with Joseph Matthews a leader of the Treboeth branch.

Family records indicate that the bodies of Ebenezer Morris and his sons were never recovered, but the presence of their names in the burial book would suggest that they were. Headstones have been moved to the periphery of St Johns' graveyard so it is not possible currently to identify the plot or locate the headstone for the Morris grave. However, the inscription on the headstone read:

*Ebenezer Morris died 10 May, 1852 aged 32
Also John Morris son by Mary his wife aged 10
Also David Morris, son by Mary his wife*

¹ Available online at: <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/MStar/id/37879/rec/15>

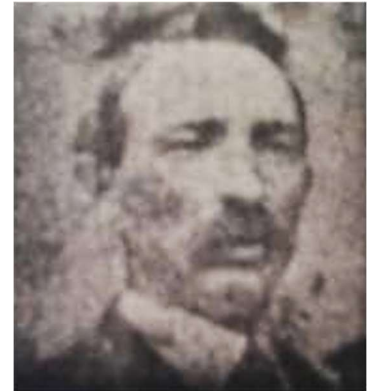
Died 10 May 1852 aged 8
Also Mormon Morris, son, died 4 May, 1850 aged 1 year.

Life would have been hard for the widows and children left behind – even if there were surviving boys in the family who could take on the role of breadwinner. But the following year two of the widows chose a different form of hardship and risk by emigrating to America, along with other converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. They chose to face crossing the Atlantic, travelling many miles across the eastern States among strangers (some of whom were openly hostile to the Latter Day Saints), and then facing the trek west by wagon train or pulling a handcart across the plains and through the Rocky Mountains to the Salt Lake Valley. Driven by the desire to worship freely, as well as the hope of a better life for themselves and their children, they were following the counsel of LDS church leaders when they left the British Isles.

Mary Margaret Morris had given birth to her seventh child just days before the Dyffryn colliery accident. In the spring of 1853 she emigrated with her surviving four children, and settled in Cache Valley in what is now northern Utah, having re-married. She had a further six children. Ebenezer had loaned money to the LDS church, to further the cause in Wales, and family lore states that the loan was re-paid after his death, which enabled Mary to emigrate.

Sarah Hopkins also emigrated in 1853, with her youngest son William Thomas Hopkins, on board the *Jersey*. She also re-married in Salt Lake City and moved with her husband and son to Cache Valley in modern-day northern Utah.

William Thomas Hopkins, who was just a child
when he left Wales with his mother in 1853



Another two widows would also emigrate, but not for another decade or more.



Hannah Pritchard left in 1864 with the three youngest of her four children – by then young people; an older son had emigrated in 1862.

Hannah Davies Pritchard in later life

Anna Jenkins left for America in 1868 with two daughters from her first marriage and another two from a second marriage (from which she was also widowed). Her married daughter with husband and young child also travelled with them; an older son and daughter had emigrated two years previously and worked to send money home for the rest of the family to follow. Anna settled in Samaria, a small town in Idaho which had been first settled by Welsh LDS converts, where she and her eldest son acquired land for farming.

These widows did not lose their lives in the same sense that their husbands had. They were certainly victims of the colliery disaster, in that they experienced loss, and their lives would never be the same. But they were able to find another sort of life – one which offered them greater possibilities, though far away from their native Wales and the burial places of their husbands.