

Carmel: Reminiscences

James Price, 1918

Carmel was a Congregational chapel, founded in 1834, just south of the Aubrey Arms and the Old Post on the road to Llancafarn; it has recently been sold, having been disused for a number of years. One of its most faithful members was Mr David Evans, originally of Village Farm, Bonvilston, and who now lives in Cowbridge. He was for many years the NFU secretary. Mr Evans has kindly given me these notes written by James Price, who wrote his reminiscences in 1918. By then Mr Price had already been a member of Carmel for 46 years, so these memories go back to the 1870s.

I have to tell you that everything was carried on in the Welsh language when I remember Carmel first, and for many years afterwards. The singing, reading, praying and preaching, and it was a rare thing to hear the text of a sermon given out in English. I don't think there was an English bible in the chapel.

Dear Friends, I can assure you that it has given me very great pleasure to comply with the committee's request, to give you my reminiscences of Carmel, as by thinking over this subject it has instilled into my mind many sweet and happy recollections of the past 56 years, during which time I remember the place, also having been a member of the church for the past 46 years and have had the honour and pleasure to be Secretary for the Church for the past 43 years. Naturally the place is near and dear (to me). I see a great change in the place to what it was when I first remembered it. Change in the building and in the surroundings, in the congregation, in the services and even in the language and customs of our fathers and mothers who used to worship here.

Carmel is situated in the parish of Llanancarvan. Who were the instigators to erect a place of worship here I cannot tell you, as I have no history whatever of the place, whether it was some of the good people of Llanancarvan or some of the people of Bonvilstone or Llantrithyd, I rather think myself that it was people of the latter as I cannot recollect any of the inhabitants of Llanancarvan attending Carmel, with the exception of one or two families. But if Llanancarvan people did not build this place they can boast if they wish that they have five places of worship in their parish for five different denominations.

Carmel was built in the year 1834 and was given a very appropriate name as it stands so near this mount, or Waen-pen-y-lan, and after the Biblical historical Carmel of old. If you consider for a moment you will find that most of the chapels throughout the country villages are named after some historical places, such as we read of in the Bible, for instance Zoar, Bethel, Carmel, Bethlehem, Bethesda, Calvary, &c; all these are places where wonderful deeds have been wrought. In the towns most of the chapels are named after the denomination and the street.

After this brief introduction I shall endeavour to tell you what I remember of Carmel.

First of all, I have to tell you that it is a remarkable fact that the first memory I have of the place is in connection with one of their large gatherings, namely the Congregational Union meetings, which were held in Llantrithyd Park in the year 1861. I have no memory whatever of the place before this.

Perhaps the reason for this is, that the children of Llantrithyd at this period were compelled to attend the services at the Parish church, and the Church Sabbath School, and were not allowed to ramble about and just do as they liked in those days, but were taught to observe the Sabbath day and to keep it holy, and I may say that I have often looked back with reverence and gratitude to those who taught us when children to observe the Sabbath.

When I remember the chapel first, it looked like a small insignificant cottage, with a brick chimney on the west end, and was quite obscure from the north, especially from the Cross road, until you came close to it, as the road at this time was only a narrow passage close to the hedge of Wain pen y lan, leaving a large mound of soil opposite the chapel, and the frontage then was only about three yards to the road. There was no burial ground there then, neither was there any other building.

The chapel stood with two entrance doors and two windows facing the road and two small windows in the back, with a small entrance gate on the east end. A few years later a small lean-to stable was built against the west end, which served to put three or four horses in.

The interior, opposite each door there was a flight of stairs leading to a gallery, which was on the three sides, and the pulpit on the other side between the two windows. The ground floor which was a mortar floor was covered with common forms or benches for seats, neither of them had a rail to rest our backs when I remember it first, but later new forms were provided with rails at the back, some of which I believe are in our vestry room today. One seat being under the pulpit about six inches above the floor higher than the others, where the deacons sat, caused a bit of a controversy between some of the brethren, because they thought that every brother should be equal and on the same level, so they named the old seat Cadair Moses or Moses's seat. In front of this seat was the communion table which is still preserved and in the vestry room at present.

There was a small fireplace on the south side and under each of the stairs a cupboard, one for coals, buckets, brushes, etc and the other for the Sabbath school books etc. From the centre of the ceiling was suspended a chandelier which held eight candles and it was not an unusual occurrence to see the people that sat underneath having to change their seats when something went wrong with the candles. Two candles gave light also on the pulpit. It was the custom of the young people that attended Carmel to decorate and present candles every Christmastide to the chapel, and generally met on Xmas Eve in the chapel where most of the decorating was done, and dozens of candles were fixed on the top rail of the gallery, each one placed in a lump of clay about 6 or 8 inches apart which gave a pretty appearance when lit, but often when the decorations caught fire it caused much excitement and amusement among the young people on the gallery.

Having given you a descriptive account of the building and its surroundings as far as my memory serves me, I will further tell you what I recollect of the congregation. At this time there was a large congregation generally, as this locality was thickly populated, I think I am right in saying that the inhabitants of Llantrithyd were close on a hundred more at this time than what they are today, and that most of them that were

of age attended either Carmel or Zoar, as there was no service at Llantrithyd Church in the evenings. Today I am sorry to say that we cannot find more than twelve in the whole parish that are regular attenders at Carmel, while there are several households in the place that never the darken the door of any place of worship. Although every service was in the Welsh language the people flocked here some to worship and praise God, and others perhaps from force of habit. But what impressed upon my mind most was the zeal and integrity that was in some of the old people who came here so regularly through all weathers, some of them living miles away from the place. Allow me to name some of them who were the pillars of the church at this time: Benjamin John and wife, William John their son, Thomas Jervis, David Jones, John Smith and wife, Robert Griffiths and wife, William Rees, Edward Samuel, Thomas Alexander, Nancy Jenkin, Rachel Ockwell, Mrs Sarah Morgan, Peggy Morgan and a great many others who were faithful members, taking a keen interest in all matters appertaining to the welfare of the church and the saving of souls. Although the services were held oftener in those days than they are at present, two or three services were held on week nights and they were generally all there, especially on the first Monday evening in each month, there was a good congregation when fervent prayers were offered for the success of the missionaries to spread the gospel abroad, and there is no doubt that the prayers have been heard and answered, as we are told that their sound is gone out into all lands. Another meeting which the old people took a keen interest in was held on the last Friday evening before the Communion Sunday, which they called a preparatory meeting in which they discussed the solemnity of partaking of the sacrament, and prayers were offered to God to prepare them for the Sabbath. Another important gathering was the Harvest festival which was held in prayer and praise throughout the day, three services, when people gathered together from far and near to mingle their voices in thanksgiving to the giver of all good gifts. Another meeting I should like to mention was the weekly prayer meeting which was held every evening during the first week in the new year. These were well attended and proved a blessing to many. I recollect that at the beginning of one year especially, that a revival took place after the week's prayer meetings, when 19 new candidates sought admission to be members of the Church. This proved to be a blessing to stir the church to further activity, so the meetings were held for the second week to praise God for what they had felt and proved. Perhaps the most important meeting in the minds of some was the annual preaching meeting when they could listen to some of the best preachers of these days, such as Dr John Thomas, Dr Rees, Griffiths Llanharan, Nicholson, Evans Cardiff, Morris Pontypridd, etc, all of which have passed away from their labour to their rest.

At this time there was a deep interest taken by myself and many of the members in the Sunday School, many of the old men and women came together, not merely for the sake to learn to read, but to hear what was read explained to them, as every one had to give their opinion on every verse that was read, which proved very interesting, as sometimes after been here for an hour and a half the whole chapter would not all be read, owing to different views, which created arguments among the class, so the remainder would be left until the following Sunday. These arguments were not altogether fruitless, as they moved many of us to turn to our bibles during the week, so that we could be prepared ready for the following Sunday.

It was the custom of the young people that attended Carmel to decorate and present candles every Christmastide to the chapel, and generally met on Christmas Eve in the chapel where most of the decorating was done, and dozens of candles were fixed on the top rail of the gallery, each one placed in a lump of clay about 6 or 8 inches apart which gave a pretty appearance when lit, but often when the decorations caught fire it caused much excitement and amusement among the young people on the gallery.

One custom which has died away this many years was the Plygain (dawn of day) which was a meeting at 5 o'clock on Christmas morning to offer thanksgiving and praise for the birth of our Saviour, several trudging with their lanterns through the dark and cold weather, returning home also in the dark with their hearts full of joy and gladness.

I recollect one Christmas morning when the caretaker forgot to bring the key of the chapel; but luckily the old minister and another old man had a lantern each, so it was agreed to hold the meeting in the stable. This, being small, proved inadequate to contain all the congregation, but several were content to stand outside the door. I shall never forget the hwyl on prayer and the singing by the choir on this Christmas morning.

The pastor of the church at this time was the late Revd James Thomas, a native of Car—a strong healthy man, who laboured here as pastor for 26 years under rather adverse circumstances. The church at this time consisting chiefly of farm labourers who were able to contribute but very little towards his maintenance, the wages of a good labourer then was only twelve shillings per week. But being a bachelor and a labourer himself, he was often employed on some of the farms, also he had the charge of the Welsh Congregational chapel at Penarth.

After the death of the late Mr Morgans Bethesda and Nurston, he gave up the pastoral at Penarth and took over Nurston instead, and ministered at Carmel and Nurston to the time of his death which took place 11th September 1879 at the age of 63. There was nothing special about his sermons, but nevertheless he was respected by all classes, and the multitude that came together to pay their last tribute of respect to his mortal remains proved that he was held in high esteem. He was not without wit and humour.

Another custom in connection with the Sunday school was the amalgamation of Carmel, Bethesda and Nurston, on Christmas days to recite and sing, three services were held, one school for each service, each chapel was visited in turn. On one occasion when we met at Bethesda, Carmel school being conveyed in a wagon, kindly lent by Mr Jones Maesiward, it snowed nearly all day, and on the return journey we nearly came to grief through some carelessness of the haulier, but we all escaped unhurt through the care of Providence.

About the year 1876 there was a brighter aspect on the church than had been for several years, several had been added to the membership as well as some that had been transferred from other churches, among whom was Mr Meyrick and family, who lived at the Caia St Nicholas. This man was a retired builder I believe, and soon after his arrival his attention was drawn to the dilapidated state of the old chapel, especially the windows and doors, and the floor, also the gallery was found to be in a dangerous state, so after a meeting or two to consult each other, it was resolved to renew the

building as you see it today, and extending the length by about 7 feet, also the room at the back was built the same time, the present stable also about this time. This was in the year 1877. During the time the building was going on, the services were held only on the Sabbath day, in the old shed below the Old Post, which was at this time a carpenter's shop, and was kindly lent by the occupier, who put the place always in order, and ready for the Sabbath. The restoration of the chapel was a burden to the church for some years, as the cost altogether for chapel and stable was about £400. There were many ways devised to make this amount, money had to be borrowed to pay as the work went on, the contract being let to a Cardiff firm, subscriptions were solicited from the members first, afterward people outside were approached, and everyone gave something toward defraying the cost. For some years an Eisteddfod was held annually on Christmas Day, the proceeds were given to the church. I find by looking over my books that in the year 1878 we had £27.10s in hand after paying all expenses in connection with the Eisteddfod. We also had a lecture or two which realised several pounds, also when the chapel was reopened it was decided that every family who attended should pay for their seats 1/- for side, 1/6d centre seat per quarter.

I am not sure whether we had a grant from the Congregational Union or not, although I am under the impression that we had £60 but I have no entry of it. All worked well until the last penny was paid. At the time of the Restoration, the new road from the turning was made, which gave us an opportunity to remove a large amount of the soil that was in front of the chapel, this was done gratis by the farmers, sending their carts to take it away. The church yard was extended and a new wall built between it and the road, and the gate removed from the south end to where it is now. Several important repairs and improvements have been carried out since 1877; the expenditure of all has been cleared, after a hard struggle. After the death of the old minister, who lived for eighteen years after the chapel was restored, the church had to depend on other ministers from various churches to preach to them for about twelve months, and among them, about the last, was our present minister, a young man by the name of Revd William Edgar Evans, who was at this time touring the Vale of Glamorgan soliciting subscriptions towards Bala College, I believe. The church at this time were fully convinced that they needed a new minister, so they watched carefully every young man that came to Carmel to preach, with a view to select one who they hoped would make a good minister. I recollect very well that on the first Sunday that Mr Evans came here that I was late that morning, and he was reading the lesson, so I stood in the lobby for a few minutes listening to a powerful voice reading quite distinctly, so I thought to myself, this is the man for Carmel, although I had not seen him. So I entered the chapel and saw a strong, robust looking young man on the platform giving out the hymn or to sing, and when he preached his sermon the greatest attention was given by all, so that at the close of the morning service I found that practically every member present was the same opinion as myself, and after a consultation with each other it was decided to take steps to secure him for our pastor. A deputation was appointed to visit Nurston, to hear their opinion of the young preacher.

John Smith, Thomas Lewis and myself from Carmel, and John James, Timothy Kemp, Isaac Kemp and several others from Nurston who had listened to Mr Evans preaching met at Nurston and were all unanimously the same mind with regard to his ability as a preacher, and a fit person to be a pastor for both churches, which Mr

Evans consented to do. The ordination service took place on the 28th day of September 1880 when the Revd Mr Lewis of Bala College (Mr Evans's teacher and Principal of the college) preached on the nature of a church, and Dr John Thomas Liverpool preached the charge to the church and their duty towards the pastor, and the Revd Prydderch of the Wern preached the charge to the new pastor and his duty towards the church. This duty I believe, you will all agree with me, Mr Evans has fulfilled, having been pastor of both churches for 38 years last September, and I further believe that if it is the wish of every member of the Church, and the congregation, that he will remain with us to the end of his career. May god bless him with health and strength to minister to us for many more years to come

Since Mr Evans's advent among us, we have worked together in harmony at all times, under all circumstances, and to this I think we can attribute the prosperity of the church as we find it today. For every Church or house that is divided can never prosper, but is sure to fall. Having compared the position of the Church in the past with the present position I must say that we have advanced a great deal in many ways, especially with regard to our financial affairs. One fault I find with the old fathers was, that they never tried to improve their financial position until they were forced to do so, at the time when the church was restored. This was due partly through carelessness and want of thought, on the part of the Church, and on the other hand partly on the Minister. As I have already said, the church was in poor circumstances, and the old minister never had a fixed salary, but was content to the smallest amount that the Church gave him, which was very little indeed at times, as I find that in 1879 the year that the minister died, the total contributions for that year from a membership of 49 was only £22 19. 7½d to meet all expenses. I wish to remind you that I have not mentioned this with any disrespect toward the good old people in whose piety and sincerity as to their Christian life I never had any doubt, as I believe, it was only for the want of thought.

But necessity is the mother of invention, and necessity caused us to adopt a scheme whereby we could meet all expenses in connection with the church, and although there is no compulsion on any one to contribute, instead of being in debt to the Treasurer at the close of every year, we have had a good balance in hand for several years.

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The old people never had the advantages that we possess today. I can remember well, when there was not a single hymn book in the chapel, except an old book that was on the Pulpit, and this was very seldom opened, as the minister and the people had committed all the hymns to memory. The singing also was not in the best style, they had not the advantage of a musical instrument as we have today. Therefore very often they would make a mistake by pitching the tune too high or too low, and sometimes a mistake in the metre, as I don't think there was one among them that understood music, and very often the singing would break down, but they were not faint-hearted, they would try again and if successful in finding the right pitch this time, they would put their whole hearts into it, and sing the last part of the hymn three or four times

over. But if they did not understand music, they understood the hymns and I believe that they sang in the right spirit, as many times you would see the tears rolling down their cheeks.

At the commencement I mentioned that there was no burial ground here when I first remembered the place, but a burial took place soon after, and it may interest some of you to know who was the first person buried here. It was a little girl two years of age, a sister to the Miss Coombs of Heol y March, who met her death by drowning in the stream by Caerwiga Mill, where her parents lived; the second being Morgan John who was a member of this church and who lived at Llantrithyd.

The old people had a great deal of disadvantages compared with the advantages and privileges that we possess today, and we should therefore bear in mind that the greater our advantages and privileges are, we have our musical instrument and our English and Welsh hymn books, the services are conducted in both languages, as well as a comfortable place to worship in, and if some of the old customs have died away others have been instituted instead, namely the Free Church Council, the band of Hope also, which has been a great success, and the last, but not the least, the Literary Society, which has brought forth many bright talents into the light which hitherto had been hidden. After looking back to the past, and reviewing what time has wrought on everything, I am prompted to say with the hymnist,
Change and decay in all around I see
But thou who changeth not, abide with me.