

Labour and 'Mormons' meet in the same hall: A master stroke by a young leader

Freda Entwistle

The *Millennial Star* of November 6th 1924 included a letter from President John W. Crofts of the Welsh Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to David O. McKay, then president of the European Mission. President Crofts was a young leader – just 31 years old – and only married for one month when he was called to serve as a missionary in the British Isles. A native of Yorkshire, he and his mother and siblings had emigrated to Utah after his father had died in 1912. John emigrated first with three of his sisters, then worked in the Silver King Mine in Park City to earn the fare for his mother and remaining siblings. He had served in the US Army during the First World War, and then married in Salt Lake City in 1923. His wife, Arva, supported him financially on his mission.

The Hall referred to in the *Millennial Star* article was the Bentley Hall in the centre of Merthyr Tydfil. Situated in the Market Square, Bentley's Central Hotel was advertised as a first-class Temperance Hotel, particularly suitable for families and commercial gentlemen. With a façade of red brick and Bath stone, the hotel was three storeys high, with most of the hotel facilities on the two upper floors and the ground floor being shared with the restaurant and independent shops.



Bentley's Central Hotel, Merthyr Tydfil, 1920

The hotel opened in 1894 and this leaflet was prepared and distributed by proprietor Thomas Bentley at the time.

It advertised:

“The large and beautiful Hall [which] can be hired for Social Gatherings, Meetings, Balls, etc. A dinner-lift ascends from the kitchen to the Hall, and every provision made for the prompt serving in the Hall of Dinners, Teas, or light refreshments, etc.”



The 'Mormons' had first been established in Merthyr Tydfil in 1843 by William Henshaw. Meetings were first held in members' houses, but as membership rose swiftly in the area in the following years, it became necessary to find larger accommodation. With no building of their own and generally not welcome to meet in nonconformist chapels, church members' usual option was to rent public houses for their meetings and services. The pubs often had a large room on the first floor and since they did not open on Sundays, landlords were happy to rent out their rooms to civic or religious groups. Alternatively, hotels such as the Bentley might have a hall for rent, and such was the case in Merthyr in 1924, where the hall provided a seating capacity for over 500.



The young John W. Crofts

President Crofts tells in his letter what happened there on October 19th:

"You will, no doubt, be interested and possibly amused to hear of a unique experience which we had here in the Welsh conference on Sunday, October 19th. Elder Melvin W. Grant and Gordon B. Affleck and I were scheduled to hold a meeting in the Bentley Hall, Merthyr Tydfil, at 6 p.m., and at the appointed time we commenced the service.

About this particular time, the town was in a state of political excitement, due to the fact that a noted Labour candidate was scheduled to speak there. It was not until we were half through with our meeting that I learned that he, too, was to use the Bentley Hall for his address immediately following our meeting. There seemed to have been either a misunderstanding of the time the political meeting was to commence, or an over-enthusiastic spirit on the part of the Labourites, for they congregated outside the building, five hundred strong, at least thirty minutes before their speaker was due to arrive. Quite naturally, they resented the idea of having to remain outside until the hall had been vacated, and when it became known by them that it was a 'Mormon' meeting which was responsible for their wait outside, the resentment waxed hot in certain sections of the crowd.

Realizing a disturbance was imminent, I turned the meeting over to the other brethren and went outside and asked for their leader or spokesman. No one seemed to assume any responsibility for the crowd, so after a few conciliatory remarks, I invited them to join us in our worship and thus avoid the long and tedious wait outside. One or two reluctantly accepted the invitation and sauntered into our meeting. These were followed by others, and in a few minutes, every available seat in the hall, which holds about five hundred, was taken. I then returned to the platform.

In an endeavour to cope with a rather awkward situation, I explained to them that they were now in a house of worship and that we would appreciate their toleration until the service had been properly dismissed. Before proceeding further, I called for a show of hands as an assurance that they would observe the solemnity of the occasion, and to my surprise and satisfaction, almost every hand in the hall was raised. I then proceeded to deliver my address, which to suit the occasion, was on the aims and purposes of the Church. They showed me reasonable courtesy while I was speaking and

seemed to receive my humble effort very kindly. True to their word, they maintained perfect order until the service had been brought to a successful conclusion.

In this way, through the help of the Lord, we were able to reach more people within a period of thirty minutes than we would have reached in many months under the regular routine."

Bentley's Hotel no longer exists, having been demolished in the 1950s. But this young man's prompt and unusual response to a potentially antagonistic crowd remains as a monument to his wisdom and inspired leadership.

Note: The *Millennial Star* was the weekly UK-based publication of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints from 1840 to 1970.

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