

A BRIEF HISTORY  
OF  
NON-CONFORMITY  
IN  
COWBRIDGE

by

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Nonconformist ministers were first granted a licence to preach at Cowbridge in the year 1672. One Samuel Jones, A.M., of Brynllwarch, Glamorgan, "a most excellent minister, a very moderate though firm non-conformist, and one of the most accomplished scholars and successful tutors in the Kingdom", was licensed to preach at "Evan Christopher's house within the Borough". He was a Presbyterian. He was well respected by the Bishop of Llandaff, Dr. Francis Davies, who even offered to ordain him, but he declined because of his strong non-conformist views. It is recorded that Samuel Jones had previously been committed to the "House of Correction at Cowbridge" by "Justice ----- of Ewenny, an officious, persecuting magistrate"!

Non-conformists, previously called "Dissenters", were those puritans who had been forced into opposition to the established church because they refused the terms of the Act of Uniformity of 1662, which called for "unfeigned assent and consent" to all that the Book of Common Prayer contained. This resulted in a substantial exodus from the Church of England which it could ill afford, confronted as it was with the problems of Restoration society. The dissenters were sincere and high minded men; many of them were scholars of distinction or preachers of marked ability. Their ejection from the church contributed to that decline of faith and morals against which the Wesley brothers were to rise in combat nearly a century later.

John and Charles Wesley were at Oxford University in 1729 when they formed a religious society nicknamed the "Holy Club". Their activities included Bible Study and caring for the poor. Their members lived according to a professed rule of faith, and for this they were called "Methodists".

Four years after establishing the first Wesleyan preaching house at Bristol, John Wesley visited Cowbridge in 1743. Five years earlier in 1738 Non-conformists had requested, and been granted, permission to hold meetings at the Guild Hall, the Bear Inn, the Red Cow and the White Hart at Cowbridge. Wesley prepared to address the townsfolk who had gathered in front of the Guild Hall, but was prevented from preaching by the "stone throwing and rowdy activity" of a large section of the audience. On his next visit, in the summer of 1758 the reception was better, and he preached in the "new Assembly Room", the ruins of which are still to be seen at the side of the supermarket near the river. He continued to visit Cowbridge at yearly intervals until 1788, preaching to "good congregations of both rich and poor". He preached at various meeting places, and on one occasion at Holy Cross Church on a Sunday morning. He comments in his journal for 1779, "O, how are the times changed at Cowbridge, since the people compassed the house where I was and poured in stones from every quarter."

Methodism of the Wesleyan variety was an English plant which never really took root in Welsh soil, except in the Anglicised South East corner. It was left to native Welshmen to foster their own "Methodism", which was to spread rapidly throughout the principality. "Calvanistic Methodism" as it was known, was founded by Howell Harris of Trevecca after his own conversion in 1735. He founded churches at Trehill (St. Nicholas) and St. Fagans in 1740, and is known to have preached in a farmhouse at Aberthin around 1742. His followers built the chapel there in 1749 and

another at Rhoose in 1797. They did not come into Cowbridge until the building of Sion Chapel, at the Limes in 1825.

The Baptists were the next on the scene. The first church of that denomination in Wales had been founded by John Miles at Ilston on the Gower in 1649, and from there the "Anti-paedo-baptists" spread. Baptist churches were founded in Penyfael in 1728, at Peterstone-super-Ely in 1777, Bridgend in 1789 and at Aberthaw in 1800.

A Baptist congregation worshipped in Cowbridge around 1800; the Rev. David Richards of Bridgend led them, against Anglican opposition, in a local brewery which he rented for the purpose. On January 12th, 1805, an infant boy was born at the White Hart in Cowbridge, who grew to be a famous Baptist preacher, and the first Principal of the Baptist College in Pontypool, later to be transferred to Cardiff as the South Wales Baptist College, now a constituent college of the Joint School of Theology of the University of Wales. He was Thomas Thomas, later Doctor of Divinity, Principal from 1836-77.

The first resident Baptist minister was one John Roberts, a smith who returned to Cowbridge where he had learned his trade in 1809; he had begun preaching at Meath, and came to take the oversight of the fellowship from David Richards. In May of 1820 Ramoth Church was founded, and John Roberts ordained as its minister. Preaching in the little meeting house and at farm houses in the vicinity he soon gathered a considerable congregation. A new chapel was needed to house them. Costing £1,200 the new chapel was erected, which eventually was opened on the 3rd June 1829, Rev. Christmas Evans being one of the famous preachers present.

By this time, the Calvinistic Methodist chapel was well established. Sion, its official name, had been built at the Limes in 1825, on a plot of land secured by William Howells, reputed to be a Cowbridge brewer. The records of the first fifty years of Sion are few and disconnected, but it is well known that Rev. Rowland Hill of Surrey Chapel, London preached at the opening of the chapel.

Both these churches shared their ministers with other villages; preachers from Sion conducting regular Sunday services at St. Athan and Llantwit Major, while Ramoth's ministers were similarly engaged at Colwinstone and St. Mary Hill.

As the non-conformist services were conducted in Welsh, with the exception of the Wesleyan, the coal magnate, Mr. Richard Cory, built a small hall at the Limes for English services. (This hall is now a hairdressers shop in the Limes). Services were conducted here by one David Lewis, a gardener who was a "modest preacher", assisted by a Mr. Tyler of Llantrithyd, who would walk to Cowbridge each Sunday to preach in the overflowing hall. As the Welsh chapels in the town began to introduce English into their services, the congregations at the hall dwindled. Eventually the Salvation Army procured the hall from the Cory family, the signature of General Booth being found on the present deeds of the property. A great impression was made on Cowbridge by the Sons of Temperance Society, who took over the hall from the Salvationists, who had never really been accepted in the town. This was 1881.

Just prior to this the Wesleyans had moved from their first "Assembly Hall" to a new meeting place on the west corner of Bethel's Court (now the butcher's shop on the north side of Eastgate). They did not stay there many years, for in 1895 they built yet a third chapel, this time on the south side of Eastgate, this beautiful building being used up until the closure of the Wesleyan cause in the town in 1960.

Their first assembly hall was used by the non-conformists ministers and by other missionaries as a "Navy Mission" during the time of the building of the railway from Cowbridge to Aberthaw. One story tells of a meeting there on the eve of Cowbridge Races, when the preacher emphasised the evils of gambling. Imagine the amazement of the townsfolk who awoke the following morning to find that there had been heavy snow during the night! It was mid June; the races were cancelled!

The pattern of the Churches' history from then on reflected closely that of the churches nationwide. They grew and flourished during the first decade of the century, the Baptists even having to build a school room in Picadilly, Llanblethian. But the peak year for church attendance had passed before the outbreak of the Great War. Slow and steady decline then followed; the Calvinistic Methodists made one great effort in 1926, when to celebrate their centenary which had occurred the previous year, they built the Limes' Schoolroom. The 1950's saw the all time low; the Wesleyan Church closed down, so did the Baptist schoolroom in Llanblethian, as did the two chapels grouped with Sion, those at Penllyn and Aberthin. Congregations were small, seldom exceeding six or twelve; the remaining Wesleyan joined with the Calvinistic Methodists, in what had now come to be called The Presbyterian Church of Wales. The handful of Baptists expected that their doors would soon close also.

Slowly things began to change. In the early 1960's, when Rev. Harold Griffiths was at Ramoth and Rev. Peter Williams at Sion, occasional united services were held on Sunday evenings and a mid-week united discussion group developed. At the same time, Cowbridge and Llanblethian began to grow. Young couples moved into the district and some of them joined the churches. A considerable number joined Ramoth, many of them being leaders in the churches from which they had come. They brought with them new ideas and fresh insights, and most of them were ready to throw their energy and time into the building up of a new church for a new age. Their new minister, Rev. Keith Jones, co-operated with Rev. Peter Williams to foster the movement towards unity already begun. An important decision was taken at Church Meetings held at Ramoth in October 1966 and in Sion the following December: "that we should hold joint services at Ramoth on Sunday mornings, and at the Limes on Sunday evenings, this arrangement to commence on 1st January 1967. On that day the United Church was born. There was no activity undertaken on a denominational basis after that date. Not that they were a "United Church" in the legal sense, and they still are not; but they had taken a step which soon was seen to be irreversible. The children who worshipped together in the United Junior Church did not know what "denominations" were; members of one church began to see themselves as members of the other, discussing together the affair of one united congregation.

The deacons and elders of the two churches were in the process of discussing which of the two buildings to use, when, in 1968, they learned of the interded departure of the Rev. Peter Williams to Runcorn in Cheshire. The problem of the future ministry of the church for a time became more important than that of buildings; eventually it was decided to ask the Rev. Keith Jones to act as pastor to the united congregation.

A fire in Ramoth chapel in February 1970 brought the subject of buildings back to the forefront; many months of discussion with architect and surveyor finally led the church meeting to decide to develop the site at Ramoth as the home for the United Church for the time being. On the 1st August 1971 the United Church ~~will~~ moved into its new home.

Many problems as yet remain unsolved. The constiution of the United Church is yet to be accepted by the Denominational bodies concerned. Perhaps it never will be; for if this brief resume of the non-conformist story shows anything, it shows that situations change, often unexpectedly.

The present minister of the United Church and the Rector of Cowbridge Parish Church are not strangers and even enemies as in times past; they share in each others worship, and preach from each others pulpits. The church worldwide is becoming one; it already is one in spirit. Perhaps tomorrow it will be one in organisation and worship also.

Ministers known to have held pastorates in the Churches  
 which make up the United Free Church in Cowbridge : -

Ramoth	Sion
David Richards            ? - 1809	
John Roberts            1809 - 1835	
Edward Thomas        1836 - 1839	
Jabez Lawrence        1839 - 1840	
Thomas Morris         1840 - 1841	Benjamin D. Thomas 1873 - 1879
Daniel Jones           1842 - 1845	William Lewis        1881 - 1885
John Evans             1846 - 1851	John James Morgan 1892 - 1895
Enoch Price            1852 - 1855	David T.Morgan      1901 - 1905
Dan Davies             1856 - 1867	Emrys J.Davies      1906 - 1945
Thomas Thomas        1870 - 1872	Harry Williams      1950 - 1959
William Thomas       1873 - 1876	Peter N.Williams    1960 - 1968
D.J.Evans              1879 - 1882	
Owen Jones             1884 - 1910	
B.T.Roberts            1910 - 1946	
Ridley Williams      1950 - 1958	
Harold Griffiths      1959 - 1963	
D.Keith Jones         1964 -	

United Free Church

Peter N.Williams	1967 - 1968
D.Keith Jones	1967 -