

RAMOTH

Two points to mention before I start: originally Ramoth was a *Baptist* chapel and before about 1900 *Welsh* was the language of all the services there.

Ramoth goes back to 1806, just over 200 years ago. But I want to begin the story 300 years ago - in the early part of the 18th century. At that time there were two Baptist churches in Glamorgan, the one in the west at Swansea, the other in the east at Hengoed in the Rhymney Valley. The members were few and they lived all over the county, mostly in the Uplands. Their dwellings were scattered and only in the summer months could they assemble in either of the chapels, given the difficulties of travel in those days. There were teams of ministers who went out to private houses across the county to hold Sunday services and to administer the monthly communion.

As numbers slowly increased, it became possible to think of an additional chapel; this was built in 1718 at Pen-y-fai, a mile or so north of Bridgend, conveniently situated roughly half way between Swansea and Hengoed. To Pen-y-fai can be traced all the Baptist congregations in the central part of Glamorgan as far east as Cowbridge and as far west as Port Talbot.

You won't want me to go into detail about how the Baptists spread across mid-Glamorgan. I'll just mention Nottage, Wick and Ewenny as places where they set up chapels in the late 18th century. A really important detail is that soon after 1800 a chapel was built in Bridgend - it was given the name Ruhamah, after an obscure character in the Book of Hosea. Ruhamah is the mother church of Ramoth, Cowbridge.

At the beginning of 1806 a group of people from Ruhamah registered in the Bishop of Llandaff's court what they described as 'a house called Ramoth lately in the tenure and occupation of Mr Hunt', in Cowbridge. They were obliged by law to inform the Bishop that they were starting a new meeting house. This building was actually a former malthouse behind number 31 High Street (the Delicatessen shop at the present time, then a baker's belonging to Thomas Hunt). The old malthouse and the first Ramoth is, I think, still there.

These were very bold moves on the part of Ruhamah: to send preachers to Cowbridge and then to rent a room for their converts to meet, for Cowbridge was a stronghold of the Church of England, then the Established Church. Everyone who was anyone in Cowbridge would have attended the parish churches. Furthermore, the grammar school, presided over by the eminent churchman, the Rev. Dr William Williams, exercised a strong Anglican influence in the town and neighbourhood; attached to the grammar school was a divinity school in which young men were prepared for ordination.

Why did the Baptists choose the name Ramoth? Basically I don't know. It is a rare name for a chapel - I can find only three others in the whole of Wales, where there are thousands of chapels. Since all four are Baptist chapels, it is possible that

they were named after the one in Merioneth, where there was a very well known Baptist preacher at the time: J.R.Jones, Ramoth as he was called. That is just a possibility. The original Ramoth was a city in Gilead, mentioned in the Book of Deuteronomy.

The first Baptists to venture into Cowbridge were not likely to find a welcome among the elite of the town. Very little is actually known about who the first converts were, except for one Richard Rees. He was described in his obituary notice in the local press in 1846 as 'the first who joined the Baptist connexion at Cowbridge 40 years ago'. He was a stonemason and I will say more about him in a moment.

The Baptists continued to meet in the old malthouse for about twelve years. Meanwhile membership was growing and they began to look around for a site to build their own chapel. One of the Ruhamah ministers came to live in Cowbridge in 1816-17 - presumably in an effort to strengthen the congregation. They were able to move to their second Ramoth in 1818.

How this became possible very much involved Richard Rees whom I mentioned just now as the first Baptist convert in Cowbridge. If there are heroes in this story then Richard Rees is one of them. He was a stonemason, but became what we would call a builder, even a property developer. In 1812 he bought a plot of ground on Westgate, fronted by an old cottage and a barn, with a long garden behind - to those who know the history of medieval Cowbridge this was a 'burgage'. The vendor was the Dunraven Estate and Rees paid £100 for the property. It seems that Rees redeveloped the street frontage as two cottages, numbers 21 and 23 Westgate; the long garden at the back became the site of Ramoth.

Nobody knows what Ramoth II was like - it would not be unreasonable to assume that it was smaller, plainer and more cheaply built than the present chapel, Ramoth III. There is every reason to suppose that it was built by the firm of Richard Rees - who else? When the building was registered with the Bishop of Llandaff as a place of nonconformist worship in July 1818, two of the signatories were Richard Rees and the other hero of this story: John Roberts of Sigginston.

Although they now had their brand-new chapel, the people of Ramoth were still technically members of Ruhamah, Bridgend. The next step was obviously to take over responsibility for their own affairs by becoming a separate Baptist church and appointing their own minister and officers. This was done in 1820 and John Roberts was chosen and ordained as minister. (*Seren Gomer*, III, 1820, p.187.) He was a very remarkable man.

From the affectionate account of Roberts written by his friend, the minister of Ruhamah, and from his own all-too-brief autobiography, we learn a good deal about his life and character.

He was born in 1787 at Llanmaes, the son of a labourer. The family moved a few years later to Llansannor, where John grew up and where he had his first job working on the Llansannor Estate

owned by J.F.Gwyn, but not before he had had a short period of formal education, aged ten, at the Eagle Academy in Cowbridge. His father could not afford to give him more.

In 1804 John Roberts was apprenticed to a blacksmith in Cowbridge. After serving his time he married and took a job in Neath. It was there that he was baptised, became a member of a Baptist church and began to preach. In 1809 he moved back to the Cowbridge area and set up his own smithy at Sigginston. That provided his livelihood for most of the rest of his life - for although Ramoth ordained him, they were never able to pay him a living wage.

As a preacher, John Roberts was successful and popular. Despite his having had only a brief period of schooling, he became a great reader and student, with a remarkably retentive memory for what he had read. His biographer refers to his eloquence, his loving manner, his sweet voice and his humble bearing. As a preacher he was no hot gospeller nor a hell-fire-damnation man, as so many of his contemporaries were. His preaching was not directed to the conversion of his congregation but towards expounding to them the promises of the gospel, the love of God and, above all, divine providence. In Roberts's autobiography the word 'Rhagluniaeth' stands out - that is the Welsh word for providence. He saw God's providence in every turning-point of his life.

Roberts was loved by the people of Ramoth and respected by the neighbourhood in general. He was clearly something of a saint.

Ramoth was thriving as a church in the 1820s. John Roberts tells us that he baptised 209 persons during his fifteen years' ministry at Cowbridge, that is from 1820 to 1835. A larger chapel would soon be necessary to accommodate the growing congregation. This would be the third Ramoth, dating from 1828-29 - the chapel which still stands, not having been altered much in the last 186 years.

We are told by an historian of the Baptist denomination, writing ten years later, that the new building had cost £1,200. It is difficult to make comparisons, but there is no doubt that that was a large amount; most chapels built in the 1820s cost far less. (For example, the Baptist chapel at Llancarfan was built for £358 in 1823.) This expenditure was certainly too much for the congregation - they could not afford it, and at the time of John Roberts's death in 1835 there was an unpaid debt on the building of £700 (more than half the amount still outstanding).

The result was, of course, an exceptionally fine chapel. John Newman, the scholarly author of the Glamorgan volume in the Pevsner series (1995), calls Ramoth 'one of the best early chapels in the county'. The building, even though it is largely hidden from the view of casual visitors, is undoubtedly one of the gems of Cowbridge. Why did the local Baptists, led by John Roberts and Richard Rees, risk financial disaster to build it? Of course, they had faith that the Lord would provide. An

interesting account of their motives is given by the Baptist historian I referred to just now. I quote in translation what he said:

The faithful minister was thinking that the wealthy inhabitants of the town would come to a splendid meeting house more than they did [before]; but the truth is that a large debt on a chapel is an obstacle to wealthy people coming to it, because they think that it would oblige them to take a share in the burden; and so it has happened in this place.

(David Jones, *Hanes y Bedyddwyr yn Neheubarth Cymru*, 1839, 620.)

So John Roberts's idea was to raise the standing of the Baptist cause amongst the townspeople of Cowbridge.

It would be interesting to know who designed Ramoth III. There is a hint of architecture about it, where older chapels in South Wales had been simple cottage-like or barn-like structures - some of them had actually been cottages or barns adapted as places of worship. The first chapel at Aberthin is an example. (Anthony Jones, *Welsh Chapels*, 1996, chapter 5.) But there is no reason to think that a professional architect was actually employed. The likelihood is that John Roberts and Richard Rees between them had designed the building.

Something that writers on local buildings don't seem to have noticed is that there is another chapel almost identical to Ramoth: this is Bethel, the Baptist chapel in Llantwit Major, which dates from 1830. I assume that John Roberts and Richard Rees were responsible for that too, though I can't prove it.

John Newman is enthusiastic about Ramoth, as I mentioned. He illustrates it with two photographs (interior and exterior), but he is not entirely accurate in his description of the building. He refers to its 'pyramid' roof - it does seem to be so if you stand in front, but move to the side (along Broadshoard) and it is obvious that the roof is not pyramidal at all: it is what architects call 'hipped'. Newman also refers to the 'square interior' - but the building is not quite square. (John Newman, *Glamorgan*, 1995, p.331; plates 81-2.)

The people of Ramoth did not mark the opening of their splendid new chapel in the usual way. What they did was to invite the Association of Baptists of South-east Wales to hold its annual assembly in Cowbridge; that was in June 1829. The meeting extended over three days and large congregations listened to an extravaganza of eleven sermons preached by some of the stars of the Welsh pulpit; the best known of them was Christmas Evans, at that time minister of the Tabernacle in Cardiff. An evening service on the first day was held in a field, presumably because there were too many hearers for the seating capacity of the chapel. (*Greal y Bedyddwyr*, III, 1829, p.220.)

The 1830s were a difficult time for the church at Ramoth. The unpaid debt on the chapel was a serious burden. The church asked John Roberts to give up his trade and to move into town. He could then devote his whole time to the ministry, but they were not able to pay him a living wage and he was obliged to go to preach to the Baptists of Caerphilly two Sundays in the month. He also undertook long and exhausting preaching tours - this was the approved method of collecting money towards paying off chapel debt. The minister would preach wherever he could get a hearing and afterwards a collection would be taken up.

John Roberts's biographer expressed the opinion that all this travelling damaged his health. In fact, his health broke down after his return from a tour in England in 1834. He had to give up the Sunday visits to Caerphilly and he was never well again. He died in April 1835, aged 48.

It was thought that about 2,000 people of every rank and religious denomination came to his funeral at Ramoth, showing how universally regarded he was. You may be wondering how the chapel could accommodate so many - well, of course, it could not. I suspect that the vague estimate included those who lined the street outside to pay their respects.

Forward now to the 1840s, a time when prosperity returned to Ramoth. A succession of three ministers transformed the situation. They did not stay long in Cowbridge - it was just another place which they passed through in their long ministerial careers. They could not have been more different from John Roberts: they were not local men, they were better educated, they were professional preachers and prominent in the denomination; they published books and articles; they preached in a much more aggressive way than the gentle blacksmith. In fact, they were loud, hot gospellers whose aim was the conversion of those who listened to them. This type of ministry seems to have been what the public wanted. Membership at Ramoth increased from 80 in 1839 to 156 in 1846, while the entire congregation, made up of members and non-members and, of course, children, was much larger than that. The usual practice in Welsh chapels was for non-members (known as 'adherents or hearers') to sit in the gallery - so preachers would direct their stirring message 'to the gallery'. Ramoth seems to have been full for a normal Sunday evening service.

The first of the three ministers, Thomas Morris, was a native of Carmarthenshire. He arrived in Cowbridge in 1840 and left in 1842. What he achieved in only two years is almost incredible. According to his grandson, E.W.Miles, he cleared the remaining debt, he renovated the chapel, and he baptised more than sixty converts in his first year. (It is interesting to note that the custom was to baptise in the river Thaw in the summer months and in the chapel - where there was a baptistery or baptism pool - at other times of the year.) (John Richards, *The Cowbridge Story*, 1956, p.41.)

So famous was Thomas Morris among the Baptists of South Wales that he was nicknamed 'Ten Chapel Tom' on account of his having built or enlarged ten chapels in the course of his career. Ramoth was apparently one of the ten, but what he actually did to the building, which was only twelve years old, is not at all clear - did he merely repaint it? I don't know, but it is possible that the schoolroom was added to the side of the chapel in his time.

Thomas Morris moved on to Corntown and Pyle and was succeeded at Ramoth by Daniel Jones, a Carmarthenshire man. His entry in the *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* describes him as one of the greatest preachers of his denomination. The most significant event at Ramoth in his time was the founding of a branch chapel at Colwinston. It cost only £70, which suggests that it was adapted from an existing building and that materials and labour were provided free. (*Y Bedyddiwr*, II, 1843, p.284.)

The climax of this story comes in March 1851. The third of the new generation of ministers, John Evans, from Llanidloes in Montgomeryshire, was faced with the unique problem of filling in a special census form; that year the Government had decided to conduct a 'religious census'. No one at that time was used to filling in forms, and nonconformist ministers were not at ease with figures and statistics - some, indeed, had a theological objection to numbering the people. John Evans stated that the average attendance at morning service was 150 to 200 and at evening service 500. Very round figures, but they are quite believable. But seriously over-the-top was his comment 'I have seen a thousand in the chapel in the evening before now'. Since he reported that the chapel had space for 480, with additional standing room for 200, we must accept that 1,000 is a bit of an exaggeration. (*The Religious Census of 1851... Vol.I South Wales*, ed. Ieuan Gwynedd Jones and David Williams, 1976, p.204.)

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Ramoth was in a flourishing state in the middle years of the nineteenth century and that its congregation was the largest belonging to any of the five places of worship within the borough of Cowbridge, though the Limes Chapel (which was Calvinistic Methodist) was a close second.

An aspect of this prosperity is rather unexpected, not to say surprising. Ramoth became the most popular venue in Cowbridge for weddings.

Before 1837 parish churches had a monopoly on marriages. From that year it became legal to marry in nonconformist chapels provided that they had been licensed by the Registrar General. Ramoth was so licensed in 1841 and the first wedding there was that of the minister's daughter, Mary Ann Morris, who married Thomas Miles who had a grocer's shop in Cowbridge High Street.

There were not many weddings in the first few years, but around 1850 there were nine or ten in a year, and the minister was claiming that more people were getting married in Ramoth than in the parish church. There had been at least 72 marriages

in the chapel by 1855. From the very sketchy information that I have, it seems that the couples came not just from Cowbridge itself but from country districts for miles around. The reason for that was that as yet very few local chapels had been licensed for marriages. Ramoth's main rival in that respect was Saron, the Independent chapel at Treoes.

Well, with the 1850s I have reached the end of what I have to tell you about the history of Ramoth. There are 160 more years yet to come, but I am going to leave that part of the story to be continued by someone else.