

John Parry: Stone mason, Welshman, first conductor of the *Mormon Tabernacle Choir*

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John Parry was born 10th February 1789 near Trelawnyd¹, Flintshire, North Wales. In the 1841 census, he and his wife Mary are living with their two youngest sons, William and Caleb, at Ochr-y-gop, to the northeast of the village.² John was a stonemason by trade, and one of the buildings he worked on was Point of Ayr (Talacre) lighthouse which sits at the entrance to the Dee estuary.³ His son John states that his father had a '*comfortable livelihood by following his occupation... kept a couple of cows and a pony to ride...and employed many workmen most of his time.*'⁴ A John Parry is listed in the 1844 Tithe records for Trelawnyd as Parish

Clerk. His son John states that both his father and grandfather held that position.

According to John Parry jnr, in North Wales his father was also well-known as a poet and scholar, and a man who generally appreciated good literature. *Mr John Parry of Ochr y*

¹ Now Newmarket – its original name, to which it reverted in 1954

² The exact residence is not known but Thomas Williams who farmed Ochr y Gop at the time was father in law to John and Mary's daughter Mary. Three families are named as living at Ochr y Gop in the 1841 census.

³ This would later be a site of 'Mormon' convert baptisms according to Elias Morris, another stone mason from the area who was baptised there in 1849.

⁴ John Parry Jnr (1817-1882)- journal available online at: <http://archive.org/stream/JohnParryPioneerMissionaryBuilder/JohnParry#page/n15/mode/2up>

Gop, Newmarket, is listed as one of 300 subscribers to the poetry collection *Blodau arfon: sef, gwaith yr anfarwol fardd Dewi Wyn o Eifion*, [*Arfon flowers: the work of the immortal poet Dewi Wyn*] published in 1842. He also had a reputation for a fine voice and played harp, piano and flute.

John Parry was also a lay preacher in the Anglican Church but in his late 20s, dissatisfied with its doctrine and considering the Baptists to be closer to the truth, or the *apostolic gospel* as he referred to it, he became a Baptist preacher.



Photograph: Trelawnyd parish church.

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However, when he encountered the Campbellites⁵ or Reformed Baptists he considered their doctrine to be even closer to the primitive church and joined with them, eventually establishing his own branch of that organisation. He would have been in his late 40s by this time. The *History of the Baptists in Wales*⁶ notes John Parry's changing loyalties, acknowledging that he possessed "*a knowledge higher than the ordinary*" but that he was "*unstable in his religious views.*" Rather dismissively it concludes his biography: "*In the end he joined the Mormons, and went to Salt Lake City.*" John Parry first heard the

⁵ The Campbellites were named for Scottish-born father and son Thomas and Alexander Campbell (1788 – 1866), who were part of the 19th century *Restoration Movement* in America – which also spread in the UK. Adherents of this movement believed – among other things - that the 'true' gospel had been lost as the Christian church disappeared in the first century BC; that the Millennium would be ushered in during their lifetime; and that baptism was essential for salvation. They did not regard themselves as Protestants, but simply Christians. A number of early leaders in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints had previously belonged to the Campbellites because of the similarity in their beliefs.

⁶ by Spinther James, published 1903.

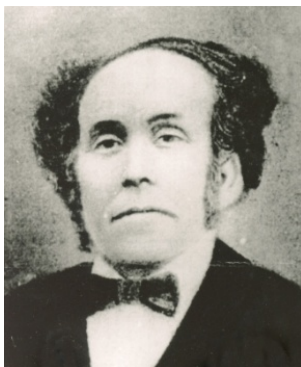
'Mormon'⁷ missionaries preach when he was living and working in Birkenhead. He was at first very much against it and warned his sons away from it, but after careful investigation and prayerful deliberation, he became convinced of its truthfulness; he and Mary were baptized 12 September 1846, when John was 59.



Mary Williams Parry (1784-1849)

Their decision to be baptised may have been influenced by two rather singular family events. John and Mary's eldest son, Bernard, followed John's occupation of stone mason. But he was also a talented artist and musician and chose to work as a portrait painter and piano teacher. In 1841 he was living in Ruthin in the Vale of Clwyd, some 20 miles from his parents' home, when he contracted a fatal illness and died, aged just 32. Shortly before his death, however, he made some extraordinary predictions. John Parry jnr tells the story thus:

Two nights before he died he was very quiet in his bed about midnight while father and myself were sitting up with him: after a while he called father and myself to his bedside, and told us that the Lord had showed him great and marvelous things that should come to pass in our time. But he should not see them as he was to die very soon. Said he, 'The Lord is going to make a great work and a wonder upon the earth, and you shall be called to it, father, and you shall preach the everlasting gospel to thousands in Wales even yet.... And you, John, shall be called to it. And you shall preach the gospel to tens of thousands, and shall baptize many, even in the Vale of Clwyd here.'



Photograph: John Parry jnr. (1817-1882)

This was five years before the Parry family encountered the Church of Jesus Christ of

⁷ Properly called *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints*, 'Mormon' is a nickname based on the *Book of Mormon*, an additional book of scripture considered by members of the church to be another witness of Jesus Christ alongside the Bible. 'Saints' denotes members of the church of Jesus Christ, as per the New Testament.

Latter Day Saints and made the decision to be baptised into that faith. But the decision may also have been influenced by another family death - that of Sarah, a younger daughter, in 1846. While living in Cheltenham with relations, Sarah had become convinced of the truthfulness of the gospel preached by the 'Mormon' missionaries but had declined baptism out of deference to her father. She returned to live with her parents in Birkenhead in 1846 but soon after contracted Typhus fever. She died in July of that year. Again, the story is told by her brother John:

"...while upon her deathbed, she accused me and father in the following words: 'Father,' she said, 'your religion is worth nothing in the hour of death. I have lived it as faithful as mortal could do, and it is of no good to me now in death. I am going to utter darkness, even to hell. Therefore, look unto yourselves, and seek a religion that will support you and enable you to face death fearless, as the one that you have is of no value. You and John did persuade and hinder me from going to the Church of Jesus Christ. And now I am going to utter darkness.'"

It was just five weeks later, that Sarah Parry's brother John and their parents took her advice and were baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. A sister and two other brothers soon followed.

The conversion of the Parry family in North Wales was a cause for rejoicing among the Welsh 'Mormons.' The Parrys were probably the most distinguished family to join the Church in this early period.⁸ Dan Jones commented on it in the *Prophwyd*,⁹ expressing the hope that those who had followed the Rev. John Parry '*from darkness to degrees of light through frown and scorn*' would follow Elder¹⁰ Parry further, '*to the midst of the fervent light of the eternal gospel.*' Their son Bernard's prophecy was fulfilled when both John Parry's (father and son) were called to serve as missionaries in North Wales, where they did indeed preach to thousands of their fellow Welshmen.

⁸ See R. F. Roberts. *Latter Day Saints in Abergele*. In *Cymdeithas Hanes Sir Ddinbych* Denbighshire Historical Society Vol. 38 1989

⁹ *Prophyd Y Jwbili [Prophet of the Jubilee]* – a weekly Welsh language publication for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, produced by Dan Jones from 1846 to 1848 and then replaced by *Udgorn Seion*.

¹⁰ Leadership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is through lay ministers. The title *Elder* denotes that a person has become a lay minister or local leader, through receipt of Priesthood authority by laying on of hands.

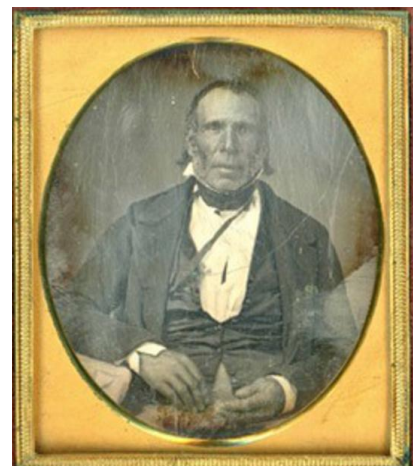
John Parry was clearly an enthusiastic preacher, even before joining the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. In a letter written 23 November 1840 and published in the *Christian Messenger and Reformer* in January 1841, he relates:

In Merionethshire I preached several times to many hundreds at a time: all my friends were greatly comforted, and many of the audience, by all appearance, were convinced of their error. As I was preaching one Lord's day in a place called Ramath, the audience appeared like as if they were ready to shout for joy: others in tears: one man after the sermon was over, stood upon a bench, and said, "Be it known to every man that I am for receiving remission of my sins today;" that instant, without any further information, he was led to the water to be born again, or immersed for the remission of all his past sins. Glory be to God.

He also appears to have been protected in his later missionary work as a member of the church. His son Joseph Hyrum Parry relates the following:

When I was on my second mission to Great Britain I traveled and preached through North Wales in the summer of 1878. At Carvwys [Caerwys], about seven miles from Denbigh, Elder George R. Emery and I had the privilege of preaching at the same spot on the village common where my father had preached some thirty years before. Some of our hearers remembered him and related the following incident: "When your father testified to the restoration of the Gospel and of the different gifts and operations of the Holy Spirit, some malicious person sent out to him a glass of poisoned water, which of course he did not drink, but went on preaching with the glass in his hand."¹¹

John and his wife Mary, with their two youngest sons William and Caleb, emigrated on the *Buena Vista* in 1849 as part of a 249-strong group of Welsh converts under the leadership of Dan Jones.¹² On arriving in New Orleans they took passage on a steamboat up the Mississippi and Missouri rivers to St Louis and thence to Council Bluffs Iowa. However Mary contracted cholera, died and was buried at Council Bluffs. John and his sons joined the George



¹¹ Joseph Hyrum Parry's journal can be found at: http://welshmormon.byu.edu/Immigrant_View.aspx?id=2929 under *Resources /Personal Writings*.

¹² A native of Halkyn who had encountered the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints while living in the American Midwest and who returned to his native Wales as a missionary for the church. His missionary success was significant. He would later serve a second term as missionary to Wales and again return to America leading a large group of Welsh converts.

A. Smith company to make the trek west to the Salt Lake Valley, arriving in October of that year. Only about 80 of the Welsh emigrants had the means to join that company; the remainder stayed to earn enough for an 'outfit' in a later company. During the journey across the plains, John organised the Welsh into an informal choir. William Morgan, a member of this choir, recorded the following:

"As we sang the first part of 'When the Saints shall come,' we saw the English and Norwegians and everyone, I would think, with their heads out of their wagons. . . . Some asked me where they had learned and who was their teacher? I said that the hills of Wales were the schoolhouse, and the Spirit of God was the teacher. Their response was, 'Well, indeed, it is wonderful; we never heard such good singing before.'"

When the company reached the valley of the Great Salt Lake, John Parry was asked by Brigham Young – then leader of the Church - to direct his Welsh singers in several musical numbers at general conference, held in the Bowery.¹³ President Young reportedly commented, *"Now I know what angels sound like,"* and shortly thereafter asked John Parry to form a choir with his singing group as the core.¹⁴ The choir he directed became the nucleus of the now world-famous Mormon Tabernacle Choir.¹⁵ He continued to direct the choir until 1854 when he was called to return to Britain as a missionary.

Ron Dennis, descendant of Dan Jones, points out¹⁶ that Brother Parry had to overcome numerous obstacles in preparing his singers for their performances. In the Salt Lake Valley they were a thousand miles from the nearest music store. So with printed music unavailable, part of each rehearsal had to be dedicated to memorizing the words of songs. In addition, many of the early Welsh Saints spoke little or no English, so much of

¹³ A temporary building constructed shortly after the Saints first arrived in the Salt Lake Valley, on the block selected by Brigham Young for the building of the Salt Lake Temple. Described by an eye witness as 'a large bowery of brush and boughs... this was the first structure in the nature of a habitation or place of shelter, erected for white men in the Valley, though it was only a light and temporary affair.'

¹⁴ See: *First Director of Tabernacle Choir Identified in Rare Photograph*. Ryan Morgenegg, Church News 8 May 2014.

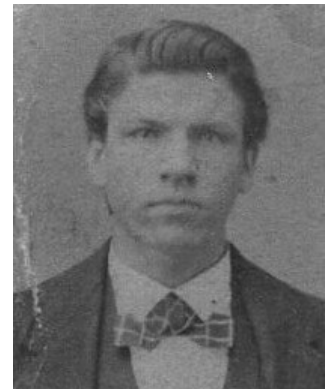
¹⁵ Name amended in 2019 to *The Tabernacle Choir at Temple Square*.

¹⁶ Ron Dennis. *John Parry and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir*. In *Y Drych*, [weekly Welsh language newspaper published in the USA] April 1985. Online at: http://welshmormon.byu.edu/Resource_Info.aspx?id=4077

what they sang was essentially in a 'foreign' language – they could hardly sing only in Welsh as no one else would understand them. Despite these difficulties, this was a time when cultural events were practically non-existent among the early settlers, so the choir was received with great appreciation.

John and his second wife Harriet (also from Flintshire) settled in Salt Lake City, where he built a modest home of adobe. He worked as a stone mason for some years until his health began to fail when he was in his late 60s. He had helped to build the wall which enclosed the Salt Lake City temple block, and was present at the laying of the cornerstones of that Temple in 1853. Joseph Hyrum Parry, son of John's second marriage, tells that many – but not all - of his children inherited his musical talents,

"After coming to Utah in 1849 he was in great demand as a singer... My half brothers William and Caleb, both fine singers located in Ogden. They walked down to Salt Lake City frequently to visit their father, and one of my earliest happy remembrances was that of hearing the three sing together. Lacking the gift of melody or "something," my father despaired of making me a singer, as music seemed to be left out of my makeup. My brother Edwin, however, inherited richly the talent of music and poetry, being a good composer and performer."



Photograph: Joseph Hyrum Parry

Once John Parry was no longer well enough to practice his trade the family survived on the products of their land, which included an orchard. He was, according to Joseph Hyrum, *"a lover of flowers and trees - a born gardener. We grew strawberries and pieplant [rhubarb] ... for which we obtained very good prices.... We kept one or two cows and the fine butter which mother made was always in demand. We produced an abundance of peaches and plums in the little orchard and dried them in quantity, exchanging some for groceries at the store."*

John Parry certainly lived a long and fruitful life, which began in verdant rural North Wales in the year of the French Revolution, and ended thousands of miles away in the

blossoming deserts of Utah. He died in 1868 at Salt Lake City in his 79th year, and is buried there with his wife Harriet.



In February 1854, writing from Utah Territory to his Baptist friend Evan Roberts in Wales John Parry bore testimony of his faith:

I am healthy, strong, active and full of happiness through having obeyed the true and eternal Gospel. I know, as the Lord liveth, that the Saints are the Church of the living God, and the only sanctuary under all the heavens; and despite the world and all its sectarian servants, Mormonism will prosper until all the world will be under its leadership, and if otherwise, the Almighty himself will be dethroned; in spite of the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph, in spite of the persecution and the killing of the Saints, Mormonism will stand like eternal columns, and it would be easier for you to keep the sun from shining than to extinguish Mormonism or to cause it to fall. Jehovah is the Mormonism of this people, their Priesthood, and their power, and everything which belongs to him shall come up in the appointed day, and shall stand before the eternal King, and shall receive the crown of life.

He ends his letter:

“Well, this is my testimony, that we have the work of God in hand,—that this is the dispensation of the fullness of times,—that Joseph Smith is the greatest prophet who has ever been on the earth except for the Son of God himself, and heaven and earth will pass away before this testimony fails.”¹⁷

¹⁷ *Udgorn Seion (Zion's Trumpet)*, vol. 7, no. 38, 16 Dec 1854, p. 600-03. Translated from the original Welsh by Ronald D. Dennis.