

## NANTYFFIN

Since finding the establishment of the Baptists in Blaen Cwm Tawe we must turn and face back and try to fly and turn our inspiration over the shoulder of the years, back to the period when being a non conformist asked for many decisions and self sacrifice over principles and of the gospel the Lord Jesus Christ.

If we can give an omen for the suffering, it is not a surprise that the upper reaches of the Swansea Valley possesses, in this period of darkness, men of great strength in the gospel and leaders of freedom.

Tradition tells us that the Apostle Paul as well as Chlaudea – Caradog's daughter, the prince of Wales paid a visit, amongst other places, to the Upper Swansea valley and that he preached in the cave that is called to this day – Caradog's Church.

If this is true, I wonder if the Apostle Paul left in this one, more than in the other areas, without leaving his influence of his great spirit and self sacrifice in THIS AREA.

Whatever the tradition noted which one is fact or not is difficult to decide, but we know this with certainty that in the last part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and with even more persecution and without leaving the land that several men and women that lived in the area called themselves BAPTISTS.

Tradition tells again and we had this tradition from our grandmother, the one that she received from her ancestors that the Baptists and the churchmen had been worshipping together for a long period of time in the CHURCH of CARADOG'S CAVE.

The first history that we have about the Baptists worshipping together was in a small dwelling about 400 or 500 yards from the cave – its name was TANYRYWAETH or TANRHYW ARTH or more ordinary – TY BILLY SHINKIN by the side of the river Tawe opposite Penybont Llynfell and tender providence has left some of the walls of the old house still standing until today and until recently there were many red gooseberry trees that tended to make us believe that as the persecution diminished that the saint left the cave for the small house nearby and we believe that this is entirely consistent with the development..

Possibly also is that these baptised saints had some sort of protection via the hand of providence because of the owner of the land Tanrhyw'r arth, Pwllcoedog a'r Shoulder being Baptists and living in the Shoulder and this undoubtedly was an advantage to non conformism in the upper Swansea Valley, we must remember also that the population was of a low count in those days.

Following the steps of the baptised saints is quite a harder task for the next few years since there are no records available, nor much history about preaching, probably they didn't feel the happenings of the day were worth recording but only in the MEMORY and unfortunately that's how it is with us today – when the memory failed the records were lost But besides all this the ARK was kept in the house of his friends and the next part of its history we have is in the BEL FACH or the house of William Evans the cobbler, this house was called the School House. The Bel Fach was in a more central area than Tanwarth and the ordination ie the communion was ministered here.

The Bel Fach became too small in the end and therefore the fathers decided, after a long time deliberating to build a tent ( pavilion) which would be bigger to accommodate the ARK in a settled position.

In the period between Tan'rywarth and Bel fach, William Lewelyn and his wife, William Evans and his wife were all baptized. The history states that these were baptizes in PONT NEDD FECHAN by Shon Shinkin – Hengoed and Dr. Jenkins.

Rees Davies or Rees o'r Parlwr, Watkin Morgan o'r Shoulder, Shon Dafydd Llwynturnor and Shon Jones o'r Lon and all these were incorporated as well as many others but their names are lost., in the church in 1796 – and they had a membership festival in Rhydwylym the same year. The members in total were 61 – 16 Baptizes – Sunday School 30 and the church was without a minister.

The small church held meetings in the homes of the saints and the ARK was carried on their shoulders from dwelling to dwelling. and the church gradually grew until the year 1809 when it was placed down in this place.

After the the establishment of the church in 1796 the brothers went to search for land to buidld upon and the place chosen was a small spot between Godrewaunoleu and the Ancient Britain - about 400 yards lower down the valley than Tyn y coed Chapel on the main road between Blaen Y Cwm and the lower region and it was planned to build a wooden bridge over the river so that Coelbren people could cross.

Mr. Gwyn o'r Dyffryn refused the application and stated that he would not allow a Non Conformist Chapel or a pub to be built on his estate. Although refused by one land owner another opened his heart, Mr Llewelyn Powell from Lower Glynllech. Mr Powell was a a Baptist and a brother of his married Shoulder's son, who was mentioned earlier, a spot was chosen as near as possible to the main road.

They went ahead with the building and in 1809 the small chapel was built to the great happiness of the saints and was named NANTYFFIN and it has stood as a remembrance to this day that only a small brook separated the refused land and the gained land and the message of the old chapel over the ages past and to be is to show the world that the gained and the refused were side by side.

Mr Powell gave the land to build the chapel as well as a parcel of land to bury conveniently over a 99 year lease for - £1.00 a year .on the condition that part of the cemetery should be kept to bury the Powells.

A successor to Mr Powell many years later added an extra 9 to the 99 year lease to ensure a safe future 999 years. The chapel was built in 1834 by changing its form and placing 2 doors instead of one and an upstairs, a door to the outside to the upstairs and stairs leading up.

It was a church for many years under the care of neighbouring ministers especially Mr Ellis Davies from Cwmdru, then Rev. Dafydd Jones - Ffynnon Henry was made a shepherd on her in 1811 and although he didn't come to live in the area he ministered the church with innocence and great success for 14 years and then he took charge of Cwmsarnddu church.

After that Rev. Dafydd Williams SOAR, Llandyfaen cared for the church for 3 years. When Rev. D Williams left a call was given to Rev. John Williams, Llanymddyfri and he was ordained on Oct. 23<sup>rd</sup> 1835. In this service the Reverends Dafydd Jones Talgarth, Thomas Williams, CWMDWR, Dafydd Jones, Cwmsarnddu, Jesse Jones , Capel Seion, Titus Jones, Castell Nedd all preached..

The REV. John Williams stayed for 2 years but had to relinquish his duties because of the travelling distance from Llanymddyfri and he was weak with poor health. Afterwards, Rev. Thomas Gabriel Jones , Hirwaun was ordained in 1837. A very eccentric and well educated man - His ability to give directions were inexhaustible, especially in languages - although he was very short of common sense. It was said by one of NANTYFFIN's characters when he was there a second time that he sometimes read his text in 9 or 10 languages. Not long after being ordained as a minister he married Miss. Margaret Powell- the daughter of Llewelyn Powell - Glynllech, the owner of the land where the chapel was built. The family were very unhappy about the marriage. In 1840 Rev. Gabriel Jones was invited to become a classics lecturer in Haverfordwest College . After his departure Rev Dafydd Moses Williams Llandyfaen came for a second time but he fell a short time after his arrival this time. and his stay was a very short one.

A successor to him came Rev. Thomas Williams or Thomas Williams Bach as he was called . Why he was called Bach no one knows because he was of great stature. From where the name came from I don't know or when he left.

Following him came Rev. Thomas Williams Cwmdwr for 2 Sundays a month and sharing with Cwmtwrch. After him Rev. Thomas Roberts from Pontestyll and he remained for 18 years and here he died in 1853. He was buried in Nantyffin cemetery and his memorial stone is above the pulpit.

We don't know much about his baptisms, his collections or deaths for 50 years but we understand that 37 were baptised in the 4 years between 1850 - 1854. Therefore , we see that in the early period of its history and from its start in 1854 that the small church had been through many a storm , sometimes on the wave and sometimes below it and with all that - many still believed.

After Rev. Thomas Roberts came Rev. Thomas Williams Cwmdwr and he was a great servant to Nantyffin Chapel whilst he was here. Rev. Gabriel Jones had served his term in Haverfordwest College and a call was given to him to return and he remained for many years until 1870. the chapel was then without a minister for about a year until Rev. J. H Jones of Rhos Hirwaun came to minister on some Sundays and a call was given to him - Unanimously- to become the minister for the area and he arrived in May 1871. Membership then was 35. By 1873 membership rose to 48. the new minister nor the chapel building agreed well - the pews were very heavy and in poor state. The pulpit was high as if it wanted to leave the ground and the minister was of a weak stature and his voice was not of a loud mode. The big seat and the pulpit had no link between them and the old people in the big seat moaned that the two were too far apart from one another..

After a great deal of discussion on the topic it was decided to renew the inside and leave the old walls to stand as they were. An agreement was made with a contractor - Rev. H Thomas, Pengorof was to do the work for a sum of £300.00 and somehow the work was completed and the chapel was ready in Oct. 1874.

There was a heart with the small church to work and contribute and on its opening over £100.00 was collected and in a short period of time the last penny was paid. It happened that at this time the chapel had people who had a lot of backing and a love for the cause eg Mr. & Mrs. Davies Bwlfa, Mr. Herbert Kemeys Nanthir, Mr. Richard Morgan Coelbren, Mr. & Mrs. Thomas Morgan Pencae, Mrs. Evans Pantywal, Thomas and Hywel Powell Ongur Isaf, Mrs. Ann Davies Penwyllt and others.

Because other people lived in Banwen and Coelbren had quite a way to walk to Nantyffin two and three times a Sunday and also to weekday meetings it was decided on the application of the brothers and sisters to build a small building for them in order to keep the Sunday School and weekday meetings when they were unable to attend. The building cost £200.00 to build in 1869 and a donation of £200.00 was given by a gentleman called William Watkins Ty Mawr Abercraf - to be placed in a bank for interest in a safe place and that the interest only would allow keeping the word of life alive in the place. The sum of money was placed in Harbour Trust in Swansea and the interest has been of great support and comfort to this small cause until today. By the end of 1875 the membership had increased to 73.

The cause was kept quite successfully over the years under the blessing of God and the industrious manner of the ministers and the officers and strong brothers in the scripture. There were keen people in front of the throne - diligent workers eg Dafydd Thomas Coelbren, Richard Morgan tailor, the secretary at the time, Herbert Kemeys Nanthir, Dafydd Jones, weaver, John Davies Cefn yr Erw, and Thomas Dafydd Jones who was also a deacon of the song. It was a great pleasure to hear these in a Prayer Meeting. Also the Sunday School was very successful with able teachers and the ones who were faithful for years guiding the young people along the correct paths and ensuring that they were strong in the scriptures so that they could face the temptations of the world and its experiences.

Many others were faithful and diligent and walked for years two and three times a Sunday and attended very early in the morning because at some times the Young Peoples Meetings and Sunday School met before morning service at 10.30 am.

David Buffton, Penwyllt who was an excellent person was a man with a will to bring men to salvation. He and one or two others were responsible and instrumental in starting a Sunday School in Penwyllt and a lot of goodness was made in teaching the pure scriptures to the children.

After the Rev. J H Jones had been here for a while he thought it was not a good thing for a man to be on his own and he looked for a suitable partner and found one in Rachel Powell - Ongur Isaf and they lived a comfortable life for many years near the chapel. Mr. Jones was not strong in body throughout his life and he had to give up being the reverend of the chapel and for many years he did what he could to support the cause but he became weaker and weaker and at the beginning of 1902 he passed away. He was buried in Nantyffin cemetery and a memorial stone was placed by his widow above the pulpit in the chapel.

During the winter of 1895 the members wanted change and to improve condition of the chapel and to modernise it according to the age. Builders were sought and the work contracted to David Lewis & Bros. Ystalyfera for the sum of £191.00. These men did their work in a very diligent manner and it was one of the most beautiful chapels in the Swansea valley.

On Sept. 12<sup>th</sup>, 1897 it was reopened for the fourth time. The sermons preached were received by the congregation in a very favourable manner - The officiating ministers were :- Rev. J Mills - Abernant and Rev. David Davies - Britton Ferry and everyone throughout the area praised the ministers for their efforts to inspire the members to consider giving a call for a leader to their souls. The collections showed that the church was in good spirit and in good heart to work and contribute since the collection raised on the day was £40.00.

In about 1897 an organ was obtained to help with the singing. Many children were nurtured in this little church, some went away to bigger chapels in the town and villages where there was work available for the people. This happened to many of the small chapels in the country and the big chapels gained and were very fortunate in gaining young people as new members. The small chapels being starved of their members and the large chapel in the town gaining greatly.

Nantyffin is the MOTHER of all the the Baptist Churches in the Swansea Valley and from this chapel the brothers and sisters went on to establish churches in Cwmtwrch, Ystradgynlais, Ystalyfera, and the surrounding areas. Two branches have already gone from here since the turn of the century.

Noddfa - Abercraf, in 1890, Moriah - Coelbren in 1910.

Some ministers have been brought up in the little church. The first was Lewis W Lewis the one who had been for some time in Cemaes North Wales and then Liverpool where he remained for the rest of his life. Also Howel Davies or Shon Dafydd as he was called. The next John Lewis, a cousin to Lewis W Lewis, the one that spent many years in Tyldesley, Manchester. After this Thomas Powell and Ioan Thomas also John and Richard Hopkins from Cefncoed. All these brothers were very very industrious in the time they spent here. Lewie W Lewis lived in Gorslwyn Coch, Coelbren and walked three times a Sunday reading on his way and on his way back.

In 1899 rev. C J Pipe Cardiff College became the minister following Rev. D H Jones and Mr Pipe remained for many years and was a very diligent person. In his time the branch went out and Moriah Chapel was built in Coelbren. He was very keen initially to begin a cause for the Baptists in Banwen, Maesmarchog and a small chapel was built there. Without much labour or effort he succeeded to lay

foundations like this in many places., walking back and fore in poor weather so as to ensure someone would start a cause here and there.

In 1900 a branch went from Nantylffin to Noddfa Abercraf which created a huge void in the congregation here and Mr Pipe was the shepherd for both churches and the church built a house for him in Abercraf. He was very comfortable for many years and the cause succeeded in both places. The membership in Nantylffin was 64 and in Noddfa 46. The numbers increased in Coelbren to such a degree that they thought that they were enough of a membership that they could have a chapel of their own, although there was a Vestry big enough to hold weekly meetings and a Sunday School.

Moriah was built in 1910 and another branch went out. Two branches in 10 years.

The MOTHER church weakened greatly since strong men in the faith left but they were determined to remember what the Apostle Paul said to Timothy, to continue to keep the faith.

The Rev. C J Pipe ministered the church for some years and was very well respected until he left in 1913. He was followed by Rev. George R Davies who was minister in Bryn Seion, Cwmtwrch and Bryn Gwilym Cwmllynfell and in 1919 he accepted a call to Nantylffin and Noddfa Abercraf. Later on he took charge of Moriah Coelbren also. He left in 1926.

Then came Rev. William Morris, Blaenffos, Pembrokeshire. A very fine gentleman and his ministry was well accepted and respected in the whole of the area. He died suddenly in a service in Coelbren on January 5<sup>th</sup> 1943.

Next arrived the Rev. Elfed Cox in 1944 and remained until 1950. The Rev. R G Roberts became minister in 1951 and remained for 9 years before moving to Calfaria, Morrision. Then straight from college came Rev. Byron Evans to minister in the church until he accepted a call from Castle Street, London.

In 1964 the Rev Dudley Morgan came to Nantylffin before eventually moving after a few years to Llangadog.

No minister has been in Nantylffin since Mr Morgan left but many local ministers have cared for and ensured that the members received the ordinance of the communion.

And at present the Rev. ~~Feifon Rees~~, Cwmtwrch cares for the cause.

*J. THORNTON JONES*

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE OLD CHAPEL?

WHO KNOWS?

Translated by Hywel Williams - May 2011