

Evangelical Friends in Radnorshire from the Late 19th Century

Martin Williams

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Radnorshire

It has often been said that Quakerism in England was slow to embrace evangelism; Quakerism in Wales - or at least in Radnorshire - was even slower. By the time it was in full swing in London Yearly Meeting, it had hardly taken hold in Radnorshire at all.

This is no doubt partly due to the geographical nature of Radnorshire. Radnor is very sparsely populated, with no large towns. Llandrindod Wells, currently the largest town, was only a hamlet until the Victorian era, when it boomed as a spa town. The measure of Radnorshire's rurality can perhaps best be expressed by the fact that, even today in 1995, there are no traffic lights in the entire county!

Certainly in the mid-nineteenth century Radnorshire was a remote, sparsely-populated, economically backward region - scarcely at the forefront of new ideas. Quakerism appears to have been at a low ebb there at that time. Despite its early history of involvement - Fox visited Radnorshire in 1657, 1663, and 1667 or 8 - Stanley Pumphrey wrote in 1860 concerning the Pales "the Meeting can hardly be said to exist, consisting of one infirm, lame old man, (who) still crosses the hills at the hour of worship to sit there alone with God."

Pales is one of the oldest Meeting Houses, its graveyard dating back to at least 1673, and is certainly the spiritual home of Quakerism in Radnorshire. It was at that time the only Meeting House in the county, though Friends met elsewhere in each others houses.

Despite Pumphrey's remark, there are records, particularly from Susannah Wilding's journal, of a steady stream of visitors to the Pales, from 1858 onwards. There are also records of a few marriages from these times, for instance that of Joseph Cooper in 1856, which appears to be well attended. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that most of those attending here were Quakers. Incidentally, the photograph of this wedding must surely be amongst the first ever taken of a Quaker wedding, certainly in Wales. Not only was photography itself only a few years old at the time, but the right of Quakers to conduct their own marriages was only granted the year before, in 1855.

A larger and stronger Meeting was to be found in Leominster, some 30 miles east of Pales, and it is from that Meeting that we look to find the first inroads of the evangelistic spirit in Radnorshire. The two key names here are Henry Stanley

Newman, and Stanley Pumphrey. Both born in 1837, they were alike influential, well travelled Quakers of the evangelical persuasion. Newman particularly was a leader of the mid-century evangelical movement. He was at that time editor of *The Friend*. He founded the Orphans' Printing Press in Leominster, and wrote numerous widely read books. It was Newman, perhaps more than any other, who was responsible for the revitalising of the Pales Meeting.

The turning point was the perceived need for a school for the people of the Llandegley area, served by Pales. The Pales Minute Book contains the following circular:

"Many persons having expressed the conviction that there is a great want of further accommodation for the good education of Children in the neighbourhood of Llandegley and Penybont, we have thought it right to commence a day school at the Pales."

The document is signed by Henry Newman, and others from the Hereford and Radnor Monthly Meeting.

The first teacher at the Pales was a young Quaker by the name of William Knowles, who was appointed in 1867. Apparently a 'strict' Quaker (certainly a strict disciplinarian), he was held in very high esteem by many locally, and appears to have revived fortunes. Numbers attending the school grew well: the average attendance in its first two years was 25, but was nearer fifty seven years later. Some of the subsequent characters we shall hear of were his pupils, which included six future J.P.s: John Owen Jenkins, Owen Owen, Morgan Evans, William Watkins, T L Vaughan, and William Morgan.

In March 1874, however, William Knowles offered his resignation, for reasons I have not been able to establish, though in an interesting reunion in 1905 he expressed his sense of guilt at having resigned too rapidly, and "without taking council from God". This posed a problem, as 1875 was due to see the establishment of a state-run Board School; a minute records the committee's decision to discontinue the school - unless a suitable person could be found. The school was in fact closed from summer 1874 to autumn 1876.

In 1876 the American evangelist Yardley Warner was in England, where he visited the Leominster Meeting, possibly as a result of having met Stanley Pumphrey in America. Warner was a very well-known Quaker, who had worked hard for the rights of slaves, in particular working for their education. It must have been quite a triumph for the Leominster Meeting to persuade so illustrious a man to take on the role of teacher at the Pales, which he did. Now, in no uncertain way, evangelism had arrived in Radnorshire.

3. Yardley Warner

Yardley Warner started his teaching mission at Pales in September 1876. It is clear that from the outset, his style was different. A highly charismatic man, he apparently delighted the children with tales of adventure with Red Indians and Negro Slaves, of long sea voyages and meetings with Presidents. He also had a passionate interest in the local flora and fauna, and would spend much time with children on the study of Natural History - not an official part of their curriculum. Sadly, the extensive pressed flower collection that he made (referred to in his letters) is no longer extant; his magnificent hand carved model of the Pales as Noah's Ark, however, is still preserved in Springfield Museum, North Carolina.

His style of classroom management can be set in contrast to Knowles' by two quotes, one from each.

A newspaper report of Knowles speaking in 1905:

"As boys they had the same nature as boys now, and he believed they were as wicked a lot of boys as could be found in the neighbourhood, but when they came to school, and were under the eyes of the master, those things were left behind."

Yardley, talking of his own style says:

"Along came little Welsh feet with much clatter and I find myself saying 'no rest till 4 o'clock!' or mostly so. They are elastic and buoyant beyond all children I ever had to do with; and my resources are taxed to keep them supplied with work; that is the only way to keep order and to manage without 'the cane' - to which they have been used, but I will never use, nor can use."

It is clear from Yardley's letters that he was also away from the Pales quite a lot, visiting London, Manchester and Dublin, where he rejoiced at Yearly Meeting's relaxation on rules regarding music.

Apart from his work as a teacher at Pales, Warner was an active evangelist throughout Radnorshire. Inspired, no doubt, by the often quoted passage from Fox's Journal, he held many meetings on Penybont Common, of a strongly revivalist nature, throughout his five year stay in Radnorshire, from 1876 to 1881. His links with Methodist ministers in this and other affairs are significant.

The main bone of contention appears to have been the afternoon meetings at Pales which seem to have been thoroughly 'infiltrated' by Primitive Methodists. Monthly Meeting complained that Quakers had to obtain permission to attend these meetings from Methodist ministers - a point that Yardley sharply rejected.

Additionally, his increasing absences (when teaching was left to Anne Warner, whom he had married recently) angered Monthly Meeting, who were, after all, paying him twice the annual salary that had been paid to Knowles.

He also continued to edit the Monitor, and retain ties with his American activities. All in all, something had to give, and after minuted criticism of his teaching ability in June 1880, he resigned.

He returned to the USA in 1881, where he died 4 years later.

Teaching at Pales was carried on by Richard Evans for 8 weeks, then by James Abbatt, with his wife Mary, and sister. It was largely due to the Abbatts that the Sunday School at Penybont was started, in 1883. Held in the Iron Room adjacent to the Severn Arms, it quickly became popular, with an average attendance of 40 children, with eight teachers. James Abbatt became a recorded minister the following year and devoted more and more of his time to "local Temperance effort...Gospel work and house to house visitation."

Recognising this change in Abbatt's calling, the Day School was discontinued in 1884, to allow him to pursue his evangelical path. This path led, the following year, to Home Mission Work in London; he and his family left the Pales in September 1885.

The Pales Committee pleaded with Anne Warner to return from the States to carry on the teaching work: in this she acquiesced, and a minute of July 1885 notes that "we have no objection to Samuel Dart (? - name uncertain) residing with her or to her bringing over the Black Boy to act as servant at the Pales" ! She ran the school until 1889, when ill-health caused her to leave for a less arduous post in Somerset. The school then closed permanently.

The legacy of the Warners remained, however, in the meetings and ministers that were established during Yardley's brief residency, or shortly thereafter.

Following the revivalist meetings on Penybont Common, a meeting was established at Penybont in 1880, meeting at the Iron Room, a familiar landmark until recently. The Meeting prospered and in 1890 a Meeting House was built, known as Greenfields. It is in this context that we come to the first of the 'home-grown' evangelists of Radnorshire, John Owen Jenkins.

John Owen Jenkins (1856-1944)

Born in 1856, John Owen Jenkins was amongst the first cohort of five pupils present on the opening of the Pales school in 1867. The seeds of Quaker belief were obviously sown by William Knowles, but it was not until the revival meetings of Warner on Penybont Common that he was received into membership, on the 9th of the 9th 1879, aged 23. His commitment grew rapidly, and by 1884 he was recorded as a minister.

He was a man of enormous vigour. Throughout the 1880's he would ride the seven miles to the Pales for early morning Adult School, followed by Meeting for Worship; in the afternoon, it was Meeting for Worship at Llwynmelyn or another neighbouring farm, and then on to Penybont for the third Meeting for Worship of the day. He estimated that his Quaker work had taken him some 25,000 miles on horseback - equivalent to the circumference of the Earth.

In 1890 he married Florence Fisher, from the then-ailing Swansea Meeting - some 6 years before Benjamin Elsmere returned there to revive it - possibly more than a coincidence.

In the 90's, he turned his sights to Llandrindod and collaborated with Benjamin Elsmere and Hercules Phillips in the establishment of the Llandrindod and Llanyre Meetings.

Apart from his Quaker interests, he was a farmer who specialised in breeding pedigree cattle. He qualified as a magistrate in 1894, serving in that role for fifty years, for many of which he was senior Justice of the Peace for Radnorshire.

He had a passionate interest in education, as evinced not only by his own teaching, but also his commitment to agricultural education, a field in which Radnorshire was particularly backward. He was a founder member of the Farmers Co-operative Society for Radnorshire. He was a school governor, and a member of the Radnorshire Education Committee.

He was totally committed to the evangelical cause, and was particularly active in the distribution of tracts and Bibles. He was a life-long supporter of temperance, and spoke widely on the subject.

The Welsh Revival of 1904/05 gave him great scope. He was extremely active during this period, in a wide range of locations, but notably Penybont and

Leominster. One of these revival meetings, at Almeley, lasted a marathon five hours!

In a fascinating and moving document written in 1933, when he was 77 years old, John Owen Jenkins declares

I promise through Divine Assistance and God's Grace that I will devote my life entirely to the service of God, in season and out of season, in living to promote a spiritual awakening in this neighbourhood, and throughout the world, by all the means in my power, especially by much prayer, and testimony on all occasions when it is needed; and to equip myself for the very best service I can, render to my Lord and Master, and to love others as Christ has loved us, and to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, that his power may fall on me, and further I will say with Jacob of old I will not let Thee go, unless Thou bless me, and give the blessing through me to others.

To which I subscribe my name, this the 21st day of June 1933.

John Owen Jenkins

This declaration, apparently written to coincide with his withdrawal from public duties, gives us a rare insight into the language with which the Radnorshire evangelicals chose to express themselves.

Later years saw his vigour, but never his commitment, diminish. He died in 1944, aged 88.

Benjamin Elsmere

Another prominent member of Pales was Benjamin Elsmere. His name first appears in the Twelfth Annual Report of the Pales Mission: Noting Anne Warner's ill health, the committee record that "During her absence B. J. Elsmere, of Swansea, has already paid a short visit". A variety of Friends looked after the Pales in turn over the Winter of 88-89, and the following Spring. A minute on the 13th of April, 1889 notes that Anne Warner is unlikely to return, and that a letter from Penybont suggests that a 'man Friend should reside among them as a missionary worker'. Elsmere (along with William Knowles and other Friends) was at Pales in June and July, partaking in Revival Meetings.

The following meeting of the Pales Mission Committee, on 13th August '89, records that Benjamin Elsmere was to be the 'man Friend'. The salary was only £60 a year,

and it is apparent from the minutes that the committee was concerned about this. Another minute records that

"The Committee guarantees B J Elsmere a salary of £60 a year, in addition to whatever J O Jenkins may be able to collect in the neighbourhood."

Elsmere and his family moved in to the Pales on 16th October, 1889, a week after Anne Warner finally left.

His role was very different, however. The school as such closed, and he was employed as a mission worker: by all accounts he was very good at it. In the late Autumn of 1889, he outlined some of his proposals for mission work:

*"On November 8th we had a welcoming tea of all the Friends in these parts. As we held counsel together how best we could help one another, and be a blessing to those around us, I believe that we were drawn closer to each other, and to the truth as it is in Jesus. Among other things, we propose to start an Improvement Class for young people, when short papers will be read on the lives of some of the worthies of the past, and other subjects that will, I think, tend not only to mould and improve the lives of the young, but to circulate the books of the Library and the principles of the Society."
(Quoted in the 13th Annual Report of the Pales Mission, 1889)]*

He evidently reported in writing monthly (!) to the committee. His report from April 1890 is illuminating:

"In the past month I have attended 28 meetings and paid 53 visits to the homes of Friends and others. Much of my time has been spent in digging, cleaning and tidying up the ground in front of the Meeting House and Cottage, repairing the fences, clearing the drains, building up the bank of the graveyard and laying turf."

In June:

"We have been holding meetings every night for three weeks in different houses of the neighbourhood. These have grown in interest, numbers, and power.... I suppose when Paul said, 'Do the work of an evangelist,' he meant 'Whatsoever thy hands find to do, do it with might;' but I should not like to put to paper all the jobs that I find it includes."

The work continued throughout 1890, with a very well-attended tea on Christmas Day at the Iron Room in Penybont. Subscriptions were running at an all-time high, and Elsmere seems to have been very well liked locally. It must have been a disappointment, therefore, for the committee to receive notice of his intention to leave the Pales Mission. He and his wife were not entirely happy there, as a letter dated 29/8/90 indicates: he informs the Pales Committee "that I must tell you that we are thinking of leaving the Pales early in next March as we do not feel happy here." They did indeed leave in March 1891; after several candidates for his replacement were rejected, the Pales Mission closed on the 13th April, 1891.

He did not, however, leave the area. Taking up residence in the then prosperous spa town of Llandrindod Wells, he was a founder member of the Llandrindod Meeting in 1892. Strongly influenced by Yardley Warner, he and John Owen Jenkins and Hercules Phillips, discussed below, form the nucleus of the Radnorshire evangelical Quakers.

Another Meeting, in an extremely remote spot above the hamlet of Llanyre, was founded by these three the following year. Within a year or so, the iron structure which still stands, complete with organ, was erected.

Llandrindod Meeting did not have a Meeting House of its own, meeting first in Cae Bach chapel, then in Friends' houses, and then for some time in the Lower Assembly Rooms in Llandrindod. The Meeting was formally constituted in August 1892.

In 1896 Hercules Phillips departed the scene for six months to do Friends work in Birmingham. His absence appears to have been felt, for on his return the Meeting was considerably depleted. Moreover, Benjamin Elsmere and his family left for Swansea, to revitalise Quakerism there, soon after his return.

Several of Elsmere's relatives are buried at the Pales, including his daughter, Dorothy. Benjamin himself is buried at the Swansea Meeting House, although he had resigned his membership of the Society, following the decision in 1924 to abolish the practice of having 'recorded ministers' (of which he was one). His second wife, Maggie Thomas, was a Calvinistic Methodist, who met him whilst he was preaching at the Methodist chapel in Penybont. He subsequently became a minister of that faith.

Hercules Phillips (1869-1944)

And so we come to the last historical figure of Radnorshire evangelism, Hercules Phillips. Born in 1869 at Knighton to an Anglican family, he was apprenticed at the age of 17 to a journalist and printer in Llandrindod Wells. As a teenager, he had

been exposed to a range of non-conformist preachers, and, on “not having been welcomed or taken any notice of” by the Anglican community in Llandrindod, he turned to the Calvinistic Methodists, which church he soon joined.

He appears to have had a yearning for preaching and evangelical work from an early age, and was soon being urged by his Minister and Deacons to give up his trade and enter the ministry. He was never happy, however, with Calvinistic theology. He came in contact with Benjamin Elsmere through Bible classes conducted by him at Llandrindod, and he soon resigned his membership of the Methodists and joined the Society of Friends in the early 1890's.

The first minute of the Llandrindod Meeting, dated 1893, records that on the 7th of the 8th, 1892, “a meeting was opened at Llandrindod Wells.. when meetings were held morning and evening. The work was carried on on subsequent First Days, with a meeting on Fifth Day evenings, by Benjamin Elsmere. A First Day adult morning school was established, and about the same time an afternoon school for children was commenced under the superintendence of John James.”

The founder members were Eleanor Breeze, Ernest Compton, Benjamin Elsmere and six of his family, Adeliza Hughes, John James and his family, Agnes Jones, Charles and Martha Smith, Francis Stead, and Hercules Phillips.

The following year saw the building of Llanyre Meeting House.

After his brief period with the Friends Home Mission in Birmingham, he returned to Llandrindod, but did not find full-time work for the Mission conducive. He accepted a post as a journalist, and this became his life's career - though how he found time to do it is hard to see!

Soon after his return, Henry Stanley Newman set him the task of raising the £1000 plus needed to build a proper Meeting House in Llandrindod. The building was paid for and opened by 1908. The impressive building added status to the Quaker presence, and at one time Llandrindod was the second largest meeting in the whole of the Western Quarterly Meeting.

It was also in Llandrindod, and under the personal influence of Hercules, that the origins of the great Welsh Revival of 1904 can be found. Although not commonly associated with Quakerism, the Revival, which had the profoundest impact on Welsh life, can be traced directly back to a conference held in Llandrindod in 1903 and organised by Phillips. Revival Meetings were held locally throughout 1904 and into 1905.

Another intriguing fact, perhaps related to the charisma of the men discussed here, is that at this time there were 11 Meetings for Worship throughout the whole of

Wales - and 4 of them were in Radnorshire, the smallest county by far in terms of numbers!

The time commitments were strenuous; up until the end of the First World War, a typical week for Hercules looked like this:

Sunday

9.15 *Bible Class*
11.00 *Meeting for Worship, Llandrindod*
2.15 *Mixed School, Llanyre (6-mile walk)*
3.00 *Meeting for Worship, Llanyre*
6.00 *Meeting for Worship, Llandrindod*
7.30 *Meeting for enquirers, Llandrindod*

Tuesday

6.00 *Evening Meeting for Worship, Llanyre*

Thursday

6.00 *Band of Hope*
 Meeting for Worship, Llandrindod

For over 30 years, he made the twice-weekly 6 mile walk to Llanyre and back, half of it over rough terrain.

Note the features typical of this period: the adult schools, and the evening meetings for worship, which were programmed, featured an individual minister, and involved singing. Such evening meetings actually continued at Llandrindod until the 1950's.

It should be stated that the Llanyre Meeting, particularly, was not typically 'Quaker' - at least not typically British Quaker. With a clearly defined ministerial leader, and a strong emphasis on hymn singing, it found itself in the cleft stick of many such missions, born out of revivalism: how to sustain a missionary zeal whilst remaining true to Quaker principles. Mrs M J Jones, in a fascinating article about the chapel, significantly says

"It seemed for this, her special day (anniversary of founding) the Quaker Chapel itself exuded great pride as everyone gave of their best and her timbers quivered when the hymn 'Guide me over, thy great Jehovah' was sung to Cwm Rhondda with such volume and feeling."

Deeply moving, but not typically Quaker.

This dilemma was not unique to Llanyre: it affected Llandrindod and Pales meetings, and no doubt other meetings. (See 'Some Rural Quakers', by Jack Wood, for a discussion of these points in the Warwickshire/Worcestershire/Oxfordshire area)

The 14-18 war had a devastating effect on Hercules' work. Male attendance naturally fell dramatically, as a result of draftings, death and increased geographical mobility. The Llanyre Meeting never fully recovered from the effects of rural depopulation that the First World War triggered, though the children's school there remained strong until 1934.

Numbers never really picked up after the war, and all too soon were hit by yet another World War, which once again adversely affected the Quaker cause. Hercules Phillips himself died on 23rd of the 11th, 1944, only months after John Owen Jenkins.

The Llanyre Meeting collapsed soon afterwards, being taken over by the Baptists, in whose style the Meeting had in reality been conducted. The chapel continued into the 'fifties, but depopulation eventually took its toll. Some veterans of Llanyre, however, still worship at the Baptist chapel in nearby Newbridge-on-Wye.

As with all the Radnorshire evangelicals, one is struck dumb by the apparently tireless energy of the man, and the range of public, as well as spiritual, life he was involved with. Once again, the commitment to education is paramount: apart from his own teaching, Hercules was for 30 years a member of the Radnorshire Education Committee, whom he represented at the Federation of Education Committees for Wales, and the Central Welsh Board; he was a governor of Aberystwyth University College, and founded what is now Llandrindod High School. This says nothing of his deep involvement with local hospitals, social services, local Development Associations, Boy Scouts, Free Church assemblies... the list of official posts covers a side of A4 paper.

Interestingly, he severed his connection with the Liberal Party, and with all political parties, upon the First World War, but I have not been able to trace the reasons for this in his writings. Hercules was unusual amongst this group in being a writer; he published numerous articles relating to Quaker history, and worked as a journalist for the local newspaper now known as the Brecon and Radnor Express. Examples of his evangelical style are to be found in its pages, and elsewhere:

"We might go on to speak of Christ as our present Friend and Helper, our present Teacher and Shepherd, etc. He is all these to His people day by

day, and beyond doubt He wants us to be more to every one of us than He has yet been. To many the Lord Jesus Christ is inestimably precious, but we repeat that whatever He has been to us in the past He wants us to be more gracious, more helpful and more precious in the future."

The Nature of Evangelism in Radnorshire.

So what did the evangelism of this period amount to? A large part of that question can never now be answered, for it surely lay in the quality, the passion, of the verbal ministry given by those involved, now lost forever. By and large, the characters involved were not great writers - they were do-ers. And it is in their actions that we see the meaning of evangelism for them: temperance work, the distribution of tracts, Bible study, pastoral visits, social and legal work, but above all, overwhelmingly, a commitment to education - not sectarian indoctrination, but genuine education, some of it radical in conception. At a time when education in this area is under such dire threats, we may do well to remember their dedication.

It would be a serious mistake, however, to assume that all Quakers at this time were of an evangelical persuasion - they were not. A letter from an eminent Friend in Hereford and Mid Wales Monthly Meeting (who expressed a wish to remain anonymous on this point), dated 1972, recalls the evangelical period thus:

"The 'Welsh Revival' in South Wales, was conducted by keen evangelists (not Friends) - their methods were not acceptable to most Quakers, but a few, like J.O. Jenkins, were swept away by their enthusiasm, and "blood and thunder" type of ministry! I remember hearing J.O.J. preach but did not feel he really understood Quakerism."

And again

"In the period 1887 to 1891 (the house, Gwernalcwm) was occupied by a man named Thomas Williams who joined Friends at a time when there was a short-lived period of activity during a "Welsh Revival".

A local Friend named John Owen Jenkins was much influenced by his visit to South Wales where the revival was active - he endeavoured to carry their methods into the Quaker regime. But this was not acceptable to most Quakers, and the meetings in Thomas Williams' home ceased when he left this house."

It is impossible now to know how the balance lay, between these two contrasting poles of attitude; and no doubt the balance shifted over time. Suffice to say that both poles were not only present but felt very strongly. I should like to conclude by quoting in full a letter from the original mover of all this, Henry Stanley Newman, to its principal pillar, John Owen Jenkins, written in 1904 during the Revival period:

Dear John

I was right glad of your message to our Quarterly Meeting, especially was I glad that you were throwing yourself again into revival work, and enjoying the reality of the wonderful work of God's Holy Spirit. Bring this home with you that the dry bones may live again and that the flame may be re-kindled again in very many hearts in Radnorshire. Not only is salvation free, but the work of the Spirit is free and not bound to the apron-strings of any sect. He is a Free Spirit, to work without respect of persons or names or denominations, just as much among us as anywhere else. Get low and keep low, and He will fill the Soul. But we must yield ourselves up to be filled, and must hold nothing back.

In much brotherly fellowship with yourself and your wife,

*Your loving Friend,
Henry Stanley Newman*

An earlier draft of this paper was delivered by the author to the inaugural meeting of the Wales and West Midland branch of the Quaker Historical Society on 25th April 1992. A later draft was delivered as a talk to mark the Anniversary of Quakerism in Llandrindod Wells, August 1992. This draft was completed on 18th September 1995

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