

Brecon and Radnor Congregationalism.

1662



Commemoration

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EDITED BY

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MAESYRONEN AND GLASBURY-ON-WYE.

BY REV. D. C. LLOYD.

MAESYRONEN.

EVERY beginning is difficult to trace. That truth is exemplified in the history of the beginning of evangelical religion in this district. When, however, certain ascertainable facts are collated, we are driven to the irresistible conclusion that the cause here must have originated a few years before the Long Parliament of 1640.

We learn from the history of the saintly William Wroth, who by his evangelical preaching had earned the title of "Apostle of Wales," and who, in consequence, was dragged to the Court of High Commission, that he was in 1638 deprived of his living at Llanvaches, near Chepstow, and that in 1639 he formed an Independent church there. But prior to his ejection, Mr. Wroth had frequently preached in many parts of Wales; and it is more than probable that Walter Craddock, the curate of Mr. Erbury at St. Mary's, Cardiff,—who for refusing to read the Book of Sports, lost his licence for that cause by order of the Bishop in 1633—had early come under Mr. Wroth's influence. Walter Craddock, when he left Cardiff, went to Wrexham, but his earnest ministry there stirred up opposition, and in a year he fled to Shrewsbury, and thence to Brampton Briars, near Ludlow, the hospitable home of Sir Robert Harley. He remained here three or four years, and made many preaching excursions into the counties of Radnor, Brecon, Montgomery, and even Cardigan. His

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ministry everywhere was remarkably owned in the conversion of sinners, and in the establishing of churches. It is also known that the celebrated Vavasor Powell, who was born at Knucklas in 1617, preached with much power in these parts. Putting these facts together, we conclude that a revival of religion broke out in this locality prior to 1640.

The church at Llanigon, of which the Rev. Richard Powell was the vicar, formed the centre to which were attracted worshippers over the wide area stretching from Troedrhiwdalar to Merthyr Tydfil, and from Hay to Cefnarthen, Carmarthenshire. This church, for the convenience of worshippers, separated in 1688 into three branches: Maesyronen, Tredustan (both Independent), and Maesyberllan (Baptist). But before founding a church at Maesyronen, the Gospel had been preached, and people had been assembling for fellowship for years at a place near where the present edifice stands. This was called the "Beudy" (cowhouse), on a spot in the meadow in a corner of which the present building was erected. It must have been in this older building that Oliver Cromwell worshipped. That event probably occurred in the summer of 1648, when the Lord Protector was in South Wales after the subjugation of Pembroke to allegiance.

The present structure dates from 1696. A bi-centenary service was held here in 1896, when the Revs. J. B. Jones, B.A., W. Catwg Davys, and other ministers of the Association took part. The deed was drawn up in 1714. The site was given by Lewis Lloyd, Esq., of Maesllwch, who himself appears to have been a member of the church. It has been called "the oldest chapel in Wales"; and, having regard to its being the spot where evangelical religion flourished almost as early as at Llanvaches, and especially to the fact that the building, both outside and in, retains its primitive and antique appearance, it amply confirms that proud designation.

Of the ministers who had the oversight of the united church at Llanigon after its reformation into an evangelical body, we find that Richard Powell was the first. He was one of the "approvers" under the Act for the Propagation of the Gospel in Wales. During the Commonwealth, in 1653, he was inducted to the living in Glasbury, Breconshire—a living from which Alexander Griffiths had been ejected in 1650 for immorality. Mr. Powell was slandered by Mr. Alexander Griffiths, but this fact must be attributed to a spirit of violent abuse, for Mr. Thomas Watkins, a justice of the peace for the county of Brecon, testifies that Mr. Powell was "an honest, faithful preacher of the Gospel." He died at his residence, Penywerneithin, Radnorshire, in 1658.

The next minister was Mr. Henry Maurice. He was educated at Jesus College, Oxford, and ordained at Broomfield, near Ludlow, before the restoration of Charles II. He was then unconverted. After his conversion he became one of the most remarkably devoted servants of God. Having weakly conformed in 1662, he was appointed to the living at Church Stretton; but he had no peace of mind until he gave up that living. His wife, who was a partner of a saintly and bright disposition, told him not to trouble about her or their child—that God would provide for them. He gave up his charge and came to Llanigon. He visited many places, and soon had no fewer than twenty different stations wherein to preach. He was assisted by four or five ministers. His diary shows that he was a man who lived very near God. He died at the comparatively early age of from 45 to 50. [See also under TREDUSTAN.]

Next there followed Rees Prytherch of Llandoverly. [See under TROEDRHIWDALAR and TREDUSTAN.]

After the founding of Maesyronen Church, the first minister was David Price. He was here from 1700 till his death in 1742. He resided at Llwynllwyd.

Next came Lewis Rees, whose father was the son of a clergyman, but who had left the Established

Church. His son, when quite a little boy, asked his father why he had dissented. The answer was: "My dear boy, listen to me. I left my father's house and the Established Church because of the persecuting spirit of its priests, and of high Churchmen generally. I was compelled to dissent, or to be a bitter enemy to religion and to the followers of Jesus Christ; and I assure thee that if thou wilt be spared to my age, and wilt be of any service to the cause of Christ, thou wilt have to feel bitterly from their spirit. And I cannot see how men can be godly whilst persecuting godly men and women, nor how the Established Church can be a Church of God; and I chose to worship amongst those who exhibit the spirit of the meek and lowly Jesus." The child grew up and wished to enter the ministry. He was educated at Llwynllwyd Academy under the celebrated Vavasor Griffiths. He settled at Llanbrynmair about 1734. His wife being a native of this neighbourhood, he had charge of Maesyronen from 1745 to 1748, but returned to Llanbrynmair, where the people, whom he had only partially left, still looked to him as their pastor.

Next came James Davies (1749-1759), and after him Walter Bevan, who was here in 1762. These were followed by William Llewellyn (1767-1775).

The next was Thomas Bowen. Educated at Abergavenny College, he was ordained in 1781, and left for Neath in 1796. He often preached in houses opened for him in various parishes in Breconshire. A Mr. Frew was then vicar of Llansantffraid. He was highly indignant that this "preacher" should enter his preserves; and because the house in which Bowen had preached was unlicensed, the minister was summoned to answer before the magistrates at Brecon for a breach of the law. Mr. Bowen duly appeared and pleaded guilty. When told he should be fined £20, he put down that sum on the table and walked out of court. At the foot of the stairs he was stopped, and asked to return. The

chairman of the bench said, "We *can* fine you £20, but do not wish to take the whole sum." "No matter, gentlemen," was the reply, "the money is now paid, and as my accuser, Mr. Frew, gets one-third of it, it would be a pity to deprive him of his share: but this money will be his destruction." He then left the court. Mr. Frew was fatally injured by a fall from his horse when returning from Brecon some six weeks later.

David Jones was ordained at Maesyronen in 1796, and ministered here nearly 50 years. He resigned the pastorate in 1846, and died in 1848. He was buried in the graveyard at Maesyronen. On his tablet in the church is a rather curious epitaph. It contains these words:—"He began early, continued late, met with enemies of a most malignant type, but he overcame them all, and in the end did cry, Hallelujah!"

The remainder of the story is soon told. Thomas Havard, minister of Tredustan, took Maesyronen along with Tredustan on Mr. David Jones' death, until 1861. In 1863 Mr. Harvey became pastor of Maesyronen only. Mr. Harvey retired in 1867, and was followed in 1868 by J. R. Lewis from Brecon College, who removed to Dorrington, Salop, in 1871. He was succeeded by H. D. Shankland in 1872, who in 1877 removed to Domgay in Salop. Then came J. Thomas from Brecon College in 1878, who removed to Trecastle in 1881. After him came D. Watkins from Carmarthen College in 1882, and left in 1884. In 1885 came W. Fairhurst from Ystal-yfera, who removed to Barrow in 1891. In 1891 D. C. Lloyd came from Shipley in Yorkshire, and is the present pastor.

Vavasor Griffiths, a native of this locality, was ordained as the Congregational minister of Maesgwyn between 1715 and 1725. That church exists no longer, but the name of Vavasor Griffiths is associated with Llwynllwyd Academy. Llwynllwyd is a farmhouse opposite to Maesyronen on the Breconshire side of the Wye, and, as was mentioned above, was the home of

the Rev. D. Price. Here Vavasor Griffiths kept a school, at which William Williams of Pantycelyn, amongst others, received his education. Whilst a student at the Academy, one Sunday morning W. Williams heard Howell Harris, who had himself been a pupil at Llwynllwyd, preach in Talgarth churchyard. That sermon was the means of awakening his soul to the claim of God upon his life. He became one of the sweetest singers of Israel, and a successful minister. Vavasor Griffiths was appointed principal of Carmarthen College, which was removed to Llwynllwyd. He was a good man and a fine scholar. He received his education at Tewkesbury, at Mr. Samuel Jones' celebrated Academy.

Some years ago, the then Mr. De Winton, of Maesllwch, attempted to close the path leading to Maesyronen through his park; but, acting upon the advice of his lawyer, he referred the case to arbitration, and the path was re-opened. The worshippers had used the path for 150 years.

There is a small farm of rough land situated near the Black Mountains in Breconshire, left as an endowment to the cause at Maesyronen; it is known as Blaenau Uchaf, and yields a rent of £20 annually. A rent-charge of £4 per annum on Blaenllyndeg Isaf is also left for the benefit of the poor worshipping in the church at Maesyronen or Glasbury.

THE MEMORIAL CHAPEL, GLASBURY-ON-WYE.

Since Maesyronen is a mile or upwards from the village of Glasbury-on-Wye, it became desirable to erect a place of worship in a more convenient position for the inhabitants. Accordingly, when a suitable site had been acquired on the village green, the Rev. T. Thomas, Glandwr, the architect, prepared plans, and a very substantial, neat, and commodious building with Gothic arches and good building-stone was erected at a cost

of £1,000. It was opened 28th October, 1866, when Dr. David Thomas, Stockwell, and others preached. Since that time the two churches of Glasbury and Maesyronen have been regarded as one pastorate. Under the sketch of the history of Maesyronen the names of the ministers have already been mentioned. It only remains to add that in 1905 the trustees erected, in close proximity to the chapel, a very convenient house for the caretaker, at a cost of £212. In case of need, the cottage might be utilised for a manse, as it is roomy and well-built.

[The present pastor of the two churches, the Rev. D. C. Lloyd, on his settlement in 1891, immediately opened a Grammar School at his residence, Hampton House. A school had been founded here by Mr. W. Vaughan many years before, and had been very successful. He was succeeded by a Mr. Phillips, but the school had been closed for ten years previous to Mr. Lloyd's settlement in the district. Under him Hampton Grammar School, as it is called, has had a fine record. Hundreds of boys and girls have there received instruction which has enabled them to cope more successfully with the problems of life, and has fitted them for various positions of usefulness and responsibility. Many former pupils occupy positions of influence in the Christian ministry; many others are discharging important duties in the commercial world or in the Civil Service; while others, again, have their spheres in quieter and less prominent, though not less important ways. All have, from time to time, testified to their appreciation of the help they received at the School. This fact has greatly cheered and inspired Mr. Lloyd.

At the end of 1912, greatly to the regret of his people, he will retire from the pastorate, the duties of which he has discharged so faithfully for over 21 years, and will devote the whole of his time to the prosperous school under his charge.—EDITORS.]