

1935 Health Fair in Pontypool Town Hall

Jill Morgan

The Civic Centre for Torfaen County Borough Council is situated in Glantorfaen Road, Pontypool.



Coflein describes the building as:

Built between 1853-6 by Bidlake and Lovett from Wolverhampton on land given by the Hanbury family. It was 2-storey, stone faced, with a parapet, bay windows and pilasters. Now with modern extensions to rear built in 1991. The new work involved demolishing a part of the original building and encasing a part of the Council Chamber in new work.'

In 1974 the Building was listed Grade II, for being 'A good example of a provincial town hall built with the close patronage of the local ironmasters, the Hanbury Leigh's of Pontypool Park.'

In 1935, the building would have been referred to as the Town Hall, and in September of that year it was the location for a 3-day Health Fair organized by local members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (then commonly referred to as *Mormons*). This was a considerable accomplishment given that the local membership was not large, but it provided much positive publicity for the Church in the local area.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints encourages its members to follow a specific health code known as the *Word of Wisdom*. This includes refraining from drinking tea, coffee and alcohol, and not smoking or using drugs (other than medication).

WALES HEARS THE WORD OF WISDOM

Three Thousand Attend the Mission Health Exhibition

IN picturesque Pontypool, resting in the heart of South Wales' green-blanketed hills, cheerful mothers are spreading their tables with new menus. They are health meals. They include more fruits, more milk and eggs and grains. There is less meat.

And as some of those happy families gather around the board the conversation no doubt leads to the Latter-day Saints. . . . Who are they? Just what do they teach? Where did they get this "new" code of health?

All of this has resulted from the Exhibition of Health in Pontypool Town hall, sponsored by the British mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, September 19-21. Approximately 3,000 persons, including many Pontypool civic leaders, attended the three-day exhibit, the theme of which was "Live Wisely."

The town hall was distinctively decorated in a colour scheme of cream and black. Converted into a model kitchen by the local gas and water company, the stage was the scene of lectures and demonstrations. Along the side walls of the hall were booths in which health food concerns exhibited and demonstrated their goods. At the left of the stage was a large Word of Wisdom exhibit, where travelling elders explained the Latter-day Saint health teachings as revealed by the Lord to the Prophet Joseph Smith. Parts of the programmes were relayed to the street by two powerful amplifiers outside the hall.

Upon entering, each person was given an attractive yellow souvenir brochure containing the programme, advertisements, health recipes and an explanation of the Word of Wisdom.

The exhibit was planned by Welsh district President Richard C. Thomas and Elders Henry R. Pearson, Horace L. Hulme and Walter J. Eldredge, supervised by President Joseph J. Cannon. Speakers at the various programmes were President Cannon, Elder Hulme, Dr. James L. Woodruff of Los Angeles, Councillor Charles Gray, C.C., D.C., and Fred Densall, manager of New Royal theater. Music was furnished by Sisters Elise Mace and Elizabeth Cornwall and the Mission M Men quartette (see page 623). A feature Friday was a "Shirley Temple" healthy girls' contest, judges of which included Mrs. Ivor Jones, J.P., and Mrs. W. C. Watkins, wife of Councillor Watkins.

Pontypool *Free Press*, which published several accounts on the exhibit, expressed its purpose:

The purpose of the project is to stimulate interest in wiser diet, proper exercise and correct health habits. The interest of the Latter-day Saint Church is prompted by their teaching, known as the Word of Wisdom, which is essentially a health code. Its simple principles have achieved remarkable results among the people who have applied them.

The health exhibit is another evidence that Wales is interested in the message of Mormonism. At Welsh district conference February 23, 2,000 persons sought admittance to the evening session.—WENDELL J. ASHTON.

¹ The UK publication for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints from 1840 until 1970.



That last statistic for attendance at the Welsh conference in February 1935 can be put into perspective by the Statistical Report of the British Mission for December 1933, which gave the number of Church members in the whole of the Welsh District as only 255.

Thousands of nineteenth-century converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints had left Wales for 'Zion' in the American West, wiping out many of the early branches, which were often small to begin with. Many Welsh branches were not revived until after the Second World War, but Pontypool was an area where Church membership had largely persisted.

The local congregation now meets in a purpose-built chapel on the Highway in Croesyceiliog (Cwmbran) with the area headquarters in Cardiff.

Local members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints associated with the Health Fair



Richard Charles Thomas, referred to above as the District President was born near Ross-on-Wye, some 30 miles from Pontypool. His wife Naomi (nee Forward) was born in Cwmavon, just a few miles north of Pontypool.

The *Millennial Star* of September 12th 1935 gave details of Brother Thomas' introduction to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, through his wife's family.

In the little village of Varteg in the Welsh hills lives a man who has found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ the stabilizing influence to be his comfort and guide.... With a faith that has grown constantly with activity and sacrifice through the years, President Richard C. Thomas of the Welsh district inspires his fellow brethren and sisters with a courage and a hope in the future. It is born of a testimony of the Gospel [of Jesus Christ], with the accompanying assurance of God's goodness to those who live its precepts.

The article goes on to describe how Richard Thomas moved to Garndiffaith, north of Pontypool, as a 15-year old and found work as a grocer's assistant, but changed to being a coal-miner, as the hours were shorter and the pay much better. It continues:

While labouring in the grocer's shop he met Naomi Forward, and in August of 1909 they were married and moved to Severn View Place, Varteg. Her grandmother and uncle were Latter-day Saints and the young couple frequently came in contact with the Elders [missionaries] and the teachings of the Church at the home of saints [members] nearby. Elder Thomas L. Biggs, also a relative of Sister Thomas, interested his cousin in the Gospel message, and took Richard, then but 21 years of age, with him to surrounding localities to hold cottage meetings. In 1909 Brother Thomas's wife asked for his permission to apply for baptism, but he told her to wait to see what his own decision might be concerning the new message.

Meanwhile Elder George F. Price came to Wales as a missionary, and a close friendship was formed between him and Richard Thomas. In 1910 Brother Thomas and his wife were baptized into the Church.

In 1911 Richard Thomas became the president of the Pontypool branch of the Church, then meeting in the Varteg.

Thomas Biggs (pictured right) was an uncle to Naomi. His parents and grandparents had been baptised into the LDS Church in 1866. In 1877 his grandparents and three of his uncles emigrated, leaving behind his parents and siblings in Wales. The local branch became more depleted over time and his family more isolated. Travelling missionary Elders visited the family and held meetings with the few local members. Thomas himself would not formally become a member of the Church (through baptism) until missionaries came to the area and a branch was re-instated in 1905.



The *Star* went on to describe Richard Thomas as:

...always ready at the call of service, whether it means a fifty-mile ride by bicycle to fulfill an appointment on Sunday circuit, a walk of ten miles to hold a cottage meeting, or an assignment to arrange or advertise a public function in his branch. For 23 years, with not more than one or two exceptions each year, he has walked over the hills to a little canal-side cottage one Sunday each month to hold a meeting in the humble home of Brother and Sister Charles Jones, both now past the four score mark. President Thomas has stood with the missionaries in many an open-air meeting, facing aroused crowds who hurled missiles and slander at the expounders of truth.

The *Star* also acknowledged his wife's part: *[She] has been the kind of wife and mother that makes men great; her encouragement and loyal assistance has made possible the service which Brother Thomas has rendered in the cause of truth.*

Richard and Naomi Thomas emigrated to Utah in 1947, to join their five living children who had already left Wales. Naomi Thomas' Forward family relatives are still represented among Welsh Latter Day Saint congregations to this day.



The usual meeting place for the Pontypool branch was the Memorial or Band Hall, Varteg, to the north of Pontypool, close to where the Thomas family lived. The congregation was therefore sometimes referred to as the Varteg branch

The Word of Wisdom was particularly dear to Richard Thomas' heart, as the following item shows. It is taken from his record on www.familysearch.org (see below for transcript).

Richard C. Thomas
When working as coal miner, in South Wales England, I joined the church and had given up smoking tobacco still suffered with asthma and was advised to use a mixture much like to tobacco, and you had to use a pipe, to make it ease your breathing, as I was going to work one night voice said to me you just as well use tobacco I throwed the pipe and the contents of the Package away, and never used any of it to this day and I have never been troubled with asthma since, and my father had it and I have two Brothers who are martyrs to it who are ten and twelve years younger than my self.

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Other members of the Pontypool branch referred to in the *Millennial Star* include:

Haydn Forward, his wife Hilda (nee Roberts) and their children.
The *Millennial Star* reported their wedding:

FORWARD-ROBERTS—On Saturday, June 4th, at Talywain Church, Pontypool, Monmouth, Branch President Haydn Forward and Sister Hilda Roberts of Varteg Branch were married. A reception for the couple was held at the Memorial Hall, Varteg, where District President Richard C. Thomas spoke on "The Marriage Covenant" and gave the couple a blessing. Brother Wilfred A. Thomas was best man



Hayden was a nephew to Naomi Forward Thomas, but Hilda's parents and siblings were also members of the branch.

The family is pictured here in about 1925: Christopher W. Roberts, Cecelia Ann (nee Rogers), and children Cecelia, Irene, Christopher, Hilda, and Harold.



Christopher and Cecelia would emigrate to Canada in 1947.

Other branch members referred to in the *Star* include

- Ivy Parry Forward, a sister-in-law to Naomi Thomas
- Elise Mace, who with Elizabeth Cornwall provided musical items for the Health Fair
- Elsie Vale who accompanied musical items and played a piano solo at the Welsh District conference in 1937
- Gladys Lewis.

Sadly the *Star* also reported a funeral among the members of the branch:

FORWARD – Sister Alice May Forward, of Varteg Branch, died on Thursday, October 6th, at the Cefn Mabley sanatorium. Short services were held in the home on Monday, October 10th, conducted by Elder Ranald H. Hebdon. Speakers were Elders Hebdon and Ivan V. Miller, and

a vocal duet was rendered by Brother and Sister Albert Perry of Cardiff. Elder Hebdon dedicated the grave.



Alice May is pictured here with her parents and three of her siblings – Hayden, Ivy and Glyn – in the 1930s.

Three missionaries were referred to in the *Star* in connection with the Health Fair:

Henry R. Pearson, who was born in Utah and served as a missionary in the British Isles from 1933 to 1936. On his return to the USA, he completed his education in Business Management and would serve for 35 years as Executive Director of the *Utah Foundation*, a non-governmental, not-for-profit research agency studying the financial aspects of State and local government operations. A *Deseret News* article in 1976 described him as *'soft spoken with a ready smile'* and *'an almost fanatical penchant for compiling statistics accurately and letting them speak for themselves.'*



Horace L. Hulme was born in Idaho (USA). He also served as a missionary in Britain from 1933 to 1936.

He is listed as Clerk to the Conference held in Merthyr Tydfil in 1934, and as the organizer of an event for the *Primary* (the children's organisation) in the Merthyr Tydfil branch. This was an era when missionaries were generally fully involved as members of local units, rather than focusing on gaining new converts. As many of them came from Utah and Idaho and multi-generational Latter

Day Saint families, their extensive experience of Church organization and activities was invaluable to the small branches and new converts in Britain.

Walter J. Eldredge also served in Britain between 1933 and 1936. He was born in Salt Lake City, Utah.





Joseph J. Cannon was President of the British Mission at the time of the Health Fair. Where most of the missionaries were young men, it was more typical for Mission Presidents to be older and more experienced. Joseph Cannon came to Britain with his wife and three of his sons.

The *Millennial Star* of October 3rd 1935 reported one of the likely effects of the Health Exhibition, in terms of increased local interest in the Church:

The New Royal Theatre was in the centre of Pontypool on Osborne Road. It has since been demolished.

A week later the *Star* would report:

The Health Fair had evidently served its purpose in introducing a healthier lifestyle to local residents. But it had also advertised the presence of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the area, and the commitment of local members.

APPROXIMATELY 700 persons, more than 600 of whom were non-members, crowded New Royal theatre, Pontypool for the evening session of Welsh district conference, Sunday, September 22. Some 2,500 people visited the Health Exhibit sponsored by the Mission in the Town hall during the previous three days (*Star* September 26.)

Felicitations

NEARLY 25 letters of congratulation have been received from leading Monmouthshire citizens by Elders Henry R. Pearson, Horace L. Hulme and Walter J. Eldredge, entrepreneurs of the recent Health Exhibition conducted by the Mission in Pontypool.

Among the authors of compliments are Mr. Ivor P. Jones, former chairman of district council, town councillor and member of the town Health and Housing committee; Mr. B. Morgan, clerk of urban district council; Mr. Thomas Davies, president of Monmouthshire Grocers' association, and numerous business proprietors. Councillor Jones wrote: "It gives me great pleasure to pay tribute to the excellent health exhibition held at the Town hall, Pontypool, September 19-21. It was fully appreciated by the people of this town. If the advice of the lectures is followed, this town will have a clean 'Bill of Health.'"

Sources:

<https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk>

Coflein – The online catalogue of archaeology, buildings, industrial and maritime heritage in Wales, at: www.coflein.gov.uk

www.familysearch.org

The *Millennial Star* online at: www.archive.org

The *Church History Biographical Database*, online at:
<https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/chd/?lang=eng>