

Athanaeum, Llanelli, Carmarthenshire: LDS Church Conference Venue in 1868



Photograph: Jill Morgan

Prominently sited on the corner of Church Street and Vaughan Street, the Llanelli library is a Grade II listed building in Italian palazzo style - squared brown rubble stone with extensive Bath stone dressings and slate hipped roofs behind balustraded parapets. It was converted to a library in 1926.

On Sunday 4th October 1868, the Carmarthenshire conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [the 'Mormon' or LDS church] was held in this building. A letter from missionary Elder Elias Morris, printed in the *Millennial Star*¹ reported that

'much valuable instruction and counsel were given during the day, and an excellent spirit prevailed.'

The South Wales Press reported that the morning meeting was *'well attended'* and that in the afternoon the hall was *'densely crowded.'* There was also an evening meeting which began at 6pm. Elder Morris stated that *'the afternoon and evening meetings were attended by several strangers [non-members] and the spirit of inquiry seems to be increasing in the neighbourhood.'*

¹ Weekly UK-based publication of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints from 1840 to 1970.

This is significant because it shows that the LDS church was still vibrant and active at this point in time and in this area. Previous documentation of the history of the LDS church in South Wales has focused very much on the first two decades of enormous missionary success and high rates of emigration from the area, with a sense that there was little to report thereafter. This conference, reported in the press, suggests that the situation was quite otherwise. While we have no precise attendance figures, the Llanelli branch would have been holding their weekly meetings in the purpose-built chapel in Island Place, Llanelli (dedicated in 1849 and less than half a mile away from the Athanaeum), but evidently attendance at this conference was expected to exceed the capacity of that building.

In 1850 Parliament passed the Public Libraries Act that allowed parishes to levy a rate of a penny in the pound to provide a library building. In 1854 plans were submitted for a new building on Church Street, Llanelli, with funds to be raised by public subscription to build a literary and scientific institution, which became known as the '*Athenaeum*'.

The original building was completed in 1857 by a James Wilson of Bath. The Nevill Memorial Hall – entrance pictured here – was named for local industrialist R.J. Nevill and was added in 1864 in matching style but with a campanile tower. Interior alterations during the 1926 modernisation included a new staircase to the rear of the entrance hall, and an additional section was added to the west side of the building in 1972.



The Comprehensive Gazetteer of England & Wales, 1894-5 describes the Athenaeum as being

'partly occupied by the Mechanics' Institute, which has an extensive library, a reading-room, a geological museum, and a school of art, and partly by the Chamber of Commerce; there are also class-rooms and rooms for meetings, &c.'

In 1868 when the Carmarthenshire conference was held in the *Athanaeum*, it would have been recognisable as the building in the photograph below.



Photograph: source unknown

As the photograph shows, before the 1926 modernisation there was a Roman Doric portico around the ground floor main entrance. The upper storey windows on this side of the building are those of what is now called the *Athanaeum Hall* – a large meeting room, most probably the one used for the 1868 conference.

Although not the seat of county government, Llanelli was the largest town in Carmarthenshire at the time, and already established as the largest industrial centre in southwest Wales by the mid-19th century. It is sometimes referred to as *Tin-opolis*, indicating the primary focus of the local heavy industry, as neighbouring Swansea was known as *Copperopolis*. Llanelli was also the town with the highest LDS church membership in southwest Wales at the time.



Elias Morris (1825-1898)

A native of Llanfair-Talhaearn in North Wales, Elias Morris was a stone-mason by trade and moved around North Wales and as far as Liverpool with his work. While in Liverpool he heard John Parry, a recent local convert to the LDS Church, preaching, and asked to be baptized. This occurred in the sea by Parlwr-du (Point of Ayr) lighthouse in 1849. Elias Morris emigrated to Utah

Territory in 1852 age 27. He married Mary Parry – daughter of the John Parry who had baptized him, and they settled first in Provo, south of Salt Lake City, and then in Cedar City in southern Utah.

Elias Morris continued to work as a stone mason in Utah Territory and was then called to return to Wales as a missionary in 1865. He served for 4 years, during

which time he was President of the Welsh District of the LDS Church. He returned to America with 365 converts, sailing from Liverpool to New York in 1869 and from there travelled on the newly built trans-continental railway all the way to Salt Lake City. His journal can be found on the welshmormon website (see below).

John S. Lewis (1835-1893)

John Saunders Lewis was a native of Bedwellty, Monmouthshire who had converted to the LDS church and emigrated in 1856, settling in Salt Lake City, Utah. He was present at the Carmarthenshire Conference meeting in 1868, where he testified that '*President Brigham Young was the greatest benefactor of man [then] living on the earth, and bore testimony to the divine authority of Brigham Young.*



Evidently a man of musical talent, he sang a solo at the Monmouthshire conference later in 1868, and on his return to Utah in his spare time conducted choirs and glee clubs and composed many hymn tunes and anthems.

Sources for this historical information:

- Hugh Jones, former member and branch president of Llanelli, who has researched the history of the LDS church in the area, and taken a particular interest in the Island Place chapel, as the first purpose-built LDS chapel outside of the continental United States.
- *Llanelly Community Heritage* website: <https://www.llanellich.org.uk/>
- The *Millennial Star* of October 1868 available online at: <https://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/digital/collection/MStar/id/12708/rec/30>
- *Ar Drywydd Y Mormoniaid [On the Trail of the Mormons]* by Geraint Bowen. Especially Chapter 9: *The Missionaries from Utah 1865-77*
- <http://welshmormon.byu.edu> is a repository for information relating to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Wales, particularly in the 19th century. In the *Immigrants* database, Elias Morris is listed and his journal can be found under the *Resources* tab of his record there.