

# Baptisms by immersion on Swansea beach

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Swansea beach is popular year round for dog-walking and in the Summer for sun- or sea-bathing. It's also become the focus of community events such as the annual Wales Air Show as it provides such a large, open space for viewing the aerial displays. A stretch of sandy coastline approximately 5 miles long, Swansea beach curves around the bay from the river Tawe and docks on the east to the Mumbles Head on the west. It lies on the north side of the Bristol Channel with its second longest tidal range in the world, so it can feel as if the tide is 'out' for the majority of the time. And as anyone who has tried it will know, a walk to the water's edge at low tide can be a long and tedious process, navigating sandbanks and stretches of sinking mud.



Photograph: Swansea beach looking southwest towards Mumbles Head. Jill Morgan

But in the nineteenth century, Swansea beach was the site of baptisms for converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints – often referred to as *Mormons* or *Latter Day Saints*. And these baptisms took place in the sea because the LDS church practices

baptism by immersion. The river Tawe was sometimes used for baptisms, but it was so polluted by local heavy industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that it could have been a pretty hazardous alternative.



Photograph: Swansea beach looking east towards the river and docks. Jill Morgan.

Evidence for the performance of these baptisms comes from two main sources: the personal journals of individuals who spent time in Swansea while serving as missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints; and the *Millennial Star*, a UK publication for the church from 1840 to 1970.

David John [1833-1908] was a native of Little Newcastle, Pembrokeshire, who first encountered the Church of Jesus Christ as a teenager, but who took some years to devote himself fully to the faith because of considerable opposition from his family. He emigrated to America in 1861 but returned in 1871 as a missionary, and spent some time in Swansea. He noted in his journal for 10<sup>th</sup> February 1872:



*Spent the day in visiting the Saints [members of the church]. I baptized Albert Unger in the sea and confirmed him on board of a ship of which he had the charge, got quite wet in the rain.*

George Albert Unger [1823-1874] was born in Copenhagen, but can be seen on the 1871 census on a ship in the port of Swansea. He had in fact married Gower girl Sarah Morgan [1824-1906] in 1845, and they can be seen with three of their children on the 1861 census for Swansea, with Albert listed as a Mariner.

This obituary from a Utah newspaper – reprinted in the *Millennial Star* – provides some further detail of his life. We know however that Sarah was baptised into the LDS church before her husband, as David John refers to her in his journal entry for 5<sup>th</sup> July 1871:

*Spent the morning visiting the saints, took dinner with Sister "Unger".*

He would not have referred to her as ‘Sister’ Unger if she had not been a member of the church. Two of their daughters are also to be found on the records of the local Swansea congregation, being blessed as young children – baptisms not being performed on anyone younger than age eight.

UNGER.—In Spanish Fork, Utah, Nov. 1st, 1874, of Consumption, Albert Unger, in his fifty-second year.

Bro. Unger was born in Copenhagen and emigrated early in life to Swansea, Wales, where he obeyed the Gospel; was a member of the church 27 years, and was for some time president of the Swansea branch. He emigrated to Utah with the last company of Saints in 1873. He leaves a wife, five children, and a large circle of friends in Wales and Utah to mourn his loss. He lived and died a faithful Latter-day Saint.—CON.

Farewell dear brother, tho' thy friends  
Desired thy longer stay,  
The Lord, whose wisdom cannot fall  
Has called the hence away.  
And we must bow to the decree  
That bade thy spirit go  
Beyond our sight to other scenes  
An untried state to know.

Peaceful thy exit from the world,  
Thy faith was clear and bright,  
And heavenly glories met thy view  
As earth was lost to night.  
And tho' thy wife and children dear  
Had to be left behind,  
Thou knew that Israel's God would be  
Unchanging, wise and kind.

—*Millennial Star* please copy. H. C.

Albert and Sarah Unger emigrated in 1873 with three of their children. They settled - as many other Welsh converts did – in Spanish Fork, Utah Territory.



John Thomas [1837-1914] was born in Llanelli, Carmarthenshire, and converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in 1848. He also emigrated and returned as a missionary, 1886-1889, and left a very detailed and interesting journal.

His entry for 24<sup>th</sup> November 1887 reads:

*24th Got up late & got breakfast & am thinking to go & know Something about Baptise [Baptizing] the young Ladys. Where to find [find] Water Except in the Tide.... I went up to Bro Parrs to try & find if we Could find any Water to be able to Baptise thoes young Ladys. .. but we Could not find a Convenient place to Baptize So we postponed untill Next Wednesday in the Sea.*

Then on the 30<sup>th</sup> November he recorded:

*... after Supper two young Ladys Came to be Baptized ... Names Mary Alice Rees. & Margaret Ann Rees. two Nice young Girls One 15 years past. the Other 12 years past. I Baptized them In the Cloud & in the Sea... I walked Home wet. but I dont think I will Catch Cold. their was a Meeting at Swansea but we were to [too] late for it. as we had to Attend to the Baptism*

John Thomas later recorded in his journal for 6<sup>th</sup> December 1887:

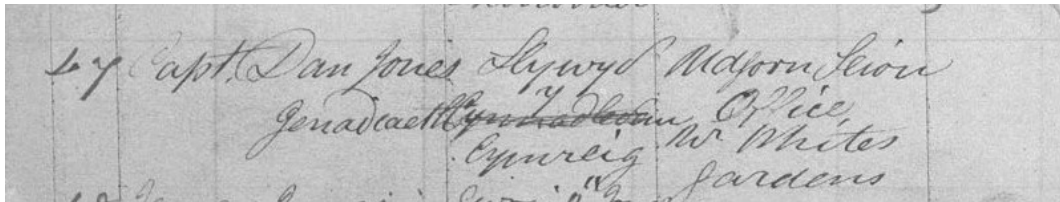
*In the Evening I Changed & in Company with Lorenzo went to Bro Daviess & we three went to the Sea Shore & waited for the tide to Come up Enough. & about 1/2 past Ten I Baptised Thomas Davies. after that we went Home to 4 Grove Place in My wet Clothes.& got Changed went to bed at Prest Williams.4 Grove Place Swansea.*

This entry shows the difficulty of timing baptisms to match the tide. Also, although the walk from the beach to Grove Place in the centre of Swansea would only have taken 10-15 minutes, it would have been a chilly walk in wet clothes that late on a December night!

Dan Jones was a native of North Wales who converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints while captain of a Mississippi river boat, and who returned twice to Wales as a missionary, experiencing phenomenal success in terms of the number of converts his efforts attracted. He's listed on the Swansea branch records for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in 1854 as president of the Welsh Mission, with his address given as the *Udgorn Seion* office. *Udgorn Seion* was a Welsh-language publication which Dan Jones had established. The majority of the inhabitants 19<sup>th</sup>



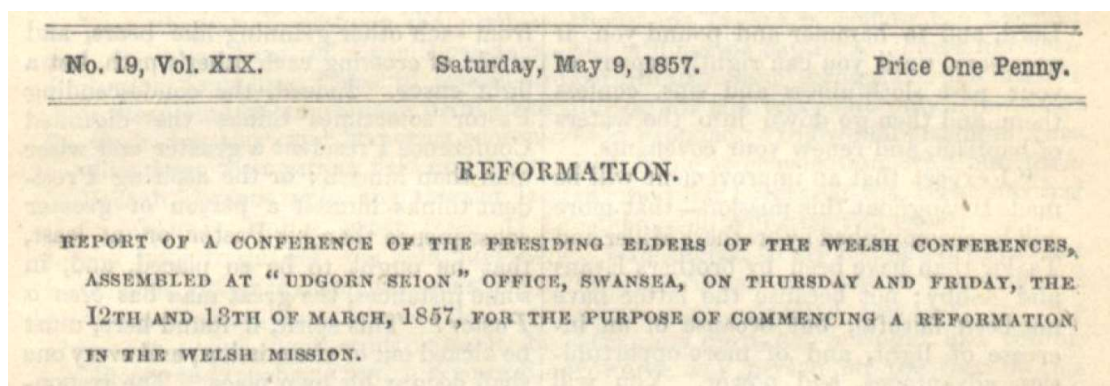
century Wales would have spoken only Welsh. Much of Dan Jones' success as a missionary is credited to his enormous output of LDS literature in Welsh – some in translation, much of it original – taking the gospel to the people of Wales in their own tongue.



Dan Jones baptized a husband and wife on Swansea beach in March 1855 before a large crowd. Later, in the *Saints Hall* in nearby Orange Street, they were confirmed as members of the church and he preached so forcefully that the hall was crowded for many weeks afterwards.



In 1857 a conference was convened in Swansea under the leadership of Ezra T. Benson, one of the leaders of the church from America, *'for the purpose of commencing a reformation in the Welsh Mission.'* It was felt that a certain apathy had entered into the work of the missionaries, and that there was a need for a renewed commitment. The conference was reported in the *Millennial Star*.

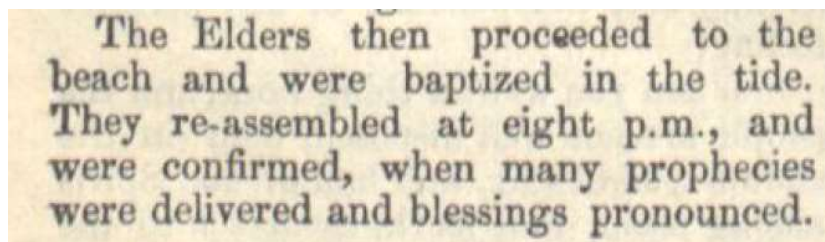


Benson was determined to

*'stir up the people to a sense and to the accomplishment of their duties – to awaken, arouse, stir, and shake them, and, if necessary, to kick and thump, hammer and pound them.'*

A letter was read from president of the church, Brigham Young, about the reformation, and Elder Benson expressed the hope that they would be *'like pliable clay, that they may be moulded into vessels of honour.'*

After the two meetings held on Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> March, the *Millennial Star* reported that:



The Elders then proceeded to the beach and were baptized in the tide. They re-assembled at eight p.m., and were confirmed, when many prophecies were delivered and blessings pronounced.

Although all of the participants at the conference had already been baptized, this second baptism was undertaken as a sign of their re-commitment. Speaking at the meeting held the following day Elder Benson remarked:

*You have now covenanted again, and have henceforth to live, not by a part of your religion, but by every word which shall come from the mouth of God. It is a great covenant and the Lord will hold you to it.... If you will do all you have covenanted, you shall be filled and clothed with [the Spirit] and nothing shall hinder you.*

#### **Sources:**

The journal of David John. Available online at:  
[http://welshmormon.byu.edu/Resource\\_Info.aspx?id=2427](http://welshmormon.byu.edu/Resource_Info.aspx?id=2427)

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The *Millennial Star*. Online at:  
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