

Baptisms by immersion in the River Taff near Merthyr Tydfil  
Freda Entwistle

Cefn Coed viaduct is the third largest viaduct in Wales. It was built in 1866 to carry the Brecon and Merthyr Railway across the river Taff at Pontycapel at a cost of £25,000. It consists of 15 arches, each one almost 40 feet across, making a total length of 257 yards and with a maximum height of 115 feet. The original contractors, Messrs Savel and Ward, experienced a strike of their stonemasons, leaving the brickwork in each arch to be completed by local bricklayers.



Once a thriving, busy means of transportation between industrial MerthyrTydfil and the rural town of Brecon, the Cefn Coed Viaduct on the outskirts of Merthyr Tydfil is no longer used and the railway track has long since been removed.

The last train passed over the viaduct in 1964. Today, the viaduct is a Grade 2 listed building - built on a curve, this is the viaduct's main point of architectural interest - and is a footpath for the much loved and used Taff Trail.

However, the river Taff below the viaduct continues to flow, a calm, silvery glimmer in summer time, on its way down to the sea, and in Autumn when heavy Welsh rains fall it becomes an expanding, rapidly rising, torrential rush of water, impatient for its release into the seas of the Welsh coast.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> January 1932, with snow on the ground, five new converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints were baptised in this fast flowing, icy river. With no church building or font, early Latter Day Saints ['Mormons'] were often baptised in ponds, rivers, or in the sea in coastal areas – anywhere where the water was deep enough for complete immersion. The five new converts were:

Walter Ernest Pulman, age 44 years

Florence Ellen Pulman, his daughter, age 21 years

Thomas Hubert Pulman, his son, age 12 years



Tommy Price, a cousin, age 25 years, and William Henry Davies, age 30 years.

All five became members of the Merthyr Tydfil Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

[L-R] Hubert Pulman, Florence E. Pulman Jones and Tommy Price, who were all baptised in the Taff 10<sup>th</sup> January 1932, pictured here in 1988.



Below the arches the river Taff still holds its natural 'baptism' pool, though in Summer not very deep - an ideal spot for a Winter baptism in January! The pool like the railway track, is also 'redundant' since a font is now provided for baptisms in the nearby Merthyr Tydfil LDS Chapel. The little cottage which once stood at the side of the river is also demolished or washed away. The occupants kindly offered hospitable shelter and warmth for newly-baptised members; it was also used for confirmations - laying hands on the new convert's head to confirm membership and confer the Gift of the Holy Ghost.

During the 1930s, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints appears to have gone through a 'revival period' in Merthyr Tydfil. Many who joined the Church between 1840 and the 1860s emigrated to the USA to join the Saints<sup>1</sup> in Zion. A handful of members continued on into the early 1900s but gradually the Merthyr Tydfil branch was closed. However, through the missionary efforts of Elder Evan Arthur and others a new era began with at least 23 baptisms in 1932. Elder Arthur was born in Blaenavon, Monmouthshire, just a few miles from Merthyr Tydfil. He emigrated to Salt Lake City then returned three times on a mission for the Church to his beloved Wales.

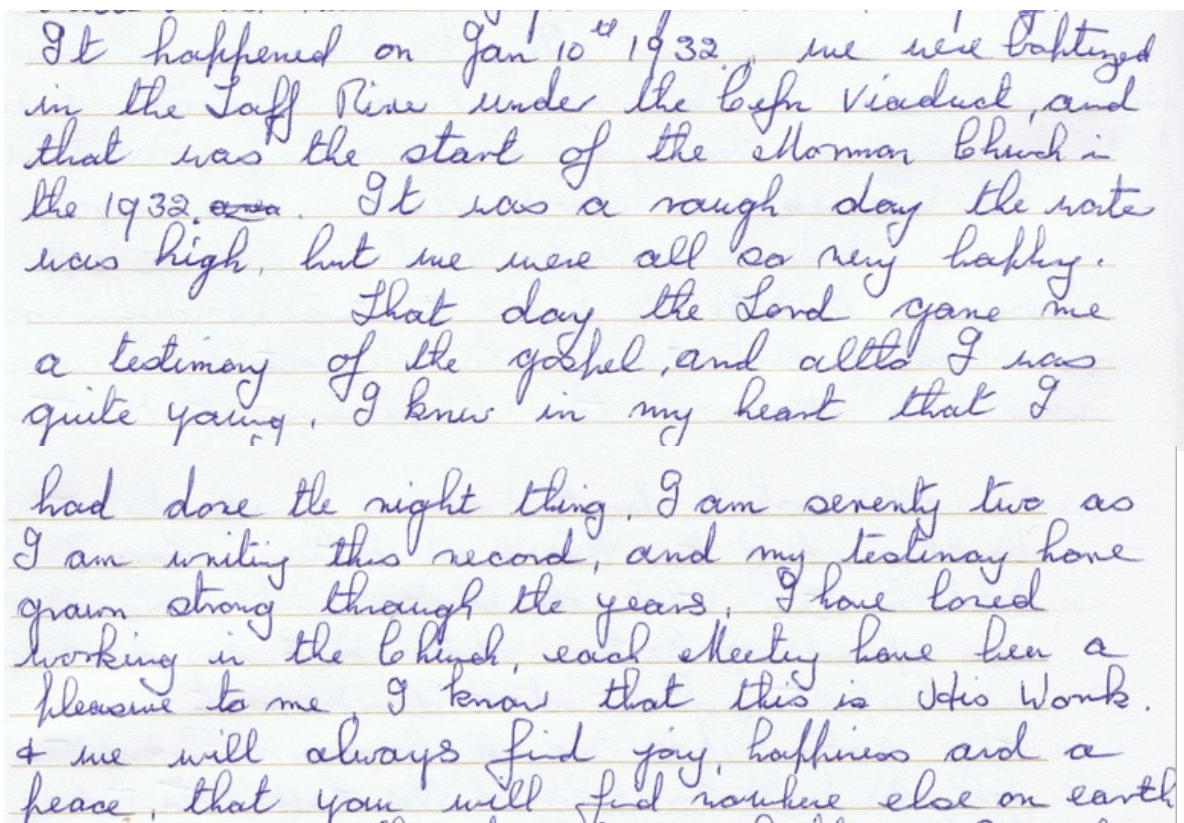
The Merthyr Tydfil area now has two Latter Day Saint congregations with an average weekly attendance of 300 people. Many of the families in these congregations are direct descendants of those who were baptised in 1932. Whilst remembering their ancestors with resolute fondness they are ever grateful for the heritage they were given by their stalwart, pioneer families.

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<sup>1</sup> a term used for members of the LDS church



Florence Pulman recorded her memories of that day in her journal in 1980:



It happened on Jan 10<sup>th</sup> 1932, we were baptized in the Taff River under the Llyn Viaduct, and that was the start of the Mormon Church in the 1932 ~~area~~. It was a rough day the water was high, but we were all so very happy. That day the Lord gave me a testimony of the gospel, and altho I was quite young, I knew in my heart that I had done the right thing. I am seventy two as I am writing this record, and my testimony have grown strong through the years. I have loved working in the Church, each meeting have been a pleasure to me. I know that this is His Work. & we will always find joy, happiness and a peace, that you will find nowhere else on earth.

And the following is an excerpt from an Oral History interview with Florence Pulman Jones in 1988:

*Well, from that time on, my dad and I became really interested in the gospel, and we started reading and studying a little bit with Elder Arthur. We continued our meeting for quite a while. And then my father said to me, "I think I'm going to be baptised." I said, "And I am too, Dad."*

*And so with two other brethren, we all went up to the Taff River, and I got baptised in the river. I came home that day, and my grandfather put his hand on my shoulder and said to me, "Well, Florence, that's the finest day's work you've ever done." And now fifty years, or sixty years, later, I can assure you it's the best day's work I've ever done in my life, because the gospel has been so wonderful to me.*

*Well, we went home then that day, and I was confirmed a member of the Church, Dad and I, and these two other brethren, and from there on, we started to hold meetings in our home, first, because we had no meeting house. I was thrilled with the Church, and I knew when I came out of the waters of baptism that this was the Church of Jesus Christ. All the years since, that testimony has strengthened, and I know without a shadow of a doubt that this is His work, and the restoration of the gospel. I've come to know that, and it's been wonderful."*

From the Journal of Thomas Hubert Pulman (1988) we read:

*10 January 1932 was the first baptism under the Cefn Coed viaduct – Walter Ernest Pulman, Thomas Price, Florence Ellen, and Thomas Hubert Pulman. Brother Olsen and Brother Miller were missionaries at (the) time(s).*

*Evan Arthur served three missions in Merthyr Tydfil. Attracted others like Brother William Richards and William Jones in the ILP hall High Street Merthyr Tydfil – the upstairs rooms of WH Smith. Elder Arthur was Branch President.*

*The church moved to the Trevethick hall after a few years. My father then found a piece of ground on the Penyard Hill. In about 1935 we started building the hall. Kitchen, cloakroom and hall – two outside toilets. We stayed there until about 1963. The building cost £100. My father was one of the first Branch Presidents; I was a clerk at 13 years of age.*

*Lunch times on a Sunday we would often have visitors from other Branches to our homes. The Perry's from Cardiff, the Richards and Thomas's from Pontypool and so on.*

From the Oral History interview of Tommy Price in 1987:

*“When I was nineteen, a missionary by the name of Elder Evan Arthur came. He had oftentimes called before to our home. He had been avoided of any contact by my mother because of stories which had been told regarding our great-grandfather, Moses Jones. He had left the family, left his wife with six children, three boys and three girls, and went up to Salt Lake. At this particular time in a moment of wariness, she spoke to him. After a while he asked her if he could hold a Book of Mormon class in our home. That's the first time ever that I had come in contact with the Mormon Church.*

*“He had two missionary companions with him, and I believe the names of them were Cleo Whiting and Vance Ellsworth. I know Vance Ellsworth was from Arizona, but I can't be sure where Elder Whiting was from. [Then] Two missionaries came in again by the name of Elder Marion J. Olsen, now of California, used to be of Provo, and Elder Frank R. Miller. Who used to live in Salt Lake, now living in California.*

*“Under such expert teachers, to be honest even before I read the first chapter, I knew without a doubt that what I was reading was a true history. I couldn't get it out of my mind that it was true.*

*“ They started the Book of Mormon class in about November, and on January 10th I decided to get baptised. I was the only one in our family at that time to accept. I, with Florence Pulman Jones, Walter Pulman, and Hubert Pulman, was taken up to the Viaduct Cefn on a cold snowy morning, and we were baptised.*

During 1931 and 1932, these two missionaries – Elder Evan Arthur and Elder Marion J. Olson - and others - preached the gospel to the families



Elder Marion J. Olson - Missionary 1932

of Jennet and Walter E. Pulman and Ellen and Walter Price. Jennet and Ellen were first cousins, both being grandchildren of Moses Jones who emigrated to Salt Lake City in 1869.

The *Millennial Star*<sup>2</sup> of February 11<sup>th</sup> 1932 reported the baptisms:

*Five persons were baptised by Elders Evan Arthur and Leon Whiting at a baptismal service held near Merthyr Tydfil, Glam., Sunday, January 10<sup>th</sup>, [1932]. They were confirmed members of the Church the same day by local Elder Edward M. Rowe, President Clarence H. Taylor, and Elders Evan*

*Arthur, Marion J. Olsen and Elman T. Woodfield.*



Elder Evan Arthur

A local newspaper, the *Merthyr Express* of January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1932 also reported the baptisms:

*CEFN COED*

*BAPTISMS IN THE RIVER TAFF*

*The unusual scene of baptisms by immersion was publicly witnessed in a storm of rain on Sunday week at Cwmcapel. The spot at which the ceremony took place was a corner pool of the flooded Taf Fawr under the Railway Viaduct. The five converts attended in white robes which they had put on in a neighbouring cottage. They were dipped by the Merthyr Mormon elders, Mr Evan Arthur, Mr Whiting and Mr Houlsen (all of Utah), and the service was carried through without mishap. A delegation of the church present from Cardiff included Mr Taylor (president of the S.W. district), Prof. Rowe, of Utah (who is studying at the South Wales University College), and Elder Woodfield. A short time ago a committee was held at Merthyr, at which the claims of the Mormon Church were expounded. It is understood that more of these baptisms are to take place.*

Just a month later, the *Millennial Star* again reported:

*Onlookers numbering over two hundred and fifty were deeply impressed by a baptismal service held in the waters of the River Taff [probably 10 March 1932]. Nine baptisms were performed by Elders Marion J. Olsen and Clarence R. Ellsworth. At a meeting held immediately after, the new members were confirmed by President Clarence H. Taylor and Elders Evan Arthur, Marion J.*

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<sup>2</sup> A UK-based publication of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints from 1840 to 1970.



*Olsen, Donald K. Ipson, Clarence R. Ellsworth, Frank R. Miller, and Vern R. Butcher.*  
*[Millennial Star No.13, Mar 31, 1932]*

Research by descendants shows six of the converts baptised on 10 March 1932 were:

- Jennet Pulman wife of Walter Earnest Pulman who was baptised 10 January 1932.
- George Martin Pulman, son of Jennet and Walter.
- Walter George Price and David Mafeking Price, siblings of Tommy Price, who was baptised 10 January 1932.
- Kate Eileen Mahoney Jones and Thomas Glyndwr Jones, who at the time of baptism rented rooms with the Pulman family.

In June of that year Gwladys Price, sister to Tommy Price, was also baptised in the Taff by Elder Frank R. Miller. Their mother Ellen was baptised in the July along with two other converts. Another four converts were baptised there in the September, and were confirmed in the nearby cottage.

Baptisms continued to be held in the pool under the Cefn Viaduct after this date though other venues were also used. A baptism at Cefn Coed is also recorded in the *Millennial Star* during 1937.

Church Historians Visit Historic Site of Early Baptisms in River Taff at Cefn Coed



Elders Steven E Snow, Church Historian, Richard E Turley Jr., Assistant Church Historian, Arnold Jones, CH Adviser UK&I, Kent E Richards, Area Presidency and Elder Turley, full time missionary - 04 May 2013

In May 2013 Steven E. Snow, LDS Church Historian, accompanied by his wife with Richard E. Turley, Assistant Church Historian, Kent F. Richards, UK Area Presidency, and Sister Richards, Elder George R. Donaldson, UK Area Seventy and Sister C. Donaldson, and Elder and Sister Turley, full time missionaries, visited this and several other local historic sites.

There were various meetings in their busy schedule including a Sunday evening fireside where Elder Snow left this message with the local members of the LDS church:

*British converts were a great strength to the Church in difficult times – they had faith. For our faith to increase we must continue to take action to exercise that faith. Attributes rise to the surface as we exercise faith.*

*Just like our predecessors, we all have rocky ridges, the road is steep, it is strewn with boulders. The gospel of Jesus Christ helps us overcome these challenges. I am grateful for those who left this country those many years ago; they were examples. They were not perfect, they were just like us; God works with imperfect people.*

*I read of their lives and it gives me great hope that he will work miracles through us. I testify in the name of the Saviour, He did live, He did walk the earth, He formed an organisation, and He set apostles aside and gave them special callings. This organisation has been restored in its fullness. His gift of the atonement made it so special. The Saviour covers our depression and our disappointments as well as our sins. The atonement is the greatest gift we have received. Doing hard things makes us stronger and makes us happy. Imperfect people can work miracles. I ask the Lord's choicest blessings upon you.*

In August 2014, a film production team for the Mormon Pioneer National Heritage Area, based in Utah, also visited various historic sites in Wales, collecting footage for a documentary to be shown as part of a series of 'Discovery Road,' to be shown in America in 2014/15. The production team was headed by Monte Bona, assisted by Ginny Oliver and James Nelson. The series told the stories of Welsh, and English, families who left their homeland to cross the plains on the Mormon Trail to the Utah Territory.

River Taff Under Cefn Viaduct Historic LDS Baptism Site of 1932



Film producer, Monte Bona, (centre) heads filming team for 'Discovery Road,' documentary series for the Mormon Pioneer Heritage Area, based in Utah, USA

In the documentary, descendants of the pioneers who remained in Wales tell the story of what happened after their ancestors left on their journey to Zion. Four of those descendants were baptised in the River Taff, under the Cefn Viaduct, on the 10th January 1932: Walter E. Pulman, Florence E. Pulman, Thomas Hubert Pulman and Tommy Price. Their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren continue to treasure this heritage of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

Aerial View of Cefn Coed showing Viaduct

