

Llanddowror to Salt Lake City; The Isaac Pioneers

During the uprising in west Wales in the early decades of the 19th century, the Toll Gate in the village of Trevaughan [Trefechan], in Cyffig parish, across the river Taf south of Whitland received particular attention from Rebecca and her daughters. They demolished the Toll Gate and its replacements, four times between November 1842 and April 1843 !

Rees Isaac [1796-1868], his wife Margaret [née Phillips][1795-1869] and their five sons and one daughter lived right by the Toll Gate in a house called Bridge End. Rees was a Stone Mason as was his eldest son while his second son, nineteen year old Benjamin, was an apprentice learning the same trade. Were they also members of Rebecca's family ?

Their cousin and my wife's great great grand-father, twenty three year old



Thomas Isaac was a farm labourer in nearby Llangan parish and was very likely to have been one of Rebecca's daughters. As tradesmen, the Isaacs of Trevaughan would have been less affected by the Tolls than the lime-carting farmers. But at the same time any disinclination on their part to support the uprising would

have been countered by Rebecca's threats of retribution.

Be that as it may, it is undoubtedly true that oppression of the ordinary people by landowners, magistrates and other ruling cliques in 19th century Wales, not only caused the Rebecca uprising, but also turned people to religion for their hope of a better life. And they went about it with extraordinary vigour: a new chapel opened its doors every eight days; a building programme that lasted for the first half of the 19th century !

The grey boxes provided a platform for “big” preachers to deliver their thundering message which, in fact, brought scant relief for their oppressed flock who were told to accept their lot in this world for the promise of better in the “world to come”. By the second half of the 19th century this religious message began to wear thin with the masses and it helped clear the way for the trade unions to emerge as the best hope of what most people understood as a “better life”.

But in the 1840’s religion held sway. It was a time when Wales was often invaded by Mormon missionaries from the United States of America. The first may have been a seaman, Captain Dan Jones, who had emigrated to the USA in the early years of the century, was converted to Mormonism and came back to Wales as a fiery missionary in 1845. It was in 1848 that Benjamin Isaac [1823-1886] was converted to Mormonism by a missionary at Llanddowror where he was baptised by one Henry Evans on the 10th August 1849.

In 1844 Benjamin had married Phebe [née Davies][1822-1911], born in Trelech parish, and they were recorded in the 1851 census as living in Llanddowror village, about five miles from Trevaughan. Phebe was baptised at Llanddowror by Henry Evans on the 20th August 1849. Benjamin’s younger brother, John Philip Isaac[1834-1895] and Phebe’s sister Mary Davies[1825-] were also converted to the Mormon faith at Llanddowror.

Eight years after his baptism, Benjamin and his brother John Philip and their families left their relatives and friends in Trevaughan and Llanddowror and set out for America. On Monday, 18 February 1856 a company of Mormons numbering four hundred and fifty four left Liverpool on the ship Caravan. They included Benjamin and Phebe and their four children, Phebe’s sister Mary and Benjamin’s brother, John Philip Isaac and his wife Rachel née Williams, born in Trevaughan, Whitland in 1835. Their only child Mary Ann, born in St Clears, died in Liverpool when only a few months old, a few days before they sailed for America.



Benjamin Isaac

It was nearly six weeks later, after a very rough crossing, that they landed in New York. The company settled initially at Pitston Ferry, Pennsylvania while awaiting a call to travel west to Utah where the Mormons were establishing their main center in Salt Lake City.

Benjamin Isaac was chosen to be President of the company. Another daughter was born to Benjamin and Phebe in Pitston Ferry.



John Phillip Isaac

That part of Pennsylvania was a coal mining area and most of the men, including John Philip Isaac, worked in the mines. Benjamin, however found employment as a mason. In a letter dated 29th October 1856 Benjamin informed his parents that his brother John Phillip was earning 7 shillings [35p] a day and he urged his family in Trevaughan to “come here from the prison” !

He tried to entice his father to cross the Atlantic by offering him a job of carrying mortar for himself for which he would pay him 5 shillings [25p] a day. But the money that he and John Philip sent home together with their warning that emigrating meant “bidding farewell to Wales for ever” probably helped their parents and their brothers and sisters decide against up-rooting and joining them in America. It was four years later before the Mormons at Pitston Ferry received the call to “go west”.

On 18 June 1860, two weeks after the birth of Benjamin and Phebe’s first son, Thomas John, they left Pennsylvania having sold much of their possessions to buy oxen and wagons. Three hundred and fifty nine persons formed the wagon train but with only thirty nine wagons many people were forced to walk. The trail went through the plains of Nebraska and can be followed for many miles to this day.

Trail-side cemeteries serve to remind present day visitors of the arduous conditions faced by the pioneers. In fact Benjamin’s wife Phebe carried her infant son Thomas John for three and a half months, only for him to die two weeks before reaching Salt Lake City.

Benjamin and his family settled in a town called Spanish Fork about 20 miles south of Salt Lake City. Benjamin worked as a mason and was expert at decorating walls and ceilings with beautiful designs made with Plaster of Paris. He helped with the construction of the Salt Lake City Temple and the famous Tabernacle as well as many other buildings in the state of Utah. The old meeting house at Spanish Fork, now the Winona Theatre, stands as a monument of his work.

In letters sent to their parents in 1863, Benjamin wrote that he and John Philip earned 15/- shillings [75p] a day as masons and John Philip described how he had, by then, paid for his house and garden and owned two cows, ten heifers, ten sheep and two pigs. "We have everything for our comfort and so has Benjamin".

John Philip went on to commiserate with his brother Thomas on the death of his wife at 35 years of age. He hoped that Thomas would "consider emigrating here because God has chosen that his Saints be in this place of refuge".

Thomas had left Trevaughan for the vale of Neath and the tin works. In previous letters he had been urged by his brothers to join them in Utah but in this letter John Philip advised Thomas to stay put for a while because of the risk of his being conscripted to fight in the Civil War [1861-1865]. Of course if he managed to reach Utah he would be safe because Utah was not, at the time, part of the United States.

In subsequent letters the brothers continued to urge the family members left in Llanddowror and Trevaughan to join them in America. They extolled the virtues of living in Utah: they were materially prosperous as a result of regular well paid work as masons and "much better off than would be the case in Wales" although, as they hurriedly pointed out, that was not their chief reason for being there. They claimed that all the gold of California could not compensate their loss in leaving Wales, "but when we had the message of the eternal Gospel preached to us by the Latter Day Saints, it gave us sufficient courage to leave our old country."

But it was not all milk and honey in their new country. Utah, in those times, was frontier land. In fact the Indians were unhappy about their land being taken by settlers and from 1865 a state of war existed between the Utes under their Chief Black Hawk and the Mormons.

In 1866 Benjamin Isaac acted as Captain in the Black Hawk Indian War. In 1867 Black Hawk made peace with the Mormons and a peace treaty was signed in 1868. But intermittent raids continued until the Federal Government finally agreed to send in its troops to finish off the poor Indians in 1872. The Government had been reluctant to assist the Mormons because of a mounting crusade against the polygamy practiced by them.

During the 1860's five boys were born to Benjamin and Phebe but only one of them lived. In common with many Mormons, Benjamin Isaac was a polygamist and had three wives. Phebe, he had married in Llanddowror and she was the mother of all his ten children.

After settling in Spanish Fork, he married Mary Jones [b1829] in 1870, a singer originally from Whitland. And in 1885 he took a third wife, Mary Davies, sister of his wife Phebe.

John Philip worked as a mason on the Temple Block, Salt Lake City and he acted as a Ward teacher in Salt Lake City and took an active part in Church and secular affairs as a faithful Latter-day Saint and High Priest.

In a letter written to his brother Thomas in 1869 John Philip again stressed how comfortably off they had become, although he and Rachel had no children. Benjamin was going from strength to strength and had many cattle and horses and had recently put up a saw mill. They were living in a very prosperous country. John Philip went on to suggest that if Thomas was thinking of marrying again he “.. had better come out here to have two or three at once.”



Rachel Isaac, née Williams

But John Philip himself was clearly not over excited about collecting more wives since it was another 14 years, after he wrote that letter, before he took a second wife. John Philip married Ingrid Nilsson [b1858], originally from Malmo in Sweden, in 1883. They had four children.

It would be interesting to read John Philip Isaac's letter in the original Welsh. Bearing in mind John Philip's deep commitment to the Mormon cause it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the apparent light hearted reference to taking two or three wives at the same time is the result of losing something in translation.

Thomas Isaac did not join his brothers in America and he died in Neath in 1880. But one of his sons, John Isaac [1859-1943], did emigrate and finished up in Salt Lake City in September 1881 and converted to the Mormon faith..

In 1880 Benjamin was called or required to go on a mission to Pennsylvania where he spent three years preaching the Mormon message and receiving converts. During those years he walked a total of 3,795 miles and worked his way into many homes by doing plastering and building jobs. But the mission broke his health and three years after returning to Spanish Fork he passed away. His widow Phebe lived for a further twenty-five years.

In 1891, thirty five years after leaving Llanddowror, John Philip Isaac and his wife [which one is not clear] returned on a visit to seek out relatives.... with what success we do not know.

And in far off Utah, 69 year old widow Phebe Isaac was left with her memories and thoughts of up-rooting her young family of carrying her baby on the four month trek to Utah ... only to see him die a fortnight from their destination ... of producing all of Benjamin's ten children ... but then having to share him with two others. No doubt Phebe waited eagerly for news of Llanddowror ... was it a "prison" she left in 1856 ?

Denley Owen (3564)

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