

SICRWYDD CADWEDIGAETH¹
AMMANFORD: A GOSPEL HALL IN A
WELSH MINING COMMUNITY

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The town of Ammanford

Although human communities evolve under conditions that are unique to their localities, they do not evolve in isolation. Large-scale social and economic forces operate on similar communities in similar ways, leaving similar results behind, so that deeper patterns can usually be detected beneath surface differences. The growth of the small Welsh mining town of Ammanford is fundamentally no different from countless others within the British coalfields where conditions were comparable (though in this case the conditions would have to include an overwhelmingly Welsh-speaking population). It is possible, too, that the evolution of Ammanford's Plymouth Brethren is paralleled elsewhere, and that the story detailed herein has common features with others. But whichever way we look at it, the elements of a tale that most interest us are the ones that give a place its unique character, the ones which provide it with a 'local habitation and a name'.

The South Wales town of Ammanford today is a small, former mining town in southern Carmarthenshire, twenty miles north of Swansea. Situated at the bottom of the Amman Valley, the town has a current population within the administrative boundaries of the local Community Council of 6,000, but which disguises a population of around 25,000 in the immediate district. The ubiquity of the motorcar has long rendered local government boundaries redundant for all but the purposes of civil administration and the once-rural villages of the area are now strung between new housing developments like shiny

1. 'an assurance of salvation'. The Welsh phrase is used of the Brethren's doctrine in Rev. W. Nantlais Williams and Others, *William Herbert of Ammanford, with some reminiscences of the Welsh Revival* (Cardiff, 1937), p.8.

beads on a string. The town of Ammanford grew from a tiny hamlet of 286 people occupying fifty-nine dwellings (1851 Census) to 6,074 by the 1911 Census, with the most spectacular growth being from the 3,054 people recorded in 1901 to 6,074 souls of the 1911 Census. This growth is typical of most, if not all, mining towns of the British coalfields. The opening up of the Amman Valley's rich anthracite coal seams in the mid-nineteenth century drew a large population into the valley in search of work in the mines, tinplate works and associated industries, giving the town a frontier-like character (and reputation) for many decades. The penetration of a railway line from the Llanelly Dock network into the Amman Valley in 1840 provided a transport infrastructure to facilitate this growth. By 1913, the Amman valley's thirty-five collieries employed 7,900 men, more or less the high point for mining in our little valley.²

Jim Griffiths (1890–1974) was an Ammanford coal miner who became a Labour MP in 1936, a cabinet minister in the post-war Atlee governments, and who was appointed the first-ever Secretary of State for Wales in the first Wilson administration of 1964. In his autobiography *Pages From Memory* of 1969 he remembers—and describes—this frontier-like character well:

Those were the days when coal was king and the valleys were the throne. For beneath the rugged mountains there was coal in abundance—steam coal for the navy, coking coal for the furnaces and anthracite coal for the hearth. And as the cry went out for coal and still more coal, the roads to the valleys were crowded with men in search of work and 'life'. They came from the countryside in the North and the West of the Principality and the shires across the Severn. And as they came they brought with them their way of life—the chapel and the choir, the Rechabite tent preaching abstinence from drink, and the pub, the rugger ball and the boxing booth—all mixed up together. And as they settled in the valleys the cottages climbed even higher up the mountainside until the mining village looked like a giant grandstand.

The life of a collier was hard and brittle. The day's toil was long and perilous. Everyday someone would be maimed—and every year

2. Dylan Rees, *Carmarthenshire: The Concise History*, (Cardiff, 2006), Table 5, p.150.

some valley would experience the agony of an explosion. Yet in spite of it all or, perhaps even because of it all, the men and women who came to the valley created a community throbbing with life. Thrown together in the narrow valley, cut off from the world outside, they clung together fiercely, sharing the fellowship of common danger. Life in the valleys has a magic of its own, and to us who grew up in the glow of its fires there comes a nostalgic longing—‘hiraeth’ as they say in our mother language—of the fellowship of long ago.³

The preferred religions for this new industrial class were provided by the host of Nonconformist churches that flourished on this population influx. The long-established Anglican Church was the place of worship for the gentry families and their agricultural labourers, along with a small middle class who depended on the local gentry for their positions and income. The gentry hereabouts was still an influential social class into the twentieth century and one local aristocratic family, Baron Dynevor, owned most of the land on which Ammanford and the smaller mining villages of the Amman Valley were built. This included Ammanford’s Gospel Hall,⁴ which the Brethren built in 1911 on land purchased from Lord Dynevor. At the time the Gospel Hall was being built the good Baron could be seen attending the family church in all his finery:

On Sunday mornings when the Dynevor family were in residence, we would often watch the coach bringing the family to church. The big coach, like an old stage-coach, was drawn by four horses. Brooks, the coachman, was accompanied by a groom on the driving seat, and two smartly-dressed footmen at the rear. It would draw up with a crunching noise on the road outside the church-yard gate, the footmen would jump down and assist the passengers to alight. Then

3. James Griffiths, *Pages from Memory*, (London, 1969), p.27.

4. Assemblies in this area can be referred to as either Gospel Halls or Mission Halls, which doesn’t signify any doctrinal differences. The English language uses two words—Gospel and Evangel/Evangelical—for the same concept, where Welsh uses just one, Efengyl, clearly from the same Latin root as Evangel. When some assemblies named their halls in Welsh they became *Neuadd Efengylu* (literally, the hall for evangelising). Local Welsh-speaking Brethren often seemed to use Mission Hall when they referred to the halls in English.

the footmen would re-mount, and the coach would withdraw, to return at the end of the service. The scene had a great deal more drama and dignity than the arrival of a Rolls Royce on a similar errand.⁵

Once Ammanford's population growth flattened out in the 1930s, and death duties had done their dastardly worse in the 1950s, the Dynevor fortunes went into a tail spin from which they never recovered and their stately home of Newton House in nearby Llandeilo was sold in 1974 to appease the tax man. The rest of the 800-acre estate followed suit in the next twenty years.

The tiny hamlet of Cross Inn (as Ammanford was called before a name change in 1880)⁶ had no church of its own during most of this growth. The two Anglican churches of nearby Llandybie and Betws villages which served the population were fifth/sixth century in origin, with the current stone buildings of both dating back to the conquest of Wales by Edward I in 1282, with inevitable Victorian alterations coming along later.

The strength of Protestant Nonconformity can be demonstrated by the fact that dozens of chapels were built in the Ammanford area from the eighteenth century onwards, the first being a small farmhouse licensed by the authorities for 'dissenting protestants' in 1748, though these dissenters had been gathering there as early as 1742. Most are still standing, though some have been demolished or have fallen into disuse since. No new church, however, had been built

5. John Miles Thomas, *The Llandeilo Apprentice (1906-1911)*, (Carmarthen, 1983) p.10.

6. The town adopted the name of Ammanford as recently as 1880 when a vote was taken to change the name from Cross Inn. This was the name of a coaching inn on a cross roads that is now Ammanford square. The town's name was in English from the start but people started translating it into the Welsh form of Rhydaman ('rhyd' is a ford) soon afterwards. The Amman/Aman is the name of the local river. The English spelling of the river is Amman, and the Welsh way, Aman, is the form the more nationalistic or linguistically inclined choose. The town's official name is either Ammanford (English) or Rhydaman (Welsh). The river can therefore be spelled either Amman or Aman and the present article uses 'Amman' to be consistent with the name Ammanford. For further details see 'The origins of the town's name' at www.ammanfordtown.org.uk in the History section.

in the area since the two medieval churches already mentioned. It was only in 1885 that this situation changed when a church for the Welsh speakers of the town was built, followed by another for the English speakers in 1915. The populations of Ammanford and the Amman valley were well over ninety percent Welsh speaking at this time and still have a majority of Welsh speakers today (or at least people who are able to speak Welsh). This situation is slowly but remorselessly changing in the face of a steady migration of English speakers into the area.

Ammanford, like the rest of Wales, has been dominated by Nonconformity from the nineteenth century. The largest body of Nonconformists in Wales are the Independents (*Annibynnwyr*), the Welsh counterparts of English Congregationalists. The Baptists and the Calvinist Methodists (not the Wesleyan version preferred in England) are the next in size. The same social and economic forces that produced Nonconformity in England were also at work in Wales but the new denominations developed independently. There were three great figures associated with what has become known as the Methodist Revival in Wales: Howel Harris (1714–73), Daniel Rowland (1713–90), and the great Welsh-language hymn writer William Williams, Pantycelyn (1717–1791). These three criss-crossed Wales on horseback evangelising the new faith. They looked theologically, however, to John Calvin and not John Wesley, and they preached and wrote in Welsh for a Welsh-speaking population, not the stranger's English.

This legacy is great indeed: at the dawn of a new millennium Wales has 5,000 chapels for its 2.9 million inhabitants to worship in—more than England and Scotland together, even with their combined populations of 55 million. The bad news though, at least for believers, is that these 5,000 chapels are currently closing at the rate of more than one a week. Of these at least 1,000 according to one authority are currently under threat of demolition, and the process is only just gathering pace.

Ageing and dwindling congregations no longer have the financial means to maintain their once mighty palaces of worship and some chapels in Ammanford cannot even find a preacher to minister to the

faithful. Others are even resorting to sharing their Sunday services with members from other chapels, even those of different denominations. Wales has gone from being the most religious to the least religious region of Britain in just one generation and Nonconformity is facing a precarious future as a result, if indeed it has a future at all. 'The streets and byways of Wales are nowadays littered with the decomposing hulks of chapels', writes a recent historian.⁷

Everywhere, abandoned Bethanias and Bethesdas; Calfarias and Caersalems; Elims and Ebenesers; Gerazims and Goshens; Moriahs, Seions and Tabernacles are quietly slipping out of sight and into oblivion, their resounding Biblical names soon to become a forgotten litany of lost devotion. And if a smirk of *Schadenfreude* is flitting over Anglican faces at this news, they would do well to remember their own shrinking congregations and their own backlog of churches in urgent need of attention.

And into this heady mix of Congregationalists, Methodists, Baptists, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, Salvationists, Christadelphians, Unitarians, and many more, including a small Roman Catholic and smaller Jewish population, came the Plymouth Brethren.

Although the breaking of bread did not commence until 1902, the movement started in Ammanford around 1888, later holding gatherings on Sundays in an ante-room of the long-vanished Ivorites Hall, with weeknight meetings in private houses. They assembled later at the also-vanished hall of the Rechabite Temperance movement.

The Ivorites were important in the rise of several of the smaller churches in Ammanford, for their hall was used for worship by sects who were too small to build their own churches. A small digression on these Ivorites may therefore be in order, as Ammanford's Plymouth Brethren and Catholics owe their existence to the hospitality of these folk, an organisation which will be unfamiliar outside of Wales.

7. Anthony Jones, *Welsh Chapels*, (Stroud, 1996). p.ix.

Ammanford's Hall Street takes its name from the Ivorites Hall, built by the grandly named 'Philanthropic Order of True Ivorites, St David's Unity, Friendly Society', whose even grander motto was: 'Cyfeillgarwch, Cariad a Gwirionedd' (Friendship, Love and Truth). This was one of the many Friendly and Mutual Societies that sprang up in the nineteenth century, working men's self-help groups that were the forerunners of our modern building societies, insurance companies and trades unions. The Ivorites Order had been established in Wrexham in 1836 by Thomas Robert Jones ('Gwerfulyn', 1802–1856) and it was the only Working Men's Society which was exclusively Welsh. The Ivorites took their name from Ifor Hael (Ivor the Generous), patron of Wales's greatest poet, the fourteenth-century Dafydd ap Gwilym (David son of William).

An Ammanford branch, called the Glanllwchwr Lodge of Ivorites, was established on 4 March 1841 and had fifty-one members by 1848. The 1910 edition of Kelly's Directory for South Wales, describing Ammanford, has this to say of the Ivorites Hall: 'The Ivorites Hall is used for concerts, theatricals and public meetings, and will seat about 1,600 persons.' In the days before cinemas and the radio, the 1,600 seats in the Ivorites Hall would certainly have been filled as often as not. As well as public meetings, the Hall provided a venue for property sales and auctions; concerts, plays and drama festivals; and, on the more serious side, was also the site for the magistrate's court. The Ivorites Hall seems to have been available for all sorts of uses, including providing a place of worship for churches with no home to call their own.

And it provided a venue for a while for Ammanford's Plymouth Brethren until 1911 when they opened the Gospel Hall, their own custom-built church. Ammanford's Roman Catholics, a small but dedicated group in an overwhelmingly Protestant area, also used the Ivorites Hall for their church services throughout the 1920s until they took possession of a former chapel property in 1926, converting it into their own church called Our Lady of the Rosary.

The Ivorites did not, or would not, adapt to a changing twentieth century, and on the 31st of December 1959, after a dissolution vote

of 922 members for and twenty-five members against, the Ivorites ceased to exist.

Another early home of Ammanford's Plymouth Brethren was at the hall of another Friendly Society. The Rechabites, founded in 1835, were a temperance organisation, but before anyone could join them and benefit from their insurance and savings schemes, a document called a pledge had to be signed swearing that the proposed member and his family would not drink any alcoholic beverages. Their name—and teetotalism—are Biblical in origin. The Rechabites were members of the tribe of Judah who took no drink nor built any houses, choosing to live in tents instead. (Jeremiah 35: 6,7). A branch of the Rechabites was thus known as a tent.

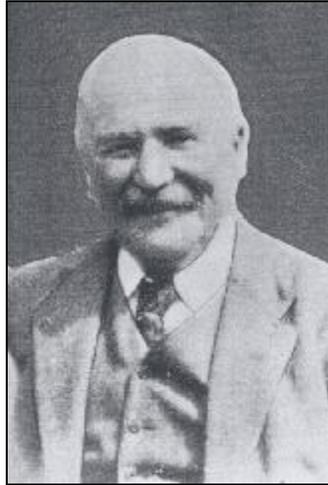
William Herbert (1859-1937)

With a growing membership in the twentieth century the local Brethren were able to proceed with building their own church, and a Gospel Hall was registered as a 'Place of Meeting for Religious Worship' on the 30th of March 1911.

The prime mover in this new church movement was a Mr William Herbert of Ammanford, who was also one of the town's most influential entrepreneurs and who, along with his brother Henry, were major players in Ammanford's industrial development at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Local farmers John and Mary Herbert of Cathilas farm near Ammanford must have been proud of their children, who in their respective fields had a considerable effect on the development of Ammanford. The family were Congregationalists, and John Herbert was a deacon at Ammanford's long-established Christian Temple. The eldest son, Mr. Henry Herbert, a Justice of the Peace, local councillor, and also a Congregationalist deacon, took a leading part in the development of both Ammanford and Pantyffynnon Collieries.

He also contributed to many major civil engineering schemes in the area such as the introduction of the town's water and sewerage systems. Anne Herbert married Evan Evans, a major property



William Herbert

developer of the time, who built the multi-storey block of business premises in 1900 that still makes up today's Ammanford Square. It was he who also built the Arcade of shops leading to the now vanished Palace Cinema, also his creation. Herbert Herbert, the youngest of the children, qualified as a doctor and set up a local practice, and finally we come to William Herbert of our story who involved himself in various business ventures while also being active in the local community of the Plymouth Brethren.

William Herbert had become a converted gospeller following his emigration to New Zealand sometime around 1880, after attending a religious meeting at Ngaire in Taranaki Province in the south-west of North Island, and such was his zeal that after his return to Ammanford in 1888 he took his new-found faith to the townspeople, Bible in hand, preaching on street corners to those who cared to listen to him.

Of his joining the Brethren in New Zealand, his biographer writes:

During his stay at Ngaire [*sic*] in that country [New Zealand], he attended services which were held at a farmhouse. It was here he

discovered that, though he was a religious young man, he was not “born again”.⁸

It would seem that Herbert was in at the founding of the Nagaere assembly as well as, later, the one in Ammanford. Even fifty years after his departure for Ammanford, he was well enough known to New Zealand Brethren to warrant an obituary on his death in 1937, which states that he was one of the ‘original believers’ (i.e. a founder member of the assembly). The obituary reveals that he came to New Zealand in 1880 and returned to Wales in 1887, which fits in with what we know from his biographer, W. Nantlais Williams.⁹

The years 1883–84 were a period of major growth among the Brethren in that part of New Zealand. Henry Rees was a missionary in India who, on his first visit home to England, returned via New Zealand, and wrote of this time:

The Lord visited the district with mighty power during the years 1883–1884, when for miles around a large number of precious souls was brought into the kingdom. The chief instrument used of God in that movement was the late Mr. C. H. Hinman, and it was through him, as is well known, that Mr. Herbert was brought to know the Lord; I might also add that Mr. Hinman baptized my wife in New Zealand before she left for India, whilst I was baptized by Mr. Herbert in Ammanford.¹⁰

William Herbert’s time in New Zealand had been spent in the timber trade and on his return to Ammanford he took over and developed a local sawmill in the early part of the century until its sale in the 1920s. But in 1909 William Herbert embarked on another enterprise of even greater significance to the town: the establishment of the electricity generating station known as the Power House, which

8. Williams and Others, *William Herbert*, p.4. Readers can find a complete on-line version of this biography on <www.ammanfordtown.org.uk>. Then click on ‘People’ and scroll down to ‘William Herbert’.

9. *The Treasury*, vol. 40 (1938) p. 31; cf. Peter J. Lineham, *There We Found Brethren: a history of assemblies of Brethren in New Zealand* (Palmerston North, NZ, 1977), pp.69-70. Information kindly supplied by Peter J. Lineham, Head of School and Associate Professor of History, Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand.

10. Williams and Others, *William Herbert*, p.5.

he built across the road from his Baltic Sawmills. We take the supply and use of electricity for granted today and think nothing of the matter, at least until the bills arrive, but it is worth making a short detour in this story about a local church to gain an insight into how electricity arrived in our little town (and also see how the Protestant work ethic operates in practice).

The Power House

As an integral part of the operation of the Baltic Sawmills William Herbert installed electrical generators to drive various motors and for lighting the premises. Following a common practice of the day neighbouring properties enjoyed the privilege, at a price of course, of connecting into these circuits as a private supply. William Herbert quickly realised the huge potential of the new technology as a competitive source of power for lighting and other uses. In 1909 he opened the Power House in Park Street and started to generate electricity for sale to private consumers as a commercial venture.

Negotiations took place with the Ammanford Urban District Council to establish the rights to erect poles on various roads for a distribution network through overhead cables. The formal agreement signed between the two parties later proved to be loaded in favour of the local authority, which more or less set itself up as the consumers' watchdog, overseeing the charges which the operator could bill for the electricity supply.

At times the constant wrangling between the two parties over this and other contentious issues became quite embittered. In March 1924, the Ammanford Urban District Council finally resolved to buy out William Herbert and become the sole owners of the electricity distribution at a cost in the region of £17,000. The pound in 1924 had the purchasing power of £29 at today's rates (Bank of England figure) so the sale of the Power House brought William Herbert £500,000 in today's money. He also sold the Baltic Sawmills for a similar amount at the same time, becoming a wealthy man by anyone's standards. Christ's strictures against wealth in the New



Ammanford Gospel Hall

Testament are well known,¹¹ so we may assume that William Herbert found justification from the same source for his own wealth.

When William Herbert died in 1937 the local newspaper chose to emphasise this entrepreneurial side of him, and his obituary carried the headline: 'Man who introduced electric light to Ammanford'.¹²

The Plymouth Brethren again

But back to William Herbert and the Plymouth Brethren. As a founding member of the new Gospel Hall (and a leading benefactor) William Herbert had a significant influence on the design of the building, and his shrewd approach to detail ensured the floor of the new hall was constructed with a built-in slope, the object being to discourage the premises being used for any purpose other than preaching the Gospel (no dancing!).

11. Matthew 6:19; Mark 10: 23-25; James 5:1-3.

12. *Amman Valley Chronicle*, 2 September 1937.

William Herbert seems to have impressed even some members of Ammanford's other churches, no mean feat given the disputatious nature of religion. One such admirer was the Minister of Ammanford's Calvinistic Methodists at Bethany church, W. Nantlais Williams, who after Herbert's death wrote the biography of him already referred to, in which we learn:

After thus witnessing to his new-found Redeemer for four years in New Zealand, he found himself yearning to return to his old Wales, to testify also to his own people, and so to bring his family and his friends to the same knowledge of Christ. In 1888 he arrived at Ammanford, and like Paul, he began to preach without delay, witnessing both to small and great. True, he was not a preacher by profession ... Now this was the William Herbert who stood at the street corners of Ammanford with his Bible in his hand preaching to those who cared to listen to him. When I came to the town in 1900, as the young minister of Bethany, with others, I came to regard him as a very peculiar man, or at least a man who held very peculiar views, and who did very peculiar things.¹³

But building a membership in Ammanford was not easy at first:

At last, after many years of unfruitful toil, God rewarded him with two or three souls who were outstanding in their experience ... It is stated that on Lord's Day, July 20, 1902, after baptising three brethren in the river Aman, a company of seven brethren were gathered together in the Ivorites Hall, Ammanford, to remember the Lord in the breaking of bread, for the first time.¹⁴

Small beginnings, by anyone's standards. Until, that is, 1904, when a major religious Revival (Diwygiad) spread like wildfire throughout Wales. Although this is sometimes referred to as the Methodist Revival, having been started by a young Methodist ex-coal miner, Evan Roberts, all denominations were to benefit from the incredible speed with which it spread throughout the country. It had a limited effect on England, but in the United Kingdom its greatest impact

13. Williams and Others, *William Herbert*, p.7.

14. *Ibid.*, p.10.

outside Wales was in Scotland, where many Brethren assemblies had periods of revivalism lasting until early 1905.¹⁵

Between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries Wales had experienced no less than fifteen revivals, but the 1904 Revival was the biggest yet by far. Though the Revival was not particularly long-lived (it fizzled out in less than a year), as a result of those few months of frenzied activity hundreds of chapels were either built or extended. The fervour was so great that sport was suspended in many places for as many as three years. The events of 1904-05 spelled doom to rugby in Ammanford and such was its effect that both players and officials severed their connections with Ammanford Rugby Club. Even the use of the playing field was withdrawn, and membership of the Welsh Rugby Union was discontinued. Many players even burnt their jerseys and boots (or at least their mothers and wives did). Rugby was not resumed in Ammanford until the 1907 season, presumably with newly bought items of sportswear.¹⁶

Nantlais, a published and prize-winning poet as well as a preacher, describes the Revival, rather over-poetically it has to be said, like this:

These were the days of small beginnings. Few indeed were the boulders that became loose. But the avalanche was on its way. The year 1904 will be ever memorable in Ammanford and throughout Wales, and many parts of the world. This was the year when the great glaciers thawed under the gentle heat of the Sun of Righteousness. Yes, this was the year of the great Welsh revival.¹⁷

And Ammanford's Plymouth Brethren were amongst the Revival's beneficiaries:

Needless to say, the Revival proved a time of much reaping to Mr. Herbert and the few attached to him. His harvest had come. Many now sat at his feet as their teacher. After a period of assembling on Sunday in the anteroom of the Ivorites Hall (the week-night meetings were held at his home) and subsequently in the little Rechabites Hall near Ammanford Station ... the increasing company decided to build

15. Neil T.R. Dickson, 'Scottish Brethren and the Welsh revival of 1904-5', in Dyfed Wyn Roberts (ed.), *Revival and Renewal. Celebrating the centenary of the Evan Roberts Revival* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, forthcoming).

16. *Ammanford RFC Centenary, 1887-1987*, (Carmarthen, 1987), pp.12-14.

17. Williams and Others, *William Herbert*, p13.

a more suitable edifice for themselves. This led to the erection of the Gospel Hall, which has been a centre of much evangelical activity and blessing in the town and district. He was the means too of helping to establish other assemblies in surrounding places. What his generosity has been to these centres, and to the poor and to the work in the mission field God alone knows.¹⁸

Brethren assemblies were established at the nearby mining villages of Pantyffynnon, Brynamman, Penygroes, Maesybont (Gorslas), Cross Hands, and Tycroes, and Tycroes is where the Brethren's burial ground for the area survives to this day. (Of these, Ammanford, Pantyffynnon, Tycroes, Maesybont and Penygroes have made it to 2006.) The Brethren were certainly in the right place at the right time to take advantage of this fervour, as circumstances in Wales had been against them before the tumultuous events of 1904, as this author explains:

The strength of Nonconformist culture and the lack of Welsh-speaking evangelists probably counted against the movement in the principality ... Although it is difficult to document, it would seem that apart from the immediate numerical growth of some assemblies, the long-term effect of the revival led to the increase of the movement in Wales. By 1922, when the first address list after the revival appeared, there were fifty-five Welsh assemblies listed, an increase of 48.6 percent since 1904. This represented twenty-one new assemblies.¹⁹

But 1904 was not the only golden period for the Brethren in the Ammanford district, because the 1920s and 1930s saw growth as well. Maesybont Gospel Hall was built in 1923 and Tycroes had sufficient Brethren to raise their own Hall in 1932. A local Brethren historian hints at this secondary revival around 1923:

Preaching in the halls: this was an era in Wales when it was the custom for people to come to such places to listen to the Word (Halcyon days!). There were many in the area who had reason to

18. *Ibid.*, p.19.

19. Dickson, 'Scottish Brethren and the Welsh revival', in Roberts (ed.), *Revival and Renewal*.

bles the Lord for the mission of 'Clark and Bell' in Ammanford and Penygroes districts in 1923.²⁰

Not only in Ammanford and Penygroes, either, because this was the case with Scottish Brethren as well:

And that very year [i.e. 1923] was one of major increase for the Brethren in the mining districts of Scotland, which led the Brethren there to enjoy their highest numbers in the early 1930s with a long, slow decline setting in, hastening after the 1960s. I would be surprised if south Wales was that different.²¹

One individual from Ammanford Brethren was to be important in this process. Lewis Tranter (1881-1976), a native Welsh speaker of the district, had been converted in Swansea, where he was working, through the YMCA and had associated with the Brethren there. On his return visits to his family in Ammanford he joined William Herbert in his activities,²² and during the revival years he became a full-time evangelist, mainly in the smaller villages of south Wales, founding and strengthening a number of Brethren assemblies. A stern critic of the churches, he used to say, "You're either going to hell on Welsh religion or to heaven by the blood of Christ." In his travels he would preach in Welsh or English, depending on what was appropriate.²³

Ammanford and the Welsh language

The evidence is not available at this distance in time to ascertain which language Ammanford's first Brethren used for their services, but it is inconceivable that they would have opened an English-language church at this time in the Amman Valley. Coming from

20. Ronnie Perkins, *Saint y Neuaddau* [*Mission Hall Saints*] in 'Y Cylchgrawn Efyngylaidd' [*Evangelical Magazine*], (Spring, 1997), Translated into English by the author as *East Carmarthenshire's Mission Hall Saints* (privately printed, 1998), p.10. Mr Perkins, a former member of the Brethren, kindly loaned his copy for the purpose of this article.

21. Neil Dickson, e-mail 11 May 2006. I am grateful to Neil Dickson for commenting on a number of aspects of this paper from the wider Brethren historical perspective.

22. Williams and Others, *William Herbert*, p.12.

23. 'Lewis Henry Tranter (1881-1976)', in James Anderson (compiler), *They Finished Their Course* (Kilmarnock, 1980), pp.153-155.

nearby Brynamman, William Herbert's parents would almost certainly have been Welsh speaking, as would their children. At the time of William Herbert's birth in 1859 hardly anyone in this fairly inaccessible part of Wales would have spoken English at all, and it would have been as a second language for those few who did. Both William Herbert's father and brothers became deacons at local Congregationalist chapels,²⁴ which conduct their services in Welsh even today. The census of 1891, when William Herbert was evangelising alone on the streets of Ammanford, shows that 89.3 percent of Carmarthenshire's 112,685 population were Welsh speaking, of which 54.6 percent were Welsh speaking only. The Amman valley has always had the highest incidence of Welsh speakers in the county, so the figure was even higher for Ammanford, and two in three of everyone stopped by William Herbert on the streets would not have understood a word of English. Here is the progress of monoglot Welsh speaking for Carmarthenshire:²⁵

Census Year	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931
Welsh Speaking (%)	89.3	90.4	84.9	82.4	82.3
Welsh Speaking only (%)	56.4	35.6	20.5	16.5	9.2

We know of at least one English-speaking Brethren member in the early twentieth century, Frank Peers from Kent, so services would have changed to English to accommodate him. It was the practice for services to be conducted in Welsh unless a non-Welsh speaking visitor attended or became a permanent member, in which case English would be used. Welsh was used by Ammanford Brethren until a non-Welsh speaker joined them recently so English is currently their language of worship. As of 2006 nearby Penygroes is the sole Welsh-speaking Assembly in Wales with no non-Welsh Brethren currently worshipping there.²⁶

This process seems to have been underway even as Ammanford's Gospel Hall was being built in 1911, for that year a hymnbook was published by the Ammanford assembly containing hymns in both

24. Williams and Others, *William Herbert*, p.2.

25. Welsh Assembly Website (<www.wales.gov.uk>), accessed 2006.

26. Information on Welsh-speaking practices supplied by Penygroes Assembly member on 23rd June 2006.

Welsh and English, This probably explains the dual-language hymnbook—Welsh for the Welsh but English to be used when visitors turned up or non-Welsh speakers were members.

There is one volume, bequeathed in the form of a bilingual hymn book *Hymnau o Fawl (Hymns of Praise)*, published (in 1911, in a second edition) by a committee of the Gospel Hall in Ammanford. This contains some of the work of the hymn writers among them, e.g. Olwyn Jones, Ammanford; Edward Hughes, Cross Hands; David Rees Roberts, Llanelli. (The main body of the hymnal is an interesting mix of the great Welsh doctrinal and experiential hymns of the past and the more evangelistic thrust of hymns from the Moody/Sankey era.) As a footnote, it is worthy of note that the original, pre-1911 edition was a slimmer volume containing only hymns relating to the Lord's sufferings, death, resurrection and coming in glory. This was, presumably, published for use at the gatherings to remember the Lord. The hymn book is also important because of some of the hymn tunes composed by some of the local brethren with a gift in the field of music.²⁷

The local Brethren started using their own burial ground around 1945 and in 2006, of the fifty-two headstones where the language could be determined, twenty-nine were in Welsh (other graves either have no headstones or they are illegible) and most of the English headstones are recent. Before 1945 Brethren were buried in local chapels or the local cemetery and even more of those who died before then would have been Welsh speaking. When two founder Brethren—Thomas Higgs (1884-1976) and Olwyn Jones—put their memories of the 1904 Revival onto tape in the 1950s, they did so in Welsh.²⁸

Two of the nearby Gospel Halls declare their names in Welsh above their front doors to remind us of their origins. Tycroes is called 'Neuadd Efengylu' (literally, the hall for evangelising) while Penygroes Brethren have chosen 'Yr Eglwys Efengylaidd' (the Evangelical Church), but an Anglicising of the church seems to have set in fairly quickly:

Unfortunately, (and I use this word advisedly and deliberately, for it seems to me that along with the Anglicising I refer to below came a

27. Perkins, *Saint y Neuaddau*, p.12.

28. Information supplied by former Brethren member Ronnie Perkins.

diminishing and, eventually, the demise of the warmth and spontaneity of testimony and expression of worship) the Anglicising of these assemblies of God's people was already at work during this period. We see an example of this in the work of a contemporary wag by the name of Eirwyn Pontsian. He relates in his anecdotal autobiography 'Hyfryd Iawn' [Very pleasant indeed] how he was persuaded when working underground in one of the pits near Cross Hands to go to the 'Gospel Hall' to a prayer meeting. These are his remarks on the event, "The thing that struck me as strange was this—they thought I was a worthy subject for their prayers. Personally I felt that they also were a matter for prayer, and for this reason that, although they were, every one of them, Welsh-speaking Welshmen, they were praying in English!"²⁹

It is difficult to know when—and more importantly, why—this drift away from Welsh and into English began. The mists of time have already closed around this period, placing it well beyond the reach of living memory, and the Brethren's lackadaisical record keeping does not help to illuminate matters either.³⁰ Even if most Brethren were Welsh speaking, a decision to conduct meetings in English would have severely hampered the early growth of Ammanford's assembly, for not only was Welsh the first language of most Ammanford residents at this time, for most it was their only language.³¹

Another possible reason for the decline of the Welsh language within the Brethren could have been Brethren moving into south Wales from elsewhere in the UK. This would include evangelists who

29. Perkins, *Saint y Neuaddau*, pp. 4-5.

30. Ronnie Perkins states: 'Unlike the major movements of God's Spirit throughout the centuries following the Reformation these people did not leave a body of literature for us to study.' (Perkins, *Saint y Neuaddau*, p. 11). Of Lewis Tranter, already mentioned, we learn: 'shortly before he died he instructed his wife to destroy all the records he had kept of his life'. (Anderson, *They Finished Their Course*, pp.153-155).

31. If this author may offer a theory—and it is only a theory—their early slow progress with Ammanford's Welsh speakers could have caused the Brethren to look to English speakers being drawn into the valley by the growth of the coal industry. After all, the message (*pace* Marshall MacLuhan), is greater than the medium of the message, and to the Brethren a soul saved would be the same in any language.

would preach, but non-Welsh speaking members moving into the area in search of employment would also require services to be conducted, first in both languages, and finally in English only. Several Brethren are known to have migrated into Wales from Scotland at this time so it is likely that other regions of the UK contributed. This influx of members would dilute the Welshness of the local assembles and draw them into a more British identity.³²

The beginnings of Welsh Nonconformity in the eighteenth century occurred when Wales was overwhelmingly Welsh speaking and probably three-quarters of the population was monoglot Welsh, so the native language had to be used to spread the word and build the new churches. These early pioneers of Nonconformity had a blank slate to write on once they had wooed Anglican worshippers away from their parish churches. (This would not have been too difficult, for the Church of England at this time was little more than a mouthpiece for the hated landowners, 'the Tory Party at Prayer', as it has been dismissively called, and the Welsh joined the new Nonconformist denominations in a steady stream.)

These new Nonconformist denominations were effectively indigenous to Wales (although, as we have seen, most Methodists looked, not over Offas's dyke to English Methodism, but over the English Channel to the ideas of the Frenchman John Calvin). William Herbert thus encountered problems not experienced by those eighteenth-century pioneers of Nonconformity. He had several major obstacles in his path: he had a language handicap to overcome; he was importing a message of salvation to the Welsh that had not originated in Wales; he had to sell the Brethren's anti-culture stance in an area rich in proletarian culture; and, most importantly, Nonconformity, now over 100 years old, was no longer an unfamiliar concept whereas the Brethren's message was. The town's Nonconformist chapels were now thoroughly entrenched as the dominant spiritual force in Ammanford (and the rest of Wales).

32. Neil Dickson, from a suggestion communicated to the writer by e-mail 11 May 2006.

By the early decades of the twentieth century the language situation had changed significantly. Although Ammanford, as we have noted, was still overwhelmingly Welsh, and while the new workforce came mostly from nearby Welsh-speaking counties, immigrant workers were also streaming in from the English shires as well as Scotland and Ireland. (Some middle-class Welsh speakers were even abandoning their language in favour of what they saw as the more prestigious English). And by now most Welsh speakers could speak the foreigner's tongue as well, though the rural areas around Ammanford still possessed monoglot Welsh speakers.

English speakers were still in a minority but this minority was large enough to support a few churches in their own language, albeit with much smaller congregations than the massive membership of their Welsh counterparts. But what was significant about these new non-Welsh churches was that they were, in the main, English-speaking versions of already established Welsh-speaking denominations, and were being assisted in their efforts by their Welsh-speaking co-worshippers. William Herbert and his hardy band of evangelisers had an uphill struggle indeed.

When William Herbert was labouring on behalf of his God the main places of worship in Ammanford and the village of Betws, half a mile away, were:

- St David's Church, Betws, (Welsh-language Anglican). 13th century in origin.
- Christian Temple (Welsh Independent/Congregationalist). Founded in 1748. Rebuilt and enlarged in 1782, 1836, and 1865.
- Capel Newydd (New Chapel), Betws (Welsh Calvinistic Methodist). Built 1795. Rebuilt and enlarged 1829 and 1898.
- Ebeneser Chapel (Welsh Baptist). Built in 1850. Rebuilt and enlarged 1877.
- English Wesleyan Methodist. Founded in 1875, closed 1980s.
- Bethany (Welsh Calvinist Methodist). Built 1881, and significantly enlarged in 1929.
- St Michael's Church (Welsh-language Anglican). Built 1885, with a hall added in 1900.
- Gwynfryn (Welsh Independent/Congregationalist). Built 1904.
- Welsh Wesleyan. Founded 1911; closed 1980s.

- All Saints (English-language Anglican). Opened 1915.³³

The membership of some of these chapels was impressive. When Bethany Methodist chapel was rebuilt and enlarged in 1929 it was constructed with seating for 800, and with a vestry holding another 300. The Congregationalist Christian Temple and Welsh Baptist Ebeneser are similar in size and all three had memberships in excess of two thousand at their peaks. The Anglican St Michael's church was built to seat 500 in 1885 and a hall for another 100 was added in 1900. All Saints Anglican church can seat around 400. The Welsh Wesleyan church held 350 plus a vestry (the English Wesleyan held half that). The membership of Gwynfryn Congregationalist chapel, which had only opened in 1904, was over 450 in 1927, all of which gives a pretty clear idea how forbidding the task facing the Brethren was.

The major denominations also opened numerous smaller off-shoots, or annexes; in the years following the 1904 Welsh Revival the Welsh Baptist chapel of Ebeneser, for example, established three in Ammanford and assisted in the founding of an English Baptist church. The Apostolic Church, which claims churches in fifty-two countries,³⁴ had its beginnings in 1916 just three miles away in the village of Penygroes. Unitarians were in the area until 1838 when they moved to nearby Llandeilo after being expelled from a Church building they were being allowed to use. The local Christadelphians built their first church here in 1892. Ammanford's Catholics celebrated their first mass in their own church in 1926, the same year the Salvation Army erected their Citadel just a hundred yards away from them. It has been said that every person in Wales once had their very own sect and Ammanford's early history certainly seems to confirm this.

Several English churches were built during the Brethren's formative years and it is relatively easy to spot some of them as they carry the word 'English' before their denominational name, a hint if

33. Dates and seating capacities for most of these churches are taken from: W.T.H. Locksmith, *Ammanford: Origin of street names and notable historic records*, ([Carmarthen] Carmarthenshire County Council, 1999), *passim*.

34. <www.apostolicworld.com/history.htm> [accessed 31 July 2007].

ever there was one: English Wesleyan (built 1875); English Congregationalist (built 1909), and English Baptist (founded 1905). Some other English-language churches in the town are not so thoughtful as to provide this assistance, so you need to know beforehand that the Christadelphians, built in 1892, All Saints Church, built in 1915, along with St Thomas Church (1890) and the Salvation Army (1926), hold their services in English. There is also an 'English' Catholic Church but the mass was celebrated in Latin at that time, so the language spoken on the streets was not so important.

Establishing assemblies in similar mining areas outside Welsh-speaking Wales seems to have been less difficult (though it was never easy, as can be imagined):

The obvious parallel with the Welsh mining context is Scotland. Contrary to the common myth, most Brethren in Scotland were not in the north-east fishing communities (though they existed there), but were in the central-Scottish coalfields of west Fife, Mid and West Lothian, Lanarkshire and Ayrshire. The Brethren had an appeal for miners because, in a dangerous occupation, revivalist Christianity secured meaning. There was in addition a strong tradition of the autodidact among miners, and the Brethren, run entirely by lay people who had to acquire preaching and interpretative skills for themselves, appealed.³⁵

Well, the earlier, long-established Nonconformist denominations also 'secured meaning' for Ammanford's miners but they had got in first, and in the miners' own language at that. The miners of Ammanford's Nonconformist churches also had their own strong autodidactic tradition and took their places on the chapels' governing bodies with confidence alongside managerial, professional and business types. More deacons who sat in a chapel's 'Sêt Fawr' (Big Seat) had the miner's blue scars than the office worker's silky-soft hands.

Missionaries

There is an acknowledged relationship between increased fervour and the rise of missionary vocation, so the period of missionaries leaving

35. Neil Dickson, e-mail to the writer 9 April 2006.

is a sign of the movement being strong. The names of some of these missionaries from the Ammanford district have come down to us:

- Mr & Mr D.T. Griffiths, Penygroes to Poland (1921-62).
- Mr Edward Wilkins, Cross Hands to South Africa for a period from 1908.
- Mr & Mrs Watkyn Edwards to South Africa (1947-1951).
- Mr & Mrs John Dan Rees, Penygroes to Brasil.
- Mr & Mrs D.T. Morris to Patagonia (1922-71).
- Mr & Mrs J.M. Davies, Ammanford to India (1924-66).
- Mr & Mrs Henry Rees, Llanelli to India (1903-48).³⁶

Neil Dickson identifies the following trends from this list:

Three high points of enthusiasm emerge—round about the Revival (two missionaries for 1903-8), the 1920s, and probably one more after WWII. This suggests that Brethren vitality lessened in the area from the 1950s onwards, but had peaked in the 1920s. This sounds very reasonable and would fit with what we know about the rest of the UK in the inter-war period, but more especially with South Wales where the Brethren (and other fundamentalist groups such as the Pentecostals) seemed to have profited from the slow decline of the mainstream churches, attracting disaffected members into their more vigorous conservatism.³⁷

The same commentator offers a further extrapolation from this list of missionaries:

Missionary vocations are relatively rare, but the Brethren tended to have higher numbers in comparison to other denominations. Even so probably about one percent of the movement became missionaries, although one calculation for Scotland produced 1.7% of the membership. That is, it took somewhere around 100 members to produce one missionary. Extrapolating from the list, then, means that there were perhaps no more than 100 Brethren members in the Ammanford district about 1908 (the missionaries from Llanelli are not being counted here), rising to about 600 in the early 1920s. Obviously there are too many variables for this to be accepted as anything like a precise figure. But what the projections do suggest is

36. This list of missionaries is from Ronnie Perkins, *Saint y Neuaddau* p.11. The dates are from W. T. Stunt et al., *Turning the World Upside Down: a century of missionary endeavour*, 2nd edn. (Bath, 1973).

37. Neil Dickson, e-mail to the writer 20 April 2006.

a large percentage increase between 1904 and the 1920s (something that is confirmed by the formation of seven assemblies in the area after 1902); and also, given the number of missionaries it produced in the 1920s, that the inter-war period probably saw the movement in the Ammanford area at the peak of its vitality and size with both declining after the 1950s, features that are true of the Brethren in the rest of the UK.³⁸

Ammanford's cultural life

Another factor which would have militated strongly against the Brethren in Ammanford was their anti-culture stance.³⁹ Education (which meant book-reading and music above all else) was absolutely crucial to the culture of the Welsh at this time, and not just because it was a route out of the hellish mines and factories of the valleys, a route which, if the miners could not travel themselves, then at least their children could. Along with education, culture and religion were absolutely fundamental to the lives of Ammanford's miners and their families in these years. The self-imposed cultural austerity that the Brethren were asking of their converts would most certainly not have appealed to people whose material lives were austere enough already. There were the daily hardships and danger of their working lives to contend with, with injury and death peering over their shoulders every moment of the working day. There were regular strikes and lock-outs in a bitter, never-ending battle with millionaire mine owners who begrudged them even the pittance wages they received. Frequent economic slumps meant lay-offs and no income, or enforced migration in search of work. Wages were at poverty levels and the housing rented from the mine owners was slum standard. Infant—and adult—mortality were at levels we cannot conceive of today. And at the end of their working lives, Ammanford's miners had only the horrific lung diseases of pneumoconiosis and silicosis to look forward

38. *Ibid.*

39. 'The Brethren had a distinctive teaching about the imminence of the second coming and their anti-cultural stance is often ascribed to it (what's the point of getting involved in or changing the culture when it's all going to disappear soon?).' Neil Dickson, e-mail to the writer 11 May 2006.

to. There was no shortage of faiths offering them salvation after death—but what to do until that fateful day was also a matter of some importance.

Culture, education, and their long-established religion were what gave them respite from their daily toil and meaning in their harsh world. Several times a week their local chapel would ring to the tumultuous hymn-singing of the congregation, often several hundred strong, and the impassioned preaching of their ministers, often drawn from their own ranks, would send them home with a spring in their step and hope in their hearts. There would be a Gymanfa Ganu (hymn singing festival) or Noson Lawen (variety evening) at these chapels on a regular basis. A local choir or silver band might practice in the chapel vestries. Concerts would be given here, with big-name soloists of the day appearing on the programme, and great religious works by Handel, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Bach, Verdi and others would thunder out over an enthralled audience. The Band of Hope met here; the chapel's annual charabanc outing would provide the only holiday these people knew and the chapel became in effect a community centre, fulfilling roles as library, school and concert hall, as well as a place of worship.

And an annual eisteddfod (literally, a sitting) would be held by every chapel. Literature, and especially the writing of poetry, was at the heart of this proletarian culture. David Rees Griffiths (1882-1953), brother of the Jim Griffiths MP already mentioned, was one such collier-poet who won fifty-two bardic chairs at eisteddfodau in his writing lifetime. Usually referred to by his bardic name of Amanwy, he was merely the best-known among many in the Amman Valley. When local miner Gomer Roberts won a Workers Education Association scholarship to train for the ministry, a collection of poetry by six fellow miners was published to help finance his studies (he would later become Moderator of the Methodist General Assembly).

On returning home after winning the Crown Poetry prize at the National Eisteddfod held in nearby Ystradgynlais in 1954, Ammanford's Baptist Minister, E. Llwyd Williams, was met by a large crowd on the outskirts of the town who carried him on their

shoulders into Ammanford. Banners proclaiming ‘Croeso i Llwyd’ (Welcome to Llwyd) were placed across the road and the procession was led into town by the Ammanford Silver band playing Handel’s ‘See the Conquering Hero Come’. After congratulatory speeches, a spontaneous Gymanfa Ganu (Festival of Song) was taken up by the gathered throng. If winning a major poetry prize meant so much to Ammanford’s residents in 1954, how much more would it have meant fifty years earlier, when William Herbert was labouring for his Lord on Ammanford’s street corners?

Before the advent of cinemas, radio, the phonograph, and other forms of passive entertainment, the chapel was an all-embracing institution indeed, one that provided for all your non-material needs. Wales’s choral tradition is well known and Ammanford at this time possessed the best amateur choir in Wales. The Ammanford and District Choral Society had won the chief choir prizes at the 1919 and 1920 National Eisteddfods, and all within just two years of the choir’s formation in 1917. The chance to really shine, however, came in 1922 when the National Eisteddfod came to Ammanford for the first time (it returned again in 1970). Now the choir could show what they could really do in front of their own people. A leading Amman Valley historian muses on:

... that warm fine Tuesday evening of 8 August, 1922, when the Ammanford Choral Society performed the Bach B Minor Mass in the National Eisteddfod Pavilion, to the accompaniment of the London Symphony Orchestra. It was the first public performance of the B Minor Mass in Wales. The choir and orchestra had given a fine performance of the Brahms [German] Requiem, the previous night. The choir’s members numbered around 350 men and women, most of whom were miners and their wives, who sang the work in the original Latin from tonic sol-fa copies. It is this ‘peasant culture’ or ‘diwylliant gwerin’ which has enthralled me over the years,—eisteddfodau, local orchestras, amateur operatics, silver bands and sacred concerts,—in an age when the great oratorios of Handel and the works of Mendelssohn, Spohr and Dvorak were familiar among the proletariat. These were ordinary people who sought to participate in the culture and artistic expression of higher forms of society, and more complex and developed forms of civilised living. Not that the

Aman Valley community was any different to other valley communities in south Wales at the time, and it is something which we have in common with some of the large industrial areas of the north of England, such as Workington and Darlington, Middlesborough, Halifax and Huddersfield.⁴⁰

In addition there were Music Halls, and touring theatrical companies played the theatres, cinemas and, later, the working men's halls that were springing up all over the place. The cultural richness of the Amman Valley in these early decades of the twentieth century has never been surpassed, before or since. The Brethren, and indeed some other denominations in the valley, regarded all this as vanity, of course, but it is doubtful if an exhortation from the town's Brethren, or anyone else, to abandon their culture would have had a sympathetic hearing. Much of the non-religious cultural activity stopped during the 1904 Revival, it is true, but not for long, showing the importance it held for the local community. William Herbert and his fellow evangelisers would have known what they were up against and it is a tribute to their steadfastness that they persisted so assiduously in building their assemblies in the area.

Nantlais tells us in his biography of the initial hostility that was shown towards William Herbert in Ammanford:

Just think of some of the things which offended us. He preached in the open-air!—a very unusual thing to do. It was quite unorthodox. All the “right” preaching we thought was to be done in the pulpits, in a respectable way. It was only cheap jacks who held forth on a street corner. Moreover he carried a Bible with him. What an offensive display of godliness. He had not been set apart to preach, either. Who was this layman who had never been to any Theological College nor ordained to preach by any Church, who dared to encroach on the preserves of the trained ministers of Christ? The most offensive thing of all was what he taught. He said that we had to be “born again”—all of us. We would have had no objection to this, of course, if he had confined his message to well-known sinners in the town, but when he insisted that all members of Churches—and ministers as well—had to undergo this spiritual experience, and that no one was really saved,

40. Dr Huw Walters (National Library of Wales), *Ammanford Choral Society*, from <www.ammanfordtown.org.uk>, History Section.

whatever his profession was, unless he knew too that he was saved, perhaps it was this assurance of salvation (Sicrwydd Cadwedigaeth) that was chiefly the bone of contention in the town. Regeneration in itself is a drastic thing to preach ... it created a stir, and an ill-feeling as well ... in Ammanford the town was divided between all the people and Mr. Herbert. He stood alone.

There was also his attitude towards the Churches. Logically this followed his insistence on assurance of salvation. Since everybody, according to his standpoint, had to know that he was saved and as nobody in the Churches had such knowledge—in theory at any rate—or had ever thought of it, or dared to express such an experience, it stood to reason to Mr. Herbert that all members in the Churches were lost. Yes, the ministers and deacons and members of all the Churches—including the young minister of Bethany—were lost. This led him at that time to speak disparagingly of the Churches almost in every address. Of course, as I said, it was the logical issue of his belief regarding assurance of salvation.⁴¹

William Herbert's openly expressed contempt for the other churches in Ammanford might explain something that happened in 1925. At a meeting of Ammanford Urban District Council held on the 4th of March that year, a member attempted to move a proposal of testimonial to William Herbert in recognition of: 'the way in which he had managed the Electric Undertaking in the Town, during the time it was in his hands'. The motion, however, did not command sufficient support and was defeated.⁴² The Council in those days consisted almost entirely of local church and chapel worthies so perhaps William Herbert's speaking 'disparagingly of the churches almost in every address' lingered on in rather too many memories.

The Gospel Hall also upset other, more 'respectable', townspeople by the type of people they were prepared to accept through its doors. Nantlais again:

But perhaps the most outstanding convert was Eli, the Carpenter—(Eli y Saer). Eli [Morgan] was originally from Carmarthen ...

His life in Ammanford, however, was not exemplary in any way. In fact he became a confirmed drunkard, and as hopeless a character

41. Williams and Others, *William Herbert*, pp.8-9.

42. Locksmith, *Ammanford*, p.187.

as one could imagine. Nobody thought that Eli could be reclaimed. One night he set fire to a shed in which he slept. Mrs. Davies, however, had a strange dream about that time, if not in fact the night of the fire. She saw in her dream a man bearing the name Eliezer in some terrible plight appealing for help. One can imagine her surprise when she found afterwards that a man by the name of Eliezer ("Eli") had put a shed on fire close by, and that he was lying in a field which adjoined her house in a miserable condition. She pleaded with him to come inside for some food. Having come as far as the door, Eli, observing his hands and his general condition, could not think of entering the house, so some food was given him to partake of outside. The next step in this spiritual drama was Mrs. Davies' pleading with her family to allow her to take him in altogether as a lodger. Naturally there was a definite objection to such a procedure. Entertaining as lodger the despised Eli who was not much better than a tramp! But ultimately Mrs. Davies, the wonderful interceder she was, won her point; and with her importunity at the throne of Grace, and Mr. Herbert's testimony, Eli became a new man, and what a beautiful character he turned out to be.

We shall never forget an open-air meeting held on the Square in a later year, when the leader of the meeting, the Rev. Seth Joshua, testified to God's grace in saving a drunkard like himself, and threw out the question:

"Is there anybody else here who has been saved from the sawdust of the tap-room? Let him come on to say so."

In a flash came the answer from the back of the ring:

"Yes, here's one."

It was Eli. He made his way calmly through the crowd to the middle of the ring, and bore such a wonderful testimony to God's grace in saving him that many were moved to tears, such power accompanied his words.⁴³

A fellow Brethren member touchingly remembers the loneliness of William Herbert's efforts in the church's early life. In the biography already quoted from, which was published immediately after William Herbert's death in 1937, we find this testimonial to his steadfastness:

Our beloved brother stood alone for God in Ammanford for many years witnessing in the open air, distributing tracts, visiting isolated

43. Williams and Others, *William Herbert*, pp.10-12.

souls who were enquiring after the way of life, and during that period he preached the presence of God, so that like Moses of old, he endured as seeing Him who is invisible. His humility, loyalty and devotion were rewarded in due time. The Lord was pleased to set His seal upon His servant's labours; an Assembly was formed, a testimony for God was established, and our beloved brother had the joy of ministering to the Church, founded according to New Testament principles, almost until the time he was called to higher service in September, 1937. We reflect with joy upon the happy seasons spent together in the Master's Service upon earth, and rejoice to know that "the fellowship enjoyed below shall sweeter grow in heaven above." (Appreciation by Mr. Olwyn Jones.)⁴⁴

William Nantlais Williams

As we have drawn extensively from W. Nantlais Williams' biography of William Herbert, an English readership might be curious to know a little about this gentleman. The Reverend William Nantlais Williams (1874–1959) was universally known in Ammanford as plain Nantlais, so we shall do the same. He was the best known and longest serving minister of Ammanford's Bethany Chapel, an imposing citadel of Calvinistic Methodism, which was an important centre for the 1904 Revival, and he made it into a bastion of conservative evangelicalism in the denomination.⁴⁵

Nantlais was a classic example, too, of a peculiarly Welsh phenomenon, the preacher-poet, a tradition that stretches back through the centuries. The late R.S. Thomas was a more recent example of this tradition, but while his preaching was in Welsh, his poetry was in English, and he was an Anglican preacher-poet at that.

During his long and productive life Nantlais was a chapel minister (Presbyterian, as the Calvinist Methodists became), editor, poet and hymn writer. He became the minister of Bethany in 1900, not long after its founding in 1881, holding the post for forty-four years, and the rebuilding of an enlarged Bethany in 1929 is attributed to his

44. Williams and Others, *William Herbert*, pp.27-28.

45. A longer item on Nantlais can be found on the website <www.ammanfordtown.org.uk> in the People section.

leadership in these years. He retired as minister in 1944, living out his life in Ammanford until his death in 1959 at the age of 85. The *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* has this to say of him:

His ambition at that time was to preach at preaching festivals and succeed as a poet in eisteddfod competitions. He was joint-winner at Bangor national eisteddfod (1902) for composing six lyrics; he won the bardic chair at the Meirion eisteddfod in 1903, and the chair at the eisteddfod held in the Queen's Hall, London, in 1904. That year the religious Revival spread to Ammanford, and Nantlais was heavily affected by the stirring events. He determined to consecrate his life thenceforth to evangelising and fostering the spiritual life of the churches.⁴⁶

Although Nantlais refrained from competing at eisteddfodau after the Revival, he continued to write, consecrating his talents and his poetry thereafter to spreading the Gospel. He is best known today as a Welsh-language hymn writer and several of his compositions are still sung in today's Welsh chapels.

It was highly unusual then for a member of one denomination to praise a member of another in such fulsome terms as Nantlais did of William Herbert, and was certainly rare to write a biography of one. Perhaps the reason lies in the effect the 1904 Revival had on William Herbert. As Nantlais explained:

Though the Revival proved a revolution in my own life and outlook, it proved almost as much a blessing in his. One of his memorable confessions to me was this: "Before the Revival I spent too much time in belittling the Churches; but God, in the Revival, showed very clearly to me that my work was to exalt Christ rather than denounce the Churches."⁴⁷

As a result William Herbert began to associate freely with other denominations and he was appointed the Treasurer of the local auxiliary of the Bible Society. He also supported the interdenominational Ammanford Whit-weekend Bible Convention and the national Llandrindod Wells Convention, known as 'the Welsh Keswick'.⁴⁸

46. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography 1941–1970*, (London, 2001) p.11.

47. Williams and Others, *William Herbert*, p.21.

48. *Ibid.*, pp.21-2.

William Herbert's influence on Nantlais seems to have been unusually powerful; once he even persuaded the young Methodist minister to withdraw a work from publication because he, William Herbert, disagreed with its theological content:

I went to the cost of printing these revelations. Mr. Herbert read the booklet, and disapproved of it in his gentle way, pointing out that it was not strictly in accord with the written Word in the Bible. He advised me not to sell more copies, and came down one day to my home and quietly placed in my hand seven gold sovereigns to help me to meet the cost I had incurred in printing.⁴⁹

Theologically Nantlais was a conservative, which might provide additional reasons for his closeness to William Herbert and the Brethren:

The Bangor church historian, D. Densil Morgan, describes Nantlais as being: 'the popular and talented minister of Bethany, Ammanford, flagship church of the Connexion's conservative evangelicals in south Wales' (*The Span of the Cross: Christian Religion and Society in Wales 1914-2000* (Cardiff, 1999), p.119). Nantlais also rejected moves to make the denomination more doctrinally liberal, so this would align him with the more fundamentalist Brethren.⁵⁰

Nantlais actually came very close to being rather more than merely aligned, as he admits in his biography of William Herbert:

... the whole question of Salvation came up, and Assurance, of course. I defied him to show me a single verse in the New Testament that proved his contention. He turned gently to John XII, 46, and read "I am come a light into the world that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness." I was startled inwardly. I never knew that there was such a verse, and though I still argued gallantly with him, I went away with an uneasy conscience.⁵¹

... After our new experience [i.e. the 1904 Revival], we found that we were one with him [William Herbert] now on the great vital issue of Salvation.⁵²

49. *Ibid.*, p.19.

50. Neil Dickson, e-mail to the writer 8th April 2006.

51. Williams and Others, *William Herbert*, p.14.

52. *Ibid.*, p.18.

There are other passages in Nantlais's biography where he seems to be closing in on the Brethren doctrinally, but close though he undoubtedly came to joining the Brethren, he never actually adopted their position or left the Methodists. He remained the minister of Bethany Church for another forty years after the 1904 Revival until his retirement in 1944. This doctrinal closeness to the Brethren was not just a private matter between Nantlais and William Herbert either:

Nantlais and William Herbert were very close friends, and some of the newspaper reports about the revival in Ammanford hinted several times that Nantlais was about to join the Brethren. Nantlais published some very immoderate articles in *Yr Efenglydd* [*The Evangelist*], the periodical he edited after the revival, in which he often denounced socialists, communists and infidels, many of whom, of course, had left the chapels.⁵³

Not all the local clergy were quite as politically conservative as Nantlais and the local Congregationalist minister, D. Tegfan Davies, was one who certainly was not. The official history of his chapel, Christian Temple, describes him thus: 'He was always on the side of the poor, the unemployed, the needy, the destitute, the drunk and the vagrant.'⁵⁴ One millionaire, he once said, means one million poor. Tegfan's political sympathies were well in tune with his mining congregation in a town that has been overwhelmingly Labour supporting for most of the twentieth century. By a neat piece of juxtaposing both Tegfan and Nantlais would officiate at William Herbert's funeral in 1937.

The death of William Herbert

After a long and productive life William Herbert was buried at Ammanford's Congregational chapel, Christian Temple, on the 4th September 1937 (Ammanford's Brethren did not have their own burial ground at this time; that would come after the war. 1944

53. Dr. Huw Walters, National Library of Wales, e-mail to the writer 12 Apr 2006.

54. Rachel L. Thomas, *Christian Temple, Eglwys Annibynnol Gellimanwydd, Rhydaman, 1782-1982* [*Gellimanwydd Independent Church, Ammanford*] ([Ammanford]1982). A brief biography of D. Tegfan Davies can also be found in the in the People section of the website <www.ammanfordtown.org.uk>.

appears to be the earliest dated gravestone). The local newspaper's report of the funeral was brief:

A large and representative gathering attended the funeral, which took place last Saturday, of the late Mr. William Herbert of Llwynon, High Street, Ammanford, a leading industrialist who had made contributions to the spiritual and material welfare of the town.

Interment took place in the family vault at Christian Temple burial ground. The service at the house was taken by Messrs. Olwyn Jones and T. Higgs; at the chapel, by the Revs D. Tegfan Davies, D.D., W. Nantlais Williams, John Morgan, Missioner Henry Rees, and Mr. C. Peers, Liverpool; and at the family vault by Mr. Olwyn Jones.⁵⁵

The obituary carried the headline: 'Man who introduced electric light to Ammanford'.⁵⁶ The town's Brethren would no doubt have claimed he brought another, greater, light to them as well.

While the service at William Herbert's house and at the graveside were conducted by local Brethren Olwyn Jones and Tom Higgs (1884-1976), what may interest today's Brethren is the part played at the chapel service by D. Tegfan Davies, the Congregationalist minister, and W. Nantlais Williams, the local Methodist minister. Neil Dickson notes that this

is highly unusual in a Brethren member and shows how far Herbert had travelled from Brethren separatism. This involvement with Christians outside the Brethren is a key point for placing him in the movement, for the Brethren run all the way from extreme separatists to ecumenicalists, and this spectrum takes in the Open Brethren, many of who are separatist, especially in mining areas such as Wales and Scotland.⁵⁷

Be that as it may, the non-Brethren author of this article finds nothing unusual in a native of Ammanford, from an extremely well-known local family, staying on cordial terms with people he had grown up with. Or having a Congregationalist minister officiate at his funeral in

55. *Amman Valley Chronicle*, 9 September 1937.

56. *Amman Valley Chronicle*, 2 September 1937. Dr Graham Johnson, Archivist of the Christian Brethren Archive, John Rylands University Library of Manchester, informs us his British Brethren obituary appeared in *Echoes of Service*, 66, (1937), p.305.

57. Neil Dickson, e-mail to the writer 11 April 2006.

a chapel where members of his own family worshipped; where they had a family vault; and where his own father had even been a deacon. Or having a Methodist friend of almost forty years officiate as well. But perhaps if we look all the way back to the Revival of 1904 we can find another explanation, because William Herbert was of its generation, when the spirit then abroad could break down inter-denominational barriers, at least for a while.

Donald Peers and the Plymouth Brethren

The most famous product of Ammanford's assembly was the fifties' popular singer Donald Peers (1908–1973). At the age of 42 he became a pop idol as the result of his BBC radio programme 'Cavalier of Song'. He made BBC musical history by earning £600 per week (multiply that by twenty in today's money) and receiving 3,000 fan letters a week. Perhaps his greatest professional triumph came on the 9th May 1949 when he gave a solo performance at the Albert Hall, London. An audience of 8,602 people paid to hear him give a two-hour solo performance accompanied only by two pianists. He also had his own TV show in the early 1960s on which he gave a young Tom Jones his first television appearance.

His father Frank was a leading member in Ammanford's Brethren. During his time in Ammanford Frank Peers was a respected elder at the Gospel Hall and a lay-preacher who had been converted during his younger days spent in Chicago. It was at William Herbert's Baltic Saw Mills that Frank Peers was given a clerical job on his arrival in Ammanford, though during the depression years of the 1930s he was forced to take a job as a surface worker at a local coalmine. As Donald Peers relates in his autobiography, *Pathway*, published at the height of his fame in 1951:

My father, as I came to know him, has always been a man of the highest religious principles, a godly and upright character if ever there was one. It was while still in Chicago, I have heard him say, that his religion became a ruling force in his life, or, as some would say, he was "converted". He, and my mother with him, became members of the Brethren. The young Englishman, who held his own

with the roughest and toughest characters who wrested a living in the vast stockyards, became an evangelist and lay preacher.⁵⁸

The Brethren have a reputation for a very severe lifestyle by the standards of most other churches, and although the Ammanford Brethren belong to the more moderate Open branch of the movement, we get occasional glimpses into this side of them in *Pathway*. Here Donald Peers tells us his father never joined in any sports and had only once gone to a theatre after his conversion in 1894. Even when his son returned to give concerts in Ammanford after he had become famous, Frank Peers refused to attend, listening instead on the radio. His father's daily routine is also described:

Father was busy each night at some meeting or other with the Brethren at the Gospel Hall. He was completely and happily immersed in his religion. Each morning, before leaving for work at six o'clock, he would read a chapter of the Bible. Home again at about three-thirty in the afternoon, he would bath and then, like a true son of Kent, work for a while in his garden. Later, the Bible was taken down again for a while, and then, between seven-thirty and eight o'clock, he would quietly make his way to the Gospel Hall. The family would attend chapel at least twice every Sunday, and much as I loved the old people, this was an environment that seemed too narrow to appeal to me as a setting in which to spend the rest of my life.⁵⁹

Donald Peers' solution to the problem of how to spend the rest of his life was simple, but effective—he left home (and the church) in 1924 the day before his 16th birthday. Initially he became an itinerant painter and decorator before entering show business some years later and becoming Britain's first ever 'pop star' in the late 1940s.

Donald Peers' upbringing seems to have been quite easy-going in comparison to some other Brethren families, or at least compared to those from the Exclusive wing of the movement, but even so, there was still a line which was not to be crossed:

At a Sunday School Treat—I had "found my voice" by then—my contribution was a sacred song. Polite applause at the end must have

58. Donald Peers, *Pathway*, (London [1951]) p.17.

59. *Ibid.*, p.17.

turned my head, for I immediately burst into a completely unrehearsed and unsolicited encore, and I sang with glee and gusto.

I shall never forget how the faces round me grew sterner with each line—especially my father's. One glance at the look on his face made me realize the fate that was in store for my temerity. But even in those days there must have been in me the germ of the performer who, having once started, will go on to the bitter end in front of the most unsympathetic audience. On to the bitter end I went, amid a startled hush from my audience which was almost a tangible thing. And indeed the end was bitter—and my “end” was subsequently painful in the extreme.

It was early to bed that night, after one of the few severe spankings I remember. I avoided singing comic songs at any of the children's parties I went to in the future.⁶⁰

Ammanford's Plymouth Brethren today

After his death in September 1937 William Herbert was described by his biographer, Nantlais, as ‘Saint, Businessman and Preacher’, not three human qualities normally found together in one person, which make this claim, if true, a rarity to be savoured. The family connections with the Church were continued by his daughter, Dr Gwladys Herbert, who took an active interest in her father's creation for many years to come.

The Brethren continue to worship in their Gospel Hall, and can even be seen occasionally evangelising on the streets of Ammanford in the spirit of their founder William Herbert, a placard advising all and sundry to prepare to meet their doom. Unfortunately for the Brethren a new religion, shopping, has replaced the two thousand-year old Christianity on Ammanford's streets. Its worshippers at this modern shrine are called consumers, and seem far too preoccupied to take heed of this rather drastic warning, preparing to meet (and even exceed) their credit limits instead.

A local historian has left a brief history of their time in our area and his prognosis for the Brethren's future in the district is not a sanguine one:

60. *Ibid.*, p.28.

Hard-headed realism tells us there is very little left in the area today of their once vibrant testimony. The buildings they graced with their presence remain and the flame is still alive in the hearts of the godly remnant but an objective analysis would show that flame to be all but extinguished.⁶¹

Ammanford's Plymouth Brethren also suffered a defection in 1977, resulting in the formation of Ammanford Evangelical Church by a breakaway group who had developed fundamental differences over doctrine. These differences were clearly deep, as Neil Dickson comments:

Their website has links to the Evangelical Alliance, the Evangelical Movement of Wales and the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, although it would appear that the church is a member of none of these bodies. Identity is always a problem once traditional Brethrenism is perceived to be irrelevant.⁶²

For many years after their birth Ammanford Evangelical Church led a nomadic life, very much like their parental Brethren before them, and various venues were used for their worship including the local Pensioners' Hall and St John's Ambulance premises. Finally they raised sufficient funds to purchase and restore the town's long-abandoned English Wesleyan Church. The 'English' of the name refers to the language of worship, as the church was founded by English businessmen who had migrated into the valley and established a variety of local commercial enterprises. The church had been relatively short-lived and survived from its inception in 1875 until the 1980s. Another Wesleyan Church had opened in Ammanford in 1911 to cater for the town's predominantly Welsh speakers but it too closed for business in the 1980s. The major Methodist churches of the town are Calvinist in affiliation and Welsh in language and the alien Wesleyan version failed to take root.

Ammanford's Evangelical Church re-opened the old Wesleyan building for worship in 2003 and possesses today, along with the Ammanford Bible Church (a local Pentecostal Church formed as recently as 1995), the town's two largest congregations, having used

61. Perkins, *Saint y Neuaddau* p.11.

62. Neil Dickson, e-mail to the writer 9 April 2006.

the intervening years to build up their membership. Paradoxically, one of the problems that hampered the growth of the Brethren all those years ago—the English language—is a significant reason for this growth, for the Welsh language today no longer dominates Ammanford as it did a hundred years ago. Both the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches hold their services in English, though they both have Welsh-speakers amongst their members.

The Welsh chapels of Wales are facing a major dilemma concerning the status of Welsh. For centuries religion was the custodian and defender of the language at a time when many Welsh speakers were abandoning their native tongue for what they saw as the higher social status of English. It was the Circulating Schools of the Reverend Griffith Jones in the eighteenth century that taught an estimated 250,000 of the country's then 490,000 population to read,⁶³ and it was Bishop Morgan's Welsh translation of the Bible (published in 1588) they learned to read, not the foreigner's King James version. Undoubtedly his schools and the increase in Welsh literacy greatly contributed to the development of Nonconformity in Wales. The Sunday School Movement, spearheaded by the Nonconformist chapels, added very high standards of writing in Welsh to this achievement in the nineteenth century. But in places like the Amman Valley today a growing influx of English speakers is changing the Welsh character of the area and those incomers who look for places to worship quite naturally turn to churches where services are conducted in a language they understand. Members of the established churches and chapels, feeling demoralised in their shrinking congregations, are also turning to these younger, more vigorous churches. The cruel irony now facing Ammanford's Welsh chapels is that in protecting the heritage of their language, they may be hastening their own decline. It is Ammanford's Evangelical and

63. 'By his death in 1761, aged 77, Griffith Jones had been responsible for establishing 3,325 schools in nearly 1,600 different places in Wales. The total number of pupils—both adults and children—who were taught to read fluently in his schools may well have numbered 250,000, an extraordinary achievement, given the fact that the population of Wales was around 490,000 at the time.' (Geraint H. Jenkins, *The Foundations of Modern Wales, 1642-1780* (Oxford, 1987), p. 377).

Pentecostal churches who are benefiting from this situation, and who also undertake active recruitment to take further advantage of it.

Two offshoots of William Herbert's creation thus survive in Ammanford today, though the original Plymouth Brethren, with an ageing congregation, will surely struggle to survive alongside their younger offspring, whose praise-and-worship services have a greater appeal to a newer generation of evangelicals. Still, far larger churches have received the bulldozer's unwelcome attentions in the years during which the Gospel Hall has sent its sandwich boards onto Ammanford's streets, and that alone is a considerable tribute to dedicated pioneers like William Herbert.

SUMMARY

We have looked at the various forces at work while Ammanford's Brethren were building their assembly in the twentieth century. Social, economic, cultural, linguistic and religious factors, with the main exception of the 1904 Revival, conspired against this otherwise dedicated band of evangelisers. A hundred years on and conditions are different again, and Welsh Nonconformity itself is in deep trouble, as indeed is Anglicanism. Curiously, the Catholic Church in Ammanford has experienced some growth in recent years and in 2004 they were able to raise a completely new church to replace their original 1926 building. English-speaking incomers seem to be the reason for this expansion. (Ammanford's chapels, in contrast, have trouble merely maintaining their existing buildings.) The only Protestant denominations in Ammanford experiencing significant growth are the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches, and it is tempting to ascribe this success to the fact they were both born in Ammanford. But fundamentalist churches like these are growing in numbers throughout the UK, not only Ammanford (and the locally-born Apostolic Church has been a world-wide movement for some decades), so clearly larger forces are at work here.

It is hoped this article has provided a coherent picture of the Brethren and their development in the little coal-mining town of Ammanford, at least in outline, and has given that 'local habitation and a name' promised at the beginning of our story.

Internet Resources:

- The full text of William Herbert's biography quoted from above can be found on: <www.ammanfordtown.org.uk>. Click on 'People' and scroll down to 'William Herbert: Saint, Businessman, Preacher'. The website also contains histories of most Ammanford churches and chapels. Longer items on Donald Peers and the Ivorites can also be found in this website.
- As we have seen, the early growth of Ammanford's Plymouth Brethren owed much to the Welsh Revival of 1904–05. The following website from the BBC gives a brief history of this important phenomenon: <www.bbc.co.uk/wales/religion/sites/timeline/pages/religion_in_wales_13.shtml>. The BBC website also provides a brief overview of the 18th century Welsh Methodist Revival: <www.bbc.co.uk/wales/religion/sites/timeline/pages/religion_in_wales_9.shtml>
- <www.welshrevival.org> is a website with electronic texts relating to the 1904 Revival. It can also be searched.
- Ammanford Evangelical Church (AEC). This was formed by a breakaway of about a dozen Ammanford Brethren in the 1970s. The church's website is on <www.ammanfordchurch.com> (though no mention is made of its beginnings in the Brethren).
- Ammanford Bible Church (ABC). A Pentecostal church formed in 1995. It has its own website on <www.abclife.org>
 - Ammanford can lay claim to being the birthplace of a world church which today boasts a presence in 52 countries. The Apostolic Church originated in the mining village of Penygroes in 1916, founded by a local coalminer converted during the 1904 Revival. Its website is on <www.apostolic-church.org/>.