

## CAM-YR-ALYN, ROSSETT, AND A QUIET WORK OF GOD

### Cam-yr-Alyn and Cox Lane

The Church of Christ at Cam-yr-Alyn, Rossett (sometimes assigned to Burton) began in the house in the photograph below, in Cox Lane, Allington, then in Denbighshire. Five generations of men, all named Charles Davies, were the tenants, but the church began with the third Charles (ca 1760-1846), who attended an Independent chapel in Marford in early life. Family worship was a feature of the home in which he grew up.

Information about the cause in the Rossett area can be gleaned from two local newspapers (the *Liverpool Daily Post* of 21<sup>st</sup> June 1989, and *The Leader* of 10<sup>th</sup> May 1963); and some verses said to have been written by Charles Thomas in about 1870, writing as if he were Charles Davies; and the estate agent's brochure who sold the farm-house by auction in June 1989. That literature was kindly supplied by Mary Ellwood of Marford, whose father was born in the house, and who, as a child, often visited two aunts who continued to live there. Further information has been drawn from Stephen (1909).

Charles Davies's future wife, Mary Hamersley, attended the same chapel as Charles, and her mother used to gather her sons and daughters and read the scriptures to them. For a while Mary moved to Mollington, near Chester, where the courtship with Charles began or continued. By 1791, the year of their first son's birth, they were living at the house in Cox Lane.



*the house in Cox Lane [courtesy of Denton Clark]*

According to the *Liverpool Daily Post* (21<sup>st</sup> June 1989, page 11) the house in the photograph was “the North Wales birthplace of the Church of Christ”. It is variously known as Cox Lane Farm and The Old House, Hoseley, Marford. In the late 1700s it was home to Charles and Mary Davies, who had a carpet-making, weaving, and tailoring business. At Cox Lane, they extended the practice of family worship to include their employees on Sunday afternoons, for Bible-reading, prayer, and worship. Neighbours began to be attracted and to enjoy the meetings.

Their employees attended family worship in the house on Sunday afternoons from 1793 onwards, and a church was formally established there in 1809.

Preachers appointed at the Pant chapel in Marford came and preached, when the preacher and his horse would be welcomed and provided for from towards the end of one week till the middle of the next, when they would set off for their next appointment.

The group had no local preacher of their own, but when no itinerant preacher came, they discussed the scriptures among themselves. In this way, largely beginning from Mark 16:16 in the Authorised Version of the Bible ("He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned"), they came to the conviction that, to correctly follow the Lord, they should be baptised by immersion, though there was initially some robust objection to this teaching. But the question arose, who should baptise them? It was decided that Charles Davies should apply for baptism to the Baptist church in Wrexham, and after a six-month probation, he was baptised by the minister, who was surnamed Jenkins. This was some time before 1809.

Charles then probably baptised his wife and his son John (1794-1865), and within a short time after 1809 upward of thirty others at Cox Lane. They are believed to be the first Church of Christ in either England or Wales - hence the claim that this house was the birthplace of the Church of Christ.

Previous to 1809 they were an organised church practising infant baptism and observing the Lord's Supper. When the practice of baptism was adopted, unbaptised members were allowed to continue to partake of the Lord's Supper, but the decision was taken from then on to admit only baptised newcomers to membership and to Communion. But in fact every member of the original church was baptised within a year. Looking back, John Davies recorded in 1859:

Two only of their number had put on Christ in immersion. At that time, having searched carefully and so satisfied my own mind as to the will of my Lord, it was my privilege to be immersed in Him in the beautiful stream of the Alyn, making three of the number.

Alexander Campbell baptised their son Samuel in 1847. Campbell visited in 1847 while attending a conference in Chester, and baptised in the "spacious open-air" baptistry built by the hedge in a corner of the garden of the house, where women were customarily baptised; men were baptised in the river, which by the shortest route on foot is about a mile away, following the same path from Cox Lane to the river as is there today, according to the 1872 Ordnance Survey map (published in 1878)<sup>1</sup>.

People came from far and wide, some walking, some on horseback, and the membership spread till they broke bread in three places, while remaining one church. It was not till 1835 that they knew there were other congregations in Britain and America with views like their own.

Preachers often arrived on horseback. The congregation met in the house most of the time, and sometimes in the front garden.

The meetings were held in the downstairs room to the right of the front door. They attracted thirty to forty people, and on occasions there were more people than the house could contain, and a chapel was opened in 1866 in Rossett in the area known as known as Cam yr Alyn.

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<sup>1</sup> The map also shows the 1866 chapel.

Charles's son John was aged 16 in 1809, and soon began to take part in the preaching and teaching, "becoming the first preacher of primitive Christianity in this first Church of Christ" (Stephen: 1909:4), being joined later by his brother-in-law William Whalley and his brother Charles Davies. John Davies reached the age of majority (21) in 1815, and it is probable that by then the itinerant preachers had ceased preaching at the meetings, as John Davies "fully entered upon preaching work that year."

Looking back from 1859, as quoted in Stephen (1909), he recorded that:

I was even looked upon as 'apt to teach'. On Lord's Days I had, therefore, to take a pretty prominent part in teaching, exhortation, remembrance of the Lord, remembrance of his needy brethren, praises, prayers, and affectionate greetings, after the example of the earliest Christian Church. By degrees the little I could do was more frequently called for, and then like a child learning to walk, I first read my writing, next spoke from notes, afterwards from pre-arrangements only, and occasionally without that. This continued some ten or twenty years, during which time that little company enjoyed much peace and concord, and received valuable additions.

When John moved to Mollington, where he worked as a land agent and surveyor, he arranged to visit Cox Lane monthly, and others within the congregation took other services. John also was instrumental in planting two other churches – "vineyards of God" as he calls them, "so that my hands continued to be pretty full, the three little flocks being several miles apart." Sadly he does not tell us where those two other congregations were, but it seems likely that they were at Mollington and Saughall, or maybe Chester.

After John Davies moved to Mollington, in 1821, others began to take a leading part at Cox Lane, including Charles Davies – that is, the fourth Charles Davies, son of the third Charles Davies. In 1845 Peter Stephen, father of the Peter Stephen who composed the manuscript history of the church, moved to Mollington, and also preached once a month at Cox Lane. The third Charles died in 1846.

At about the same time, Charles Davies (the fourth) left Cox Lane to the charge of his father-in-law Edward Evans and for the next twenty-seven years lived at Mollington, Sutton, and Gresford, returning to Cox Lane in 1871.

In March 1866 the church moved to its new chapel at Cam-yr-Alyn, built by John Davies' widow (by courtesy of *The Leader*, 10<sup>th</sup> May, 1963).



The new chapel, built in 1866.

The house was eventually sold, in 1989, by estate agents Denton Clark, Chester.

### ***Mollington and Saughall***

What is now Mollington originally included two separate places: Great Mollington, known as Mollington Tarrant (in the parish of Backford), and Little Mollington, previously called Mollington Banastre, (in the parish of St. Mary on the Hill). They were combined into Mollington civil parish in 1901.

Peter Stephen compiled a brief history of the congregations at Mollington and Saughall in 1921, but it is not easy, from that and other surviving archives, to unravel the stories of the two congregations, and little attempt is made here.

### ***Mollington***

In 1817, in Gresford parish church, John Davies married Mary Peers, whose parents were living at Tarrant Farm, Mollington. They moved to Tarrant in 1821, and lived at The Willows for many years, but by 1861 the census lists them as resident at Rose Farm.

It is said that the church at Mollington existed before John Davies moved to Mollington in 1821; it has also been said that John Davies began the church there when he and his wife Mary moved to The Tarrant. Be that as it may, the life of the church certainly centres on his work.

The church began in 1821 with eight worshippers, namely, Charles and Mary Peers, John and Mary Davies, Charles's sister, Margaret Golbourn, John Bennion and his wife. There was an open-air baptistry in the garden at Tarrant. Others were added to the church thereafter.

From 1821 to 1842 the worshippers of both Mollington and Saughall met at Tarrant, but then eleven worshippers asked John Davies to begin a fortnightly afternoon service for worship and the Breaking of Bread. It was noted that the new meeting was not set up "in a factious spirit".

In October 1835 "our venerable Brother Bennion" had borrowed from a Scotch Baptist friend in Chester the first three issues of William Jones's *Millennial Harbinger*, and taken them to Mollington. Stephen (1909:7) writes:

I shall never forget the scene when he and our friends took their seats around my little table. What delight beamed in each countenance, to hear, for the first time, that we were not 'alone' in the world as we had till then thought, but that, spread over the United States, there were 150,000 brethren and sisters, in churches numbering from 50 to 500 members in each. The first thing, of course, was to spread the news among the brethren here, the next to write to Mr Campbell (18<sup>th</sup> October, 1835) to express our gladness and desire to become acquainted, to establish an intercourse and to obtain his numerous publications.

He continues:

Still, we regarded ourselves quite 'alone' in England, and for about two years more concluded there were none other here like-minded. Then, however, we were a second time made joyful by some numbers of Mr Wallis' *Christian Messenger* finding their way to

Mollington, by which we were soon introduced to sister churches in our own beloved country.

In 1844 John Davies's brother Charles moved to Mollington.

In 1845 Peter Stephen, father of the Peter Stephen who composed the 1921 manuscript history of the church, moved to Mollington, and also preached once a month at Cox Lane. He had been an elder of the church in Dundee.

In 1847 Alexander Campbell was a guest of John Davies, and when Campbell spoke at Shrewsbury, visitors attended from Wrexham, Rhosllanerchrugog and Criccieth.

In 1860 Grove Chapel Saughall and Mollington were holding services on alternate Sundays. Peter Stephen, to whom communications were to be addressed, was living at Kingswood Cottage, Mollington.

After Davies's death in 1865, as Stephen wrote, John Davies so presented and established his beliefs in his home and neighbourhood "as to leave no room for any to say or feel that harshness characterised either himself or his message." He had been "a brother-beloved, even a father in Christ to them [i.e. the people at Rossett], and to the majority of members in the four Churches of Cox Lane, Mollington, Chester and Saughall."

In 1871 John Davies, son of Charles and Mary Davies of Cox Lane, Allington, (living in Great Sutton in 1851 and in Mollington as a boarder and already working as a land surveyor in 1861) moved to The Crosslooms, and meetings were held in the house.

In 1875 the first chapel was built (of brick, with a slated roof) adjoining the offices at The Crosslooms, and opened on 3<sup>rd</sup> August – though the date on the wall says it was *erected* on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1875. Samuel Davies and Peter Stephen were leaders in arranging for the building of the Crosslooms chapel. At the 1892 Annual Meeting the leaders of the Mollington church were Samuel Davies and G. Gilham.

In 1895 Davies bought an iron chapel, which provided more comfortable seating than the earlier brick chapel. Davies died in 1898, but the chapel continued in use at least until 1921 when the account was written by Peter Stephen.

A reminiscence in Poulton's *Beneath the Surface*, from one Dorothy Carline, records that:

Before the 1920s ... we joined the little Church of Christ Sunday School ... held in a wooden hut with a tin roof ... A Mr Stevens had it built in a corner of his garden at 'Crosslooms' on Townfield Lane. For years it was without a harmonium ... Eventually a harmonium was purchased.



*the brick chapel at Crosslooms*

It is believed that the house in the photograph, with the bricked up windows, was the chapel in Mollington. In the 1921 census “summary books” there is this schedule:

67 Crosslooms villa private house Edward Davies

68 Crosslooms villa Gilbert --- (illegible)  
Nonconformist Church of Christ chapel  
Crosslooms estate office Peter Stephen

69 Crosslooms villa private house Peter Stephen

The 1921 census includes:

Crosslooms Farm, Samuel Davies 57 land and auction agent, born Allington

Crosslooms Peter Stephen 45 land agent and surveyor born Saughall

It is clear from this entry that that link between the Davies and Stephen families remained firm.

### ***Saughall***

The register of burials for Grove Chapel record John Rhosydd Williams burying people in their cemetery in 1927-1948. In 1927 he began performing baptisms at Saughall and continued to do so till 1943. Here again is a link between Rhos and elsewhere in the Division.

But as we turn to the earlier days of the cause, we find that Gospel services were first held in the home of two unmarried sisters, Mary and Ann Furnival, and continued for seven years. In 1845 Peter Stephen moved to Mollington to assist John Davies in his business, and visited the congregations at Mollington, Wrexham, Chester, and Cox Lane, but his main ministry was at Saughall, and he may justifiably be seen as the father of the Saughall church.

Grove Chapel was built in 1849 (and enlarged in 1865). In 1854 Peter Stephen was elected as one of the four who held oversight, and he held that position for forty years.

In the years from 1846 to 1893, two hundred and thirty-two people were baptised and became members – though it is not clear whether some joined Mollington and some Saughall.

In 1897, according to the church's minutes, Peter Stephen, was a member at Grove Chapel, and he chaired the church meetings until 1929. In fact there was a large Stephen family there around the turn of the century: Peter, Anne, Emily, Catherine, William, Sarah, Mary, James.

The church used unfermented wine for Communion for the first time in January 1901.

A successful mission was held in Saughall by Bartling Ellis in 1912.

Efforts were repeatedly made to ensure the church should grow in numbers, and from 29<sup>th</sup> January to 17<sup>th</sup> February 1918 John Nicholas<sup>2</sup> of Rhos conducted special services at Grove Chapel. Nicholas worked for a while as evangelist serving the two churches at Rhos and Llanfair Caereinion. He moved to Rhos, and was received into membership in 1915, but he and his wife moved to Llanfair Caereinion in 1921, following the severe sorrow of the loss of their daughter Lily, aged 21, in the last quarter of 1920. Nonetheless, his ministry forged another link with Rhosllanerchrugog within the Division.

In the 1921 electoral register Peter Stephen is living at Crosslooms, Mollington, together with his wife Emily, and children Stephen, Samuel, and Lindley.

On 11<sup>th</sup> January 1923 the Saughall church minutes record that that, "It was mentioned with deep regret that Brother D. R. Hill's 4 week Mission in Nov. last [i.e. 1922], like that of Bro. J. John Nichols of 1918, had brought no additions to the Church. It was felt that a longer time was necessary."

The minute book of the Church of Christ at Grove Chapel, Saughall, records on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1924 (with a somewhat muddled sentence) that:

D. R. Hill Evangelist completes his 3<sup>rd</sup> year in this Division Next Aug. ...

At Chester Div. Com<sup>ee</sup> promised was made by the churches to try to maintain the present Local Contributions to G.E.C. but could not increase the amount. It was partly on the strength of this Bro. J. R. Williams is being put (pro. tem.) on Staff of Evangelists. As much of his time is expected to be given to Wales, *what are English churches to do?*

Resolved that "This church consider that Bro. Hill's engagement shd cease at end of 3<sup>rd</sup> year; suggested we, in future, try for a 2<sup>nd</sup> Evangelist for six months, in addition to Bro. J. Williams."

In 1932, although "it was still hoped to get a capable Evangelist," J. E. Stephen suggested an intensive mission by local talent.

John Rhosydd Williams, as district evangelist, is briefly mentioned in 1948: "we have had many visits from him, and ..." The next page is lacking!

When Grove Chapel closed in 1981, some of the members moved to the United Reformed Church at Blaenon, and some worshipped at the parish church in Saughall. The chapel has been demolished and I have not been able to discover an image. Its graveyard is still there.

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<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere the Minutes write Nichols, but John Rhosydd Williams has Nicholas

A longer article, which includes other nearby Churches of Christ, may be found on website [www.bethelrhos.com](http://www.bethelrhos.com)