

Penyfai Bi-Centenary Services

CELEBRATIONS AT HISTORIC SMYRNA CHAPEL

BAPTISTS WHO MET IN A BARN

Perched half-way up the hill and now almost in the centre of Penyfai village, near Bridgend, one of the oldest Baptist chapels in Glamorgan. Surrounded by stones marking the graves of worshippers in the days when the cause was young - and some of these date back nearly 150 years - the oldest Baptist Church of "Smyrna" looks down over green pastures towards Bridgend, which in the days when "Smyrna" became a Baptist "Bethel," was without its Baptist cause.

Worship amongst the Baptist denomination commenced in Penyfai in 1650, and meetings were held in the houses of "the faithful" and at Hendre, between Coity and Pencoed.

In the year 1718, however Rhys ap Rhys, a man who was not a Baptist, who was in deep sympathy with the cause, was so impressed with the devotion of the people that he handed over to them what is said to have been a barn, and which today is the chapel Smyrna.

Land as a burial ground was given with it, but this today is closely dotted with memorial stones. At first the congregation consisted of members from Swansea and Hengoed, who used to travel at regular intervals for worship.

It was not until 1726 that Smyrna became a church of its own. The first minister was Rev. Griffiths Jones, (son of the Rev. Morgan Jones of Swansea), and he held the pastorate of the cause for fourteen years, until the mother church at Hengoed asked him to become the pastor. He was followed by the Rev. Jonathan Francis (son of the Rev. Benjamin Francis of Newport) a man of great gifts, who will always be renowned for the length of his Pastorate. He remained minister to the church for 55 years - from 1745 to 1801.

During his pastorate the Baptist denomination grew in strength and influence, and his days, and it was mainly due to his great work, that the church of Nebo, Ystrad (the mother of all the churches in the Rhondda valley), was founded, as well as Salem, Llangyfelach. During his pastorate contentions concerning Arminianism and Calvinism were swaying people of all creeds. As religious dissension is rife today so it was then, and as a result there were divisions and some of the churches turned to Arminianism.

After this great minister came the Rev. Thomas Edwards, who for six years had assisted Rev. Jonathan Francis in his ministry on account of his old age. He remained pastor for ten years, at the end of which time he became a convert to Arminianism, and left Smyrna as a consequence. He was followed in 1834 by the Rev. Benjamin Davies, and for 23 years he laboured in the cause, having the oversight of Ystrad, Rhondda. The cause at Blackmill was founded during his ministry, this being a branch of the church at Nebo, Ystrad, and two other churches, Sardis, Bettws, and Bethania, Maesteg, also came into existence.

A Congregationalist before he became a Baptist, the Rev. David Thomas followed the Rev. Benjamin Davies as pastor and he remained for ten years, leaving for Bethlehem, Corntown. Then came the renowned preacher and one of the foremost in the Nonconformist world of that day, the Rev. Rees Davies who entering the pastorate of the church in 1847 remained for 42 years, founding the church of Nebo, Cefn Cribbwr, of which he had charge. His son Mr Thomas Davies a member of the Penybôn Council, and the Bridgend and Cowbridge Board of Guardians is as well known

throughout the district and resides at Aberkenfig. Another son Mr. Isaac Davies, a retired schoolmaster lives at Kenfig Hill.

Then came the Rev. William Evans, from Colwinston, followed by Rev. W Harris, Neander Richards, William Hill, and J.H. Jones. The minister today is the Rev. G. Bowen. The Rev. George Bowen has charge also of the Baptist cause at Laleston. He is a gifted preacher, and for 18 years ministered to the church at Bargoed, and Aberfan before that.

On Sunday, the Rev. W A. Williams secretary of the sustenation Fund, officiated, and on Monday he was supported by Rev. Benjamin Humphries, (president of the Welsh Baptist Union). In the afternoon the new vestry was opened by Councillor Jenkin David of Coity. A history of the church was given by the pastor, the Rev. G. Bowen, and among those present were Rev. B. Lewis, pastor at Llangyfelach, which was formerly a branch of Smyrna and Mr. William Jenkins M.P. (loan Rhondda).

A presentation of a musical cabinet was made by Mr. Williaril Blyton to Miss Violet Lloyd. A.L.C.M., who has recently won a diploma at the University College of Wales.

A resolution was passed by the Baptists of the neighbourhood as well as by members of Smyrna thanking, Capt. W.H.C. Llewellyn, J.P. Court Colman, for the gift of a piece of land adjoining the churchyard, in order that the new vestry could be built, and the many friends who had contributed useful articles were also thanked.

The services continued during the week, the Rev. Paran Griffiths. Blackrhill, officiating on Tuesday, the Rev. Alderman William Saunders on Wednesday, and the Rev. Evan King Jones, Ruhamah, Bridgend on Thursday.