

## **Tracing Your Welsh Nonconformist Ancestors by Beryl Evans**

Many of you will be familiar with tracing your ancestor's baptisms, marriages and burials using parish registers, but may come across some branches that don't appear in these records. Where do you go next? Have you considered that they were nonconformists?

Nonconformist = one who did not conform to the beliefs of the Established Church. Also known as Dissenters.

Parish registers were the official records of the established church, kept by order of Thomas Cromwell in 1538. Very few parish registers for Wales survive before 1660. The earliest Welsh nonconformist register is the church book of Particular Baptist Church of Ilston in Gower and dates from 1649. The original is held at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island but a transcript copy is held at the National Library of Wales (NLW Facs 863)

Nonconformity was illegal before the Toleration Act of 1689, which gave freedom of worship. After this date the Church was unable to cope with the spiritual needs of a growing population and therefore saw a widespread increase in nonconformity. By mid-eighteenth century 80% of the people of Wales were nonconformists.

1753 Hardwicke's Marriage Act saw all marriages between 1754 and 1837, except of those of Jews or Quakers taking place in the parish church.

Prior to the Civil Registration Act of 1836, the Registrar General made it a requirement to hand over all nonconformist registers to its custody, these registers are now held at The National Archives in Kew and have been digitised and indexed and are available to view in various ways –

- The National Archives, Kew – free onsite access
- The National Library of Wales – free onsite access via microfilm, Findmypast, Ancestry, Familysearch
- <https://bmdregisters.co.uk> – subscription in association with The Genealogist
- [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk) – subscription
- [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk) – subscription
- [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) – free access to index

Use *Nonconformist Register of Wales* book by Dafydd Ifans to check names of chapels within different parishes, dates of surviving registers and where they are held.

Variety of denominations -

- Congregationalists
- Independents
- Calvinistic Methodists
- Wesleyan Methodists
- Baptist
- Quakers
- Unitarians
- Catholics
- plus many others

Not all denominations will be found in all parts of Wales and many registers will be partly or wholly in Welsh.

After Civil Registration in 1837 there was no legal obligation to continue to register baptisms and burials in nonconformist registers, but many continued to do so.

After 1837 a chapel had to apply for a licence in order to hold a marriage in the chapel, therefore if unlicensed they would be unable to hold marriage ceremonies – look for marriage in the local registry office or parish church of either bride or groom.

Many chapels did not have their own burial grounds and therefore, members were buried in the parish church graveyard.

Other records that may hold genealogical information of value -

- Sunday school registers
- membership lists
- chapel histories
- contribution books
- printed annual reports
- denominational periodicals, these had sections for - births, marriages and deaths and obituaries

Main collections for Calvinistic Methodists, Wesleyan Methodist and Baptists are held at the National Library of Wales, search the online catalogue. They also hold an in house database relating to all chapels in Wales, contact the enquiry service

Many of the denominational periodicals were in Welsh, -

- Trysorfa Ysrydol (est 1799)
- Yr Eurgrawn Wesleyaidd (est 1809 Wesleyan Methodist)
- Seren Gomer (est 1818 Baptist)
- Y Drysorfa (est 1831 Calvinistic Methodist)
- Y Dysgedydd (est 1832 Independents)
- Y Diwygiwr (est 1835 Congregationalists)
- Yr Ymofynydd (est 1847 Unitarians)

For further information see <https://www.library.wales/collections/learn-more/printed-materials/welsh-periodicals/denominational-magazines>

Welsh newspapers online and Welsh Journals online are very useful resources for all kinds of information regarding nonconformity – members, history, preachers, events, as well as family history in general, see links below.

Nonconformist records are not held centrally, therefore, search the catalogues of the National Library of Wales, local county archive office and the chapel if still open. I would suggest reading some background information regarding different denominations and being aware of different practices eg. The Baptists practice adult baptism not infant baptism. Many sources of additional information are listed below.

### **Further reading**

*Cofrestri Anghydfurfiol Cymru/Nonconformist Registers of Wales*, ed Dafydd Ifans, (NLW, 1994)

*Catholic Missions and Registers 1700-1880*, Volume 3, Wales and the West of England, Michael Gandy (London, 1993)

*The Chapels of Wales*, D Huw Owen, (Seren, 2012)

*My Ancestors were Congregationalists*, David J H Clifford (SOG, 1997)

*My Ancestors were Baptists*, G R Breed (SOG, 1995)

*My Ancestors were Methodists*, W Leary (SOG, 1990)

*Tracing Your Welsh Ancestors*, Beryl Evans (Pen & Sword, 2015)

*Welsh Family History: A Guide to Research*, ed John Rowlands (AFHSW, 1993)

*Second Stages in Researching Welsh Ancestry*, eds John & Sheila Rowlands (FFHS/UWA, 1999)

*The Liverpool Welsh and their religion: two centuries of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism*, R Merfyn Jones and D Ben Rees (Modern Welsh Publications Ltd, 1984)

*City Mission: The story of London's Welsh chapels*, Huw Edwards (Y Lolfa, 2014)

*Calvinists Incorporated: Welsh Immigrants on Ohio's Industrial Frontier*, Anne Kelly Knowles (University of Chicago Press, 1997)

## **Websites**

National Library of Wales [www.discover.library.wales](http://www.discover.library.wales)

Enquiry Service, National Library of Wales

<https://www.library.wales/services/enquiries/nlw-enquiries>

The National Archives [www.bmdregisters.co.uk](http://www.bmdregisters.co.uk)

Archives Wales <https://archives.wales/>

The People's Collection Wales

[www.peoplescollection.wales/collections/376915](http://www.peoplescollection.wales/collections/376915)

Welsh Religious Buildings Trust (Addoldai Cymru) <https://welshchapels.wales/>

Capeli (The Chapels Heritage Society) [www.capeli.org.uk/](http://www.capeli.org.uk/)

Presbyterian Church in Wales [www.ebcpcw.org.uk](http://www.ebcpcw.org.uk)

Association of Family History Societies of Wales [www.fhswales.org.uk](http://www.fhswales.org.uk)

Welsh Journals <https://journals.library.wales>

Welsh Newspapers <https://newspapers.library.wales>

Findmypast [www.findmypast.co.uk](http://www.findmypast.co.uk)

Ancestry [www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk)

Familysearch <https://familysearch.org>