



The Real Story of *Mary Jones* and Her Bible

by **Graham Chewter**, Deputation Speaker

We would encourage children to read this interesting article carefully, as it forms the basis of our 2023 Children's Quiz, which can be found on our website at tbsbibles.org/2023quiz.

Over the years many books and articles about Mary Jones and her Bible have been rather fictionalised by the writers' imaginations. However, the basic narrative elements are true and can be verified from Welsh records of those times which have been translated into English in more recent years.

Mary Jones 1784–1864

The lovely country of Wales stretches only 130 miles from north to south, and east to west it is just 40 miles at its narrowest point in the centre. For 64 years our current monarch, King Charles III, was the Prince of Wales, but his son Prince William has now taken this role.

The north-western corner of Wales is an exceptionally beautiful part of the United

Kingdom, boasting of majestic mountains and delightful views across its valleys. It can look a picture of tranquillity on a sunny day as the sheep and cows contentedly feed on the fresh green grass.

This was the world that the remarkable, and now famous, Mary Jones knew. She was born on the 16 December 1784, the only child of Jacob and Mary (Molly) Jones in the tiny village of Llanfihangel-y-Pennant (pronounced: Thlan-vee-hangel-uh-

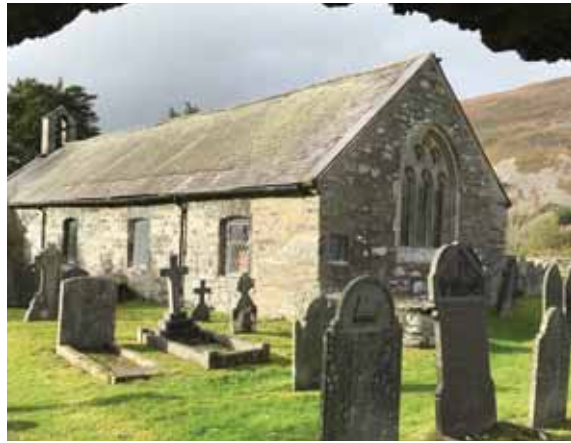


pennant) which nestles at the foot of the Cader Idris (Cad-er-id-ris) mountain. In Mary's day this was known as the county of Merioneth (Merry-o-neth), but is now part of Gwynedd (Gwin-eth; a 'dd' in Welsh is pronounced like the 'th' in the word 'breathe'). Today the village setting may seem idyllic, but it disguises the harsh reality of life for so many people in those times where it could be a struggle for survival.

Soon after Mary was born the family moved to a cottage called Tyn-y-Ddol (Tin-uh-thall) about half a mile from Llanfihangel. This cottage was built of local stone next to a flowing stream which provided water for drinking and washing. There was a large fireplace for cooking and keeping out the cold during the harsh winter months. The nearest shop was two miles away at Abergynolwyn (Aber-gun-olwin); the nearest market town was some fourteen miles away and it would have taken about four hours to walk there.

Mary's parents were poor and unable to write. Her father suffered from asthma, yet would have to work long hours as a farm labourer. He died at the early age of 30, leaving his wife and little four-year-old Mary to mourn their loss.

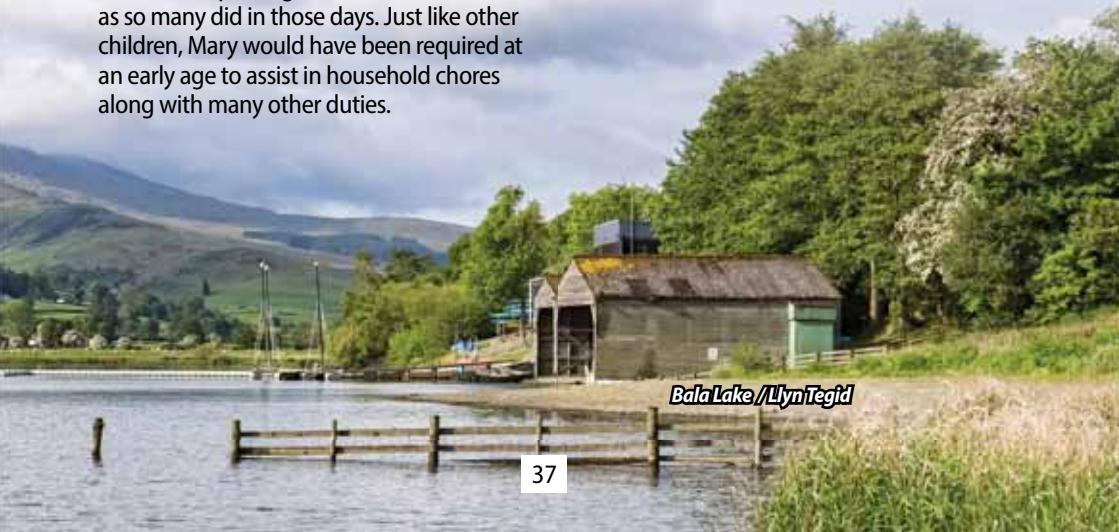
Mary and her mother would most likely have had a spinning wheel in their home as so many did in those days. Just like other children, Mary would have been required at an early age to assist in household chores along with many other duties.



St Michael's Church, Llanfihangel-y-Pennant. Mary Jones lived in this parish for much of her childhood

Welsh seasons of blessing

Wales had experienced a remarkable season of revival blessing some years before Mary Jones was born. God had raised up great preachers such as Howell Harris, Daniel Rowland, and William Williams (author of the famous hymn, 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah'), who had preached far and wide to vast crowds that listened intently to the message of God's grace in the Gospel. These preachers often experienced great public opposition, abuse, and sometimes injury from people who



Bala Lake / Llyn Tegid

hated them, yet thousands of people were sorry for their sins and repented before God and found forgiveness through faith in the atoning death of Christ upon the cross. Many of these new believers were unable to find spiritual food at their local parish churches, which eventually gave rise to the formation of a new denomination known as the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists. Many chapels were built for worship, and during the week Christians would meet in homes to share their experience of God's grace and seek to encourage one another.

Mary's mother Molly was a member of the nearest Calvinistic Methodist Chapel at Cwrt (Cour-t) near Abergynolwyn. Mary, with her mother and friends, would walk the two miles each week to hear a message preached from the Bible, God's Holy Word. At the early age of eight the Lord touched Mary's heart with His grace, bringing her to trust in Christ alone for salvation. For this reason she was accepted as a member of the Methodist Society.

Thomas Charles

By the time Mary was a youth most of the earlier revival preachers had died, but a younger generation of men such as John Elias and Christmas Evans had been called by God to preach the Word. Also among these men was the Reverend Thomas Charles, who had studied at Oxford University and had also spent time at Olney in Buckinghamshire. Here he was influenced for good by John Newton (who wrote the hymn, 'Amazing Grace') and other well-known preachers who spent time in

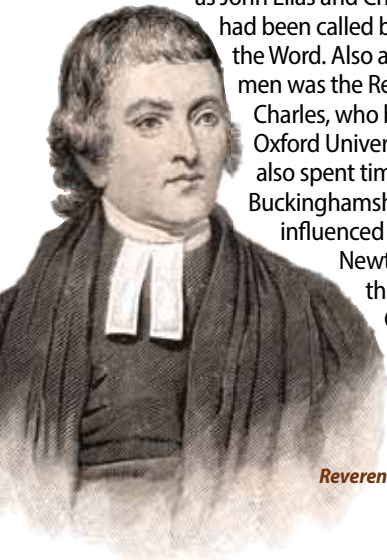
that town. In 1783 Charles began a long and fruitful ministry in the north Wales town of Bala which overlooks the attractive Bala Lake and green mountains beyond. This lake is the largest inland water in Wales; its Welsh name is Llyn Tegid (Thlin-tegid), which means 'lake of serenity'.

Sometimes as many as two thousand people would come to hear Thomas Charles preach God's Word at Bala. But out of concern for people throughout the country he often went on long tours, preaching in barns, farmhouses, and in the open air. On more than one occasion he preached to a vast crowd of twenty thousand people.

As a child Mary knew Thomas Charles, for he would sometimes come to preach at her chapel at Cwrt. He was a man of much wisdom, energy, and ability to organise. A close friend described him as, 'of moderate height, somewhat stout (heavily built), with a well-formed physique, comely, good-looking, lively of movement, with gentlemanly expression ... a man full of thought and judgement'.¹

He was concerned for the spiritual and educational needs of the people so he set up 'circulating schools' during the week, as well as Sunday schools. He would send teachers to a village who would encourage as many people as possible (of all ages) to come and learn to read and write. No one had to pay for these lessons as the Rev. Charles paid the teachers, having received generous support from his friends in England. These lessons would continue for about six months before the teachers moved on to another area. Sometimes Thomas Charles would visit the schools himself to examine the pupils and, in his usual kindly way, encourage them all to persevere.

Charles's great ambition was that they should have the opportunity to read and then discuss the Bible and its message.



Reverend Thomas Charles

Complete chapters, sometimes whole books of the Bible, would be committed to memory. Such was the success of this method of education that soon Wales became one of the most literate countries in Europe. These schools were a means of grace to thousands of people who were blessed as they read their Bibles.

Learning to read

Just before Mary's tenth birthday one of these school was set up in Abergynolwyn, and she was delighted to have the opportunity to attend and learn from her teacher John Ellis and, later, Lewis Williams.² Mary made excellent progress learning to read from the Welsh Bible—an excellent and majestic translation by Bishop William Morgan, first published in 1588 and then revised in 1620. This translation is of the same quality and accuracy as the English Authorised (King James) Version, and such has been its influence that without its widespread use over many generations it is possible that Welsh would not still be spoken as a living language today.

Mary's new ability to read deepened her interest in and love for God's Word. Time and again she would exclaim

Statue of the Rev. Thomas Charles

Note that one hand is on his heart, and with the other he is handing out a Bible

to herself, 'If only I had a Bible of my own!' But that could not be—at least, not yet. A local farmer's wife, Mrs Evans, kindly invited Mary to come to her home whenever she was free to read their family Bible in the parlour. Mary was only too pleased to walk the two miles (whatever the weather) to avail herself of the opportunity.

The journey for God's Word

By now Mary had resolved to work hard and save up the three shillings and sixpence to buy her very own Bible; in today's values this would be nearly £40.³ While this may not seem too expensive to us today, for a poverty-stricken girl in the late eighteenth century it would have been a huge challenge. Undaunted, she worked hard to save a little money week by week and month by month. She kept chickens and sold the eggs, sold the honey from her extra hive of bees, and also took in sewing. One day she returned a wallet she had found to its owner and was delighted to receive a sixpence for her honesty. In her own words she tells us that:

One stormy Monday morning I was walking to a farmhouse about 2 miles from my home. A gentleman riding a white horse and wearing a cloth cape came to meet me and asked where I was going through such wind and rain. I said I was going to a farmhouse where there was a Bible, that there wasn't one nearer my home and that the mistress of the farm had said that I could see the Bible which she kept on a table in the parlour, as long as I took my clogs off. I told him that I was saving every halfpenny, this long time, to get a Bible but that I didn't know where I could get one. The gentleman was Charles of Bala. He told me to come at a certain time, that he was expecting



some Bibles from London and that I could have one from him.⁴

The Rev. Charles lived in a big house at the centre of the High Street in Bala, twenty-six miles away. Here he held prayer meetings in his large attic room, and trained the teachers before they were sent out to the towns and villages. Part of the house was a busy grocer and draper's shop which was run by his diligent wife, Sally. Bala was one of the major market towns of north Wales where large quantities of woollen garments were sold. When market day came it was attended by many purchasers and up to £500-worth of woollen goods would be sold which in today's values would be nearly £90,000.⁵

Finally Mary, now nearly sixteen years old, had enough money to make the journey to Bala. The long journey and whatever dangers she might face on the way were not considered by her too much, if only she could obtain a Bible of her own. She walked barefoot (as so many people did in those days) up over the Cader Idris mountain, passing the lakes below and crossing mountain streams, through woods and

Footpath running along Cader Idris



Thomas Charles's House, Bala

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Plaques commemorating Thomas Charles and Mary Jones as found on the building today

fields to get to her destination. Again, in her own words she relates her memorable experience:

When the time came, my mother put the money and a little bread and cheese in one end of a wallet and my clogs in the other, and I set off for Bala on a fine morning, resting where there was a stream of clear water, to eat the bread and cheese. I came to Bala, and trembling, knocked on the door of Mr Charles' house. I asked for Mr Charles and was told he was in his study at the

back of the house. I was allowed to go to him and he told me the Bibles had not arrived. I started to cry because I did not know where to stay. He sent me to an old servant of his who had a house at the bottom of the garden, until the Bibles came. When they came, Mr Charles gave me three for the money, that is the price of one. I set off home with my precious burden. I ran a great part of the way, I was so glad of my Bible.⁶



Mary Jones in her old age, still with her Bible

Mary Jones was not the only young person anxious to obtain their own copy of the Bible. In a letter to a friend, the Rev. Charles reported that 'Young females, in service, have walked over thirty miles to me with only the bare hope of obtaining a Bible each; and returned with more joy and thanksgiving than if they had obtained great spoils.'⁷ It was becoming clear to this good man that there was a great need to publish more Bibles in the Welsh language. This matter was raised among his friends in London, and after much discussion, a new organisation was formed in 1804, to be known as The British and Foreign Bible Society. Among the early supporters was William Wilberforce, the great campaigner against the horrors of the slave trade. The vision of this new society was not only to provide Bibles in Welsh, but for as many of the world's language groups as possible.

Mary's later life

In 1813 Mary married Thomas Jones at St Mary's Church, Tallylyn (Tal-uh-thlin). Thomas was a weaver, and he and Mary

made their home at Cwrt, a very busy wool and cloth-making village.

Soon there was the joyful birth of a boy whom they named Lewis, followed by Mary, Jacob, John, and Ebenezer (Benny). Mary and Thomas would need the comfort that God gives His people from His Word, for there would be many sorrows as the years passed. Lewis died aged 18; Mary at about 18 months; Jacob at 15, and Ebenezer died young (we do not know at what age). Another baby daughter was born in 1826 which they named Mary, but sadly, she

also died aged 5. Three of these deaths were due to the scourge of tuberculosis (TB) that swept so many young people to any early grave in those times. Of her six children only John grew up to adulthood, and he later emigrated to the USA. In 1849 Mary Jones also lost her husband, Thomas, to tuberculosis. This was not only a great loss to Mary but a loss to the church where he was an elder, Bethlehem Chapel, Bryncrug (Brin-Creeg).

The question is sometimes asked: 'Did Mary Jones know that a new society had been formed as a result (at least in part) of her determination to save for years and then walk all that way for a Bible?' It is very likely that she did, for she knew the Rev. Charles well; the new society had been in existence for ten years by the time he died in 1814, during which time many Bibles had been published in a wide variety of languages.

In her later years Mary lived in a little end-of-terrace cottage at Bryncrug. Sadly she gradually went blind and was now unable to read her beloved Bible. A girl named



Lizzie Rowlands from Bala came to work in Bryncreg as a governess, and hearing of someone from Bala Mary Jones struck up a friendship with her. Often Lizzie would kindly read the Bible to Mary for her encouragement. One day, reminiscing of her teenage years, she told Lizzie of that memorable day that she walked to Bala for a Bible.

Lizzie Rowlands has left us with an interesting account of Mary's last days.

She was nearly 80 years old, small, thin and quite blind these many years, living in a small, miserable cottage. The poorest I have ever been in with an earthen floor, a small table with a rush candle on it and 2 or 3 three-legged stools. She wore the old Welsh dress, a petticoat and bed gown, an apron made of linsey and a white cap. To go out to chapel, she would wear a 'Jim Crow' (a soft felt hat), a blue homespun cloak and a hood and carry her stick in her hand. In winter she used to carry a lantern with horn windows, not to light her way, she could not see, but so as others could see her.⁸

In December 1864, Mary's redeemed soul passed from earth to heaven, and her mortal remains were buried in the

same grave as her husband at the rear of Bethlehem Chapel, Bryncreg. A marble headstone marks the spot and carries the following inscription, in English and Welsh:

IN MEMORY OF
MARY JONES
WHO IN THE YEAR 1800,
AT THE AGE OF 16, WALKED FROM
LLANFIHANGEL-Y-PENNANT
TO BALA
TO PROCURE A COPY
OF A WELSH BIBLE FROM THE
REV. THOMAS CHARLES, B.A.
THIS INCIDENT LED TO THE
FORMATION
OF THE BRITISH AND FOREIGN
BIBLE SOCIETY

A similar inscription is found on an obelisk erected in the centre of the ruin of the house Mary Jones lived in as a child at Tyn-y-Ddol.

A sound Bible society

After the death of Rev. Thomas Charles in 1814, some regrettable changes took place in the British and Foreign Bible Society. Some people involved did not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity (Trinity refers to the important biblical doctrine that there is



The grave of Mary Jones

one God, but three equal Persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—see 1 John 5.7). Those who denied the Trinity were also denying that Jesus was the true Son of God. To address the problem a special meeting was arranged for 7 December 1831 at Exeter Hall in the Strand, London.

A large crowd of people attended, and the decision was made to begin a new organisation: the Trinitarian Bible Society. So in an indirect way we must regard the Bible-loving Mary Jones as a forerunner of our society.

Finally you may wonder what happened to the three Bibles Mary Jones received. Some years ago I went to the University Library at Cambridge and was handed a Bible which had these words on the flyleaf:

*I bought this Bible in the 16th year
of my age. I am daughter
of Jacob Jones and Mary Jones His wife.*

The Lord may give me grace. Amen.

Mary Jones His the True Onour of this Bible.

Bought in the Year 1800. Aged 16th.

This is very interesting. Did Mary Jones learn to read English as well as Welsh? Quite possibly; but Welsh being her first language would explain why her spelling and wording in English is irregular. It appears that this was the Bible she used throughout her life.

Another 'Mary Jones's Bible' is kept at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. It is quite possible that her son John took the third one with him when he emigrated to America.

As we have seen, Mary Jones lived in a very remote part of the United Kingdom, yet her love for the Lord and His Word shone through resulting in wonderful things throughout the country. It is humbling to know that in some parts of the world today many people still have the same love and hunger for the Bible as Mary had.

Mary Jones's Bible

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Endnotes:

1. J. Aaron, *Thomas Charles of Bala* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth Trust, 2022), p. 353.
2. S. Eade, P. Hey and I. Hale, *Mary Jones*, 2015. I am very much indebted to a brief record (of just 14 sides of A4) by the late Sara Eade with Pauline Hey and Irene Hale, obtained in 2007 from the Mary Jones exhibition set up in the vestry of St Michael's Church, Llanfihangel-y-Pennant.
3. This calculation has been obtained from www.in2013dollars.com/uk/inflation/1784?amount=1.
4. S. Eade, *The World of Mary Jones: a Social History of the Places Mary Jones knew* (England: self published, 2015).
5. This calculation has been obtained from www.in2013dollars.com/uk/inflation/1784?amount=500.
6. Sara Eade with Pauline Hey and Irene Hale, p. 6.
7. J. Aaron, p. 215.
8. S. Eade with P. Hey and I. Hale, p. 11.