

CHARLES, THOMAS (1755 - 1814), Methodist cleric

Name: Thomas Charles
Date of birth: 1755
Date of death: 1814
Spouse: Sally Charles (née Jones)
Child: David James Charles
Child: Thomas Rice Charles
Parent: Jael Charles (née Bowen)
Parent: Rees Charles
Gender: Male
Occupation: Methodist cleric
Area of activity: Religion
Author: John Roberts

He was born 14 October 1755, probably at Longmoor, Llanfihangel Abercowin, Carmarthenshire, son of Rees Charles, farmer, and his wife Jael, daughter of David Bowen of Pibwr Lwyd, sheriff of Carmarthenshire in 1763; [David Charles I](#) was his brother. From Llanddowror village school he went (1769) to Carmarthen Academy under [Jenkin Jenkins](#), and thence (1775) to Jesus College, Oxford (B.A. 1779); his friends there were all of the Evangelical school. Ordained in 1778, he held various curacies in Somerset till 1783. But during a Long Vacation visit to his friend [Simon Lloyd](#) he had fallen in love with Sally Jones, daughter of a Bala shopkeeper (her mother had in the meantime married [Thomas Foulkes](#)), and married her 20 August 1783. As she would not leave Bala and her business [which in fact became Charles's financial mainstay], he sought curacies in the neighbouring region — at Llangynog, Montgomeryshire, Llandegla and Bryneglwys, Denbighshire, and Llanym-mawddwy, Merionethshire, but his Evangelical views made his position in all of these untenable, and any prospect of Anglican preferment in Wales vanished. On 2 July 1784 he was formally enrolled as a member of the Methodist Society at Bala, and his career thenceforth [though he not infrequently officiated in Anglican churches and chapels in England] was that of a preacher among the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists and an active member of their synodical assemblies — it was he who, c. 1800, initiated the important innovation of allowing the societies to choose their own 'leaders' (today called 'elders'), who had hitherto been centrally appointed by the Association.

He had early been shocked by the prevalent ignorance of the Scriptures among his people. The circulating schools of [Griffith Jones](#) and [Bridget Bevan](#) had by that time come to an end, and Charles resolved to provide a substitute. He trained group after group of travelling teachers, who remained for six or nine months at a time in a locality, teaching reading and the principles of religion; they were paid £10 a year out of funds collected ad hoc by the Methodist societies in North Wales. Later on, Charles decided that such schools should meet weekly, on Sundays. Charles was not 'the founder of the Sunday School' [even in Wales — see [M. J. Rhys](#) and [Edward Williams](#) (1750 - 1813)], and indeed some Welsh Methodists opposed this innovation; but it was he, by his organizing ability, his diligent visiting, and his energy in providing reading matter for

the schools, who placed the Welsh Sunday schools on a solid foundation. To remedy the paucity of reading matter, he set himself and others to work. In collaboration with [Thomas Jones](#) (1756 - 1820), and with the approval of the Association, he began in 1799 to issue the quarterly *Trysorfa Ysprydol*; he himself compiled a Biblical dictionary (*Geiriadur Ysgrythyrol*), 1805, and a doctrinal catechism (*Hyfforddwr*), 1807; both of these were in use throughout the 19th century; and a *Welsh spelling-book*, 1807; he also published '*Rules*' for the conduct of Sunday schools, 1813.

The paramount need, however, was a plentiful and cheap supply of Welsh Bibles. Though Charles had been greatly helped in this matter by the S.P.C.K., there were still not enough Bibles. As a member of the Religious Tract Society, he laid before that Society, 1802, a strong plea for more Welsh Bibles. One of the consequences which emerged from the discussion was the foundation of the British and Foreign Bible Society, which undertook as one of its first tasks an edition of the *Bible* in Welsh, under Charles's supervision.

During the last quarter of his life, Thomas Charles, now that [Daniel Rowland](#) and [William Williams](#) of Pantycelyn were dead, became the chief leader of his connexion. The books mentioned in a previous paragraph form but a part of his copious printed output — [in 1803, for the better furtherance of his publishing work, he had induced the printer [Robert Saunderson](#) to settle at Bala as quasiofficial printer to the connexion, but even before that], in *The Welsh Methodists Vindicated*, 1802, Charles had undertaken the rebuttal of charges of 'Jacobinism' brought against the Methodists [by such men as [T. E. Owen](#) and [Hugh Davies](#) of Aber], and he had been commissioned by the Association to promulgate its revision in 1801 of the connexion's official rules. A strictly orthodox though moderate Calvinist, he had taken a leading part (1791) in the expulsion of [Peter Williams](#) [no doubt he was alarmed by what seemed at the time to be the rapid spread of anti-Trinitarianism in west Wales].

But Charles is also remembered for the part he took in the Methodist ordinations of 1811 and the severance of the Anglican Church and Welsh Calvinistic Methodism. Himself a clergyman, he had long opposed this movement, and the Methodists of Caernarvonshire and Merioneth had supported him. But after two years of opposition, he gave way, and was indeed commissioned by the Association to draw up the form of ordination which is still in use by his denomination. And whatsoever may have been his feelings on the matter — his attachment to the Church, his moderate (even conservative) temper, his recoil from the more thrustful among the Methodist exhorters who cried out for ordination — he never looked back; he showed no sympathy for such South Wales Methodist clergymen as now abandoned the Connexion; he backed up the newly ordained ministers, and took a strong line with conservative Methodist societies which demurred at receiving the sacraments at their hands.

Thomas Charles died 5 October 1814, and was buried in the churchyard of Llanycil, then the parish church of Bala. His widow survived him by a mere three weeks, dying on 24 October They left two sons, Thomas Rice Charles [father of [David Charles III](#)], and of Jane Charles who became the wife of [Lewis Edwards](#)], who continued the family business, and David James Charles, who practised at Bala as a physician.

Author

Reverend John Roberts, (1879 - 1959)

Sources


The three-volume (English) *Life of Thomas Charles (Denbigh 1908)* by D. E. Jenkins, 1908, with its copious references and bibliography.

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Thomas Charles](#) 

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