

## HARRIS, HOWELL (1714-1773), religious reformer

**Name:** Howell Harris  
**Date of birth:** 1714  
**Date of death:** 1773  
**Spouse:** Ann Harris (née Williams)  
**Child:** Elizabeth Prichard (née Harris)  
**Child:** Ann Harris  
**Parent:** Susanna Harris (née Powell)  
**Parent:** Howell Harris  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** religious reformer  
**Area of activity:** Religion  
**Author:** Gomer Morgan Roberts

His father, who came from Llangadock, Carmarthenshire, to Talgarth, Brecknock, c. 1700, is called ' Howell Powell alias Harris ' in the Talgarth parish register; he married Susanna Powell of Trefeca-fach in 1702. Their eldest son, [Joseph Harris](#) and another son, [Thomas](#) also made names for themselves. Howel, their youngest son, was born 23 January 1714 and was educated at Llwyn-llwyd. From 1732 to 1735 he was a schoolmaster at Llan-gors and Llangasty. In 1735 the preaching of Pryce Davies, vicar of Talgarth, wrought wonderfully upon him and he began to evangelize in the neighbourhood of his home. He matriculated from S. Mary Hall, Oxford, but left the university within a week. He applied for holy orders in 1736 but this was refused because he was preaching irregularly (incidentally, this refusal was repeated more than once subsequently - and for the same reason). He consulted [Griffith Jones](#) who besought him without success to be more moderate. In 1737 he came into contact with [Daniel Rowland](#) and the two began to work together. Among their earliest converts were [Howel Davies](#) and [William Williams](#) of Pantycelyn. In 1742 these formed themselves and their adherent societies into an Association which formed an alliance with the corresponding Methodist movement in England. In the Calvinistic controversy the Welsh reformers sided with George Whitefield but Harris steadfastly supported the two Wesleys in their efforts for union. On 18 May 1744 he married Anne, daughter of John Williams, esquire, of Ysgrŷn ('Skreen'), Radnorshire. The next few years were spent preaching in England and Wales and in establishing societies as he went along. He came under the spell of the Moravians and, to the great distress of his friends, began to be influenced by the Patripassian doctrine. He was also influenced by a wealthy lady - [Mrs. Sidney Griffith](#) of Cefn Amwlch, Caernarfonshire - who claimed to be a prophetess. In 1750 a split occurred between him and his brethren, and Welsh Methodism was divided into two sects, the followers of [Rowland](#) and the followers of Harris. This hindered the success of the religious reformation in many districts.

In 1752 Harris retired to Trevecka where he established a 'Family' from among his supporters, being stoutly supported in this design by [Evan Moses](#) and [Thomas William](#) of Eglwys llan. Buildings for the 'Family' were erected on an extensive scale

at Trevecka and various trades and occupations were planned for the support of the community. Harris was interested in agriculture and was one of the founders of the Brecknockshire Agricultural Society (1755) - the first of its kind in Wales. Those were the days when a French invasion was feared and Harris formed a company of soldiers from among the members of the 'Family' with himself as captain. He was attached for a time to a militia regiment but as soon as the danger was over resigned his commission. In 1762 he rejoined his old associates and began once more to attend Associations, visit societies, and preach. But the old enthusiasm was lacking and he was conscious of the strong opposition of the unordained exhorters who refused to be guided by him any longer. He, in turn, opposed the tendency to break away from the Church of England, to erect chapels, and to make the Association a governing body. For all that, he gave his support to the countess of Huntingdon who in 1768 built a seminary at Trefeca-isaf for the training of Evangelical preachers. His health began to fail in 1772 and he died 21 July 1773 and was buried near the altar rails of Talgarth church.

He was not as great a literary figure as some of the other Methodist reformers but he wrote some hymns which are to be found in the small volumes published at that time, e.g. *Llyfr o Hymneu o Waith Amryw Awdwyr*, 1740, and *Sail, Dibenion, a Rheolau'r Societies*, 1742. The Trevecka press published a few of them in *Ychydig Lythyrau ... Ynghyd a Hymnau*, 1782. The same press had in 1774 published *Cennadwri a Thystiolaeth Ddiweddaf Howell Harris*, of which an English edition appeared the same year. He left behind him a large number of diaries which give a detailed account of his experiences, his journeys, and his preaching over a long period of time. It was from these diaries that the 'Family' collected the material for the autobiography (*A Brief Account*, etc.) published in 1791 (Welsh ed., *Hanes Ferr*, etc., 1792). From time to time, much that was written in the diaries has been published but more remains unpublished. His greatest contribution to the welfare of the people was his preaching. This was the means of waking the humbler classes of Wales from their torpid slumber and of revealing to them their spiritual endowments. He was, indeed, one of the makers of modern Wales. In spite of his cross-grained and dictatorial temper, his unceasing enthusiasm and his unbounded desire to save souls carried everything before him in the early days of the religious renaissance. The influence which he has had on the life of his people proves that he was the greatest spiritual force in his generation and many believe that he was the greatest Welshman of his age.

Harris's first child, ANNE, christened 14 December 1746, was buried 7 January 1748/9. His other, ELIZABETH HARRIS, later PRICHARD, was christened 18 December 1748. Nearly all our knowledge about her comes from references in Moravian records by her father's friends Lorenz Nyberg and Benjamin La Trobe, (printed in *Y Llenor*, xiv, 243, *Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes Bedyddwyr Cymru*, 1935, 14, 23-4, and the third essay in the volume *Er Clod*, 1935), and in the manuscript diaries of [Thomas Roberts](#) of Trevecka (at the National Library of Wales). She seems to have been good-hearted and impulsive, and to have become increasingly irked by the strict regime at Trevecka after the death of her father. On 10 May 1782 she was married at Talgarth to Charles Prichard, surgeon, of Brecon; the witnesses were her two cousins [Samuel Hughes](#) and [Elizabeth Robinson](#) (see [Harris, Thomas](#)); the entry in the register was printed by [M. H. Jones](#) in *Cylchgrawn Cymdeithas Hanes y Methodistiaid Calфинаidd*, ix. Prichard, of the old Roman Catholic family of Graig, Monmouth, ([Theophilus Jones](#), *History of the County of Brecknock*, 3rd ed., iii, 30), was a widower with three (some say four) children; he died 10 November 1804, aged seventy-three. He and Elizabeth had five children (*History of the County of Brecknock*); Elizabeth died 8 February 1826 - the inscription on her tombstone at Brecon is printed in *History of the County of Brecknock* ii, 103.

## Author

Reverend Gomer Morgan Roberts, (1904 - 1993)

## Sources

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*Cylchgrawn Cymdeithas Hanes y Methodistiaid Calфинаidd*, i-xxxv, passim

*Trefeca Manuscripts and Diaries at the National Library of Wales* at N.L.W.

## Further reading

William Williams, *Marwnad er coffadwriaeth am Mr. Howel Harries, yr hwn oedd un o'r rhai cyntaf a ddechreuodd y Diwygiad mawr yng Nghymru* (Aberhonddu 1773)

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Published date: 1959

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