

## THOMAS, JOHN ROWLAND (1881 - 1965), religious leader and prominent merchant

**Name:** John Rowland Thomas  
**Date of birth:** 1881  
**Date of death:** 1965  
**Spouse:** Lily Anna Thomas (née Jones)  
**Child:** Eluned Marian Thomas  
**Child:** Gwyneth Thomas  
**Child:** Morfudd Jenkins (née Thomas)  
**Parent:** Ann Thomas  
**Parent:** Griffith Thomas  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** religious leader and prominent merchant  
**Area of activity:** Business and Industry; Religion  
**Author:** William Thomas Owen

Born 2 March 1881 at Penrhyndeudraeth, Caernarfonshire, son of Griffith and Ann Thomas. In 1883 Griffith Thomas and the family returned to Dwygyfylchi, Penmaenmawr - his old area. John Rowland attended Pencae school, Penmaenmawr, and won a scholarship to Friars School, Bangor, but after two years transferred to the new John Bright School at Llandudno. He went to work for a short period for the railway company at Llandudno Junction, and when he was 18, he became, for three years, an apprentice at the Cloth Hall shop in Bethesda. He then went to work in the silk department at the shop of Thomas Lloyd (of Llanybydder) in London. This was the start of the period that made him a world-famous specialist in silk. After Selfridges bought Lloyd's shop in 1914, he stayed with them for five years. From 1919-20 (18 months) he was assistant to the silk buyer at Harrods; from 1920-22 the silk buyer at Derry & Toms, Kensington; from 1922-30 silk buyer at Harrods; from 1930-35 chief silk buyer for the John Lewis Partnership, and from 1935-53 one of the company's Directors. As the silk dept. of John Lewis in London employed 130 men, and as the partnership had a number of shops across the country, 'J.R.', (as he was known by everyone), could be considered the leading silk buyer in Europe, possibly the world, and his work regularly took him to the continent.

He was equally energetic in London's religious and Welsh life. From 1902-1965 he was a member of Tabernacl, King's Cross Welsh Congregational Chapel, a deacon 1921-1965, and secretary 1940-53. He was also the editor of the Tabernacl periodical, *Y Lamp*, from its inception. During the depression of the 1930s, when people from Wales flocked to London, he was conscious of the need to have Welsh chapels in the suburbs for them. In June 1936, when he was the association's secretary he addressed the quarterly meeting on 'Extending the Boundaries', and a direct result was the establishment of a committee to undertake the work. Welsh Congregational chapels were established in Slough, Luton and Harrow. 'J.R.' was the person mainly responsible for establishing the cause at Harrow in 1937, and under his leadership the church quickly grew to 200 members. As he was elected its first deacon and then made a deacon for life, he was, for 28 years a deacon in two churches at the same time! He was also a leader in the Union of Welsh independents. From 1941-52 he was its treasurer, from 1949-50 its President. His address from the chair, at Caernarfon, on the subject 'The Call to Move Ahead', displayed the same missionary zeal and religious restlessness which characterised him throughout his life. He was one of the energetic directors of the London Missionary Society. He promoted everything Welsh, and in 1925 was at the forefront establishing the London Caernarvonshire Society. Prominent (c. 1930) in establishing branches of Urdd Gobaith Cymru in several of London's Welsh chapels, he was one of the first Vice-Presidents of the Urdd. He was president of the Association of the Societies of London-Welsh Churches and a staunch life-long supporter.

In 1913 he married Lily Anna Jones (died 1964), a Welsh lady born in London. At their home, 'Y Nant', Dollis Hill, there was an open door for a host of Welsh people, especially ministers of the Gospel. They had 3 daughters; Morfudd, who married J. Idris Jenkins, the first minister of the Welsh Congregational church at Harrow; Gwyneth; and Eluned Marian, who emigrated to Toronto, Canada, and who was President of the North American Welsh National Gymanfa Ganu Association 1976-78. He died 16 April 1965.

### Author

Reverend Dr William Thomas Owen, (1914 - 2000)

### Sources

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**Published date:** 2001

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