

## GRIFFITHS, JOHN POWELL (1875-1944), minister (Baptist) and schoolmaster

**Name:** John Powell Griffiths  
**Date of birth:** 1875  
**Date of death:** 1944  
**Spouse:** Lilian Griffiths (née Jones)  
**Parent:** Griffiths (née Powell)  
**Parent:** J. E. Griffiths  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** minister (Baptist) and schoolmaster  
**Area of activity:** Education; Religion  
**Author:** D. Hugh Matthews

John Powell Griffiths was the son of J. E. Griffiths (1841-1918), minister of Horeb Welsh Baptist church, Skewen, Glamorganshire. The father was born in Froncysyllte and raised to the ministry in Pen-y-cae, where he had been taken by his uncle following the death of his parents when he was three years old. After training for the ministry in Llangollen Academy he was ordained in Swyddffynnon and Pontrhydfendigaid, Ceredigion in 1870, moving to be pastor of Horeb, Skewen, in 1874. He married a Miss Powell from Llanybydder, and it was her surname that was given as a Christian name on the eldest of their three children.

Powell Griffiths was born in his grandparents' home in Llanybydder on 25 September 1875 but brought up in Skewen. He received his early education in the National School in Skewen and the Alderman Davies School in Neath and then went to the 'Sawel Academy' conducted by the [Revd Jonah Evans](#) in Llansawel. It is said that it was there that he developed his interest in the classics. In 1894 he was admitted to the South Wales Baptist which had recently moved from Pontypool to Cardiff. The President of the College, [Dr William Edwards](#), who was already translating the New Testament into Welsh, was a keen classicist and it is little wonder that his enthusiasm should rub off on his pupil. Powell Griffiths was registered as a student in the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire in 1896 and he was a student there until he graduated Bachelor of Arts in June 1904. Honours degrees were not awarded at that time but University records show that he had graduated in Greek, Latin and Hebrew. A year after graduating Powell Griffiths was ordained minister of Painscastle and Llandeilo, Radnorshire, both English-language Baptist churches.

He moved to become minister in Mount Pleasant English Baptist church, Ponciau, Wrexham, in 1913, remaining there until his death in 1944. Lilian Jones, the wife he married in 1917, died after only two years of marriage. He never remarried but eventually employed a housekeeper to look after his home - and his students.

Powell Griffiths, it appears, succeeded J. W. Humphreys in the school that he had established while minister of Mount Pleasant; but such was his enthusiasm for the classics that he also conducted evening classes in Greek and Latin in Rhos and Ponciau. In a biographical note for the *Baptist Handbook* (1944-1946) [Herbert Morgan](#) (extra-mural tutor and organiser in Aberystwyth University) said that Powell Griffiths had served as a Greek tutor under the auspices of the W.E.A. when 'miners, clerks, labourers, shop-keepers, and others were introduced to the New Testament in its original form.' His work and success brought him to the notice of Stanley Baldwin, M.P., who, as a tribute to his enthusiasm and faith in the cause of mankind, sent him a copy of *The Classics and the plain man: Presidential Address delivered to the Classical Classical Association in the Middle Temple, 8th January, 1926*.

But his greatest contribution was to the work of preparing preachers and ministers. He specialised in teaching Greek, Latin and Hebrew to them before they sat entrance examinations to theological colleges, and that at a time when such colleges were full and competition for entry was fierce. He also taught History and Christian Doctrine when necessary. It is estimated that 140 ministers from different denominations went to him for teaching. Among them were [Dr Emlyn Davies](#), Toronto, Principals [Gwilym Bowyer](#) and [Tom Ellis Jones](#), Bangor, and the poet Rhydwen Williams.

The name 'Rhos College', which is sometimes used to refer to his school, can be misleading in spite of the number of ministers he trained. The teacher and his residential pupils all lived in 'Preswylfa', a terraced house in Stryt Osborne. He could, therefore, only cater for two residential students at a time, but there was an open door and welcome to anyone else who lived locally and wished to attend. He arranged preaching engagements for his residential students and the payment they received was enough to meet the costs of residence and teaching. In the evenings, their teacher would conduct his extra-mural classes and prepare for Sunday services and Monday prayer meetings.

Powell Griffiths believed that education was incomplete without mastery of the classics and if students put their mind to it, they could learn Latin and Greek quickly. According to Rhydwen Williams, the teacher was like a soldier drilling his recruits. He described him as 'A Roman who had learned Greek ... A centurion who had received grace. He raised an academy, but

chose to teach in the fashion of the regiment. His class was made up of soldiers, not students ...'

It was not only the classics that he taught in the village since he was considered an expert in mathematics and European languages, including Esperanto. When relaxing, he would take over the lounge in his home, fill his pipe, put his feet up and read French-language detective novels. Because of this, many parents in Rhos would ask Powell Griffiths to coach their children in French as well as Latin. Indeed, prior to the Second World War, he went to France regularly and preached there on several occasions.

His students were almost always successful in gaining admittance to the college of their choice - and that at a time when entry to theological colleges was fiercely contested - although it was the Cardiff College that he himself favoured. Ultimately it was passing the examination that he considered important, not which college was chosen. Preaching was also important to him, although he frowned on 'popular' preaching and insisted that students should concentrate on the content of their sermons.

Few denominational honours came to him - indeed he did not seek honours nor offices. He was reluctant to accept the Presidency of the North Wales Baptist Union which came to him twice.

He died after a short illness on Sunday, 5 March, 1944 at the age of 69. He was cremated the following Wednesday and according to his wishes, his ashes were scattered on his parents' grave in Aberduar Baptist Chapel, Llanybydder.

## Author

D. Hugh Matthews

## Sources

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Rhydwen Williams, *Gorwelion*, (1984);

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His photograph appears in *Gorwelion* and *Trafodion Cymdeithas Hanes y Bedyddwyr* (2007).

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