

## Two Early Welsh Friends

### John Thomas of Welshpool and Bristol, Inventor and Ironmaster

**J**OHN THOMAS, the Ironmaster and co-inventor with Abram Darby of casting cooking pots in iron, was born near Welshpool in 1690. He was the second of the five sons of Robert Thomas, "who was not a Friend but a sober man", and his wife Pricella Evans. The wife was "a fair Latin scholar and for a while in the service of the Countess Conway". Her parents were Edward and Katherine Evans, said to be natives of Radnorshire, but residing in Welshpool. They were imprisoned in November 1662 for declining to take the Oath of Allegiance, where Edward Evans "being an infirm man and unable to bear the Filth and Dampness of the Place, laid down his Life, the unwholesome Confinement there having hastened his death". He was buried in St. Mary's Churchyard, Welshpool. His wife was imprisoned for five years.

John Thomas was first employed by Thomas Oliver, Coedcowrid, Dolobran, Meifod, "a Minister among Friends". Later he was shepherd to Charles Lloyd, the Ironmaster of Dolobran. Here he succeeded in rescuing a flock of his master's sheep from a snowdrift, and later in the spring of the same year, during heavy rain and melting snow, he swam the river Vyrnwy to fetch home a herd of mountain cattle. These he collected and drove to the river, but the ford had now become a boiling torrent. He nevertheless crossed it on the back of an ox, and brought home the whole herd in safety. As a reward for his courage his master presented him with four of the sheep which he had saved. He sold their wool in order to buy better clothing for himself, and afterwards disposed of the sheep so that he might obtain money wherewith to travel to Bristol to seek his fortune. This was in 1704. Afraid of being taken for a soldier if found in Bristol out of work, it being the time of the Duke of Marlborough's wars, he requested his master to recommend him as an apprentice to a relative Edward Lloyd, a wine merchant who was one of the partners of the Baptist Mills. The boy was accordingly sent into the brassworks until he should procure employment. As he was looking on during the trials of the Dutch workmen to cast iron he told Abraham Darby that he thought he saw how they had missed it. He begged to be allowed to try, and he and Abraham Darby remained alone in the workshop the same night for the purpose.

Before morning they had cast an iron pot. The boy Thomas entered into an agreement to serve Abraham Darby and keep the secret. He was enticed by the offer of double wages to leave his master; but he continued nobly faithful, and afterwards showed

his fidelity to his master's widow and children following the untimely death of Abraham Darby. From 1709 to 1828 the Thomas family were confidential and much valued agents to the descendants of Abraham Darby. For more than one hundred years after the night in which Thomas and his master made their successful experiment of producing an iron casting in a mould of fine sand, with its two wooden frames and its air-holes, the same process was practised and kept secret at Colebrookdale, with plugged keyholes and barred doors.

John Thomas married Grace Zeane in Bristol in 1714, and died in 1760. Their son Samuel settled at Keynsham as a wire drawer, and married Esther Derrick in 1746. They had a son John, born in 1752, who commenced business as a grocer on the Somerset side of Bristol Bridge, the business being still carried on under the name of John Thomas, Sons and Company. In 1776 John Thomas the second married Elizabeth Ovens, of Bristol, and they had ten children. The chief interest of this John Thomas's life was the promotion of waterways for the facilitation of trade, especially the Somersetshire Coal Canal, and the proposed Kennet and Avon Canal to connect Bath with London. John Thomas the second retired in 1812 and purchased Prior Park, near Bath, where he died 3rd 3mo. 1827, aged seventy-five.

The fifth son of John and Elizabeth Thomas was George Thomas the noted Bristol Quaker Philanthropist. He was born 1791 and died without issue 1869.

Sources : Charles R. Gibson : *The Romance of Coal*. London, Seeley Service Co. 1923. *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, Vol. 17, 1920, quoting a pamphlet by J. F. Nicholls, Bristol City Librarian, c. 1870. *Life and Convincement of Richard Davies* : London.

## Cadwallader Edwards of Meifod

CADWALLADER EDWARDS, "one of the chiefs of the Quakers of Meifod", in Montgomeryshire, was first a member of the Independent Conventicle, in Dolobran township<sup>1</sup> founded 1640, and the earliest recorded Nonconformist Church in Wales. In 1660 at the approach of the Restoration he was imprisoned at Montgomery for his faith. There he met Richard Davies, the Welshpool Quaker and Autobiographer, and was converted to Quakerism. The first Friends Meeting in Meifod was held in his house at Dolobran 9 mo. (Nov.) 1662. He was again in prison for ten years from 1662-1672 at Welshpool for refusing to swear the oath of Allegiance and Supremacy. On his release he became a partner with his fellow prisoner Sarah Wilson in the Parc

<sup>1</sup> Dolobran although the name of the residence of the Lloyds of Dolobran, the Bankers and Ironmasters, is also the name of the township. The neighbourhood has very strong protestant traditions commencing with the Lollards, Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham, being captured here.

Mathrafal Iron Forge in the Meifod valley. He died a prisoner for debt in Fleet Prison before 1708.

Thomas Cadwalladr (i.e. Thomas ap Cadwaladr ap Edwards),<sup>1</sup> Dolobran, an educated man who assisted Amos Davies (clerk of the Dolobran Forge) and John Kelsall (Quaker schoolmaster) in 1707 in drawing up Trust Deeds of burial grounds and Meeting Houses was probably his son. Thomas married 4 mo. (July) 1712 Hannah Marchant of Manorbier, Pembrokeshire.

A. STANLEY DAVIES

<sup>1</sup> Until about 1850 Welshmen took their father's Christian name as their surname. When, however, a family came into contact with the outside world, or moved into England, the surname became fixed.