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THE REV. JOHN GRIFFITH AND THE REVIVAL OF THE ESTABLISHED CHURCH IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY GLAMORGAN

by

WILTON D. WILLS

FEW religious leaders in the last century were more actively involved in the religious and social life of Wales or provoked more heated controversy than the Rev. John Griffith, vicar of Aberdare between 1847 and 1859 and rector of Merthyr Tydfil from 1859 until his death in 1885. His long and turbulent pastorate spanned the most formative years in the history of Glamorgan and was associated with that part of the county in which not only the industrial but also the political and religious life of modern Wales was forged.¹ The interesting feature of his life was his gradual abandonment of the strong Tory sympathies which he had expressed as the young and inexperienced vicar of Aberdare in 1847. John Griffith grew with his parish into a dedicated evangelical and involved himself completely and professionally in the evangelical crusades in the south Wales coalfield in the 1850's and 1860's: in so doing he became estranged from the Tory establishment who controlled county and Church affairs and from the ironmasters and coal-owners who controlled the county's economic life. John Griffith is perhaps more representative of the evangelical movement in Glamorgan than any other Anglican clergyman. Inspired in the 1840's by fear of the county social order for its survival this was a movement which attempted to revive and extend the agencies of the established Church for social and political reasons but which also

¹ See especially books and articles by Mr. Ieuan Gwynedd Jones, Dr. Kenneth O. Morgan and Dr. Gwyn A. Williams. Merthyr and Aberdare was the focal point of the growth of political Nonconformity and Liberalism in Wales in the 1860's and of the labour and trade union movement in the 1880's and 1890's.

produced religious zealots as obstinate and as independent as John Griffith. Towards the end of his pastorate John Griffith had more in common with the Nonconformists not only in his religious opinions but also in his sympathies for the working-class and the aspirations of the Welsh nation. The Tory authorities of the established Church had long come to regard him as an outrageous and irreconcilable opponent who would have decomposed the entire social and political character of the Church. In the serious industrial disputes of the 1870's John Griffith sided with the miners against their employers, and finally, in 1884, he openly supported the campaign of the Liberation Society to disestablish the Church in Wales.²

John Griffith was appointed to the living of Aberdare in 1846 but he did not take up residence in his parish until March 1847. He was 28 years of age and, in common with most of his new parishioners, he was a west-Walian. He was the son of a gentleman farmer of Llanbadarnfawr, near Aberystwyth, and had been educated at the Church school at Ystrad Meurig which was used exclusively by the gentleman-farmers of Cardiganshire who intended a university education for their sons.³ Griffith had sprung from the lower ranks of the *uchelwyr* of west Wales and this should be remembered when examining his infamous and "treacherous" indictment of Aberdare in the reports of the Welsh Education Commissioners in 1847—evidence which he gave after only a month's residence in the parish. He had grown up in the rural society of west Wales, a society divided by the intense bitterness which existed between the landowning *uchelwyr* and the poor tenant-farmers and farm labourers. Griffith had reached manhood at the height of the Rebecca Riots.

² News of the death of John Griffith in 1885 was received with mixed feelings. The Church periodical *Yr Haul* gave a polite but critical summary which is not surprising in view of Griffith's life-long antagonism against it. Charles Wilkins, the editor of the *Red Dragon*, and a close friend of John Griffith at Merthyr, was almost poetical in his lavish praise. The most revealing notices appeared in the *Western Mail* from which it is evident that Griffith had few remaining friends amongst the clergy of the Church.

³ His education was completed at Bishop Gore Grammar School where he was a contemporary of Henry Austin Bruce of Mountain Ash who may well have been instrumental in Griffith's appointment to Aberdare.

He had no sympathy for the lower orders and took a critical view of the moral condition of the unstable and volcanic society of the south Wales of the 1840's. He had graduated at Cambridge in 1841 and had been ordained by the bishop of Chester. After a brief apprenticeship in the poor curacy of Astbury in Cheshire his social connections obtained for him the valuable patronage of Sir Stephen Glynne, the brother-in-law of W. E. Gladstone, and for a brief period he became the family chaplain at Hawarden. But the collapse of the family finances in 1846 compelled the young and fashionable evangelical to seek alternative employment. It was at this time that he started writing outspoken articles to the press, attacking with considerable boldness the abuses which still persisted in the established Church despite the reforms of the 1830's. His letters to the *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* under the *nom de plume* of "Cambro Sacerdos" attracted the attention of the owner of the newspaper, the Marquis of Bute, who was himself an evangelical and an ardent Church reformer.⁴ As Lord Lieutenant, Bute had the dual responsibility of preserving order within the county and directing from Cardiff Castle the revival and extension of the moral and religious influence of the established Church. The marquis and his agents wanted clergymen who would be effective in the growing industrial parishes of Glamorgan both as pastors and magistrates. John Griffith, with his strong sense of evangelical urgency and acceptable social background, appeared to be an excellent man to appoint to the newly revived and vacant parish of Aberdare.

The living at Aberdare was neither the most lucrative nor the most attractive in Wales, and young John Griffith must surely have regarded it as a "stepping stone" to further promotion in the Church. In 1846 the living, formerly a perpetual curacy, had been separated from the parish of Llantrisant to which it had been annexed for centuries. The prolonged negotiations with the vicar of Llantrisant—who was very reluctant to surrender the valuable marriage and

⁴ *W(estern) M(ail)*, 5 September 1877. A letter from John Griffith describes this episode in his life. He refers to the fact that his attack on clerical abuses had embarrassed the non-resident Bishop Coplestone who stopped him writing in the *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian*. Griffith had promptly started writing for *John Bull*.

burial fees of Aberdare—were started in the early 1830's but were not completed until 1846.⁵ Even in Wales the vested interest of an incumbent could stand in the way of the reform and progress of the Church. The "new" parish of Aberdare, which was endowed by the Marquis of Bute with an income of £85 per annum, and which had been previously served by a curate appointed by the vicar of Llantrisant, was a very difficult one stretching over a vast area of 50 square miles from Hirwaun in the north down the Cynon Valley as far as Mountain Ash.⁶ It was the centre of a well-established and expanding iron industry owned by Richard Fothergill and Crawshay Bailey and of the new infant coal industry being developed by Thomas Powell, Thomas Wayne and other prominent coal-owners. In the 1840's the parish of Aberdare was growing at a fantastic pace; new ironworks and collieries were being opened each year and the population of over 12,000 was growing at the rate of 1,000 people each year. The immigrant population were almost all of them west-Walians and settled in the different scattered communities of Hirwaun, Trecynon, Llwydcoed, Cwmdare, Abernant, Aberaman, Cwmbach, Cwmaman, Capcoch, Mountain Ash and Abercynon. To minister to the needs of this widely scattered flock John Griffith had the assistance of one curate. The parish church of St. John's, Aberdare, was a small, decayed and ancient structure which had been neglected for centuries and which had inspired one English visitor to describe as a place where "an Englishman would not litter his most ignoble quadruped", in which the people of Aberdare "worshipped their maker in darkness, pelted through the crevices by the elements and immersed in dirt, more profound and impenetrable than their own miserable hovels".⁷ It took John Griffith ten years to raise

⁵ C(ardiff) P(ublic) L(ibrary), Bute MSS, contain solicitors' bills for the negotiations. I am grateful to Mr. T. J. Hopkins for recently bringing this to my notice. The other vested interest involved was the Dean and Chapter of Gloucester who were patrons and impropiators of Llantrisant. Bute's good intentions were also frustrated in the case of St. John's and St. Mary's Cardiff.

⁶ The average annual net income of incumbents in England and Wales was £285. At Aberdare Griffith received less than an assistant curate would have received in England.

⁷ B. H. Malkin, *The Scenery, Antiquities and Biography of South Wales* (2nd

sufficient funds to make the historic parish church fit for public worship.⁸ The other place of anglican worship until 1858 was a licensed room at Hirwaun, apparently in one of the local public houses.⁹ In Cardiff Street, Aberdare, the Church also maintained a small National School which was supervised by the vicar and attended by about 80 children. Consequently, the influence of the established Church in Aberdare was very weak. The returns made by the parish in the census of religious worship held on 30 March 1851 show that the parish of Aberdare had become in the previous fifty years a stronghold of Nonconformity.¹⁰ The parish was served by at least fourteen large nonconformist chapels and it can be estimated with some degree of certainty that between 5,000 and 6,000 of the 12,000 inhabitants were members or hearers of the nonconformist denominations.¹¹ Active membership of the established Church on the other hand can have been little more than 400 people who, on Griffith's own admission, were drawn almost entirely from the old town of Aberdare.¹² It is evident from the census that John Griffith had made no headway amongst the immigrant population who had settled in the outlying communities of his parish. The answer to the question as to why this should have been would resolve the wider and vital question of why did Nonconformity make such remarkable progress in early

ed. 1807), p. 258. In 1847 John Griffith described the chancel as a "damp and dingy place". Various other sources show that the ancient churches of south Wales were in a deplorable condition. One of the main causes of the growth of nonconformity was the absence of efficient clergy and suitable Church accommodation.

⁸ The restoration was completed by 1859 at a cost of £900.

⁹ C(hurch) B(uilding) S(ociety), File No. 5032, John Griffith to the Society, 20 June 1850. A church was not built at Hirwaun until 1856.

¹⁰ Public Record Office, H.O./129. The information has been extracted from the individual returns made by places of worship in the parish of Aberdare on Sunday, 30 March 1851.

¹¹ In attempting to calculate the strength of the denominations from the attendance figures made in the returns, I have added to the number which attended the evening service one half of the number which attended the morning service and a third of those who attended the afternoon services and the Sunday schools.

¹² N(ational) L(ibrary) of W(ales) MSS, LL/QA/55, Bishop of Llandaff, Visitation, 1848, information supplied by John Griffith.

nineteenth-century Wales. One obvious answer is that many of the immigrant population had become Nonconformists because of the failure of the Church to provide for their religious needs during the crucial years of industrialisation. But the explanation of the religious patterns of Aberdare may well have been complicated by other factors. The migrants who settled in Aberdare had broken with the oppressive society of the Tory *uchelwyr* and the established Church: with the burdens of church rates, tithes, high rents and the new Poor Law. Was Nonconformity for the migrant who had adopted the freer society of industrial Wales an expression of his desire to break completely with his rural past?¹³

The storm which broke in Aberdare over the "Blue Books"—*The Reports of the Commission of Inquiry into the State of Education in Wales*—appears to have been an extension of the social struggles of the farming society of west Wales into the expanding world of industrial Glamorgan. The young vicar, John Griffith, was quite clearly on the side of the *uchelwyr*, that is, of the social order of established Church and landowners. The evidence he gave the commissioners about his parish consisted of generalisations:

(on *Sobriety*). Generally speaking, there is very little sobriety. The men drink in beer shops and are occasionally joined by the women; but on the whole the women drink at home. Saturday night and Sunday night and also Monday morning are always spent in drinking if the times be good. If it be after pay day the carousal is generally extended till Tuesday or even Wednesday.

(*Religious feeling and observances*). Their religious feelings are very peculiar to the temperament of the Welsh. They are very excitable, have nothing what is considered elsewhere a disciplined religious mind. They go to meetings at six, come out at eight, and spend the remainder of the evening in beer shops. Properly speaking, there is no religion whatsoever in my parish, at least I have not yet found it.

¹³ See particular articles by Mr. Ieuan Gwynedd Jones in *Ceredigion*, 1965, and in the *Journal of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society*, 1968.

(*Care of Children*). The Welsh are very fond of their children but they have no idea of parental responsibility. No matter how well off a man may be, he immediately takes his boy from school as soon as he has arrived at the legal age to work. Once at work, the child becomes a man in miniature. He contracts all the vices of a man; he drinks, smokes and commits all kinds of immorality. There are spots in my parish where of a summer's evening knots of these men in miniature may be seen, ages varying from 12 to 17, congregated together to drink and smoke in the open air. The moment a child commences to earn money he feels his independence, and on the slightest quarrel with his parents he separates from his father's roof and takes lodgings elsewhere and becomes, as it is unnecessary to say, the nuisance of the whole community. I could cite many instances of this description. It is also no infrequent thing to see the father and the son come out of a beer shop together, both intoxicated, the father amused to see a lad of 13 following his own examples. The parents themselves, being uneducated, they have no idea of its advantages to their children. When I have gone to parents to induce them to send their children to the parish school, they have done so with the idea that they were conferring an obligation upon me rather than a benefit upon their children.

(*General Intelligence*). As the bulk of the people are engaged in mining all day, and spend their evenings for the most part in the tavern, and as they are totally uneducated, I do not believe they ever reflect on their position beyond the present moment. Intervals of sensuality, and labour as the means of procuring them more, seem to me, as far as my experience goes, to be the only subject which mostly engages their attention. A sense of their own position in life they certainly have not, and perhaps it is as well, as this in its present state is very degrading indeed. Naturally the Welsh are very intelligent, perhaps more so generally than other inhabitants of the British Isles.

(*Character of Females*). Nothing can be lower, I would say more degrading, than the character in which the woman stands

relative to the men. The men and women, married as well as single, live in the same house and sleep in the same room. The men do not hesitate to wash themselves naked before the women; on the other hand, the women do not hesitate to change their under-garments before the men. Promiscuous intercourse is most common, is thought of as nothing, and the women do not lose caste by it.¹⁴

The furore which followed the publication of the report in 1847 and the development by John Griffith of the main points of his indictment in letters to the *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* and the *Monmouthshire Merlin* under the *nom de plume* of "Ordivices" turned the whole parish against him. In defence of John Griffith it should be said that his generalisations were basically true: life in Aberdare was both brutal and immoral. But Griffith made no reservations in his indictment either about the good influence of the Nonconformists or the Sunday-schools. In making a strong case for increased government aid for the voluntary schools of the established Church in south Wales, Griffith, like most of his fellow clergymen gave evidence which was prejudiced and tempered to attract the attention of the Government. The report was a political lever to draw attention to the need for more churches and school in south Wales. Griffith expressed the Tory viewpoint in 1847 that the moral and religious education of Wales could not be safely left in the hands of the Nonconformists—as the recent political and social instability of Chartism had shown.¹⁵ For the vicar of Aberdare the whole affair was a personal disaster. The Nonconformists, led by the Baptist minister, Dr. Thomas Price, successfully ostracised and disgraced him. Public meetings were held in the chapels to refute his evidence, and Dr. Price quickly won the reputation as a staunch defender of the moral reputation of Welsh womanhood. He became the obvious leader of the Nonconformists in Aberdare who were

¹⁴ *C(ardiff) and M(erthyr) G(uardian)*, 26 February 1847 reprints this evidence.

¹⁵ The Bute manuscripts at the National Library and the Cardiff Public Library reveal that the Bute administration suspected a close connection between Chartism and the growth of Nonconformity.

becoming increasingly conscious of their numerical strength and their potential influence in the social and political life of the parish.¹⁶

The whole parish was a frontier seething with the industrial progress of the steam age. Unstable, turbulent and often brutal, the social life of the parish was a strange mixture of good and evil. If a census had been taken on 30 March 1851 of the public houses and their attendances, it would have given the historian perhaps a more balanced view of the lives of the iron-workers and colliers of south Wales; for if religious enthusiasm was one of the virtues of the parish, heavy drinking was its biggest vice. Such drinking was perhaps the product of the type of society which Victorian "laissez-faire" had created rather than of human weakness. The sanitary and living conditions of Aberdare and Merthyr Tydfil were unbelievably bad. In 1849 the Merthyr Union, which included Aberdare, registered the highest number of deaths from cholera and diarrhoea of any other Union in the United Kingdom—1,779 deaths.¹⁷ Human life was brutalised not only by the filth and dirt of rapid and unplanned urbanisation and overcrowded houses but also by the long hours of work and the heavy and dangerous nature of employment in the iron and coal industries. No reader of the newspapers of the middle of the last century can escape being struck by the brutality of the lives of the working classes. Exploding furnaces, mining disasters, frequent industrial injuries, regular visits of the cholera and unemployment; these were the hardships of the industrial workers and the stuff of which Chartists were made. The only consolations were the high wages and the drink and the strike or riot in which the workers could express their discontent and misery. In 1849 Griffith wrote to the Church Building Society describing his parish as a "San Fransisco" of immigration and unrest. "We are continually having strikes here", he wrote. "There is not a fortnight since we had one of ten weeks. We are just entering another: how long it will last and whether it will end quietly God only knows. There is some excitement here always. Had we more churches and more church rooms we should, I trust, do better. As it is now we are very

¹⁶ See particularly I. G. Jones, *Dr. Thomas Price and the Election of 1868 in Merthyr Tydfil in Welsh History Review*, Vol. 2, Nos. 2 and 3.

¹⁷ *Report on the Cholera Epidemic of 1866*, p. 15.

bad.”¹⁸ The strike did not end peacefully, and was dramatised by the murder of a blackleg worker, John Thomas of Cwmbach. The strike of 1849-50 in Aberdare roused not only the concern of the Home Office in London but also triggered off an evangelical crusade by the established Church in the industrial parishes of south Wales directed by the new resident Bishop of Llandaff, Dr. Alfred Ollivant. The Chartist disturbances, the European revolutions of 1848, and the Aberdare strike were the background to a reassertion by the upper classes of Glamorgan of their responsibilities for the moral and religious welfare of the masses. In 1850 the Church was on the move. At Aberdare, John Griffith was on the move, inspired by the same sense of evangelical zeal and moral earnestness which inspired the Nonconformists. The visit of the cholera in 1849 was a reminder to men in the coalfield of their mortality and Griffith, like his nonconformist colleagues, regarded it as divinely inspired to fill the chapels and improve the moral and religious tone of the community.

The parish of Aberdare was the first to benefit from Bishop Ollivant's emergency operation. Schoolrooms and other suitable buildings in the different corners of the parish were immediately licensed for public worship and additional curates were sent into the industrial parishes to supplement the work of the incumbent.¹⁹ In the 1850's the established Church made more progress in Aberdare than it had done in the previous hundred years. Three new large churches were built—St. Elvan's in 1850 at a cost of £6,000, St. Fagan's, Trecynon in 1854 at a cost of £5,000, and St. Lucius, Hirwaun in 1856 at a cost of £3,700.²⁰ Three new National Schools were built; at Cwmbach in 1851, Trecynon in 1858, and in Cardiff Street, Aberdare in 1859. These schoolrooms were also used for public worship. The clerical manpower of the Church in Aberdare was also increased: Trecynon became a separate parish with its own vicar in 1856 and the remainder of the parish was supervised by John Griffith with the assistance of five additional curates who served

¹⁸ C.B.S. No. 4219. Griffith to the Society, 11 December 1849.

¹⁹ The additional curates were poorly paid. They received grants from the various Church Societies which varied between £40 and £60 per annum.

²⁰ St. Fagan's was rebuilt in 1856 after being destroyed by fire.

either in one of the consecrated churches or licensed rooms.²¹ Suddenly and dramatically the established Church in the parish of Aberdare became in a matter of years an efficient and active religious denomination, and a denomination with a distinctively working-class character. John Griffith quickly won a reputation for himself as an evangelical preacher. He deliberately appealed to the masses and it was his frequent complaint that many of his fellow clergy were far too much concerned with keeping up with the fashions and satisfying the whims of the middle classes. Griffith was essentially a working-class preacher and used the theatrical pastoral techniques which the Nonconformists had used successfully for a hundred years. The formal Church services at Aberdare gave way to histrionic performances, reports of which shocked and offended the more conservative clergy in the Vale of Glamorgan. Griffith at Aberdare revelled in using what can be crudely called high-pressure salesmanship, deliberately setting out to win over his hearers by giving them good entertainment value. He won the reputation at Aberdare of being able to capture and delight his congregation, using his large muscular appearance and grave features to full advantage to move his listeners, to produce the "oohs" and the "ahs" which accompanied a dramatic story. It should be remembered that mid-nineteenth century congregations actually participated in the sermons and expressed openly their reactions to the preacher: they came to church or chapel to be entertained, to be frightened and amused, as well as to be inspired. It was often said of John Griffith that he could have made a great reputation for himself in the ranks of the Nonconformists. The curates who assisted him were similarly men of evangelical zeal; drawn from the poorer classes and ordained without having received any formal education or training. They were classed as "literates" or non-graduates and were lowly paid. Over them John Griffith assumed a protective role directing their pastoral work, and, whenever possible, promoting their careers. Their efforts were very rarely recorded. David Griffith, the curate at Hirwaun, appears to have been very effective in building up an active local congregation and a Sunday-school in the 1850's.²²

²¹ N.L.W. LL/BR/2.

²² *Cambrian*, 27 March 1857.

These years at Aberdare were for Griffith years of growing estrangement with the Tory social order which controlled the Church. Frequently he expressed his impatience with the red tape and lethargy of the "central office" at Llandaff Cathedral: with the licences, the ecclesiastical legalities and technicalities, the visitations and Bishop Ollivant's insistence upon rigorous orthodoxy in matters of clerical discipline, ritual, doctrine and education. He was often frustrated by the indifference of his own class towards the needs and problems of the industrial parishes and his own efforts to provide more schools and churches in Aberdare. The death of the second Marquis of Bute in 1848 he regarded as a major disaster for the Church in Glamorgan for it deprived the county of a man who had not only the zeal but also the wealth to restore the influence of the established Church. The ironmasters and coal-owners of Aberdare were completely indifferent, while the trustees of the young third Marquis were "dilatory in everything".²³ And yet, complained Griffith, thousands of pounds were subscribed to restore Llandaff Cathedral to its primitive Gothic simplicity, and to restore the ancient and historic fabric of St. Woolos, Newport and other churches of rural south Wales. Money which could have been better used to provide churches and clergy where they were desperately needed was, complained Griffith, being squandered on preserving ancient monuments.²⁴

John Griffith's relations with the Nonconformists of Aberdare appear to have run hot and cold throughout his pastorate there. While they respected his religious zeal and moral earnestness they regarded him with suspicion and frequently challenged the socially privileged position he claimed for himself. His arch-opponent was Dr. Thomas Price, the Baptist minister of Penpound—later of Calfaria—Chapel, who in the columns of *Y Gwron* engaged in a running battle with the vicar throughout the 1850's. It was Price who, in 1847, organised public meetings at Siloa, the largest Congregational chapel, to which Griffith was summoned to vindicate his evidence to the Education Commissioners. At the subsequent

²³ C.B.S. No. 4219.

²⁴ *M(onmouthshire) M(erlin)*, September 1848, and various letters in the *S(tar) of G(went)* in the 1850's.

meeting—which Griffith refused to attend—Price and the other nonconformist ministers condemned the vicar's evidence as consisting of "general statements, utterly void of truth" and resolved that the local M.P., Sir John Guest, should be asked to repudiate the vicar's evidence in Parliament, and that copies of their resolutions should be sent to the Committee of Council on Education and to Lord John Russell.²⁵ In 1853, Griffith once more disturbed the denominational peace of Aberdare by a printed circular in which he had described Hirwaun as "a spiritual wilderness" and had argued the desperate need for a church in the community. The Rev. D. E. Williams, Minister of Nebo, the large and powerful Independent chapel at Hirwaun, replied in no uncertain terms that Griffith was distorting the truth in order to raise funds for a new church.²⁶ The uproar in the press developed into a personal attack on Griffith himself and upon his recent appointment to the magistrates' bench. *The Star of Gwent* suggested that Griffith would best be employed preventing crime rather than punishing it.²⁷ The nonconformist ratepayers of Aberdare expressed their disapproval of the vicar by using their votes to elect Dr. Thomas Price to replace him as one of the Poor Law Guardians on the Board of the Merthyr Poor Law Union.²⁸ During the years of the Crimean War (1854-56) his relations with the Nonconformists improved. The rapid expansion of industry and population which the war stimulated, absorbed the energy of all the religious denominations. But after the war the growing depression in the iron industry increased tensions in Aberdare once more. In 1858 great excitement was aroused by proposal of the vicar and the trade to organise "rustic sports" to celebrate the marriage of Queen Victoria's eldest daughter to the Crown Prince of Prussia. Price regarded the sports as degrading and tried to rouse up as much opposition as possible in *Y Gwron*, the local newspaper which he edited.²⁹ He objected to the proposal to hold races involving women, but the whole affair fizzled out.³⁰ A

²⁵ See I. G. Jones, *Dr. Thomas Price*; also B. Evans, *Cofiant Dr. Price, Aberdâr*, (1891).

²⁶ *S.G.*, July, August, 1853.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ I. G. Jones, *Dr. Thomas Price*, p. 160.

²⁹ See Evans, *Cofiant* pp. 51-57.

³⁰ C.P.L. MSS 3-508, Letters of John Griffith.

strong meeting was held in one of the Methodist chapels and although Price and the radicals blustered the peacemakers prevailed.³¹ In the same year Griffith provoked the Nonconformists by pleading the case for Sunday trains to be run for the workers of Aberdare and their families.³² He did not share their sabbatarian feelings, as the following letter from a certain David Davies, tailor and draper of Ystradyfodwg, suggests: "A young man from Aberdare rose up in the middle of the congregation and said that the vicar of Aberdare was saying that he could have his service in his church every morning at 11 o'clock and could go to play football in the evening if it was not through Mr. Price, Penpound, and his church."³³ The writer of the letter required reassurance.

Difficult and perhaps embittered though the relations between Griffith and the Nonconformists at Aberdare may have been he did win their respect, and Charles Wilkins in his *History of Merthyr Tydfil* would have us believe that for years after he had left Aberdare he was still known as "the honest vicar".³⁴

In 1858 John Griffith was appointed rural dean to the industrial parishes of Glamorgan, and in the following year was promoted to the wealthy living of Merthyr Tydfil, worth over £600 per annum.³⁵ These two appointments gave him the official leadership of the industrial clergy in South Wales. The previous holder had been John Colquhoun Campbell, a distant cousin and protégé of the marquis of Bute, who was elevated in 1859 from the rectory of Merthyr Tydfil to the bishopric of Bangor. Congratulating friends of John Griffith warmly predicted that *his* next promotion would be a Welsh bishopric.³⁶

The parish of Merthyr Tydfil was a larger, more settled and older community than Aberdare, and had a population of about 50,000. In contrast to Aberdare the industrial life of Merthyr Tydfil had been relatively stagnant in the 1850's. The evidence suggests that the town had passed its high-water mark of industrial

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Yr Haul*, 18 Mehefin 1885.

³³ C.P.L. MSS 3-508. Letters to John Griffith, 10 August 1858.

³⁴ Charles Wilkins, *The History of Merthyr Tydfil*, (1908), p. 310.

³⁵ *Ecclesiastical Revenues Commission Report*, 1835—worth £675 net.

³⁶ C.P.L. MSS 3-508.

development and that there was in the 1850's some movement of people away from the town.³⁷ The Census of Religious Worship held in 1851 showed that Merthyr Tydfil was a citadel of the nonconformist denominations. The town contained at least 48 nonconformist chapels and the Nonconformists could claim that over 20,000 of the inhabitants as members or hearers. The established Church had five places of worship in the parish—four churches and one licensed room—and a following of about 2,000 Anglicans, roughly 5 *per cent* of the town population. The parish had been virtually abandoned to the Nonconformists. Much of the blame must rest with George Martin Maber, the rector between 1834 and 1844, and a former tutor of the marquis of Bute, who had refused to reside within his parish and who had delegated his pastoral duties to a curate who was paid £143 per annum.³⁸ His successor, J. C. Campbell—a brother-in-law of H. A. Bruce the future Lord Aberdare—was a man of evangelical temper and had been diligent in his duties but neither inspiring nor popular.³⁹ The changes which had taken place under him were significant: new churches had been built at Cyfarthfa and Pontyrrhun. In 1859 negotiations were being completed for making the district of Pontyrrhun a separate and independent parish. Dowlais, on the northern outskirts of the parish had already been made a separate parish under the rigid control of the Guest interest as early as 1827. The larger part of the parish still remained under the care of the rector and to assist him in his pastoral work in 1859 he had three additional curates.

Griffith was appointed to Merthyr Tydfil at the height of the town's worst economic depression. After the Crimean War the

³⁷ Thomas Jones Dyke, *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of Merthyr Tydfil for the year 1865*, p. 6. In the ten years 1851-60 Merthyr Tydfil grew from 46,692 to 49,520 but births exceeded deaths in the period by 5,759. It would appear therefore that 2,931 persons left Merthyr Tydfil.

³⁸ N.L.W. LL/N/3. Llandaff non-residence license register. His non-residence was permitted because of ill-health.

³⁹ Born Stonefield, County Argyll, married Blanche Bruce in 1840. 1840-44 curate at St. Mary's Cardiff. 1844-59 Rector of Merthyr Tydfil. He was one of the Marquis of Bute's many Scottish "transplants" introduced into the county to strengthen the Church and the magistrates' bench in the 1840's. His appointment to the bishopric of Bangor in 1859 aroused a storm of protest because of doubts about his knowledge of the Welsh language.

iron industry in south Wales had fallen on hard times. Trade was bad, wages were low and unemployment was widespread. For the people of Merthyr Tydfil the years 1858-61 were the hardest they were to suffer in the nineteenth century with perhaps the exception of the "Great Strike" of 1875. Gloom and pessimism hung over a town which the newspapers claimed had no future. The rate of movement of people from Merthyr which had been growing steadily in the 1850's increased suddenly, larger numbers emigrating to the United States of America.⁴⁰ The town was on a downward course, and this coincided with a decline in the healthiness of the inhabitants and a dramatic rise in the death rate.⁴¹ The response of the religious denominations was a frightening acceptance of the situation. Many regarded the unfavourable swing in the trade cycle as a natural phenomenon, God-inspired to trigger off a much needed religious revival. In a sermon preached in the parish church of St. David's in 1859 John Griffith expressed in forceful words the evangelical view of the instructive benefits of material hardships: "It was a rough lesson, and he trusted the lesson would not escape them. The worst times he remembered at Aberdare were religiously speaking the best times the workingmen ever had. He turned the tide of his prosperity, not into the good of his soul but into the ruin of his soul and his body. The good times God gave him became the devil's own time: he it was who reaped a good harvest from them. Ah! who does not remember when wages poured into the workman's lap like a stream flowing from the horn of plenty, the drinking, the debauchery, the spending there was . . . It is only by tethering us with affliction and trials that He prevents us from straying."⁴² John Griffith was

⁴⁰ T. J. Dyke, *op. cit.* Over 500 persons left Merthyr in 1860. It is impossible to be accurate for the town was flooded in that year by unemployed from other distressed areas and the figure "500" is therefore a "net" figure.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* T. J. Dyke describes how improvements in public sanitation in Merthyr Tydfil had brought down the death rate in the 1850's, but now the death rate had risen to 36 per 1,000 in 1858-60 because of typhus and small pox epidemics. He estimated the number of deaths attributable to the economic depression to be between 400 and 500.

⁴² *C.M.G.* 25 May 1850. T. J. Dyke, the town's M.O.H., also argued "that a larger number of working men die in the prime of life in good times than in bad, the cause being the excessive use of intoxicating drinks".

stating in simple terms "the law of religious revivals" as it applied to south Wales. In the past, the bad years of cholera, typhoid and distress—1839, 1849, 1854 and 1859—had been years of the greatest religious progress in which large numbers of churches and chapels had been built. In the good times there was always a falling off of enthusiasm and spiritual relapse.

The great revival of 1859 was the biggest of all the nineteenth century revivals. In Merthyr Tydfil the "flash-point" was at Shiloh, the Wesleyan Chapel, where with great demonstrations and emotional excitement the converts were overcome by strong preaching and hymn singing. From Shiloh the spirit spread to all the denominations.⁴³ The energy of the churches was poured into a campaign of spiritual regeneration and social retrenchment. The most striking aspect of the revival at Merthyr was the temperance movement in which all denominations co-operated. John Griffith was active in every respect of the revival and took the lead in various practical enterprises to help the stricken working classes. At the height of the severe winter of 1860 he assumed responsibility for organising clothing clubs and soup kitchens for the unemployed and their families.⁴⁴ He was also involved with H. A. Bruce in organising and giving lectures to the working classes and in extending the reading-room at the Merthyr public library. He also played his part in the temperance campaign in the town, and was present at the public meetings on the subject although he was not a teetotaler as were many of his fellow temperance workers, for example Evan Jenkins, the Vicar of Dowlais.

As an evangelical denomination, the established Church at Merthyr Tydfil probably achieved its largest increases in membership in these revival years. John Griffith was now himself an eloquent and successful preacher, and his sermons filled the churches of Merthyr Tydfil.⁴⁵ At the triennial confirmation held in the parish of Merthyr Tydfil in 1862, 445 new members were confirmed by the bishop of Llandaff, an impressive increase in Church membership.⁴⁶

⁴³ Charles Wilkins, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

⁴⁴ *C.M.G.* 5 January 1861.

⁴⁵ *C.M.G.* 7 June 1862.

⁴⁶ N.L.W. LL/CL/31. Minute book of the annual meeting of the rural deans of Llandaff.

The early 1860's are significant in the history of industrial south Wales. These years marked not only the climax of a half-century of religious progress but also an increasing awareness amongst the Christian denominations of the social problems of the coalfield. It would be true to say that all the Christian denominations were conscious of the spiritual needs of the industrial population decades before they saw the need to alleviate social needs or human misery. The established Church in the 1860's took the initiative—possibly more so than the nonconformist churches—in tackling for the first time the broader social problems of excessive drunkenness, poverty, prostitution and moral education. Clergymen of the established Church like John Griffith—working within the framework of the “laissez-faire” society of mid-Victorian Britain—used the social and political prestige, the organisation and wealth of the state Church to initiate schemes to improve society. The anglican clergy broadened the scope of their pastoral work and were instrumental, with the help of their fellow ministers in the nonconformist ranks, in establishing libraries, schools, hospitals, disaster funds, temperance halls, etc. The actions of these clergymen and their enthusiasm for social improvement stemmed from their deep sense of despair about the times they were living in. John Griffith certainly never believed that he was living in any “golden age” or any “middle-class paradise”. In a sermon preached in 1862 he described in vivid terms the world of Merthyr Tydfil: “He was sorry to say that all the ragamuffins made Merthyr their headquarters. As decomposed elements in refuse water, all gravitated to the bottom of the basin, so all the dregs of the vast population found their way to Merthyr—all the gypsies, thieves, rag-and-bobtail of those 200,000, all the way from Pontypool were to be found in Merthyr. There they lived in unity by themselves and were in perfect peace amongst themselves but at war with all the rest of the world.”⁴⁷

In 1862 John Griffith launched his crusade against Merthyr Tydfil's “China Town”—“a citadel of atheism, drunkenness, vice and other extremes of human depravity”. He worked hard to draw the attention of the Glamorgan social order to the problem of prostitution in the county, and obtained detailed knowledge of the problem

⁴⁷ *C.M.G.* 7 April 1862.

and astonishing statistics. In south Wales, he claimed, there were 1,500 prostitutes: 700 at Cardiff, 400 at Merthyr, 200 at Swansea and 200 at Newport.⁴⁸ It was as a result of his efforts that the Llandaff House of Mercy was established. For the rest of his pastorate John Griffith was responsible for organising this institution, situated outside Cardiff, and for collecting the £200 which was needed each year. The scheme was perhaps a disappointingly small one. Funds were sufficient to support only 200 inmates, and in any case the rector found it difficult to persuade the fallen women of "China Town" to become institutionalised and to be "redeployed" into making church linen, surplices, hoods and kneeling-mats for the diocese.⁴⁹

While John Griffith was absorbed in drawing attention to the problem of prostitution the trade cycle took a favourable turn and the economic life of Merthyr Tydfil quickly recovered. Exports of iron from the town increased, the Dowlais works were extended, and coal for the first time became the most important export of the town. The opening of new collieries attracted a wave of "strangers" into the parish—some 1,240 in the years 1862-65—and well over 1,000 houses were built to accommodate them.⁵⁰ The social restraint and the religious dedication was quickly forgotten in a deluge of renewed industrial progress. Disappointed, and dismayed by the sudden increase of crime and drunkenness within his parish, John Griffith, no doubt, yearned for the bad years. The Church, which had succeeded in making an impression in the late 1850's in parishes like Merthyr Tydfil, no longer had the resources or manpower to keep pace with the renewed industrial growth. This situation also faced the nonconformist denominations: population growth was outstripping accommodation and the number of ministers and clergy. Merthyr Tydfil fared better than most parishes: the number of curates assisting John Griffith and the vicar of Pentrebach was increased between 1862 and 1870 from three to nine. This was made possible by the fact that the Ecclesiastical Commissioners for England were permitted for the first time in 1864 to use their funds to support

⁴⁸ *C.M.G.* 17 May, 1862.

⁴⁹ *C.M.G.* Various references.

⁵⁰ T. J. Dyke, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8. He blamed the recurrences of epidemics and disease on the fact that these houses were badly constructed.

assistant curates in mining areas. But no new churches were built, although St. Tydfil's was enlarged and partly rebuilt. The parish continued to depend mainly upon the national schools and other licensed buildings for public worship each Sunday. In 1865 the parish had four national schools, including the two Dowlais schools, which instructed some 4,000 children.⁵¹ An equal number of children received no formal, secular education at all. It must be said in favour of these schools in Merthyr, as in most other industrial parishes in south Wales, that they did not proselytise but gave a broad instruction to the children of anglican and nonconformist parents on how to lead godly and industrious lives.⁵²

In the decade after 1865 evangelicalism began to lose its exclusive hold on south Wales. Fashions in the established Church changed. The new generation of property owners were less concerned with the social dangers of spiritual destitution and more addicted to the mysteries of Anglo-Catholicism. They no longer subscribed as generously to the evangelical schemes of Bishop Ollivant and Rector Griffith. The work of the Llandaff Church Extension Society—the instrument of evangelical progress in south Wales—was at a standstill from the middle 1860's onwards. More serious was the growth of strife not only in the relations between the Church and the nonconformist denominations over the bitter question of disestablishment but within the Church itself. What can be described as a three-cornered struggle developed after 1865 between the Evangelical Churchmen, the Broad-Churchmen and the Anglo-Catholics, or Ritualists as they were then called. For the next twenty years of his life John Griffith became the arch-protagonist in this conflict, fighting Bishop Ollivant and the Cathedral Broad-Churchmen on the one front and the Ritualists on the other. In a continuous flow of articles to the south-Wales newspapers he attacked the enemies of the true evangelical Church in the diocese, and more and more of his energy and time was consumed by diocesan rather than parochial affairs. His weekly sermons at Merthyr were "political" pronouncements intended for publication in the *Western*

⁵¹ C.P.L. MSS 3-508, H. A. Bruce to John Griffith, 11 August 1865.

⁵² See E. T. Davies, *Monmouthshire Schools and Education until 1870*, (Newport, 1957.)

Mail rather than for the spiritual edification of his parishioners. His regular explosions against his enemies resounded throughout the diocese, and, to the discomfort of Bishop Ollivant, were applauded by most of the industrial clergy. John Griffith became in these years the champion of the "left wing" in the Church, of those evangelical clergy who were frustrated by the red tape, regulations and class discrimination which poured out of Llandaff. The "Low Churchmen" wanted a simple, zealous and working-class Church, and in the 1860's they found themselves in much the same position as the Methodists had been a century earlier. Poorly paid, inferior in education, and dedicated to their parishes, the evangelical clergy of the coal-field looked to Griffith as their natural leader. By 1870 there appeared to have been two bishops in south Wales—one at Llandaff and one at Merthyr Tydfil.

The first clash between the Low and Broad-Church parties came as early as 1861 during the election held at Llandaff Cathedral to elect a new proctor to represent the clergy of Glamorgan in the Convocation of Canterbury. The industrial clergy favoured John Griffith, while the rural clergy of the Vale of Glamorgan, who were almost all university men with social connections with the country gentry, supported the Rev. Thomas Stacey. Stacey was the undistinguished Precentor of Llandaff Cathedral and since 1838 the non-resident rector of Gelligaer. He was one of the more fashionable clergy of the diocese and preferred the cloisters of Llandaff to the unsuitable climate of Gelligaer. The result of the "Llandaff contest" was close—49 votes to 45 in favour of Stacey. That Griffith should have been defeated by such an unworthy opponent left the industrial clergy permanently embittered.⁵³ The contest epitomised evangelical impatience with ecclesiastical officialdom and the political outlook of the Broad-Churchmen. Bishop Ollivant and the rural clergy, however, regarded Griffith and his evangelical followers with their demands for a working-class Church and working-class pastors as a dangerous pressure-group which would have decomposed the traditional nature of the Church as a semi-religious and semi-political institution. The threat of "disestablishment" was as serious within the Church as it was outside. At the annual meetings

⁵³ C.M.G. 22 June 1861, S.G. 29 June 1861.

of the rural deans at Llandaff, Bishop Ollivant resisted the perennial request that the shortage of clergy in the diocese should be solved by ordaining into holy orders more and more untrained men of humble origin who had the necessary pastoral vocation but no formal academic qualifications. In opposition to evangelical demands he insisted in fact in the 1860's on rigid qualifications for ordination. The divinity schools at Cowbridge and Abergavenny, which had for thirty years or more given many the minimum training to enable men to qualify for ordination as literates, were closed, and Ollivant insisted from all candidates a broad academic education at a university or theological college.⁵⁴ At the Welsh Church Congress held at Llanidloes in 1869 Griffith bitterly attacked this policy, arguing that the Church did not need men trained in the finer points of Greek and Latin but men of vocation who were Welsh speaking and who were able to work amongst the poorer classes. He claimed that the theological college at Lampeter, the main source of clergymen in Wales, had taught 170 students since 1862, all of whom were the sons of farmers, gentlemen, clergymen or tradesmen. Only one student had been the son of a labourer.⁵⁵ The Church remained the Church of the upper classes—of the *uchelwyr*—and for this reason, argued Griffiths, it had failed to make significant headway in either rural or industrial Wales.

Relations between John Griffith and Bishop Ollivant were also embittered in these years by the growing controversy which raged over ritualism. Ritualism or Anglo-Catholicism entered south Wales in 1866 through the rural parishes of Llanvaches and Caldicot in Monmouthshire. In the next four years the Ritualists made dramatic progress, capturing one parish after another. They gained an important advantage in 1868 through the conversion to Roman Catholicism of the third Marquis of Bute. He was the largest private patron of Church livings in south Wales, and in later years he used this power to present Ritualists to many of the large industrial parishes. Ollivant provoked Griffith and the evangelicals by his dilatory and moderate attitude towards the Ritualists. The *Star of*

⁵⁴ N.L.W. LL/Ch/31.

⁵⁵ John Griffiths, *The Welsh Church Congress at Llanidloes. What did it aim at?* (1869), pp. 4-9.

Gwent, which had been hostile towards Griffith ten years earlier, now saw the rector of Merthyr as the champion of the Protestant cause in a diocese which was moving rapidly in the direction of Rome. In March 1868, John Griffith organised anti-ritual meetings at Pontypool and Newport at which he attacked Ollivant for "dallying and coquetting" with the notorious practices which were becoming common in the churches in rural Monmouthshire; he insisted that the established Church should concern itself with union with the working classes and not union with Rome. In a virile speech he expressed the bitter personal feeling he felt towards the rural clergy. "They live in such nice out of the way country parishes; far away from the smoke and the soot and grime of our towns. There they dream dreams and see visions, and pass their time away among the cowslips and the daisies, brooding over impossible unions and impossible things. Wandering by purling brooks and silvery streams, listening to the birds singing and the sheep bleating, how can they know anything of what is going on in our great towns?—How the middle class think? How the lower orders live? What is existence like in our back slums? What vice and filth and devilry may be seen festering and seething there?"⁵⁶ The battle against Ritualism was fought hard, and lost. In 1870 David Jenkins was appointed vicar of Aberdare; in 1872 Arthur Jones ("Father Jones") was appointed to St. Mary's Cardiff and F. W. Puller to Roath. All three were Ritualists and presented to their livings by the Marquis of Bute. One by one the strongholds of evangelism fell and their churches reconstructed and redecorated in keeping with Anglo-Catholic tastes. The unity of the established Church was split asunder and many of the clergy who were in sympathy with John Griffith found that they now had more in common with the Nonconformists than large numbers of their fellow-clergy.

In the late 1860's there was not only a decline of evangelical enthusiasm within the established Church but also among all the Christian denominations. The wider cause of this decline was the growing popular interest in politics and in organised trade unions, and the sustained material prosperity of the late 1860's. In the town of Merthyr Tydfil, John Griffith and his nonconformist

⁵⁶ John Griffith, *Reunion with Rome* (1869), p. 13.

colleagues had to compete with the forces of a new secular age. The men who were reshaping Merthyr Tydfil in the 1870's were Henry Richard and the Liberation Society and Thomas Halliday and the Amalgamated Association of Miners. Between them they made Merthyr Tydfil a stronghold of Liberalism and Trade Unionism.

In this new order of things John Griffith became increasingly isolated. He had no real sympathy for organised party politics or organised labour. He intensely disliked the new national leaders like Gladstone and Bright. If his political and social attitudes were influenced in any way by current opinion it was by Disraeli's "Tory Democracy" and Charles Kingsley's Christian Socialism. John Griffith passionately believed that the established Church must seek "union" with the working classes if it was to survive and that it was his Christian duty to alleviate human suffering. The 1870's were the most heroic years of his long pastorate during which he championed the cause of the downtrodden and the oppressed in a manner which no other religious leader could or had the courage to do. The columns of the *Western Mail*, particularly during the great "lock-out" of 1875, reveal Griffith as a fearless critic of his times: he stood alone amongst the clergy of the established Church. In the trial of strength between the South Wales Coal-owners Association and the Amalgamated Association of Miners in 1875 over a 10 per cent reduction in the wages of colliers and hauliers John Griffith supported the workers. In the strike and lock-out of January-May of that year his main concern was the suffering which was inflicted by the employers on the whole community in order to destroy the miners union. In bringing relief to the families of the strikers and setting up a national distress fund for the town he was accused of perpetuating the strike in the coalfield:

"I have been singled out especially as being something very wicked. I have been branded as a professional agitator; a disturber of the peace and yet one whose special business it was to preach peace. One great employer of labour has said I am worse than Halliday himself. And when the ministers of this parish sought an interview with the masters and were publicly refused, some of them were solaced in private that the interview would willingly have been granted if the rector of Merthyr

could only be eliminated. You see then, I am the blackest of all black sheep—or rather no sheep at all but a sort of hairy, dusky animal without a single whisp of wool growing on me; a hideous sort of creature with horns, and cloven feet, and long tail complete precisely as the old monks in the Middle Ages painted him. This question is you know often called ‘a battle between capital and labour’. But in all warfare that I have ever read of I have never once read, whether in ancient or in modern wars, of a method of fighting like this. It seems to me neither heathen nor Christian. When a portion of any army, apart from the whole, has laid down its arms, quarter is always given, the lives of those who yield are saved. Or when a great town is besieged and is taken, the inhabitants are all spared even though the fort or citadel may still hold out. But what is this lock out? Why, it is simply this—the masters, or conquerors, are saying—‘Very true, you have laid down your arms, you have taken the reduction—we admit that, but until you get the citadel of Rhondda and Aberdare to lay down their arms too, we give you no quarter. They have the key of the position; unless you get them to give that up, your yielding and taking the reduction will not in the least help you. We must punish you and your wives and children until they do; you must persuade them, or else starve; there is no other alternative for you’. That, you see, is political economy. It is doing evil that good might come.”⁵⁷

John Griffith further attacked the employers during the lock-out for refusing to consider the attempts of the ministers of the town to negotiate a settlement acceptable to both sides and for using the magistrates bench and their powers to call in the troops against the workers.⁵⁸ Not only did he defend the miners of Merthyr against the employers but also against *The Times*, the “rich man’s paper” as he called it, which had rejected his national appeal for help on the grounds that the miners of south Wales were the best paid

⁵⁷ *W.M.* 31 March 1875.

⁵⁸ *W.M.* March 1875. Griffith wanted the religious denominations to draw up a manifesto condemning the high-handed attitude of the employers and their refusal to negotiate.

workers in the country—"pine eating and champagne drinking brutes":—

"I have lived among them for nearly 30 years, and I know what their earnings are on average as well as that of any master that ever employed men. I know that earnings of some of them have been great. But, then, have they not earned them? Were they not fully entitled to their earnings? Do they not risk life and limb for them? Do they not descend into the earth every day of their lives, leaving wife and children behind, and no man can say whether they shall ever again see them? Have we not seen men killed by the scores and even hundreds at one swoop? Do not the annual returns of her Majesty's Inspectors of Mines show that men are so killed every day in the year, of whom the public hear nothing? When a great explosion happens, and scores and hundreds are hurried into eternity at once, all England hears and shakes and pities. But the number killed annually as individuals nobody hears of, nobody cares for, nobody pities. And yet this number, so killed, one by one, far exceeds the number killed wholesale. But these leave behind widows and orphans like the rest. Now, sir, I ask when a trade is attended with so much risk as this, ought not the men who labour in it to be well paid, especially when those who profit by their labour accumulate fortunes that are almost fabulous, except to those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, what is passing around them? It does, therefore, make my blood boil to hear men spoken of as 'Pine-eating and champagne-drinking brutes' when I know the facts are quite the other way, to take the average all round. Of course, I admit that they earn much in good times; that they spend good which they ought not to spend, in rioting and drunkenness; and let me ask you sir who has told them of this more pointedly than I have, as Vicar of Aberdare in the past and Rector of Merthyr in the present?"

Griffith warned the employers that the day would come when the hardworking miners of Merthyr would see the advantage of savings and would not drink away their money; then the masters would no longer hold the whip hand.

In the soup-kitchens of Merthyr where 2,000 people were fed daily the exertions of the rector were unremitting. These soup kitchens fed the families of the strikers but not the strikers themselves and were financed from the rector's distress fund into which money poured from all over the United Kingdom.⁵⁹ When the strike and lock-out ended in May 1875 and the miners returned to work with a 12½ per cent reduction in wages, the fund had £563 left, which was used to start a cottage hospital.

In the trade depression of 1877-78 John Griffith once more came to the assistance of the distressed. Once again it was the rector who organised a national distress fund for the starving families of Merthyr and worked daily serving meals at the drill hall. On this occasion Griffith attacked not the employers but the Poor Law Guardians and the inhumanity of the workhouse system they operated. He rejected the accusations of the employers and his fellow magistrates that he was pauperising the parish and encouraging laziness amongst the workers.⁶⁰

Although John Griffith became working-class in sympathy in the 1870's and 1880's he remained until his death the rector of Merthyr Tydfil—a gentleman somewhat isolated and removed from the rest of the community. His social outlook remained as pessimistic and grim as it had been in 1847:

“Talk about heathendom and savagery. We have as much heathendom in England, the heart of the Gospel, as is to be found anywhere in Africa . . . The backslums of our great towns are the very out-scum of corruption, the vortex of vice and devilry—filth and brutality and ignorance mingled together, surging and festering, and whirling, like the race in a maelstrom! There is nothing that is degrading to human nature that you do not see there. Drunken men and drunken women—aye, women who starve their own infants to feed their own vices . . . Help us then, I say, help everywhere to scatter God's Word where ever and when ever you have the opportunity.”

⁵⁹ *W.M.* March-May 1875.

⁶⁰ *W.M.* 2 September 1878.

He had married on two occasions: firstly, Sarah Francis King in 1847, the daughter of a West Indian merchant, and later, in 1863 Louisa Stuart the daughter of Alexander Stuart of the Isle of Bute. These marriages had produced two sons and three daughters. The Griffith household was never a lavish one and it was rigidly organised by a man who was a typical "Cardi", who never spent a penny without noting it in his pocket book, who was cautious in the extreme and economised everywhere: in his garden, in his stables and his cellar. His clothes were always of homespun wool ("gwlan du'r ddafad"), one of the small eccentricities which pleased his parishioners. In the summer months the whole Griffith family always retired to the Braichycelyn estate, near Aberdovey, which he had inherited in 1850. Here his great delight was his private yacht; he was an expert sailor and very fond of the Cardiganshire coastline.⁶¹ He was also a true Welshman and very knowledgeable in Welsh history and Welsh literature. A member of the Cambrian Archaeological Society he was one of the first to debunk the views of Iolo Morganwg on Celtic antiquity.⁶² John Griffith was considered at one time for a vacant Welsh bishopric, but thought to be too unsafe and outspoken.⁶³ It was perhaps this disappointment which pushed him into taking up extreme positions on different issues towards the end of his life. At Swansea on 4 March 1884 he shocked his fellow clergy by accepting the invitation of the Liberation Society to speak at a public meeting in favour of the disestablishment of the Church in Wales.⁶⁴ The editor of the *Western Mail*—who had good reason to be grateful to Griffith for his contribution to that paper in the first ten years of its existence—summed up the true worth of John Griffith. "He was a popular man in spite of himself who spoke the truth boldly and for truth's sake."⁶⁵

⁶¹ *W.M.* 26 January 1875.

⁶² *W.M.* 27 April 1885.

⁶³ *Weekly Mail*, 1877.

⁶⁴ *Red Dragon*, June 1885, p. 482.

⁶⁵ *W.M.* 24 April 1885.