

PALMER, ALFRED NEOBARD (1847 - 1915), historian

Name: Alfred Neobard Palmer

Date of birth: 1847

Date of death: 1915

Parent: Catherine Palmer (née Neobard)

Parent: Alfred Palmer

Gender: Male

Occupation: historian

Area of activity: History and Culture; Literature and Writing

Author: Arthur Herbert Dodd

Son of Alfred Palmer, coachbuilder, of Thetford, and of Harriet Catherine, daughter of John Neobard, wine merchant; born 10 July 1847 in a part of Thetford then attached to Suffolk, now in Norfolk, he attended the local grammar school (1855-60) and a private academy kept by Morgan Lloyd, an Independent minister who awoke his interest in natural science (1860-2). After a brief trial as pupil teacher in Cambridgeshire (January 1863) he was articled the same year to a druggist at Bury S. Edmunds, where he won grants for research in the Pharmaceutical Society's London laboratories (July 1866), and for a time assisted Attwood, the chemistry professor there (1873). In October 1874 he was appointed analytical chemist to a Manchester firm; here he contributed articles to the *Pharmaceutical Journal* (1875-9), and married (June 1878) the daughter of John Francis, city surveyor, a Caernarvonshire man who was a patron of **Ceiriog** and a leader in the Manchester Welsh community. Returning for health reasons to Thetford, he was directed by a Wrexham man, whom he had met in London, to a new opening in his own line at Wrexham, and he lived there from September 1880 to his death, employed professionally at a mineral water works till February 1882, at Brymbo steel works, 1882-4, at the Cambrian leather works, 1891-1904, and in private practice during some of the intervals, still contributing to professional journals.

A lecture he prepared in 1883, however, for the Wrexham Scientific and Literary Society (printed the same year) on *The Town, Fields, and Folk of Wrexham in the time of James I*, indicated the emergence of an interest which had simmered in his mind since as a youth, he had talked with the Thetford local antiquary and pondered over the puzzle of detached portions of townships, in one of which he lived. He now set himself to acquire a knowledge of Welsh and of the technique of historical research, and with this equipment planned to write the history, if not of Welsh Maelor (his first aim) at least of Wrexham and its environs. In 1885 he published an essay on *The History of Ancient Tenures of Land in the Marches of North Wales*, intended as an introductory study, but believed by him (and by other scholars, including **Frederic Seebohm**, who became his warm admirer) to be his best work. It was expanded and republished in 1910 with the collaboration of **Edward Owen** of the India Office. Spurred by the constant fear of a breakdown in health, he followed this up, in rapid succession, with *The History of the Parish Church of Wrexham*, 1886; *The History of the Older Nonconformity of Wrexham*, 1888; *The History of the Town of Wrexham*, 1893; and *The History of the Thirteen [Country] Townships of the Old Parish of Wrexham* (finished c. 1900 but not published till 1903). In 1905 there appeared his *History of ... Gresford*, and in 1906-10 his *History of ... Holt*, both first published in serial form in *Archæologia Cambrensis*, to which, and its sister journals *Y Cymmrodor* and the *Transactions of the Cymmrodorion Society*, he made numerous other contributions, listed by R. G. Smallwood in *Wrexham Advertiser*, 13 March 1915; he also edited and placed in the local public library (1887) a collection of manuscripts (meant as the first of a series) from ancient local records in the Public Record Office. In the summer of 1889 he was commissioned by **Seebohm** to investigate the crofter system in the western isles of Scotland, on which he subsequently wrote; but his health and his finances, both impaired by almost every book he wrote and the latter particularly by his unsuccessful novel, *Owen Tanat* (1897), remained a source of constant anxiety until the situation was eased by family legacies in 1892 and 1894 and Civil List awards (procured by the unsolicited efforts of **Edward Owen**, with many eminent backers) in 1904 and 1908, enabling him to go into semi-retirement; while his appointment in 1910 as assistant inspecting officer to the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments in Wales revived his health at a time when failing eyesight was precluding close manuscript work and holding up the 'History of Ruabon Parish' which he began in 1909 but never finished. Before his death he had inspected most of the ancient monuments of Denbighshire and Flintshire and begun on those of Merioneth, and from 1907 he took an active part in the excavation of the Roman site at Holt, which was indeed prompted by hints in the opening chapter of his 'Holt,' published in *Archæologia Cambrensis* that year.

While eschewing public life, he held strong convictions (of a liberal cast) in both religion and politics. It was primarily with a view to checking what he called 'the scandalous invasion of the rights of the poor' in the common lands (on which he also wrote to the local press) that he gave evidence before the royal commission on land in Wales in 1893. A Wesleyan by upbringing and an ardent lay preacher in his youth, he joined the Unitarians in 1873 and the convictions he then came to (and never shed) deterred him from identifying himself, save for public worship, with any Trinitarian religious body until, in 1900, he helped to found a new (and short-lived) chapel with an 'open' trust deed. His private journal, kept at intervals since c. 1892 and now deposited in N.L.W., reveals deep humility and devotional feeling, and a strong and compelling conscience, combined with broad charity and an acute critical judgement - qualities which (with his natural 'flair') have helped to keep him in the front rank of local historians. He died on 6 March 1915, and is commemorated by a mural tablet (with portrait in bas-relief) in Wrexham Public Library.

Author

Emeritus Professor Arthur Herbert Dodd, (1891 - 1975)

Sources

N.L.W., *Edward Owen Manuscripts at the National Library of Wales*, 123-5

Wrexham Advertiser, 13 April 1915

Brymbo Works Magazine, iv

Royal Commission on Land in Wales and Monmouthshire. Minutes of Evidence; Report (1894-6), C - 7757, iv, 1895, 83-92, 93-4, 932-5

Y Cymmrodor, xli, 1-6

M. Eluned Williams, 'Alfred Neobard Palmer, Hanesydd,' unpublished National Eisteddfod essay (by permission)

unpublished essay by G. G. Lerry (by permission)

personal recollections

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Alfred Neobard Palmer](#)

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