

ROBERTS, ARTHUR RHYS (1872 - 1920), solicitor

Name: Arthur Rhys Roberts
Date of birth: 1872
Date of death: 1920
Spouse: Hannah Dilys Roberts (née Jones)
Child: Thomas Esmor Rhys Roberts
Parent: Thomas Roberts
Parent: Winifred Roberts (née Jones)
Gender: Male
Occupation: solicitor
Area of activity: Law
Author: Keith Bush

Arthur Rhys Roberts was born on 27 April 1872 at 20 Ogwen Terrace, Bethesda, the only child of the **Rev. Thomas Roberts**, minister of Jerusalem chapel (Calvinistic Methodists), and his wife Winifred, herself the child of a Methodist minister, the Rev. Rees Jones (Brynmenai, y Felinheli).

He was sent, for a secondary education, to the Salop School, Oswestry, a non-denominational boarding school. Having decided to pursue a legal career, he spent a period in articles with a Bangor solicitor, John Glynne Jones. Having passed the Law Society's final examinations in April 1894 (coming third out of all candidates in England and Wales) he qualified, at the age of 22, as a solicitor.

His first appointment as a solicitor was in the offices of Lloyd George and George, the firm of the local MP, **David Lloyd George**, and his brother **William George**. But he decided, after a few years, to accept a post with Ward, Colbourne and Coulman (a firm which also had strong Liberal connections) in Newport, Gwent. There, he had the opportunity to develop expertise in the fields of commercial and industrial law.

At Easter 1897, Lloyd George offered him a partnership in a new legal practice in London, a remarkable offer to a young solicitor of 25, with only three years' experience since qualifying.

The background to the proposal, which Roberts only accepted after intense negotiations over the terms of the proposed partnership, was that ever since Lloyd George had been elected as an MP in 1890, he had practised as a solicitor, at least nominally, from an office in New Inn in the Strand which he shared with another solicitor, Harvey Clifton. This enabled him to accept, from time to time, instructions from 'country' practices (including Lloyd George and George) to act on their behalf as 'London agents' in cases before the higher courts. But he had, in practice, to employ Clifton to deal with such cases on his behalf, with the result that Clifton received the bulk of the fees paid. By 1897, now a father of four children, Lloyd George felt the need to establish a genuine legal practice in London, with a skilled and energetic young partner to take on the burden of the everyday work. He hoped to increase his professional income, that being his only income, other than occasional payments for articles in the press, since, at that time, Members of Parliament received no salary.

The new firm, Lloyd George, Roberts and Company - a partnership between David Lloyd George and Arthur Rhys Roberts only - opened at Walbrook in the City of London on 1 July 1897, and moved a few months later to an office in Ormond House in Queen Victoria Street. It had been decided to locate the practice in the City of London rather than in the traditional centre of the legal world around the Temple and Chancery Lane, in line with the strategy of developing a practice among City companies.

The partners' ambition of developing a successful legal practice in the City of London was gradually achieved, although Lloyd George's unpopular political stand against the war in South Africa hindered that development for a while. Lloyd George's principal contribution was to attract clients, benefiting from his personal and political connections, while Roberts focused on using his exceptional skills as a lawyer to ensure that they received a service of the highest standard. The written evidence demonstrates Roberts's meticulous approach and his growing confidence in dealing with heavy and complex corporate legal issues. The new firm was competing with the most prominent lawyers in the realm and the fact that it succeeded, not only in attracting clients but also in keeping them, is testimony to Roberts's exceptional professional ability.

Day-to-day contact with Lloyd George's other legal practice in Wales was limited. Lloyd George, Roberts and Company received, from time to time, instructions to act as agents on behalf of Lloyd George and George in specific matters before the London courts (for example the well-known libel case, **Lord Penrhyn v Parry** in 1903). Roberts would also travel, occasionally, to represent Lloyd George and George's clients before the North Wales courts in cases involving a specialist commercial law subject such as bankruptcy, licensing or corporate law.

As well being a solicitor, Roberts had qualified as a parliamentary agent, thereby enabling the firm to represent bodies (including local authorities) who were applying to Parliament for special statutory powers, for example in order to expand a harbour or to build a railway. Amongst the applications which he handled were a number from Wales, such as the application on behalf of the Portmadoc, Beddgelert and South Snowdon Railway Company for a private Act of Parliament to authorise the construction of a railway from Rhyd-ddu to Porthmadog (now part of the Welsh Highland Railway).

Part of Lloyd George, Roberts and Company's expertise was in the field of the contemporary mass media, namely the daily press. They became solicitors to the owners of the *Daily News* newspaper, which was under the control of the Quaker industrialist Joseph Cadbury. That paper was politically supportive of Lloyd George, who for a time became a director of the company that ran it. In addition to acting on behalf of the company in corporate matters, Lloyd George, Roberts and Company acted on behalf of the *Daily News* in a number of libel actions.

An unusual client (attracted on the basis of Lloyd George's assertion that he was an expert in African affairs) was the global Zionist movement. The movement arranged, through one of its leaders in the UK, the keen Liberal, Leopold Greenberg, for Lloyd George, Roberts and Company (in practice, Arthur Rhys Roberts) to draw up, on their behalf, a detailed draft agreement between them and the UK Government for the establishment of a Jewish settlement in East Africa. Although the scheme did not come to fruition, the commission clearly had a major impact on Lloyd George, who boasted to his brother that he and Roberts had become 'solicitors to the New Jerusalem'. An obvious link can be discerned between these professional instructions and the decision of Lloyd George's government, 14 years later, to create a national home for the Jews in Palestine.

At the end of 1905, Lloyd George was appointed President of the Board of Trade in the new Liberal government, with his ministerial salary meaning that he no longer had to rely to the same extent on professional earnings. However, the London company continued to practise under the name Lloyd George, Roberts and Company for a further six years and Lloyd George did not give up his partnership in the firm until 1911. The name of the practice was then changed to Rhys Roberts and Company. Another young Welsh lawyer had been recruited to assist Roberts, namely **Wynn Powell Wheldon**, also the son of a Methodist minister from Arfon and a former pupil of the Salop School. It was not unexpected that the company, in addition to its London clients, had developed a professional link with the Calvinistic Methodist Church and its ministers, with Roberts giving advice, in 1908, to the **Reverend R. Silyn Roberts** on an accusation of libel made against him by another minister, (**D. M. Phillips**, Tylorstown) based on comments made by Silyn which had been published in the periodical *Y Glorian*.

The personal and professional connection between Lloyd George and Roberts continued after their partnership ended, with Roberts acting on behalf of Lloyd George in a number of professional and business matters. He was responsible, in 1918 (Lloyd George having by then become Prime Minister) for the complex and sensitive legal work relating to the establishment, under the direction of Lloyd George, of United Newspapers (1918) Limited. The purpose of that company was to acquire a number of newspapers, including the *Daily Chronicle*, so as to secure for Lloyd George reliable support in the popular press.

Arthur Rhys Roberts was a leading member of the Charing Cross Road chapel, London. He married, in 1907, Hannah Dilys Jones (1882-1967), a notable operatic soloist originally from Flintshire. They had one child, Thomas Esmor Rhys-Roberts (1910-1975) who began his career as a professional soldier (winning the George Medal in Italy in 1943) before turning to the law. He became Queen's Counsel (1972) and one of the most prominent barristers on the Wales and Chester circuit.

Arthur Rhys Roberts was an active member of the Liberal Party throughout his life and served as secretary of the **T. E. Ellis** Memorial Fund. He put his name forward to be Liberal parliamentary candidate for the Arfon constituency when the sitting member, **William Jones**, died in 1915, but was not selected.

By 1914 his health had begun to deteriorate, and the stress of maintaining Rhys Roberts and Company on his own added to the problem. The First World War had led to the departure of Wynn Wheldon, who had joined the Royal Welsh Fusiliers. When it became clear in 1919 that the Official Solicitor, Sir William Winterbotham, was about to retire, Roberts saw an opportunity to relieve the pressure of running a busy private practice, and he asked Lloyd George to recommend to the Lord Chancellor that he be appointed to the post.

The Official Solicitor was (and is) responsible for providing representation before the higher courts for persons under a disadvantage who would, unless the Official Solicitor intervened on their behalf, have no-one to protect their interests. Roberts believed that he was well qualified for the post, and he had the support of a number of judges, including his fellow-Welshman, **Lord Justice Atkin**. Bearing in mind his continuing importance to Lloyd George as a personal lawyer, he emphasised, when asking for Lloyd George's support, that the conditions of the appointment would not prevent him from continuing to undertake some private work at the same time. Lloyd George agreed to support the application and Roberts was appointed Official Solicitor of the Supreme Court in December 1919. However, his health was already so damaged that it was too late for it to be restored. He died only 11 months later, on 26 November 1920, at the age of 48, of complications following surgery to treat a duodenal ulcer. He was buried in Abney Park cemetery, London.

Author

Keith Bush

Sources

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[Lloyd George Archive](#) (UK Parliament Archives)

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The various other biographies of David Lloyd George

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