

Grave No: A21

The Meredith-Daniel Family



This is another story of hardship and resilience that began in 1847 when Benjamin Meredith, a young puddler* working in the iron industry, married Rebecca Williams at Llanelly Church.

As the 1850s dawned, Benjamin and Rebecca started their family. Their first daughter, Mary, was baptised in 1855, followed by Elizabeth in 1858 and Rebecca in 1861. The Meredith family grew alongside the booming iron industry that was reshaping the Welsh landscape.

However, life in industrial Wales was far from easy. The 1861 census paints a poignant picture of a family temporarily separated. Rebecca, then 35, was found visiting her parents, Abraham and Ann Williams, along with her daughters Ann (8), Elizabeth (3), and baby Rebecca. Meanwhile, Benjamin was recorded living in Aberdare with their daughters Margaret (11) and Mary (6). The reasons for this separation remain a mystery, but it highlights the challenges faced by working-class families of the time.

Tragedy struck the Meredith family in 1870 when young Rebecca, just 9 years old, was laid to rest in Llanelly Church. The loss must have been devastating for the family, but life continued. In a bittersweet turn of events, Benjamin and Rebecca baptised another daughter, Martha Jane, just months after Rebecca's passing.

The 1870s brought more hardship. In 1873, Elizabeth, then 16, succumbed to typhoid fever, a common and deadly disease in the overcrowded industrial towns of the era. Despite these losses, the family persevered. By 1881, they had settled in Ebbw Vale, with Benjamin now aged 60, working as a labourer in the iron works. Their household had grown to include a grandson, young Sidney, hinting at the expanding family tree.

As the children grew, they began to forge their own paths. Mary, the eldest surviving daughter, became a dressmaker. In 1888, she married Thomas Daniel at St. John's Church in Gowerton. Her father Benjamin had passed away by this time, marking the end of an era for the Meredith family.

Mary's marriage to Thomas Daniel opened a new chapter in the family story. Thomas worked as a steel worker and later as a pitman, embodying the changing face of Welsh industry as it shifted from iron to steel and coal. Together, they raised a family in Llansamlet, including sons Meredith and Gethin, and twins Thomas and Mary.

Interestingly, Mary's sister Martha Jane, also a dressmaker, remained a constant presence in the Daniel household. She was recorded living with the family in multiple censuses, described as a

"sister-in-law" to Thomas. This arrangement speaks to the close-knit nature of families during this period, often banding together for support.

The dawn of the 20th century brought new opportunities. By 1911, young Meredith Daniel was recorded as a student at the age of 21, suggesting he may have been pursuing higher education - a significant achievement for a working-class family of the time.

The family faced another loss in 1916 when Thomas Daniel passed away at the age of 56. Mary, now a widow, continued to head the household. The 1921 census shows her living with her adult children, all of whom had found success in their chosen paths. Meredith and Mary Rebecca had become school teachers, while Gethin worked as a furnace superintendent.

Mary Daniel's own story came to an end in February 1922, at the age of 67. Her life, spanning from the heights of the Industrial Revolution to the aftermath of World War I.

The tale of the Meredith and Daniel families is one of resilience in the face of hardship, of bonds that endured despite the challenges of industrial life, and of a generation that laid the foundations for the Wales we know today. From iron puddlers to school teachers, their journey reflects the broader story of a nation in transition, preserving their Welsh heritage while adapting to a rapidly changing world.

*A puddler, also known as a puddling furnace worker, played a crucial role in the iron-making process during the Industrial Revolution. Puddling was a technique used to convert pig iron into wrought iron, which was more malleable and better suited for many industrial applications. The puddler would tend a special furnace where pig iron was heated to very high temperatures. As the iron melted, the puddler would use long iron rods to stir or "puddle" the molten metal. This stirring exposed the molten iron to air, which oxidized impurities like carbon and silicon.

The work was extremely physically demanding. Puddlers had to manipulate heavy iron rods in intense heat for long periods. They worked in shifts that could last 12 hours or more and the environment was incredibly hot, often exceeding 3000°F (1650°C) near the furnace. Puddling was considered a highly skilled job. It took years of experience to judge the quality of the iron by its appearance and behaviour and they had to know exactly when to remove the iron from the furnace and form it into balls for further processing.

The job came with significant health hazards. Puddlers were exposed to extreme heat, toxic fumes, and the risk of burns. Many suffered from respiratory issues and heat-related illnesses. The physical strain often led to premature aging and a shortened lifespan. Despite the harsh conditions, puddlers were often well-respected in their communities due to their skill and the importance of their work. They were typically better paid than many other iron workers, though the job's difficulty meant few could sustain it for their entire working life. The puddling process began to decline in the late 19th century with the introduction of the Bessemer process for making steel, which was faster and more efficient.

For Benjamin Meredith, being a puddler would have meant long hours of gruelling work in dangerous conditions. It would have provided a decent wage to support his family, but at a significant cost to his health and well-being. This occupation gives us insight into the harsh realities of industrial life in 19th century Wales and the sacrifices made by workers like Benjamin to provide for their families during this transformative period in history.