

YMDDIRIEDOLAETH ADDOLDAI CYMRU
WELSH RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS TRUST

Report to Buildings Sub-committee, 15th September, 2005

HEN GAPEL LLWYNRHYDOWAIN, Rhydowen, Llandysul

*Unitarian. First built 1733; rebuilt 1834. Listed Grade II**

I visited Hen Gapel on 2 September, following the local Unitarian Association's offer of the chapel to the Welsh Religious Buildings Trust. The chapel has not been used at all in last three years due to difficulty of insuring it, and previous to that, it was, for many years, only used for an annual Christmas Eve meeting by members of local Unitarian chapels. For a period the chapel was used as a kind of museum of Unitarianism in the district and was the repository of a large collection of their books. Most of the books have now been returned to various chapels.

History: Llwynrhydowain was the mother church of Unitarianism in Wales and the centre from which grew a remarkable group of Unitarian chapels (14 in all) in Dyffryn Tywi and Dyffryn Aeron, Ceredigion, an area that later became known as Y Smotyn Du ('The Black Spot) to some hostile nonconformists. The first chapel was founded by Jenkin Jones, an Independent minister, after he became dissatisfied with the orthodox Calvinism of his co-pastor at Pantycreuddyn. Jenkins adopted Arminian views and built the first chapel in 1733. Apparently, the chapel was enlarged in 1754. It was rebuilt entirely in 1834. Forty two years later, in 1876, the congregation was evicted for failing to vote in accordance with the landlord's wishes in the 1868 election. The then minister, William Thomas (Gwilym Marles) - grave in front of chapel - held services in the open air until a new wooden chapel (Ty Cwrdd) was built at Castell Hywel, followed later by a stone chapel on the Pontsian road.

[references: G & J Hague, The Unitarian Heritage (1986); D R Barnes, People of Seion (1995)].

Description: Exterior- a medium-sized, two-storey chapel built in Sub-Classic long-wall style with a half-hipped slate roof. Symmetrical front elevation comprises panelled wood doors with semi-circular fanlights at either end with round-headed sash windows above, two tall round-headed sash windows in middle section and central, circular slate date panel (LLWYNRHYDOWAIN 1834) at high level. A timber eaves board with scalloped decoration runs for full length below roof. Rear elevation is plain apart from two, very tall and slim, square-headed windows. Generally constructed in roughly shaped and coursed local stone with ashlar quoins and door and window heads. Four large slate memorial slabs have been let into masonry on front elevation at low level - one each (roughly contemporary) below central windows and two (later) on either side of left-

hand door. Of particular interest are two inscribed stones - presumably reused from the original chapel - let into the front wall near left-hand quoining; they read, as follows:

in Latin: DEUS NOBIS HAEC OTIA EFCIT 1733;

in Welsh: DYMMMA PORTH YR ARGLVVYDD NID YW HWN ONID TY
L DDUW =

S ~ LCXVIII.

Interior- almost square, box-like space with wide pulpit and set fawr below central windows. Wood and glass panelled entrance porch, with slate and tiled floors, on either side of set fawr with stairs leading to U-shaped gallery. Timber panelled gallery front with 'gothic' trimmings. Gallery supported on 7 cast-iron columns, each marked 'Carmarthen'. Simple timber panelled pulpit with spiral twisted newel posts and turned balusters, appears to be older than rest of fittings, perhaps from original C18 chapel? Panelled set fawr and seats. Plain, flat plastered ceiling.

Graveyard - on south (entrance) side of chapel; now very overgrown.

Location: The chapel forms one of four separate 19th century, or earlier, stone buildings, situated at each corner of the crossroads, giving the group a strong sense of identity. The chapel is on the upper side and is visually prominent, particularly when approached from the south. There are no pavements or verges and no parking space available near the chapel.

Condition:

Exterior - Apart from some repairs to the roof slating a few years ago, little or no repairs have been carried out in recent years. Despite that, the chapel is in surprisingly good structural condition; there are, for instance, no visible cracks. Most of timberwork to doors and windows require some repair and maintenance.

Interior - the general impression is that this is in reasonable condition, but a closer look shows that there is damp on rear wall and east wall and that the ceiling, although not bowed, requires urgent repairs. In particular, the ceiling joists above east stairs have become rotten and are breaking down; there is also vegetation growing in this area and one of upper windows.

Comments: Because of its relationship to the Unitarian movement in Wales, this is an outstanding chapel historically, perhaps the most important that has, so far, been brought to the attention of the WRBT. Architecturally, it is also an excellent example of a two-storey, long-wall chapel, so

typical of the early nineteenth century but now surviving in only limited numbers. Every effort must be made to save this chapel. Unfortunately, as a result of lack of maintenance in the past, the building is now at a critical stage of its life; unless considerable repairs are carried out soon, it will soon fall into a situation which will be difficult to reverse without enormous costs.

The lack of parking space, and the possible difficulty of acquiring anything suitable nearby, is a drawback to finding alternative uses for the chapel; this also limits access for tourists if acquired by WRBT. On the other hand, there appears to a fund of goodwill and knowledge amongst local Unitarians and this would, no doubt, be invaluable should the Trust take over the chapel.

John B Hilling, 9th September 2005

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