

YMDDIRIEDOLAETH ADDOLDAI CYMRU WELSH RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS TRUST

Report to Buildings Sub-committee, January, 2009

CAPEL PENIEL, Tremadog, Gwynedd

Presbyterian Church of Wales (Calvinistic Methodist); built 1809-11; Listed Grade I



I visited Capel Peniel, Tremadog, with the Trust Manager, Mr Gruff Owen, on 29th October, 2008, in the company of the chapel's treasurer, Mr Gwilym Meirion Jones, following a request to advise on the suitability of the chapel for acquisition by the WRBT if and when the chapel Trustees decide to close the building.

History: The genesis of this remarkable chapel began with the opening of a Sunday School in 1805 in one of the few houses that had been built in William A Madocks' embryonic 'new town' of Tre Madoc. By 1808 moves had been made to erect a purpose-built chapel in the developing town and by February 1810 construction work was sufficiently advanced to hold an opening service in the presence of Rev. Thomas Charles of Bala. Construction work was completed a year later, in 1811, eighteen months ahead of the nearby new Anglican church. However, the chapel as completed in 1811 was without the Classical portico that was to give the building its iconic character; that came later. Apparently, the pedimented portico with its Tuscan columns had been intended from the start (probably by Madocks as an adornment to his new town), but as the promised £50 towards its cost was not forthcoming it was left off. But, even without its portico the chapel was unique in Wales at the time of its erection, both for its innovative size and for its unusual plan.

The chapel thrived and various alterations were made later, e.g. insertion of a gallery at the rear in 1840; completion of the pedimented portico in 1849; introduction of fixed seating in 1860; extension of the gallery along side walls in 1880; a new *sedd fawr* and pulpit in 1898; and a new ceiling in 1908-10.

The two-story dwelling house at the rear of the chapel appears to have been built during the middle of the 19th century, while the substantial, single-storey Schoolroom alongside it was added somewhat later.

Description: *Exterior* - The chapel sits at right angles to the road at the rear of a large grassed and tarmaced forecourt in a plot surrounded by a random (local) rubble-stone wall. The chapel is rectangular in plan, and unusually large for its early date. The front, as completed in 1849, has an open portico in Classical style, comprising a bold, triangular pediment (with 6-paned wheel-window) supported on circular Tuscan columns (of rendered brick) and end pilasters to extended side walls. There are two entrance doors at the rear of portico with single sash-window between and three sash-windows above. The floor of the portico is paved with slabs of local slate. In contrast to the bold front, the long, side walls are of roughly coursed local, igneous rubble-stone; they have rectangular windows in two ranges. The rear elevation is rendered and has two, tall round-headed windows (possibly inserted later), and is partly obscured by the later house and schoolroom (both built in local rubble-stone).

Interior- Inside, there is nothing to suggest the chapel's early foundation; all is of a late nineteenth-century character, the result of various alterations referred to above. The dominating impression is of a rich, timber interior, whether it be the angled and panelled pews at ground level, panelled gallery and pews upstairs, panelled *sedd fawr* and pulpit, or the red-painted, match-boarded and panelled ceiling. The floor is slightly raked. Apart from the elaborate woodwork, the main internal features are the blank arch with fluted pilasters and Composite capitals behind the pulpit, and the large ceiling rose-cum-vent divided into six segments (like the wheel-window to the external pediment). There are two doors at rear, one of which leads into the Schoolroom; the other door has been blocked off.

Location: Visually prominent position at south end of the village, on the road to Porthmadog. There is a reasonable amount of car parking in the forecourt.

Condition: *Exterior*- The buildings appear to be in generally good condition except in two critical areas, viz.: plaster broken off capital of south pilaster and architrave (lintel) of portico, revealing brickwork (pilaster) and iron joist (architrave); and structural movement (loose joints, etc.) to north-west corner of Schoolroom wall.

Interior- Generally in good condition, although some remedial work may be required in

House (upper floor locked and not visited) and toilet area.

Comments: Although money will need to be spent on repairs to the building, it would, in all other respects be a most worthy chapel for the Trust to take into care. The reasons for taking it into care can be summarised as follows:

- i). The severe Classical, porticoed front - similar to and possibly based on Inigo Jones' St Paul's Church (1638), Covent Garden, London - has made this an iconic building both visually and architecturally;
- ii). Historically, it is extremely important as one of the earliest (if not the earliest) chapels in Wales to be built on a generous scale with a gabled ended front, when virtually all other chapels at the beginning of the nineteenth century were small, and had long-wall facades with pulpits placed between the two entrance doors;
- iii). Accommodation at the rear (house and Schoolroom) would provide, if required, suitable office space (35m², per floor) for the Trust's own use as well as providing a venue for meetings and for letting to other, suitable bodies;
- iv). The chapel's location and availability of parking makes it a convenient venue for visitors, individually, or in groups (particularly if the Trust has a permanent presence on site).

John Hilling, 21st November, 2008

References:

Site Report (National Monuments Record Wales, 2007); *Madocks and the Wonder of Wales*, by Elisabeth Beazley (1968); *Welsh Chapels*, by Anthony Jones (2nd. edit., 1996)