

# Yr Hen Gapel, Llwynrhydowen : Conservation Statement

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## 1. Introduction

Yr Hen Gapel, Llwynrhydowen is a Unitarian chapel located in the village of Rhydowen, Ceredigion, historically a predominantly Welsh speaking part of Wales. The cause at Llwynrhydowen started in 1726 and the first chapel was built on a nearby site in 1733. A second chapel was built on the current site in 1791, and this was replaced by the current building in 1834. In the early 19th century, the congregation was in the vanguard of the spread of Unitarianism in Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire. In 1876, the chapel was the scene of a national scandal when its radical minister and his congregation were evicted by the local landlord who claimed their radical Unitarian ideologies was a breach of their lease.

The building is a rectangular, stone, long-wall entry chapel with a half-hipped slate roof. The interior has open-benched fixed seats and a 3 sided gallery facing the pulpit and sedd fawr situated at the centre of the front wall. The burial ground is situated in front of the main elevation. Yr Hen Gapel is grade II\* listed for its historic significance and as a fine example of a longwall chapel of un-restored late Georgian character with a largely original interior.

Following the 1876 eviction, the congregation built a new chapel nearby in Rhydowen and, although Yr Hen Gapel was returned to its original owners shortly afterwards, it had limited use thereafter and became disused in the 1960s. Ownership was transferred to Addoldai Cymru / Welsh Religious Buildings Trust in 2008.

Addoldai Cymru is a charitable trust established by Cadw to take into care exceptional examples of Wales' historic places of worship that have become redundant, with the exception of Church in Wales buildings. Addoldai Cymru's remit is to conserve its acquisitions as found and to make them accessible for appropriate uses by future generations.

This Conservation Statement has been prepared by Neil Sumner and utilises material provided by Robert Scourfield, former trustee David Russell Barnes, and architect Roger Clive-Powell.

## 2. Understanding the Building and Setting

### Historical Overview

Yr Hen Gapel is the third chapel of a cause which was the first Arminian congregation in Wales and the mother church of the Unitarian “Black Spot” of Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire, a radical tradition in an apparently unlikely rural setting that was to have both national and international reverberations.

The cause at Llwynrhydowen started in 1726 when Jenkin Jones is said to have preached to the first Arminian congregation in Wales. Jones was a student of Thomas Perrot, one of the most influential tutors at the Carmarthen Academy. In Wales, as in England, an important catalyst in the growth of Unitarianism was a love of learning and the liberal education provided by the dissenting academies which developed in the 18th century owing to the restrictions preventing dissenters’ attendance at Oxford and Cambridge universities. The Carmarthen Academy was originally founded by Samuel Jones in Bridgend and was the first dissenting academy in Wales, and its first “university” of sorts. The majority of Unitarian students were educated at the academies which also provided vocational training for prospective ministers of religion.

The first Llwynrhydowen chapel was built in 1733, and after Jenkin Jones’ death in 1742 he was followed by his nephew, David Lloyd. He was a very popular preacher and the congregation increased enormously under his care making it necessary to extend the chapel in 1745. He was succeeded by the influential preacher, political radical and educator David Davis, Castell Hywel, and during his 50 year long ministry, the chapel was completely rebuilt in 1791 on the site of the current chapel building. In the early 19th century the congregation progressed into Arianism and, affected by influential preachers such as David Lloyd’s son Charles Lloyd and Thomas Evans (Tomos Glyn Cothi), on to Unitarianism. The strength of the congregation is reflected in the need to build on the same site a third chapel, the present building, in 1834 and this was further extended in 1862. During this period, up until 1876, the congregation could number anywhere up to 600. It was a part of a radical Unitarian culture within a Welsh rural setting, resistant to successive waves of evangelical revival emanating from the epicentre of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism at Llangeitho, not far to the north. Eventually, there were 13 Unitarian chapels in the area, and these communities became collectively known to a hostile Methodist historiography as Y Smotyn Du, or the ‘Black Spot’.

In 1876 it was the scene of a national scandal when the congregation and its minister William Thomas (also known as Gwilym Marles) were evicted by the local landlord, John Lloyd of Alltyrodyn. Lloyd claimed their radical Unitarian ideologies were a breach of their lease. After the closure, the popular minister addressed an outdoor congregation of about 3,000, with his back to the locked and chained chapel gates. Due to the interest prompted by the eviction, a national fundraising campaign enabled the building of a new chapel

elsewhere in the village, but after the death of Lloyd his sister had Yr Hen Gapel returned to the congregation. Unfortunately by this time, Gwilym Marles had died before he was able to attend the opening ceremony of the new chapel, but it was subsequently dedicated to his memory and his grave is located near its front door. Gwilym Marles is also significant as the great uncle of the poet, Dylan Thomas.

After these events, the original chapel was utilised primarily as a Sunday school and a place for concerts and Eisteddfodau, before becoming disused in the 1960s. It had a brief re-opening in the 1970s as a Unitarian museum. Ownership was transferred to Addoldai Cymru / Welsh Religious Buildings Trust in 2008.

### Architectural Overview

Yr Hen Gapel is a long-wall entry chapel, a type of chapel popular in Wales from the 1820s before being superseded by square-plan and then gable-fronted chapels from the mid 19th century. It is built of coursed rubble stone with dressings and quoins of paler ashlar stone and has a half-hipped slate roof. There are two doorways to the outer bays, with panelled doors and fanlights with intersecting tracery. There is a central pair of tall round-headed windows with sash glazing beneath a head of intersecting tracery, and two shorter, similar windows to either end over the doorways. In the centre is a slate plaque inscribed "Llwynrhydowain 1834". At the north-west quoin there are two inscriptions from the earlier phases of building including the foundation stone from the first meeting house of 1733 which possibly reads DEUS NOBIS HAEC O(MNIA) FECIT: "GOD MADE ALL THESE THINGS FOR US". Built into the west wall there are four 19th century memorial stones, including one to Mary Thomas, the first wife of Gwilym Marles.

In the interior are slate flagged vestibules, leading ahead up steps to the main chapel interior and to gallery stairs. Each vestibule has a 19th century half-glazed screen wall parallel to the pulpit and 2 doors leading to the chapel, fitted with etched and coloured-glass margin panes. The main interior has a wooden floor and white plaster walls and a ceiling with a circular centre panel and moulded coving. There are fixed bench seats to the ground floor, laid out in three blocks to the rectilinear sedd fawr. Two flights of steps leading up to the rectangular platform pulpit have turned bobbin balusters of 17th century style. The pulpit has a central canted projection with moulded panels and a sloping lectern, lit by two candlesticks. Against the northern wall is the former minister's library containing a two tier bookcase with a zinc front. There is a mid 19th century gallery to three sides, supported by 5 iron columns stamped "T BRIGHT CARMARTHEN" and with a front of grained and moulded panels. Opposite the pulpit is the clock with the legend "Dd Jones, Lampeter". The gallery is fitted with fixed open bench seats.

Yr Hen Gapel is grade II\* listed for its historic significance and as a fine example of a long wall chapel of un-restored late Georgian character with a largely original interior.

## Setting Overview

Yr Hen Gapel is located immediately adjacent to a crossroads of the A475 Newcastle Emlyn - Lampeter and B4459 Talgarreg - Pencader roads. Directly opposite is the Alltyrodyn Arms, a former public house now an antiques business, and agricultural buildings occupy the other two corners. The bulk of the village of Rhydowen lies to the north west alongside the B4459 road.

The curtilage comprises the chapel building and its burial ground which is situated to the south west of the building's main elevation. There is no vehicular access or land suitable for parking within the curtilage.

The burial ground is enclosed by rubble stone retaining walls, including wrought iron entrance gates and a short flight of stone steps which lead directly from the busy A475 road. Drivers frequently exceed the 30mph speed limit here and pedestrian access is therefore fraught with danger, especially for the elderly and those with any disability. The burial ground is grassed and contains a number of primarily 19th century memorial stones, many of which are in poor condition. The area between the entrance gates and the chapel doors is concreted.

## **3. Significance**

### Cultural Significance of Yr Hen Gapel

The core belief of Nonconformists, that preaching was of overwhelming importance, is reflected in their buildings. A chapel was not seen as a building, but a congregation, a community of believers: "it is a house that had a pulpit from which to hear preaching." (Jones, 1996) Nonconformist buildings evolved from simple barn-like meeting houses to the architectural eclecticism of the mid 19th century onwards, all the while retaining the pulpit as focal point. As Nonconformity came to pervade 19th century Welsh society, its chapels were ubiquitous in the Welsh urban and rural landscape, to the extent that they have been described as the "national architecture of Wales". The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales' (RCAHMW) Chapels Recording Project has logged over 6,000 chapels built in Wales, almost certainly an over-provision, which reflected the predominance of Nonconformity and the diversity of, and rivalry between, denominations.

Welsh grew out of Brittonic/Brythoneg, the language of the people of these Isles over 2,000 years ago, and it has survived the linguistic pressures of a succession of encroaching cultures. Aided by the translation of the Bible in 1588, Welsh was the principal language of a form of Christianity which came to predominate Welsh society, and was the vehicle of the growth of pan-Wales institutions in the 19th century. Today it is a key ingredient in Wales' identity and an equal component of what is an increasingly bilingual

nation. Yr Hen Gapel's congregation reflects the local community in that it is Welsh speaking, although bilingual.

Despite being a relatively small denomination, the Unitarians have a significant place in the story of Dissent and Nonconformity in Wales. Like the Independents and Baptists, Unitarians have their roots in Puritan dissatisfaction with the religious settlement imposed by Elizabeth I as her response to the Protestant Reformation which swept through Europe in the 16th century. They were motivated by a desire to recover a purer, more primitive form of Christian belief and organisation based firmly on the teaching of the Bible. In Wales, as in England, an important catalyst in the growth of Unitarianism was a love of learning and the liberal education provided by the Dissenting Academies which developed in the 18th century owing to the restrictions preventing dissenters' attendance at Oxford and Cambridge.

Unitarians believe in a rational theology, and are driven by the humanity and moral authority, as opposed to the deity, of Christ. The transition from Arianism to Unitarianism during the period of the French wars represents a renewed politicisation of the dissenting tradition, given sharpened libertarian focus through sympathy with revolutionary French politics. Unitarians have been in the vanguard of struggles for civil and religious liberty and were possibly the only Christian denomination in the 19th century not blown off course by the Darwinian revolution; in fact the movement embraced the new thought as it has, in the main, subsequent scientific advances. In the 19th century, traditional Unitarian thinking, which had been reliant on Biblical texts, evolved into a new faith based on reason and the enlightened conscience.

### Historic Significance of Yr Hen Gapel

Yr Hen Gapel is grade II\* listed for its historic significance.

Although not the first Unitarian church in Wales, Llwynrhydowen is generally regarded as the mother church of Unitarianism in Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire owing to the radical thread which began with Jenkin Jones (1700-42) establishing the first Arminian congregation in Wales in 1726. This particular strand of theological thought evolved, and by the mid 19th century, 13 Unitarian congregations had been established in the area which became known as Y Smotyn Du – the Black Spot.

A descendant of Jenkin Jones was Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), the great American architect.

The third minister, David Davis, Castell Hywel, (1745-1827) had a wide circle of influential friends including Edward Williams (Iolo Morganwg) (1747-1826), Thomas Evans (Tomos Glyn Cothi) (1764-1833) and Dr Richard Price (1723-91), all Unitarians who had attended worship at Llwynrhydowen. These men were pivotal in the evolution of radical political and religious thought not just in Wales but on an international stage.

The renowned Baptist preacher Christmas Evans (1766-1838), worked as a farm labourer for David Davis, Castell Hywel, and was a member of Llwynrhydowen and preached his first sermon here, before becoming a Baptist.

William Thomas (1834-79), also known by his bardic name Gwilym Marles, was minister, social reformer, theologian, poet, educator, and editor. He championed political, social and religious freedom and worked for the rights of the tenant farmers of west Wales. When some local farmers encouraged by their minister dared to vote in the 1868 general election contrary to the wishes of their landlord, John Lloyd of Alltyrodyn, they were evicted. The situation achieved the status of a national scandal when in 1876 Lloyd evicted both congregation and minister from Yr Hen Gapel, claiming that their radical Unitarian ideologies were a breach of their lease. Due to the interest prompted by the eviction, a national fundraising campaign enabled the building of a new chapel nearby in Rhydowen, but after the death of Lloyd his sister had Yr Hen Gapel returned to the congregation.

Gwilym Marles was the great uncle of the poet Dylan Marles Thomas (1914-53).

### Social and Community Significance of Yr Hen Gapel

Yr Hen Gapel has a significant place in the community not only of Rhydowen but in south Ceredigion and north Carmarthenshire - the wider area represented by the Unitarian "Black Spot". Despite its closure in 1876, it escaped the fate of many a redundant chapel and continued to be cared for and used albeit in a low-key way. In view of its importance in the history of Unitarianism, the 1970s the local congregations came together and endeavoured to make Yr Hen Gapel a museum of Unitarianism, but this project was short-lived. Nonetheless it has continued to be used for occasional services. Addoldai Cymru is aware of a considerable number of potential local supporters, not only Unitarians, but from the wider local community.

### Architectural Significance of Yr Hen Gapel

Yr Hen Gapel is grade II\* listed as a fine example of a long wall chapel of un-restored late Georgian character with a largely original interior.

The authors of *The Buildings of Wales: Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion* (London: 2006) state "The slightly Gothic eaves cornice is unusual, likewise the long back windows. Atmospheric tightly packed interior, refitted in 1862. Painted grained gallery on thin iron columns, panelled in vertical panels with a delicate Gothic Moulding under the top rail. Small platform pulpit with balustraded sides and panelled front, similar Gothic moulding. Disused since 1876...thus the chapel preserves an atmosphere of the mid C19 in a manner lost elsewhere." This thumb-nail sketch finesses the chapel's late Georgian character with Gothic details and places emphasis on its atmospheric interior, unaltered since its closure.

In *Welsh Chapels* (Stroud: 1996), Anthony Jones notes that in the period 1810-1840 especially in rural area there was a slow but steady transition to rectangular-plan gable-end chapels but some growing or more ambitious congregations chose to continue the simple long wall entry design and simply increased the size of the building. He cites “the spacious and galleried Llwynrhydowen...with its hipped roof and fine scale” as an excellent example of this trend in the development of Welsh chapel design.

D. Huw Owen selected Yr Hen Gapel Llwynrhydowen as one of 105 Welsh language chapels described in detail in *Capeli Cymru* (Talybont: 2005) and as one of 113 chapels in Wales described in detail in *The Chapels of Wales* (Bridgend: 2012).

The elements of high architectural significance are considered to be:

1. The long-wall entry main façade, with its four round headed sash-glazed windows with intersecting tracery, two panelled doors and matching fanlights, and slightly Gothic eaves cornice.
2. The slate plaque inscribed “Llwynrhydowain 1834” and the two inscriptions from the earlier phases of building, including the 1733 foundation stone.
3. The half-hipped slated roof.
4. The painted grained gallery on iron columns, panelled in vertical panels with a delicate Gothic Moulding, and incorporating clock.
5. The platform pulpit with similar Gothic moulding, turned bobbin balusters and painted grained panelled front.
6. The ground floor fixed bench seating.

#### **4. Condition of the Building**

##### Roof

The slating and lead hips are generally sound but there is no slating felt and without that, there is no safety net when slates slip. The roof timbers are generally sound except where there have been long-standing leaks in the past. These are along the south gable wall and towards the north gable wall, where the ceiling plaster was removed recently. There is no obvious infestation by wood-boring insects.

##### Fascias

The fascias and barge-boards are all timber, ornamental and apparently original on the front wall. Elsewhere they have a simple, ovolo moulding and may be replacements. Their condition will require closer inspection.

### Rainwater goods:

The rainwater gutters and downpipes are aged and consist of a mixture of materials and sizes. Rainwater gullies are non-existent.

### Exterior walls

The exterior pointing appears sound except for particular areas, namely

- the roadside (north) gable
- parts of the rear (east) wall where there have been long-term leaks
- near the ground around the bases of walls
- under verges and eaves.

Elsewhere, over much of the walls' surface, the lime pointing has shrunk away leaving many minute cracks and fissures. The impervious limestone blocks provide little buffer through absorption so damp works its way through the wall. The outbreak of dry rot inside the front wall indicates that, whatever its appearance, it is leaking. Possible sources of ingress through the front wall are as follows, although it is most likely to be a combination of all these:

- defective pointing, or through the damaged window sills
- running in behind the wall-memorials
- being trapped under the exterior concrete apron or running in through two rusted under-floor vents.

### Windows

The front elevation windows exhibit varying degrees of decay and missing glazing bars but sufficient original material remains to justify workshop conservation rather than replacement. The rear elevation windows are both derelict. While the interior looks sound, the exterior shows a lot of damage with missing glazing bars. The exterior vandal protection has completely rotted away and there is damage to the glass.

### External doors

These have been repaired many times in the past. The frames exhibit varying degrees of decay and are beyond useful repair. The doors are well worth repairing.

### Access path

The concreted area between the entrance gates and the chapel doors is unsightly and tends to trap water in the base of walls, so encouraging dampness.

### Boundary walls and gates

The north boundary wall forms the boundary between the burial ground and the main A475 Newcastle Emlyn - Lampeter road. It has increasingly retaining function towards the west, and at the north-west corner is about 3m high above the road. It is pierced by several relatively mature ash trees and is collapsing.

The east boundary wall's junction with the chapel's south-east corner is a source of water ingress into the chapel and inside is about 2.5m high and has a retaining function

in respect of B4459 Talgarreg - Pencader road. The corner of the burial ground at this point is piled high with debris.

The yard entrance gates are in good condition.

#### Memorials attached to the chapel

The four memorials built into the base of the west wall are quite damaged and a major source of water ingress to the area inside that is most affected by dry rot.

#### Memorial stones in the burial ground

Amongst the numerous memorials in the burial ground, nine are broken. The memorials are an integral part of the attraction and the story of the chapel.

#### Pulpit

The podium has wood rotting fungus in the base. This extends to the wainscoting between the podium and the northern entrance door. The source appears to be the floor immediately under the podium. From above it does not seem to extend beyond that area of floor, but it must be assumed that the surrounding under-floor area is affected. The cause is water ingress combined with lack of ventilation. Possible sources of ingress are discussed in the "Walls" section above.

#### Floor in other areas

Wet and rotting timber along the back (east) wall need to be investigated. Supporting timbers to the suspended floor need to be repaired and separated from damp masonry.

#### Ceiling plaster

The ceiling is plain, flat lime plaster on laths, without mouldings except for a simple, ceiling centre rose. The failure of lath nails affects the entire ceiling. It would be quite possible to conserve the remaining, existing lath and plaster but, given the lack of decoration, such techniques would seem extravagant for the task.

#### Wall plaster

There is widespread deterioration in the lime plaster which may or may not be patchable. Worst affected are the south wall, the west wall and, to a lesser extent, the east wall.

#### Balcony support

The side balconies' supporting beams are carried over the outer doors on cast-iron posts and lintels, the posts being in the form of extended Doric columns - very thin but with capitals and entasis. They are badly corroded but the ends of the balconies' supporting beams have sensibly been encased in tin.

#### Balcony staircases

The two staircases to the balconies are supported on the external gable walls. The fixings are concealed by plaster on the underside of the staircases so could

not be inspected. As both flights have dropped and show some distress, the plaster will have to be opened up to expose the fixings. These will have to be secured, and the plaster made good.

### Electrical installation

The system is very old. It arrives overhead to insulators on the south wall. Cables are clipped around the fascia and a cable head is mounted outside, over a window. Thence, the rather obvious supply cable makes its way to a row of meters mounted in full view on the side of a balcony support beam. A modern street light (with all its cabling) has been mounted on the north-east corner of the building.

## **5. Conservation Issues and Capacity for Change**

Addoldai Cymru was established by Cadw and the WCVA to take into care examples of redundant Nonconformist buildings which are of exceptional architectural and/or historical significance. The Trust takes a long term, legacy approach to the buildings within its care, at a time when the impact of changes to and loss of Nonconformist chapel buildings is likely to increase. It is therefore incumbent upon the Trust to afford the greatest respect to the integrity of the building fabric, and its fixtures and fittings. There shall always be a presumption in favour of retaining the building “as found” and of resisting proposals for alterations, especially removal of original fabric, fixtures and fittings.

Nonetheless, Addoldai Cymru is realistic in recognising that some managed change to a building may be necessary in order to realise its potential after-use and to assure its future. The Trust will therefore carefully consider changes to building elements which are deemed to be of minor significance, and whose sympathetic alteration would not adversely affect the building’s overall significance. Some issues specific to Yr Hen Gapel are:

1. Despite only having limited use during the last 138 years, it is clear that the building has been cared for by its congregation. Maintenance has been undertaken, and it would appear that the roof has been at least partially re-slatted in recent decades. Although the structure of the building is basically sound, there has been inevitable deterioration of parts of the building fabric, e.g. the sash windows, and there is a growing problem of damp ingress.
2. The limited use and minimal changes that have been made to the chapel interior during those 138 years contribute strongly to the preserved atmosphere of a mid 19th century interior. It is important that any repair works or alterations to the interior do nothing to diminish that atmosphere.
3. Acquisition of Yr Hen Gapel by Addoldai Cymru provides opportunities to resurrect the local Unitarian congregations’ ambition to utilise the building as a focal point to celebrate Unitarianism and the unique cultural development of the “Black Spot”. Not only can this lovely building be interpreted but it can be set within this context.

4. There is evidence that bats are using the roof space as a habitat, and consideration will need to be given to them during any works.
5. The difficulty of providing vehicular access and car parking will be a challenge.

The chart below details the various areas, their significance and their capacity for change.

Area		Significance	Capacity for Change
<b>Exterior</b>			
West (front) elevation		7	7
North elevation		4	6
East elevation		6	6
South elevation		3	5
Roof		5	6
Steps and gates		6	5
Concrete path		1	2
Burial ground incl. monuments		5	7
Burial ground boundary walls		4	5
<b>Interior</b>			
Vestibules		4	7
Pulpit		6	7
Sedd fawr		5	6
Ground floor bench seating		5	6
Staircases		4	6
Gallery		6	7
Gallery bench seating		5	6
Ceiling		4	6
Walls		4	4
<b>Key</b>			
<b>Significance</b>			
7,8	Exceptional	National or international significance	
5,6	Considerable	Regional significance	
3,4	Some	Local significance	
1,2	Negative or Negligible	Negative or limited heritage value	
<b>Capacity for change</b>			
7,8	Very low capacity for change	Highly fragile and very vulnerable to change and neglect. Only capable of accepting minimal interventions carried out with great care if these avoid compromising significance. A conservation approach is needed.	

5,6	Low capacity for change	Vulnerable to change and neglect. Capable of accepting some changes if these avoid compromising significance. A conservation approach needed.
3,4	Moderate capacity for change	Capable of accepting a number of changes without compromising significance. Significance must inform proposals.
1,2	High capacity for change	Very major or major interventions possible without compromise to significance.

## 6. Conservation Policies

Addoldai Cymru endorses the principles and guidance contained in Cadw's *Conservation Principles* (Cadw 2011).

Whilst planning and undertaking any project at Yr Hen Gapel, the Trust will endeavour to pursue good conservation practice, ensuring that only people with appropriate skills will work on the historic building and artefacts. The Trust will retain the maximum original historic fabric, fixtures and fittings, and reinstate original details and finishes to reinforce the unity of the original design. Traditional materials and craft techniques will be employed, utilising locally sourced materials wherever possible. External specialists and advisors will be consulted when necessary and guidance will be sought from Cadw and the local authority. Any new work will be designed to complement the historic fabric sensitively and sympathetically and its design will be environmentally sustainable. New services in the historic fabric will be incorporated discreetly. Building improvements will reflect the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act whilst being sensitive to the significance of historic fabric.

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Addoldai Cymru  
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