



Ymddiriedolaeth Addoldai Cymru Welsh Religious Buildings Trust

NEWSLETTER 3

SUMMER 2009

Friends, thank you for your continued support.

Income from the Friends of the Trust has proved invaluable - every penny counts!

If you are not already a Friend – would you like to support us and help us with our work?

Membership of the Friends is open to all and costs £10 a year: a membership form and bank standing order form are enclosed with this newsletter. Alternatively, contact the Trust's office.

To those of you who are already members – why not pass on the membership form to someone you think might be interested?

Our various projects also need local friends and supporters. We welcome active local volunteers to become involved, to help keep an eye on buildings, to help arrange occasional events and to open buildings to the public as buildings are repaired.



Capel Peniel Tremadog Interior



Capel Peniel Tremadog, awaiting repairs to façade

Capel Peniel - an iconic gem

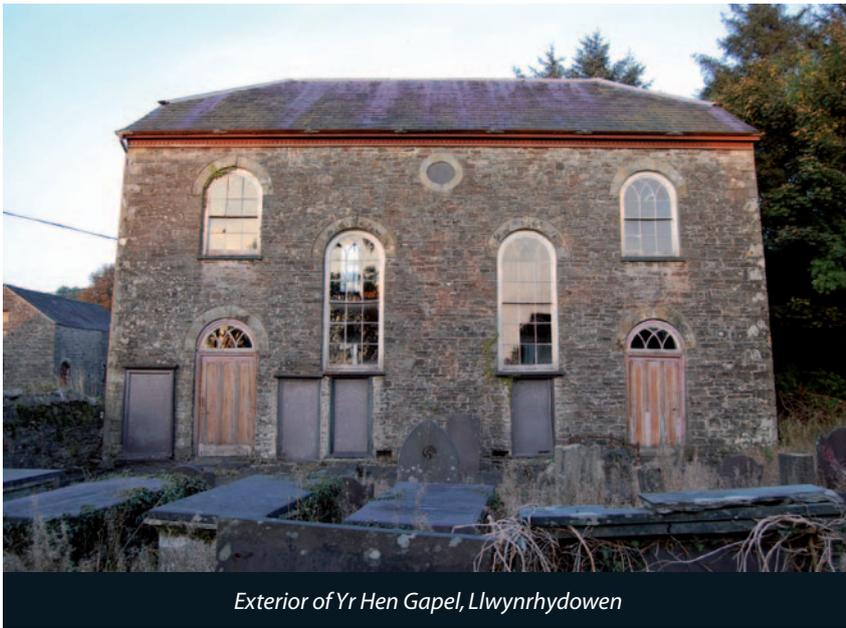
The Trust is in the process of acquiring Capel Peniel, Tremadog from the Presbyterian Church of Wales. We are very grateful to the minister, elders and church membership at Peniel for their co-operation, and also to all the relevant denominational officers concerned.

Peniel's 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. Historically, it is extremely important as one of the earliest chapels in Wales to be built on a generous scale with a gable ended front, when virtually all other chapels at the beginning of the nineteenth century were small, and had long-wall façades with pulpits

placed between the two entrance doors.

Peniel was built in 1811, without the Classical portico; that came later. 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 and end pilasters to extended side walls. Inside, there is little to suggest the chapel's early foundation; all is of a late nineteenth-century character. 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 *sêd fawr* and pulpit, or the red-painted, match-boarded and panelled ceiling. Peniel is listed at Grade I.

Based on report from John Hilling, the Trust's Architectural Adviser



Exterior of Yr Hen Gapel, Llwynrhydowen

Yr Hen Gapel, Llwynrhydowen

The opening of the first Arminian chapel in Wales at Llwynrhydowen in 1733 initiated a radical tradition in an apparently unlikely rural setting that was to have national reverberations. From this cause grew the Unitarian “Black Spot”, a unique community of rural Unitarians in the Teifi valley in the vicinity of Lampeter. Most of the other congregations with which this community was to share its intellectual life were situated in progressive urban locations like Birmingham or Manchester. Unitarianism stands at the end of the steady march towards rational Christianity that caused much upheaval in the religious life of eighteenth and nineteenth century Wales, as Arminians evolved into Arians and on into Unitarians.

The term “Black Spot” derives from a hostile Methodist historiography. This small area of some twenty square miles proved impenetrable to waves of Calvinistic Methodist revival that had their epicentre just a few miles to the north at Llangeitho. Llwynrhydowen was founded by Jenkin Jones, fresh from the Presbyterian Academy at

Carmarthen, and under the spell of its founding Principal, Thomas Perrot, an Arminian.

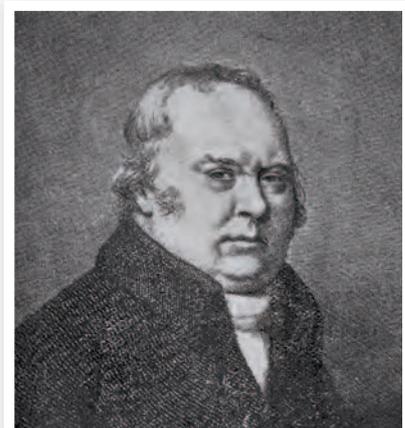
Jenkin Jones made a lasting impression on the locality, drawing a number of local dissenting congregations into his Arminian orbit. He was succeeded as minister of Llwynrhydowen by his nephew, David Lloyd, in 1742. A powerful preacher, Lloyd’s classical learning became legendary in the locality and beyond. The congregation at Llwynrhydowen continued to grow under his leadership - and the chapel was enlarged in 1754.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century Llwynrhydowen was moving steadily from Arminianism to Arianism, that is, it had adopted explicitly anti-Trinitarian views. David Davis (1745-1827) was a crucial figure in this transition. In addition to ministering at the chapel, he opened a school at Castellhywel that acquired a fine reputation. His distinguished circle of radical literary friends included Richard Price, Iolo Morganwg, Jac Glan-y-gors and Tomos Glyn Cothi and during the

French Revolutionary Wars, he was put under surveillance by the government. His congregation increased, however, and Davis oversaw the re-building of the chapel in 1791.

In 1801 a Unitarian secession occurred from Llwynrhydowen and Alltyblaca establishing the first two Unitarian congregations in Cardiganshire at Pantydefaid and Capel-y-Groes. The new causes were opened by Iolo Morganwg, whose tramping visits to London linked the “Black Spot” Unitarians with the progressive Unitarians of the age of Priestley. In 1834, the present chapel was completed during the ministry of John Davies, Llanybri, replacing the chapel of 1791.

The story of Llwynrhydowen reaches its climax in the nineteenth century in the career of William Thomas (Gwilym Marles). Appointed Unitarian minister at Llwynrhydowen in 1860, he had been educated at Carmarthen Academy and then at the University of Glasgow. The great-uncle of the poet Dylan Thomas, Gwilym Marles may be the model for the Revd. Eli Jenkins in *Under Milk Wood*. In 1862, the chapel was renovated as a bicentennial commemoration of the ejection of nonconformist



*Dafis Castellhywel
David Davis 1745-1827*



Interior of Yr Hen Gapel, Llwynrhydowen

clergy from their livings. Gwilym Marles was an advocate of the new rationalistic theology of Theodore Parker, so that in 1860, as in 1733, Llwynrhydowen continued to blaze new trails.

Gwilym Marles remained at Llwynrhydowen as minister until his death in 1879. His childhood had coincided with the "Hungry Forties," a time characterised by evictions and emigration. Anna Lloyd Jones, the mother of the celebrated American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, crossed the Atlantic at this time when poverty drove her parents, both Unitarians, from their farm of Blaen-alltddu, along with other tenants of

Alltyroddyn. Gwilym Marles, who had become a committed Liberal, joined the political fray in Cardiganshire in the heady days before and after the 1868 General Election, making frequent contributions to the press, public lectures and a regular stream of sermons that antagonised local landlords.

On 29 October 1876, the young playboy squire John Davies Lloyd of Alltyroddyn, from whom the Unitarians of Llwynrhydowen rented the land upon which their chapel stood, sensationally evicted them, stating that the chapel had been built "for the worship of God and to no other purpose whatsoever." On the following Sunday, Gwilym Marles preached to some three thousand souls at the roadside, his back to the chained entrance gates of the chapel grounds. He warned that this vindictive act was the harbinger of a general persecution of nonconformists who traced their origins to a prior eviction from their livings over two centuries earlier in 1662. The eviction attracted national publicity, although the conservative *Western Mail* assured its readers that no real Christians had been evicted, "only Unitarians".



Capel Newydd Llwynrhydowen 1879

A nation-wide fund-raising campaign saw a New Chapel opened in 1879, a little to the north of the former chapel. Gwilym Marles, a broken man, was too weak to attend the opening ceremonies. He died on 11 December 1879, aged 45 years, and is buried in front of the New Chapel that was subsequently dedicated to his memory. John Davies Lloyd had pre-deceased him by twelve months and the young squire's will was successfully challenged by his sister, Mrs Massey, who gifted the Old Chapel back to the congregation.

David Barnes

Further Reading

- D. R. Barnes, *People of Seion* (Llandysul, 1995).
- D. Elwyn Davies, *They Thought for Themselves* (Llandysul, 1982).
- D. Elwyn Davies, *Smotiau Duon* (Llandysul, 1980).
- A. Martin, *Hanes Llwynrhydowen* (Llandysul, 1977).
- N. Martin, *Gwilym Marles* (Llandysul, 1979).
- T. Oswald Williams, *Undodiaeth a Rhyddid Meddwl* (Llandysul, 1962).
- Geraint H. Jenkins, "Thomas Burgess, Iolo Morganwg and the Black Spot", *Ceredigion*, XV, 3 (2007).
- Euros Meredydd Lloyd, "Datblygiad Undodiaeth Ardal y Smotyn Du," *Ceredigion*, XV, 4 (2008)



*Gwilym Marles
William Thomas 1834 – 1879*

Trustees Wanted...

the Trust, and would welcome enquiries from those who think they may be able to help. We would particularly welcome prospective Trustees with experience of legal issues, financial and property management or fundraising.

Please contact the Trust for more information.



WRBT Trustee D. Huw Owen, Prof. Ralph Griffiths, RCAHMW Chairman, and Dr Peter Wakelin, Secretary of the Commission.

Centenary

As a part of its 100th birthday celebrations, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales held an event in August 2008 at Capel Bethania, Maesteg. The RCAHMW is the national body of research and record for the historic environment of Wales.

Tidy Towns assists the Trust

Two of the Trusts' buildings have benefited from the Welsh Assembly Government's Tidy Towns initiative. At Bethania, Maesteg, a three-man team provided by Bridgend County Borough Council has been clearing both dead Japanese Knotweed and fly-tipped rubbish. Fresh gravel has been laid on the burial ground path, and the gates re-hung. Similarly, at Hen Dy Cwrdd, Trecynon, a team provided by Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council has tidied the burial ground. The transformation at both chapels has been remarkable, and the Trust is very grateful for this work undertaken at no charge.

Open Doors 2009

Open Doors European Heritage Days in 2009 will take place during September and this year two of the Trust's buildings will be open.

Yr Hen Gapel, Llwynrhydowen will be open on **12 September** and **Bethania, Maesteg** will be open on **19 September**.

This is a rare opportunity to visit buildings not often accessible to the public.

If you think you can help please get in touch with the Trust!

*Open Doors is organised by the Civic Trust for Wales
Tel. 029 2034 3336.
www.civictrustwales.org*

Gift to the Trust

An interesting gift has been received by the Trust from Mair and Les Workman, Ogmoredy, in the form of a chair originally presented to Rev William H Thomas, who was originally from Caerau, Maesteg, and a great uncle of Mrs Workman.

The chair was given to the Trust at the open day at Bethania in August 2008. By a remarkable coincidence this same chair was a gift from Libanus church, Waunclyndaf, which is now of course one of this Trust's buildings.



Chair presented to Rev Wm Thomas by Libanus Church, Waunclyndaf

The Trust receives grant aid from Cadw, the Welsh Assembly Government's historic environment division, to support a significant part of its day-to-day running costs.

For more information please contact us. We would be very pleased to hear from you!

Trust Manager: **Gruff Owen**
email: post@yacwrbt.plus.com
Tel: **01286 881365**

**10 Heol y Dŵr,
Penygroes,
Caernarfon,
Gwynedd LL54 6LR**

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