

Capel

CYMDEITHAS TREFTADAETH Y CAPELI
THE CHAPELS HERITAGE SOCIETY



TAFLEN WYBODAETH LEOL
LOCAL INFORMATION SHEET

4

MEIDRIM
& TRELECH

CYFARFOD Y GWANWYN

1992

SPRING MEETING



INTRODUCTION

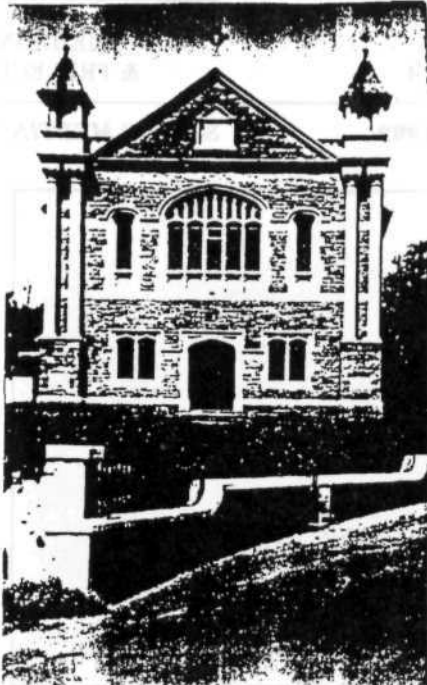
The day's activities take us into three parishes: Meidrim, Tre-lech and Betws, and Cynwyl Elfed.

For people interested in the religious history of Wales, Meidrim is associated with the name of Stephen Hughes (1622-88), who held the living during part of the Commonwealth period and who subsequently became the guiding genius of Dissent in Carmarthenshire. However, the conventicle which represented his influence in the area met not in Meidrim but in the remote upper reaches of Tre-lech and Betws.

In Meidrim itself we will hear of religious influences in the eighteenth century, when the Castell Gorfod family patronised Wesleyan and Calvinistic Methodism.

BETHEL C.M. CHAPEL, MEIDRIM

This chapel was opened on 12-13 April 1904 but the history of Methodism in the locality is very much older. The architect of the present building was Mr A.L. Jones of Carmarthen and it was built by local contractors Messrs Evans, Thomas and Lewis of Meidrim, at a cost of over £2,000. The materials and fittings are more lavish than in the average country chapel, suggesting a measure of prosperity among the members. The main impetus for building is said to have come from the Lloyd Family of Pentowin.



Methodist meetings were held in the area from about 1760 but the tempo increased with the settlement at Castell Gorfod (Llangynin) in 1789 of James Bowen, Llwyngwair, this property being part of the inheritance of his mother Easter. James Bowen, under the influence of a powerful religious conversion, was in close contact with the Wesleyan and Calvinistic Welsh Methodists and gave much practical help to the local adherents. A building at Castell Gorfod was adapted for meetings, while another building in Meidrim village was made available. The first chapel (1837) was built on James Bowen's farm of Clos, the site being a stone's throw from the present chapel.

AINON, GELLI-WEN

On the way to Tre-lech, we will pause briefly at the Gelli-wen Baptist chapel to see the place of Baptism.

This Baptist cause is a daughter of Salem, Meidrim. It was founded in 1828 but did not receive complete autonomy until 1847. Like many country chapels it was built with a double purpose, to serve the distant members of the mother church and to extend its influence. It was located on land owned by the Richards family of Pantrhedyn, prominent members of Salem. Just inside Tre-lech and Betws, it is the only Baptist chapel in the parish. It was re-built in 1880 and a vestry was added in 1924-5.

CAPEL-Y-GRAIG INDEPENDENT CHAPEL, TRE-LECH

At Tre-lech there will be brief comment on the building of Capel-y-Graig and the history of the church.

The first meeting house on the site was built in 1703. It is reputed to have been a white-washed, thatched building. The chapel was re-built between 1750 and 1765 and enlarged according to need later. The last extensive changes were carried out in 1827 and seem

to have involved putting in at least part of the gallery. The extension was a response to population growth in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and a greatly increased membership during the ministry of the Rev. Morgan Jones, 1790-1835.

The church meeting in Capel-y-Graig dates from the late seventeenth century. It was in this northern extremity of Tre-lech and Betws, not in Meidrim or Merthyr that Stephen Hughes's ministry produced a new religious nucleus. The meeting place was the substantial farm of Dinas in a lonely valley about 3/4 of a mile from the chapel and within a mile or two of the county boundary with Pembroke. There are many unanswered questions, but a persistent tradition, recorded in the early nineteenth century, associates these meetings with the period of Stephen Hughes' lifetime. When the chapel was eventually built it was located in the periphery of Dinas farm rather than near the farmhouse. It became the centre of a cluster of houses and eventually a village.

During the nineteenth century the chapel became the hub of an evangelising drive; Sunday schools and services were held in outlying farmhouses. New churches were established, those in the immediate locality being Ffynnon-bedr and Pen-y-bont (Tre-lech and Betws parish), Blaen-y-coed (Cynwyl Elfed), Llwyn-yr-hwrdd (Clydau), and Bryniwan (East Cilrhedyn).

The chapel was the centre of local religious and social life and it is reputed to have produced more ministers than any other Independent church. Apart from its religious importance it reinforced an independence of attitude found among the owner-occupying farmers traditional to the area. The mark perhaps of the impact of Capel-y-Graig was that gradually the village which had grown up around the chapel and which was sometimes called Tynewydd by popular usage came to be called Tre-lech. (This name originally was applied to the area around the parish church).

Y GANGELL, BLAEN-Y-COED

This is the birthplace of Dr Elfed Lewis, restored and maintained as a museum by the trustees and Management Committee of Coffa Elfed. Rhydfelen (the adjoining cottage) and Y Gangell were purchased in 1957. Rhydfelen was restored as a caretaker's house. The opening ceremony was performed by Mrs Elfed Lewis 13 June 1964.

The visit to Y Gangell takes us to the Blaen-y-coed area and the day will finish with a cup of tea in the vestry of Blaen-y-coed chapel and an opportunity to visit Dr Elfed Lewis's grave.

DR ELFED LEWIS (1860-1953)

Howell, the first child of James and Anna Lewis, was born at Y Gangell on 14 April 1860. There were nine further children and the family moved more than once, settling eventually at Blaenbryn.

Amongst the sounds of early childhood at Y Gangell were preaching and prayer meetings, since James and Anna were devout people, members at Blaen-y-coed Independent chapel, and it was usual at the time for services to be held in people's homes as well as in the chapels. Sunday School *Y Gymanfa Bunc*, Singing *Y Gymanfa Ganu*, Bible reading and



Y Gangell

discussion groups and Blaen-y-coed Day School (held in the chapel vestry) all combined to form his taste, and at 13 he entered Newcastle Emllyn Grammar School, setting his sights towards the ministry. In the same year he preached his first sermon.

After training at the Presbyterian College, Carmarthen (1876 - 1880) he held pastorates at Buckley (Flintshire), Hull, Llanelli (Park Church), Harecourt (London), and King's Cross (London), retiring in 1940. During these years he had also won great esteem as a hymnwriter and poet adopting *Elfed* from his native parish of Cynwyl Elfed as his bardic name. It was Elfed's stature as a leader in the religious and cultural life of Wales which inspired the foundation of the museum. But it is also a memorial to the society which produced him.

Muriel Bowen Evans