

# Capel

CYMRITH IAS TREFTAADAETH Y CAPEL  
THE CHAPELS HERITAGE SOCIETY



NEWSLETTER / CYLCHLYTHYR

5

GORFFENNAF / JULY 1988

## EDITORIAL

The Editor of a Newsletter, Journal or Magazine is in the fortunate position of being able to express an opinion from time to time in the columns of his publication. The editorship of the Capel Newsletter has till now gone hand in glove with the post of Secretary of the Society and it is in that dual capacity that I have prepared, composed and produced the last 4 issues. This issue, the 5th, will probably be my last as I shall be retiring as Secretary at the AGM in October owing to pressure of work. Dr. Huw Owen of the National Library of Wales has kindly indicated that he will be prepared to take over this work and, hopefully, to oversee the Newsletter.

Enclosed with this Newsletter you will find a copy of a new publicity leaflet which it is hoped will serve to attract new members. We have had 2,000 copies printed and these will be circulated throughout Wales via libraries, county archives and the various denominations. Should you require more copies please write either to me at the Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagans, Cardiff CF5 6XB or to Dr. Huw Owen at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. It is vital that we reach a wider audience and increase our membership if Capel is to continue as an active and credible organisation.

Regional committees have by now been established in most parts of the country and it is important that such groups not only meet fairly regularly but are well attended. If you are a member of Capel then please do try and attend at least some of the meetings within your area. County Secretaries for their part should send details of forthcoming meetings, talks, slide shows etc. to the Secretary so that this information can be included in the next Newsletter - thus enabling the membership to know what is happening, when, and where. The county committees are a crucial part of the organisation of Capel and the national Executive Committee relies on the information passed on to it by committees in order to act in the case of threatened chapels, archives or grave yards and make representations to Cadw, County Archivists or The Family History Society.

I would suggest that one item that should be on every agenda at every County meeting is that of chapels (or their contents) that might be under threat. All too often the Executive Committee does not hear (or hears when it is too late) of a chapel that might be closing down, or has been purchased for redevelopment. Obviously not every building can be saved, indeed it could be argued that not every building ought to be saved, but where such chapels are

of obvious architectural merit or form an important visual element in a street-scape or in the countryside, or are closely associated with perhaps a famous preacher or a revival then they are surely worthy of consideration for listing and statutory protection. To quote just one (recent) case in point. The fine classical-inspired congregational chapel at Bethesda in Gwynedd closed down and was purchased by a developer who intends to demolish it and build anew on the site. The loss of such a building which forms such an important part of the town would be tragic. What is even harder to understand is how the townsfolk of Bethesda can accept the demolition of the very building which gave the town its name. Hardly a voice has been raised in protest. Also in and around Bethesda the CM church alone intends to close six chapels and to unite the congregation in the remaining chapel, Jeriwsalem. Such a move cannot in itself be criticised, after all maintaining large chapels with often small memberships must be an enormous strain on any congregation, but the loss of the buildings, many of which can be described as architectural gems seems tantamount to vandalism especially when one sees what is so often put up in their place.



Capel Bethesda

A bit of care and/or a good architect is all that is needed to preserve such buildings or at least the most significant feature such as the facade. As for Capel Bethesda, well, Cadw were informed of its intended fate at the eleventh hour and the building was listed. Let us hope that its new owner will treat it sympathetically.

If you know of an interesting chapel that is under threat, or chapel archives, please contact your county representative or the Secretary of Capel so that an assessment can be made of the subject in question and action taken accordingly.

Annual General Meeting - advance notice

This year's AGM will be held at the Radnor College of Further Education in Llandrindod, Powys on Saturday 15 October 1988. Following the formal business of the AGM there will be an illustrated talk on chapel architecture by John Hilling R.I.B.A. and after lunch, we shall be visiting a number of chapels in the town. These meetings have proved very successful and popular in the past and as Llandrindod boasts several very fine chapel buildings we feel sure that the high standards set at Caernarfon, Aberystwyth and Newport will be maintained here. Please make an effort to attend, and tell your friends about the meeting ... and Capel.

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Report of CAPEL Spring Meeting held at Newport, Gwent on  
Saturday, 7 May 1988

25 members and friends were present at the Spring Meeting which was based at the Castle Room, in the Newport Centre, Newport. Apologies were recorded from Mrs. Patricia Moore (County Archivist for South Glamorgan), Hywel Davies (Columbia USA), Delwyn Tibbott (Deputy Archivist for Gwent), Prof. A. Jones (Chicago, USA) and Graham Rosser (Cardiff).

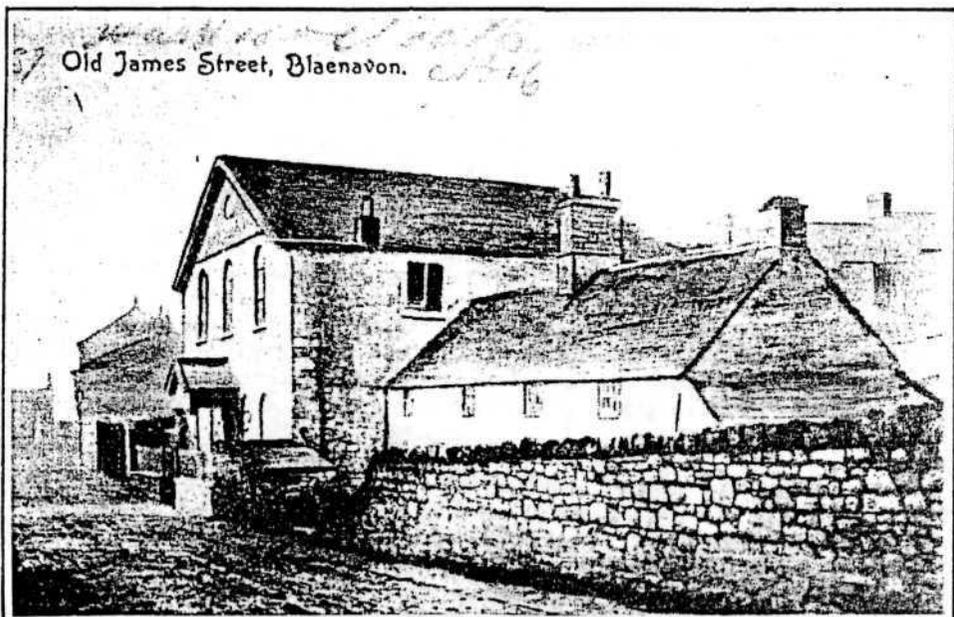
The meeting was opened by Dr. Prys Morgan (Chairman) who also drew the delegates' attention to an extensive article on Welsh chapels by Hywel Davies of Columbia, USA, that had recently appeared in the New York Times. Dr. Morgan then introduced the guest speaker, Mr. Adrian Babbidge, Director of the Torfaen Museum Trust, who presented an illustrated talk on Nonconformity in the Pontypool Valley.

The lecture was meant not so much as a comprehensive study of nonconformity in Pontypool but rather to highlight specific points in the nonconformist history of the area. It was interesting to note that during the 18th century even though the nonconformists were not that strong in the area, they nevertheless played a most significant role in the social development of the valley. Pontypool developed during the late 16th and 17th centuries as an important iron-making town. There was a strong dissenting tradition here from an early date, and significantly, several of the more powerful and influential families such as the Hanburys (ironmasters) were adherents to or actively supported the Society of Friends (Quakers) or, later, the Baptists. They were also tolerant of their aims and methods.

The Baptist cause started at Pontypool about 1727 at Penygarn, the brother-in-law of the first minister being a manager at the nearby Hanbury ironworks. The Baptists were influential not only in terms of the spread of nonconformist religion but also nonconformist politics. In 1795, the then-minister Morgan John Rhees left Penygarn to establish a 'wladfa' (homeland) for Welsh emigrants in the United States on a site to be known as Beulah. Shortly afterwards,

Rees Lloyd, also a minister at Penygarn, left for the States to join Rhee. A split occurred and Lloyd left to form a second colony at Ebensberg (named after Ebenezer chapel). The Beulah project was not successful and the settlement went into decline, whereas Ebensberg remains to this day.

In the period c.1800-1820 there was a large influx of English people into the Pontypool area, a district that had previously been mainly Welsh speaking, establishing a pattern that was to remain to the present day. In the early 1830s the first Welsh Baptist College was established at Abergavenny following suggestions put forward at Penygarn. A new chapel was built at Grove Street with the college attached, the minister acting as president of the college. It is interesting to note that the Welsh language was not included in the curriculum of this first college. Under the Rev. William Edwards the college moved to new premises in Cardiff in the 1880s.



After c.1880 more elaborate, ornate designs became fashionable for chapels, the simplicity of the early structures giving way to generally classically-inspired designs. Many of these chapels were actually sponsored and paid for by the wealthier members of the community and local industrialists, the Conway family was one example as were the Jenkins, at Ponthir, near Cwmbran.

As the English language supplanted Welsh in the area especially c.1820-1840, so the Welsh chapels changed to English. However, after 1840 there was a spate of building new Welsh chapels for the Welsh-speaking population whose original places of worship had been converted to English.

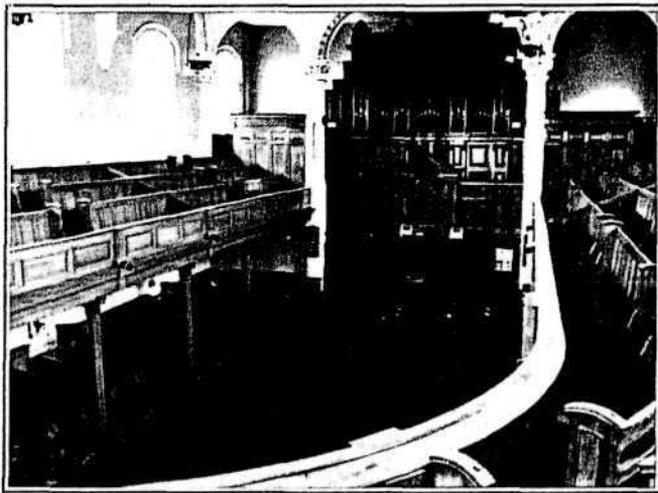
One of the most interesting and progressive developments took place in the 1880s when a non-denominational mission was founded at Pontypool. This corrugated iron built hall contained a Sunday School, library and offices. It provided accommodation for 'friendless girls' and boasted a building society in the early 1900s. It was supported by the philanthropic Wintel family, and is still active today.

Mr. Babbidge was thanked for a most interesting and informative talk which prompted many questions from the floor.

Mr. Martin Culliford, organiser of the Newport meeting, then outlined the agenda for the afternoon which would include visits to several chapels and former chapels in Newport. Mr. Culliford also outlined the development of Newport during the 19th century from a town of 1,000 people in 1800 to 20,000 in 1850 following an influx of people especially from the west country during this period; this was reflected in the preponderance of English chapels in the town.

The meeting then adjourned for lunch.

United Reformed Church Newport (Gwent)  
Victoria Road Church



Among the sites visited in the afternoon was the Morgan Howell Memorial Chapel which was built in the 1830s. This Welsh language chapel closed about 4 years ago and was converted to a mosque, at which time all the Welsh gravestones and memorials were smashed. The pulpit was removed and has since been installed in a public house. The mosque is thriving and boasts over 1000 adherents. Other chapels included Capel Mynydd Seion; Havelock St. Chapel and the United Reformed Church in Victoria Street. Mr. Les James, Schools Officer at Newport Museum assisted Mr. Culliford during the 'walk-about' in Newport.

The meeting was an undoubted success and the Society's thanks are extended to both Mr. and Mrs. Culliford for organising the arrangements so efficiently.

## ASHTON'S LITTLE GAME

The origin of Wood Street Congregational Church, Cardiff

Roger L Brown

Wood Street Congregational Church was one of the best known churches in Cardiff, and at one time it was the largest congregational church - in terms of membership - in south Wales. Its first pastor, "Pop" Watkiss - as he was popularly known - was one of the most influential Christian leaders in the Cardiff of his day. He died in 1892.

It is generally known that the Wood Street church building was formerly a music hall, but less well known that the church was formed as a result of one of the most celebrated scandals Cardiff has ever witnessed. Writing fifty years after the event Sam Allen could say that the details were so well known even then that they did not need to be repeated. But the story is now forgotten, and perhaps needs to be revived as a reminder about how God's providence can redeem even the most unsavory episodes of life.

Watkiss became pastor of the United Methodist church in Guildford Street, Cardiff, in 1864 - the building is now part of the masonic hall in Churchill Way. Born in a Shopshire village and sent to work in the coal mines as a boy of twelve, Watkiss was converted to the Christian faith, and in his thirties became an itinerant evangelist until he was persuaded to become pastor of this church.

Two years later a journeyman-painter by the name of Ashton - surprisingly his Christian name is never recorded - joined this church together with his wife and daughter. His piety and exemplary conduct soon brought him into prominence, with the result that he began to take a leading part in the prayer meetings and activities of the church. Gradually he unfolded a story, obviously step by step, and much of it, it seems, had to be coaxed out of him. But because of his piety he was believed by Watkiss, and because of Watkiss's acceptance, by the majority of the congregation.

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This was his story. He and his wife had been entrusted with the care of a son of one Lord Baynton. This son had grown up, left for America, where he had amassed a fortune but died from a snake-bite. But he had not forgotten the kindness of the Ashtons and in his will left them his entire estate. This comprised properties near Hull and in Surrey, and a sum of money estimated between £80,000 and one million pounds in cash.

All this took time to tell. And no doubt Watkiss had time to tell Ashton of his problems. Unlike his fellow ministers he was able to attract the working class to his services. The Cardiff Times of 12 June 1869 contained a report of a conference about the state of Cardiff. There was one licensed house for every twenty-six inhabitants, while 5,204 people living in twenty-one streets never attended a place of worship. Watkiss believed he could pack these people in, but obviously needed larger premises than the Guildford Street chapel. It was at this point that Ashton appears to have informed Watkiss of his good fortune, and promised to assist Watkiss to obtain the Wood Street music-hall. This had proved to be a "white elephant" to its proprietor, one Mr Matthews.

A meeting of the church was called to explain to them this almost real-life fairy-tale. Ashton's assumed piety, Watkiss's ready acceptance, convinced most of its truth, but two members denounced it. Captain Richard Cory, of the shipping firm, called it "all rot and nothing but a dirty swindle", while E F Kennard, who later wrote about the incident in his reminiscences, commissioned to investigate, concluded that Mrs Ashton was a base character and her husband "a tool in her hands". When he informed the church of his findings all but twenty members "took their cushions from their seats and left the church for good." Watkiss left with them.

Thus in the September of 1868 Watkiss opened up his new cause in the Wood Street building, then known as the Temperance Town Circus. The equestrian cartoons were still on its walls the following April, and its interior bare of all that made a chapel respectable, but the crowds came nevertheless. A Cardiff Times reporter suggested that fine buildings,

stuffed cushions, wooden pews and a heated and suffocating atmosphere, would never attract the working man. Watkiss obviously did, even though many echoed the sentiments expressed earlier by one Wesley Price on another occasion that "religious confectionary" displayed in theatres was completely inconsistent with the "sublime truths of our most holy religion." (Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian, 21 Jan and 4 Feb 1860).

Here, in this new chapel, Ashton was in his element. His fellow worshippers, believing his promises to purchase the building, buy a manse and build a chapel keeper's house, regarded him "as a man of such consequence as untold wealth usually confers upon individuals". No service was complete unless he took part; indeed, he once thanked God in a prayer that the devil had been cheated for he would devote all his new found wealth for religious purposes. Had he accomplished half the things he had promised, concluded the Cardiff Times, he would have been regarded as one of the greatest benefactors of his day, far surpassing the marquess of Bute! Mrs Ashton too played the part of the gracious lady. She would enter the chapel, radiant with smiles, condescending to return the greetings given her by her "admiring friends", and then sit in a "commodious and prominent seat" set apart from the rest of the congregation.

These, and other friends, who defended Ashton against Cory's and Kennard's calumnies, were promised great rewards. Birch, a railway porter, gave up his job on the strength of a promise of being made steward on one of Ashton's estates, and his brother, who lent Ashton his hard won savings, was offered a similar post. A minister was induced to leave his church in London to come and assist Watkiss, while a well known Cardiff quack was gratified to be appointed Ashton's travelling physician. Others acted as guarentors of his debts with various tradesmen. For by now the story of his good fortune had eclipsed even the news of the general election so far as Cardiff was concerned.

It was true that Ashton had taken his friends to see him enter a solicitor's chambers in London, and had shown them imposing documents, but equally true that he still had to prove his identity before the fortune would be his. To do so

would mean travelling to Hull - where he would claim immediately £22,000 due to him, and all agreed it was only right that he and his wife should appear

to be respectable and wealthy people as they set out on their journey. "Tradesmen who would hesitate to give credit to a struggling and honest man, were only too eager to take the orders of this newly discovered millionaire ... the prospect of serving so important a personage as this owner of untold wealth, seems to have sent them a woolgathering", was one contemporary description. Various sums were advanced him, and Ashton took thirty pounds from the chapel's collection arguing that he would soon replace it fourfold. "Silk dresses innumerable and other articles of female attire were ordered upon a scale of magnificance commensurate with the dignity of a wife of a millionaire", by Mrs Ashton, who left Cardiff, it was reported, "with a stock of apparel that would not be spurned by a titled lady", and all provided on credit by Cardiff's drapers. A travelling draper was even persuaded to leave all his stock with her.

Kennard attended the chapel "send-off" for Mr and Mrs Ashton. It was crowded; people were weeping with joy. Ashton in his speech nearly broke down with emotion. The doxology was sung, and then there followed the shaking of hands and congratulations from hundreds of persons. Those going with him to take up their new appointments "were warmly congratulated."

With these friends Ashton journeyed to Hull. At the supper table that night "he asked a blessing". Leaving on the pretext of a small errand the next morning he was never seen again. His wife, who had travelled to London to await his arrival there, disappeared at the same time. Ashton kindly left three pounds to defray his friends' expenses and his carpet bag. It contained an old great coat.

It slowly dawned upon these friends that they had been cruelly deceived. The news created a sensation at Cardiff. The Ashtons had left with an estimated £600 in cash and about the same in goods, all on credit. A number were ruined outright. The enquiries were now made which should have been made earlier. These revealed that Ashton had performed the same tricks at Swansea and Worcester, although under different names.

The local newspaper editors had a field day about all the good religious people who had fallen down before the "golden calf". But there was sympathy for Watkiss as an innocent victim and because of his obvious concern for Christian mission. Other churches came to the rescue - the wealthy Hannah Street chapel in the docks being one - and £5,450 was raised to purchase the Wood Street building. Samuel Morley himself contributed £600 towards the cost.

There was one other sequel. A group of amateur actors in Cardiff - Sam Allen being one of their number - wrote a review about the whole incident which they called "Ashton's Little Game". This was put on at the old Theatre Royal in Queen Street, and played to packed audiences for a week. It was even patronised by Richard Cory, possibly as it provided a salutary warning against greed, but also as the profits of the review went to the recently established Royal Infirmary. Poor Watkiss was portrayed as Nathaniel Sheepsby! But the great attraction of the show was the song sung to the tune of "Jenny Jones" by the character who represented the Welshy-English draper of the town. Its title, "I did like her uncommon" because proverbial in Cardiff for years thereafter. Its first verse went as follows:

'Tis about Mistress Ashton, who was do me so tidy,  
 And leave me so sudden, I am going to sing.  
 She did come to my shop and buy linsey and wolsey,  
 But to tell you the truth, she don't pay for a thing.  
 Her husband I hear, he do have lots of money,  
 Is safe as the Pank, and worth thousand a day.

Chorus: So as she's nice ooman, I did like her uncommon.  
 But she swindle me shocking, indeed as may say.

The origin of the Wood Street chapel is a remarkable story, and there can be no surprise why the historians of the chapel failed to record it. But if the humorists found in it a subject for great mirth, and the editors found it a tale to commend the need for care in business affairs, it is also a tale of God's providence, for in spite of all human limitations a work started in his name was continued and blessed.

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E F Kennard, The Remarkable Career of a Well Known Athlete, (Cardiff, c 1910), pp 128-32.

John Williamson (editor), The History of Congregationalism in Cardiff, (Cardiff, 1920), pp 62-3.

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7 April 1988

CHURCH MONUMENTS SOCIETY

Excursion to Glamorgan, Saturday 23 July 1988

The first excursion outside London and the Home Counties will visit Llantwit Major, St. Donats, Coychurch, Llandaff Cathedral and St. Johns, Cardiff. Excursion fee £7.50 per person. Details from Robin Millership, 181 High Barns, Ely, Cambs., CB7 4RJ (tel. 0353 61426).

COUNCIL FOR BRITISH ARCHAEOLOGY

Open Meeting to examine proposal that there exists both a constituency and a need for a national society which could be devoted to the study of nonconformist religious architecture.

Venue: Lecture Theatre of the Institute of Archaeology, Gordon Square, London WC1.

Date: Saturday, 24 September 1988

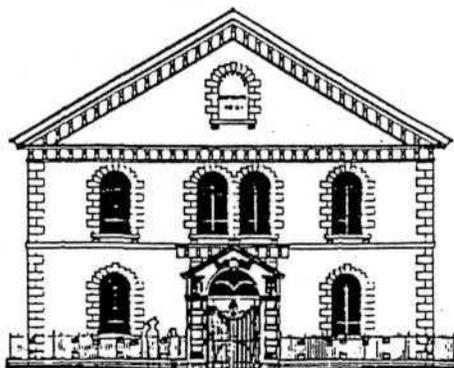
Time: Starting at 1.30pm

Tea will be provided, and the proceedings will be rounded off by an illustrated lecture.

Details: Write to Richard Morris, Centre for Archaeological Studies, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, LS2 9JT.

Newsletter No. 6 : Closing date for receipt of articles is 26 October 1988.

# Pontypridd Town Council



## Historical & Cultural Centre

Pontypridd new Historical Centre lies next to the town's famous OLD BRIDGE. The building itself, Tabernacl, was built in 1861 and ceased as a place of worship in 1983. The centre has a wealth of interest for the visitor, with regularly changing exhibitions on Chapels in Wales, local and regional history, and the creative work of local residents and school children. There is also a substantial collection of miner's lamps.

### EXHIBITIONS

- July - 5 Aug. Art Exhibition  
 2 Aug - 31 Aug. 'The Changing Face of South Wales'  
 9 Aug - 2 Sept. Exhibition from Cardiff Print Workshop  
 From 3 Sept. Exhibition by two local artists  
 30 Sept. - 28 Oct. 'Time Measurement'

ADMISSION: ADULTS - 20P CHILDREN - 10P

A TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE IS PROVIDED ON THE GROUND FLOOR

### OPENING TIMES

TUESDAYS TO SATURDAYS 9am to 5pm

(and Bank and other Public Holidays)

Light refreshments are available daily between the hours of 10.30 a.m and 3.30 p.m. During summer months, and weather permitting, teas are served on the garden terrace where one can enjoy the view of the OLD BRIDGE.

### HOW TO GET THERE

The Centre is about 500 yards from the main A470  
 (the B4237 Ynysybwl exit)  
 ...6 miles from the M4 junction 32...

For further information please write to:

The Cultural Services Officer, Pontypridd Historical and Cultural Centre,  
 Bridge Street, Pontypridd, Mid Glamorgan, South Wales.

☎ (0443) 402077