

Capel

CYMDEITHAS TREFTADAETH Y CAPEL
THE CHAPELS HERITAGE SOCIETY



NEWSLETTER/CYLCHLYTHYR

17

HYDREF / AUTUMN 1992

MEIDRIM AND TRE-LECH

The Spring Meeting was this year held in rural Carmarthenshire on Saturday 16 May. On a fine sunny day about forty members assembled at Bethel M.C. chapel, Meidrim, and heard a talk by Mr Kemmis Buckley on the early history of Methodism in the area. He spoke particularly of the part played by George Williams (of Llwyn-gwair and Castell Gorfod) and of the tradition that John Wesley had preached 'under the sweet chestnut' near Castell Gorfod. Part of his address is printed in this issue.

The party then drove in convoy to Gelli-wen to see the small, secluded, Baptist chapel of Aion, where Mr William Davies showed us the open-air place of baptism in the little stream alongside the graveyard.

We then continued to Tre-lech, near the northern boundary of the parish for lunch at Tafarn Beca and a visit to Capel-y-Graig, the Independent chapel founded in 1703, which grew from the activity of Stephen Hughes in the parish in the late seventeenth century. The history of the congregation was related to us by Mrs Muriel Bowen Evans, and Mr Thomas Lloyd commented on the architectural features of the building.

The final visits of the day were to Y Gangell, the birthplace of the well-loved poet and hymnwriter Elfed and to his grave at the Independent chapel at Blaen-y-coed.

The day's activities had been organised by Mrs Bowen Evans and were thoroughly enjoyed by all who attended the meeting. Members who were unable to be present can obtain copies of the Local Information Sheet prepared by Mrs Bowen Evans by contacting the Secretary (Miss Susan Beckley, The West Glamorgan Record Office, County Hall, Oystermouth Road, Swansea, SA1 3SN).

DID JOHN WESLEY REALLY COME TO MEIDRIM?

A précis of a talk given to Capel members in
Bethel Chapel Meidrim on 16 May 1992

by Kemmis Buckley

On the face of it, this is a most unlikely proposition: Meidrim now, as in John Wesley's day, owes its existence to the crossroads whose arms provide communication to the Northern hinterland, to St. Clears and the port of Laugharne, to Carmarthen and to the Irish Sea in the neighbourhoods of Fishguard and Cardigan. If he did come to Meidrim we can trace the ultimate reason to a letter which a Mr George Williams wrote to him from Pembroke on 23 July 1772. In it Mr Williams asked John Wesley to "visit your little societies in Pembrokeshire" and went on to say, "I am desired to inform you of a gentleman in the upper part of the county, who has expressed an earnest desire of seeing you at his house and having you preach in the neighbourhood... The gentleman whose name is Bowen contributed handsomely to the building at Haverfordwest...".

On 18 August 1772 John Wesley preached at the new house in Haverfordwest and two days later recorded in his Journal: "I rode over to Mr Bowen's at Llwyngwair an agreeable place and an agreeable family".

This was the beginning of a friendship which lasted for the rest of John Wesley's life. George Bowen was a wealthy landowner, a philanthropist and was happily married with a large family. He

is probably best remembered today for his support of Griffith Jones's Circulating Schools. After Griffith Jones died in 1761, Madam Bevan took over responsibility for them, and on her death George Bowen as a trustee embarked on long and ultimately, in 1809, successful litigation which enabled the schools to be revived.

On 11 August 1758, he married Easter the daughter of William Thomas of Pentwyn a little property some two miles from Meidrim on the St. Clears road; and a few years later she inherited Castell Gorfod another small property on the road from Meidrim to Pembrokeshire. They had twelve children, of whom the eldest, James, took up residence in Castell Gorfod in 1787. James had been a wild youth, although probably no more wild than other young men of his class. He was perpetually in debt and much interested in cock fighting; but he underwent a firm conversion when one day in 1786 as he passed through Trecastle he saw and heard a highly nubile young lady singing one of William Williams Pantycelyn's songs "Dwedwch im, pwy olwg hyfryd". Once home he gave up cock fighting, turned his kennels into a meeting house... and there is a persistent tradition that John Wesley preached under the branches of the old sweet chestnut tree at Castell Gorfod.

This is by no means unlikely. John Wesley visited George and Easter Bowen's house at Llwyngwair, not far from Cardigan, seven times during the course of his ministry; and it is at least arguable that on occasions he took the shorter route from Carmarthen to Llwyngwair via Meidrim rather than travelling along what is now the A40 and turning north at Haverfordwest. The constrictions of this précis allow no more than to say that a reading of John Wesley's Journal of 18 August 1788 and his Diary of 10 August 1790 show that there were opportunities for him to have diverted from his route by only a few hundred yards and preached under the sweet chestnut tree.

Surely he would not have resisted the chance of calling on the prodigal son?

PENARTH CHAPEL WALKABOUT

Members of the Penarth Local History Society spent a sunny Saturday afternoon in June re-tracing the Penarth Chapel walkabout which Chapel members enjoyed in May of last year.

All were impressed by the diversity and vigour of nonconformity in the town, and by the various responses to twentieth-century demands. Many admitted that they had seen inside buildings which they had never entered before.

On this occasion we were able to see the newly-built Salvation Army Citadel. In May 1991 there had been a big hole in the ground. The building was opened in October 1991. In addition to meeting rooms, a kitchen, and an upper room where young people may spend their evenings, the main room is large and lofty. There are no windows, as it lies in the middle of a terrace of houses, but it is well lit by large roof lights. The interior is panelled in wood, and furnishings are in red and purple - stimulating colours which must form a good background to the instruments of the brass band.

MEMBERSHIP DUES

We understand that some members have been sending their subscriptions to the secretaries of the county branches instead of to the Society's Treasurer. No doubt this is because they have mislaid Cdr. Mortimer's address, which is: **Allt Goch Uchaf, Llanfyllin, Powys, SY22 5EP**. This difficulty could be avoided if all members could be persuaded to make arrangements to pay their subscriptions by banker's order, a procedure which saves trouble and postage both to members and to the Society.

SOME EARLY FLINTSHIRE CHAPELS

A meeting for CAPEL members in North-East Wales was held at the vestry of Bethesda Welsh Presbyterian Chapel, Mold, on 30 April when members heard an informal lecture well illustrated with slides, from Dr Malcolm Seaborne of Pantymwyn, Mold, on early Flintshire chapels. Dr Seaborne has been a member of CAPEL since its foundation, and before retirement was the Principal of Chester College.

He began by referring to the problem of recording the very large number of chapel buildings which have survived, but which are often no longer in active use. The chapel survey in the Clwyd Record Office has recorded more than 800 chapels in what were previously Flintshire and Denbighshire, and an initial list compiled by the National Library suggested a total of at least 5,500 chapel buildings in Wales as a whole. His own interest was in the development of school buildings, but in the course of his research in Flintshire he had come across many early chapels, often converted into houses, or standing empty in varying stages of decay.

He then went on to discuss, and illustrate with slides, some of the early chapel buildings listed in the 1851 Religious Census for the Holywell District. The census records 105 places of Nonconformist worship, and he had been surprised how many of them had survived in some form. However, a considerable proportion had been replaced by later chapels and most of the rest had been substantially altered. He had found that photographs by themselves were insufficient: it was often necessary to draw a simple plan of the building indicating which parts were original. Thus, for example, a closer examination might show evidence of a blocked door or an altered window, which might not be apparent from a general photograph. Extensions indicated by different wall thicknesses etc. also needed to be shown on a plan, especially because of the all-too-common practice (usually late Victorian) of rendering all the exterior walls with cement. Inscribed date-stones, recorded by telephoto lens, provided useful information, and interior features such as ornate plaster ceilings were also worth photographing. Rear views of the building should also be taken.

Dr Seaborne concluded that the value of detailed surveys of this kind was twofold. First, it enabled one to discover more about the strength of various denominations in particular areas and about the development of

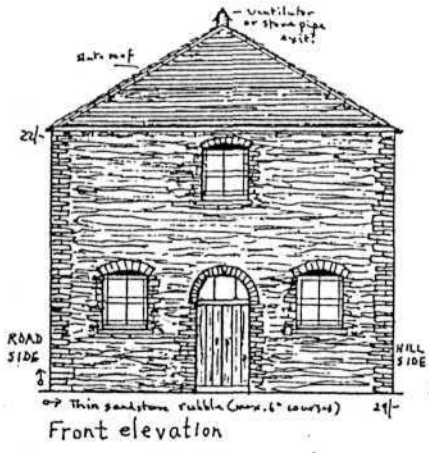


Independent Chapel, Llanfynydd

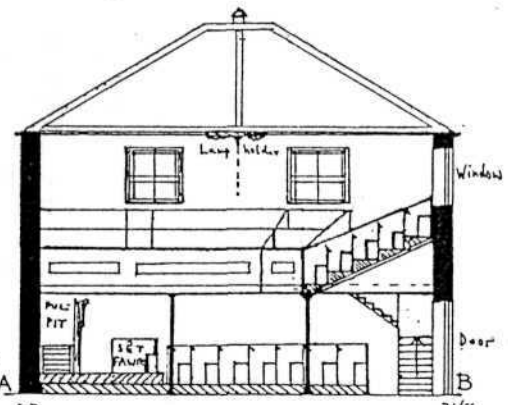
chapel plans (see his article in the National Library of Wales Journal for Summer, 1990). Secondly, it provided a basis for deciding which of the numerous surviving buildings should, if possible, be preserved. For example, he had found only one virtually unaltered chapel of the two-side-doors and attached-cottage type in Flintshire (Llanfynydd, 1828), though there were many others where one or both of the doors had been blocked up. Similarly, he had found only one unspoilt example of an original gallery in an early chapel (Greenfield 1830), and disused. He hoped that greater public awareness and positive guidance from planning officers and private architects would lead to more sensitive adaptations of chapels for other purposes, and he had noticed some improvement in this respect in more recent years. The main difficulty lay in converting a single-storey structure into a two-floor house without spoiling the original windows and overall proportions of the building, and this had been done successfully in some places. The problem of what to do about chapel buildings for which no suitable alternative use can be found still remains, but at least they can, and ought to be, recorded, both inside and out.

MOUNT GILEAD METHODIST CHAPEL, GREENFIELD, 1830.

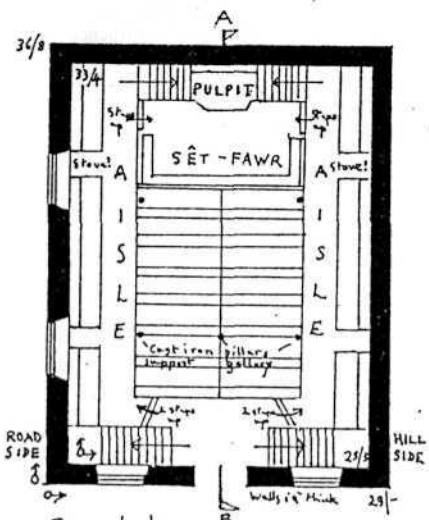
NOW DISUSED



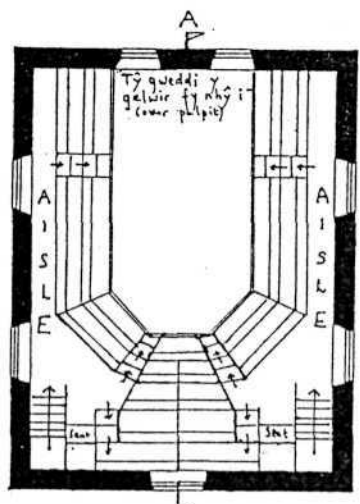
Front elevation



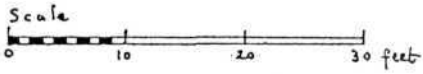
Longitudinal section



Ground plan



First floor plan



Completed 9 April 89
by S. S. S. S.

