

“If the art of architecture could cry just now, Welsh chapels would be its tears”
Sir Simon Jenkins, “The Times”

DISCOVERING CHAPELS IN ABERYSTWYTH

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Non-conformity in Wales

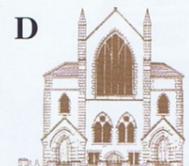
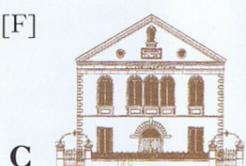
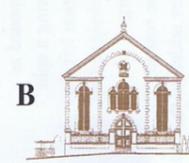
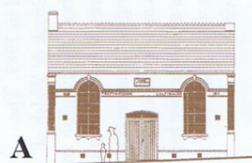
The Reformation in Europe gave rise to a persistent demand for more freedom in worship and in Wales the dissenters gathered secretly from about 1600 to hear the Word of God preached in their own language and without the restrictions of the church ritual. When William Wroth founded the first independent church in Llanfaches, Monmouthshire in 1639, it ignited a spark which ran over the mountains ‘like fire in the thatch’, in spite of severe persecution from the church authorities. The name ‘non-conformist’ was given to those church ministers who refused to conform to the Anglican Liturgy as required by the Act of Uniformity, 1662, and they were evicted from the church. Persecution of these Nonconformists (or Dissenters as they were also called) and the congregations who followed them continued until the Toleration Act, 1689 under William of Orange. From that time on chapels began to spring up all over Wales, the many differences of opinion over doctrine and practice giving rise to a great variety of denominations. Probably upward of 6000 chapels were ultimately built in Wales, becoming in many small towns and villages the heart and soul of the community they served and representing a national spirit of independence. Today, from having been the essence of much of the cultural, political, educational and religious life of Wales for over 300 years, the chapels are in decline, and many stand neglected and forlorn, while others have already been demolished. Their historical importance in preserving the Welsh language and national culture is probably immeasurable and it is in recognition of this that this series of leaflets has been produced.

Further Reading: Anthony Jones, Welsh Chapels (revised edition 1996, Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd)
Gwyn Davies, A Light in the Land: Christianity in Wales, 200-2000 (2002, Bryntirion Press)
Welsh Chapels: A Guide to the Denominations (2005, Capel)

Styles in Chapel Architecture

In the 17th and 18th centuries the earliest chapels were often converted barns and cottages. The impetus for purpose-built chapels came from the people, and the styles they chose are often considered to represent a unique form of ‘primitive’ art, even though many were also designed by professional architects. These are some of the styles you may encounter.

- 1800: Early purpose-built with long-wall façade or square-plan [A]
- 1830s: Auditorium chapels with gable-end façade [B]
- 1840s: The Classic Style [C]
- 1850s: The Gothic Revival [D]
- c1880: Early Mixture of Styles [E]
- c1890: High Victorian Extravagance [F]



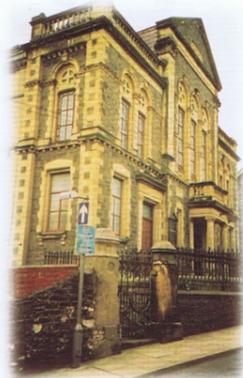
1. Salvation Army

In 1844 the Wesleyan Methodists erected this building as a day school and a chapel for English speakers. The school was short-lived and in 1870 the English congregation moved to their new church in Queen's Road. The building, which was modified during the 19th century, is now owned by the Salvation Army - very appropriately since their founder, William Booth, was previously a Methodist minister.



2. Tabernacl Former Welsh Presbyterian (Calvinistic Methodist) *

The original building on this site in 1785 was the first Calvinistic Methodist chapel in the town. The present building, the fourth, was opened in 1880. It was described as being in the 'Lombardo-Italian' style. With galleries on three sides it could seat 1100. The schoolroom was on the ground floor below the chapel. The war memorial in front of the chapel is by Mario Rutelli who also designed the striking war memorial in the castle grounds. The chapel held its final service in 2002 following a decision to join with Capel y Morfa (9), the other Welsh Presbyterian Church in the town. Tabernacl was designed by the prolific architect, Richard Owen of Liverpool. He also designed Seion (4), Alfred Place (6) and St David's (7).



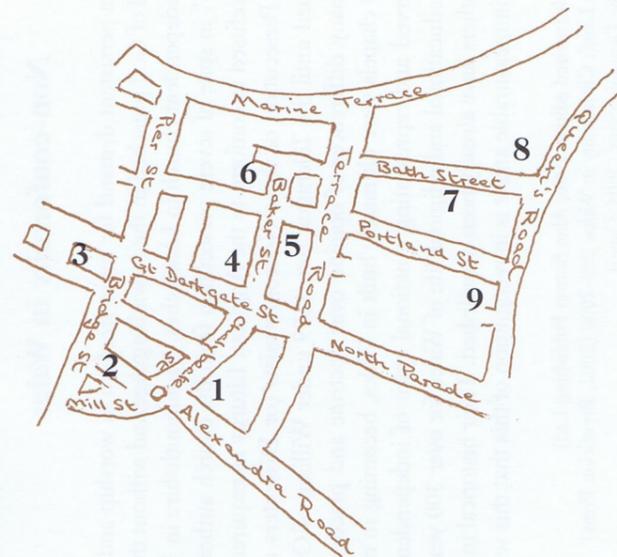
3. St Paul's Former Welsh Wesleyan Methodist

The Wesleyan Methodists erected this fine building in 1880. It cost £5,900 and seated 700. The architect was Walter P Thomas of Liverpool. The frontage is notable for its florid Corinthian columns. In 1904 the adjacent schoolroom was opened. The chapel closed in 1992 when the congregation moved to the newly built St Paul's Methodist Centre. Both the chapel and schoolroom are now the Academy public house. It is worth taking a look inside where many features of the original chapel have been retained.



4. Seion Welsh Independent (Congregationalist)

This imposing Italianate chapel was opened in 1878 and cost almost £4,400. Inside the chapel, which was built to seat 740, is strikingly beautiful and well decorated. The gallery arches supported on slim pillars are a notable feature. The schoolroom is beneath the chapel with its own side entrance. Seion replaced an earlier Independent chapel which still stands in Vulcan Street and is now the headquarters of the Welsh women's movement, Merched y Wawr.



5. Bethel Welsh Baptist

This was the third Baptist chapel to be built on this site. It was designed by T E Morgan, a local architect and member of the congregation. Opened in 1889 its fine ornamented frontage is matched by the imposing interior which was built to seat 750. The baptistry is located under the pulpit area. The schoolroom, entered from the side, is below the chapel.



6. Alfred Place English Baptist

The concern to provide English chapels in the Victorian period came mostly from the existing Welsh congregations. Pressure increased after the coming of the railway in 1864. This attractive building of 1870 reflects that concern. It is home to an independent Baptist congregation with a strong evangelical tradition. The Christian bookshop close by is run by members of the congregation.



7. St David's Joint English Presbyterian-United Reformed Church

The chapel was opened for English worship by the Presbyterians in 1872. The chapel and schoolroom, set side by side, make an attractive set of buildings in the Gothic style with an extensive frontage. In 1984 it united as St David's with the English Congregational church which was subsequently converted into the Church Surgery in Portland Street.



8. St Paul's Methodist Centre

The most modern chapel building in Aberystwyth was built in 1992 on the site of the former English Wesleyan Methodist chapel of 1870 which was demolished in 1989. The architects were Cornfield, Crook & Walsh of West Bromwich. It houses both the English and Welsh congregations who are able to worship in different parts of the building at the same time. The Centre is on two floors and is attractively designed and flexible. It has a daily coffee bar and its rooms are used for a wide range of church and community activities.



9. Capel y Morfa Welsh Presbyterian

This Gothic building was opened as Salem chapel in 1895 following a split when some of the congregation left the former Seilo chapel. It was designed by the local architect, T E Morgan. A schoolroom was added at the rear in 1898. The two transepts were added to the chapel in 1907. When Seilo closed in 1989 the two congregations joined in Salem which was renamed Capel y Morfa. At this time considerable internal alterations were made. This is now the only Welsh Presbyterian chapel in the town.



*NB: Since this leaflet was printed, chapel number 2, Tabernacl Aberystwyth, has been demolished.