

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

DISCOVERING CHAPELS IN ST DAVIDS

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Non-conformity in Wales

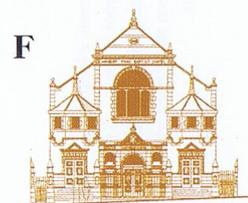
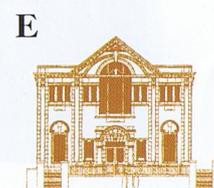
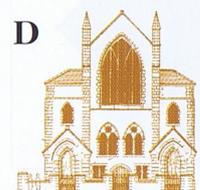
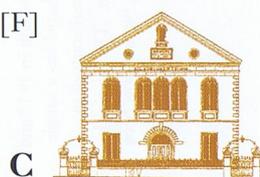
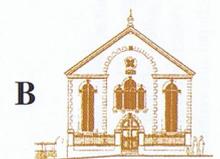
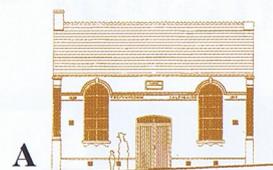
The Reformation in Europe gave rise to a persistent demand for more freedom in worship and in Wales the dissenters gathered secretly from about 1600 to hear the Word of God preached in their own language and without the restrictions of the church ritual. When William Wroth founded the first independent 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)
Capel, 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. Tabernacl Calvinistic Methodist (Goat St)

Tabernacl is the earliest Nonconformist foundation in St Davids. Meetings were held in the Black Lion Inn and various houses during the 1740s and a temporary meeting room set up in a loft in Non St - when this collapsed, the society used the cellar instead. Eventually a chapel was built three miles away on the parish boundary at Caerfarchell in 1763, suitably removed from the influence of the Bishop of St Davids. In 1785, a chapel was built in New St, near the junction of Gospel Lane, and in 1817 a new chapel was built in Goat St. This was rebuilt 1874-77 in a striking Gothic style, designed by Richard Owens of Liverpool, costing the grand sum of £3678.19s. 4d. The builder was James Stephens, whose work is of outstanding quality. The Chapel dominates the skyline of the city with its spirelet and prominent east gable window fittingly designed as a Star of David. The interior is galleried on three sides with all of the original fittings intact. The chapel is Grade II listed and in excellent repair. Rural Sunday Schoolrooms were founded at Bethania, Treleddydd-fawr (1838), Rhosson (1866) and Vachelich (1885). All of these buildings survive, in alternative use.



2. Caerfarchell Calvinistic Methodist

The chapel was established in 1763 in the face of much local opposition including one old lady who lay across the lane to prevent the materials reaching the site. The first chapel apparently took 13 days to build and was notoriously poor acoustically. In 1827 the chapel was rebuilt to a typical long-wall format complete with a horse's skull built into each corner of the foundations in order to improve the acoustics. The panelled five-sided gallery is of 1827, the benches incorporating panelling from 1763. The ground floor pews, pulpit and ceiling were replaced in 1912.

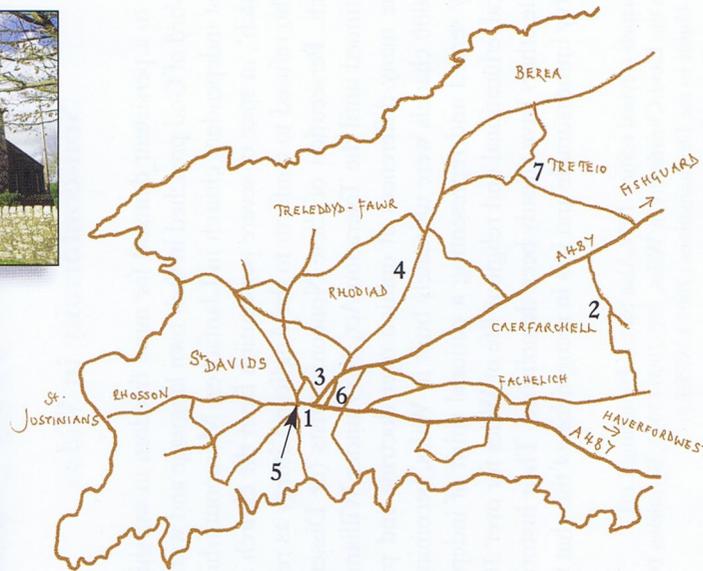


3. Ebenezer Independent (Nun St)

This was established by Rhodiad Chapel (see 4 below) and was first built in 1815. The original foundation stone inscribed 'Ebenezer soli deo sacrum - built by public subscription AD1815' survives on the front wall of the chapel. The present chapel was built 1870-71 in a

handsome rendered Temple-fronted style. The light and airy interior has a gallery along three sides with an iron balustrade, the pulpit set against a double arched recess. The chapel retains a fine Georgian brass chandelier, removed here from Rhosson.

Another Independent chapel was built at Berea in 1833, rebuilt 1881- 82 in a simple but substantial Gothic style. A mission room (Carmel) was established in 1871 at Treleddydd-fawr, now a house.



4. Rhodiad Independent

This was the earliest local Independent cause, built in 1784. Although now in other use, the listed chapel has been beautifully maintained and is a very rare survival of a late eighteenth century rural chapel. The interior (of 1884) has been stripped out, but a fine tablet survives inscribed in Welsh, Hebrew and Latin.



5. Bethel Wesleyan Methodist (Goat St)

Bethel was built in 1818, rebuilt in 1837 and renovated in 1884. The chapel has a simple rendered lateral front - a real contrast to Tabernacl just up the street. The interior had a panelled gallery of 1837, but has now been converted to a dwelling.

6. Seion Baptist (New St)

Seion was established in St Davids by the Baptists of Felinganol, Solva. Meetings were held from 1816 in a thatched cottage in High St and in 1843 Seion chapel was built within a spacious plot in New St. The chapel was renovated in 1873 by T Evans of Solva and again in 1897. The gabled façade is that of 1843 with later glazing and render but is an early example of a gable-fronted chapel locally. The interior is Victorian with a timber-fronted gallery.



7. Bethel Baptist (Treteio)

Another Baptist chapel (Bethel) was built at Treteio for Henry Bevan, a local farmer whose wife was unable to walk to Felinganol. The simple gable front is similar to that at Seion. The interior has an attractive gallery of 1839, incorporating turned spindles; the remaining detail is of 1902. Bethel closed in 1978, but has been maintained intact and the community hope to restore the chapel as a visitor attraction.