

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

DISCOVERING CHAPELS IN LLANGOLLEN

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Non-conformity in Wales

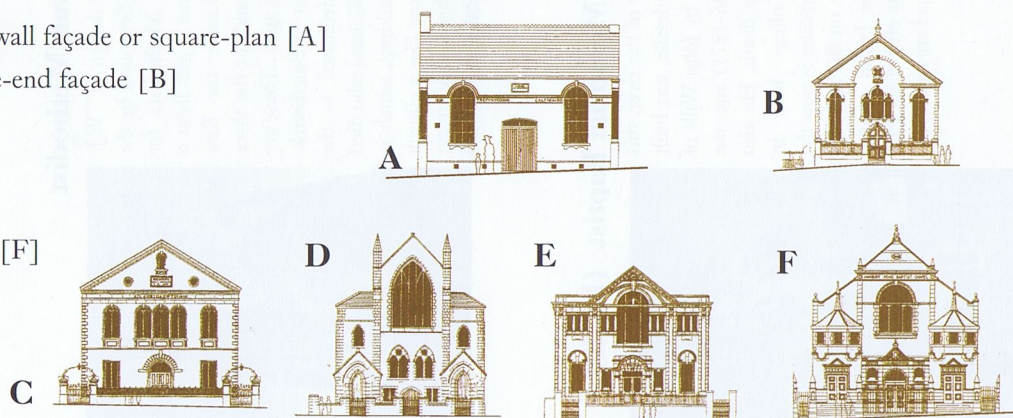
The Reformation in Europe gave rise to a persistent demand for more freedom in worship and in Wales the dissenters gathered secretly from about 1600 to hear the Word of God preached in their own language and without the restrictions of the church ritual. When William Wroth founded the first independent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



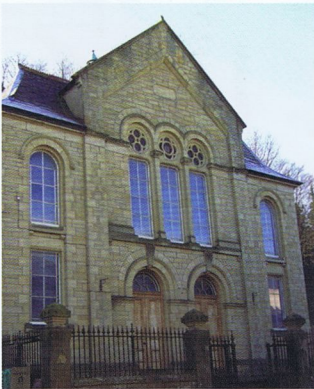
1. Capel Pont Felin Hen

This is the oldest chapel in Llangollen, dating from 1773. The chapel is now a dwelling. The front of the building has been changed but the central window in the top is original and corresponds to a similar one at the rear. The chapel had a side entrance, now a window, but still recognisable as a door. To the left is a house the end of which is the original one-up, one-down house for the travelling preacher. From 1829 onwards the congregation had grown so much they could afford a resident minister. The chapel was used by the Calvinistic Methodists until 1838 when the congregation built a much bigger chapel on Victoria Square (Rehoboth).



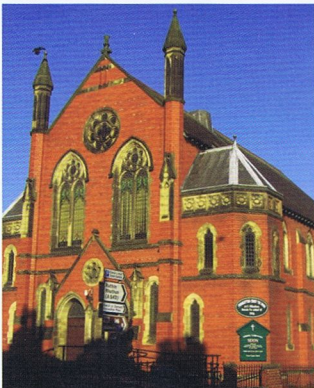
2. Rehoboth Calvinistic Methodist

Erected 1838 and enlarged 1874. In 1846 members of this big impressive chapel set up the British School (a non-Church of England school) the building for which still stands near to (1) above. The nursery rhyme 'Mary had a little lamb' is believed to have originated in the school; one of its pupils, Mary Hughes of Tŷ Isa Farm, had a pet lamb which often followed her to school. Llangollen Museum holds baptismal records for the cause, some of which are displayed from time to time. The chapel closed in 1982 when four Welsh-speaking congregations joined to worship in Seion.



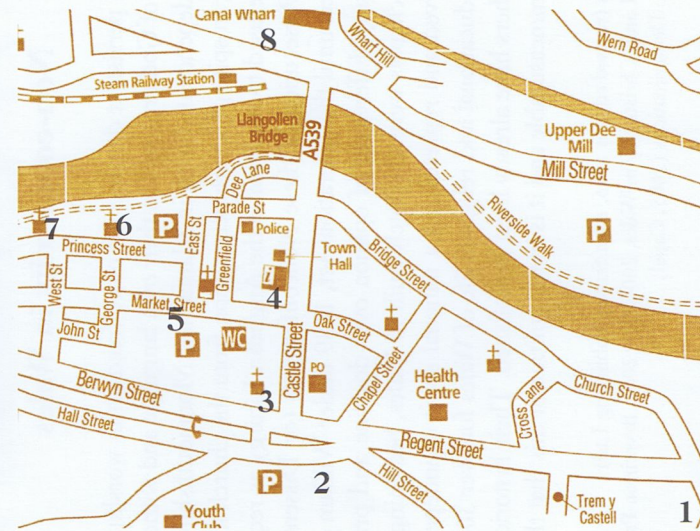
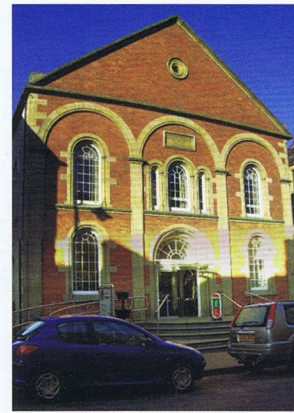
3. Seion Welsh Wesleyan Methodist

Built in 1903 of stone and Ruabon brick, it has Gothic windows. An architect's drawing is kept in the vestry, showing that W.J. Morley and Son, a firm from Bradford, designed the building. It has a traditional chapel interior with a gallery on three sides. Originally there were schoolrooms and a caretaker's house adjacent to the chapel on Castle Street. The schoolrooms were used for school lunches for children from the nearby primary school. In the 1970s both the schoolroom and house were sold and the National Westminster Bank now occupies the site.



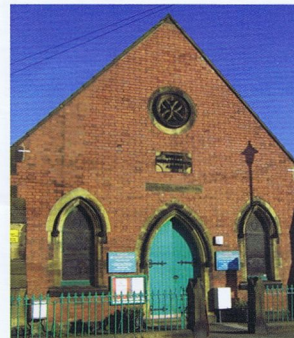
4. Welsh Baptist (Y Capel)

This chapel was built by the Welsh-speaking Baptists in 1860 to seat a congregation of 400. When it closed in 1982 Clwyd County Council took it over and developed it for ECTARC (European Centre for Trade and Regional Culture). More recently Denbighshire County Council has used it for the Tourist Information Centre (ground floor) and for the Public Library (the original gallery level). The library retains original details in the windows and the arched ceiling features three large roses. Down below there used to be a well for baptism by total immersion.



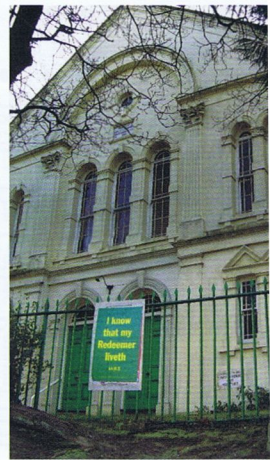
5. Memorial Hall (formerly English Wesleyan)

When this chapel was built in 1863 it had seating for 150 people. Although it only had nine members at the time, the railway arrived in Llangollen in 1862 and was expected to bring in lots of visitors. In 1869 a schoolroom was added at the rear. When the new English Methodist Church was opened in 1904 the chapel became a Memorial Hall with windows commemorating prominent members of the congregation. It is used today for social events by the town and the Methodist Church.



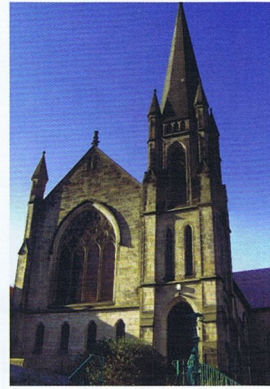
6. Glanrafon Evangelical (formerly Congregational)

The chapel was built in 1903 to the design of Owen Morris Roberts of Porthmadog. One of the foundation stones commemorates William Williams who was associated with the establishment of the first Congregational church in Llangollen. In 1904/5 there was a Revival in Wales and all places of worship saw a growth in their membership, but by the late 1970s the chapel had to close. The building was bought by the Evangelical Church in 1981. Glanrafon means 'Beside the River'. The present congregation practises adult baptism in the river Dee.



7. English Wesleyan Methodist

Built in 1903, also to the design of W.J. Morley and Son, the same firm used by the Welsh-speaking Wesleyan Methodists for their chapel (3). The site was a gift from a retired superintendent minister, the Rev. Sewell Haworth. He also paid for the three stained glass windows in the apse. These are by Thomas William Camm of Smethwick. The middle window is dedicated to the memory of Haworth's son Richard who died when 3 years old. This building, which is clearly designed to look more like a church than a traditional chapel, shows very strong Gothic influence in its details and its tall spire.



8. Dr Pritchard Memorial Baptist (English)

Standing on the other side of the river, this chapel, with some Gothic details, was built in 1895 of brick and stone by John Wills of Derby. Dr Pritchard (1796-1875) was the pastor from 1823 until his death. He also founded the Baptist College here in Llangollen in 1862 (the building is now the Post Office Sorting Office on the A5). Dr Pritchard's grave is in the burial ground belonging to their previous chapel on Hill Street. Records for this chapel are held in the local museum.

