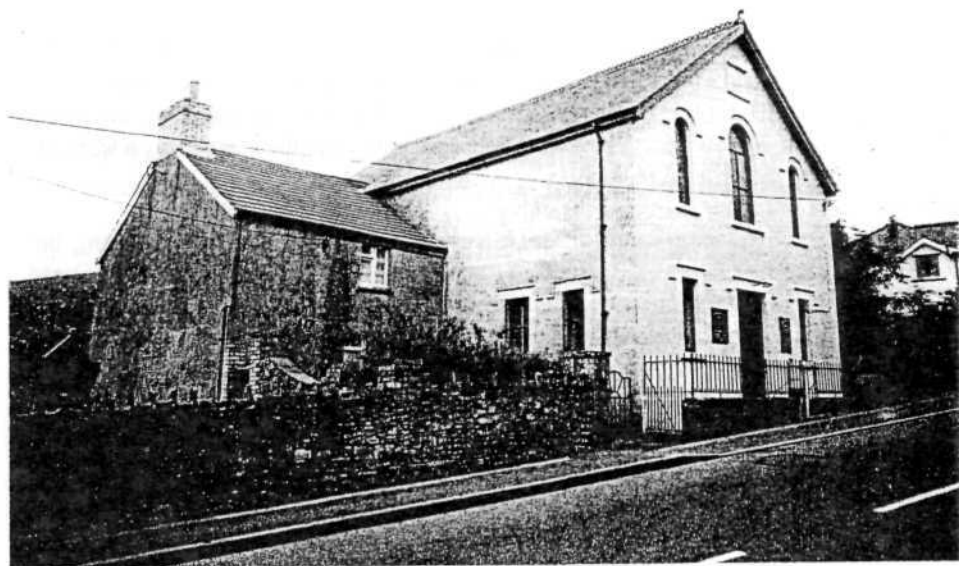


Capel

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Watford

Watford was the first chapel to be built in the Caerphilly area. Groeswen was a close second. In the nineteenth century, two branches were built from Groeswen - Bethel at Caerphilly in 1848 and Adulam in Abertridwr in 1856.

The history of Nonconformity in the area, however, probably goes back a further eighty to a hundred years since the Nonconformist community gathered to worship God in dwelling houses before any chapel was built and Mr Daniel Davies of Ynysgau, Merthyr, in a lecture given in 1849, stated that a flourishing congregation had existed at Watford since the days of the ejected ministers in the 1660s. There is, unfortunately, no concrete evidence to substantiate such a claim and, whereas it is perfectly conceivable that Nonconformist activity was prevalent in the area prior to 1739, for our purposes we must commence our journey at this date.

Watford Chapel

This chapel is named after a house which stands some 250 yards away. Watford Farm/Plas Watford was occupied during the eighteenth century by the Price family - Thomas Price, known as Price yr Ustus (Price, the J.P.), Cadben Price, his brother, and Grace Price, Cadben's wife - and tradition has it that their house was one of the dwelling houses used for worship by the Nonconformists of the area. It was famous for its hospitality, especially to some of the itinerant preachers of the day, among them Daniel Rowland, William Williams, Pantycelyn, Howell Harris, George Whitefield and John and Charles Wesley. Indeed it was from Plas Watford that Whitefield married Elizabeth James of Abergavenny at Trinity Church, Cardiff.

There are some references to a lease dated 29 December 1733, but it was in 1739 that Thomas Price leased a portion of land to the Rev. David Williams of Pwll-y-pant for one thousand years. The chapel built in 1739 was a very substantial building, the walls being two feet thick. The roof trusses were of the finest oak. Over the years many alterations were made to the original building.

The church enjoyed some successful years and a need arose to enlarge the building, but a period of decline followed. The doctrine and teaching of the Minister, the Rev. David Williams, wavered and many could not accept his theology. Indeed, some members of Watford left to start a church at Groeswen. They were attracted by the theology and enthusiasm of the Methodists. With a dwindling membership, Watford chapel was reduced in size. The gallery was removed and part of the building was converted into a dwelling house. By 1842 the congregation had again increased significantly and the building was restored. The original high seating (so high that the congregation could not see one another and only the head of the minister was visible above the pulpit!) was replaced by more appropriate pews.

In 1877, more changes were made to the building and in 1892 its size was increased by extending the front wall by a few yards and restoring the gallery to seat 140 people. The chapel also owned the cemetery, three dwelling houses and an additional piece of land, all freehold. In 1938 the building was once again repaired and again in 1962 further repairs and renovations were carried out in readiness for the tercentenary celebrations planned on the basis of the possibility of the church's existence in 1662/63. One of the cottages adjoining the chapel had at some time been granted a licence to convert into an inn. It remained as such until 1904, when pressure from the Temperance Movement caused it to be changed into a refreshment room and shop. This building and the other two cottages were demolished in 1950 and the area turned into a car park.

During its 250 years, Watford has enjoyed the services of fourteen ministers, the last of whom was the Rev. Thomas Cassam, previously a deacon of Abertridwr Welsh Congregational Church. Since 1945 it has depended on visiting or itinerant preachers to conduct the services. Over the years the chapel has gone through periods of religious prosperity and decline. Recently, as with so many other churches, it has been a period of decline and today the list of members is barely into double figures.

The chapel however is also used by the Caerphilly Evangelical Church, the building is being maintained and services are held there. It is a Grade 2 listed building, the first known purpose-built chapel in the Caerphilly area.

Groeswen

Some time in the late 1730s the Rev. David Williams of Pwll-y-pant, who was minister of Watford Nonconformist Church and of Trinity Independent Church, Cardiff, sent Howell Harris an invitation to preach in the Caerphilly area. Initially Williams had been an enthusiastic supporter of the Methodist Revival and Harris responded to the invitation.

In 1738 he preached at Maesdiofal Farm, Senghennydd and also at Parc Farm and other locations in the area. Such was the success of his visits that a Parc Society was formed in the Aber Valley, probably as early as 1739. Thomas Price the Justice (he who had leased the land for Watford Chapel) now embraced Methodism with enthusiasm and the door of Plas Watford was open for meetings and as a place of hospitality for all the leaders, both Welsh and English, of the Methodist Revival. Indeed, in January 1742 at a meeting at Plas Watford between Harris, Thomas Price and others it was decided to build a meeting place for the Methodist Societies on a site offered by Thomas Evans at Groeswen. The corner of the field offered by Evans was known as Waun Fach. It is thought that work commenced in August 1742 under the direction of an ardent Methodist, William Edwards of Tŷ Canol Farm, Groeswen.

The building must have been completed by 16 November 1742, when a monthly Society meeting was held at the New House, so called to avoid the use of the term Chapel and also that of Meeting House, which savoured of Nonconformity.

Thus the first specifically built place of worship in Wales for the Calvinistic Methodists had opened at Groeswen. Harris and other leaders insisted that it must remain within the orbit of the Church of England - an obstinate insistence which was to lead eventually to radical change. The Societies were led, and their services conducted by 'exhorters'; the exhorters at Groeswen were Thomas Price, William Edwards, Thomas William and Evan

Thomas. All, however, were not happy with Harris's leadership and the discontent became more and more apparent. In spite of the opposition of many Anglican clerics to anyone of Methodist leanings using the parish church for services, Harris insisted that Communion must be taken in the parish church, the dead were to be interred in the parish graveyard with a burial service conducted by the parish priest and the Societies were not to appoint their own ministers.



Groeswen

Discontent increased as the years went by. Doctrinal disputes between Harris and Daniel Rowland also emerged, adding to the dissensions. Eventually in 1751 the Groeswen Society defected from the Methodist movement and by 1752 had declared itself an Independent Church (Eglwys Annibynnol). William Edwards and Thomas William were ordained as joint ministers - appointments encouraged and endorsed by the Rev. Edmund Jones of Pontypool. Sacraments were administered in the chapel and ultimately the dead were buried in land acquired by the chapel for use as a graveyard, the burial services being conducted by the chapel ministers.

Groeswen Chapel was at the centre of a large area. In 1744 the membership was about 62 and it was felt necessary to organise five Societies in the chapel, at Groeswen, Bedwas, Rhydri, Coedcernyw and Llanfabon. There had been a Parc Society in the Aber Valley in 1738. This practice of establishing and maintaining branches went on until the twentieth century.

The church flourished under powerful ministries. By 1789 membership had reached 100, by 1820 it was 204. During the 41 years of the ministry of the Rev. Griffith Hughes 706 members had been received into the church. With an ever increasing congregation, the building was now no longer able to accommodate everyone, especially on Sunday mornings. The building was enlarged in 1830-31 to seat 600 but by 1870 it was again found to be inadequate and in 1874 it was resolved to undertake a complete restoration at a cost of £1,025. In 1945 more repairs were undertaken and electricity was installed. Further work was done in 1967-68 and 1982-83. Cadw made substantial grants for major restoration in 1987 but much still remains to be done.

Groeswen and the branches enjoyed the leadership and services of a number of powerful ministers. Not only were they leaders in the field of religion but also in the realm of culture and literature. Two in particular were nationally known bards, namely W Caledfryn Williams (minister 1856-69) and C Tawelfryn Thomas (1880-1926). In common with most other churches, Groeswen entered into a period of decline particularly during the last century. In 1909 the combined membership of Groeswen and Nantgarw (the other branches having gained their independence) was 240. By 1919 it was 219, by 1926 186 (139 at Groeswen). By 1939 the number at Groeswen had sunk to 61 and the decline continues. Today the membership is close to ten people. During the decline, the membership has fought to keep the cause alive and the building in a state of repair. It is a listed building and efforts are being made to maintain it and safeguard its historical importance as the first purpose-built Calvinistic Methodist chapel in Wales.

For many years, Anniversary meetings have been held on August Bank Holiday Sunday and Monday and preachers of all denominations have accepted the invitation to preach at these services. One Baptist minister, the Reverend E M Thomas once said "You have not earned your spurs as a Baptist minister until you have preached the Anniversary services at Staylitle and you have not earned your spurs as an Independent minister until you have preached in the Anniversary services at Groeswen."

Bethel

Groeswen had become the Meeting House for an ever-increasing number of Nonconformists. It was the centre of a very large area, including Caerphilly, the Aber

valley, Rudry Bedwas, Glyntaf, Nantgarw and Llanfabon. Whereas it was expected that all members attended Groeswen for the Sunday morning service, especially the Communion service, the members residing in the villages soon began to organise services in their own immediate localities. Prayer meetings, Sunday schools and even preaching services were held at various venues. The ministers of Groeswen often conducted preaching services in the 'branch' areas also. Although many services were conducted in dwelling houses and taverns, by 1829 two purpose-built buildings had arisen; Ebenezer, Rudry, and Y Winllan, Nantgarw. In the Caerphilly branch of Groeswen they met for prayer meetings in the house of Mr Morgan Roberts on the Twyn. After his untimely death in 1824, the meetings were held in a cottage in Castle Street. A room in the Black Lion Inn (later refurbished and renamed the Clive Arms Hotel) was also used.

Matters moved on apace. Some members felt they ought to have their own building. Others were hesitant because they feared Groeswen's displeasure. However, a building was erected in Castle Street and opened in 1848 with a membership of 70. They continued to attend Groeswen for



Bethel pre-1990

Sunday morning service and, while the chapel remained a 'branch', they also had to make a financial contribution to the mother church. In August 1856 Groeswen recognised Bethel as a church in its own right, now independent of its parent body.

In 1866 the chapel was rebuilt on the same site. In 1891, however, the Goodrich Estate put up for sale the land on which the chapel stood. The congregation had mistakenly supposed that the site was subject to a 150 year lease. They hastened to rectify matters and secured the freehold for £150. Soon afterwards, the Marquis of But asked the members to sell him the land, which they did for £1800. They were then given a plot of

land on Nantgarw Road on a 999 year lease. A new building was erected and the first service held at Easter 1895.

From 1970 problems arose with the chapel building. Possibly the site on Nantgarw Road was partly to blame, facing as it did one of the main roads of the town. From 1945 the volume of traffic increased markedly and the vibration caused by heavy vehicles changing gear before proceeding downhill soon began to damage the structure of the chapel. Slates began to fall from the roof and by 1984 dampness was evident in the internal and external wall at the front of the chapel. On 15 December 1985 the congregation was informed that the building was in danger of collapsing. Services were transferred to the vestry as the chapel confronted the crisis. After many months discussion, it was decided to demolish the old chapel and construct a new modern building in its place, on the same site. The last service was held in 'Old Bethel' on 8 July 1990 and on 15 July the congregation joined with that of Tonyfelin Welsh Baptist Church, an arrangement which lasted until 30 November 1992. On the following Sunday services began to be held again in Bethel. The new chapel cost £32,268, the later addition of the vestry £16,856. It is a warm comfortable building seating 100 and in the words of one of Bethel's historians, the late Miss Edith Petch, 'a great advance on what was once there'.

In 1832 there were 42 members. By 1848 the number had risen to 70. Membership continued to rise, possibly until the 1930s but, in common with the large majority of churches in Wales, Bethel has experienced a decline. At the end of 2001 there were 77 members on the church register and there is an active Sunday School.

Abertridwr Chapel

As early as 1738 and 1739 Howell Harris visited the Senghennydd area and preached at the Maesdiofal and Parc Mawr farms. The result of these visits was the founding of a Parc Society in the Aber Valley, the area being then known as Cwm Parc. When the 'New House' was built at Groeswen in 1742 the Parc Society amalgamated with the Society meeting there. As in the case of Bethel, Caerphilly, and other societies in the area, in addition to the services at Groeswen, services were held in dwelling houses, farms and inns in the immediate vicinity. By the 1850s the members of Groeswen resident in Abertridwr and Cwm Parc felt the need of a building to hold additional services and to seat an ever-increasing congregation. By 1856 the building had materialised and was named 'Adulam' - the cave where David sought refuge when being pursued by King Saul. Adulam, a daughter church and a branch of Groeswen remained so for a period of 45 years. There were, however, rumblings of discontent among the

members who frequented Adulam, especially towards the end of the 1890s. They spoke of separation from Groeswen and the need to sever the ties between the two congregations. Gradually and without rancour or animosity and in a friendly spirit, many of the ties were severed. The minister of Groeswen remained the minister at Abertridwr until 11 October 1903.

Meanwhile, due to the opening of two coal mines in the valley, there was a tremendous influx of people. This resulted in an ever-increasing congregation at Adulam. The thoughts of the members were expressed in a motion carried in 1900 for 'the erection of a new and more spacious building at Abertridwr'. By 1902 the dream had materialised and a much larger chapel was opened, subsequently named 'Abertridwr, Capel yr Annibynwyr'. The name Adulam was dispensed with because it was 'foreign'. The chapel should have a Welsh name, said the congregation.

The minister was still the pastor at Groeswen, namely the Rev. C Tawelfryn Thomas. But he brought his ministry at Abertridwr to a close on 11 October 1903. On 1 October 1905 Mr E G Davies, a student at Bala Bangor was ordained full time minister at Abertridwr, his ministry lasting until his death on 1 March 1934. He was succeeded in turn by Edward James (1938-46), Robert Edwards (1946-54) and William Davies (1954-61).

Meanwhile, the church, in common with many others, was experiencing a decline in membership. The members felt that they could no longer sustain a full-time minister and an approach was made to Mr Gwilym Morris, minister of Bethlehem, Gwaelod-y-garth, (later of Bethel, Caerphilly) to ascertain whether he would take Abertridwr under his wing. He was more than glad to do so and commenced his part-time ministry at Abertridwr on 1 August 1961, a fruitful ministry which lasted until his untimely illness in 1976. From then on, the church has relied on itinerant ministry.

At the same time, membership and the condition of the building have continued to decline. In 1992 a builder reported that he deemed sections of the building to be unsafe. The membership of eighteen decided it was wise to vacate the building and eventually to demolish it rather than see it used for any purpose other than as a place of worship. Meantime the Community Church offered the use of a room for meetings, an offer which was gratefully accepted. By 1 January 1999 only ten members remained. During the year this number declined to six and on 4 July the six remaining members resolved to close on 1 January 2000, thus bringing to a close 144 years of worship at 'Adulam' and Abertridwr.

David Parry