

# Capel

CYMDEITHAS TREFTADAETH Y CAPELI  
THE CHAPELS HERITAGE SOCIETY



**Taflen Wybodaeth Leol**

**Caerfyrddin**

**Local Information Sheet**

**31**

**Carmarthen**

The authors of the recently published Pevsner guide to *The Buildings of Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion* write, 'Carmarthen can justly claim to be the oldest town in Wales'. In view of this long history it is not surprising that the town has a gripping religious inheritance, probably originating in the Celtic period. In the Middle Ages it had a Priory (where the Black Book of Carmarthen was compiled.) In Tudor days it saw the horror and courage of a martyrdom and it was at nearby Abergwili that translation of the Scriptures into Welsh was pioneered.

Carmarthen has been over the centuries one of the bigger towns of Wales and it was from its prosperous merchant class that Stephen Hughes, the most significant figure of early local Dissent emerged in the middle of the seventeenth century. Likewise the eighteenth and nineteenth century revivals were helped on their way by prosperous farmers and middling people.

Regrettably, the time available during a CAPEL visit would not be enough for us to visit, or walk past, all the chapels if interest in the town. One can only hope that members of our society will some time in the future have an opportunity to visit Bethania, Penuel and Y Priordy in Priory Street and Union Street and the English Congregational Church in the West.

## **Heol Awst Independent Chapel**

The history of Heol Awst (Lammas Street) takes us back to the origins of nonconformity in Carmarthenshire. By the time of the passing of the Toleration Act in 1689, Stephen Hughes 'the Apostle of Carmarthenshire' was dead, but a small group of Nonconformists

had survived in the town from the days of persecution. William Evans of Pencader succeeded Hughes as leader of the local Independents and he moved into the town about 1702-3. He also became Tutor of the Dissenting Academy when it moved to Carmarthen about 1704. There were some breaks, but overall there was a strong connection between the Independent chapel and the Academy until the middle of the nineteenth century (for example, David Peter, minister of Heol Awst, took up the Principalship at Christmas 1795 and held it for the next forty years Also the school which was conducted alongside the Academy.

A meeting-house was built in 1726 following a gift of land by John Corrie a silk merchant and chapel member (see monument). It was enlarged sometime before 1733. A new chapel was built in 1802 and re-built by William Owen of Haverfordwest in 1826-7 to seat a thousand people. The schoolroom was built in 1888-9 by George Morgan.



Heol Awst

The Pevsner guide draws our attention to the paralleled gallery on 'marbled wooden Ionic Columns', the box pews in two large centre ranks, the very rare 'wine-glass type' pulpit (likened by Dyfnallt, a former minister, to a witness box) and the stained glass in the lobby windows 'perhaps the earliest stained glass in the county'.

Off-shoots of Heol Awst were Union Street (1847), Salem Johnstown (1847) and the English Congregational Church which was opened in May 1862.

## Heol Dŵr Calvinistic Methodist (Presbyterian) Chapel

There were Calvinistic Methodists in Carmarthen from about 1740 and there is mention of a room in Goose Street (Catherine Street) at which the 'society' met in 1748. The establishment of Heol Dŵr (Water Street) Chapel resulted from the activities of Peter Williams, a local man who was converted by the preaching of George Whitefield in 1743. He took orders and served as a curate in more



Heol Dŵr Chapel

than one parish but was refused ordination as a priest by the bishop because of his Methodist inclinations. He joined the Methodists and also embarked on the ambitious project of publishing a Welsh Family Bible with explanatory notes, John Ross of Carmarthen to be the printer. This would be the first Welsh Bible ever to be printed in Wales. About 1765 in order to work more closely with Ross, whose printing business was located at that time in Lammas Street, he leased a house in nearby Water Street.

With the passing of time a number of changes happened with regard to this site. Firstly Peter Williams built a chapel or preaching house in the garden for his own use, but in 1771 this was converted into a house and a second chapel built. Because of a doctrinal difference between Peter Williams and the CM Connexion, there was a period when the 'society' was not able to use the Heol Dŵr chapel, but eventually after Peter Williams's death the congregation returned

(see R T Jenkins in J E Lloyd ed. *The History of Carmarthenshire*, p. 207) The present chapel is on the same site as Peter Williams's preaching house of 1771.

As for the publication of the Bible, the first Family Bible appeared in parts and then in 1770 it appeared in one volume. Three editions were printed by Ross for Peter Williams and it is calculated that over 18,000 copies were published during his lifetime. The notes on each chapter have been described as 'brief, pithy and devotional' in 'simple homely idiom' (R T Jenkins).

Amongst the notables associated with Heol Dŵr was David Charles (1762-1834) a local man and brother of Thomas Charles of Bala. He began to preach at Heol Dŵr and was one of the 11 exhorters ordained in 1811 – the action which brought the Calvinistic Methodist denomination into being. David Charles is highly regarded as a hymn writer (O fryniau Caersalem ceir gweled holl daith yr anialwch i gyd'). See the memorial by Daniel Mainwaring. David Charles the Younger 1803-80 was his only son. Hugh Hughes the artist was his son-in-law.

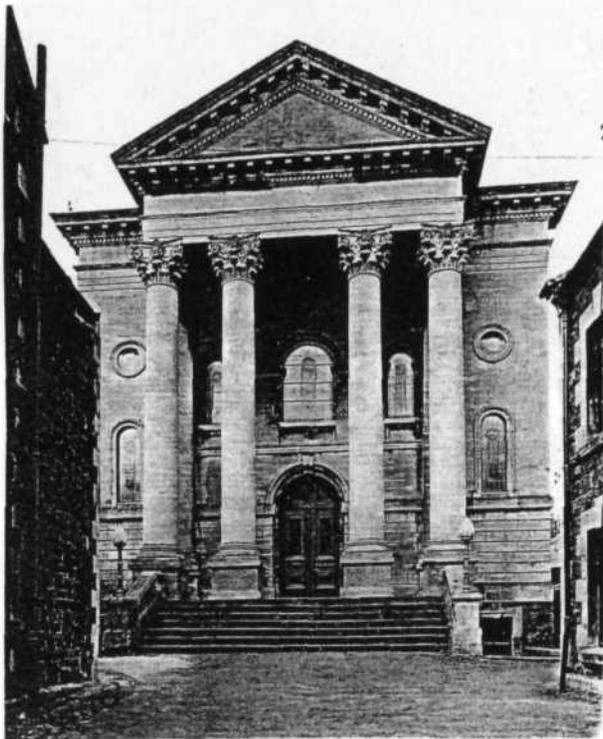
The chapel has a long-wall front. Box pews radiate to follow the line of the gallery. One of the Corinthian columns bears the date 1813. The pulpit is of the 'wine glass' type.

Heol Dŵr is the mother church of Y Babell, Pensarn (1834), Zion, Mansel Street (1850) and Bethania, Priory Street (1902). Zion was founded to serve the needs of non-Welsh speakers. It was built in 1849-50 by R G Thomas of Newport. The wrought iron railings are of 1850. An organ by Hele and Co (1895) was rescued in 2000 from St Matthew, Fulham, London.

### **The Baptists**

There was a Baptist church in Carmarthen during the Commonwealth but it seems to have passed out of history. In the mid-eighteenth century there were Baptists meeting for worship at Chapel Yard in Priory Street. In 1782 a section of this congregation founded a church in Dark Gate. They increased in numbers, especially during the ministry of Titus Lewis, 1801-11, and bought

land to build a chapel and establish a burial ground. Lewis died, aged 38 before the work was complete and he was buried there. The church moved to its new home at Tabernacle in March 1812. In the following decades the membership increased and the chapel was rebuilt in 1841-2. The interior was refitted by George Morgan in 1875. The building now included a baptismal pool and pulpit platform (replacing the previous high pulpit), pine seats and a gallery on three sides with continuous bowed front of pierced cast-iron, by Baker of Newport. George Morgan designed the



Lammas Street Chapel

schoolroom and caretaker's house 1883 and a new doorway for the chapel in 1884, so that the three buildings would conform. Further improvements were carried out during the early twentieth century, involving J. Howard Morgan and others.

In 1870 an English Baptist church was built in Lammas Street. This was the work of George Morgan, who was a deacon here. Morgan began his career with this dramatic Bathstone

temple front, the more arresting for being raised at the end of a narrow courtyard. Morgan's three temple fronts stand alone among Welsh chapels and this one is the most concentrated. The others are Mount Pleasant, Swansea 1874 -76 and Newtown, Montgomery 1881.

## The Wesleyan Chapels



English Wesleyan Chapel

John Wesley passed through Carmarthenshire on several occasions and on some of these journeys addressed the populace in Carmarthen town, for example on the Castle Green in 1763, at Peter Williams's chapel in 1769 and in the Market Place in 1774. A 'society' came into being and tradition relates that it met in the mid seventies in a warehouse in what was later called John Street. By August 1779 it was meeting in a building in the yard of the Red Lion. A chapel was built in 1804. This was an English 'society' and head of the Carmarthen Circuit. (Previously Carmarthen was part of the Haverfordwest or Pembroke circuit., The chapel, in Chapel Place - Inter Street – was enlarged in 1821, rebuilt in 1861 and further altered later. It was demolished in 1978 and a new chapel built nearby.

In the meantime, by 1808, a Welsh 'society' had been set up in Carmarthen and in 1809 a Carmarthen (Welsh) circuit. Eventually in 1824 the Welsh 'society' built Ebenezer chapel on the corner of John



Ebenezer Chapel

Street. One of the ministers of the Welsh 'society' was Hugh Hughes a Caernarfonshire man who was stationed at Carmarthen for three periods and lived here in retirement. His grandson, a native of Carmarthen was Hugh Price Hughes, an eminent London Wesleyan preacher and reformer and upholder of the Nonconformist conscience.

Ebenezer was abandoned about 1920. The building has since been put to a number of uses, including a commercial college known as the Myrddin College. Since 1995 the site has been occupied by a Job Centre. The burial ground may be seen.

## **The Quakers and Quakers Yard**

Quakerism was found here in the early Commonwealth. A meeting house was built about 1746. Its position can be identified due to good detective work by local historians. A stone tablet tells us, "This wall and Pine end is the property of the People called Quakers, 1772".

By 1820 regular worship seems to have ceased, since the meeting house was let to the Wesleyans in that year. In 1831 the house and ground were sold. The house was afterwards a school-house conducted by Edward Donnard Evans, whose son Alcwyn, the Carmarthen antiquary, continued it until 1887. (From 1834 to 1849 the school-house was the temporary meeting-house of the Carmarthen Unitarian congregation.)

## **Parc-y-Felfed and the Unitarians**

The first chapel of which the Unitarians had use was the old Dark Gate Baptist Chapel from 1812. Between 1834 and 1849 they had the use of the former Quaker meeting house. In 1849 they built their own chapel at Parc y Felfed in Mansel Street. See the gates and railings of 1849 and the plaque with the Unitarian creed. In 2005 it was converted into a dentists' surgery.

MBE

[The preparation of these notes has been facilitated by the publication in late 2005 of *Capeli Cymru* by D Huw Owen and the appearance of the Pevsner *Architectural Guide to Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion* (by Thomas Lloyd, Julian Orbach and Robert Scourfield) towards the end of 2006.

Some of the illustrations have been taken, with their permission, from Joyce and Victor Lodwick, *The history of Carmarthen* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1994. They are mainly the work of Mrs Edith Lodwick, Victor's mother. Others are from the collection of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales.]