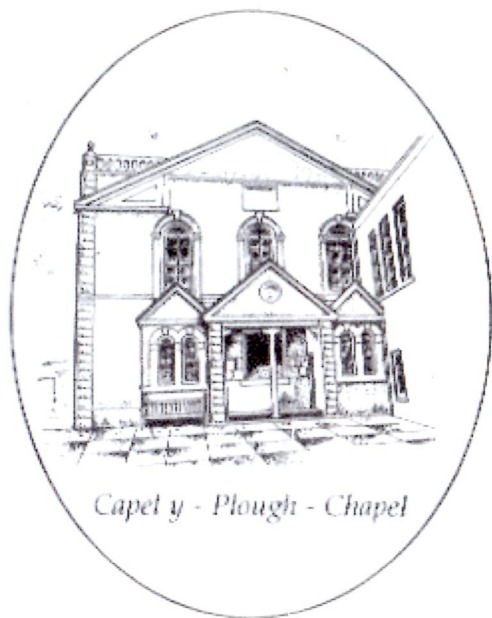


The Plough Chapel

United Reformed Church/Union of Welsh Independents

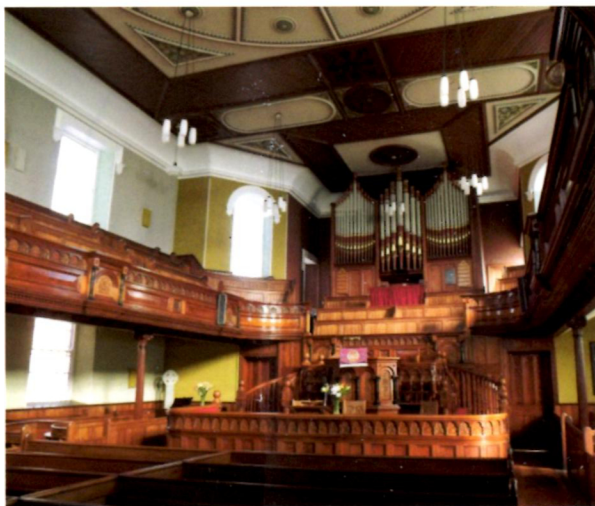


Lion Street, Brecon, Powys

Croeso – Welcome

Welcome to The Plough Chapel, Brecon, and we very much hope you enjoy your visit here.

The chapel has been described by at least one authority as having the most beautiful interior of any in Wales. The existing building dates from 1841, but was substantially altered in the early 1890s, and that is when the elaborately carved woodwork you can see inside was created. The Plough is a Grade II* listed building.



'The Plough' is an unusual name for a chapel, but local tradition has it that the original building on this site was an inn. Nonconformist worship here goes back as far as the seventeenth century.

Today the chapel is part of the United Reformed Church and also *Undeb yr Annibynwyr Cymraeg* (Union of Welsh Independents). Morning worship on the second Sunday in each month is conducted in Welsh, and the other services are in English. You are most welcome to come and join us.

Description

The chapel building you see now stands on the site of an older building, which itself had been built adjacent to an earlier nonconformist meeting-house. The front elevation, and especially the interior, are the result of extensive renovation during the early 1890s, but parts of the older building remain. The organ recess and the vestry beneath it were added to the older building in the 1880s.

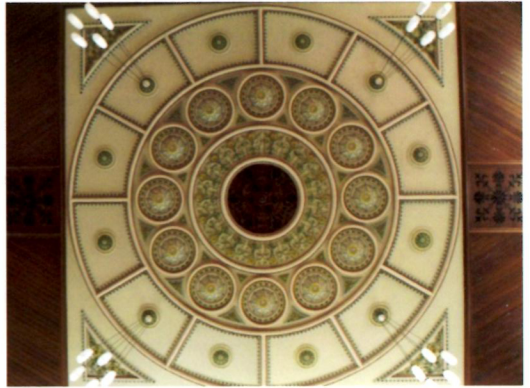


The 1841 Chapel

What is most striking is the magnificent interior with particularly rich woodwork- the finely carved mahogany, oak, ebony and pitch pine. It is testimony to the skill and craftsmanship of local workers, especially those of Benjamin Jenkins, whose joinery workshops in the town were reputed to be the best in Wales. The pitch pine was

imported from the southern United States, and a particular feature is the way in which the panels were cut at an angle to the annual rings in order to highlight the distinctive patterning of the timber. It's known as "tortoiseshell pine". Pitch pine is an expensive wood which is now rarely available.

Let's begin with the paneled **ceiling**, with a centre boss of pitch pine surrounded by panels of plaster radiating outwards, with a fleur-de-lys pattern within them – more ornate than usually found in Nonconformist chapels. Originally the ceiling was higher but was lowered in the 1880s because concealed behind it is a Victorian ventilation system, which still serves to get rid of any hot air produced by the sermons!



Turning to the **balcony**, you can see the continual sweep of the mahogany handrail around the top. The workmen in the 1880s used steam to bend the wood in order to achieve the curves. Below the handrail, there is a series of arched panels fretted and moulded in oak with ebony pillars, rebated into pitch pine frames. The lower panels are solid pitch pine, not veneered, and are an excellent example of the dense patterning effect achieved by sawing the log tangentially to the grain of the wood. The balcony is supported by columns made of cast-iron.



The **big seat**, or *set fawr*, in front of the pulpit, was for the chapel deacons, who sat there throughout the service. They sat facing the minister, but would turn to face the congregation during the hymns to



see who was there and who wasn't. It is not as intimidating as it sounds because it was part of their pastoral role to find those who were absent, check they were well - and give them a resumé of the minister's sermon. The duties of the current chapel elders are not quite so

onerous!

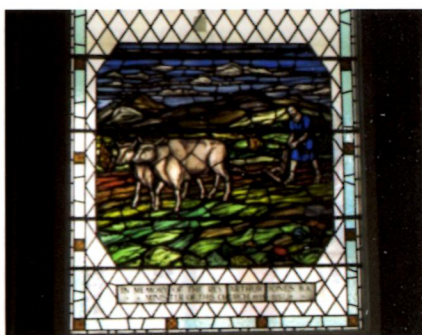
The carving on the *set fawr* matches the balcony, and the mahogany handrail was again steam-bent to shape. The sweeping handrails on the stairs to the **pulpit** were created in similar fashion, with fine hand-carved mahogany newels, supported on Corinthian capitals. The inner panels on the pulpit and the *set fawr* are done in oak, hand-carved with designs of flowers and leaves and stained alternately green and red.

The **pews** are also built out of pitch pine, all of them retaining the original brass fittings with numbers on the doors. The doors to the pews helped to cut out the draughts, but they signified more than that. Then, as now, the same families usually sat in the same seat at every service, but then they paid an annual rent and regarded it as the family pew. The pews were all individually built, and so are all different, with the curved pews at the sides of the chapel and in the balconies steam-bent to shape.

The installation of fixed pews was new to The Plough in 1890, and the aim was to fit in as many as the chapel could take. The seating capacity is 550, if you include the seats for the choir between the organ and the pulpit. There is no spare space, so no room for any other activities. The congregation was expected to sit down for the service as soon as they entered the building. As part of a general refurbishment of the building undertaken in 2011, work was carried out to improve access for the disabled, and two pews at the front of the chapel were removed to provide space for wheelchairs. When removed, one was found to have the signature of the carpenter who made and installed it. This work was made possible by grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund and Cadw.

When, in 1923, The Plough Chapel united with the English-speaking chapel in Glamorgan Street the latter building was closed. The memorial plaques and balcony clock were then removed and placed in the Vestry, together with a brass plaque to record the union

At the rear of the chapel there is a **stained glass window** commemorating one of the ministers of The Plough, Rev. Arthur Jones. It was donated by his sons in 1966. The present colour scheme on the ceiling and walls of the chapel were designed in 1967.



The **organ** was installed at the same time as the building work was finalised in 1896. It cost what was then the princely sum of £355. But in recent years, the quality of the sound from the organ had deteriorated, and in 2009, with the help of gifts and grants, it was completely refurbished. The opportunity was taken to repaint the organ pipes with what are believed to be their original Victorian decorative patterns and colours.



Outside, the **front porch** is an unusual, triple-arched design, on narrow, fluted supporting columns - a feature added in the early 1890s. On the right-hand side is a memorial plaque to the poet and critic Roland Mathias, who was a member of The Plough for 40 years. The plaque was erected by the Rhys Davies Trust.

The chapel was given listed building status in 1976. Giving the reasons for the listing, Cadw described The Plough as “an imposing late 19th century chapel with an unusual porch” and cited especially “its elaborate and fine interior”.

History

The Plough grew out of the Congregational or Independent strand of Protestant Christianity. The Independents, *Annibynwyr* in Welsh, first rose to prominence during the time of the Civil War in the 17th century. The Independents believed there should not be any kind of state church, instead organising themselves so that each congregation was a democratic unit making its own decisions and subject to no hierarchy, whether bishops or any other kind. Among their most important tenets was 'the priesthood of all believers'.

With the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the Independents, like Baptists, Quakers and others, became 'Nonconformists' or 'Dissenters', refusing to attend the services of the re-established Church of England. Dissenters found themselves banned from meeting in public or in private, and it became an offence for a Nonconformist minister to live in, or visit an area, within five miles of a town such as Brecon. To avoid this kind of persecution, what were called 'gathered churches' began to appear – that is, congregations without a settled building in which to meet. Often people came from considerable distances, and the venue of worship was moved frequently.

But the persecution failed to stem the growth of Nonconformity and restrictions on their activities were gradually eased. In 1689, with the ascent of William and Mary, the Bill of Rights was passed, guaranteeing freedom of religious worship for Dissenters. Soon a number of houses in the Brecon area were licensed for Nonconformist meetings – at Garthbreny, Llechfaen, Cantref and Llandefaelog. It was inevitable that soon a meeting house would be established in the town itself.

'The Plow House'

In 1697 Edward Havard of Tyle Crwn, a farm on the road from Talachddu to Llanfilo, bought the 'Plow House' in what was then called Canterselly Street for the sum of five shillings (Canterselly was a corruption of *Cantref*'

Selyf, still the name of a house in what is now called Lion Street). The plot stretched back to include a portion of the old town wall, part of which can still be seen. The house was licensed as a Nonconformist place of worship on November 1st, 1699.

It was a big house thought to have been occupied by a number of tenants, and the first worshippers apparently used just one room in the building. The name, 'The Plough', suggests that the building was an inn, and that suggestion is backed by local tradition. An inn at this time, however, might simply have been a large house in which one room was given over to the serving of locally brewed beer, rather than anything resembling a modern 'pub'.

The first Plough chapel

In 1715, about 70 people attended services at 'The Plough'. They included farmers, landowners and the founder of the first ironworks in the area, Benjamin Tanner. The church was ministered to by James Watkins from Trefeca, who had a lot of travelling to do because he was also the minister at a chapel in the Llanthony valley. It was during the time of James Watkins, between 1728 and 1733, that the first Plough Chapel was built. Much of the work was carried out by the members themselves, with farmers from neighbouring villages helping to carry the materials.

The new chapel could still be more accurately termed a meeting-house, because it seems to have been sub-divided into a number of small rooms, some of which were sub-let. It is recorded, for example, that one room was used as a school. For much of the following century, The Plough shared its ministers with Aber Chapel, near Talybont-on-Usk, and was part of what was known as the 'Church of Breconshire'.

The second Plough chapel

In 1841 a new chapel was built in what was then the garden of the existing meeting-house, and the accompanying sketch shows the front elevation of the building. The Plough had become a chapel in the Victorian style, of the same kind which were springing up all over Wales. It had a seating

capacity of 700, which was remarkable for a church with only about 200 members. It was formally opened at the end of December 1841.

Such was its success that a daughter chapel was built at Cantref, to the south of Brecon, for the benefit of Plough members living in that district. Called Twyn Chapel, it was closed in 1958 and is now a private dwelling.

The greatest physical transformation to the second Plough Chapel took place towards the end of the 19th century during the ministry of Rev. John Bowen Jones. The work included the addition of a new porch to the front, as well as the finely carved woodwork in the chapel interior which is described earlier in this pamphlet and was completed in 1896. It is obvious that the chapel was relatively prosperous during that period, because it also commissioned the building of Nos 1 & 2 Lion Street to the side of the chapel courtyard at a cost of £1,750.

It was during the ministry of Revd J B Jones that English began to be introduced into the services which, till then, had been conducted entirely in Welsh.

Brecon as a Congregational centre

In 1833 an English Congregational minister, Rev David Blow, moved from London to Brecon. Finding that there were no English-speaking Congregational chapels in the town, he began to conduct services in his own house. Three years later, a chapel, seating 350, was built in what had been the minister's garden in Glamorgan Street.

That wasn't his only contribution, for he then sold his own large house in St Mary Street (the building which is now the Conservative Club) to be a residential theological college. The new college was established on a sound financial footing with a Board composed of Congregational Ministers. A limited number of non-ministerial students were also taught there.

The College was later moved to Camden Road and opened in 1869 as the Memorial College (the memorial was to the Dissenting ministers persecuted in the 1660s). It provided many members and preachers for both The Plough and Glamorgan Street churches. The Memorial College

remained a centre for training students for the Welsh and English Congregational ministry until it was moved to Swansea in 1959. The building was subsequently converted into the 'Cwrt-y-Camden' flats.

By the 1920s, the purpose in having two separate Congregational chapels in Brecon became less clear, as The Plough had, since the 1870s, begun to use the English language in some of its services. The evening service on a Sunday gradually became an English service as did parts of the morning service, most notably the children's address, reflecting the increasing dominance of English among the younger generation.

Around this time, talks between the two chapels began, and it was agreed in 1923 that the two congregations should unite. Welsh was to be the language of worship on one Sunday morning a month, and English on other occasions. It is an arrangement which has persisted to this day. After the closure of the Glamorgan Street chapel, its memorial plaques were relocated to the Plough vestry, where they remain.

The Plough Chapel today

In 1972, the congregation of The Plough voted to join the United Reformed Church, which was created in that year by the union of most of the Congregational churches in England and Wales with the Presbyterian Church of England (and later joined by the Churches of Christ and the Scottish Congregationalists). At the same time, The Plough retained its membership of the Union of Welsh Independents, the mainly Welsh-speaking Congregationalists who did not join the URC. The Plough shared its minister with two other chapels just outside Brecon, at Libanus and Cwm Camlais.

It became increasingly difficult for the congregations in country chapels to continue to find the resources to maintain separate ministries, and the mutual support between a number of congregations in the Brecon Beacons area was soon to be put on a more formal basis. In 2004 nine URC and UWI chapels joined to form the Brecon Beacons Pastorate. The Plough, Libanus and Cwm Camlais were joined by Maesyronnen at Glasbury, The Tabernacle at Pennorth, Llanfilo, Bethania at Talgarth, Ebenezer at Upper

Chapel and Clyro. The union of Pennorth with Llanfilo, together with the closure of Clyro, mean that today there are seven chapels in the pastorate.

In the meantime, work has continued on maintaining the fabric of The Plough, including work on the roof and adjacent buildings. The organ was completely refurbished in 2009. Two years later, in 2011, there was a large-scale renovation, improving disabled access and turning the ground floor of No 2 Lion Street into a community hall with an entrance off the courtyard in front of the chapel.

The Plough is an active church, and especially so during the annual Jazz Festival held in the town every August. To coincide with the Jazz Festival, the annual Flower Festival is held in the chapel, encouraging thousands of visitors to come and see the building as well as the floral decorations. On the Sunday evening, a Songs of Praise (*Gymanfa Ganu*) fills the chapel to capacity as the walls resound to the singing of familiar hymns.

Previous Ministers at The Plough Chapel

The Plough Welsh Independent Church

c1714-1730	James Watkins
1740s	John Williams
1752-1757	David Jones
1762-1800	William Williams
1794-1811	Evan Davies
1814-1826	Thomas Powell
1827-1839	Timothy Evans
1840-1848	Griffith Griffiths
1849-1860	Caleb Gwion
1861-1872	Richard Solomon Williams
1874-1901	John Bowen Jones
1904-1909	D. Miall Edwards
1910-1920	R.J. Williams

Glamorgan Street Congregational Church

1833-1843	David Blow
1843-1873	Henry Griffiths
1875-1878	Edmund Goodison
1878-1880	G.W.Cooper-Smith

1882-1886	B.L.Thomas
1888-1889	Melchizedek Evans
1891-1893	A.R.Ezard
1894-1905	John Evans
1907-1916	T. Gwyn Thomas

The Plough United Congregational Church

1924-1932	D. Arafnah Thomas
1934-1957	Arthur Jones
1961-1971	Luther Mosely

The Plough United Reformed Church

1973-1983	T.G.O.Thomas
1983-1989	Peter Noble
1990-1995	Gethin Rhys
1997-2005	T.Gerwyn Jones

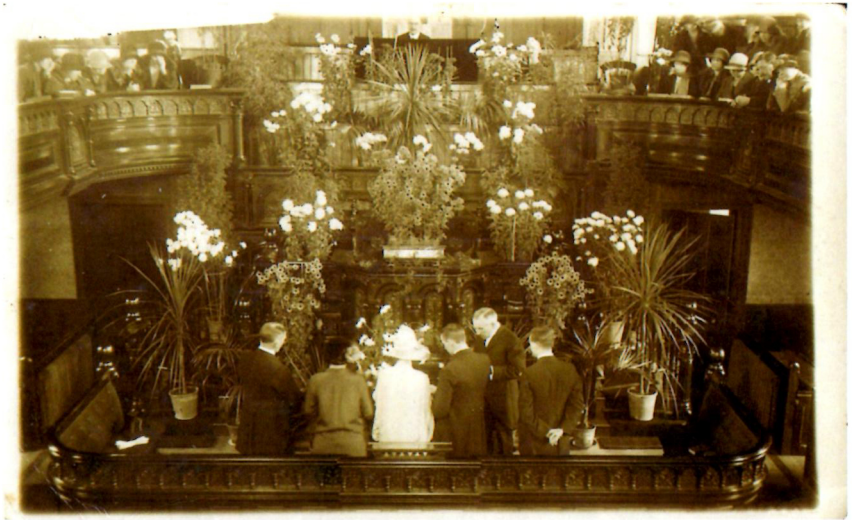
The Brecon Beacons Pastorate

2006 -----	Michael Hodgson
2009-----	Greg Thompson

For further information, please telephone 01874 623154 or look at the Brecon Beacons Pastorate website www.brecon.urc.org.uk . If you wish to gain access to the Plough Chapel, or would like advice on any other matter, please contact the Minister.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Glyn Matthias, Jill & Jeff Williams, Gruff Roberts, Michael Hodgson, Mike Chappell, Eric Tadd and Brecknock Museum for the text and photographs in this booklet.



The wedding of Rev Arafnah Thomas & Nancy Morgan



The builders 1891



1925 and 2013

