

Cefnarthren: One of the Oldest Chapels in Wales

Situated just two kilometres north of the A40 just east of Llandovery in the extreme north-east corner of Carmarthenshire stands one of the oldest chapels in Wales. It is called Cefnarthren after the long ridge below which it is situated, tucked away in the bottom of the narrow valley of Nant Gweddol. It seems far more isolated than it actually is - partly because the quiet, unpopulated valley is now a cul de sac, thanks to the development in 1939 of the army firing ranges of the Mynydd Eppynt. The ranges start on the other side of the ridge, and their establishment destroyed forever a significant if small and scattered Welsh farming community, and persuaded many others in the immediate area to leave - many of whom had been the chapel's adherents for generations.



[<https://lh5.googleusercontent.com/-1V25K0fK3ZE/TYInSmQEu4I/AAAAAAAAADg/yRdhmahpLgI/s1600/P1000655.JPG>]

The narrow road to the chapel - more a track really, still covered with last autumn's leaves and broken twigs - hugs the low hillside. In places a wire fence is all there is to guard against your car rolling down to the valley bottom should you misjudge things as the hill drops sharply down from the very edge of the roadway. On its way from the tiny and aptly named village of Pentrebach, it passes just two houses, one of which is down off the road. Then, just as it reaches the valley floor, before crossing the narrow bridge over the stream to climb steeply up into the small hamlet of Babel, it reaches the chapel.



[https://lh5.googleusercontent.com/-1Mn6gjAAAd3Q/TYI3l9zrwGI/AAAAAAAAAD4/Uw_mWdAXB4Y/s1600/P1000564.JPG]

Cefnarthren chapel stands completely isolated in the middle of fields, closely sheltered by the two wooded hillsides on either side of Nant Gweddol. In fact, you could easily miss it, situated as it is well back and down from the road, and because at first sight it looks more like an abandoned old house.



[<https://lh4.googleusercontent.com/-t2-i2pLnm4c/TYIoBHstR0I/AAAAAAAAADk/9UebLZtx2LM/s1600/P1000657.JPG>]

The chapel is a simple, box-shaped structure with two doors, one on each side of a plain pulpit situated on the long west wall. A balcony overlooks the pulpit on three sides. There is nothing at all ornate, as with many older Welsh chapels. Everything is purely functional. On the side of the chapel against the outside wall there is a simple two-storey lean-to structure which provided schoolrooms when there were children. The only thing that suggests even the slightest degree of provision for creature comforts is a small corrugated-iron earth closet set against one corner of the back of the building.



[<https://lh4.googleusercontent.com/-eN-WJnAP-OY/TYI0WZistUI/AAAAAAAAADs/gG97ybVx-H4/s1600/P1000570.JPG>]

The chapel is apparently still in use, probably by a small devoted congregation anxious to preserve what little remains of the old ways for as long as possible, but it conveys an overwhelming sense of decay. Two of the windows on the front elevation are broken, and the window sills are rotting and beyond the help that can be provided by a few coats of paint. The gable ends also are in need of urgent attention. However, the overall effect of the front elevation of the chapel is graceful and lovely still.



[https://lh5.googleusercontent.com/wc_PAirRbeY/TY11WmkEEeI/AAAAAAAAADw/O6zc8DTICvA/s1600/P1000576.JPG]

At one time there used to be a chapel house called Llanerchlas to accommodate a minister, but that burned down in 1966, and was subsequently levelled to provide a small parking space opposite the schoolroom at the south end of the building.

The adjoining burial ground is still very much in use, and some of the headstones are singularly impressive, the rank of black marble seeming to present a united front of guardianship to the chapel when viewed from the north.



[<https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/RKldfEtc6ro/TYI2v93QLrI/AAAAAAAAAD0/hgMMUICKP5U/s1600/P1000588.JPG>]

The current chapel building is not very old, relatively speaking, having been put up in 1854 to replace a smaller building which itself had been constructed in 1799. That chapel building had itself been built to replace of an even older building which had been erected in 1689. But the church as a group of people committed to worshipping God together under the guidance of an appointed pastor had already been in existence in some form for many years prior to that, albeit illegally after Cromwell's time - a fact attested do by the date over the door.



[[https://lh4.googleusercontent.com/-](https://lh4.googleusercontent.com/-iNz_Wq6lft8/TYI4oqe3w4I/AAAAAAAAAD8/XXAwLMYZnV0/s1600/P1000574.JPG)

[iNz_Wq6lft8/TYI4oqe3w4I/AAAAAAAAAD8/XXAwLMYZnV0/s1600/P1000574.JPG](https://lh4.googleusercontent.com/-iNz_Wq6lft8/TYI4oqe3w4I/AAAAAAAAAD8/XXAwLMYZnV0/s1600/P1000574.JPG)]

The present sense of hopeless decay hides a history which deserves not to be forgotten, and which can serve today as an encouragement to God's people in Wales. My purpose in writing this is to honour those who were involved in the establishing and building up of Cefnarthen in the past in such a way that those involved in similar work today can themselves be blessed and strengthened within through the reading of their story. I think this is what 'redigging old wells' is all about.

The first disciples were formed and gathered here by Jenkin Jones just before the outbreak of the Civil War (1642-1651). He was born in Llandetty in Breconshire in 1623, maticulated at Jesus College Oxford in 1639, and was a staunch supporter of Oliver Cromwell. He went on to be commander of the Parliamentary forces in his home county; and was appointed an approver of ministers under the terms of the Act for the Better Propagation and Preaching of the Gospel in Wales in 1650. A close friend of prominent Welsh Puritan leader Vavasor Powell, he believed in Baptist principles; but he was not exclusive, and welcomed to the communion table believers of other persuasions and denominations. His preaching ministry was widespread, including Carmarthenshire and Glamorganshire (especially in the Merthyr Tydfil area) as well as Breconshire, and so converts in the Cefnarthen area were part of a widespread church whose focal point was Llanigon, near Hay-on-Wye. Once Charles II came to the throne in 1660, Jones and many of his followers, including some from the Cefnarthen area, were arrested and imprisoned at Carmarthen for a season. He later became the minister at Llandetty, though what finally happened to him is not known.



[https://lh4.googleusercontent.com/-pNGd3NjdazI/TYMroCsk_ZI/AAAAAAAAAE0/vpw8rPjXvLw/s1600/P1000580.JPG]

Such were the origins of the church at Cefnarthren; but these were difficult times, and there was much persecution of non-Conformists following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. The government in the reign of Charles II developed what was known as the Clarendon Code - a series of Parliamentary Acts introduced between 1661 and 1665 designed to curb the development of non-conformity and persuade dissenting believers to return to the Anglican church. Life became particularly difficult for non-conformists after the passing of the Conventicle Act in 1664 which banned the gathering together of more than 5 people for religious purposes outside of the services of the Church of England. You had to be fully persuaded that your beliefs and values were worth dying for, and be living with a very real sense of the presence of God with you to continue to be a non-conformist at that time. At the very least you risked open ostracism from the majority of the populace, but you could also face serious fines and imprisonment once it was generally known that you were a dissenter. It was during that period, and for quite a number of years, that the new church in the Cefnarthren area began meeting in secret at Castell Craigyryyddon, which is about a kilometre north of the present chapel building.



[https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/-1qxf4ZrkNrk/TYJloQR_N3I/AAAAAAAAAEA/M6ey_y4jFjM/s1600/P1000654.JPG]

Looking towards Castell Craigyryyddon (the hill in the centre) from just above Cefnarthren

Near the top of this remote hill is a natural rock fortress, which, as its Welsh name suggests, was used by druids in Celtic times, according to long-established local tradition. Access to it would not have been straight-forward at the time, but the natural open-air amphitheatre found there was well hidden from view from the valley below, whilst providing excellent acoustics for preaching and worship. Furthermore, there was access to a large barn-sized cave at the back of the rock amphitheatre, sadly no longer accessible, which would have provided an even greater measure of protection from the elements as well as from the prying eyes of potential betrayers.



[<https://lh4.googleusercontent.com/-kfJ5JpWqgG8/TYJpKaKEQbI/AAAAAAAAAEM/OFi58iPBgoQ/s1600/P1000610.JPG>]

The path up to the Castell ..

If you follow the narrow road north from Cefnarthen chapel, it crosses Nant Gweddol by a small bridge before climbing steeply and roughly up to Penrhiw, and then on to the site of the old village school at Babel, now recently converted into a modern hall. Here, the road north heads down towards Nant Gweddol again; and at the edge of Crychan Forest, there's a forestry road which climbs steeply up the hillside towards Castell Craigyryyddon. You have to leave your car at the bottom, but after about half a mile there's a narrower track switchbacked upwards to the left which leads up towards the 'castle'. It's a lot more accessible than it would have been in the second half of the 17th century. At the top of the rise, a slight dip brings you to a shallow bracken-filled, rocky basin at the back of which is a twenty foot high rocky outcrop. Behind that again, above a short scree slope tower the dramatic smooth rock walls of 'Y Castell', above which soar buzzards. There was also a magnificent pair of red kites in the sky when I was there.



[https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/_tPNbSKAOUY/TYJoXDEI9BI/AAAAAAAAAEI/EjQilKcOY78/s1600/P1000592.JPG]

... a natural amphitheatre backed by cliffs - the rocks in the centre make a good pulpit

This was the place used by the Cefnarthren dissenters to worship God, pray and be moved and encouraged by the preaching of 'Yr Efwngl' - The Gospel - by Rees Prycherch and others. It's a very quiet place today. All that I could hear when I was there was the calling of the buzzards who hover high over the cliff face, and the distant sound of small arms fire and artillery (briefly) from army exercises taking place miles away towards Sennybridge across the lines of hills that make up the Eppynt. But it's a very moving place to be when you tune in to how it was used by persecuted Welsh fellow-believers 350 years ago.



[https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/-cVMT9fOUjU/TYMXy77_T3I/AAAAAAAAAEo/StDBVUjIcs/s1600/P1000593.JPG]

Looking over the natural amphitheatre from the 'pulpit rock'

In their four volume History of the Independent Churches of Wales published in 1871, Thomas Rees and John Thomas write that many inspirational sermons and prayers were given in that place.

Throughout this period, Rees Prycherch of Ystradwalter (b. about 1620) was locally responsible for the care of the saints, though during the last ten years of his life he benefitted from the support and encouragement of Henry

Maurice (1634-1682) who exercised a wider apostolic ministry from the village of Llanigon, just south of Hay-on-Wye in Breconshire.

Prytherch was a hugely influential dissenter who staunchly supported the independent cause, inspite of being heavily fined Carmarthen at in 1662 for failing to attend the local Anglican church. He became widely known as a biblical epigrammatist in the tradition of another early writer from his home parish, Rees Pritchard (1577-1644), writer of 'Canwyll y Cymru' (The Welshman's Candle). Seven hundred of Prytherch's pithy saying were collected and published after his death. They display a sharp cutting edge. At one and the same time they expose the hypocrisy and Godlessness of the age, and confront people with their need for God's grace:

Better a lowly state in the love of God, than the highest state without it.

It is better to be saved in the brine of affliction, than to rot in the honey of ease.

There are many who are trampled upon by sin, but few trample upon sin.

Through his writing there also comes a strong streak of compassion for the poor; for example, he urges brewers to use their barley to make bread for distribution or sale to the poor rather than to be used in the production of ale.

For forty years Prytherch ran an important school for non-conformists at Abercrychan near his family home of Ystradwalter in the valley of Afon Bran, a few miles north of Llandovery, and a little west of Cefnarthren. He also supported Henry Maurice in his wider ministry in the wider area. It sounds as if they operated very much as an apostolic team might among the new churches of today. After Maurice's death, Prytherch moved his school to Abergwili, where by 1690 he was providing education for between 80 and 100 students.



[<https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/-l-64sOiQcPQ/TYJ0AwUwc9I/AAAAAAAAAEQ/ziw2zP0quRY/s1600/P1000568.JPG>]

It was under Rees Prytherch's ministry, immediately after the passing of the Act of Toleration in 1688 which made it possible, that the first proper chapel building at Cefnarthren was built - probably the first purpose-built chapel building of any kind in Carmarthenshire. As a result of his ministry, the chapel's influence was felt across what was a huge area in those days, with people travelling to worship from Tirabad in the north, Myddfai in the south, Llandeio'r Fan and Sennybridge in the east, and Cilycwm and even Caio in the west. Even by a conservative reckoning, that's an area of about 120 square miles of extremely hilly terrain with what in those days would have been a very poor network of tracks and paths.

A reflection on the impact of the work centred on Cefnarthren can be found in a report to the bishop made in 1710 which mentions that of the 156 families served by the local parish church, St. Mary's, Llanfair-ar-y-Bryn, one half of

them are thought to be Presbyterians. To have a proper perspective of the significance of this, it needs to be set against a figure of 1.15% as the estimate for the percentage of the population who were dissenters in Wales in 1676, when the total population of Wales in 1670 was about 371,000 - that's 4,196 altogether; and a figure of 75% as the percentage of non-Conformists worshipping in chapels in Wales at the time of the religious census of 1851 when the total population was 1,163,139. (*Figures from Geraint H. Jenkins*)



[<https://lh3.googleusercontent.com/-w51zGY58TU8/TYNuY-1sjOI/AAAAAAAAAE4--VFbqrBjto/s1600/P1000589.JPG>]

Nant Gweddol alongside the chapel

Prytherch died in 1699, having strongly established a united, vibrant, growing church which was becoming increasingly influential in the area. After his death, his role was taken on by one of his own local team, Roger Williams of Cefnrhosan, Sennybridge.

Roger Williams also had the care of a chapel in Merthyr Tydfil at that time. It is amazing to consider how he must have managed both works, though it was probably a case of necessity in terms of earning a living. You can drive from Merthyr to Sennybridge in about 40 minutes today, while the journey from there east to Cefnarthan takes about half that time by car. But in the early 18th century, the journey over the Brecon Beacons to Merthyr via the Storey Arms pass must have taken all day on horseback. Williams must have visited one congregation one Sunday, and the other the next. It supposes that there was a supply of trained and disciplined lay-preachers of sufficient capability in both locations, which says something about the commitment to the cause of the people involved given the hard working lives many of them endured at that time.



[<https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/-tEZaWlrJGnc/TYMYu37XpPI/AAAAAAAAAEs/xThofeV6TQM/s1600/P1000663.JPG>]

*The headstone of a member of the Prytherch family at Cefnarthren
which reads 'Rees H. Prytherch, born again 1840, died October 31st 1906'*

The next phase in the story of Cefnarthren is characterised by tensions and division as a result of the gradual espousal by Roger Williams of Arminian theological views. Two of his sons, who one after the other succeeded him in the pastorate in the first part of the 18th century, held the same point of view, so that many in the congregation were gradually persuaded. The problems started when the next leader appointed to lead the church, David Thomas, brought the theological emphasis back to Calvinism. A parting of the ways gradually became inevitable, and it was after this time that the Calvinist party began meeting separately at Glynpentan farm in the hamlet of Babel in July 1739. One of those to do so was long-standing church elder John Williams, Pantycelyn - the father of William Williams, soon to become one of the greatest hymn writers of Wales.



[<https://lh5.googleusercontent.com/-ZQZWDsDbHhc/TYJ-dEGGKeI/AAAAAAAAAEU/eJXJYYTmqZk/s1600/P1000575.JPG>]

John Williams died soon afterwards in 1742 aged 86, and in 1749 his widow Dorothy and already well-known son William gave to the new work at Glynpentan a parcel of Pantycelyn land on which to build a chapel of their own. In this way the chapel at Pentretygwyn came into existence in 1750 a mile or so from Cefnarthren as the crow flies. The

two chapels operate in close relationship today, even sharing paint pots to judge from the similarity of the doors of them both!



[<https://lh5.googleusercontent.com/-zZYNjii90Tk/TYKB8tb0FRI/AAAAAAAAAEY/bXwNO2styDQ/s1600/P1000530.JPG>]

Pentre-ty-gwyn - the second building

Both works seem to have flourished. By the end of the century the building at Cefnarthen was too small and cramped for the growing church, in spite of planting out at least two other congregations, so the original building was replaced in 1799. In the first meeting in the new building, Mr Rees Morgans, Cwrtebach was appointed minister and an offering was taken up towards the cost of the work which realised £61 - an enormous amount at the time for a poor rural community. Today it would be worth about 1000 times as much. It is clear evidence of tremendous faith among the people as well as of the faithfulness of God.

in 1807 Rees Morgans was replaced by Jenkin Morgan who in turn died in 1835, to be replaced two years later by Edward Jones, Blaenglyn who was a member of the church. His pastorate was to cover both the church at Cefnarthen and the one at Pentre-ty-Gwyn, evidence that by this time the divisions of the previous century over the issue of predestination had been sufficiently overcome for the two the congregations to operate as one church.



[https://lh4.googleusercontent.com/-Y-2_G11yV5c/TYKKQKpxSQI/AAAAAAAAAEc/f0zIUZV1Vp4/s1600/P1000579.JPG]

In the previous few years the work had languished somewhat and was in need of being revived. Edward Jones worked hard to try to find new strategies to bring growth to the church, with very little success. But then in 1840, his prayer was answered and his own efforts rendered totally obsolete when God powerfully broke into the place, and

impacted the whole community for miles around with a powerful revival. Over the course of 18 months some 250 people were added to the church. It must have more than doubled in size in a very short space of time. Sadly, Jones was not able to enjoy the fruits of revival in the church for long as he died of TB at the end of 1841. A memorial to Edward Jones to be found in the most prominent place possible at Pentre-ty-Gwyn, right in the middle of the front wall of the church between the two tall windows, is clear evidence of the high esteem in which he was held by the congregations he served.



[\[https://lh4.googleusercontent.com/-36ITcl0nr8E/TYKSQBjITBI/AAAAAAAAAEk/XpE3KCAEbVA/s1600/P1000615.JPG\]](https://lh4.googleusercontent.com/-36ITcl0nr8E/TYKSQBjITBI/AAAAAAAAAEk/XpE3KCAEbVA/s1600/P1000615.JPG)

The church continued to grow in the following years, albeit more slowly, so that by 1854 once more the building was far too small and needed to be rebuilt. Once more a special single offering was taken up which realised over £206 - the equivalent of a staggering £160,000 in today's values.

Both chapels would undoubtedly have been significantly impacted by the revivals of 1859 and 1904, but I am not yet able to say to what extent that was the case. What is clear that after the Great War, decline became the experience of both places, especially after the development of the adjacent Mynydd Epynt ranges by the army in 1939.



[\[https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/-SrcPATZmMyM/TYMe5W3hw-I/AAAAAAAAAEw/3FcXnieUinc/s1600/Cefnarthen-1935.jpg\]](https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/-SrcPATZmMyM/TYMe5W3hw-I/AAAAAAAAAEw/3FcXnieUinc/s1600/Cefnarthen-1935.jpg)

Cefnarthen school at what is now Babel Hall in 1934

A faithful handful remain. But there is also the inspiring story of how this people continued to worship God in spite of early opposition and internal challenges right through a period which now covers the best part of four centuries.



[https://lh6.googleusercontent.com/-nNu2oQFK0u0/TYKLV_KoPgl/AAAAAAAAAEg/_oDnxOluaCE/s1600/P1000566.JPG]

Sources

Eppynt without People - Ronald Davies (Swansea 1971)

Bread of Heaven: The Life and Work of William Williams, Pantycelyn - Eifion Evans (Bridgend 2010)

Literature, Religion and Society in Wales 1660-1730 - Geraint H. Jenkins (Cardiff 1978)

Protestant Dissenters in Wales 1639-1689 - Geraint H. Jenkins (Cardiff 1992)

Congregationalism in Wales - R Tudur Jones (Cardiff 2004)

Welsh Biography Online - National Library of Wales

Hanes Eglwysi Annibynnol Cymru - Thomas Rees & John Thomas; 4 volumes (1871+)(transl. online by Gareth Hicks as *History of the Welsh Independent Churches*)

Posted 17th March 2011 by [David Edward Pike](#)

1 View comments



anon 18 February 2016 at 20:07

Title: CEFNARTHEN, - y comin, y capel a'r ysgol.

Author: Davies,Rhys

Publisher: W. Walters

Year: 1983

[Reply](#)

Enter your comment...

Comment as: Google Account ▼

Publish

Preview