

## Local Interest Group visit to Maesyronnen Chapel 27<sup>th</sup> June 2019

**Present:** Maureen Lloyd (ML), Wendy and Dainis Ozols, Ruth and Bill Johnson (BJ), Neville Harley, Richard Harris, Edwina Griffiths, Grace Davies, Sylvia Illingsworth, John Price, Cherry and Victor Williams, Joan Lloyd, Alen Harrison plus three people staying at the Maesyronnen Chapel Landmark Trust Cottage.

**Apologies:** Roy and Avryl Lloyd, Ann & Howard Dean, Jenny Francis and Carole Gibbs

ML welcomed everyone on such a wonderful evening with a fantastic view of the Black Mountains.

Maesyronnen means "Field of the ash tree".

To start the visit, we had a look around the Landmark Trust cottage, with kind permission of the people staying there for their holiday. (The information about the cottage which follows has been taken from the Landmark Trust's website.) This small cottage, which is attached to the Chapel, was probably built in its present form in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and it is thought that it was adapted from a much earlier building, and meant to house the caretaker. It has been beautifully restored by the Landmark Trust, who took on this task in 1985 in order to help the Chapel Trustees and congregation to ensure its future, as well as that of the Chapel. The Trust leases the cottage from the Chapel Trustees and this income helps with the maintenance of the Chapel.

The last caretaker to live in the cottage was Mrs Annie Lewis; she looked after the Chapel for 52 years. Apparently, she gave birth to 15 children there. Since the cottage was too small to accommodate all of them, as a new baby arrived one of the older children was sent away to live with relatives. This was quite a common practice in large families. The family had to fetch their water from a well in nearby woods until a standpipe was installed at the bottom of the lane – still some way to go to obtain water! Mr Lewis died in 1974 and Mrs Lewis moved out in 1979 to go to live with one of her sons; she died in 1985, aged 88.

The cottage has a cosy sitting room (with an interesting old range) and dining room/kitchen on the ground floor, with a bathroom in a "new" lean-to building at the back. Upstairs, there are two good sized bedrooms. Everything is comfortably and tastefully furnished, with furniture in keeping with the age and style of the cottage. We all agreed that it looked like a lovely place to spend a holiday, especially since the view over the Black Mountains is spectacular.

Detailed information about the restoration process can be found at the following:

<https://thelandmarktrust.sharepoint.com/sites/LMTPS/History%20Property%20Documents/Forms/AllItems.aspx?id=%2Fsites%2FLMTPS%2FHistory%20Property%20Documents%2FMaesyronnen%20Chapel%20History%20Sheet%2Epdf&parent=%2Fsites%2FLMTPS%2FHistory%20Property%20Documents&p=true&cid=02899c50-51e1-4bcf-9d66-9e4ec611d29b>

ML then introduced Bill Johnson (BJ) who was to talk to us about the Chapel and its history. He started by showing us how there were very obviously two distinct parts to the whole building when looking at it from outside: the stone cottage and the whitewashed Chapel. Whilst the Chapel itself dates from 1697, it (and the cottage) were not built from scratch; they were both "adapted" from an already existing building, possibly late Elizabethan or Jacobean in age (late 16<sup>th</sup> – mid 17<sup>th</sup> centuries).

Evidence of this can be found in the wall between the cottage and the Chapel. Here there is an impressive timber cruck truss (which could also be seen on the cottage side) which was made by splitting a curved oak trunk into two, to form a pair. It is possible that the building was originally a timber-framed "box" and may have been a traditional Welsh longhouse with living quarters at one end and a byre at the other. The two would have been linked by a door. There would have been no chimney, simply a central fireplace; the chimney was added in around 1600.

Later, the byre was rebuilt as the Chapel and the doorway between the two was blocked up. The wall between the two parts of the cruck frame was infilled with stone using lime mortar. It is possible that a caretaker was already living there by this time, looking after the secret meeting place and making sure that the authorities found no evidence of the religious activities taking place there.

BJ gave us a potted history of the development of religion in England and Wales in order to help us understand the beginnings of the Chapel. He started by talking about the 1534 Act of Supremacy which severed Britain's connection with the Roman Catholic Church and made Henry VIII and his successors the Supreme Head of the Church of England. This was followed by the dissolution of the monasteries and confiscation of their properties. Following Henry's death (as well as that of Edward VI), when his daughter, Mary Tudor, acceded to the throne, there was a short period when the country became Roman Catholic again, later reverting to Protestantism under Elizabeth I. However, this new Anglican Church, whilst Protestant in dogma, had a hierarchical structure very similar to that of the Catholic Church and a liturgy that was essentially that of the Catholic Church, but translated from Latin into English. This led to some opposition and there were many dissenters or non-conformists, who wanted to make the church simpler and "purer".



The 17<sup>th</sup> century was also a period of political upheaval and the English Civil War (1642 – 1651) resulted in the defeat and execution of the King, Charles I, in 1649. After this, there was no monarch for some years and the country entered a period known as The Commonwealth, initially led by Oliver Cromwell and his army. It is during this period that the “official” religious history of the Chapel begins, and this is shown in the names of the ministers recorded on the front of the pulpit, starting with those associated with the Llanigon and Glasbury Association of Churches. The first names are Richard Powell 164?-1658, Thomas Powell 1658-1660 and Owen Griffith 1658-1660. There is a photograph of the pulpit on the next page which records the names of all of the ministers from these first few right the way up to the present day.

During the Commonwealth period, a number of Acts made it impossible for those who, through matters of conscience, did not want to worship in the prescribed manner; they were therefore forced into clandestine meetings, often in farms, barns, woods and other “secret” places. Maesyronnen was one of these places, it was a cowshed, in Welsh “Y Beudy”. So, the building already existed before the Chapel was established.

In 1689, the Act of Toleration was passed very early in the reign of William and Mary. This granted the right to nonconformists to practise their faith as they wanted, as long as they were obedient to the monarch. Maesyronnen was first registered at the Easter Quarter Sessions of the Assizes at Presteigne in 1697 and this makes it the earliest purpose-built Nonconformist Chapel surviving unaltered in Wales, predating other buildings by nearly 80 years. The congregation could finally worship as they wanted, without fear.

The building is “a rare and important example of a very early Nonconformist Chapel which has survived almost intact”. (This is from the short history of the Chapel written by Derek Price in 2016.) It is rectangular in shape and about 50ft by 22ft 6 inches, on an east-west axis. It is unlike more modern Welsh chapels in its layout. Rather than the pulpit being in the centre of one of the shorter sides, it is in the wider side and the benches and tables are set out at right angles to the pulpit, some facing east and some facing west. The original windows survive; there are 10 of these and they give the place a light and airy feel. The wooden box pews, where the wealthier members of the congregation would pay to sit out of the draughts, are contemporary with the building. They have seats all around the “box” and so some sitting here would have had their backs to the preacher. There are two lovely wooden tables, one used for communion; communicants sit around this table to take the Sacrament, with the Minister at its head. A bench by one of the tables carries the date 1728. BJ told us that there are about 35 members of the Chapel today and that regular services are held here.

The roof of the building was renewed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the system of posts and tie-beams was inserted at this time in order to help the “spreading” of the walls. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the original earth floor was covered with flagstones. Furniture in the Chapel will have been added bit by bit as it dates from a number of periods. BJ drew our attention to the fact that many of the pieces of wood in the Chapel look as though they have been recycled from elsewhere. The walls are hung with memorial stones which tell quite a bit about members of the congregation, for example two families, the Prossers and the Lloyds, who each lost three children. One stone also has a Latin inscription, “vita mihi mors est, mors mihi vita nova est, nam dilexit multum”. Roughly translated, this means, “My life is death, Death is my new life, For much loved”. On one of the wooden benches there is a plaque commemorating Private Thomas Williams of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, South Wales Borderers, a member of the congregation who died in WW1. Some of the flagstones are engraved with the initials of people interred within the building. Outside, above the door, is the Chapel clock – actually a sundial!



We generally agreed that the Chapel has a light and airy feel and that the views through the windows must have been an inspiration to congregations over the centuries. This is obviously a well-loved place. There were eight fresh flower arrangements in the Chapel and it has a very welcoming feel about it.

A notice board listed a number of famous people who have visited the Chapel, including the broadcaster Huw Edwards, actress Thora Hird, author Bruce Chatwin and, in 2014, Prince Charles. After his visit, the Prince of Wales donated a new piano to the Chapel.

Outside is a graveyard, but the gravestones are all in one half of the plot. BJ explained that this is because much of the graveyard has very thin soils and the underlying rock is very hard, making the digging of graves almost impossible.

At the end of the visit, John Price read some extracts about Painscastle people linked with the chapel. John Griffiths, Portway, was one of the ministers listed on the pulpit, while a memorial to Richard Lloyd (and his family) from Glanyrafon, Painscastle, who was instrumental in establishing the chapels of Rhosgoch and Painscastle, is another illustration of the elaborate network that existed in non-conformity in the nineteenth century. There was also a memorial to Thomas Powell Tuck, died

1880 (Noyadd, Llanstephan) who was probably related to the Tuck family, who used to live at the Castle, Painscastle.

ML thanked Bill for a most enjoyable visit and for putting so much work into researching the history of the chapel. We had all thoroughly enjoyed the evening, made even more special by the lovely weather which allowed us to marvel at the wonderful view.

(WO would like to acknowledge that she made use of the Landmark Trust's website and "This is my Story: A Short History and Guide to the Chapel at Maesyronnen" by Derek Price in the writing up of these enotes.)

Cherry Williams announced that she will be doing a talk about her Great Grandmother's Diaries at Colva Church, at 6.30pm on Sunday, 14<sup>th</sup> July, in case anyone had missed the talk she gave LIG on a very snowy and cold night in January this year.

ML said that next month's LIG meeting will be on Thursday, 25<sup>th</sup> July, when we will be visiting Bottle Dock and Penisarplwyf. We will meet at Painscastle Village Hall at 7pm in order to arrange transport as there is restricted parking at the venue.