

“If the art of architecture could cry just now, Welsh chapels would be its tears”

Sir Simon Jenkins, “The Times”

# DISCOVERING CHAPELS IN BANGOR

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## Non-conformity in Wales

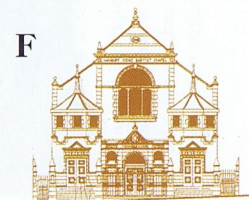
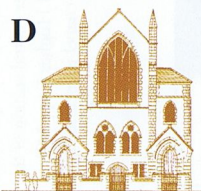
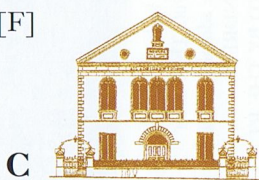
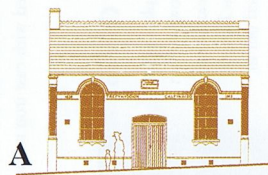
The Reformation in Europe gave rise to a persistent demand for more freedom in worship and in Wales the dissenters gathered secretly from about 1600 to hear the Word of God preached in their own language and without the restrictions of the church ritual. When William Wroth founded the first independent church in Llanfaches, Monmouthshire in 1639, it ignited a spark which ran over the mountains ‘like fire in the thatch’, in spite of severe persecution from the church authorities. The name ‘non-conformist’ was given to those church ministers who refused to conform to the Anglican Liturgy as required by the Act of Uniformity, 1662, and they were evicted from the church. Persecution of these Nonconformists (or Dissenters as they were also called) and the congregations who followed them continued until the Toleration Act, 1689 under William of Orange. From that time on chapels began to spring up all over Wales, the many differences of opinion over doctrine and practice giving rise to a great variety of denominations. Probably upward of 6000 chapels were ultimately built in Wales, becoming in many small towns and villages the heart and soul of the community they served and representing a national spirit of independence. Today, from having been the essence of much of the cultural, political, educational and religious life of Wales for over 300 years, the chapels are in decline, and many stand neglected and forlorn, while others have already been demolished. Their historical importance in preserving the Welsh language and national culture is probably immeasurable and it is in recognition of this that this series of leaflets has been produced.

*Further Reading:* Anthony Jones, Welsh Chapels (revised edition 1996, Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd)  
Gwyn Davies, A Light in the Land: Christianity in Wales, 200-2000 (2002, Bryntirion Press)  
Capel, Welsh Chapels: A Guide to the Denominations (2005 CAPEL)

## Styles in Chapel Architecture

In the 17th and 18th centuries the earliest chapels were often converted barns and cottages. The impetus for purpose-built chapels came from the people, and the styles they chose are often considered to represent a unique form of ‘primitive’ art, even though many were also designed by professional architects. These are some of the styles you may encounter.

- 1800: Early purpose-built with long-wall façade or square-plan [A]
- 1830s: Auditorium chapels with gable-end façade [B]
- 1840s: The Classic Style [C]
- 1850s: The Gothic Revival [D]
- c1880: Early Mixture of Styles [E]
- c1890: High Victorian Extravagance [F]



## 1. The Albion Hotel Public House

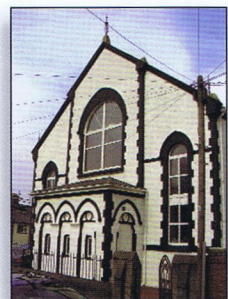
The Albion Hotel, formerly the Virgin Inn, remains a fine example of later eighteenth century Georgian architecture despite later mid nineteenth century alterations. This building is of huge importance in the history of Nonconformity in Bangor as it was from the parlour of this public house that the first flowerings of Methodism were to appear.

In 1792 there were only nine Presbyterians or Calvinist Methodists recorded in the whole parish and meetings were held in secret in small farms on the outskirts of towns. When the Rev Evan Richards began to perform an outdoor service at Lôn Pobty it is recorded that stones were thrown at him. Against this background of religious intolerance the kindness and hospitality of the Virgin Inn's licensee Margaret Williams in providing a safe environment for meetings, worship and growth to flourish must not be underestimated. Meetings were held between 1802 and the construction of the first chapel in 1804.



## 5. Peniel Chapel

Peniel Chapel was constructed c.1950 to replace an earlier chapel (built 1812) which was destroyed in 1949 following the widening of Garth Road. In direct contrast to its more ostentatious gothic neighbour, the post-war architecture of Peniel Chapel sees a return to the simpler origins of the chapel movement. The building style is reminiscent of the much earlier side-wall facade of the 'barn-chapel' with a modern twist offered by the contemporary styling of the porch. Unlike many of Bangor's Chapels, Peniel Chapel is still home to a flourishing Welsh Baptist congregation.



## 2. Hirael Calvinist Methodist Chapel

The existing Calvinist Chapel is the church's second incarnation, the location of the first is still unknown but it is recorded to have been built in 1845 at a cost of £300. In 1870, as the congregation grew, the present chapel was erected. It was created in the classical style with a gable-end entrance. The chapel is inscribed with the words "SITE GRANTED 1870 AD BY THE RT HON LORD PENRHYN" in three segments above the porch windows. The building has been recently converted into residential flats.



## 3. Penrallt Baptist Church (previously the Twrgwyn Welsh Presbyterian Chapel)

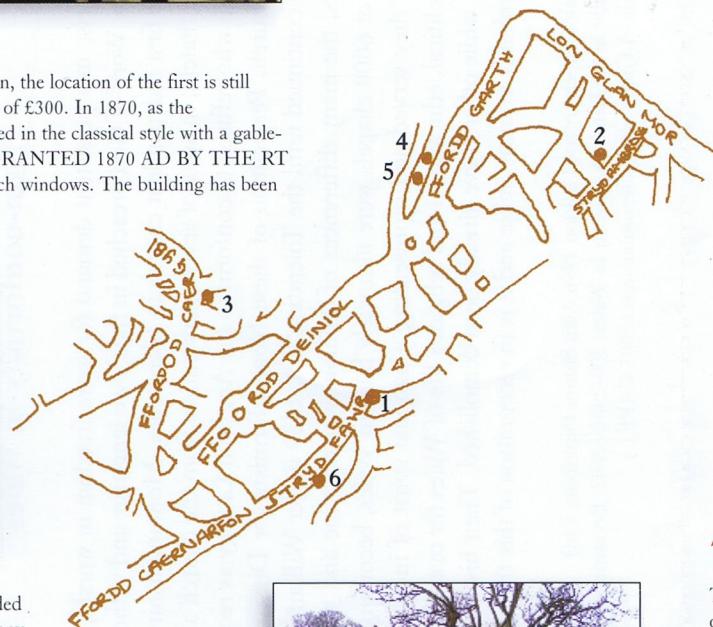
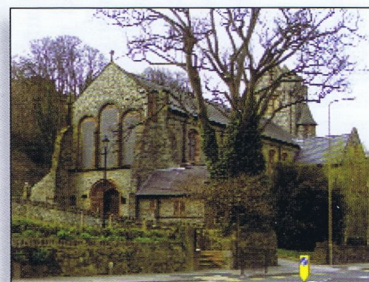
The Twrgwyn Chapel was built in 1854 by Bangor architects George Northcroft and Thomas Evans. It is a two storey construction, built in the classical style and was modified c.1865 when the taller main front was added by Kennedy and Rogers. The chapel has its own burial ground which is bounded to the front and right by a rubble wall, by railings to the right and tall gate piers to the rear. Many of the original/early interior architectural features survive. The chapel has changed denominations since its construction and lay empty for a time. It was purchased in 2003 by Penrallt Baptist Church and is once more home to a thriving chapel community.

## 4. Tabernacle Chapel

In its day Tabernacle Chapel was considered by many to be the most beautiful chapel in North Wales and received the praise of renowned poet the late John Betjeman. The Tabernacle was the third incarnation of the Welsh Presbyterian Chapel, the first (Hen Gorph) being built on Lôn Pobty in 1804. The second larger chapel was built on Dean Street in 1834.

Tabernacle Chapel was designed by renowned chapel architect James Cubitt and built at a cost of £20,000. The chapel foundation stone was laid in October 1903 and the chapel was officially opened in July 1905. It was to be Cubitt's last project and he died following a short illness on August 8th 1912. The building was designed in the arts and crafts gothic style and was based on the manner of the Scottish Kirk, with a stone tower, pillar and arches.

The chapel struggled to pay off its extravagant initial building costs and only became debt free in 1968. Unfortunately by this time the congregation numbers had dwindled to such an extent that a decision was taken to close the chapel. The last service was held on the 29th September 1968. The building has subsequently been converted into residential flats.



## 6. Pendref Chapel

Pendref Chapel was built 1881-1882 following the breakaway of over a hundred members of the Ebenezer Chapel congregation in November 1879. The official opening ceremony was held in June 1882, and by 1913 there were 267 church members. The chapel was designed in the classical style by local architect Owen Williams and built by Robert Jones of Bangor and D. Owen of Llandegfan at a cost of £3,700. Three stone plaques adorn the front of the building: a central plaque adorning the centre of the triangular upper part of the gable declaring "PENDREF CONGREGATIONAL CHAPEL SITE GRANTED BY THE RT HON LORD PENRHYN 1881". The second and third stone plaques are situated on the upper two quoins either side of the lower central section of the gable. They inform us that the stones were laid by W.B Hughes Esq., MP and W.Rathbone Esq., MP on January 8th 1881. The chapel is enclosed by a rubble boundary wall topped with cast iron railings.



## 7. St John's Methodist Church

The chapel was built in 1876, replacing an older building elsewhere in the town which had been used for just over 40 years since English Methodism first came to Bangor. Extensive renovations were carried out in 1954, and again in 1992 when a new Makin organ was also installed. The unusual mural painting was executed in egg tempera by Nora Yoxall and Elsie Whitfield of Gloucestershire. Modelled on a Last Judgment by Giotto in Padua, it depicts Christ in Glory, seated on the throne of judgment but with his feet set on a rainbow, the Biblical sign of mercy. Notice the hands, which recall the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. The Baptismal font, in Austrian oak, bears an early Celtic symbol- three bands which intertwine and have no end, signifying the Trinity and Life Eternal. At the east end, somewhat hidden by the organ, is a rose window. A collection of historical artefacts may be seen in the Minister's Vestry.

