

Welsh Chapels

A recent exhibition of Welsh Chapel architecture compiled by Anthony Jones, Director of the Glasgow School of Art, with a beautifully illustrated booklet, show that even non-conformist church architecture is more than a matter of merely providing a place large enough for the church to meet for worship. The design of church buildings has both reflected and influenced the church as people.

In Wales, as elsewhere, the early non-conformists met secretly in barns and houses. Many such conventicles were registered following the short-lived Indulgence of 1672, and more after the 1689 Toleration Act, but only Maesronnen Independent Chapel survives from these times. Converted from a barn in 1696 and externally hardly distinguishable from the house which adjoins it, the interior still has all the homeliness of a 'well scrubbed farm kitchen' (Betjeman).

Other church buildings constructed or converted for a century after Toleration continue to echo this domestic theme. Lime-washed walls, double pitched roofs and earth floors, with the pulpit placed in the centre of one long wall and the entrance doors either opposite or each side of it, 'meeting house style'.

As the 19th century dawned, large prosperous congregations, swollen by the methodist revivals and with little experience of persecution, brought about a rapid change in the appearance of chapels. The non-conformist church buildings became a speciality and books were written about it, such as: *Observations on the fitting-up of Meeting houses for Public Worship, illustrated by Plans, Sections and Descriptions, including one lately built in the City of York, embracing particularly the*

Method of Warming and Ventilating (William Alexander 1820)!

New independent chapels were built (at a mid century rate of four a week), old chapels demolished and rebuilt (on average every 20 years). The new buildings were more and more easily recognisable as religious buildings by their style. Medieval arches and classical columns, embellished gable end facades, the pulpit now at the far end of a long room, 'lecture room or theatre style'.

By the end of the century most of the 4,716 chapels in Wales were distinguishable as the 'House of God'; many were lavish temples, as remote in style from the farm kitchen as, one suspects, was much of the teaching from everyday life. It seems hardly surprising that, according to Jones, chapel building ceased abruptly in 1914.

The architectural glory of such places as Glendower Street Chapel in Monmouth, Frogmore Street Baptist Chapel, Abergavenny, and the Tabernacl Congregational Chapel in Morriston, Glamorgan (which cost £15,000 in 1872), is not in itself bad. Any Christian view of architecture surely accepts that all buildings should be beautiful to behold, as well as convenient and well constructed. But when a church building reminds one of traditional churches or temples, it also tends to encourage the traditional view that the building itself rather than the body of believers is the church.

Although Anthony Jones does not reach such a conclusion himself, it is clearly implied by his book that the simple domestic beauty of the early chapels expressed a more scriptural view of church building design. The rise and fall of the Welsh Chapel is therefore both a warning and a reminder to those of us who are involved in post-1914 chapel building projects!

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Welsh Chapels by Anthony Jones; published by the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff, 1984.