



HEN Dŷ CWRDD
(Old Meeting House)
Cefn Coed y Cymer
CF48 2PR



a **unitarian** meeting house
tŷ cwrdd **undodaidd**

Hen Dŷ Cwrdd is the oldest nonconformist cause in the Merthyr Tydfil area. It has been a centre of religious, educational and social influence since 1747.

www.ukunitarians.org.uk/sewus/cefncoed.htm



To chronicle the story of the Unitarian cause at Cefn Coed y Cymer only from the gathering of the congregation in 1747 is to ignore a fundamental part of its history. The story begins on the wooded mountainside above, and to the west of, Merthyr Tydfil, at the lonely farmstead of **Blaencanaid**, about a mile south of Penyrheolgerrig. It then continues at the nearby, and even more secluded, **Cwmglo**.

Some writers point to 1620 as the likely start-date for the story at Blaencanaid: others maintain that there are weaknesses in this claim and that we should look to a later date. As there is no documented evidence to help us decide one way or the other between these views we shall settle for the 'middle' of the 1600s.

It was a time when Merthyr Tydfil was still a straggling rural hamlet and the inhabitants depended upon pastoral farming for their livelihoods. The neighbouring countryside remained attractively rural: Dowlais was yet to come into existence, and Coedycymer was a dense woodland.

It was an era of major change...

In 1642 came the outbreak of the Civil War which resulted in the execution of Charles I in 1649 and the Monarchy being replaced by a republic – the *Commonwealth* of the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell – which continued until 1660.

Events that had taken place a little over a century earlier also had an influence on the story...

- In 1534-35, the determination of Henry VIII to have his marriage to Catherine of Aragon 'annulled' so that he could marry Anne Boleyn, brought about the final severance of Rome's jurisdiction over the Church in England and Wales, and a 'National' Protestant Church came into being.
- In 1558, Elizabeth I began her reign. Her first task on becoming queen and 'Supreme Governor of the Church' was the Religious Settlement of 1559. The clergy were forced to take an oath of loyalty and the people were compelled to attend at local churches in which Protestant services were to be administered.
- There were those whose consciences would not allow them to accept the doctrines and government of this new Elizabethan Church. Some remained loyal to the old Roman Catholic faith. Others were of an opposite persuasion whose consciences demanded a much purer simple reformed Church than that given to them by Elizabeth. These **Puritans**, as they came to be called, were to become a major force throughout the land in the succeeding years.

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During the era of the Cromwellian Commonwealth (1640–1660) the Puritans enjoyed encouragement and freedom to worship in their own way. This came to an abrupt end however when Charles II was brought back from exile and restored to the throne in 1660 and the Anglican Church restored with him. Acts of Parliament were introduced in 1662 and 1664 requiring that only the Anglican Book of Common Prayer be used and forbidding the holding of any gatherings for worship except of the Anglican form.

The *Five Mile Act* of 1665 prohibited any Puritan minister to come within five miles of any borough, or from living within five miles of any parish, within which he had previously ministered.

For those **dissenting** Puritans who refused to conform to the new church settlement –the **Dissenters**, or **Nonconformists**, as they came to be known– there now followed a quarter of a century of persecution.

Undeterred by threats of punishment and high fines, the defiant and daring worshippers of North Glamorgan held secret meetings in lonely recesses. Included among them were inhabitants of the parish of Merthyr Tydfil and the surrounding area, who chose the lonely farmstead near the source of the Canaid brook as their meeting place. Blaencanaid was an ideal spot for secret meetings and the small group of worshippers who met there included

some who travelled from Aberdare, Vaynor, Caerphilly, and other places equally as distant.

By 1669 the members at Blaencanaid found that the place was too small for their growing congregation; also their increased numbers made the place less safe from a raid by Government spies and soldiers who were trying to stamp out the secret meeting-places. They decided to transfer along the mountainside to a more spacious and safer meeting place in a barn at Cwmglo farmhouse, half a mile away. To avoid suspicion, the barn was stored with hay during the weekdays and emptied for secret services on Sundays.

The barn was inconspicuous in a dingle screened by a profusion of dense copses and tall, overhanging trees, so that one would have had no idea there was a building was in the vicinity. They could observe the approach of strangers without being seen themselves. (Even today it is difficult to find.) The well-hidden location did not lull the worshippers into a complacent sense of security. On high ground around the clandestine meeting-place lookouts were posted to warn of any unwanted visitors. Although it is not known whether any of the Cwmglo Dissenters were actually persecuted, it is significant that two of the fields in the vicinity of Cwmglo were known as *Maes Gwaed* (*Field of Blood*), and *Cae Dial* (*Field of Vengeance*.)

'This era of persecution was ... a time of trial and tribulation for all those who clung to their religious principles as Dissenters. It called for courage, tenacity, ingenuity, and a deep conviction...

Only the committed and the principled would stand by their faith when there were so many inducements that made it easier and more profitable to accept the line laid down by the Government. It says much for Merthyr Dissenters that they emerged from the icy winds of persecution so well.'

[Prof. Glanmor Williams, *Merthyr Historian Vol 1*]

In 1688 relations between the *Catholic* king, James II, and the majority of his *Protestant* subjects moved to an impasse. Dissenters generally were desperately afraid that James intended to establish an autocratic and Roman Catholic regime that was bound to be hostile to their interests. With his downfall, flight into exile, and replacement by the Protestant William and Mary, the Dissenters looked forward optimistically to a more sympathetic regime which would ease the burdens under which they had laboured.

The *Toleration Act*, passed in 1689, did indeed allow them to worship freely in meeting-places licensed for the purpose. But the freedom accorded to

them was a restricted one --- the Act required them:

'to take an oath of loyalty to the Crown; to accept the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England; to keep the doors of the meeting-place unlocked during worship; to continue paying tithes; and to serve as churchwardens and parish overseers when chosen for such offices.'

In other words they were tolerated not emancipated; they remained a suspect and underprivileged minority kept under fairly close surveillance.

The Act, however, applied only to those who subscribed to the *Trinitarian* Creed — it was not until 1813 that Arminians (Unitarians) were allowed by *Statute* to worship in public. Yet, limited and incomplete as the liberty conferred upon them was, their situation was now decidedly easier than it had ever been between 1660 and 1689.

The Dissenters took advantage of the enhanced opportunities conceded to them. They improved upon arrangements for ordaining, training and maintaining their ministers, and set about building their own places of worship, undisguised and openly acknowledged.

One of the earliest chapels to be erected in this first phase of building activity was at Cwmglo where the congregation relinquished the old barn, acquired a plot of land close by on a 60 year lease, and built a chapel.

The little flock was now enjoying comparative peace, free from external persecution, but soon began to be undermined by internal theological disputes. Just as in years gone by they had been at variance with the Church of England, they were now contending with one another. The chapel became an arena of argument between Calvinists and Arminians.

*[The **Calvinists** could be said to have adhered more or less strictly to the doctrine that God had predestined the salvation or damnation of every man or woman (as enunciated by John Calvin).*

*The **Arminians** (taking their name from Jacobus Arminius) took a more liberal view of the freedom of human will, the power of reason, and the capacity of each human being to influence in some degree the process of his or her own salvation.]*

There was a clear division of the members into a Calvinist wing and an Arminian wing but despite their quarrels they managed to co-exist for many years.

In 1724 Roger Williams, the Arminian who had been minister since 1698,

began to suffer ill-health. To ease the strain the congregation appointed a minister to assist him. He was joined by a junior colleague, James Davies, a Calvinist. Unlikely as it might seem, this arrangement provoked no quarrels during the last six years of the life of Roger Williams, who died in 1730.

Thereafter, the earlier tolerance seemed to go sour. The man chosen by the Arminian faction as ‘their’ minister was Richard Rees. From now on, relations between the contending elements in the congregation deteriorated markedly until, in 1747, those Arminians who lived on the Merthyr side of the mountain broke away and set up their own chapel (Hen Dŷ Cwrdd) at Coedycymer – in the wood at the confluence of the two streams of the Tâf .

Those Arminians who lived in the Cynon valley delayed *their* departure from Cwmglo for two years: they then built Hen Dŷ Cwrdd, Trecynon, which opened its doors in 1751.

The remainder of the congregation – James Davies and his supporters – moved to Merthyr and founded Ynysgau. Cwmglo, with its lease expiring, closed in 1752.

Blaencanaid was rebuilt in 1840.

TŶ CWRDD

The Chapel of 1747 (a ‘barn-like’ structure) was erected in a clearing in a wood that stretched from the confluence of the Tâf Fawr and Tâf Fechan rivers up to the higher slopes of Cilsanws mountain. When Anthony Bacon built his first furnace at Cyfarthfa in 1765 this wood was stripped of its trees in order to provide fuel to smelt the iron. As Anthony Bacon’s works expanded, a small village grew.

In those early days the chapel would have been referred to as “Tŷ Cwrdd”. The appendage ‘Hen’ [meaning ‘old’] was added after Moriah Calvinistic Methodist chapel (now demolished) was built in 1807, so as to distinguish the old chapel from the new.

Very little is known of those early days. The congregation is thought to have been perhaps two to three dozen – the chapel at Cwmglo was not a large one, and even if they had all joined in the exodus to Cefn Coed (which, of course, they did not) their number would still have been small. Even as late as 1821 the Chapel register contained the names of only 33 members: in 1887 it had risen to 81, and in 1935 to 129. In the 1950s the membership was 134 but sadly it has now (in 2012) fallen below 30.

The chapel was rebuilt in 1853 and again (following severe storm damage) in 1895. It then remained intact for almost a hundred years until 1991 when work which began as a 'limited-repair-job' turned into a complete rebuild. The chapel was re-erected using the masonry and fittings of the 1895 structure and (as now seen) is an almost exact replica of that building. The reopening took place in 1997, coinciding with the celebration of the chapel's 250th Anniversary.

Above the entrance is the inscription 'I NI NID OES OND UN DUW, Y TAD' (*To us there is but one God, the father*) which proclaims the fact that the congregation continued its religious development and progressed all the way into Unitarianism – a step which is thought to have been taken not later than 1761.

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Ministers and dates of their incumbencies

Richard Rees	1747 -1749
Philip Charles...	1749 -1790
Thomas Davies	...	...	1790 -1832
Daniel Davies...	...	...	1832 -1837
Owen Evans...	...	...	1837 -1865
Isaac Thomas Williams	...	...	1867 -1873
John Hathren Davies...	...	...	1877 -1910
John Carrara Davies	...	...	1910 -1918
Thomas Eric Davies	...	...	1918 -1925
Thomas Lewis Jones...	...	...	1931 -1935
John Marles Thomas...	...	...	1936 -1951
Wadcyn Davies...	...	...	1957 -1958
Alan Robert Taylor	1964 -1978
James Eric Jones	1999 -2003
John Christopher Clifford...	2003 -2004

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Today Hen Dŷ Cwrdd plays an active part in the welfare, heritage, and culture of the community, and it has served as a centre of religious, educational, and social influence in the locality since 1747.

Sunday services are held regularly and the chapel fulfils the needs of the usual rites of passage.

Schools as we know them today were practically non-existent in the nineteenth century, so when, in 1837, the Rev Owen Evans opened a

‘Grammar’ School at the Hen Dŷ Cwrdd it played a significant part in education in the community. His successors in the pulpit – Rev Isaac Williams and the Rev John Hathren Davies– also had schools

"where many people who were later to distinguish themselves received their early training."

[*School and Play in the Parish of Vaynor, J Evans & T J Harris*]

Until 2009 there was still a ‘Sunday School’ –*Children Together*– a Sunday morning activity group. It is our hope that it may be possible to reform the group.

The chapel and graveyard are visited by interested individuals and groups – including pupils from local primary schools as part of their programme of study. Up to the closure of the local high school in 2005 Hen Dŷ Cwrdd sponsored an annual prize to be awarded for musical excellence.

The chapel's earlier ‘*social influence*’ is best addressed by reference to comments made by two well-known and respected professors of history:–

Prof Gwyn Alf Williams describes Unitarians as

"... a striking and radical denomination who were key players in the politics of early nineteenth century Merthyr." [Fishers of Men]

and Prof Glanmor Williams writes:

"The Arminians ... had a well-defined streak of political radicalism in their make-up. This they transmitted to their Unitarian heirs, who became still more critical of the existing order. In Merthyr, as in many other towns and cities, Unitarians played a role in the radical politics of the first half of the nineteenth century out of all proportion to their numbers."

[*The Earliest Non-Conformists in Merthyr Tydfil, Merthyr Historian, vol 1*]

The chapel's link with its radical past has been recalled on two occasions in recent years when Hen Dŷ Cwrdd has been the venue for the annual Keir Hardie Memorial Lecture.

[James Keir Hardie, Labour MP for Merthyr in the early 1900s, was present at the unveiling of the memorial to the Rev Hathren Davies in 1911. He expressed his admiration for the late minister of Hen Dŷ Cwrdd, describing him as *"a man whose character was as strong as the granite monument which had just been unveiled, and whose countenance shone like the gloss upon it."*]

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The Women's League has fortnightly cultural and social gatherings, and raises money for chapel funds and for a number of charitable causes.

Many members of the congregation take an active part in the life of the community through membership of various other organisations.

From March 2000 to March 2007 South Wales Police used the ground floor of the chapel vestry as an office for community constables. It also accommodated the Neighbourhood Watch Centre for the Merthyr Borough.

The upper floor of the vestry is hired by a Ladies' Association for their monthly meetings.

Police and Community Together (PACT) monthly meetings are held in the chapel, as are the monthly meetings of the Vaynor Community Forum.

Since 1974 the Chapel Secretary has conducted the annual Remembrance Sunday ceremony at the village war memorial and the community Service of Remembrance at Hen Dŷ Cwrdd that follows it.

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Some sources of information

History of Hen Dŷ Cwrdd Cefn Coed Y Cymmer, Tom Lewis

Merthyr Tydfil: A Valley Community, Merthyr Teachers Centre Group

They thought for themselves, Elwyn Davies

Vaynor, Elwyn Bowen

To find out more about Unitarians visit

www.unitarian.org.uk

www.ukunitarians.org.uk/sewus/

www.ukunitarians.org.uk/sewus/cefncoed.htm

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