

Beili Du Chapel, Pentrebach

CONSERVATION STATEMENT



Ymddiriedolaeth Addoldai Cymru

Welsh Religious Buildings Trust

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1. Introduction

Beili Du is a former Calvinistic Methodist (Presbyterian) chapel on the edge of the small village of Pentrebach, near Sennybridge, Powys. It is listed Grade II and was acquired by Addoldai Cymru in 2009 as a very important example of Welsh Nonconformist heritage, to be conserved and repaired as necessary, opened to the public and returned to community use. The chapel itself was repaired and re-roofed in 2018.

This conservation statement has been prepared by officers and trustees of Addoldai Cymru to support funding applications for the conservation and potential re-use of the attached stable/schoolroom, as well as generally celebrating and promoting the chapel itself.

2. Understanding the heritage

2.1 Setting

Beili Du is located to the west of Pentrebach, a small village north-west of Sennybridge. The setting is deeply rural, the chapel and adjacent cottage beautifully set against rising wooded ground, approached by the narrow hedge-lined lanes which typify this part of Breconshire.

2.2 Historical Overview

The cause was established in 1790, the chapel first built in 1800 on land leased from Beili Du Farm. The rural Welsh-speaking congregation was served by student-preachers attending Trefecca College, settled pastorates not being typical of the denomination until the later C19. The chapel was rebuilt in 1868 according to the date-stone. Little is known of the original building, the 1851 Religious Census recording that there were 19 benches, 14 of which contained free seating, allowing attendances of 85 in the morning and 60 in the evening.

2.3 Architectural Overview

The rebuilding work of 1868 was remarkably conservative. The architecture of the chapel – a four-bay whitewashed lateral façade with lofted stable in-line – harks back to chapels of the 1820s and 30s. By the later C19, many Welsh chapels has been rebuilt to a gable-end plan, this allowing for more convenient internal arrangements and a little architectural embellishment. There has been speculation as to whether there was an undocumented rebuilding in the 1830s, the 1868 work comprising repair and re-fitting. The 1839 Tithe Map of Llandeilo'r-fan however indicates that the 1800 chapel was a smaller building, set parallel to the lane. This all suggests that the 1868 chapel is an entirely new building, set further back on a different orientation, allowing for some increase in size. Given the site constraints, a laterally-planned chapel was a natural response.

No architect or designer is recorded for the 1868 chapel – the model was an easy one to copy, well within the capacity of a local contractor to draw up and construct.

The chapel has a simple whitewashed rubble façade of four bays with outer doors and a pair of round-arched hornless sash windows to the centre, lighting the pulpit. To the left, sharing the same ridgeline is the former stable with boarded door; stone steps to schoolroom which has a boarded door and 9-paned window. The chapel is set behind a shallow forecourt with low walls and attractive wrought-iron railings with central gates. The un-galleried interior of 1868 has painted grained panelled pews stepped back in five steps, panelled curved set-fawr and panelled pulpit with canted angles (the pulpit is flanked by box pews). Plaster ceiling reinstated 2018.

The whole is seemingly untouched by Victorian fashion – the exterior detail is still Late Georgian, the tub-like pulpit and box pews in similar vein. Only the imitation graining is typical of the date of construction.



Figure 1 - extract from 1839 Tithe Map

2.4 Calvinistic Methodism

The history of the denomination is well described on Addoldai Cymru's website <http://www.welshchapels.org/nonconformity/>. Of particular interest here is the proximity of Trefecca College near Talgarth, founded in 1752 by the Methodist leader, Howell Harris as a Christian community. Trefecca became a highly influential college in 1842 and was instrumental in fostering the cause in rural mid-Wales, including that at Beili Du.

2.5 The Welsh language in the development of Nonconformity and the story of Beili Du

The predominance of Nonconformity in Wales is closely linked to the Welsh language, the strength of the former a major factor in the survival of the latter. However, the mid-later C19 saw a sharp decline in the use of Welsh in rural Breconshire, as a visit to any historic graveyard will show. It is recorded that the local Presbytery minutes (dating from 1837) were written in Welsh for several years and that the 1868 date-stone is inscribed in Welsh is telling.

2.6 Overview of Social and Community Value

Beili Du clearly played a key role in the local community, the chapel and vestry in general supplying Wales with much of its popular culture. Often the role of the vestry/schoolroom is overlooked, such places being the only public meeting places in rural Wales until the later C20.

2.7 How the heritage is managed today

As with many other chapels a dwindling and mostly elderly congregation struggled to maintain Beili Du. In 2009 its trustees passed its future care to the Welsh Religious Buildings Trust. The Welsh Religious Buildings Trust was brought into being in 1999 by Cadw and the Wales Council for Voluntary Action to take into care important examples of Wales' non-Anglican religious built heritage which have become redundant: in practice this means the rich heritage of Wales' Nonconformist chapels, what have been described as the "national architecture of Wales". The Trust is staffed by a part-time Trust manager and part-time Administrator and managed by a board of trustees. The Trust received money from the Listed Places of Worship Roof Grant to undertake considerable capital works to replace the roof and ceiling of Beili Du, which were completed on 12 June 2018. A 10-year Maintenance Plan has been produced.

3. Statement of Significance

3.1 Historic Significance

The establishment of the cause well before the 1811 split between the Anglicans and Methodists indicates the confidence and faith of the founding members, bolstered by the local 'power-house' at Trefecca. The rebuilding of the chapel in 1868 indicates the growth of the congregation perhaps influenced by the Great Revival of 1859 and aided by the growth of the local population.

3.2 Architectural Significance

This is outlined in 2.3 above. The lateral-fronted model was popular across Wales from the 1820s-1840s, derived from C17-C18 English models. The plan focuses on the all-important pulpit, which is placed in the centre of the long (front) wall, typical of the period. The precedents for long-walled chapels (of which Maesyronnen Radnorshire is an exceptionally early survival pre-dating 1720) are difficult to pin down.

The Reformation placed stress on the pulpit in Protestant churches, as evidenced by the Calvinist churches in late 16th century France, the Netherlands and Scotland. The post-Reformation Scottish kirks with their prominent pulpits and galleries (for example, East Cromarty church, Ross & Cromarty) provided a good model for the early chapel builders. The first generation of post-1689 chapels in the north of England, such as Rivington Unitarian chapel, Lancashire, built in 1703, owe much to Scottish precedent in their planning and simple symmetry. This evidence suggests that from an early date, the builders of Welsh chapels were aware of new

developments in chapel-planning elsewhere – and whilst some early surviving chapels are often considered rustic, they were not when compared to the typical living conditions of the day.



Figure 2 - interior of chapel

1868 is a very late date for a chapel of this design, but as shown earlier, this was probably dictated by the constraints of the site, where a more formal and fashionable gabled façade was not easy to achieve on a narrow plot on the edge of a farmstead. The present layout allowed for access to chapel and stable off the farm track, as well as access to the fields behind, providing optimum space for the building itself. Often, very late examples of laterally-planned chapels may be explained by similar pragmatism.

The interior of the chapel appears old-fashioned with barely a hint of Victorian style. This is not unusual, for it was not until the 1870s and the increasing standardisation of building specifications prepared by architects that details such as pitch-pine joinery, cast iron detail, ornate plasterwork etc became common. Until the latter date, many chapels, especially rural ones were designed by local masons and carpenters – and members of the congregation did what they could to save costs in terms of supplying or carting materials. Raising funds – difficult in areas where many chapels were being built – was typically addressed via public subscriptions, concerts, collecting tours etc. History does not record the cost of the 1868 rebuilding, but one assumes that it was a major undertaking for a small rural congregation.

Box pews and panelled set-fawrs/pulpits typify 1860s chapel interiors across Wales, but the tub-style pulpit is archaic, such usually replaced by more fashionable

'platform' pulpits by this date. The plan-form itself is quite typical of the period, the tiered ranks of pews allowing a decent view of the pulpit and avoiding the need for a gallery. Several interiors of this type are found across Powys and Ceredigion in particular.

3.3 Significance of Nonconformity

The core belief of Nonconformists, that preaching was of overwhelming importance, is reflected in their buildings. A chapel was not seen as a building, but a congregation, "a community of believers": "it is a house that had a pulpit from which to hear preaching." (Jones, 1996) Nonconformist buildings evolved from simple barn-like meeting houses to the architectural eclecticism of the mid 19th century onwards, all the while retaining the pulpit as focal point. As Nonconformity pervaded 19th century Welsh society, its chapels became ubiquitous in the Welsh urban and rural landscape, to the extent that they have been described as the "national architecture of Wales". The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales' (RCAHMW) Chapels Recording Project has logged over 6000 chapels built in Wales, almost certainly an over-provision, which reflected the pervasiveness of Nonconformity and the diversity of, and rivalry between, denominations.

3.4 Social and community significance

Rural causes such as Beili Du were the lifeblood of the area, here the focus of the village of Pentrebach, located well away from the parish church at Llandeilo'r-fan. Unfortunately, there is little recorded history of the chapel itself, but rural chapels and Sunday Schools such as these provided spiritual and educational nourishment as well as weekday social events, as well as raising members to ministry – Breconshire being fertile territory with the proximity of the Presbyterian College at Trefecca.

Nonconformity is in general decline, the number of chapels substantially reduced. Although long closed for worship, Beili Du makes a prominent visual statement within the landscape, attesting to the days when the building sustained the local community and (witness the date-stone) Welsh was still spoken.

3.5 Statutory status

Beili-Du was listed at Grade II in 1998 'for its special interest as a simple rural chapel retaining painted grained woodwork within'.

3.6 Overall Significance – summary

Beili-du is one of 500 or so listed chapels representing the cream of the 6000 or so chapels built across Wales. Beili-Du in many ways is a typical rural chapel of conservative design, very much in the local vernacular tradition. In other respects, the chapel is of impressive scale for a small congregation in rural Breconshire, a building distinctly designed as a meeting house, with the attendant amenities of stabling and schoolroom.

Inevitably as chapels continue to close across Wales, their historic interiors (including those of listed chapels) will be nearly all altered in association with conversion. Whilst their place in the landscape may be preserved, the loss of interiors – essentially auditoriums of high-quality joinery focussed on the all-important pulpit – result in a loss of architectural integrity and character.

Unaltered interiors such as Beili Du are becoming increasingly rare survivals. The chapel is in the care of a charitable trust dedicated to preserving it 'as found' for the benefit of posterity and to finding a sensitive use for the stable/schoolroom in association with greater community involvement with the chapel as a whole, in order to give opportunities for people to learn about its heritage and Welsh Nonconformity.

4. Condition and Capacity for Change

Beili Du is generally in good condition. Window repairs and lime-washing was followed by re-roofing (together with a new ceiling) and replacement of rainwater goods, together with a new drainage system in 2018. It is envisaged that future works to the chapel itself will be largely confined to minor joinery repairs and redecoration. Given the completeness of the interior, capacity for change here is limited, any change requiring careful consideration within the context of the Conservation Principles.

The stable/schoolroom offers capacity for change, being simple open spaces, currently disused. The critical features of the schoolroom include the charmingly rustic wall-seating and the fireplace, currently boarded over.



Figure 3 - interior of schoolroom

The stable itself is a simple space, any fittings long removed. The chief features of importance are the pitched stone floor, beamed ceiling and boarded door.



Figure 4 - interior of stable

4.3 Conservation Issues

The Trust was established by Cadw and the WCVA to take into care examples of redundant Nonconformist buildings which are of exceptional architectural and/or historical significance. It is therefore incumbent upon the Trust to afford the greatest respect to the integrity of the building fabric, and its fixtures and fittings. There shall always be a presumption in favour of retaining the building “as found” and of resisting proposals for alterations, especially removal of original fabric, fixtures and fittings. There will also be a presumption in favour of retaining more recent changes to a building which illustrate its altered use, rather than endeavouring to “restoring” a building to an earlier presumed condition.

Nonetheless, Addoldai Cymru is realistic in recognising that some managed change to a building may be necessary in order to realise its potential after-use and to assure its future. The stable and schoolroom appear to offer potential for reuse whilst retaining the exterior unaltered, as well as the simple internal detail.

Addoldai Cymru endorses Cadw’s *Conservation Principles* (2011) and will seek to closely follow such in the preparation of a Conservation Management Plan.

4.4 Conservation and Management Aims

Whilst planning and undertaking any scheme/proposals/project at Beili Du the Trust will consider the following:

4.4.1 Conservation

The Trust will endeavour to pursue good conservation practice, ensuring that only people with appropriate skills will work on the historic building and artefacts. The Trust will retain the maximum original historic fabric, fixtures and fittings, and reinstate original details and finishes to reinforce the unity of the original architectural design. Traditional materials and craft techniques will be employed, utilising locally sourced materials wherever possible. External specialists and advisors will be consulted when necessary and guidance will be sought from Cadw and the local authority.

4.4.2 New Work

New work will be designed to complement the historic fabric sensitively and sympathetically. Its design will be environmentally sustainable. New services in the historic fabric will be incorporated discreetly.

4.4.3 Access

Building improvements will reflect the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act whilst being sensitive to the significance of historic fabric.

4.5 Effects on the Environment

In relation to sustainable development, developing Beili Du will contribute to enhancing community identity, and the conservation, interpretation and presentation can be a source of pride and well-being. The on-going use and raised profile of Bethania will contribute to community cohesion and social capital, through bringing people together for a shared purpose.

There are environmental gains to be achieved through the maintenance and conservation of heritage building stock. These buildings represent a major investment in natural and human resources. Maintenance and conservation of the built heritage drastically reduces or eliminates demolition and new construction waste, and conserves the embodied energy in the existing buildings. Currently the building has no energy saving mechanisms, energy efficiency or environmentally sustainable energy generation. Any project will be designed to have a minimal impact on the environment and aims to follow these principles.

4.5.1 Energy

Beili Du currently has no thermal insulation or heating system. For the intermittent use of the chapel, this is considered acceptable. The space is well ventilated and the walls able to 'breathe' due to the presence of lime pointing, plaster and limewash.

The abundant ventilation is considered critical in keeping issues such as dry rot at bay, which thrives in moist airless conditions. Portable heaters are considered acceptable for the anticipated occasional use of the chapels space for services etc.

In terms of the stable/schoolroom, re-use is likely to require the provision of heating, lighting and basic amenities. It is anticipated that energy efficiency will be achieved to at least that required by Building Regulations using sustainable materials and systems including natural insulation and energy efficient equipment and fittings.

4.5.2 Water

Aerated taps and other water-saving fittings, grey water systems and flow-reducing valves on pipework will be installed where appropriate.

4.5.3 Building materials/construction waste

Traditional products and building materials and those with a low embodied energy will be used and sourced locally wherever possible. Paints, varnishes and other finishes which are natural oil or water-based and not petro-chemical or solvent based will be used. Material from the existing building will be re-used where possible. 10% of the materials' value will come from recycled content. The building contractor and sub-contractors will be required to adopt an environmentally responsible site waste management plan. The retention of unimpeded access and avoidance of nuisance to the neighbouring property is paramount and will require consideration within any waste management plan.

4.5.4 Soil, timber and biodiversity

No peat to be used. All timber to come from proven legal and sustainable resources. Ecological appraisal to be carried out at design stage to assess impact on biodiversity.

APPENDIX A – LIST DESCRIPTION

Entry Name: Bilidu Calvinistic Methodist Chapel including forecourt wall and railings.

Listing Date: 17 February 1998

Last Amended: 28 October 2005

Grade: II

Source: Cadw

Source ID: 19375

Building Class: Religious, Ritual and Funerary

Location: In the village of Pentre-bach 4km N of Sennybridge. On rising ground to W of village centre.

County: Powys

Town: Brecon

Community: Maescar (Maes-car)

Community: Maescar

Locality: Pentre-bach

Traditional County: Brecknockshire

History

Calvinistic Methodist chapel of 1800, rebuilt in 1868. The building retains the long-wall facade of the chapels of the early C19, though may be 1868, with the small stable and vestry added. Chapel is now in the care of the Welsh Historic Religious Buildings Trust.

Exterior

Chapel, whitewashed rubble stone with slate flat-eaved roof overhanging at right end gable. The roof covers the chapel and a small stable with loft over to left. Facade has two big centre arched windows with stone sills, stone voussoirs and small-paned glazing with radiating bars in heads. A round-headed plaque between reads: 'Bilidu Capel Methodistiaidd Calfinaidd Adeiladwd 1800 Ail Adeiladwd 1868'. Outer doors have tall arched heads with stone voussoirs and blank tympana. The doors are 4-panel. Right end wall has similar arched window with radiating glazing bars in head and stone voussoirs. Rear has two cambered headed 12-pane hornless sashes with stone sills.

To left of chapel are outside stone steps to a boarded loft door with 9-pane hopper window to left. Beyond steps is a ground floor doorway with stone voussoirs to cambered head and board door.

Attached to front wall are low rubble curving walls with iron railings with spearhead finials and centre double gates with dog-bars.

Interior

Simple interior without galleries. Modern ceiling. Painted grained matching woodwork throughout: panelled box pews stepped back in five steps, with ramped ends and divisions; panelled curved great seat, panelled pulpit with plain steps up on right, the pulpit panelled with canted angles and moulded cornice, flanked by box pew each side facing forward with ramped ends.

Reasons for Listing

Included for its special historic interest as a simple rural chapel retaining painted grained woodwork within.