



CWM DULAIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY CWMDEITHAS HANES CWM DULAIS

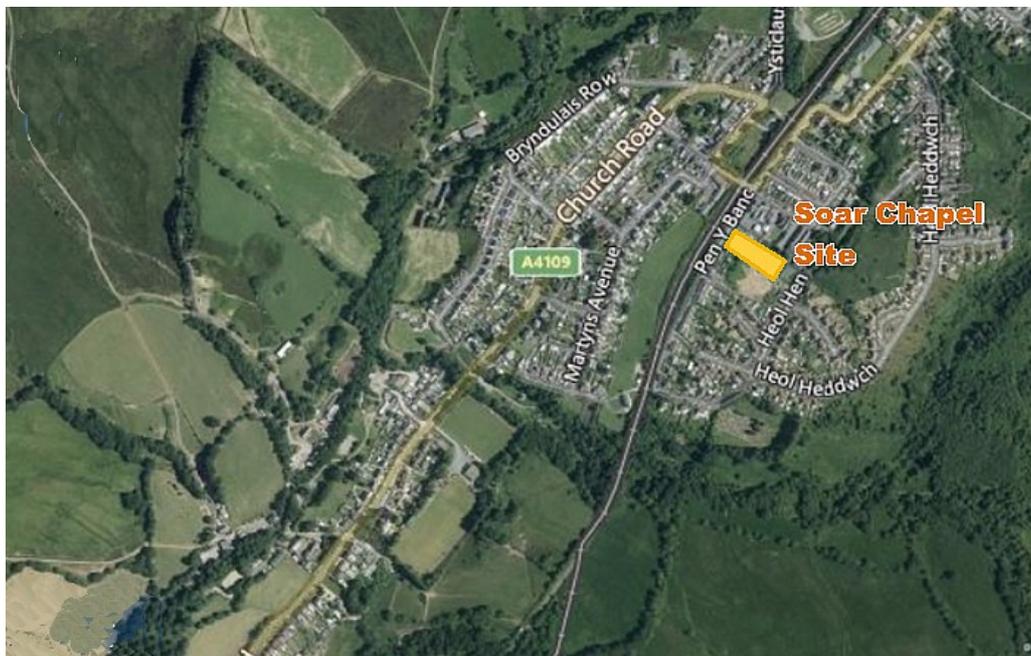
Newsletter - Cylchlythyr

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SOAR CHAPEL SEVEN SISTERS – A Story by Eifion Williams



At one time Seven Sisters had seven Christian denominations, namely, Baptist Welsh and English, The Church in Wales, Independent (Congregationalist), Methodist, Plymouth Brethren and The Salvation Army; each had its own building designed for Christian worship; now only one is in use and another still standing but awaiting demolition. This is sad as our forefathers worked hard to establish places of worship.



Initially the Dulais Valley had two chapels, both belonging to Neath Abbey, one at Creunant - the present Creunant Church and the other at Coelbren, this is still called Capel Coelbren.

Initially, the Independence movement began in Blaendulais which was the name given to a

collection of local farms. (Following the opening of the pit, its name, Seven Sisters, was adopted as the village name.) At that time, the farmers themselves decided that their children should have a place where they could receive some form of education. This was in 1833. It came to their attention that Mr Noah Davies who owned Ynysdawli Farm had built a new cowshed nearer to the farmhouse and that the old one (in Cwm Nant hir, built in 1782) had been empty for three years. His fellow farmers approached him to secure the use of the old building and he agreed.

After many months of hard work the old cow shed which had only one window and a leaky thatched roof was transformed. The old window was replaced with three glass windows, a fireplace was built in the pine end, and the thatch restored. In addition, a big cauldron was set on three large stones in the middle of the floor, which was made of lime and clay, to warm the pupils during the winter months because it was then when they would be taught for three months that is when work was slack on the farms. They would be expected to help out during the other months.

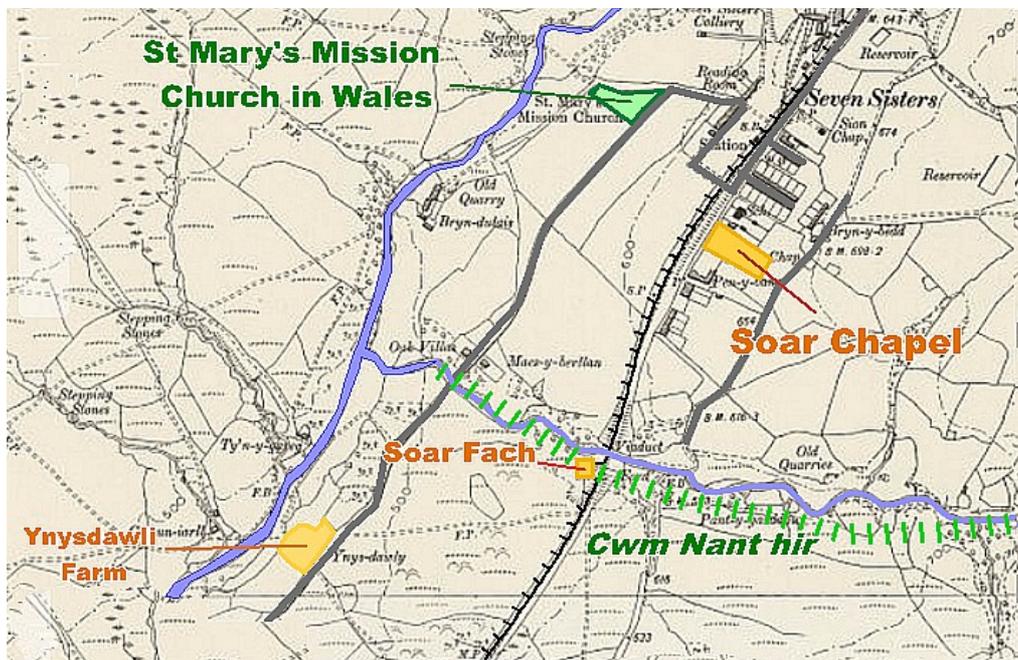
The school was ready by 1834 and the first tutor was a John Davies (Jac y Sant / Jack the Saint) as he was called who hailed from the upper reaches of the Swansea Valley. He taught at the school for three months every year for four years until 1838. He was followed by another Swansea Valley man who kept school for another two years. He was followed by John Morgan Waun Iarll a local man who taught until 1848; when Griffith John (more famously remembered as a missionary in China) filled the vacancy for three months in 1844. This fact alone should be enough for the school to be remembered in the history of Ysgol fach, Cwm Nant hir. An anecdote, relating to Griffith John's three months at the school, is told by Ianto'r Glyn, a local poet. The landowners were hunting hares and rabbits near the school and in their company was the Vicar of Cadoxton. When he saw children playing around the school, he called to his fellow hunters. Perhaps thinking of Griffith Jones' Circulating Schools - circa 1730 - when in six years, 200,000 learned to read – with children teaching children, he walked into the school and was surprised and astonished to see a young man sitting there – the teacher – and more surprised still to learn that the young man (Griffith John) could read and write in five languages. He was so taken aback that he ran out of the school to tell the whole company.

When Griffith John's term ended, John Morgan Waun Iarll returned for a further three years until the school was forced to close owing to a cholera 'outbreak' and it remained closed for about three years. John Davies (Jac y Sant) returned in 1852 for two years followed by Joseph Williams of Ystalyfera, again three months a year until 1800 in which year the inhabitants of Blaendulais also used the school to hold prayer meetings. Before this, the practice was to hold their meeting at each other's farms. Dafydd Lewis was the next tutor

In 1865 the school was taken over to be used as a blacksmith's shop by the men working on the building of the Neath and Brecon Railway which would run from Neath to Brecon (as the name implies). The smithy was there for the next fifteen months. Unfortunately, through neglect and carelessness a great deal of damage was done to the building. Who would take the responsibility for its repair?

A committee was formed and through hard work and dedication the cowshed/school was refurbished; once more to be a schoolroom with the added use for weekday and Sunday prayer meetings. More and more attended the Sunday meetings – it saved the walk to Godre'r Rhos, Creunant to attend a religious service. With so many attending the schoolroom meeting; it was decided that the schoolroom would become a " branch chapel " to Godre'r Rhos. It was also felt that the building was not suitable to be a chapel. – more renovation work was done, for instance, floor boards were laid to cover the clay and lime floor, a ceiling was built to hide the thatch and new windows were fitted as well as a new door. Eventually with the the blessing of Godre'r Rhos, Soar Fach was born – an independent chapel. It flourished and many different activities took place including a successful choir formed from the members; it competed successfully in eisteddfodau in Ystradgynlais, Ystalyfera, Glynneath, Abercraf, Godre'r Rhos and Onllwyn.

In 1875 Cwm Nant hir was flooded. The railwaymen had built a bank to carry the rails with a culvert for the brook. An eye witness reported seeing a holly tree with its roots being carried by the waters of the brook which had swollen rapidly owing to a 'cloudburst'. This lodged itself at the entrance of the culvert/ tunnel causing water to build up behind the bank; eventually the bank broke and the waters rushed down the valley leaving damage in its wake. Amazingly, part of the bank held and Soar Fach was saved. The chapel members called it a miracle. The flood did cause damage to farms in Cwm Nant hir and in the Dulais Valley but that's another story.



Railway officials were soon on the scene to see the rails hanging in mid air but a train was saved from driving into the flooded valley by the quick action of the eye witness who alerted the train driver to the danger!

The following Sunday a special train ran from Neath carrying engineers and shareholders who had come to see the damage. Included in their ranks was Mr Bevan the colliery owner. On arrival, they saw that a service was being held in Soar Fach as usual. Mr Bevan joined the congregation

remaining till the end of the service; afterwards he talked to the deacons and suggested that Soar Fach was now too small and that a bigger building was needed. He knew a company, a galvanised metal firm, in Scotland which would build a bigger chapel and he would give land nearer to the rapidly expanding village which was calling out for a place of worship. He also promised to help the chapel in any way possible – a promise that he kept. So a new chapel was built of galvanised iron – Y Capel Haearn – the Iron Chapel. Keeping the name Soar, it was opened in 1778.

By the turn of the nineteenth century when the population of Blaendulais (Seven Sisters) was increased by families accompanying their men folk coming to work in the Seven Sisters Pit, the Capel Haearn was again deemed too small for the congregation. A decision was taken to build a bigger chapel and the foundation stone was laid in 1900.



Chapel members and numbers flourished. The annual Gymanfa Ganu regularly required benches to be placed in the aisles to accommodate the congregation. With the passing years, membership dwindled and the fabric of the building was deteriorating: the last services were held in 2014 and the chapel was demolished in 2015.

Unfortunately the contractor responsible for the demolition left the site in a terrible condition, showing no respect for the departed buried in the chapel graveyard.

Capel Haearn is still a place of worship in the nearby village of Cilfriw.

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Photographs by I. Fearnside