

A SHORT HISTORY OF DUBLIN'S WELSH CHURCH, 1831 - 1939 (by Howell Evans)

The foundation stone of the Custom House was laid by Lord Beresford to Gandon's design in 1781.

When completed in 1838 another foundation stone was laid nearby in Talbot Street, at this time a very rundown district. The founding of the first Welsh Church in Ireland.

Its original intention was not for the Welsh in Dublin, but mainly for the Welsh visiting the city.

At this time sailing ships came to Dublin from most of the Welsh ports, bringing coal and steel from South Wales, and slates and building materials from North Wales, and returning with flour, butter, potatoes, cattle etc.

This was the time of Dublin's expansion, when its famous squares were built, together with the adjoining Pembroke estates out to Ballsbridge and Donnybrook, followed by great houses all over the county.

Not only were there many Welsh sailors always in port, but there were many who were stranded as a result of shipwreck.

Ships were constantly wrecked on the east and south-east coasts and stranded sailors were numerous in Cork, Waterford, Wexford and Dublin.

In those days it was every man for himself as there were no unions or societies with social inclinations.

But due to the religious revival taking place in Wales at this time men's attitudes were changing and an outlook of caring and responsibility developed, so that hospitals, schools, colleges and missionary activities grew up.

There were many sea captains who really cared for their crews and gave heed to their welfare at the various ports.

Notably among such captains were Israel Matthews of Holyhead, John Williams of Chester and William Evans of Aberdaugleddau, who when in port in Dublin went from ship to ship and pub to pub, inviting sailors to a sing-song and prayer meeting on their ships.

Welsh people living in the city heard of these meetings and joined in. The majority of these city people would have been in the building trades, some were craftsmen in silver and leather.

These meetings became very popular, so that the need for a regular meeting house was urgent, and before long they got help from the Dutch Lutherans who had a chapel in Poolbeg Street - a prominent city street.

The Welsh were given use of the hall on condition that the collections went to the Dutch.

In 1831 the Presbyterian Church on Ormond Quay invited as temporary minister Dr Wm. Roberts of Anglesey and New York. He stayed for a year and gave much of his time to the welfare of the Welsh sailors.

Another man who came here to give his support to the effort was Thomas Foulkes Roberts of Bodedern, Anglesey.

The churches in North and South Wales got interested in the work and gave financial aid - a collection was made in Aberystwyth which amounted to £4.

It was reported that every Sunday in Cork over 100 Welsh sailors wandered about the city pubs; indeed they had no inclination towards local churches as most of them did not understand English.

Londonderry had a similar problem, but nine ships, their crews and families were the average attendance to a service in Welsh held on one of the ships in port.

The arrangement in Poolbeg Street did not last very long, because the money on the plate was rather small, and unfortunately Daniel O'Connell had his Sunday meetings at the same time; so that they had to revert once again to a service on the ships. The support was so enthusiastic that they had 2 services each Sunday.

In 1832 Captain Evan Lloyd wrote to the Methodist Monthly Journal "Y Drosorfa" that there was a great need by Welsh sailors and by the Welsh residents in Dublin for a resident pastor.

The Church in Wales felt responsible and accepted the challenge by sending to Dublin Rev. Robert Williams of Chester. He was popular and ministered here for 9 years. He was successful in gaining once again the favour of the Dutch Lutherans at an annual rent of £12 and to keep the Sunday collections.

Seemingly, everyone supported Rev. Williams, and 2 services were held each Sunday together with a weekly prayer meeting.

This success was appreciated by the Church in Wales, so they decided to support the cause. The sum of approximately £26. was collected and sent to Dublin.

This Robert Williams was a very enthusiastic minister and evangelist. Not only did he faithfully serve the Welsh sailors and residents, but he travelled all over Ireland with the Gospel Message, learning Irish so as to reach the people. Later in 1836 he succeeded in bringing over 2 young men to learn Irish and to support his work. Then he sent them to Tuam and Galway to become fluent in the Irish language.

At this time about 2 1/2 million people spoke Irish and only had a few words of English, out of 8 million population.

In order to educate the poor the Bible was translated into Irish, and at the same time David Jones of Carmarthen made a translation of the Bible into the Breton language.

Robert Williams in 1835 invited his friend John Parry of Chester to Dublin to preach and talk to the Welsh. He was well received and on one Sunday he records that 22 people received Holy Communion.

Despite all the political disturbances in the city the services were well maintained, although Robert

Williams needed 2 policemen to take him safely through the crowds.

Poolbeg street area appears to have been a noisy and troublesome spot, so it became necessary to seek a quieter and safer place.

After several moves the Church found a place in Lower Gardiner Street, at that time a good residential area.

Robert Williams continued to gather the sailors to his new fold, in addition many of the 300 Welsh soldiers who were billeted in the city barracks attended. his weekly services.

These later successes were not overlooked by the Welsh Church Societies in Wales, so that on St David's Day 1838 the foundation stone of the little Welsh Church in Talbot Street was laid.

The Ground Rent was £10 per annum for 999 years. The founders were David Elias,. Pentraeth; Robert Hughes, Gaerwen; Dwen Hughes, Edw Edwards, John Roberts, Richard Jones and Wm Thomas, all of Holyhead.

The building was completed by November 1838, and the opening service was at 10 a.m.; sermon by Cadwaladr Williams, Penceint. At noon there was an English Service led by Rev WH Cooper, Dublin. Also, a Temperance Service was held on the Monday by 2 clergymen from Holyhead. Another Service followed during the week. The collection on the Sunday was £24. The Landlord gave £15 towards the £110 which had been collected by the Dublin Welsh.

The Church was named "Bethel", being the favourite name for sailors' churches, and it measured 40' x 27', built of brick, with corner stones of cut granite; the total cost being £500. The seating was for 300.

The congregation was divided into 2 parts. On one side were pews for ladies which had doors, whilst on the other side were the men's pews, without door.

The mens' pews had spittoons for the sailors.

The seating was for 300.

The pulpit was so high that those in the front seats got stiff necks looking up.

On the opening day in November 1838 there were 18 registered city members being:

Robert Williams, the missioner and his wife Thomas Humphreys and his wife

Richard Jones, Dawson Street

David Thomas

Mrs McCarthey

Elizabeth Jones, Frederick Street

Ann Evans, The Hotel

Elizabeth Williams, Fitzwilliam Place Hannah Thomas

Elizabeth Evans, Dominick Street

Catherine Dwen

Mary Hughes, Harcourt Street

Elizabeth Williams, Hotel
Mary Price
Ellen Hughes, Club House
Phoebe Lewis.

There was plenty of noise in Talbot Street on Sunday mornings. The local pipe and drum bands met nearby and tuned up near the Church with deafening results in later years passing trams added to the noise. The bands and drummers paraded here until the late 30's. The noise lasted about 15 minutes resulting in competition between the pipers and preacher.

A caretaker's house was added in 1839. A Scots lady, Mrs Campbell, was installed, she also looked after the visiting minister during Sunday for 1/6d.

Mr Thomas Humphreys acted as Church Treasurer. He recorded that 3 pence per month per member was collected towards the Communion Wine.

In later years a sum of "bad money" was found in the Treasurer's Drawer. These coins dated from James 11 about 1700, and were made of brass. 16 ozs of this coin was valued at 2 pence.

In 1840 the North Wales Churches contributed towards the church debt as follows:

Anglesey	£42. 7.6	
Denbigh	15.15.6	
United Churches	51. 0.0	
Holyhead	5. 0.0	
Aberteifi	14. 0.0	
Aberystwyth	11. 7.6	
Camarthen	20. 0.0	
Morgannwy	15. 0.0	
Llandeilo	5. 0.0	
Brecon	15. 7.6.	£194.18.0

In 1842 at the Caernarfon Methodist Session it was felt that the debt on the Dublin Church should be the responsibility of the sailors. But they replied that they all had their own homes and churches in Wales to maintain and support.

Although there was extensive and rapid building in Ireland after the '79 rebellion and hundreds of ships brought in the materials, the sailors regarded themselves as visitors to the ports, and thought the church was only a temporary effort and would diminish after the towns were rebuilt.

In 1844 two sea captains reviewed the year's achievements. Although the church was full on this day the Sunday collections brought in only 10/4d. £7 was collected towards the painting of the Church. Sunday School was still maintained, together with the 2 regular a.m. and p.m. services.

The North Wales interest in the Church was continued, and in order to provide further help a preaching festival was arranged; the invited preachers being Rev. Wm Charles, Gwahchmai; Rev. Joseph Williams, Liverpool; and John Jones of Wrexham.

This event was so successful that further preachers came. Usually 2- 3 dozen sailors came in the morning and about 50 in the evening.

The first child to be baptized was the son of Mr and Mrs T Humphreys in 1839.

After nine years the Rev. Robert Williams decided to return to Chester. While here he had been the representative of the British and Foreign Sailors Society. He died in 1858 after a stroke while preaching at Llandegla.

Ireland was living through a period of great change and its effect was to last many years. The great hunger devastated the people and the land. One million emigrated; one million died. People attacked any place where food was stored. Houses and shops were looted. Those who could, procured arms for self protection. Starvation was effecting everyone.

The Quakers were concerned to the extent that they sent 2 members from England to collect the facts and in part of their report in 1847-8 they said:

"At Carrick on Shannon 100 people waited for 30 vacancies. Mothers imploring for their starving children who were like skeletons, their features sharpened with hunger and their limbs wasted, so that there was little left but bones."

A well-known judge in Cork, Mr Nicholas Cummins, visited Skibereen and reported:

"Being aware that I should have to witness scenes of frightful hunger, I provided myself with as much bread as 5 men could carry, and on reaching the spot was surprised to find the wretched hamlet apparently deserted. I entered some of the hovels to ascertain the cause, and the scenes which presented themselves were such as no pen or tongue can convey the slightest idea of. In the first house, six famished and ghostly skeletons, too all appearances dead, where huddled together in a corner on some filthy rags, their sole covering what seemed a ragged horsecloth, their wretched legs hanging naked above the knees. Other houses contained frozen bodies."

Between 1846 and 1849 were the most difficult years in Ireland's history. Continued battles over landlords repossessing the land; eviction of the poor tenants who could not pay the increased rents.

Thousands were forced to leave the land; and the black plague spread over Munster where 48 doctors died literally at their job.

Dysentery spread overall with not a bed to spare in any hospital. In Dublin beds were put into cellars and even tents were erected for the sick.

Through all these perilous days the Welsh Church continues and in 1849 it had 20 members plus the visiting sailors.

Several ministers came over here during these years although only staying a few months. The Churches in Anglesea, by subscriptions, maintained the Dublin Church, for instance in 1855 they contributed £300.

To show you the value of money in those days, here is the balance spent for 1846:

Debt from 1845	9.2
Costs for sick brother	17.0
Minister's Services	8. 0.0
Travel	1.11.0
Caretaker's Costs	4.0.0
Furniture ex Wales	3.0.0
Minister's Salary	45.0.0
Postages	2.6
Cash in Hand	3.0.3

In 1855 the average attendance on Sunday was 50 and Sunday School restarted. In Wales each denomination stayed in its own Church, but here was no discrimination - all worshipped together.

During these years some visiting Welsh ministers came for the day only and the steamers from Liverpool and Holyhead had a special low fare for them..

In the early 19th century life at sea was extremely precarious. For instance in 1857 1,153 ships were lost around the British Isles alone - 12 out of every 17 sailors were lost annually. The ships were small and lighthouses and lifeboats were scarce indeed.

These hazards produced sailors who by and large were of a religious and often superstitious nature. But at the same time those were also the days of the religious revivals from which grew societies to aid the impoverished and unfortunate people at home and abroad. One of these was the Sailors' Society.

Captain Evan Lloyd of Barmouth was shipwrecked off the Irish coast and fortunately rescued by an Irishman. In thankfulness for his good fortune he became a preacher and came to Dublin in 1857 as the missioner of the Sailors' Society.

The Society had a ship called the "Ark" which visited all the ports in these islands helping sailors with their problems and providing a Christian service. Where ships' captains were Christians they hoisted the "Bethel" flag on the mast, made of blue bunting 9' x 6' with the letters Bethel in white; the star of hope in one corner and the dove of peace in the other. Over 200 such flags were raised in ports on Sundays.

Capt. Lloyd became a popular preacher, commencing his services at Kingstown when King George IV arrived there in 1857.

The Chester and Holyhead Railway Co. gave him cheap fares and also allowed the use of the Mail Boat as a Church - services in Welsh by Capt Lloyd, and in English by the local Church of Ireland minister. After paying the expenses involved, the balance was passed on to the Dublin Welsh Church.

Capt. Lloyd was also a great favourite with the Dublin Non Conformist Churches. Someone asked Dr. Stanford, Rector of St Thomas "who is this Capt. Lloyd" and he replied '(!he father of all the Welsh girls in Dublin".

At this time the little Welsh Church was packed to the doors at all services. The Shipping Company had extended and its ships now came to the North Wall from Holyhead each day and their crews

were mostly Welshmen.

A well known preacher Rev. Owen Jones, Llandudno came to preach for a month, but it was found the Church was too small to contain the crowd - membership had now risen to 77.

There were great enthusiastic singing sessions after the Sunday evening service. It was the same in Hamburg or Gibraltar where there were always Sunday singing sessions when the Welsh were in port.

Through the various Church magazines in Wales young men were urged to come to Dublin for good education and for the opportunity to serve their fellow Welsh men and women, quoting such attractive terms as:- Digs for the week 3/-; School for the term 5/-; Food 6/-. It was said one could easily live on 10/- a week much cheaper than anywhere in England. Thus many medical students came here as there was no such suitable school in Liverpool or in Wales. Then for theological students there was the Presbyterian College on Ormond Quay.

In 1870 the usual 3 services continued each Sunday, attended by approximately 150 sailors, and 80 city members also a small service was held in Kingstown.

The Church members arranged tea parties and Sales of Work to support the Church's finances.

During the troubled times of Parnell many Protestant Churches were in danger from the mobs, and the little Welsh Church had its quota of broken windows, as it was unfortunately sited in a noisy spot which had its pipe bands which played outside the door. The Methodist people from Holyhead chose a new site, but they couldn't obtain permission from the landowners to build an alternative Church thereon.

It was known that one of the sailors from Holyhead always went to the service with a loaded revolver in his pocket.

When the railway line at Amiens Street was built a massive clearance of poor properties took place and Talbot Street was rebuilt and so the area became respectable.

Now onto 1885 when a new minister arrived - Rev. John Owen, who was a real enthusiast, who regarded Ireland, and Dublin in particular, as a strange foreign country. This man really cared for his flock of migratory sailors and the local residents. He kept close record of his work, for instance during 3 years he preached 500 sermons and each one was different, which shows how genuine he was. His diary read as follows:

1887	Visits to ships 596.	To Hospitals 71.	To Homes 128
1888	487	144	168
1889	561	77	142

Sick people in Anglesea who needed hospital treatment always came to the Adelaide Hospital, as it was the nearest, and the Churches made an annual collection for it.

John Owen mentioned a lady member who left his Church to marry an Irishman, who when she was dying sent for John Owen as she wanted to die in Welsh.

The next and last minister of the Welsh Church was the Rev. John Lewis, known to the sailors as 'Sullivan'. He took office in 1894, when the Church was renovated, so that an extension was added and new furniture installed. Members provided new hymn books, copper collection pans (like bed warmers). A Miss Violet Watson of 25 Fitzwilliam Place, presented a large Bible for the pulpit, and a Miss Mary Jones gave linen. Gifts of money came from many city Churches, and also from a nearby Catholic Church. So John Lewis got off to a clean start.

He was a tall bearded active man, always on the trot in the city. Everyone got to know him and saluted him, as he wore a continental flat priest's hat.

He came from Llanddona, Anglesea, and was a schoolmaster near Machyntheil. Then followed a time with the Manchester Guardian. He had a son who became a minister at Colwyn Bay - his only daughter married a Baptist Minister. He was a poet and had many books to his credit. During the 1922 Rebellion he was around the city helping unfortunates, and came to no harm as everyone knew him as the Welsh Bishop. His sermons were very long winded and often ended up with the "hwyl". He was very anti-Sweepstake.

Now the Dublin Ports and Dock Board had a Welsh Consulting Engineer, who married into the Purser family, and he added that name to his, becoming Sir John Purser Griffith, and lived at Rathmines Castle. Being a Moravian and exceedingly charitable he donated £50 each year to the Welsh Church from 1901 -1938. He also purchased a house for the Minister on Home Farm Road. Later he purchased War Bonds for the St David's Society, the interest of which though now trivial we still receive.

Sir John was made a freeman of the City of Dublin in 1936.

Another eminent person who took an interest in the Church was the late Ernest Blythe. In 1951 he said, "When I joined the Gaelic League in 1905, I began to learn Irish. Then one of my fellow members told me almost with bated breath, that the Welsh Community in Dublin had their own Church, in which the services were conducted entirely in Welsh".

"I went there one Sunday morning to revel in a language closely related to Irish but had held its ground much longer than ours".

"That little community maintaining its individuality in a foreign city made a profound impression on me, and aroused in me an interest in Wales which I never lost. Because of that I spent short holidays in Wales every Easter, and on each occasion improved my Welsh".

Ernest Blythe was a constant visitor to the Church, and eventually became a Welsh pupil of Rev. John Lewis.

Continuing he added:- "For a couple of years Mr Lewis generously sacrificed a part of an evening every week to help a stranger whose only claim on him was that he was interested in Wales, her language and literature."

"Besides teaching me the amount of Welsh I wanted - enough to enable me to get the gist of a speech or a sermon, Mr Lewis told me a great deal about the lives of the writers, politicians, and other personalities in Wales, and much that interested me in Church organisation and methods, so unlike anything we have in Ireland."

"I would like to pay tribute to Mr Lewis for his enthusiasm for Wales and her literature".

Another visitor to the Church was Miss Dora Herbert Jones, doing secretarial work for Lord Wimborne at the Vice Regal Lodge 1917 -18. Lord Wimborne's Secretary was Mr Selwyn Davies and he was a constant visitor also.

Miss Beta Jones of Pwllheli was Lady Wimborne's private Secretay and she always came to the Church during the family's stay in the Phoenix Park.

The "Carl Rosa Opera Company" was annually at the Gaiety Theatre, and as its members were almost all Welsh they came to the Church, and as you can imagine the singing was superb, and they usually gave The Dublin Welsh Society a private concert in Robert Robert's Cafe before returning.

Professor John Lloyd-Jones was head of Welsh Studies at UCD from 1910 - 1955. Known all over Wales for his scholarship, he adjudicated regularly at the National Eisteddfod. His devotion to the Welsh Church kept the community together until commencement of World War II in 1939, when the membership had dwindled to but a few and visiting clergy were reluctant to come for fear of submarines.

Many of the old members by this time had passed away - there was Mr and Mrs DJ Jones who had a tailoring business in Pearse Street; a Mr Ritchie, a well known builder; Alfred Jones, manager of Robert Roberts *Cafe*, known as the Welsh Consul; then William and Jane Lewis, brother and sister, who owned the Northumberland Hotel later to become Liberty Hall; also WS Llewellyn, manager at Switzers.

Sadly the Welsh community dwindled away as a result of the war, so by 1944 it was decided to sell the Church and house, but in the meantime it was rented out to a small religious community. The books, communion vessels and a few remaining articles were given to some of the small Churches in Anglesey.

During the late 1940s Evan Dwen Williams of BBC Radio Wales came to Dublin and made a recording of the Church's history given by my parents, myself and other remaining Welsh residents of Dublin. I remember that the recording took place at the house of Professor John Lloyd-Jones. In addition the last remaining photograph of the Church appeared in the Radio Times - Welsh edition.

Looking back I can appreciate that had there been no Welsh Church I would have lost my language and Welsh interest.

The Church became "Griffith Shoe Stores" and customers sat on the Church Seats while trying on shoes. Nowadays it is a Billiard Saloon.

Until 1980 Mrs Freda Lloyd-Jones and myself were the 2 surviving members of the church.

Sadly, this lady passed away in May 1980.

Howell Evans
February 1981