

ANGLICAN CHURCHES OF BLAENAVON

ST PETER'S CHURCH

Capel Newydd

Prior to the establishment of the ironworks in 1789, Blaenavon was a sparsely populated, Welsh-speaking, agricultural community. The spiritual needs of the local farmers were catered for by a small, medieval chapel-of-ease, known as Capel Newydd (New Chapel), located in the parish of Llanover. In the late eighteenth century, however, the sleepy agricultural economy of Blaenavon was rapidly being replaced by dynamic industry and the population of the area soared. Capel Newydd could not accommodate the increased number of adherents and was also situated at an inconvenient distance from the ironworks.



It soon became apparent to the ironmasters, Thomas Hill of Dennis and Samuel Hopkins of Blaenavon, that the industrial community needed a permanent Anglican church near the ironworks, suitable for an ever-growing population. In 1804, the devout ironmasters, at their own cost, built a new place of worship and donated it to the Established Church of England. The church was dedicated to Saint Peter and was consecrated in June 1805.



The Reverend James Jenkins

A farm, near Garn yr Erw, later known as 'Y Persondy', was donated to the church by the Blaenavon Company and the rent received from the tenant farmer was used to secure the £20 annual salary of the curate. The first curate-in-charge of St. Peter's Church was the Reverend James Jenkins, who served the town for thirty-seven years between 1805 and 1841. The Reverend Jenkins was a very popular and influential member of the Blaenavon community; he married the daughter of John Griffiths, a senior Blaenavon Company official, and was the father-in-law of the ironmaster, Robert Wheeley. When the Reverend Jenkins left Blaenavon in 1841, his parishioners presented him with a silver ornament, valued at eighty guineas as a token of their great esteem.

The Reverend John Jones

Jenkins' successor, the Reverend John Jones, was also an extremely popular minister, renowned for his oratorical skills. The Reverend Jones, who was held in high regard by Anglicans and nonconformists alike, was a proponent of adult education in Blaenavon and held classes for those wishing to better themselves. The Blaenavon historian, Lewis Browning, who attended church services led by John Jones, noted that the cleric was 'a remarkable man in many respects; he was beloved of all because he loved all'.

It was during Jones' incumbency that an Order-in-Council, passed in August 1860, created the Ecclesiastical Parish of Blaenavon with Capel Newydd. Land from the parishes of Llanover, Llanfoist, Llanwenarth and Trevethin was given to the new parish; land from the parish of Aberystroth was added in 1885. The Reverend Jones was subsequently elevated to the post of vicar, a position he held until his death in 1885.



Architectural Features

St. Peter's Church was built in the gothic revival style and a number of its features represent the industrial community which it served. A cast iron baptismal font was made for use by the church and, in later years, iron pillars were installed to support the wooden gallery in the church interior. Local iron was also used for the door sills and the tomb covers of prominent Blaenavon citizens, such as the ironmaster Samuel Hopkins, who died in 1815, and the Blaenavon Company Mineral Agent, Thomas Deakin, who died in 1851.

Recent Years

St. Peter's Church has remained as Blaenavon's leading Anglican place of worship until the present day and has played a significant role in the Blaenavon community. The church has received considerable investment in recent years from Cadw and the Heritage Lottery Fund, facilitating a £410,000 renovation, sympathetic to the historic nature of the building.

On Sunday 20th March 2005, to mark the bicentenary of the consecration of St. Peter's Church, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Right Reverend Dr. Rowan D. Williams, led the Palm Sunday service at the church. It was the first time that a serving Archbishop of Canterbury had visited the town of Blaenavon. Two of the town's chapels closed so that their adherents could visit St. Peter's Church to witness such an historic occasion. It was a fitting way to mark two hundred years of worship at St. Peter's Church, which, even in the early twenty-first century, boasts a strong congregation.

ST PAUL'S CHURCH

Throughout the 19th century the population of Blaenavon continued to rise, with the population standing at over 11,000 during the early 1890s. A new church was needed to cater for the spiritual needs of Anglicans living in the east of the town, so a piece of land was donated to the parish by the Blaenavon Company and Reginald Nevill, the second Marquess of Abergavenny, for the building of a new place of worship.

John Burgoyne, a builder from nearby New Inn, was contracted in 1892 to build the church for the sum of £1,275. He was a very experienced builder and had built much of nearby Charles Street during the 1880s. The foundation stone was laid on the 21st April 1893 and work commenced at Easter. Local dressed stone, including some of the old stones from the ruin of Capel Newydd, which had closed in 1861, was used to construct the new church.

The building work was completed in autumn 1893 and the attractive church, which was dedicated to Saint Paul, was opened and consecrated by the Bishop of Llandaff on the 10th October 1893.

Notable features, which can be viewed at the church today, include a number of artefacts from Capel Newydd, Blaenavon's earliest known place of Christian worship. The door key to the old church can be viewed, as well as a Welsh Bible, used in services when Welsh was the dominant language in the area. The stone altar and reredos (screen) were also transferred from Capel Newydd and still survive.

Saint Paul's Church may be opened on request.

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