

# **NON CONFORMIST CHAPELS OF BLAENAVON**

## **BETHLEHEM WELSH INDEPENDENT CHAPEL**

The Welsh Congregationalists had long worshipped in Blaenavon but it was not until the late 1810s that they financed the creation of their first purpose-built chapel, which was built near Fferm Ty Will Rhios (New Road Farm). The first sermon was held on Christmas Day 1820 and the chapel was named 'Bethlehem', in honour of the town of Jesus Christ's birth. The congregation grew throughout the 1820s and 1830s and eventually a settled pastor, the Reverend Harris, was appointed.

The second minister, the Reverend Thomas Griffiths, was appointed in 1838 and it was decided that the existing chapel was inconvenient and too small. The new, classically styled Bethlehem Chapel was built alongside the quiet stream, the Nant Llechan, in 1840. The interior of the chapel was plain, in keeping with the many early 19th century non-conformist chapels, although the gallery was supported by eight cast iron piers, demonstrating local pride in the iron industry. The 1840s and 1850s were a time of growth in Blaenavon and soon Bethlehem Chapel was surrounded by a variety of buildings and businesses as Broad Street (or Heol y Nant) was extended along the Nant Llechan.

During the second half of the 19th century, as the English language gained in strength and influence in Blaenavon, Bethlehem Chapel continued to worship in Welsh. Some English-speaking members decided to hold their own services, eventually establishing Lion Street English Congregationalist Chapel in 1867. As the Welsh language declined, Nonconformist chapels across Wales, were forced to hold bilingual or English language services. Bethlehem Chapel, however, resisted this change for as long as possible and continued to hold Welsh language services until the early 20th century, making it the last chapel in Blaenavon to abandon the native language.

Sadly Bethlehem Chapel closed in April 2009.

## **HOREB CHAPEL**

The Baptist denomination in Blaenavon had its origins in the late 18th century when the Blaenavon landowners, William and Francis James, invited preachers from Llanwenarth and Penygarn to lead Welsh language sermons at their home on Ton Mawr Farm. A purpose built chapel, known as Horeb, was founded by the congregation in 1807 on land belonging to the James family (later known as Old James Street) and was extensively renovated in 1823. Horeb Chapel was situated near a stream, the Nant Llywetrog, which may have been used for outdoor baptisms.

In 1825, 81 of the 138 members of Horeb Chapel came into a dispute with the Baptist chapels of Llanwenarth and Penygarn, which controlled the Blaenavon chapel. The majority of the members of Horeb decided to gain their independence and subsequently founded Ebenezer Baptist Chapel, just one hundred yards away from Horeb, on land leased from Francis James.

Despite the trauma of losing most of its members, Horeb Chapel recovered and in 1862 a larger, more imposing chapel building was built on the corner between High Street and Church Road. The chapel's gallery was supported on cast iron pillars and a baptismal pool was created in the floor, both features remain today.

Ebenezer Baptist Chapel closed in the late 1980s and was demolished in the 1990s; the site is now occupied by Market Street car park and the chapel is commemorated by a small plaque. The congregation of Horeb, however, remains strong and the chapel celebrated its bicentenary in 2007.

## **KING STREET (BETHEL) CHAPEL**

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King Street Chapel was built in 1829 by the Primitive Methodists after a visit to the town by the noted preacher, Hugh Bourne, in 1823. However, having built a magnificent new chapel on Broad Street in 1878, they sold King Street Chapel to a group of Baptists who had broken away from Broad Street English Baptist Chapel.

The first Baptist minister of Bethel Chapel was the radical Reverend Owen Tidman of Bradford on Avon, who became well-known in the town for his charitable work, providing free meals and clothes to the poor of Blaenavon. He also oversaw extensively renovations in 1883 and the building of a schoolroom 1887.

Today, Bethel Chapel supports a strong Baptist Congregation and retains many of its late 19th century features.

## **MORIAH CHAPEL**

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An increasing number of migrants, seeking employment in Blaenavon in the nineteenth century, came from the counties of England and could not speak the Welsh language so it became necessary for English-speaking nonconformists to form their own chapels. The English Baptists erected their first chapel, a somewhat humble building, in Broad Street in the year 1844. The chapel was rebuilt in the year 1888, in a much grander, classical form. The renovated interior contained ornate iron pillars, supporting a gallery with an iron balustrade. The exterior was also enlarged, incorporating elaborate masonry on the rooftop.

Following the opening of a new forge and steelworks on the other side of the Afon Llwyd in the 1860s, a new area of Blaenavon, known as 'Forge Side', developed. The English Baptists believed that the Baptists living at Forgeside should have easy access to a place of worship and therefore funded the creation of Zion English Baptist Church, which was built from rubble pennant sandstone in 1874.

Broad Street Chapel is now a Grade II Listed Building and many of the improvements made during the 1880s can still be seen, giving the chapel much of its distinct character. The rooftop masonry, however,

was removed during the 1980s. A schoolroom extension, which was erected at the rear of the chapel, also survives and has long housed a pet & garden shop, known as Hawkins' Corn Stores.

Since 1968 Moriah Chapel has accommodated the Blaenavon Evangelical Church and a strong congregation continues to worship at the chapel today.

## **PARK STREET METHODIST CHAPEL**

John Wesley (1703-1791), the founder of the Wesleyan Methodist movement, visited Pontypool and Abergavenny in 1739 and many were converted to his cause. The Wesleyan message reached Blaenavon by the early 19th century and an old malt-house served as the first place of worship for the Blaenavon Wesleyan Methodists.

The growing congregation meant that by the 1830s a more convenient place of worship was required and in 1837 Wesley Chapel was built on Chapel Row. In 1871 the Wesleyans constructed a day school in Park Street for the benefit of Blaenavon's nonconformist children and during the 1880s the Wesleyans decided to build a new chapel next to the schoolrooms. Park Street Methodist Chapel was designed by a Derbyshire architect named John Wills and was built in 1885 on land leased to the Wesleyan Methodists by the Blaenavon Company.

The Wesleyan Chapel of Chapel Row was demolished shortly before the demolition of the surrounding houses in the 1960s. Park Street Methodist Chapel, however, the last of Blaenavon's Methodist Chapels, still has a strong congregation today.