

## RELIGION IN BLAENAVON

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Standing out in the townscape of Blaenavon are a number of nineteenth century churches and chapels, bearing witness to the community's strong religious history. Although only a handful of these places of worship remain today, at the dawn of the twentieth century the town had eighteen chapels and churches. Each played an important role in the life of the individual worshipper and wider society. Throughout Wales churches and chapels, with their distinctive architecture, had a visible presence in every community.



### Anglican Worship

St. Peter's Church, Blaenavon's oldest remaining place of worship, was built by the ironmasters in 1804 and was the first new Anglican church to be built in Monmouthshire during the industrial revolution. The Church of England was slow to create new churches and parishes so many of the newly populated areas of Wales did not have an adequate place of Anglican worship. The gifting of St. Peter's to the Church of England was significant in that it provided Blaenavon's Anglicans with a place of worship.

### Religious Nonconformity

Blaenavon, however, like the rest of Wales, was strongly nonconformist in its religious beliefs. Horace Mann's Religious Census of 1851 revealed that 80% of Welsh worshippers were chapel-goers. Nonconformity in Blaenavon had its origins in the eighteenth century when Methodists held open air meetings and met at an ancient farmstead near Garn yr erw, later known as 'Y Persondy'. The celebrated itinerant Methodist preachers, Howell Harris of Trefeca (1714-73) and Edmund Jones (1701-93), the Prophet of the Tranch, are said to have held meetings in this farmhouse.

The increase in population, following the establishment of the ironworks in 1789, resulted in a rise of many different denominations in the town. Many of the early nonconformists, such as the Welsh Baptists, held services in members' homes or in any suitable building. Blaenavon's Wesleyan Methodists, for example, initially met in a disused malt-house. Blaenavon's first purpose-built chapel was Capel y Graig (Chapel of the Rock), which was opened by the Calvinistic Methodists near the ironworks during the 1790s.

### Chapel Building

A rapidly increasing number of chapels were built in the town in the early nineteenth century. They were somewhat plain and simple buildings constructed by local builders. As the century progressed, however, the congregations increased and the denominations became wealthier and more confident. Many of the town's chapels were rebuilt by the end of the century. Broad Street English Baptist Chapel, for example,

was built in a plain style in 1844 but was extensively renovated in 1888. Blaenavon's most elaborate chapel was undoubtedly the Primitive Methodist Chapel in Broad Street, completed in the gothic style in 1879. Tragically the chapel was demolished in 1972 but examples of the revived classical construction can still be seen on the town's surviving chapels today and reflect what may be considered a Welsh national architecture.



## Cultural Role of Nonconformity

Throughout their history, chapels had a very strong social and cultural role. Sunday Schools, primarily used for training up future chapel members, had a huge educational role, especially in the days before compulsory State Education. The chapel was the focal point of the community; they organised youth clubs, choirs, bands, women's groups, day trips and even sports teams.

Religious ministers and chapel deacons were prominent and highly respected members of the community. It is recorded that when William Arfon Johns, the long serving pastor of Lion Street English Congregationalist Chapel, died in 1930, the whole town of Blaenavon mourned his passing. The same was true of Anglican ministers. The obituary of the Reverend John Jones, the first vicar of St. Peter's Church, records that 'he retained the love and respect of all classes in Blaenavon – Churchmen and Nonconformists alike'.



## Decline of Religion in Welsh Society

The influence of nonconformity and organised religion, however, declined throughout the twentieth century. The reasons for this decline are varied; arguably nonconformity became too conformist, with expensive chapel buildings and hierarchies, which betrayed the movement's humble origins. The success of the remarkable 1904-05 religious revival, which adopted an earlier simplistic, itinerant approach, suggests that there may be some truth in this. Chapels were also becoming increasingly out

of touch with their congregations – socialism was on the rise and was generally opposed by the Liberal nonconformist chapels. The support by many chapels for enlistment during the First World War made many people believe that the encouragement preached from the pulpits led many young men to their deaths. Additionally, Britain was experiencing profound social change. The rise of the cinema, the radio and other forms of popular entertainment meant that the social and cultural activities of the chapel were no longer desired by many people and there was also an increase in religious scepticism due to the increasing acceptance of scientific theories and ideas.

Whatever the reasons for the decline in popularity for the chapels, the declining congregations of the second half of the twentieth century were left with a problem. The rapid chapel building of the nineteenth century meant that there were too many chapels and as congregations dwindled it became too expensive to maintain such large buildings. In some chapels only a handful of aging members remained. In the late twentieth century the number of Blaenavon's churches and chapels declined and many were sadly demolished, including Ebenezer Baptist Chapel and Broad Street Primitive Methodist Chapel. Nonetheless several of Blaenavon's churches and chapels continue to survive and still support respectable congregations.

*Nathan Alexander Matthews (2008)*