

SECTION 5:

“Lots of Land”: Tan y Garth



In earlier sections we’ve seen how important the Hut at Tan y Garth is to the Club’s mountain activities. Also, for many years we have successfully let surplus space at the Hut to guest groups, and have let the adjacent Cottage to holidaymakers, and at a discount to members.

The name Tan y Garth means “under the hill” – it’s well named, set under an oak and birch woodland. John’s book told of its purchase by us and the hard work early members put into its renovation – but what was the history of the place before our time?

The original Welsh Chapel and adjacent Cottage were built during the 1880s by the congregation themselves on land loaned to the Calvinistic Methodist Church by the big local landowner, the Earl of Ancaster.

The website <http://www.welshchapels.org> tells that this Church grew out of Welsh methodism, which started in the 1730s with three preachers working to revive the Church of England within Wales. They were associated with English Methodist leaders George Whitefield and John Wesley (in whose old room at Oxford I was taught history!). The Methodist movement split over the Calvinistic doctrine that God had predestined a limited “elect” body of people for salvation, and the term Calvinistic Methodist was first used in 1801. They split from the Church of England in 1811 and grew throughout the 19th century to a peak early in the 20th, before decline set in. They had about 190,000 members in 1926 but by 1982 that figure was around 80,000. Hence chapels like ours becoming disused. John’s account starts with its deconsecration in 1957.



2nd Earl of Ancaster

The Church is now known as the Presbyterian Church of Wales with (per their website) around 20,000 members and 600 chapels.

In the 1920s when the Church numbers were at their height, the 2nd Earl of Ancaster conveyed the freehold of the land to the trustees of the Chapel for free. The deeds show the conveyance as witnessed by his land agent and his valet – how the other half live!

I’ll never forget one evening many years ago when Gwilym, the local farmer, came into the Chapel to talk with us, something that was very, very unusual. I know he was born in 1940 and worshipped there as a child. He sat in the kitchen with us and recalled the Welsh names of the long-gone congregation - “XX stood there, YY stood there” pointing to places on our workaday quarry tiled floor. I found this very poignant and moving.

So people had regular places in the chapel. What else was it like? Well, my parents had a great friend called Helen Davies, a native Welsh speaker and ex-headmistress who helped my Dad as a volunteer after he became disabled. She was the daughter of a Welsh chapel minister who started out before the First World War. I described Tan y

Garth to her and she explained its likely workings.

Helen told me that her father looked after three chapels, going between them in a pony and trap. Each one would have three services a day on Sunday; a main service he would take, a second service led by a lay minister, and a third prayer meeting. People were expected to come to them all! Though set against that the Church's own censuses were taken at main services as they were the best attended. I remember Helen showing me her father's massive two volume bible that he used in church, beautifully bound in green leather.

She said that the cottage was not the minister's own house – she grew up in a much bigger and grander place. Instead, it was the “Chapel Keepers House”. A family from the congregation would occupy it in return for the lady looking after and cleaning the Chapel. That's why our Cottage has two sitting rooms. The smaller one on the right (which would have been smaller still as the part of it leading to the little window was a walled-off larder) would have been reserved as the “best room”. This would have been for the minister to meet people and conduct business. If you look at the chapel south of the railway station in Dolwydellan, you'll see there a smaller Keeper's House “welded on” to the chapel itself.



A painting of the cottage by the artist John Ockenden from the early years of the Club

Via the website <https://historypoints.org/index.php?page=capel-curig-war-memorial> we have some details of who lived in the Cottage albeit in the sad context of the Capel Curig war memorial:

“**Jones**, Evan, Private 40686. Died 20/09/1917 aged 20. York and Lancaster Regiment. Tyne Cot Memorial [near Ypres]. Son of William and Jane Jones of Tan-y-Garth.”

Let's now fast forward to 1999 and continue the story of Tan y Garth itself.

At the start of our period both properties were in a good state of repair and had facilities as good as, or better than, most Huts and holiday cottages at that time. Maintaining and improving such old buildings in a relatively remote area has always posed a challenge. They are also subject to heavy use, as well as standing empty from time to time, and so get greater wear and tear than a normal house.

At the Hut, maintenance continued in the early years of the century while Mal Bonner was Hut Warden. He was a hard worker and I remember seeing him up to his eyes in mud, wrestling with a leaking water inlet pipe outside the Cottage. So too with others. In “The Gwydyr 22” magazine Linda and Mike Gavin recount the annual working weekend in May 2005. At my count no fewer than seventeen volunteer members worked on the Chapel doing a range of jobs, included digging out the leaves, mud and muck from the areas to the rear of the building, while more dextrous hands repaired gas fire linkages. Two further members tackled a number of issues in the Cottage.

In our period, however, the challenge inherent in Tan y Garth was intensified by the currents of social change. People – our members, prospective members and guests included, were less and less willing to put up with, and pay for, “basic”. The demand grew for better facilities and we needed improvements to meet it. At the same time health and safety standards rose, and some jobs could no longer be done on DIY terms. There were also changes to our own skills base in DIY as more people had office jobs and were less likely to have practical hands on ability (again, that's me folks!).

At the Hut, improvement accelerated largely through the efforts of Margaret Blakeborough, who became our Hut Warden in February 2008. Margaret is a member of the Just Do It school and was adept at making surgical strike improvements that made a big impact, but didn't cost a lot of money. For example, we got more comfortable and practical furniture acquired second hand so after a while we were lounging on sumptuous leather. With girly curtains on the windows (OK Margaret, you won that argument!). She also in 2009 acquired dehumidifiers that made the first new impact on the cold and damp in the Chapel, and folding trestle tables to make party events easier to

run. Margaret's projects all benefitted from the assistance on the ground of Graham James.

She deployed effective influence in getting other members to help out. In 2009 Dave Cole did a huge amount of heavy work making the car park more user friendly. He undertook a further large outdoor project in 2012 when he built the patio area.

The wide ranging professional skills of Reg Cromer were also mobilised by Margaret, and 2009 saw him putting in wood panelling in the lounge and hallway to match the incomplete Victorian range we had inherited with the building. Reg later did another range of totally new panelling in the kitchen.

Keith Taverner also helped out when we had big issues with the toilet block drains.

February 2010's accounts show that this was the year we installed double glazing in the toilets, another step to making the place feel warmer. The accounts also have an item for PAT testing, part of the impact on us of health and safety rules.

From then on we have done a number of major projects which have cost a fair bit of cash. As Gus Grissom said in "The Right Stuff": "No Bucks, no Buck Rogers!" and these works could only happen because we had a sound war chest to do them, which has been maintained ever since. So credit also goes to the long line of Hut and House Lettings Secretaries and Treasurers who've respectively generated much of, and husbanded all, the Club's money. Further behind the scenes desk work done in this period included our move to register our ownership of Tan y Garth at the Land Registry, giving us an up to date and more secure legal title.

It was back to the loos in the year to February 2011 for the largest scale single Hut improvement of this time. Reg Cromer and Dave Cole toiled for a good fortnight totally renovating the entire block and its fittings to a very high specification, using the same standard of materials as say a motorway service station. We now had hot water and background heating provided from a new gas boiler. The walls and partition panels are of Venesta, a material used in tea chests and on the sledges of Captain Scott's Antarctic expedition. Apparently, if our panels were twice the thickness, they'd actually be bulletproof! This was probably "the" transformative project at the Chapel in our period, as the new toilets lifted the look and feel of the whole place.

Gus Grissom might also have said though "No Water, no Loo Block" and in 2012 we moved to prevent that happening as Allan McDonald reported in the August 2011 Newsletter



The trench from the water meter



and the pipe laid



all done—Dave Cole and Ronnie Davies

"We have finally re-laid a new water pipe from the cottage to the water meter at the bottom car park. The old copper pipe [that fed both buildings] was badly corroded and leaked terribly, given that we are on a meter this was not a good thing but...it has now been replaced with a plastic pipe which should last us many years. A huge thank you to Dave Cole, Ronnie Davies and Chris Harris for being there when the JCB driver turned up and dug the trench."

In that year Margaret had the idea of having a take away meal for the working weekend, which made the event more enjoyable and also helped clear the decks for the deep clean of the Hut kitchen which always featured on the work menu.

In 2013 we accomplished the next major improvement at the Hut. This was a partial rewire of the entire building following on from a full survey. Bethan Hines helped this along enormously by facilitating an initial informal survey by a qualified electrician from her family circle; so we knew what was in the can before we opened it! Our old instal-

lation was safe but had grown piecemeal in what is a complex property, and was no longer fully up to modern standards. After this work we had a state of the art consumer unit and rationalised, modern, circuitry.

Margaret stood down to the applause of a grateful Club and Chris Harris took over as Hut Warden. The year ending February 2014 saw nearly £4,000 being spent on re-roofing the toilet block extension, contracted out to Pete Butler's roofing business. And over that year and the next, a further big uplift to the Hut came in the form of modern, controllable and programmable storage heaters, a new coal effect gas fire, more secondary glazing and loft insulation to try to keep the heat in. Years ago, I remember passing lemonade bottles full of hot water from one bed to



Building the new car park steps

another at night just to stay alive; now people actually complain the Hut is too warm on occasion!

In Capel Curig it's so wet at times even the drying rooms have drying rooms. Our drying room always worked well but got a major upgrade with modern and hence more efficient machinery in February 2014.

Additionally, Chris got a full length mirror for the bunkroom, much appreciated by the Club's fashionistas. Everyone benefitted from a new set of car park steps the next year, built against a tight deadline under the supervision of James Berwick. Beer drinkers were 2016's winners with a larder fridge going into the lobby.

Fiona took on the Hut Warden role in March 2017. In her time, the major improvement has been new cookers in the September of 2019, replacing those installed way back in 2013.

Not all the guests in the Chapel are welcome. Over the years we've had problems with mice who love staying there and are not hygienic. A friend and colleague of mine whose family owned most of Abersoch plus a big Cheshire mansion wondered why we cared – it's the country isn't it! Well, we did care and unlike in the folksong, Mistress Mouse didn't live to wed a frog called Anthony Rowley because she was wasted first, dude. First off for years by Graham James and his spectacularly blue poison which was "locally sourced"; then from 2014 by putting Mistress Mouse out for permanent contract killing with Messrs Rentokil. A great improvement and one that's easily forgotten.

A few yards to the west, what was happening at the Cottage in this period? Again we have a story of major improvement, but on a different timescale with a later start.

That was driven to some extent by the Cottage being less "visible" to members than the Hut where they stayed regularly. And at the start of the period the Cottage also seemed to be much the sounder property. We didn't have the money – and more importantly the time and people – to manage big projects simultaneously.

A number of stalwart people served as House Secretary looking after the Cottage early in our period; for most of the later years Geoff Brierley had this role, handing over to Nicky Hickin in 2019. It's important to remember that in contrast to the Hut one person oversees both the bookings and the maintenance of the Cottage.

By September 2011 it was evident we had a burning – or rather a soaking platform on our hands. In the September 2011 Newsletter Allan wrote:

"Essentially the problem is that the old pipe-work has leaked over the last few years and there is some rotting to the floorboards which has now become so bad that the ceiling in the kitchen has started to bulge. The bathroom certainly has a 'tired' feel to it and we feel it prudent to refurbish it completely in an effort to maintain a good standard and make the cottage more appealing to new users."

This work was done that Autumn by Reg Cromer and we had a smart new bathroom. Later essential major repairs involved new furniture in the next year. The year to February 2014 saw us install new internal doors to replace some very tired old ones, and install a new water tank and heater. Geoff and Reg also replaced part of the upstairs floorboards.

Mistress Mouse's rapper boyfriend Toughty DA Squirrel and his noisy noisome chums had taken up residence in the Cottage loft, so in the autumn of 2014 we installed better loft access to allow Rentokil to deal with the squirrel gang. Their hole in the wall was blocked off, but so as to still allow bats free access to their traditional roost area. Later Geoff, Kev McEvoy and John Simpson donned full PPE and cleared the loft out, enabling it to be properly insulated.

Once we had dealt with the most immediate improvements needed in the Chapel, we turned more attention to the



The new Cottage sitting room and fireplace

Cottage and worked towards a two year programme of complete modernisation that started off in 2014/15. The programme used a mix of outside contractors and Club volunteer workers operating either in small teams or at working weekends.

Early work in this programme involved replacing the front and back doors, whilst Reg, Bob Chamberlain and James Allen worked hard to replace remaining floorboards in the bedrooms, to make new doors to replace remaining old internal doors, and to open out the staircase creating a greater sense of light and air to the place. They additionally sourced and fitted a new fire place in

the sitting room.

Later phases involved installing an entirely new kitchen with new appliances, new storage heaters throughout and a heated towel rail in the bathroom, and replacing all damaged or aged plaster work and skirting boards.

To finish off the dining room got a new floor and the rest of the property got new carpets, and the sitting room suite, dining room sofa bed, both beds and all bedding and curtains were replaced, along with outdated lighting.

During and after the renovation we planned how to increase the utilisation of the Cottage. With the help of invaluable advice from Caroline Barker, we began to let it via Airbnb while retaining other sources of customers. This has been very successful and makes the work of the House Secretary a little easier on a day to day basis.



The new Cottage kitchen

Let's wrap up this section with a reminder that the cleaning and maintenance of the Hut goes on and on. Here's Fiona's jobs list for the volunteers at the 2019 working weekend:

All windows need cleaning inside and out, if necessary remove secondary glazing.

The kitchen: All surfaces need cleaning and degreasing.

The Lounge: All settees need pulling out and cleaning behind and the leather needs treating; scrub floor and polish with tile polish; clean windows.

The Showers/toilets: Use the steam cleaner to do a deep clean; the gents shower tray needs resealing, if anyone could do that job please?; possibly the ladies too.

The Lobby/Hall: Deep clean this area, and sort anything from under the stairs

Drying room: Thorough clean, take out anything left behind

Tidy Loft

Bunkroom: The mattresses need removing, cleaning underneath, wiping down and replacing; floor needs a really good clean; all windows need to be cleaned (secondary glazing removed and cleaned)

PAT electrical equipment

Outside: The gutters need clearing of leaves; anything that looks like it needs paint, weather permitting; the area around the chapel and cottage would benefit from a tidy up; cut grass?; tidy bike shed; treat the outdoor furniture.

Not much then! And almost all these jobs got done...

As at March 2019 and the Covid lockdowns, both Hut and Cottage were in good heart and well maintained. They were proving popular with guests, bringing us income and allowing others to use our facilities and relax in the hills. In the Club year ending in February 2019, the Hut had been occupied by members or guest groups for all bar 3 weekends; and the Cottage had been let for 240 overnight stays.

Additionally, given its state in 1972 when we bought it, there is a strong possibility that the Chapel would not have survived many more years to be renovated, so at least one historic building has been saved and kept in good use.

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