

St Fagans National Museum of History

A Tale of Two Welsh Churches

Earlier this year we enjoyed a few days in Wales – one of the highlights of our trip was a visit to St Fagans National Museum of History which is just a few miles outside Cardiff. It is an open air museum where buildings from across Wales have been reconstructed to help visitors learn about Welsh history and traditions. There are over 40 buildings ranging from the recreation of Iron Age Roundhouses to a 1940s pre-fab. There are farm houses, a school, shops and cottages. The gardens or land round each building reflect what the occupants would most likely have been growing or producing.

There are two Christian buildings on site. (You can visit www.museum.wales/stfagans/buildings for photographs of the buildings) The oldest is St Teilo's Church which was probably built in the late 12th or early 13th century and then extended in the late 14th or early 15th century. The church was originally in Llandeilo Tal-y-bont, Glamorgan but dismantled and moved to St Fagans in 1984-5. During the excavations a series of wall paintings was discovered and the museum decided to present the church as it would have appeared before the Reformation. This means that visitors entering what appears from the outside to be a simple plain whitewashed building, find themselves suddenly confronted with all the colour of a late medieval Catholic church, not only in the wall paintings but also in the statues and woodwork. An impressive rood screen and loft are also in place. It took almost 20 years of painstaking work, beginning with research and then using traditional techniques and materials, to complete the restoration.

St Teilo was born in Wales in the 6th century but little is known about him. He was a contemporary of St David and the two men travelled together to Jerusalem on pilgrimage. He also travelled through Wales, Cornwall and Brittany preaching and planting Christian communities.

The second building is Pen-rhiw Chapel. This was probably originally a barn but was acquired in 1777 by the Unitarians for use as a meeting house. As with St Teilo's Church, this is a simple whitewashed building but, unlike St Teilo's, the simple style continues inside. Each of the pews downstairs is slightly different because they were made for individual families who took responsibility for their upkeep. The chapel deacons sat in a pew next to the pulpit. Upstairs is the gallery which was added in the 19th century to provide more seating. There are also stone seats in the grass bank outside which were used during preaching festivals. When the chapel was dismantled in 1953 lots of evidence of it being used as a school was found – including ink bottles and quill pens. This reflects the importance Unitarians placed on learning.

Unitarianism has a long history in Wales. As with many other reform movements they were motivated by a longing for a purer form of belief and church organisation. However, they were set apart from other dissenting denominations because of their rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity, instead accepting the humanity and moral authority of Jesus rather than his divinity. Unitarians were often involved in the fight for civil and religious liberties and were radical in their politics as well as their theology.

I came across a fascinating website www.welshchapels.org/nonconformity which has lots of information about the history of nonconformity in Wales for those who would like to know more.