HE 10a

Y Pwyllgor Cymunedau, Cydraddoldeb a Llywodraeth Leol

Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

Bil yr Amgylchedd Hanesyddol (Cymru)

Historic Environment (Wales) Bill

Gwybodaeth ategol gan: Tystiolaeth ysgrifenedig yn cefnogi'r bil gan

Gomisiwn Brenhinol Henebion Cymru

Supplementary information from: Royal Commission on the Ancient and

Historical Monuments of Wales

The Royal Commission's Chapels and Churches Work

The Royal Commissions Chapels Project started in 1995 with the realisation of the disastrous affect that the decline in religious observance has had on the fabric of the buildings over the last 60 years because dwindling congregations are struggling to maintain and repair buildings now too large for their needs; and because those going out of religious use were being demolished or converted unsympathetically.

The problem was first highlighted by Capel: The Welsh Chapels Society, which was set up in 1986 to give voice to these concerned about the disappearance of both the buildings and the records as chapels closed. One of their aims was to see recognised procedures put in place that could be followed when buildings were made redundant, so that both the building and the records could be safeguarded.

Ten years later, Anthony Jones's book 'Welsh Chapels' and its accompanying exhibition in 1996 coincided with a damning report by Roger Wools, chairman of the working party for Redundant Historic Chapels in Wales, on Wales's lack of readiness to deal with this issue. A particular problem was the fact that that there had been no audit of chapels in Wales since that carried out by the 1905 Royal Commission on the Church of England and Other Religious Buildings in Wales and Monmouthshire, and therefore there were no up to date figures on how many chapels there were in Wales, of what quality and how many had since been demolished or converted to other uses.

At this point a partnership project was formed between the Royal Commission and Capel to 'compile a basic information, and where possible a photographic, record for each of the nonconformist chapels that existed in Wales at one time or another, with more intensive records of those buildings considered to be of particular architectural, historic or religious significance.'

At the same time, the National Library of Wales was in the process of compiling the Capeli Cymru register from the large amounts of chapel records and ephemera that was flooding into them. This contained around 5,000 chapels, but because the information dealt with chapel records, references could be ambiguous and trying to tie each one down to an accurate geographical location or an actual building proved very difficult. This problem was further exacerbated when the Clywd County Council Chapel database was then also amalgamated with these results. Another standalone database was identified at the time: that on historical data relating to the social history of Welsh language chapels 1899-1914 compiled by John Pritchard and funded by the Board of Celtic Studies.

The database

Amalgamating these different records has resulted in the Chapels Access database, which now holds details of 6,430 chapel sites and, taking into account the rebuilding of some of them, 9,963 individual chapel buildings. The fields within this database allow us to understand this building type in terms of the development of plan and form, the evolution of style, the denominations, chapel architects, etc.

The database also records the current status of the chapel building. Due to a historic lack of comprehensive information-gathering in this area, we carried out a 'snapshot' survey in May 2010 to December 2011 to increase our knowledge of what was happening to these buildings. Lists were prepared by county of those chapels not already recorded as demolished or converted and volunteers sought to provide us with information within their local area. This gave us up to date information for 4,081 of the 6,424 chapels we had on the database at the time and we found that:

- 745 had been demolished by this date;

- 1245 had been converted or were in use for other purposes;

- 253 were disused and derelict

- 1,838 were still in use as chapels.

Addoldai Cymru: The Welsh Religious Buildings Trust

In March 2014 we applied successfully with Addoldai Cymru: The Welsh Religious Buildings Trust for a £67,000 grant from the Digital Tourism Business Framework to create a 'virtual museum' of Welsh nonconformity and chapel buildings. This website has a range of digital resources to increase knowledge and understanding of, and engagement with, the history of dissent and nonconformity and the heritage of chapel buildings in Wales. An important aspect of engagement has been the ability for user generated content to be attached to the records of the chapels database, which when fully publicised, will be a valuable tool in continuing the work on chapel status and engaging volunteers.

Work with Addoldai Cymru is continuing: planning has started for a conference on Nonconformist chapels in Wales, provisionally timetabled for autumn 2016. We intend to invite representatives from the different nonconformist congregations in Wales to discuss how we can all work together better to open chapels to tourism, to use the chapels of Wales as venues for events and concerts and to make Wales's rich chapels heritage much better known.

Capel: The Welsh Chapels Society

Throughout the chapels project we have had close working links with Capel: The Welsh Chapels Society. Susan Fielding currently represents the Royal Commission on Capel's Executive Committee and serves as Capel's Newsletter editor.

Sanctaidd

We are also involved in the transition of the Churches Tourism Network to Sanctaidd, an organisation dedicated to supporting all denominations and congregations. Sanctaidd's aim will be

- to unite and support the sector and develop collaborative working across organisations to preserve and enhance Welsh religious heritage

- increase public understanding and appreciation of Welsh places of worship and raise their profile

- inform and influence policy makers and opinion formers in the Welsh Government and its agencies, the National Assembly for Wales and the media

- work closely with other stakeholders, and act as a conduit for knowledge sharing amongst those who have a concern for the future of Welsh places of worship whether individuals or organisations.

Faith Tourism Working Group

The Royal Commission is also represented on the Faith Tourism Working Group, a two year 'Task and Finish' group aimed at delivering the vision of the Faith Tourism Action – as set out by Edwina Hart in October 2015 – that, by 2020, faith tourism will be 'recognised as an integral component of the visitor experience in Wales, adding significant value to the destination offer, contributing to the well-being of the visitor and the host community and enhancing local, regional and national sense of place'. This follows on from our working in partnership with Ceredigion County Council on the Ceredigion Faith Tourism project aimed at increasing tourist footfall at churches and chapels across Ceredigion via a website and interpretation trails.

The Story of our Church

Finally encouraged by Cadw, the Commission hopes to apply for Heritage Lottery Funding to work with faith communities on the heritage of 19th and 20th century places of worship in Wales. This is a category of church that we know least about, as architectural historians tend to focus on medieval buildings; churches of this period are also of great interest because of their holistic design, with the building, textiles, pews, stained glass and ecclesiastical furnishings often designed as part of a single vision for the church, and because of the degree of experimentation that this period saw, and the alternatives to Gothic that were developed by arts and crafts and Modernist architects.

Because this is potentially a very large project, we intend to start with a small-scale trial in order to develop an appropriate toolkit and methodology for working with church communities, the aim being to encourage them to write their own church history and to think about the future of the building. We anticipate that the pilot project will look at Roman Catholic churches, which are even more at risk from shrinking congregations than are Church of Wales properties.

Christopher Catling

Secretary, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales