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News

Welcome to Wales: Pitt nationality classroom reflects country's ties to Pennsylvania

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By Marylynne Pitz, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Darrell Sapp/Post-Gazette

E. Maxine Bruhns leans on the "box pews" in the Welsh Nationality Classroom.

It's an auspicious year to open the Welsh Nationality Classroom at the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning because Wales recently defeated England, Scotland, Ireland, France and Italy in The Grand Slam, a fierce rugby competition.

While rugby remains popular in Wales, residents of this country that's roughly the size of Massachusetts have emerged victorious from tougher and far more significant struggles.

Since 55 B.C., the Welsh lived with or battled multiple invaders, including Julius Caesar and his conquering Romans, who stayed for 400 years. In 440 A.D., Anglo Saxons swept across Britain, pushing the Welsh to the western part of the island that is swept by the Irish Sea. Welsh names remain, however, notably Llundain, now London, and Temys, now the River Thames.

Next came the French and finally the English, who built large forts and castles. Through it all, the Welsh fought to preserve their 2,000-year-old language and exercise their religion, be it Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Quaker or Unitarian.

That's why the new Welsh room, which will be dedicated at 3 p.m. Sunday mirrors the 600 spartan chapels carved out of barns in the 1700s by "non-conformists" who rejected the Anglican and Roman Catholic rituals, which used English or Latin, and preferred reading the gospel from Welsh Bibles.

The Welsh Room is the 27th Nationality Classroom to open, and it is by far the simplest and plainest. The 19 rooms that encircle the first floor Commons Room were built between 1938 and 1957. Another seven rooms were dedicated between 1987 and 2000. Nearly 40,000 visitors tour the rooms each year.

"The Welsh learned to speak and sing their language in chapel," said Dale Richards, a retired special education counselor from Penn Hills who volunteered his time to establish the room.

To create these chapels, worshippers removed animals from a barn, mucked out the stalls and moved in a raised pulpit, wooden pews and deacons' benches. Believers often walked or rode 15 miles to attend services. The floor was made of dirt and straw, but affluent people paid to sit in box pews that had wooden floors and swinging doors.

Occupants of box pews lined their space with straw, hot bricks and even curled up with their dogs to stay warm -- if not awake -- during the lengthy sermons. From Monday through Saturday, the chapels served as schoolhouses for youngsters. In modern Wales, the Welsh Chapel Society is trying to preserve what remains of this era.

On the third floor of the Cathedral, the Welsh Room faces Fifth Avenue and features white walls, several rows of pine pews and painted blue box pews along the inner wall. Rustic poplar ceiling beams conceal a sprinkler system. Classroom chairs contain tablet-style desks and built-in shelves that can hold student backpacks.

A blue pulpit is framed by a large set of bay windows. A stone-carved dragon, the country's longtime symbol that appears on the Welsh flag in red, will adorn the wooden door. Eventually, a glass-enclosed display case will exhibit a Welsh Bible, pottery, china, dolls and a bakestone used to make tea cakes.

A tall antique oak case clock, which will not arrive until mid-June, will stand on a piece of slate, a mineral still mined in Wales. A communion table and Welsh chest to display china will be installed, too.

Raising the funds

After serious fund-raising to establish the room began in 2001, Martin E. Powell, a principal architect in The Design Alliance, traveled to Wales in 2003 and 2006 to measure and photograph several chapels.

Mr. Powell felt as if he had landed on the set of the movie, "Lord of the Rings" when he saw the mountains, treeless hills, sweeping vistas, sheep and boggy turf. He wondered if the scenery had inspired J.R.R. Tolkien, an Oxford professor who wrote the novel, although the film actually was shot in New Zealand. Mr. Powell saw Pen-Rhiw Chapel, another in the stunning Black Mountains and a third in Beuliheulog at a spot so remote that the architect who drove Mr. Powell there had not seen it.

"We had to find it on Google Earth," said Mr. Powell, who also visited Maesyronen Chapel in a town called Hay-on-Wye; in that structure the minister lived at one end and worship services were held at the other, which was common.

The Welsh, Mr. Powell said, "love language and they love poetry and literature. When you

check into a hotel, the first question they ask you is what newspaper would you like?"

While Mr. Powell's task entailed exhilarating travels, local Welsh residents, including Jack Owen, a Downtown tax lawyer, wondered if enough money could be raised. He started believing in 2001 when the local chapter of the St. David Society's board members pledged \$40,000.

"Rumors that the Welsh are cheap are not true," Mr. Owen said, adding that some committees take far longer than eight years to raise money for a nationality room.

David Roderick, the retired chairman and chief executive officer of USX Corp. and a Pitt alumnus, helped the committee raise a total of \$435,000 from individuals, as well as Texas Instruments and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

"We couldn't have done it without him," Mr. Owen said, adding that he volunteered his time to honor his immigrant ancestors, who landed in Buffalo, N.Y. So did Mr. Roderick, whose grandfather was Pittsburgh's Welshman of the year on March 1, 1890, an honor from the local St. David's Society. Mr. Roderick cherishes the engraved pocket watch given to his grandfather that day.

Many Welsh in state

The Welsh began immigrating to America in the 1600s. At one time, there were eight Welsh churches in the southwestern section of the state that William Penn considered naming New Wales; today, Pennsylvania is home to 200,000 residents of Welsh ancestry, the largest number of any state.

Cambria, another word for Wales, graces the name of Cambria County, home of the town Nanty Glo, a Welsh phrase that means stream of coal. Rowland Ellis named his large Pennsylvania home Bryn Mawr, which means Big Hill, after his estate in Wales. Later, his home became the famous women's college.

You can learn how to speak Welsh, too. Rhobert W. Evans, a Pitt professor in the department of epidemiology at the school of public health, is a native-born Welshman who immigrated to the United States in 1974. Since the spring of 2005, he has taught his native language to about seven students and hopes to teach his evening course in the Welsh Room.

The Welsh love to write poetry and sing hymns; each year they hold a festival of hymns. Known as a *gymanfa ganu*, this is held in a church and led by a choir director. The National Eisteddfod of Wales is held in August and features a week of competitions in music and poetry, entirely in Welsh.

Little wonder that James James, whose Welsh name is Iago Apieuan, called his country the "Eden of bards" when he wrote the national anthem, "Land of My Fathers."

After the room is dedicated, a reception in the Commons Room will feature a choir singing Welsh hymns. Kenneth Davies, a native-born Welsh tenor who lives in Churchill and sings with Pittsburgh's Mendelssohn Choir, will sing two solos in the Commons Room. His voice can be heard on a recording called "The Welsh Passion," which was made in 2005.

The Welsh Room, which has aisles wide enough to accommodate wheelchairs, is the first to be handicapped accessible. Eight additional rooms are planned: the Danish, Finnish, Korean; Latin American/Caribbean; Philippine; Swiss; Thai and Turkish.

E. Maxine Bruhns, director of the Nationality Rooms and Intercultural Exchange Program, said the Turkish room is most likely to open next; an architect is in Turkey hiring craftsmen

for some of the work. The Swiss room, which has received support and helmets from Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, is well under way.

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