

Narration for Visitors to the Welsh Nationality Room

When guests include the Welsh Room in their tour of the Nationality Rooms, they will be given a tape recorded explanation of the capel (chapel) narrated by E. Maxine Bruhns, director of the Nationality Rooms. The narration begins with a segment from the 1941 award-winning film, "How Green Was My Valley", depicting miners returning from work and singing the hymn, Cwm Rhondda..

"CROESO (pronounced Croy-soe).

Welcome to the Welsh Nationality Room. Imagine it is 1787 and you are in Wales, the small mountainous country on the western part of the British Isles, surrounded on three sides by the Irish Sea. Along with the lands that would become Scotland and Ireland, it has been invaded many times and is now ruled by England. The ancient Welsh language and poetry have survived, but English is the language of the courts and the official Church.

You belong to a large family. Men and boys work all day or night in a mine while women and girls are busy with household and farm chores. You work very hard, and relax by signing in Welsh, perhaps that hymn we just heard. Singing simply seems natural when you are with your neighbors, on the way home from work, in a pub or in a chapel.

This particular chapel has been built because you and your neighbors want to sing, worship and read your Welsh Bibles—but all church services are in English. Your own language was forbidden in many places so at first you had to meet in secret locations: a barn, a home, even a public house! Ministers of many denominations protested the excesses of the Roman and Anglican Churches, following the Protestant Reformation in mainland Europe. This non-conformist movement has spread rapidly all over Britain, especially here in Wales, where every village opened chapels for the preaching of the Gospel in Welsh.

You are standing in a simple chapel where the minister lives at one end. Near the door is a display case with dishes and pottery that would be found in a Welsh kitchen. Opposite the door stands a long case clock on a slate foundation. In North Wales quarries, the Welsh mined and exported the world's finest slate for many years. A clock is one of the most important furnishings in a Welsh home. This one has a painted square face and instead of numbers, you see the letters which spell "Richard Thomas." The design suggests that Richard Thomas was both the maker and owner of this clock. The case is oak, as oak trees are abundant in South Wales.

Look up at the ceiling and notice the beams made of poplar. There are no chandeliers here—candles or lanterns would have been used. The rustic beams hide modern technology—and a sprinkler system for safety. Passing the clock, your attention is immediately drawn to the bay window, which backlights the pulpit, the focus of Welsh chapel worship. The light from the window provides a halo effect, adding to the importance of the minister's sermon. He mount steps to the raised pulpit, and has a view of the entire congregation. The two benches below are for the Deacons, church leaders who strictly monitor all actions of the minister and his congregation. Why is the pulpit so important? The sermon, emphasizing the repentance of sin and personal salvation through belief in Jesus Christ, is the most important part of the Non-conformist worship service, and the congregation is fulfilled to hear the Gospel read in Welsh.

At the end of the Room is another table bearing a lectern. On week days this chapel becomes a school room, for children in the daytime, and an evening school for adults who are learning to read. Teaching in the chapels is so successful that more Welsh peasants than English have become literate.

Look at the different pews: benches of pine which face the lectern, and the slightly larger and more comfortable pews in a box along the wall. These are for wealthier families, the door helps them to keep warm in winter and they sometimes bring blankets and their dogs to warm them. The floor of the chapel is often plain dirt, sometimes strewn with straw for warmth.

As years passed, the plain chapel was not only the school room, but the center of village social life. Though at one time Methodists banned folk singing and dancing, musical performances were held in some chapels as well as the poetry contests and singing festivals, still popular in Wales. Here there is no organ or choir loft. Later, chapels would be built with a second story and a railing to accommodate the choir. Welsh hymn writers were prolific, and their songs are still very much in use in the 21st century. As the larger, ornate chapels with steeples and stained glass windows became widespread in Wales, our plain chapel becomes a piece of history.

Wars and economic depression drastically affected Wales during the past two centuries. Industries closed and thousands of Welsh left for America, especially Pennsylvania, in search of work. The Welsh immigrants brought with them the continuing traditions of poetry and singing festivals. Today, tourism is the largest industry in Wales. Welsh performers are popular all over the world. An elected Welsh General Assembly has limited powers. The language is very much alive, with bi-lingual road signs and a Welsh language television channel. As you leave the Welsh Room, notice the carved stone dragon above the entrance in the corridor. It represents the legendary victory of the Red Dragon over the White Dragon, found in numerous tales of medieval Wales. It also represents, as does our Chapel, the triumph of Good over Evil!"