

# **RESTORING THE CHAPELS at CATHAYS CEMETERY**



**The Friends of Cathays Cemetery**



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# Preface

It is with great pleasure that I am able to provide a preface to this booklet concerning the ongoing restoration of Cathays Chapels.

These fabulous Grade II listed buildings within Cathays Cemetery are an excellent example of Victorian Municipal Style cemetery chapels in gothic style. The restoration has taken a great deal of hard work over a number of years by Bereavement Services and the Friends of Cathays Cemetery to restore so that they can once again be used for both funerals and wedding ceremonies and that they can once again be used by the public and act as a base for the 'Friends' group.

None of this would have been possible without the support of the Friends of Cathays Cemetery and the Keep Wales Tidy assistance to obtain the initial landfill tax grant. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank those who contributed to the crowdfunding.

Martin Birch

Operational Manager (Bereavement & Registration Services)

# 1 Construction in 1859



*Photograph showing original steeple on Bell-Tower*

Originally in 1859 the cemetery site covered some 30 acres and was from the outset intended not only to be a practical solution to the problem of finding a resting place for the deceased of Cardiff but also a pleasant place for recreation. The grounds were landscaped and numerous specimen trees were planted along with flower beds so giving the cemetery the appearance of a country park, literally a garden of remembrance.

Located on the outskirts of the town, constructed within the cemetery were a number of buildings whose purpose was to serve the cemetery. Perhaps the most imposing of these are the funerary chapels, one Anglican the other Non-Conformist. These chapels were built to a design by Mr Robert George Thomas (1820–1883), an architect who subsequently worked in Adelaide. The chapels, which face the Fair Oak Road entrance to the cemetery, were built in a Gothic Revival style. The same architect also designed the Roman Catholic chapel that had its own entrance from Allensbank Road.





At one time, despite being Grade II listed, it seemed quite possible that the same fate that beheld the Catholic Chapel could befall the other chapels, and demolition seemed an evitable result. The roofs, full of holes and leaks, were covered in tarpaulins and safety fencing was erected around the chapels.



### 3 Re-roofed (2009)



It was announced by the Operational Manager of Bereavement Services at the Friend's Annual General Meeting in November 2008 that the roofs would be replaced, at a cost of £400,000 from the Council's "Reserve Fund", during the first half of 2009 and hopefully be completed in time for the upcoming 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary arrangements.

The purple and grey slates used in the new roofs, matched exactly the original pattern similar to that on the roof of The Lodge, which has been continuously occupied since 1859. The new slates came from the same quarries as the original ones.





The new roofs now look just as impressive, if not more so, on the inside as on the exterior. Due to their listed status, the original construction had to be replicated as far as practical.

## **4 Restored Interior (2013)**

The Exterior of the Chapels was restored in time for the 150-year anniversary in 2009. But the interior of the chapels still needed attention. The aisles had had solid floors laid with black and white diamond Victorian tiles, but the pews were on suspended timber floor frames which were not considered safe enough to mount scaffolding on, so they had to be removed (along with the few remaining pews that were full of woodworm). These left gaping ventilation holes in the floors, so the chapels were still unusable, and were only fit for the Friends to store their monthly workday's tools in.



*The Interior of the Chapel after re-roofing*

During 2014 in co-operation with Keep Wales Tidy Cardiff Bereavement Services secured a £58,000 Grant to enable the chapels to be put into use again, the doors & windows being repaired, lighting and heating installed and new ‘floating’ oak floors provided. Still far from a full restoration to the original state - polycarbonate was used for the windows – as the chapels are listed grade II, the guiding principle being that any work on the building had to be reversible should it be required. The floors were inserted as ‘floating’. On a very chilly day in January 2015, it all came to fruition as the Friends first held their Annual General Meeting in one of the chapels, but before the heating had been installed.



Interest was shown by Cardiff funeral directors for putting the chapels into use for Funeral Services. The Bereavement Services used crowd-funding to achieve the target figure required, and thanks to significant contributions from firms in the business and the Friends this was achieved. It was decided that the Non-Conformist chapel should have exposed stonework to give it a more traditional look.



*Stonework in the Nonconformist chapel.*

## 5 The Chapel Doors (2014)



*One of the exquisitely restored chapel doors*

All the original Victorian strapwork was carefully cleaned and re-used in the restoration work on the chapel doors.

## 6 The Pews (2015)

Meanwhile in 2015 the opportunity arose for the Friends to purchase some redundant Victorian pews from St. Catwg's Church, Penttyrch and the Friends carried out restoration on workdays and achieved a pristine state by re-staining them. The overall effect was stunning. The Pews were restored to former glory through the dedication of the Friends and in particular, Ivor Lippett, Eddie Newman and Michael Fairclough.



*The Pews installed in the Nonconformist chapel.*



*Ivor Lippett testing one of the new pews.*

## **7 Oak Flooring (2016)**

During 2016 the very impressive block oak floor was installed over the utilitarian floating floor. The Improved lighting, air-conditioning and heating was also installed at this time.

## 8 Bell Tower (2017)

The bell tower now cleared of debris, glazed and waterproofed requires further work. The ground floor comprises of two small vestries with fireplaces. A narrow stone spiral staircase provides access to the first floor of the tower, having the benefit of the morning sunshine and fine views over the main entrance area of the Cemetery, and at the back, the Cedar of Lebanon.



*View from the bell tower*

Temporary doors to the central passage of the tower have now been replaced by wrought iron gates, which match the other iron-work on the Cemetery gates and make a distinct difference to the character of the building, clearly distinguishing the separate roles of the side rooms. The walls of the passage are now exposed and the resulting framed view through it is very impressive.





*The gated central passage*

The Bereavement Services and Friends were very grateful to a donation from The Cymric Historic Preservation Trust for this work to be carried out and a Complimentary plaque has been installed on the wall to commemorate their contribution.



*Commemoration plaque*

## 9 Tile work (2018)

The Bereavement Services had installed the suspended wooden floors into the Victorian Chapels, but while this was a tremendous improvement, the long neglected Victorian geometric tiling on the dais was noticeably damaged in the Conformist Chapel, and in a state of disrepair. There were also a few tiles missing from the wall frieze.



*Before the Restoration*

Committee member Ivor Lippett proposed that the Friends should fund a restoration project to return the tiles to their former glory. Honorary President Paul Nicholson undertook to find a suitably qualified company and obtain a quote for the work. Pontcanna (Victorian) Tiling & Restoration, a local company, was selected.

To replace missing or broken tiles new ones had to be manufactured by specialist tile makers, Craven Dunnill, who was one of the suppliers of

the original tiles. They are based at the Jackfield museum, at Ironbridge, Shropshire, and now specialise in producing matching products for unique historic restorations such as this.



*The manufactured tiles*

The maker's mark "Maw & Co – Broseley" appears on the surface of two of the dark brown centre tiles, as well as on the reverse of the old damaged tiles. A Pontcanna Tiling expert stated that few of their tiles can be found in Cardiff today.



*Maker's Mark*

Eagle-eyed members of the Friends may have also spotted the upside down tiles in the main body floor pattern. This is thought to be deliberate as we have learnt of a craftsman who did this as his “signature”. Pontcanna Tiling has left them in place as a mark of respect to the original tiler.



*After the Restoration*

The wall frieze on the two longer walls of the Chapel has different tiles to those in the floor. This floral glazed tile pattern in brown and cream is called Godwin, after their manufacturer. The linear patterning depends on alternate tiles being 90 degrees out of phase. At first, it was thought that the replacement tiles had been incorrectly cut, but checking confirmed that Craven Dunnill had manufactured them faithfully to the patent book design. This gave rise to a pattern continuity issue to which the solution was to cut some tiles in half, thereby maintaining the momentum in the pattern. While not the perfect solution, most observers would probably not be able to spot the difference. It is thought that the original tiles, purchased 125 years ago, may have been “seconds” with reverse patterns, bought to keep the price of the frieze down. A fantastic restoration by Pontcanna Tiling has produced a legacy for the Chapels that we hope will endure for another 150 years.

## **10 The Future**

The chapels are not reserved exclusively for funeral services and there have been over a dozen weddings held in them since the beginning of 2016. It has also seen lute concerts, a male voice choir and dramatized performances. Funerary and Memorial services started in 2017.

Restoration grants are only forthcoming if you have a realistic plan for sustainable use. The aim is that one chapel will become a visitor centre, although it is already being used for occasional events.

The current intention is that income from the use of the chapels will be ring-fenced and directed to further works. The central bell tower restoration is to be one of the Projects to be started shortly by the Bereavement Services.

In 2018, you could have been transported back 150 years, when a funeral using a horse-drawn hearse awaited outside the Nonconformist chapel. A flashback to a splendid Era.



And maybe sometime in the future the nearby bier house (with its splendid Victorian urinals) may be rebuilt. An item high on our wish list.



