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Methodism in Wales, 1730–1850

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Contents

Introduction

In this free course, *Methodism in Wales, 1730–1850*, you will learn about a neglected strand of Welsh history and identity.

By the mid nineteenth century Calvinistic Methodism had become the most popular religious denomination in Wales and a mainstay of Welsh national identity. Having originally grown up as a movement inside the Church of England, in 1811 the Welsh Methodists formally seceded to form their own church. By 1851 over a quarter of Welsh adults regularly attended Methodist services, making it the largest religious denomination in Wales.

The origins of this new religious movement, how it rose to prominence, and its significance for Welsh identity more broadly, will be explored by considering the following questions:

- Where did this new form of religion come from?
- Why did it become so popular?
- How did it become so intertwined with ideas about Welshness?

What's more, the course will introduce you to some fantastic free online resources such as:

- Coflein: the online catalogue of archaeology, buildings, industrial and maritime heritage in Wales
- Dictionary of Welsh biography
- Internet Archive
- People's Collection Wales
- A Vision of Britain through time
- Welsh Newspapers Online

These collections are enormously valuable for learning not just about Methodism, but about the history of Wales more broadly.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course A329 *The making of Welsh history*.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- demonstrate an understanding of the broad history of Nonconformity generally and Methodism specifically in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Wales
- see connections and conflicts between religious affiliation and national identity in this period of Welsh history
- identify some of the types of evidence, including statistics, architecture and newspapers that tell us about that history
- make use of some of the resources for studying Welsh history that are freely available online.

1 Introducing the course

Before you start the course, watch the following video.

Video content is not available in this format.

2 The rise of Methodism

Back in the sixteenth century Catholicism had been largely ousted from Wales and replaced by the Church of England (often referred to as the Anglican Church). However, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw challenges to Anglican supremacy from many Nonconformist groups who, for various reasons, rejected the Church of England as 'not properly Protestant'. It was against that backdrop that Calvinistic Methodism arose in the 1730s and 1740s, initially within the Anglican Church but later beyond its bounds. It was originated by men like Howell Harris and Daniel Rowland (Figure 1) and, during the eighteenth century, began to exert significant sway as Wales's only home-grown brand of Protestantism.

Figure 1 Statue of Daniel Rowland, made by Edward Griffith of Chester and unveiled in 1883. Llangeitho, Ceredigion. Rowland was one of the leaders of the Welsh Methodist revival during the mid eighteenth century. Photo © Roger Kidd

Indeed, in 1811 Wales's first Calvinistic Methodist ministers were ordained at Bala and Llandeilo, marking the movement's formal separation from the Church of England. This new form of Christianity, which emerged during the 1740s, placed great emphasis on personal epiphanies, fervent preaching and doing good works. In addition, as the eighteenth century wore on the Welsh Methodists became increasingly uncomfortable with the idea of bishops, which they tended to view askance, as remnants of medieval Catholic oppression. During the 1820s, this new Welsh Methodist Church agreed its creed and constitution and in 1864 it held its first general assembly. For the first time ever, Wales had a Christian Church that was specifically Welsh in origin.

3 The Nonconformist context

Calvinistic Methodism was just one of a number of forms of Christianity that grew in strength and popularity during the eighteenth century. For that reason Wales has been referred to by some historians as a 'Nonconformist nation', with the term 'Nonconformist' referring to forms of Christianity that were Protestant but did not accept the theology, institutions or authority of the Church of England. The label 'Nonconformist nation' is more properly applied to the nineteenth century, yet it was during the eighteenth century that Nonconformity really took root in Wales. So when the Welsh Methodists left the Anglican Church in 1811, they joined a number of other Nonconformist denominations that had been around for at least a century already.

Figure 2 Portrait of Christmas Evans, painted in 1835 by William Roos and currently held by the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff. Evans was one of the leading lights of the Baptist movement in Wales. Photo: Art Collection 2/Alamy

The rise of Nonconformity in Wales can in part be attributed to the 'circulating schools' which first appeared during the 1730s and 1740s. This initiative saw teachers moving from village to village, using biblical texts as the basis for teaching both children and adults to read in the Welsh language. This new educational movement did much to improve literacy levels and religious knowledge amongst the Welsh population. It also acted as a catalyst for the growth of both Methodism within the Church of England and Nonconformist denominations outside it.

However Griffith Jones and Bridget Bevan, the leading lights of the circulating school movement, were Anglicans, much like the early Methodists who came after them. Indeed the value of their educational work was recognised across denominations. In 1892, the Welsh Anglican churchman John Morgan wrote:

> Everybody, too, who knows anything of Wales, knows its deep indebtedness in the matter to the Rev. Griffith Jones, the Apostolic Vicar of Llanddowror, the founder of the circulating charity schools, and to his friend Madam Bevan, their liberal patron. These schools, humble in their character, as best suited the ignorant and indigent state of the rural districts for which they were primarily intended, and modest in their aim and pretension as compared to modern institutions of the kind, conferred an immense blessing on Wales. Their temporary continuance in one place; the smallness of their number; the inadequacy of the masters' salaries, owing, of course, to the inadequacy of funds, as well perhaps as the extreme difficulty of finding competent teachers, or of properly training for purposes of public teaching the raw and uninformed Welsh peasant, the only material at hand, militated, it is thought, against their efficiency; but it is certain that for a whole century the only rural spots where even a glimmering of light could be seen were the parishes where these Church-schools circulated and secured the co-operation of the clergy.
>
> (Morgan, 1892, pp. 79–80)

Now listen to Audio 1, in which Neil Evans discusses why Nonconformity became so popular in Wales during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He particularly emphasises the democratic nature of Nonconformist religion, as opposed to the strict hierarchy of the Church of England, as well as the power of the Bible to inspire worshippers.

Audio content is not available in this format.
Audio 1 Extract from Programme 8, Crisis, of the BBC Radio Wales Millennium History series, *The People of Wales* (1999)

For much of the 1700s, the largest Nonconformist denominations in Wales were the Baptists and the Congregationalists (sometimes called Independents). The Quakers and the Presbyterians also claimed significant numbers. The rather forbidding fellow in Figure 2 is Christmas Evans, one of the Baptist movement's most fiery and inspiring speakers. During his career as an itinerant preacher in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Evans eschewed the accumulation of wealth and the comforts of an easy life. Instead he roamed far and wide delivering evangelising sermons to the masses. In those respects he is a great example of Nonconformist forms of ministry in this era.

4 Nonconformity in figures

Table 1 gives us an idea of the strength of Nonconformity in different parts of Wales in 1715. At that point Methodism had yet to develop, and when it did the movement remained within the Anglican Church until the start of the nineteenth century. The information that the table provides is incomplete – see, for example, the question marks in place of membership figures for Baptists and Quakers in Cardigan.

Table 1 Dissenting congregations in 1715 (the number of congregations for each county is followed by the supposed membership)

Country	Presbyterian	Independent	Baptist	Quaker	Total
Ang/Caerns	-	2/250	-/-	-/-	2/250
Merioneth	-	1/150	-	3/?	4/300?
Denbigh	2/285	-/-	1/150	1/2	4/450
Flint	1/25	-/-	-/-	-/-	1/25
Brecon	1/150	4/1200	1/400	1/?	7/1800?
Radnor	-	3/850	2/100	2/40	7/1900
Montgomery	1/120	3/300	-	6/?	10/?
Cardigan	1/250	2/1000	1/?	1/?	5/?
Carmarthen	17/4750	2/1350	3/900	4/?	26/7200?
Pembroke	1/500	3/480	1/?	4/70	9/1500?
Glamorgan	1/?	6/2060	5/1600	2/?	14/4500?
Monmouth	-	9/1180	7/2080	4/90	20/3350
Totals	25/7000	35/8800	21/ 6300	28/ 750?	109/ 22,850

(Jenkins, 1991, p. 146)

Activity 1

What does this table tell us about the religious scene in Wales prior to the rise of Methodism?

Discussion

What the table reveals is that Nonconformist denominations varied greatly in strength depending on which parts of Wales you look at. Monmouth, for example, boasted nearly 3000 Baptists but no Presbyterians. Overall, however, it gives us a figure of almost 23,000 Nonconformists in Wales in 1715. That sounds like a lot, but Wales at that time had an adult population of around 300,000. So Nonconformists made up only about 8 per cent of potential churchgoers Wales. Of course, that does not automatically make everyone else a practising Anglican. In fact, levels of attendance at Anglican services remained fairly low throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Field, 2012, pp. 718–19).

Now let's step forward in time to 1851. The religious census carried out that year across England and Wales enables us to see how our four denominations fared in Wales during the intervening period. It also gives a useful sense of the success of Calvinistic Methodism, which was by this point also a Nonconformist movement operating beyond the bounds of Anglicanism.

What the census reveals is that, by the mid nineteenth century, Nonconformity in its various forms was in the ascendancy. Out of about 950,000 people attending services in Wales that year, over a quarter were Calvinistic Methodists whilst only a fifth counted themselves as Anglican. The Baptists, meanwhile, claimed only about 25,000 fewer adherents than the Church of England. Wesleyan Methodism (a separate strand from the Calvinistic variety) was also a significant force with over 100,000 'hearers' (meaning people who 'heard' services and sermons). Meanwhile, there were almost a quarter of a million Congregationalists in Wales at that time. They were categorised as 'other' in the 1851 census because each Congregationalist church was independent, rather than being part of any wider denominational structure. What's more, a small but significant group of Catholics were still practising their religion in Wales some three centuries after the Reformation. That Catholic contingent would soon be swelled by in-migration from places like Ireland as a result of the growing demand for labour that accompanied industrialisation in south Wales and to a lesser extent north Wales.

Activity 2

To get a better sense of the religious situation in Wales in 1851, go to the Vision of Britain through time website, which uses a host of sources as the basis for a detailed statistical account of British history. Then follow these steps:

- Click on the 'Statistical atlas' tab in the menu bar towards the top of the page.
- Click on the 'Roots & Religion' option.
- Click on 'Calvinistic Methodist "Attendances" as Percentage of Total for modern local authorities in 1851' from the list of options.
- Explore the map that appears using the zoom tool in the map pane. The darker the shade of brown, the greater the proportion of Calvinistic Methodists in that area.
- Use the 'Available rates' drop-down menu to look at 1851 church attendance maps for other denominations, including Baptists, Church of England, Church of Scotland, Roman Catholics and Wesleyan Methodists.

Please note that for these other denominations you will see a map of Britain as a whole rather than just Wales. You should also be aware that for the statistics on which these maps are based are calculated in relation to attendance rates across Britain as a whole, rather than just in Wales. That is why they don't necessarily tally with the figures given in the explanation above. Nonetheless, the maps do a great job of emphasising the popularity of Calvinistic Methodism amongst the Welsh in the nineteenth century, and also how specific the denomination was to Wales.

The Vision of Britain through time website can be used to research a whole range of themes in Welsh and British history, and it gives you the facility to focus on specific areas or individual settlements. When you've finished this course, please do spend some more time exploring it.

Based on this evidence, the notion of a ‘Nonconformist nation’ is far more applicable to 1851 than 1715. Yet the seeds of Nonconformity’s dominance during the nineteenth century lies in the eighteenth. Indeed, some historians have argued that the very existence of the Baptists, Congregationalists, and other denominations, who were already worshipping beyond the bounds of Anglicanism, created the conditions in which a specifically Welsh form of Methodist nonconformity could arise (Bradley, 1990, pp. 50–-60).

5 Two strands of Methodism

When people think of Methodism, it is often the Englishman John Wesley (1703–1791) who springs to mind. Wesley, and the movement that he helped to create, certainly had an impact in Wales, as you saw in the previous section, the movement had claimed over 100,000 adherents by 1851. Nevertheless, more significant in Wales was an indigenous form of Methodism which developed at around the same time. It was this movement that grew into the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists, renamed the Presbyterian Church of Wales in 1928.

There was certainly much that united the two movements. Both emphasised the authority of the Bible, internal faith over external ritual, personal conversion, and the importance of charitable work and missionary activity. Moreover, John Wesley and his brother Charles, who led the movement in England, had a great deal of contact with Welsh Methodist leaders like Howell Harris and Daniel Rowland.

The main difference between them was theological. Wesley and his followers adhered to the view that salvation was available to anyone who was willing to work for it. However the Welsh Methodists followed the Calvinistic line that God has, through his ability to perceive all of time, already chosen those who are to be saved. In other words, our actions are known to God before we take them and our lives are therefore predestined.

As Jones, Schlenther and White point out, ‘Calvinistic Methodism, the smaller, almost forgotten, Methodist sibling, has received considerably less academic attention than Wesleyan Methodism’ (2012, p. xii). Yet the two maps below amply demonstrate the pre-eminence of that ‘forgotten sibling’ in Wales during the eighteenth century.

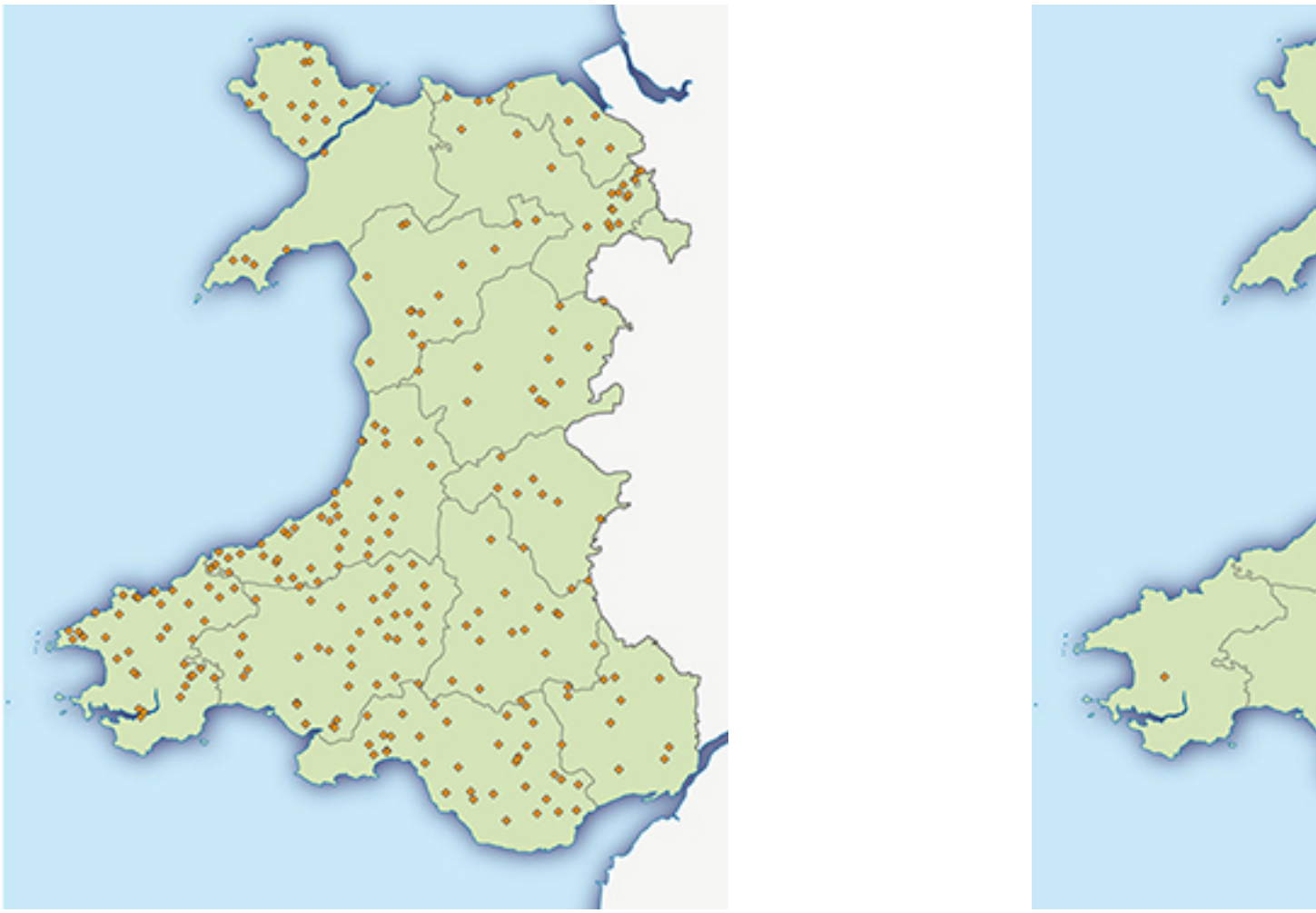


Figure 3 Left: Map showing the location of Calvinistic Methodist chapels in Wales in 1800. Right: Map showing the location of Wesleyan Methodist chapels in Wales in 1800. Maps © Crown copyright, RCAHMW

6 Calvinistic Methodism

As we have discovered, by the middle of the nineteenth century Calvinistic Methodism had become a popular form of Protestantism in Wales. At the moment, however, we are interested in its origins and early progress within the Church of England – indeed it was not until the nineteenth century that the Welsh Methodists formed their own confederation outside of the Anglican faith. Nevertheless, it was even then already a sizeable movement, claiming around 10,000 'hearers' by 1750 and approximately 30,000 by the time of its secession from the Anglican Church in the 1810s (Field, 2012, p. 707).

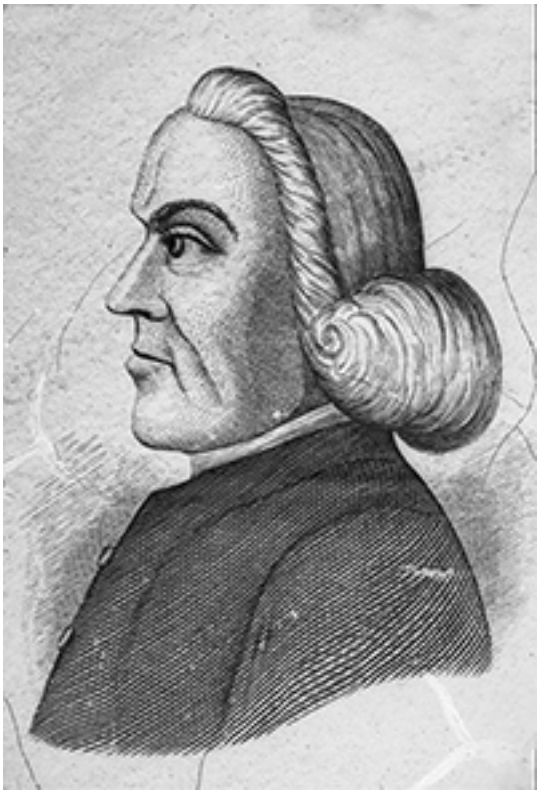


Figure 4 Portrait of Howell Harris, painted c.1875 by John Thomas and now held by the National Library of Wales. Harris was one of the leaders of the eighteenth-century Methodist Revival in Wales. Image accessed via Wikimedia Commons.

Yet the development of the movement was far from smooth, and the early leaders of Methodism in Wales were frequently met with verbal and even physical abuse. The quote below, admittedly from a later source with a pro-Methodist bias, describes Howell Harris's response to one such occasion:

> An Association was one time to be held at Llandovery. Rowland, and Williams of Pantycelyn, and Howell Davies arrived there before Harris, and began the public service. But when they stood up to preach a fierce opposition arose: such a blowing of horns, beating of drums and kettles, ringing of bells, and throwing of missiles at those on the platform took place that Williams said 'Brethren, it is impossible to go on here, in the midst of so much noise and danger; let us go to my residence at Pantycelyn, and hold the Association there.' So they reluctantly started. But on the way Harris met them, and asked with great surprise 'Where are you going?' Williams replied 'We are going to

> Pantycelyn; we cannot go on at Llandovery, for our life is in danger.' 'Life! Life!' replied Harris, 'is that all? Here is my life for the sake of Christ. Let us go back; they shall have this poor body of mine.' So back they went, with Harris at their head. When they got to the platform, Harris stepped upon it with much boldness and firmness, solemnly crying out, 'Let us pray,' and the crowd were silent in a moment. He then prayed with such power and warmth that the people were overawed, and attended to the preaching with quietness and interest.
>
> (Evans, 1907, pp. 114–15)

While Methodists were not under direct threat from the state as the dissenters of the 1600s had been, during the eighteenth century they were nonetheless still the object of considerable suspicion. This was a far cry from the ascendant Nonconformity that characterised much of Welsh society during the nineteenth century

Activity 3

To get a sense of the rise and significance of Methodism in Wales, watch the clip below from the BBC television series The Story of Wales. Then answer the question.

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 1 The Story of Wales

How impartial and accurate do you think this clip is?

- impartial and accurate on all counts
- contains traces of bias, but it is a pretty accurate account of events
- biased, but the main points are accurate
- wildly biased and very inaccurate

Provide your answer...

Feedback

To my mind, this clip implicitly marginalises the Anglican majority in Wales by exaggerating the impact of Methodism and the other forms of Nonconformity that flourished in the period. Indeed, this is a good example of how attempts to tell the 'story' of a nation tend to distort our understanding of the past by excluding elements that do not fit the narrative that the storyteller has chosen. Nevertheless, the clip does make a direct link between rising literacy levels, thanks to Griffith Jones' circulating schools, and the Methodist Revival. Although the programme simplifies that connection, it is right to emphasise the relationship between Welsh-language literacy and the evangelical fever which gripped Wales in the 1740s – a fever which boosted Nonconformity in general as well as contributing to the birth of Methodism.

Activity 4

As we learned earlier in the course, circulating schools were the brainchild of Griffith Jones, supported by the wealthy heiress Bridget Bevan. You can learn more about both of them in the Dictionary of Welsh biography. You can either search for a particular biography, or search for the individual you are researching in the text of the entries themselves.

While you are there, why not also look up Methodist leaders such as Howell Harris, Daniel Rowland, William Williams, Peter Williams and Thomas Charles. Try to read at least four entries (they are nice and short), although you should feel free to read more if you have the time. Then make some notes on what you have found out about Methodism in the box below.

What have you learned from the dictionary entries about Welsh Methodism?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

From looking at the biographies of eighteenth-century Methodist leaders in Wales, you have probably formed an impression of a religion based on powerful sermons, charismatic leaders and individuals experiencing religious conversions or awakenings. Indeed the 1730s and 1740s in Wales are often referred to as a time of 'evangelical revival', meaning a period of zealous and energetic preaching to spread the word of God. Services and sermons were conducted in Welsh and, as some of the entries mention, many Methodist preachers wrote and published both hymns and religious texts in Welsh as well. You may also have noticed that the movement's early leaders tended to operate at the fringes of the Church of England, and were tolerated rather than celebrated by the Anglican hierarchy.

7 Welsh Chapels

After the civil wars of the seventeenth century, laws were passed which banned Nonconformists from attending Anglican church services. As a result, they often ended up worshipping in their own homes or those of their neighbours. Meanwhile, groups, which during the 1700s remained within the Church of England, like the Calvinistic Methodists, attended Anglican services but also often held additional meetings for prayer and discussion in each other's houses. Those domestic roots fed into an eighteenth-century tradition of chapel building in a 'vernacular' style, meaning a type of building that had more in common with local houses and barns than the traditional churches that you and I might be familiar with (Harvey, 1995, pp. 6–9).

In part this reflected a shift across Protestant Britain as a whole, away from the grandiose architecture and ornate decoration of medieval Catholicism towards a simpler form of architecture intended to emphasise the relationship between minister and congregation. However, that trend was amplified for Nonconformists, especially since many Anglicans still worshipped in the medieval churches they had inherited from their Catholic forebears. As King and Sayer argue, the architectural simplicity of chapels built in the 1700s by Congregationalists or Baptists, or later by Methodists, was in part 'an indicator of the modest means of early nonconformist communities', but also stemmed from 'a stricter concern with spiritual matters over worldly display' (King and Sayer, 2011, p. 4).

Figure 5 Left: A Calvinistic Methodist meeting house Right: A Calvinistic Methodist chapel. Both built in the village of Llanddewi Brefi in southern Ceredigion. Photo (left) supplied by Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru/National Library of WalesPhoto (right) © Crown copyright, RCAHMW

Yet as Nonconformity grew in popularity and respectability during the nineteenth century, more elaborate designs began to become common. The two Methodist chapels above, in the village of Llanddewi Brefi near Lampeter, provide a good example of this.

Activity 5

One of the two buildings pictured above was built in 1770. The other replaced it in 1873. Which of them do you think was built first?

- building on the left
- building on the right

Feedback

The meeting house on the left was built first, in 1770. The chapel on the right replaced it in 1873. The new chapel is larger and more imposing than the original meeting

house. It would have had space for significantly more people and presumably cost a lot more to build. It also boasts elements of some of the 'Gothic' architectural features associated with medieval Catholic churches, and which made a comeback in Protestant church building during the nineteenth century. These include a gable-ended design, a high roof, tall windows, rounded arches, and a decorative clock-like design in the gable. In this respect, the new chapel looks more like a church whilst the original one looks more like a house. What this reveals is that Calvinistic Methodism was a lot more popular and wealthy in that part of Wales in the 1870s than it had been in the 1770s. The incorporation of churchlike design elements in the new building also suggests that the Methodists of the late nineteenth century were a lot more confident about their religion than their forebears had been a century earlier.

Now let's consider chapel architecture in more detail. The activity below introduces you to two useful new sites for historical research:

- **People's Collection Wales**: this is a site where people can upload and share images, texts, audio and video relating to Welsh history and culture. It currently boasts over 80,000 individual items and that number is growing daily. The website is funded by the Welsh Government and maintained by a partnership which includes Museums Wales, the National Library of Wales, and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales.
- **Coflein**: this is an online catalogue of historical buildings and sites run by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales. The name 'Coflein' is a composite word from the Welsh 'of' (memory) and 'lein' (line).

You are going to use these websites to learn more about Welsh chapels, but they also contain a wealth of information and material relating to Welsh history and heritage more generally.

Activity 6

Read these webpages on chapel building in Wales in the eighteenth and nineteenth century:

- Early chapel building
- Later chapel building

Next, go to the People's Collection Wales website and search for 'Methodist chapels'. Pick a chapel that you like the look of (it could be an exterior or interior view). Then look up your chosen chapel on the Coflein website, taking particular note of when it was built and any other historical details provided.

Finally, make some notes in the box below about what your chapel's architecture and history tells us about the people who built it. Some of the questions you might consider include:

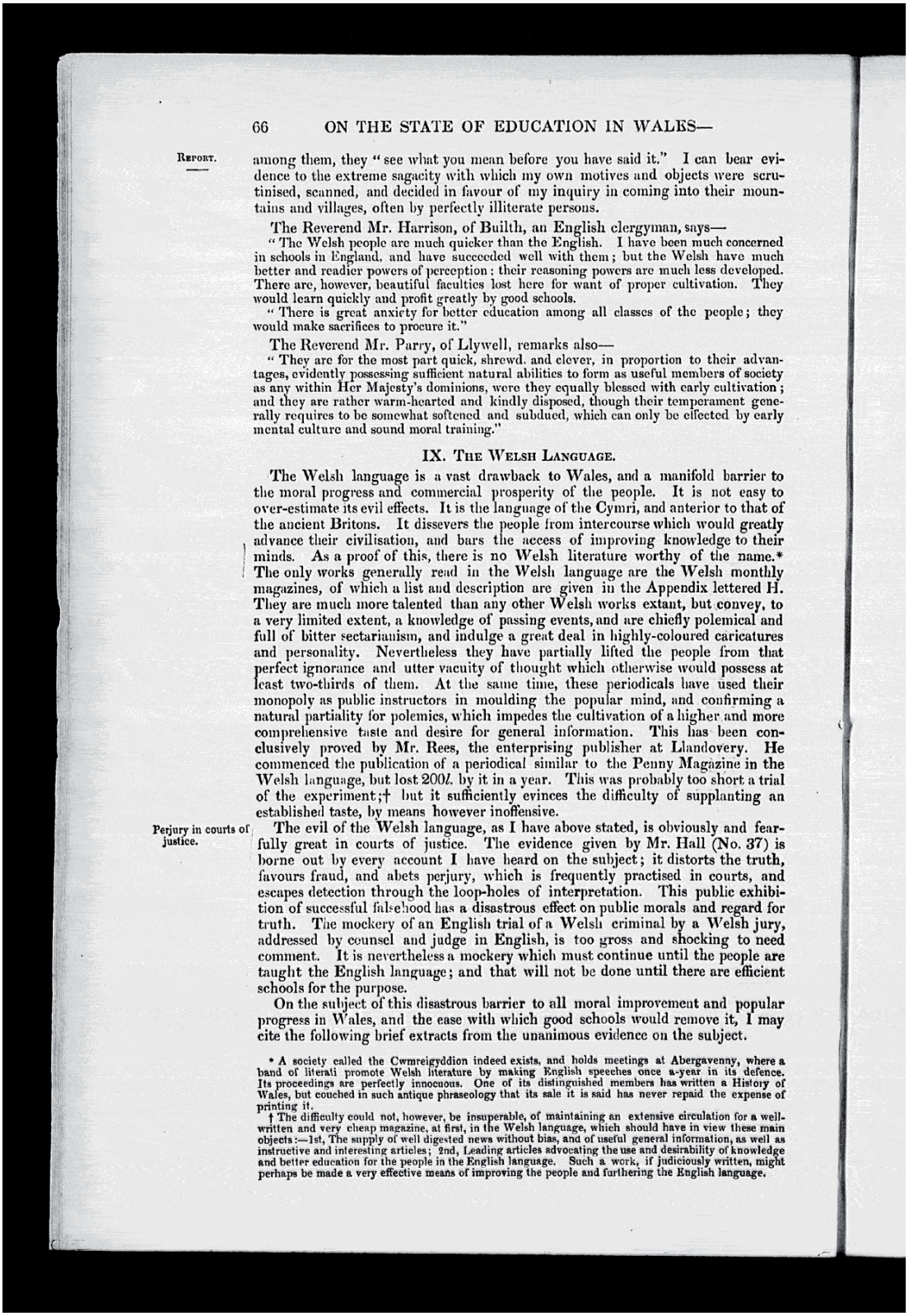
- When was it built? How popular was Calvinistic Methodism in that period? What architectural trends in church building were influential at the time?
- Does it look large and expensive or small and simple? What might this tell us about the people who built and paid for it?

- Is the design house- or barn-like, or more ornate like an Anglican or even a Catholic church? What does its design suggest about the views of the people who built and paid for it?

What does your chapel tell us about Calvinistic Methodism in Wales?

Provide your answer...

8 The Treachery of the Blue Books



66 ON THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN WALES—

REPORT.

among them, they "see what you mean before you have said it." I can bear evidence to the extreme sagacity with which my own motives and objects were scrutinised, scanned, and decided in favour of my inquiry in coming into their mountains and villages, often by perfectly illiterate persons.

The Reverend Mr. Harrison, of Builth, an English clergyman, says—

"The Welsh people are much quicker than the English. I have been much concerned in schools in England, and have succeeded well with them; but the Welsh have much better and readier powers of perception: their reasoning powers are much less developed. There are, however, beautiful faculties lost here for want of proper cultivation. They would learn quickly and profit greatly by good schools.

"There is great anxiety for better education among all classes of the people; they would make sacrifices to procure it."

The Reverend Mr. Parry, of Llywell, remarks also—

"They are for the most part quick, shrewd, and clever, in proportion to their advantages, evidently possessing sufficient natural abilities to form as useful members of society as any within Her Majesty's dominions, were they equally blessed with early cultivation; and they are rather warm-hearted and kindly disposed, though their temperament generally requires to be somewhat softened and subdued, which can only be effected by early mental culture and sound moral training."

IX. THE WELSH LANGUAGE.

The Welsh language is a vast drawback to Wales, and a manifold barrier to the moral progress and commercial prosperity of the people. It is not easy to over-estimate its evil effects. It is the language of the Cymri, and anterior to that of the ancient Britons. It dissevers the people from intercourse which would greatly advance their civilisation, and bars the access of improving knowledge to their minds. As a proof of this, there is no Welsh literature worthy of the name.* The only works generally read in the Welsh language are the Welsh monthly magazines, of which a list and description are given in the Appendix lettered H. They are much more talented than any other Welsh works extant, but convey, to a very limited extent, a knowledge of passing events, and are chiefly polemical and full of bitter sectarianism, and indulge a great deal in highly-coloured caricatures and personality. Nevertheless they have partially lifted the people from that perfect ignorance and utter vacuity of thought which otherwise would possess at least two-thirds of them. At the same time, these periodicals have used their monopoly as public instructors in moulding the popular mind, and confirming a natural partiality for polemics, which impedes the cultivation of a higher and more comprehensive taste and desire for general information. This has been conclusively proved by Mr. Rees, the enterprising publisher at Llandovery. He commenced the publication of a periodical similar to the Penny Magazine in the Welsh language, but lost 200*l.* by it in a year. This was probably too short a trial of the experiment;† but it sufficiently evinces the difficulty of supplanting an established taste, by means however inoffensive.

Perjury in courts of justice.

The evil of the Welsh language, as I have above stated, is obviously and fearfully great in courts of justice. The evidence given by Mr. Hall (No. 37) is borne out by every account I have heard on the subject; it distorts the truth, favours fraud, and abets perjury, which is frequently practised in courts, and escapes detection through the loop-holes of interpretation. This public exhibition of successful falsehood has a disastrous effect on public morals and regard for truth. The mockery of an English trial of a Welsh criminal by a Welsh jury, addressed by counsel and judge in English, is too gross and shocking to need comment. It is nevertheless a mockery which must continue until the people are taught the English language; and that will not be done until there are efficient schools for the purpose.

On the subject of this disastrous barrier to all moral improvement and popular progress in Wales, and the ease with which good schools would remove it, I may cite the following brief extracts from the unanimous evidence on the subject.

* A society called the Cwmreigyddion indeed exists, and holds meetings at Abergavenny, where a band of literati promote Welsh literature by making English speeches once a-year in its defence. Its proceedings are perfectly innocuous. One of its distinguished members has written a History of Wales, but couched in such antique phraseology that its sale it is said has never repaid the expense of printing it.

† The difficulty could not, however, be insuperable, of maintaining an extensive circulation for a well-written and very cheap magazine, at first, in the Welsh language, which should have in view these main objects:—1st, The supply of well digested news without bias, and of useful general information, as well as instructive and interesting articles; 2nd, Leading articles advocating the use and desirability of knowledge and better education for the people in the English language. Such a work, if judiciously written, might perhaps be made a very effective means of improving the people and furthering the English language.

Figure 6 Page 66 of the Blue Books, part 2, no. 9, by R. R. W. Lingen, Jellynger C. Symons and H. R. Vaughan Johnson, 1847, the British government- commissioned report. Here the commissioners cite Welsh as the root of many of the evils that they

perceive in Welsh society.Image © National Library of Wales

One of the most significant events in the history of Calvinistic Methodism, and indeed of Welsh Nonconformity more broadly, occurred in 1847. This was the publication of the 'Reports of the commissioners of inquiry into the state of education in Wales', or the 'Treachery of the Blue Books', as they came to be known in Wales.

These reports were commissioned by parliament in Westminster, and written by three Anglican churchmen from England. They were commissioned specifically to provide a justification for the reform of education in Wales along anglicising lines (Roberts, 1998, pp. 168–179). It is therefore no surprise to learn that the three 'commissioners' cast the Welsh populace, and particularly the Nonconformist majority who by that period constituted over three quarters of Welsh churchgoers, in an extremely negative light. What's more, much of the blame for their alleged deficiencies was apportioned to the Welsh language, as the page image to the right shows.

Listen to historians Ioan Gruffydd, Neil Evans and Hywel Teifi Edwards explain the origins and findings of the 'Blue Books' report. This extract is from the BBC Wales radio programme The People of Wales (1999).

Audio content is not available in this format.
Audio 2 The Treachery of the Blue Books, BBC Radio Wales, People of Wales (1999)

As Evans points out, what the reports had to say about education in Wales was overshadowed by their claims that the Welsh language led to deceit and sedition, that Welsh women were immoral and that Nonconformist practices were to blame. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the reports provoked a furious response from Welsh Nonconformists. Even some Welsh Anglicans were outraged. The poet and historian Jane Williams, for example, argued that:

> The Reports of the commissioners of enquiry into the state of education in Wales, have done the people of that country a double wrong. They have traduced their national character, and in doing so, they have threatened an infringement upon their manifest social rights, their dearest existing interests, comprised in their ordinary modes of worship and instruction, their local customs, and their mother tongue.
>
> (Williams, 1848, p. 5)

This was an uncompromising start to a systematic refutation of the report's findings which ran to some 62 pages of text. In 1854, meanwhile, the Baptist bard Robert Jones Derfel coined the phrase 'treachery of the Blue Books'. This referred to the apocryphal 'treachery of the long knives' in which Saxon invaders had supposedly duped and then murdered a group of Welsh chieftains some fifteen hundred years earlier (Morgan, 1984). The speed with which the name stuck suggests that, for many Welsh people, 1847 marked a similarly heinous betrayal.

One lasting consequence of the Blue Books was that they caused the Calvinistic Methodists to join with Wales's older Nonconformist denominations against what came to be seen as the Anglican enemy. The denominational rivalries that had characterised Nonconformity during the first half of the century seemed unimportant in the face of this vicious Anglican attack. The result was the creation of a new self-consciously Welsh Nonconformist identity in Wales (Morgan, 1984). This is a crucial point because that newly

unified sense of Nonconformist solidarity was to prove pivotal in the development of Welsh national aspirations later in the century.

The leading Welsh historian Geraint Jenkins has called the Treachery of the Blue Books ‘a seminal event … which shaped the future of political and cultural life in Wales for several generations’ (2002, p. 213). It hardened support for Nonconformity, led to a revival in religious education initiatives, and reminded the Welsh of the need to trumpet the value of their own culture.

9 Religion and identity

To uncover the roots of the connection between religion and identity in Wales, we need to look all the way back in the sixteenth century. It was in that period that two very significant events occurred in Wales at almost the same time. Firstly, laws were passed in the 1530s and 40s which, in legal and administrative terms, made Wales a part of England and also banned the Welsh language from official proceedings and law courts. At the same time, Catholicism had been being largely overtaken in Wales by new Protestant forms of Christianity.

With the accession of Elizabeth I to the English throne in 1558, the Anglican form of Protestantism became the state religion in both England and Wales. One of the main resulting changes was the idea that church services, previously held in Latin, should be in a language that people could actually understand. For that reason, and despite the prohibition on the use of the Welsh language in any official capacity, parliament passed an act in 1563 which sanctioned the translation of the Bible and various other religious texts into the Welsh language. Across the country, services and sermons were soon being delivered in Welsh and by the end of the sixteenth century a steady stream of Welsh-language religious literature was being published (Suggett and White, 2002, pp. 54–60).

The result was the creation of a strong connection between language and religion in Wales that lasted for centuries. Banned from places like law courts and the offices of public officials, Welsh instead became associated with religiosity. This was an association that Welsh Nonconformity inherited, operating as it did primarily through the medium of Welsh (James, 2001, pp. 18–19).

Nevertheless, during the eighteenth century a sense of shared Protestantism had helped to forge a new feeling of Britishness which coexisted with English, Scottish and Welsh identities. The threat of hostile Catholic powers like France and Spain made the disparities between Nonconformists and Anglicans seem pretty minor by comparison, especially following failed French-backed invasion attempts in 1715 and 1745 by Jacobites loyal to the Catholic descendants of the ousted James II (Colley, 1992, pp. 11–54). In that context, Protestant disagreements, even over relatively major points of theology and practice, no longer seemed like the life and death matters they had been in Tudor times or during the civil wars. Meetings like the one pictured below came to be tolerated by the state, whereas even a few decades before those participating would have risked arrest.

Figure 7 Painting of 1912 by Hugh Williams, depicting a 1743 meeting of Welsh Methodist leaders including Howell Harris, Daniel Rowland and William Williams. Photo supplied by Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru/National Library of Wales

However, that sense of Protestant unity was unsteady and ultimately short-lived. As the Baptists, the Congregationalists, and others denominations grew in strength during the eighteenth century, and were then themselves eclipsed by the soaring popularity of Calvinistic Methodism in the nineteenth century, the Church of England became increasingly seen as alien to Wales. Such views were fuelled by the fact that many Anglican clergy were absentee Englishmen who seldom even came to Wales, whilst by the late nineteenth century not a single bishop in Wales could speak Welsh. The anti-Anglican feeling sparked by the Treachery of the Blue Books fanned the flames further. As a result, Welsh Nonconformists generally and Calvinistic Methodists in particular were able to position themselves as the true guardians of an authentically Welsh form of Christianity.

Activity 7

Now have a look at a letter written in the 1860s by Henry Richard, a leading politician and churchman in Wales during the mid nineteenth century. He is a great example of the self-consciously Welsh form of Nonconformity that came to dominate Wales in the years following the Treachery of the Blue Books. Before you read the letter, it would be a good idea to look up Richard in the Dictionary of Welsh biography.

To find the letter, go to Richard's collection of Letters and essays on Wales (1884), available via the Internet Archive. You can either view it online (click on the page to move on) or scroll down to the 'download options' section to download a version of it. Downloading takes longer but tends to be more stable. If you do decide to download it, there are various formats listed on the right-hand side of the page. PDF is probably the most straightforward to use.

Read the very first letter, starting on page 1 and ending on page 8 and entitled 'Past religious and moral conditions of Wales'.

What does the letter tell us about Richard's view of religious and national identity in Wales?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Whilst he is a little outside of the timespan for this course, Richard's writings are a great example of how Welsh Nonconformists had come to regard their own national identity by the middle decades of the nineteenth century. In this letter, Richard paints a picture of Welshness based around religion, language and ancestry. In his view, the Church of England failed utterly to foster religious feeling in Wales, and it was only through the development of home-grown forms of Nonconformity that the Welsh acquired their sense of 'knowledge, virtue and religion' (1884, p. 6). What this suggests is that the Protestant unity of the eighteenth century, which served to draw the various peoples and denominations of Britain together, was, by the middle of the nineteenth century, on the wane. By this point, religion was being used by some in Wales as a way of expressing their identity as Welsh rather than British.

10 Newspapers as sources

Now let's put the knowledge you have gained about Methodism in Wales to the test by doing some research on the Welsh Newspapers Online database (WNO). This is a free resource hosted by the National library Wales, which allows you to search through thousands and thousands of items published in dozens of Welsh newspapers between 1804 and 1919.

Newspapers are an invaluable window onto a wide variety of events, individuals, developments and topics. However, they also present some challenges for historians, one of which is the fact that you usually a good understanding of your topic before you start using them so that you can make sense of what you find. That is what the activity below gives you a chance to practice.

Activity 8

Go to Welsh Newspapers Online and search for information on Methodists in Wales in the period between 1804 (the furthest the database goes back) and 1850. You will find advice below on how to search. Then pick one or two of the articles you have found, and use what you have learned about Methodism in Wales to try to put them into context and understand what they are about.

What are your one or two articles about? What do they tell us about Methodism in Wales during the first half of the nineteenth century?

Provide your answer...

How to search for data

Welsh Newspapers Online contains a wealth of information relevant to Wales in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, because the database contains such a wealth of material, keyword searches can generate a great many results. You will need, therefore, to be very clear about what you are searching for otherwise you could waste a lot of time looking through irrelevant material.

The database offers a number of options to narrow your results. Below are a few suggestions for searching in ways that will help you manage your results and find relevant information more quickly. I have concentrated on the 'Search' function only, although WNO also offers the option to 'Browse'. Browsing can be a useful part of the research process as sometimes you stumble upon a reference to events or developments you might not think to look for. However, it is time-consuming and it is very easy to get sidetracked, especially with newspapers, reading material that is interesting but ultimately irrelevant to your search needs. For now, therefore, concentrate on familiarising yourself with the search function.

- Using Boolean operators (words like 'and', 'or', 'not', etc.) helps to reduce the number of hits. For example, 'Methodist AND Welsh' generates 55,192. If you use Boolean operators to search, however, you must make sure that you type the limiters

in capitals: AND, NOT, OR. A lower case ‘and’ will be treated as a search word and increase the number of results (in this example to 11,436,039).

- The ‘Advanced Search’ option offers the option of Boolean operators in a drop-down list to the side of the search box and means that you don’t have to remember to type them in.
- Narrow by date. The date slide allows you to search across the whole collection or any part of it, even a single year. This is particularly useful, as for this activity you are focusing on the period up to 1850.
- Think about what type of information you are looking for. The tick boxes on the search page defaults to ‘All Articles’ but you may want only news reports. You can filter out irrelevant material by making sure you only select the type of information you actually want.
- If you forget to set the options on the search page and you generate an extensive list of hits, don’t worry, as you can still narrow your results. The database provides a number of filters on the left-hand side of the ‘Search Results’ page. From these you can zoom in on a specific newspaper title, a category (i.e. advert, news, notices), a date (decade, year, month or day), a language (Welsh or English), a region (North Wales, West Wales, etc.) and/or an illustration type (cartoon, photograph, etc.). Using one or more of these filters is an effective way of weeding out unwanted or irrelevant hits. You need to practise with these. If you are too specific with your requirements you may end up with no hits at all.
- Once you are happy with your results list, you can then organise your material by using the ‘Sorting’ option above the filters. This allows you to arrange your results by relevance or by date in ascending or descending order.

Conclusion

In this free course, *Methodism in Wales, 1730–1850*, you learned about a neglected strand of Welsh history and identity.

Below are the three questions posed in the introduction to this course. Based on the work that you have done with resources like Dictionary of Welsh biography, a Vision of Britain through time, Coflein, the People's Collection Wales, and Welsh Newspapers Online, you have hopefully started to come up with your own answers to these questions. Below are some thoughts, which you should view as starting points only rather than the final word on the subject.

- Where did this new form of religion come from?

It arose in the 1730s and 1740s from the teachings of charismatic and energetic preachers who felt uneasy with the direction that the Church of England had taken, particularly in terms of its hierarchical organisation, and wanted to inspire people to feel closer to God. It grew from a wider context in which Nonconformity, i.e. dissent from the doctrines and institutions of Anglicanism, was already an important part of the religious landscape in Wales.

- Why did it become so popular?

Calvinistic Methodism, like Nonconformist denominations such as the Baptists and Congregationalists, benefitted from a religious fervour which gripped large parts of Wales in the middle of the eighteenth century. However, it was the growing literacy of the Welsh population which helped it to become the leading form of Christianity in Wales by the middle of the nineteenth century. You should also bear in mind that there was an element of fatalism to Welsh Methodism, a sense that events were pre-ordained. In a society where poverty was the norm, this may have been some comfort. As a result, Nonconformity generally and Methodism in particular went from strength to strength in the 1800s. This led to a growing confidence amongst Methodists, reflected in some of the imposing and expensive chapels that they built later on in the nineteenth century.

- How did it become so intertwined with ideas about Welshness?

The democratic nature of Calvinistic Methodism in Wales, especially once the movement had seceded from the Church of England, also played well with Welsh people who increasingly viewed Anglicanism as an English import. Indeed, the popularity of Welsh Methodism was boosted significantly by growing criticisms of Anglicanism. The Treachery of the Blue Books galvanised that anti-Anglican feeling and turned what had been a religious quarrel into a matter of national pride. In addition, the Calvinistic Methodists were able to build on the longstanding connection between Nonconformity and the Welsh language and, in so doing, to position themselves as heirs of the sixteenth-century reformers who had first begun to translate religious texts like the Bible into Welsh. Moreover, as Wales's most popular denomination, Calvinistic Methodism's association with Welsh identity was further bolstered by the fact that it remains the only form of Christianity to be able to claim a specifically Welsh origin.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course A329 *The making of Welsh history*.

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