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The birth of Caersalem

Last updated: 05 July 2007

Les Darbyshire from Barmouth traces the ups and downs of the town's Caersalem Welsh Presbyterian Church.



The history of Caersalem can be divided into four periods, and each period is represented by a particular building.

The first period was when the members worshiped in a house, mainly at the home of Robert Griffith - Y Siop Fawr. This family led the Methodist cause and their young son Hugh was exceptionally taken up with the cause. However, Hugh died when he was 15 and on the margin of the entry of his death in the Parish Register in 1776 is written 'started the Methodist cause'. He left money towards building a proper meeting place for the worshipers.

According to the Treasurer's Book, 1767 is the date given for when the first church was opened. However, there seems to be a difference of opinion on this as the Presbytery Year Book gives the date as 1760 and denotes Caersalem as the second oldest church in the West Merioneth Presbytery.

The site of the first church has long since disappeared, though it is thought it was between where St David's Church and the railway now stand.

From all accounts it was a thriving church and the initial cost had been cleared by 1789.

For some reason the church became too small and they decided to build Caersalem number two. This was located where 1 and 2 Cumberland place is today. The deeds list November 1824 as the date of the new chapel, but it is believed that the building was completed before that date. Again it was debt-free by 1845.

Thus the second period had started which can be classified as the consolidation period. For years the membership was 95, but in 1864 it had increased to 116 as the revival of '59 changed the atmosphere. Many came seeking membership - it was reported in a local paper that 70 new members had 'joined Caersalem within the last month.'

In 1864 Caersalem invited the Rev David Davies to be their first minister. He inherited a strong and viable church and very soon the chapel became too small. The Cambrian Railway Company were anxious to gain possession of the land and offered £850 for the site. This was agreed by the Minister and elders.



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Rosaline Jones states in her book that the British School was opened in Caersalem number two around 1846 and continued later at Caersalem number three until the new school was built.

The story of Caersalem continues...



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Tai Hanesyddol

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Caersalem continues

Last updated: 05 July 2007

A new site had to be located and some land in front of the Lion Hotel was purchased for £380. The cost of the new building was around £2,500 and it was capable of holding between 600 and 700 worshippers. The Rev David Davies retired in 1874 and only £700 remained outstanding.

The Rev RH Morgan followed as minister. He was a native of Dyffryn Ardudwy and received his early teaching there. He was secretary of the North Wales Association from 1883 till 1887. He worked hard to attain a place of worship for the English-speaking residents of Barmouth.

Also during this period a small chapel was built at Llanaber - 'Parse!'. It was a branch of Caersalem and held Sunday School on the Sunday mornings, sermon in the afternoon and occasionally a prayer meeting mid week. The first sermon is recorded as having taken place on June 1856. Previously meetings had been held at various houses, and Hendre Coed is mentioned in particular.

The third period of Caersalem represents the period of benevolence influence and a golden era between the church and the town. When The Rev Gwynoro Davies came to Caersalem in 1887, through his leadership membership increased steadily and in 1892 it had reached its zenith of 440.

Christ Church was officially opened in 1878 and became Caersalem's eldest daughter, with Park Road later becoming its youngest when it was built in 1893. The church had 150 members, mostly from Caersalem, but the mother church soon increased its membership due to the influence of the revival of 1904.

Like many societies, the Great War of 1914-18 affected the cause and naturally the membership diminished. By 1920 the membership was 347 with 100 children. There was a slight improvement the following year, but in effect this was the period of the beginning of the general deterioration in church membership.

Gwynoro Davies served Caersalem and the town with a firm hand and exceptional wisdom. He was elected chairman of the Urban Council for many years and was also a personal friend of David Lloyd George.

He was invited to lecture in America and was also a keen musician. His ideas and thinking were modern and innovative. He received many calls to various churches, but declined them all and always said 'the only Caersalem which would take him away from Caersalem Y Bermo would be the



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Caersalem above.

The same year the Rev EG Jones became minister and the membership stood at 250. In an article he wrote about 20 years later he says the membership had declined by 100 and he had only received three families as members during the period.

His successor was the Rev WH Pritchard. He was in America when he received the call and had not met anyone from the Pastorate but it was a good decision. During his tenure of office of six years Park Road closed and Horeb, Dyffryn Ardudwy joined the Pastorate. He left to take up a ministry at Pontarddulais.

In 1973 the pastorate invited the Rev RW Jones, Y Parc, Bala, to be their minister. He stayed for 20 years and faced many challenges, one of which was the dry rot in Caersalem. It was decided to close Caersalem and to have the Welsh services at Christ Church.

In effect the mother church had decided to go and live with her daughter, it was a happy solution which has worked well. RW Jones deserves praise for his work and when he decided to move to the Bow Street Pastorate - it was a hard decision for our pastorate to accept after his excellent ministry.

Caersalem started worshiping in Christ Church in 1983, and in effect this has shown the toll of diminishing membership, which has fallen drastically to 34, no children, one service on a Sunday and no weekly meetings. The future does not seem bright at this time.

Is there a brighter future to come, we hope so, our faith is strong and we can only emulate the work of our predecessors and give praise to the seven ministers and 45 elders who kept the doors of Caersalem open for all.

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