Synagogue, Merthyr Tydfil

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

(449)2503-GWP-A-HIS-P00
Date: 14.02.25
Prepared by: AD
Checked by: RT

gwparchitecture

Foundation for Jewish Heritage

CONTENTS

Historical view of Synagogue frontage from top of Church Street (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk' website)

1.0 UNDERSTANDING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HISTORIC ASSET – 'STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE'

1.1 An Assessment of Significance

One of the real strengths of any historic building assessment is that it focuses attentions on what is of high importance about a cultural or national asset, whilst similarly defining aspects which are of little or no importance. Thus, in planning what or how to conserve, or develop, areas around it, it is possible to make decisions based on the best possible analytical process rather than on individual preference, or some other arbitrary method.

This section of the report seeks to set out, albeit briefly, what makes the heritage assets, the Synagogue, of value and should therefore be protected.

The assessment of significance has been provided to give an initial guidance on the proposals for the development.

Significance can be defined as the sum of the cultural, social and/or natural heritage values that make a building or place important to this and future generations. The aim of conservation is to sensitively manage change to a place to ensure that its significance is not only protected, but also revealed, reinforced and enhanced at every possible opportunity. It should also ensure that decisions regarding both day-today and long term use and management of the site take into account all of the values that contribute to a place's significance.

The purpose of a Statement of Significance is to identify the areas and aspects of the Synagogue which have cultural significance. Cultural significance is a concept which helps us in estimating the value of a place and which:

- Helps us understand the past;
- Enrich our present lives;
- Will be of value to future generations.

Most historic sites or buildings are significant for a range of reasons, and it is important to understand all of its values in order that informed, balanced decisions can be made.

Many heritage values are recognised by the statutory designation and regulation of significant places. In statutory terms, the significance of the Synagogue is formally recognised by its Listing. As a grade II Listed Building, the Synagogue is a building 'of special interest, warranting every effort to preserve' it, as appraised by Cadw.

However, while these designations provide baseline guidance to the significance of the Synagogue, it is useful to go beyond this view to arrive at a deeper understanding of their values and significance.

Cadw's '*Conservation Principles for the sustainable management of the historic environment in Wales'* (March 2011), expands on how one can analyse the public's interest in heritage assets by sub-dividing it into evidential, historic, aesthetic and communal values. These values can be used to inform the structured and consistent assessment of buildings.

Evidential Value is deemed to derive from those elements of a historic asset that can provide evidence about past human activity, and especially its historic fabric, supported in some cases by documentation. These may be visible and relatively easy to assess, or they may be buried below ground, under water or be hidden by later fabric. These remains provide the primary evidence for when and how an historic asset was made or built, what it was used for and how it has changed over time. The unrecorded loss of historic fabric represents the destruction of the primary evidence. Additional evidential values can be gained from documentary sources, pictorial records and archaeological archives or museum collections.

All buildings — domestic, commercial, religious, industrial etc — have the capacity to provide evidence of specific past human activity from one or perhaps several periods. The extent to which they do so depends on coherence and integrity, or an intelligible development sequence. The extent of survival of original or clearly phased fabric and layout, or of detail relating to use (including internal detail) are particularly important.

Context may also be relevant: the evidential value of a single industrial or agricultural building for example will be diminished if other associated buildings have already been lost or damaged.

Historical Value is deemed to be the associative or illustrative ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through a place to the present.

An historic asset might illustrate a particular aspect of past life or it might be associated with a notable family, person, event or movement. These illustrative or associative values of an historic asset may be less tangible than its evidential value but will often connect past people, events and aspects of life with the present. Of course the functions of an historic asset are likely to change over time and so the full range of changing historical values might not become clear until all the evidential values have been gathered together. Historical values are not so easily diminished by change as evidential values and are harmed only to the extent that adaptation has obliterated them or concealed them.

In practice, much of the historical value of an asset is inseparable from its evidential value — a well-preserved building can illustrate an aspect of past life much better than can a damaged or heavily altered building. But historical value may also reside in the less tangible — in associations with notable people events or movements of proven regional or national significance. As in the criteria for listing, however, these associations will be more powerful if the building as it survives directly confirms the association (i.e. is recognisably the building with which connection is claimed).

The difference between evidential value and illustrative historical value may seem difficult to define, but in general, evidential value relates to the material evidence about how a particular building or site functioned, and historical value to the capacity of that site to illustrate broader historical themes — its contribution to our understanding of aspects of past life, be they for example the organisation of society, developments in agriculture or industry, or in religious observance.

Understanding historical value therefore requires a broader understanding of the asset in context, whereas a good understanding of evidential value can be reached by close physical analysis on site.

Aesthetic Value relates to the external appearance and form of an asset and its relationship to its context and setting, be it a designed landscape, a working agricultural or industrial landscape, or a townscape. Aesthetic Value derives from the way in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from an historic asset. It may relate to conscious design or style or it may be a seemingly fortuitous outcome of the way in which an historic asset has evolved and been used over time, or a combination of both. It may relate to adherence to tradition, to quality of craftsmanship or technology of construction, or it may reflect the results of development over time.

High-quality conscious design — so-called 'polite architecture' often associated with named architects — and vernacular building according to clear regional traditions (and perhaps unconscious design), have their own aesthetic codes. But for both, composition, plan, method of construction, materials, finish and detail — including interior detail — are the essential elements of design.

The form of an asset normally changes over time. Sometimes earlier pictorial records and written descriptions will be more powerful in many people's minds than what survives today. Some important viewpoints may be lost or screened, or access to them may be temporarily denied. To assess this aspect of an asset, again the evidence of the present and past form must be gathered systematically. This needs to be complemented by a thorough appreciation on site of the external appearance of an asset in its setting. Inevitably understanding the aesthetic value of an historic asset will be more subjective than the study of its evidential and historical values. Much of it will involve trying to express the aesthetic qualities or the relative value of different parts of its form or design.

Communal Value derives from the meanings that an asset has for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory. It includes social and economic value, as well as commemorative, spiritual or symbolic value.

It is closely linked to historical and aesthetic values but tends to have additional or specific aspects. Communal value might be commemorative or symbolic. For example, people might draw part of their identity or collective memory from an historic asset, or have emotional links to it. Such values often change over time and they may be important for remembering both positive and uncomfortable events, attitudes or periods in Wales' history. Historic assets can also have social value, acting as a source of social interaction, distinctiveness or coherence; economic value, providing a valuable source of income or employment; or they may have spiritual value, emanating from religious beliefs or modern perceptions of the spirit of a place.

Each of these elements will be dealt with below.

The significance of a place is the sum of these values, brought together and expressed in a statement of significance. This statement forms the foundation upon which any proposals for change and enhancement of a place can be considered and carried forward.

In order to identify the relative contributions that these values make to the significance of a place and therefore the capacity for these values to be revealed and/or enhanced, a range of classifications are used.

For the purpose of this study we have adopted a fairly standard classification using five levels of significance, which are sufficient to measure each aspect of significance and to compare it to others consistently.

High: An aspect of value that strongly contributes to the significance of a place, forming a key piece of its history and cultural value which may be of national or international importance. In material terms, these aspects will best contribute towards the heritage values. Conservation will be a priority, and alteration is likely to be resisted unless it is demonstrated that significance will be greatly enhanced, reinforced or revealed as a result.

Medium: An aspect of value that will have some cultural importance (perhaps on a regional scale) and will make a moderate contribution to the significance of a place. In material terms they will play an important role in conveying the heritage values. Efforts should be made to protect and enhance these aspects, though a greater degree of flexibility is possible than with aspects of high value.

Low: An aspect of value that will make a slight (yet still noteworthy) contribution to the significance of a place, but perhaps only on a local scale. In material terms it will still add something to the heritage values (such as helping to maintain plan form and historic character), although this contribution may have been compromised by loss or uninformed intervention. A greater capacity for enhancement exists than for items of medium or high value, although a low designation does not necessarily mean that the feature is expendable.

Neutral: An aspect that has no discernible value that neither adds to nor detracts from the significance of the place. Informed change will be acceptable.

Detrimental: An aspect of the place that detracts from its values and therefore its significance. In material terms, removal or reversal of these aspects should be strongly encouraged.

1.2 Historical Value

Historical Value is deemed to be the associative or illustrative ways in which past people, events and aspects of life can be connected through a place to the present.

A historic asset might illustrate a particular aspect of past life, or it might be associated with a notable family, person, event or movement. These illustrative or associative values of a historic asset may be less tangible than its evidential value but will often connect past people, events and aspects of life with the present. Of course, the functions of a historic asset are likely to change over time and so the full range of changing historical values might not become clear until all the evidential values have been gathered together. Historical values are not so easily diminished by change as evidential values and are harmed only to the extent that adaptation has obliterated them or concealed them.

Historic character lies at the heart of local distinctiveness and sense of place. No two places share a history, so every place has a unique historic character, which is a powerful asset in regeneration; sustaining it can bring social, economic and environmental benefits.

Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was purpose-built for the Merthyr Tydfil Hebrew Congregation between 1876-7; the cornerstone laid by the Rev. A. L. Green, of London, in March 1876 and the opening and consecration ceremony conducted by the Rev. A. L. Green, of London, in June 1877. The synagogue was designed by Charles Taylor, a well-respected Merthyr architect with a penchant for the 'subdued Gothic Revival' style. The building was erected by John Williams, a local builder from Merthyr.

Until the mid-18th century, Merthyr Tydfil had been sparsely populated with farming and livestock forming the main economy. Then abundant deposits of iron ore, coal and limestone were discovered, making it an ideal location for the relatively new iron industry that was leading Britain's Industrial Revolution. In 1759, the first major ironworks, Dowlais, was founded. Other works, including Plymouth, Cyfarthfa and Penydarren followed in quick succession and Merthyr Tydfil changed beyond recognition. It became the largest town in Wales and the centre of the world's iron making industry. By the 1870s the iron industry was under threat from Henry Bessemer's revolutionary steel-making process, with some of the ironworks converting to making steel. However, in the late 19th century the exploitation of coal came to the fore and dominated the local industrial economy into the 20th century.

The industrial explosion in Merthyr Tydfil created pockets of wealth amongst the higher classes of society. This was reflected in the development of middle-class residential areas such as Thomastown; named after local magistrate Dr William Thomas, who originally owned the land. Thomastown is believed to contain one of the largest groups of late Georgian and early Victorian style buildings in Wales and to be one of the first purpose-built residential suburbs in Merthyr Tydfil.

As the town grew, the Thomastown area grew eastwards and uphill. Firstly, worker's cottages were built nearest the town, by the side of the tramroad, creating Tramroadside around 1805. Then, further east, middle-class housing was added from the 1840s with terraced streets such as Thomas Street "most elegant in architecture and most pleasant in situation". Then further east and uphill, several spacious villas were built, such as The Rectory (originally known as Courtland House), Springfield Villa, Bryntirion (since demolished), Brynheulog and Sunnybank Villa. Further development included religious buildings. Thomastown was designated a Conservation Area in 1978.

Jews had been expelled from England in 1290 by King Edward I of England under his 'Edict of Expulsion', expelled as perfidious (faithless) men. It wasn't until the 17th century that Jews were allowed back into Britain when Oliver Cromwell made a verbal promise, backed by the Council of State, to allow Jews to return to Britain and practice their faith freely. As a result, Jews started returning to Britain in what became known as the 'Resettlement of 1656'; although, Jews didn't receive formal emancipation in Britain until 1858.

The original Jewish settlers from Germany, Austria, and Poland had been looking to escape the poverty, discrimination and religious persecution of their homelands; seeking a better life, with Britain considered more open and tolerant. However, by the 1830s the reasons for Jewish migration had changed, with middle-class Jewish merchants travelling for economic gain. The widespread industrialisation and urbanisation in Britain providing many commercial opportunities.

Jewish immigrants were attracted to Swansea when it became the copper-smelting centre of Britain from 1717 onwards; to Cardiff and Newport as they became coal and iron ports during the first half of the 19th century; and to Merthyr Tydfil, Pontypool and Tredegar when they became ironworking centres in the early to mid-19th century. The Jewish immigrants tended not to be directly involved in any of the principal industries, not competing for jobs in the foundries or mines. Instead, they worked primarily as merchants and traders providing the much-needed goods and credit for the working-class inhabitants. In addition to economic opportunities, the tolerant attitude of Wales to Nonconformist religions also made it attractive to Jewish settlers.

Between 1881 and 1914 the number of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe increased significantly mainly due to the occupational and residential restrictions imposed on Jews by the Russian Empire. The Jewish population in Wales peaked around 1919 at approximately 5,000 individuals with the Merthyr Jewish Community accounting for around 400 of these.

The Jewish population of Merthyr Tydfil first arrived in the late 1820s. Early settlers to Merthyr Tydfil included Solomon and Leah Bloom who arrived from Poland around 1827 and Joseph and Sarah Barnett who arrived in the 1830s. Early Jewish settlers borrowed or rented a room in which prayers could be said as soon as a minyan could be formed; a minyan being the quorum of ten male Jews over the age of thirteen required for an Orthodox communal religious service.

The first purpose-built synagogue in Merthyr Tydfil was at Victoria Street in 1848; it was only small and served a Jewish population of around forty. As Merthyr Tydfil expanded, so did its Jewish population. Facilities at Victoria Street became unsatisfactory with a second purpose-built synagogue opening on John Street in 1853. By the early 1870s the John Street synagogue had become too small for its congregation and an appeal was issued to raise funds for a new building. At that time the new building was expected to cost £1,800, however, total costs had increased to nearer to £3,000 by the time it was fully built. This left the congregation with a large debt which took nearly 50 years to pay off.

Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was built on land that was the freehold property of the Court Estate, leased to the trustees for 99 years. The congregation raised the funds by way of donations and a mortgage. The synagogue opened in 1877 in what was described as "one of the most interesting ceremonies … ever witnessed here" such was the level of interest that admission was by ticket only so that the synagogue did not become overcrowded. The Jewish Collegiate School within the building opened in 1878 with a classroom designed to accommodate up to 60 children.

The synagogue was "of an imposing character" built in the "ancient gothic, the front comprising octagonal projections with the main entrance between them, approached by a flight of stone steps on each side". Following Jewish emancipation in 1858, the synagogues built had become grand and prominent symbols of Jewish presence in a town or city. This is true of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue with its distinctive architectural style, and prominent and highly visible location at the top of Church Street.

The building operated as a synagogue until the late 1970s and was sold in 1983. It was subsequently used as a Christian Centre and then a gym. A floor was added where the Ladies Gallery used to be in the main sanctuary space when building was used as a gym; this being the only significant structural change to the building. By 2004, the building was no longer in use and remained unoccupied with its condition rapidly deteriorating to the extent that it became formally classified as being at risk. The Foundation for Jewish Heritage purchased the building in 2019 and carried out urgent repairs.

An historic asset might be associated with a notable event or movement. The Industrial Revolution had a significant impact on Wales, with Wales often described as the world's first industrial nation, as by 1850 more people were employed in industry than in agriculture. The economy and society of Wales was transformed, and the evolution of Merthyr Tydfil in the 19th century epitomises this. Merthyr Tydfil's industrial expansion and resultant wealth attracted Jewish settlers and formed an important part of the history of Jews in Wales. The synagogue built in 1876-7 was an important reflection of the wealth, position in society and degree of acceptance that Jewish settlers achieved in Merthyr Tydfil.

The Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is grade II listed "primarily for historic interest as the oldest remaining Synagogue building in Wales." The synagogue is located within the 'Thomastown Villas' character area of the Thomastown Conservation Area. The synagogue is referred to as a "key building" within that character area. The synagogue is also referred to as a "key site with national importance" within the 'Assessment of Special Interest' section of the 'Thomastown Conservation Area – Character Appraisal and Management Plan (July 2014)'.

The Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue has survived through a period of immense social and economic change; the Industrial Revolution, the resultant development of industrial and suburban Merthyr Tydfil, two World Wars, the decline of heavy industries in the South Wales Valleys and the subsequent reduction in its Jewish population. The Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue remained standing throughout all of this, although it ceased to function as a synagogue in the late 1970s.

Its exterior has hardly changed except for the loss of some windows and its iron railings and lamps. Its red Welsh dragon is still in situ, albeit missing a wing. Although no longer a functioning synagogue, it is not hard to imagine how the building would have looked to its arriving congregation. Sadly, its interior has not faired so well. Most of its religious artefacts were removed for use in other synagogues or donated to Cyfarthfa Castle Museum. The Ladies Gallery was removed, and a floor added, when the building operated as a gym.

Historic view of Synagogue Front (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk' website)

Dragon in centre of frontage roof in 2020 (source: own)

Merthyr Synagogue painting by J.S. Lowry 1960 (source: 'foundationforjewishheritage.com')

A historic asset might be associated with a notable family or person. This is true of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue, the most famous name associated with it being the Sherman family. Abe Sherman (1892-1965) and his wife Anne lived at Park Lodge, just up-the hill from the synagogue and were long-term members of the congregation. There are stories that his grandmother regularly used Merthyr's mikvah in the 1920s, when the Sherman family lived in nearby Dowlais.

The famous painter L.S. Lowry (1887-1976) has recently become associated with Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue following the sale of his painting of this synagogue at Christie's auction house in 2022, selling for £277,000. His painting of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue (1960) features some of his famous matchstick characters.

In practice, much of the historical value of an asset is inseparable from its evidential value — a well-preserved building can illustrate an aspect of past life much better than can a damaged or heavily altered building. But historical value may also reside in the less tangible — in associations with notable people events or movements of proven regional or national significance. As in the criteria for listing, however, these associations will be more powerful if the building as it survives directly confirms the association (i.e. is recognisably the building with which connection is claimed). As stated above, the synagogue survives and still looks much as it did when first built, especially when viewed from the front. We can easily envisage how the synagogue would have looked in 1877, when it was opened and consecrated. Indeed, photographs from the early 1900s show very much the view we get today, albeit without the iron railings and lamps. We can imagine what it would have been like as a member of the congregation or the wider population of Merthyr Tydfil. The views from the synagogue to the surrounding spacious villas, down to the town below or up to the greenery of Thomastown Park still survive.

Whilst the synagogue has changed use over the years, and some original features have been lost, these changes have not destroyed its history. Like the proverbial onion, it has built up layers of history; and whilst the building might need some repairs, it still holds considerable historic value for the cultural importance of its association with the Jewish community established in Merthyr Tydfil. It is also valuable for its role in illustrating Jewish life in a fashionable residential suburb during the Victorian and Edwardian eras in industrial Wales; how industrialisation brought dramatic changes to small Welsh towns like Merthyr Tydfil; and how a previously thriving Jewish community in a smart residential area declined along with the industries. All of which make a moderate to strong contribution to the significance of the place and form a key piece of its history and cultural value, which is of regional and possibly national importance, suggesting that Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue has **Medium to High Historical Value**.

In material terms these aspects play an important role in conveying the heritage values of the building. Efforts should be made to protect and enhance these aspects - and any project should encourage the telling of these stories – however, a greater degree of flexibility is possible with changes to the fabric than with aspects of higher value.

1.3 Evidential Value

Evidential Value is deemed to derive from those elements of a historic asset that can provide evidence about past human activity, and especially its historic fabric, supported in some cases by documentation. These may be visible and relatively easy to assess, or they may be buried below ground, under water or be hidden by later fabric. These remains provide the primary evidence for when and how an historic asset was made or built, what it was used for and how it has changed over time. The unrecorded loss of historic fabric represents the destruction of the primary evidence. Additional evidential values can be gained from documentary sources, pictorial records and archaeological archives or museum collections.

Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is an excellent source of evidential value, displaying evidence of design and construction from the Industrial Revolution, the Victorian and Edwardian eras, the transformation of Merthyr Tydfil from a sparsely populated agricultural area into the largest town in Wales and 'the Iron Capital of the World', the wartime years and into the modern time. It has seen change, loss, and deterioration in its almost 150 years.

The considerable remains of the synagogue with its original Victorian Gothic Revival façade provide the primary evidence for when and how the historic asset was built, and what it was used for. There are good visual records available; primarily of the synagogue and its western front elevation, showing how it looked when first built, in a photo from c.1904. Also, a large body of photographs from 1978, before the synagogue closed, showing how it looked internally before most of its religious artefacts were donated and the Ladies Gallery removed. There is also a set of plans and elevations drawn at around that same time by three students of the Welsh School of Architecture.

Through the 1610 John Speed Map of Glamorgan Shyre, the 1830 Parish Map, the 1850 tithe map, Ordnance Survey Maps, photographs, books and remaining synagogue records, we can see how the synagogue has developed and changed over time. Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was built at the top of Church Street, between 1875-76, on land leased from the Court Estate. The synagogue was built in the Gothic Revival style, favoured by its local architect Charles Taylor and comprised four storeys: A small lower ground floor which housed the boiler room, coal cellar and Mikvah; an upper ground floor with entrance lobby and school room; a first floor with entrance hall and the synagogue proper; and a second floor with the Ladies Gallery.

The Synagogue was built of sturdy materials; snecked rubble facing stonework with ashlar bands and dressings, a steep duo-pitch slate roof with red tiled ridges. The front (west) elevation gabled with three polygonal finials rise from its sloping parapet and flanked either side by shorter staircase turrets with conical slate roofs. The turrets and arched windows accentuate its Gothic appearance. The front was approached by a set of double flight steps, with stone piers. The external elevations still looking much as they did when first built. Over the entrance door are inscriptions, now illegible due to erosion. Also existing is the red terracotta dragon which adorned the apex of the entrance bay pediment, understood to represent the Red Dragon of Wales, given the building's Welsh context. Unfortunately, the cast-iron railings and lamps are now gone, although pictures from 1978 show the lamps still in situ at that time. It is hoped to reinstate these features.

Internally, fewer original features remain, due to the closure of the synagogue in the late 1970s, donation of its religious artefacts and sale of the building in 1983. The subsequent use as a gym caused the greatest loss of original fabric, with the Ladies Gallery being removed and replaced by a solid floor. Only the built-in Ark in the school room, part of the timber balustrading from upper ground floor to first floor, small elements of the stained-glass windows featuring the Star of David, and the decorative roof trusses remain. The synagogue received its Grade II listing in 1988 after it had been sold and lost its internal features.

Insofar as Evidential Value is deemed to derive from those elements of a historic asset that can provide evidence about past human activity, and especially its historic fabric, Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue provides considerable evidence from its many generations of human activity and, unusually, considerable evidence from the time of its original construction. The external elevations, with lack of alteration or extension, remain much as they would have been back in mid-Victorian times. Despite the loss of original features internally, you can still read how the original building would have been laid out. This is helped by detailed descriptions in newspaper articles from 1877 on the opening of the synagogue, photographs from 1978 before the synagogue closed and religious artefacts were given away, and images from the terrestrial laser scan survey by Wessex Archaeology.

Insofar as evidential value may be buried below ground, under water or be hidden by later fabric, it is uncertain what might be hidden below ground as Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue had been part of a primarily rural area, and any farming or rural archaeological evidence is likely to have been disrupted when the synagogue and wider area were developed in the mid-1850s onwards.

Insofar as context is relevant to evidential value, Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue still stands at the top of Church Street, looking down to the town below, much as it would have done when first built in 1875-76. The synagogue is still accessed from the same front double flight of steps and entrance porch. The surrounding landscape is relatively unchanged, with spacious villas such as Primrosehill House, Springhill Villa and Brynheulog Villas still its immediate neighbours. The area to the east still remains the green and undeveloped Thomastown Park which opened in 1903. The bones of "the oldest remaining Synagogue building in Wales" remain and are unchanged by time.

Where additional evidential value can be gained from documentary sources, pictorial records and archaeological archives or museum collections, the initial web-based search undertaken exposed a fair amount from various sources. These include the 'foundationforjewishheritage.com', 'jewishheritage.wales' and 'alangeorge.co.uk' websites, to name but a few. Also books by Cai Parry-Jones, Sharman Kadish and Ursula R. Q. Henriques. Further searching may indeed throw up even more interesting information.

There has been permanent loss of some original evidential value, particularly internally. However, the general appreciation from both documentary and physical appraisal is that much of the primary original evidential fabric remains and that it can provide good evidence of past human activity and construction methods. It is also apparent that, where newer layers of construction have been applied over older, it is possible to determine what is old and what is newer.

As a result, Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is considered to have **Medium Evidential Value.** The exterior of the synagogue still retains most of its original (150-year old) fabric, and many of its features, minus the iron railings and lamps on the front steps; but internally it has lost many of them, in particular most of its religious artefacts and the Ladies Gallery. What remains still has cultural importance and makes a moderate contribution to the significance of a place. Efforts should be made to protect and enhance these aspects, though a greater degree of flexibility is possible than with aspects of high value.

One of the few remaining pieces of stained glass in 2024 (source: own)

1.4 Aesthetic Value

Aesthetic Value relates to the external appearance and form of an asset and its relationship to its context and setting. Aesthetic Value also derives from the way in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from a historic asset. In this respect, Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue has considerable aesthetic value.

Historic newspapers from 1876 and 1877 describe Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue as being "of an imposing character", in a style that "is ancient gothic" and that "the edifice which fronts Church-street presents a commanding appearance from that street". Its Listed Building details describe it as built in the "heavy Northern Gothic style". Whilst the book 'The Synagogues of Britain and Ireland' (p.90) by Sharman Kadish describes it as "a double-turreted Disney-world Gothic folly of a synagogue".

Its architect, Charles Taylor (1842-1919), was not well-known nationally but would have been well-known locally, as he both lived and worked in Merthyr Tydfil. He started his career as an apprentice to the Bristol based architect Charles Underwood (1791-1883), Underwood being best known for projects such as Arnos Vale Cemetery, Bristol (1836) and the interiors of the Royal West of England Academy, Bristol (1857). By the time of Taylor's marriage in 1865, he was living in Swansea and thereafter in Merthyr Tydfil, the hometown of his wife Amelia Lucy Thomas, the daughter of colliery owners Robert and Lucy Thomas.

Taylor worked as an architect for the Merthyr Tydfil School Board at the start of the 1870s and designed several Board Schools. His personal taste for neo-Gothicism, which was highly fashionable at the time, was incorporated into his designs for local schools such as Penydarren and Twynyrodyn. His relationship with Merthyr Tydfil School Board came to an end in 1874-5 following an acrimonious dispute over their non-payment of an increase in his fee, which resulted in a court case. Taylor went on to win the legal battle, with the School Board looking petty and dishonest. The 'Merthyr Telegraph, and General Advertiser for the Iron Districts of South Wales - Friday 12 November 1875' said "Mr. Taylor leaves the bar of public opinion, at which he has been arraigned by false accusers, without a stain upon his character, and with the sympathetic good-will of every honest man."

One of the main features of Gothic Revival architecture was the pointed form, with emphasis on the Gothic arch; this gave the impression of soaring height and was used in arcades, vaults, doors, windows and niches. Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue featured Gothic arched windows on its front, side and rear elevations. Its interior designed to complement its external appearance; the main sanctuary featuring various gothic elements such as pointed arched windows and a pointed arched Ark supported by polished granite columns.

Gothic Revival was the preferred architectural style of the Christian Church and especially the Church of England. As such, Jews in England and Scotland viewed the Gothic Revival style as being inherently Christian and English and avoided it when building their synagogues. This self-imposed ban didn't seem to exist in Wales and Ireland. In Wales, this might be explained by the popularity and tolerance of Nonconformist religions, and the widespread use of the Gothic style from the 1870s when building Welsh chapels; Welsh chapel architecture reflecting 'subdued Gothic' with pointed arched windows and doorways; this style often replicated at Welsh synagogues such as Pontypridd and Llanelli.

'The Synagogues of Britain and Ireland' by Sharman Kadish says that "In the nineteenth century, Romanticism was fashionable in Wales" suggesting that design inspiration possibly came from nearby Castell Coch. Its architect, William Burges (1827-81) would have been seen as one of the leading architects in South Wales during this period; his Gothic Revival designs at both Cardiff Castle and Castell Coch significantly influencing the architecture of late 19th century South Wales.

Although the architecture of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is described as Gothic, there are also elements which could be interpreted as 'Oriental' in style. 'Orientalism' being popular for synagogue architecture in the second half of the 19th century. Domes, turrets and minarets being architectural elements adopted by 'Orientalism'. Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue features a tripartite façade with turrets. Architectural theorists have said that a tripartite front imitates the appearance of the Temple of Solomon, whilst the use of a pair of turrets is reminiscent of the portal columns at the entrance to this temple named in the Book of Kings as Yahin and Boaz, symbolising stability and strength.

Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is highly noticeable and very much in the public eye, with its roadside setting "in one of the most pleasant and commanding sites in Merthyr, namely, on the top of Church-street". The building has a striking appearance; with a gabled and double-turreted front, and red Welsh dragon perched on the gable. Its location at the top of hilly Church Street made it highly visible within Thomastown. Its visibility and individuality providing proof of the position the Jewish community once held within Merthyr Tydfil.

Few original features can be found inside; only the built-in Ark in the school room, part of the timber balustrading from upper ground floor to first floor, stained-glass windows featuring the Star of David, and decorative roof trusses remain. Despite the passage of time and the synagogue being sold in 1983 and used as a gym, the bones of the building remain much as they were when first built. One missing component being the Ladies Gallery, which provided a double-height space within the synagogue proper. However, pictorial records survive which enable us to see the synagogue 'in all its glory' both externally and internally.

With all this in mind, Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is deemed to possess **Medium Aesthetic Value**. Those areas with a greater aesthetic value, which contribute more strongly to the significance of the place and form a piece of its history and cultural value, would be of greater importance. Efforts should be made to protect and enhance these aspects, though a greater degree of flexibility is possible in the way it, or its setting, may be adapted; not least, if any such adaptation were focussed on areas of lesser significance to the asset.

May 1978 (source: 'casgliadywerin.cymru' website)

1.5 Communal Value

Communal Value derives from the meanings that an asset has for the people who relate to it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory. It includes social and economic value, as well as commemorative, spiritual or symbolic value.

It is closely linked to historical and aesthetic values but tends to have additional or specific aspects. Communal value might be commemorative or symbolic. For example, people might draw part of their identity or collective memory from an historic asset or have emotional links to it. Such values often change over time, and they may be important for remembering both positive and uncomfortable events, attitudes or periods in Wales' history. Historic assets can also have social value, acting as a source of social interaction, distinctiveness or coherence; economic value, providing a valuable source of income or employment; or they may have spiritual value, emanating from religious beliefs or modern perceptions of the spirit of a place.

Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue would have been a source of social and spiritual value with strong emotional links during its time as a functioning synagogue and Jewish school; borne by its congregation, pupils and visitors, as well as the community who lived nearby and experienced the building as part of their day-to-day life, maybe walking past on their way home or to Thomastown Park. Most of them will sadly no longer survive.

The Synagogue would have been a source of significant social value and social interaction; with shared experiences, collective memories, and emotional bonds. It would have witnessed ceremonies of worship, births, death and marriages. It would have been where friendships were made, and budding romances began.

The Jewish community, although small in number, made a significant contribution to Merthyr Tydfil's wider community. In 1908, Alfred Isaac Freedman was noted as the third Jew 'within about 10 years' to be appointed Worshipful Master of the Loyal Cambrian Lodge of Freemasons. The Jewish community also established a Literary Society in 1903 which, in addition to literature, offered lectures and debate on politics, religion and secular topics. The Merthyr Board of Guardians and the Ladies Benevolent Society raised funds for impoverished Jews in the UK and in Eastern Europe, but also aided with general community fundraising, in the 1890s holding annual services and fundraising events for the Merthyr General Hospital.

Such values often change over time and can be important for remembering both positive and uncomfortable events, attitudes or periods in Wales' history. The synagogue would have experienced both the economic highs and lows of Industrial Wales during its lifetime. In 1919, the Merthyr community numbered 400 Jews, reducing to 175 in 1937, and falling to just 20 by 1979. The severe downturn in the industrial economy, and subsequent rise in unemployment forced people to relocate to places with a more prosperous outlook. Also, second or third generation Jews, well-educated and with a desire for professional and economic advancement, wanted better prospects than Merthyr was able to offer. The Synagogue was no longer viable and it was sold off in 1983.

Of course, many will have memories of the building as a Christian Centre and a Gym, between 1983 and its closure in 2004. Being more recent, there are arguably more people with such memories.

A significant expression of the value of the Synagogue building to the community was experienced on 18th February 2024, when around 500 people attended a special Open Day, to engage people from Merthyr Tydfil and beyond in the planned Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre being developed at the former synagogue. Visitors flocked in from across Wales and beyond throughout the day to see inside the synagogue for the first time since the building was closed in 2004. Many of those who attended brought their own memories and memorabilia associated with Jewish life in Wales, and these were recorded by members of the team, as were general comments and feedback on the project itself. Local historian, Chris Clifford, gave two talks on the history of the synagogue. Welsh klezmer band the Klezmanouts brought a lively, fun tone to the day, and their closing performance during the end-of-event reception led to dancing; whilst London-based Cantor Yudi Cohen, whose grandfather had been a Cantor in the Merthyr synagogue in the 1950s, gave an impromptu, moving rendition of 'Hashivenu' in the synagogue.

Of the event, Dame Helen Hyde DBE, Chair of the Foundation for Jewish Heritage, commented, 'It was a very special occasion that demonstrated the huge level of interest in the project. We received lots of good information and feedback that will help to shape the future of the project. The excitement in the room was palpable!' Michael Mail, Chief Executive of the Foundation for Jewish Heritage, added, 'The numbers coming through the door surprised us all. And the stories that people brought with them of being Jewish in Wales, or their experience of the Jewish community, were fascinating and moving. We felt very encouraged that the project was truly widely welcomed and would be widely supported.'

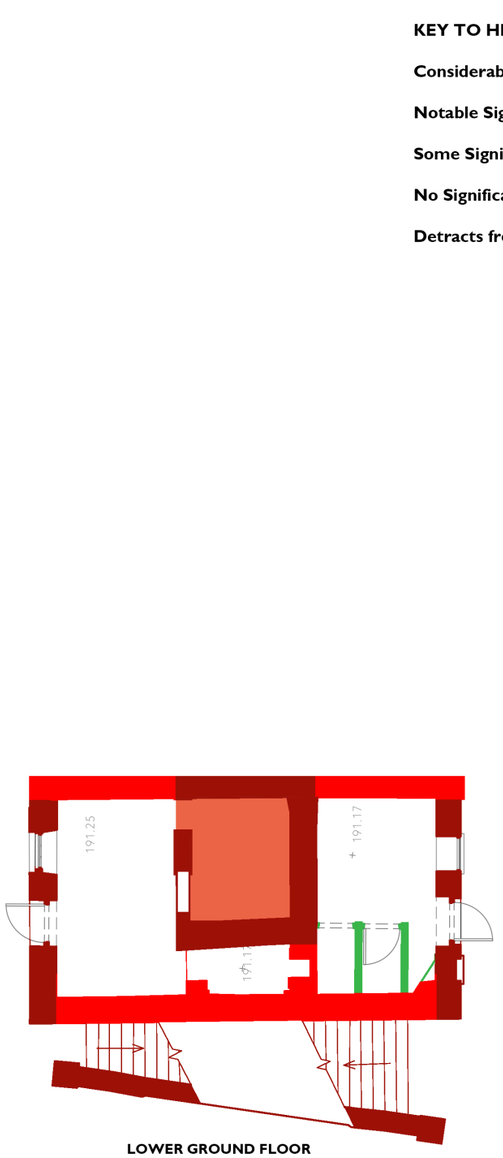
Communal Value is also closely linked to aesthetic value and the way in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from it. It can be argued that Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is located on a very noticeable site and is a very notable building type. Its Romantic Gothic architecture unusual compared to more traditional Welsh Chapel architecture. Its pointed arches, turrets and red Welsh dragon creating sensory stimulation for all who see and enjoy it. Additional intellectual stimulation must also come from the enjoyment of trying to 'read' its architecture and its history.

With all this in mind, Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is deemed to possess a **Medium Communal Value**, assigning it value that has some cultural importance. In material terms it will play an important role in conveying the heritage values. Efforts should be made to protect and enhance these aspects, though a greater degree of flexibility is possible than with aspects of high value.

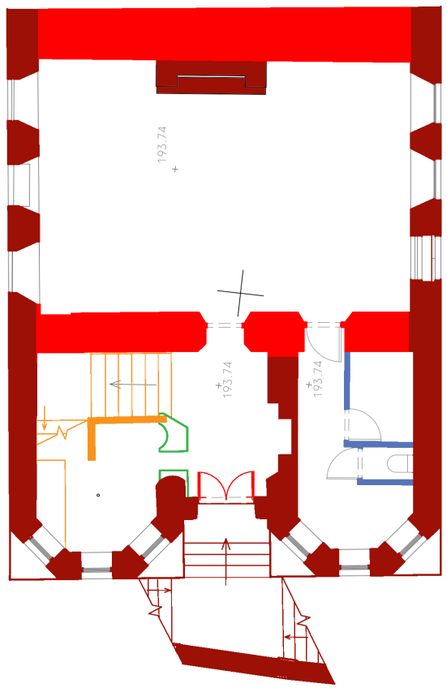
1.6 Significance Plans

KEY TO HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

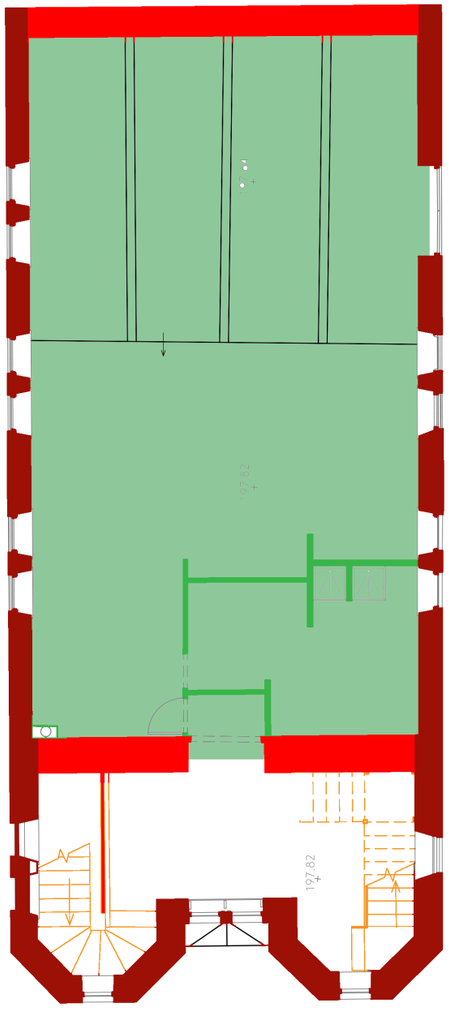
	WALLS	SPACE
Considerable Significance		
Notable Significance		
Some Significance		
No Significance		
Detracts from Significance		



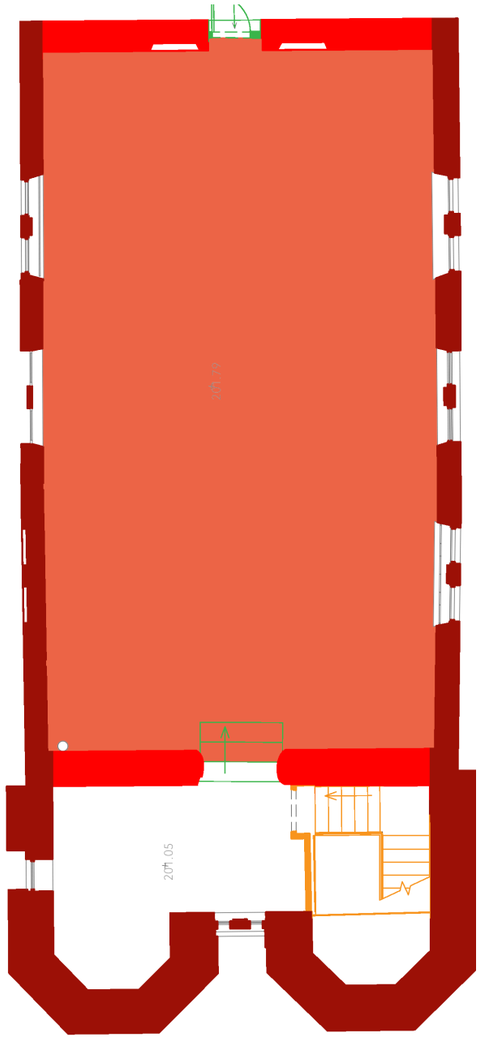
LOWER GROUND FLOOR



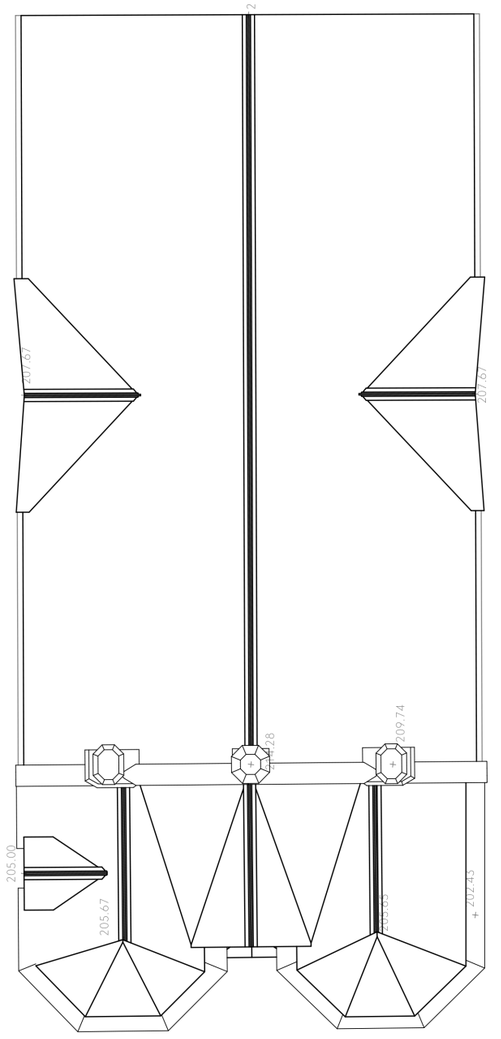
GROUND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR



ROOF