

Synagogue, Merthyr Tydfil

HERITAGE ASSESSMENT

(449)2503-GWP-A-HIS-P00

Date: 14.02.25

Prepared by: AD

Checked by: RT

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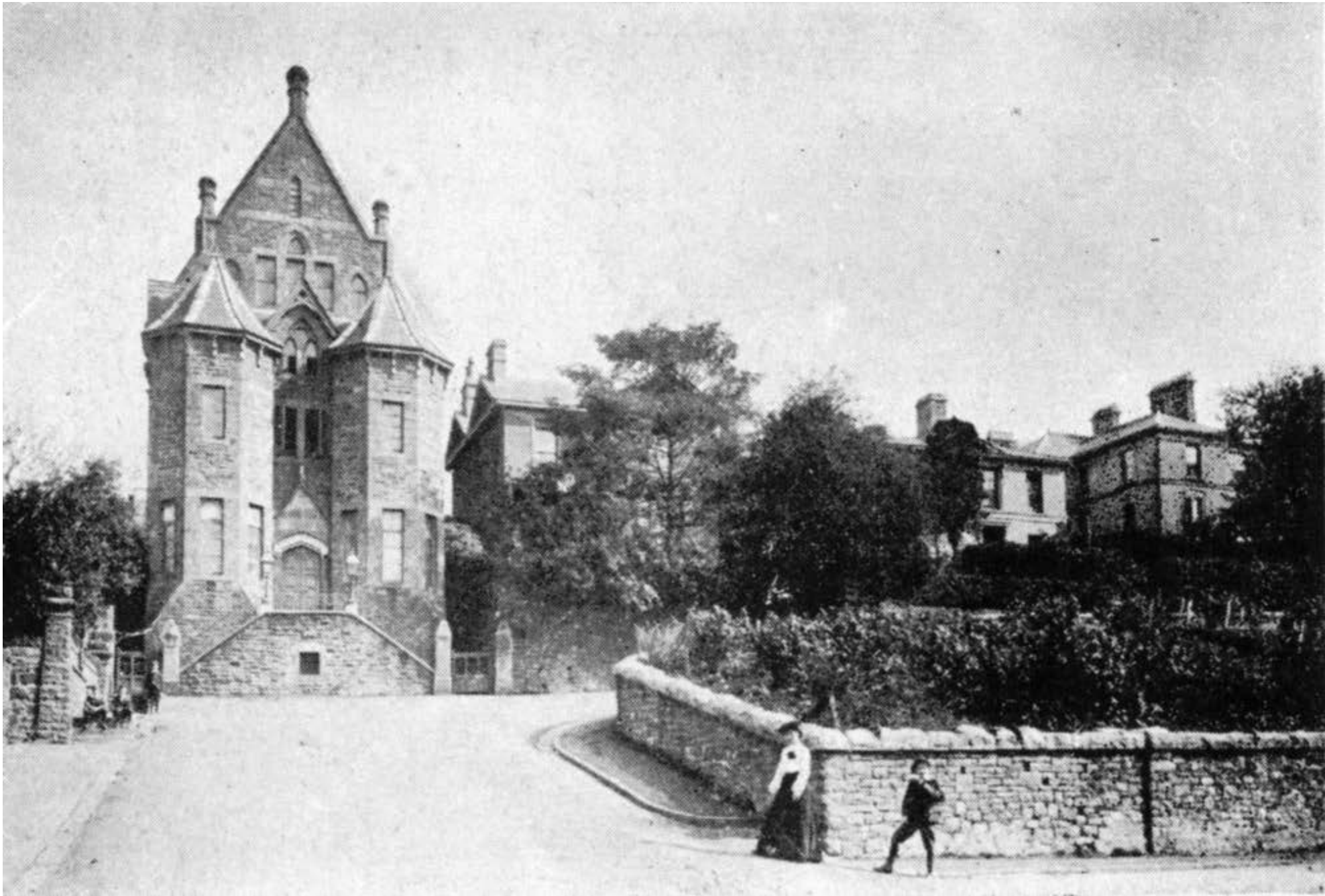
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Historical view of Synagogue frontage from top of Church Street c.1904 (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk' website)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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.

The Jewish population of Merthyr Tydfil first arrived in the late 1820s. 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 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.

This third purpose-built 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 Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was 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 had 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 provide proof of the position the Jewish community once held within Merthyr Tydfil.

The synagogue was an important reflection of the wealth, position in society and degree of acceptance that Jewish settlers achieved in Merthyr Tydfil.

Following Jewish emancipation in 1858, the synagogues built across Europe 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.

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. 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.

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 were architectural elements adopted by ‘Orientalism’. Merthyr Tydfil’s 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.

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.

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 fared 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.

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.

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)’.

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.

I.0 Introduction and Objectives of Report

This Heritage Impact Statement is written by GWP Architecture on behalf of the owners of the site and the heritage assets, the Foundation for Jewish Heritage, to inform, and subsequently in justification of, proposals for Planning Consent and Listed Building Consent applications to be submitted by GWP Architecture.

The ‘proposed development site’ is Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue, Church Street, Merthyr Tydfil, located at the top (east end) of the steep Church Street. The building is set dramatically against a dense section of woodland, and rises steeply up the hill, with long, steep flights of steps to both sides of the building. To the north-west of the site is Primrose Hill House and Union Street, to the north and east is Thomastown Park, to the south is housing which includes Bryn Heulog and Sunny Bank Villa, and to the west is the sloping hill of Church Street leading down to the Town Centre.

Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was designed by Charles Taylor, architect, and erected by John Williams, builder for the Merthyr Tydfil Hebrew Congregation; both men being local to Merthyr Tydfil. The synagogue was built between 1876-7, in a subdued Gothic Revival style; the laying of the corner stone taking place in March 1876 and the opening and consecration of the synagogue being in June 1877. The synagogue is grade II listed “*primarily for historic interest as the oldest remaining Synagogue building in Wales.*” The synagogue is also situated within the ‘*Thomastown Villas*’ character area of the Thomastown Conservation Area.

The synagogue continued to hold services until the late 1970s when it became no longer viable to keep the synagogue open, due to the dwindling congregation numbers and funds. There is no evidence to suggest that any extensions were added or internal layouts changed whilst the building operated as a synagogue. The only changes being decorative rather than structural, such as in 1923 when a new Ark, decorative stained-glass memorial windows and a commemorative ‘tablet in memory of the local Jews who fell’ in the First World War were installed. The building was sold in 1983.

After the synagogue closed, a floor was added where the Ladies Gallery used to be in the main sanctuary space when the building was used as a gym. The building was unused from around 2004 before being purchased by The Foundation for Jewish Heritage in 2019.

This Statement seeks to establish the historic development and heritage significance of the site, in order to inform the development of an appropriate heritage-led scheme for the site.

I.1 Authorship

This document has been produced by Ashley Davies, an RIBA-accredited Specialist Conservation Architect, following visits to, and appraisal of, the site between 2018 and 2024.

Ashley is also a Chartered Architect, a member of the RIBA Conservation Register National Steering Group; a Supporter of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation; has twice been the conservation specialist on the RIBA Regional Architecture awards panel; has lectured in ‘Conservation Principles’ at University; has presented at conferences on the theme of building conservation; and has appeared on a few television programmes talking about his passion for restoring historic buildings. He has undertaken several Building Conservation courses, including at SPAB and the RIBA. He has delivered dozens of heritage-led projects over his career involving the repair, restoration and adaptation of many grade I, II* and II listed buildings and Scheduled Monuments.

In addition – and usually, in parallel - Ashley has researched and written over 140no. Historic Building Reports for over 90no. historic buildings and sites, including over 70no. Heritage Impact Statements.

I.2 Who was Consulted

The following organisations and groups were consulted on the development of the Heritage Assessment:

- Foundation for Jewish Heritage
- National Lottery Heritage Fund
- Neil Richardson (Project Manager)
- Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council
- Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales
- Holocaust Educational Trust
- Dr Chris Clifford, Historian
- Dr Cai Parry-Jones, Author
- Architectural Heritage Fund
- Cultural Associates Oxford
- Headland Design Associates
- The Creative Core
- Almond Tree Consulting
- The Funding Centre
- Greenwood Projects
- Bronwen Thomas Landscape Architect
- Mann Williams
- Hydrock
- MEP Building Services Consultants
- Auditive
- IDACS

2.0 The Synagogue

2.1 Location & Setting

The development site's address is:

Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue
Church Street
Merthyr Tydfil
CF47 0ER

Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is located at the east end of Church Street, at the top of this very steep street. The building is set dramatically against a dense section of woodland, and rises steeply up the hill, with long, steep flights of steps to both sides of the building. To the north-west of the site is Primrose Hill House and Union Street, to the north and east is Thomastown Park, to the south is housing which includes Bryn Heulog and Sunny Bank Villa, and to the west is the sloping hill of Church Street leading down to the Town Centre.

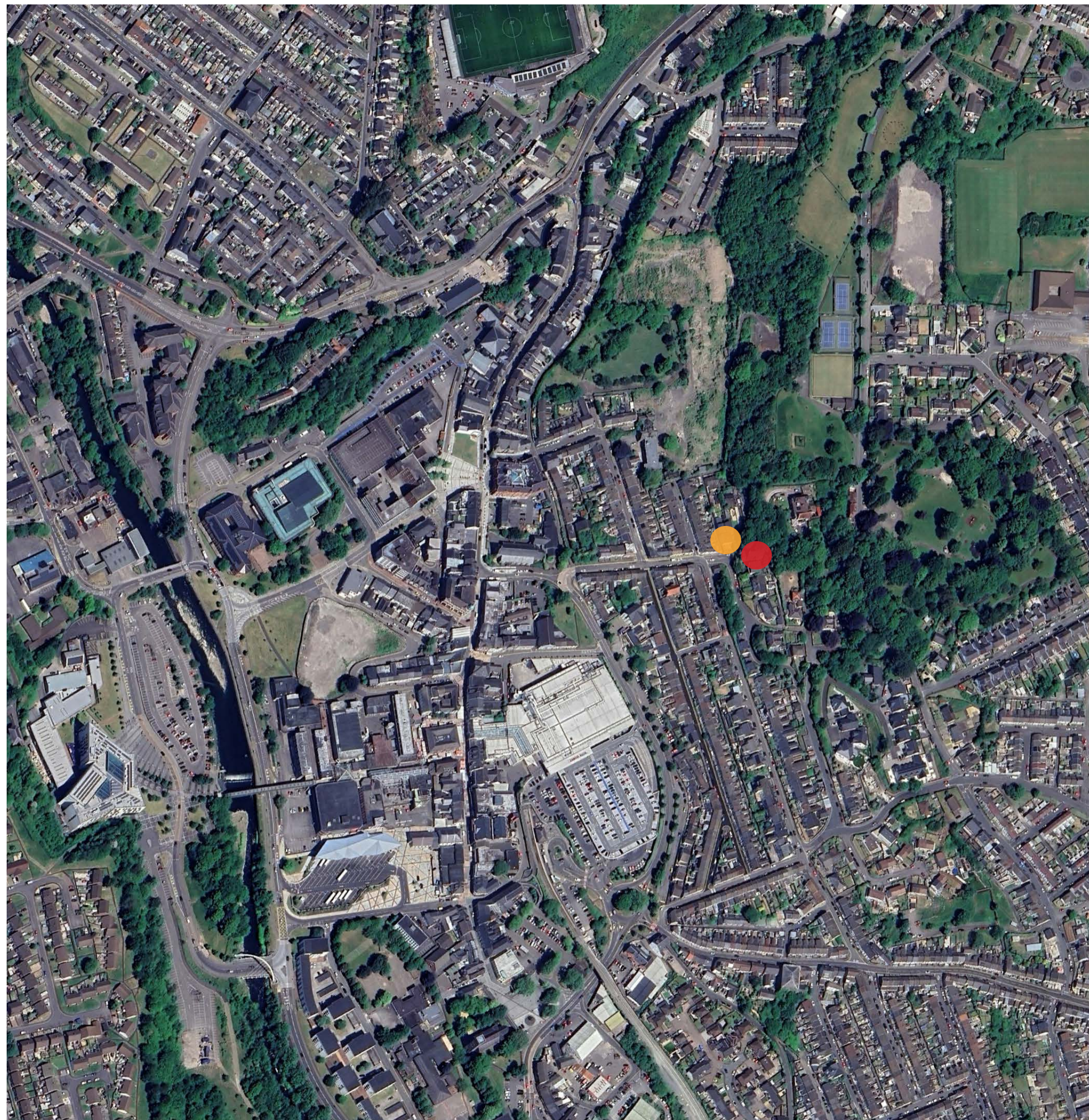
Grade II listed “primarily for historic interest as the oldest remaining Synagogue building in Wales” (Cadw), the Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was built between 1875 and 1877 “in heavy Northern Gothic style”. In his *‘The Buildings of Wales – Glamorgan’* (1995), John Newman refers to it as “said to be the oldest purpose-built synagogue in Wales”.

The Synagogue building is a tall structure of snecked rubble facing stonework with ashlar bands and dressings, with a steep duo-pitch slate roof with red tiled ridges, the front (west) elevation is gabled with three polygonal finials rising from its sloping parapet and is flanked either side by shorter turrets with conical slate roofs. The front is approached by a set of double flight steps, with stone piers.

The rear (east) elevation is a two-storeyed gable end, with a set of double flight steps set away from the building, and a concrete bridge from the top of the steps to the threshold of a door at second floor level. To the two long, side elevations, a shorter gable projects from the centre of the main body of the building.

Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue has a latitude of 51.7469 / 51°44'48"N and a longitude of -3.3746 / 3°22'28"W, with OS Eastings of 305197, OS Northings of 206247 and an OS Grid reference of SO051062.

*Aerial view of Merthyr Tydfil,
with the Synagogue identified with a red dot
and Primrose Hill identified with an orange dot,
courtesy of GoogleEarth*



2.2 Use

Below is a summary of the uses to which Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue has been put between its construction, in the 1870s, to the current day:

| | |
|---------------|---|
| 1877 | – Constructed |
| 1983 | – Synagogue sold |
| c.1986 – 2004 | – Building operated as a Christian Centre and gym |
| c.2004 | – Unused and derelict |
| 2019 | – Purchased by The Foundation for Jewish Heritage |

As such, the building operated as a Synagogue for 106 years, between 1877 and 1983.

2.3 Age

Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was built between 1875 and 1877.

2.4 Statutory Designation

2.4.1 Listing

The Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue (Listing Entry Name: Merthyr Christian Centre) is protected by a grade II listing, which was designated on 16 October 1978, and was last amended on 13 January 1988.

The listing (with a Cadw ID No. of 11426) states:

History

Built as a Synagogue, 1872-5, in heavy Northern Gothic style.

Exterior

Sneaked rubble facings with ashlar bands and dressings; slate roofs with red tiled ridges and finials. Crowning gable with polygonal finials and narrow louvred openings. 5-light window with lancets and blocked lights over 3-storey transverse n ex. Narrow entrance gable, with plate-traceried window under scissor-braced bargeboards, flanked by two 2-storey polygonal staircase turrets with conical roofs on eaves brackets, narrow windows with stone lintels. Double flight of steps with stone piers, iron balustrade (partly missing) and iron lamp standards rises to gabled doorway with dripstone.

Reasons for Listing

Included primarily for historic interest as the oldest remaining Synagogue building in Wales.

Bibliography

‘britishlistedbuildings.co.uk’ website.
Newman, John. ‘The Buildings of Wales – Glamorgan’ 1995

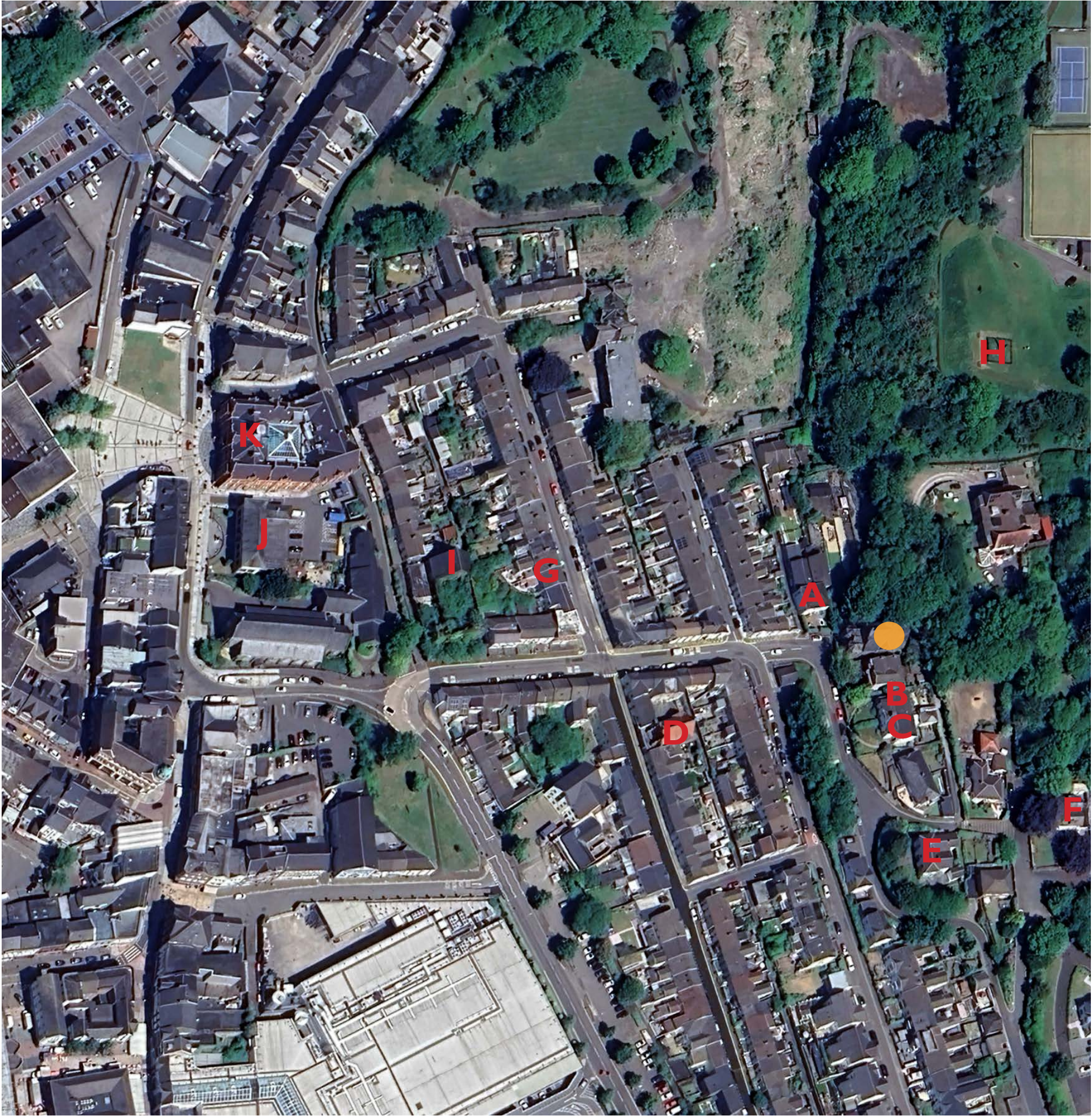


Historical view of Synagogue frontage from top of Church Street (source: ‘alangeorge.co.uk’ website)

2.4.2 Listed Buildings Nearby

There are a number of significant (grade II and II* listed) buildings in close proximity to the Merthyr Synagogue. These include the following – please refer to GoogleEarth Map below with these sites identified relative to the Synagogue (identified with a red circle).

| | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------|
| Within Thomastown Conservation Area: | | |
| A | Primrose Hill | Grade II listed |
| B | Bryn Heulog | Grade II listed |
| C | Sunny Bank | Grade II listed |
| D | Former Unitarian Chapel | Grade II listed |
| E | The Rectory | Grade II listed |
| F | Springfield Villa | Grade II listed |
| G | Newton House | Grade II listed |
| H | Boer War Memorial & Railings | Grade II listed |
| I | Former Miner's Welfare Hall | Grade II listed |
| Within Town Centre Conservation Area: | | |
| J | Carnegie Library | Grade II listed |
| K | Town Hall | Grade II* listed |



Aerial view of Merthyr Tydfil, with the Synagogue identified with a orange dot courtesy of GoogleEarth

2.4.2 Listed Buildings Nearby



Primrose Hill (source: own)



Bryn Heulog, 2018 (source: 'britishlistedbuildings.co.uk')



Sunny Bank, 2018 (source: 'britishlistedbuildings.co.uk')



Newton House, 2018 (source: 'britishlistedbuildings.co.uk')



The Rectory, 2018 (source: 'britishlistedbuildings.co.uk')



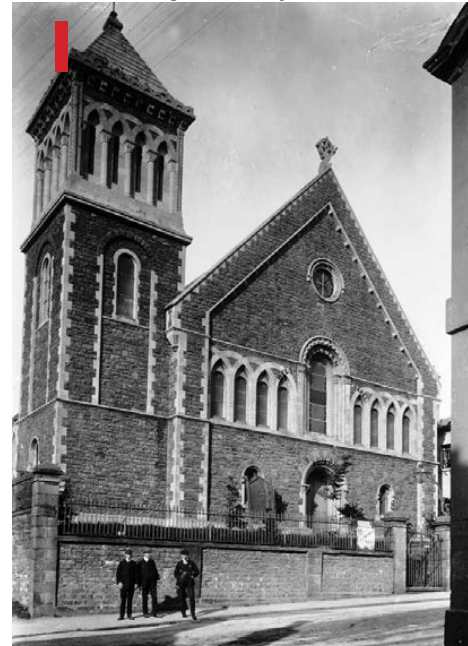
Springfield Villa, 2018 (source: 'britishlistedbuildings.co.uk')



Former Unitarian Chapel
(source: 'churches-uk-ireland.org')



Boer War Memorial & Railings,
(source: 'warmemorialsonline.orh')



Former Miner's Hall
(source: 'merthyr-history.com')



Former Miner's Hall, 1986
(source: 'alangeorge.co.uk')



Old Town Hall (source: own)

2.4.3 Other Statutory Protection

Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is located within the ‘**Thomastown Conservation Area**’ which was originally designated in 1978, in recognition of its historical and architectural quality. This Conservation Area is located to the east of Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre, on a steep slope, with impressive views across the town and the valley. The Thomastown area is named after Dr William Thomas (1794-1858) who was a local magistrate in the early 1800s and owner of the land on which this first known example of a middle-class residential area was built.

Character Appraisals of the Thomastown Conservation Area were undertaken in 2003 and 2007 which identified three character areas: 1) Georgian Tramroadside Cottages; 2) Victorian Residential Area; and 3) High Ground to the East.

The updated ‘**Character Appraisal and Management Plan**’, adopted in July 2014, identified five character areas within the Conservation Area: 1) Church Street Commercial; 2) Tramroadside North; 3) Georgian Thomastown; 4) Victorian Terraced Streets; and 5) Thomastown Villas.

The 2014 ‘**Character Appraisal and Management Plan**’ also proposed an extension to the boundary of the Conservation Area, to include Alma Street and Coedcae'r Cwrt, Old Cemetery Park, Thomastown Park, and Thomastown Park Recreational ground and woodland. This proposal appears to have been adopted. This boundary extension created the following additional character areas: 1) Alma Street and Coedcae'r Cwrt; 2) Old Cemetery Park; and 3) Thomastown Park.

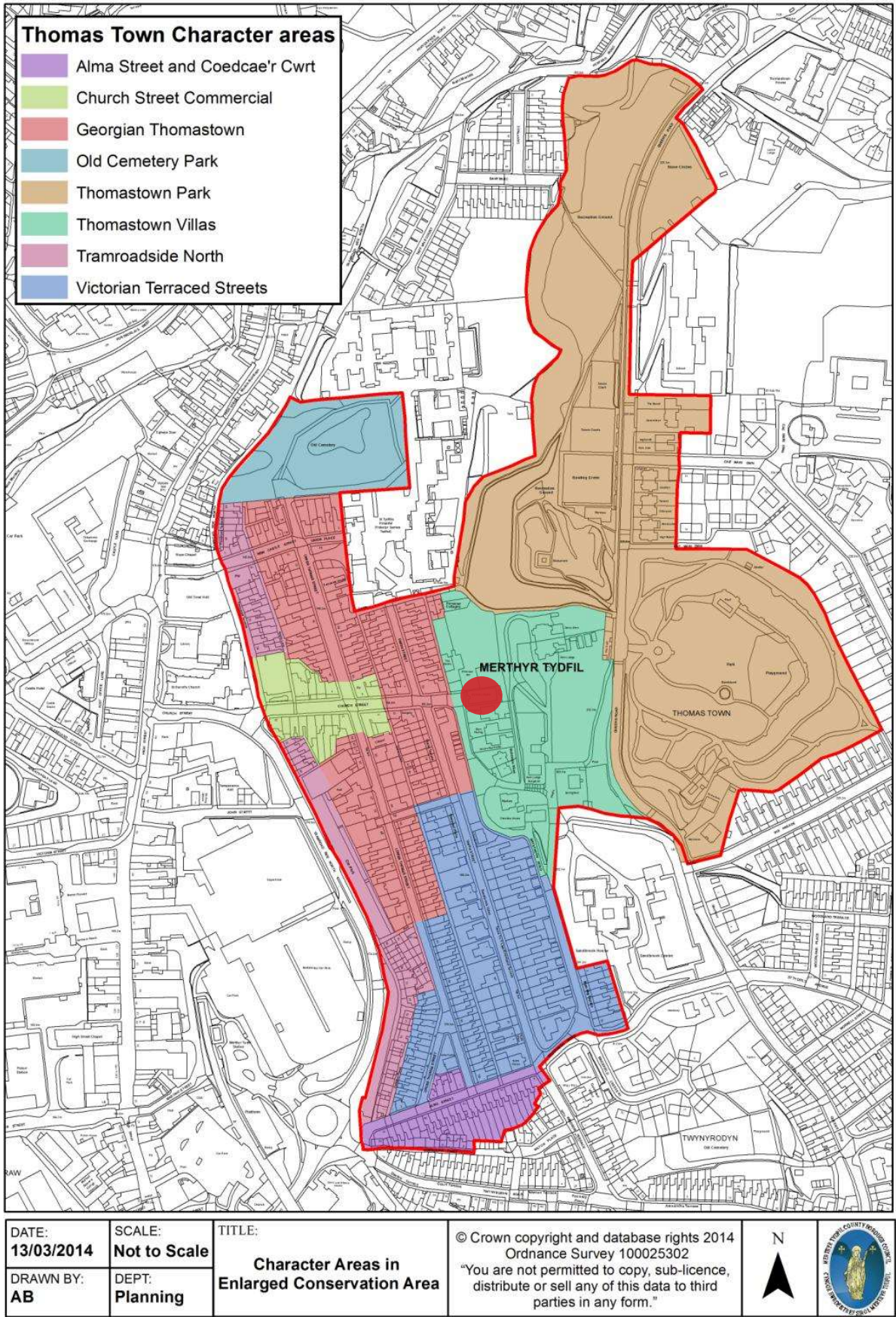
Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is within the ‘**Thomastown Villas**’ character area, which the 2014 ‘Character Appraisal and Management Plan’ describes as follows:

“**Thomastown Villas**

“This area is dominated by detached and semi-detached houses in spacious and wooded surroundings. The area is the easternmost extent and most elevated part of the Conservation Area. It is also an area where the formal layout of rectangular streets dissipates into shorter curved streets, back lanes and streets without footways. This area also contains many listed and locally listed buildings. Probably the most significant is the former Synagogue situated at the end of (and top of) Church Street with commanding views down to the town centre. The area is sparsely populated and is bounded by Thomastown Park to the east and north, and the grounds to the Sandbrook House to the south. The individual buildings have their own character and differ to the other character areas. This area has less of a sense of uniformity than the other character areas thanks to the individually designed buildings constructed at different times. However, they are all generally large in scale, especially compared to the other dwellings in the Conservation Area and some have extensive grounds.

“Key buildings in this area include the former Synagogue, Primrose Hill House, Bryn Heulog and Sunny Bank Villa. The stepped lane between Bryntirion Villas and The Rectory also adds to the physical character of the area.”

Please refer to **Appendix A** for further information from the ‘**Thomastown Conservation Area – Character Appraisal and Management Plan** (adopted July 2014)’.



Map of Character Areas within enlarged Thomastown Conservation Area with the Synagogue identified with a red dot (source: Character Appraisal & Management Plan (adopted July 2014) from ‘merthyr.gov.uk’)

2.5 Historic Map Appraisal

The earliest map reviewed was the '1610 Map of Glamorgan Shyre' by John Speed, which shows the area as predominantly rural, made up of scattered farmsteads with enclosed fields on the lower slopes and open grazing beyond.

The '1830 Parish Map of Merthyr Tydfil' shows that the general landscape had changed from green and rural to more industrial and urban, with four ironworks being largely responsible for this: Dowlais (1759), Cyfarthfa (1765), Plymouth (1763) and Penydarren (1784). However, with no valuable outcrops of raw materials in the east of the town, that area was not subjected to excavation and remained as fields. High Street had developed as the commercial centre of the town, linking the residential areas to the north-west, north-east and south which were associated with the various ironworks.

The '1850 Tithe Map' shows the future site of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue within Field Number 2009 under the Farm Name 'The Court'. The land being owned and occupied by William Thomas and used for pasture. The land to its north, south, east and immediate west also being undeveloped pastureland. Slightly further west, Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre had become more developed, High Street running north to south with a Market Hall and spacious Market Square directly off it. This area being important in the economic, social and political life of 19th century Merthyr Tydfil. The TaffVale Railway (TVR) had also made it to Merthyr Tydfil, with a station to the south of St Tydfil's Parish Church.

The '1868-75 Ordnance Survey Map 6-inch (published 1885)' - shown to the right - shows the town in much more detail. The sustained development between the 1830s and 1850s, and especially in the 1850s, being clearly visible. The residential areas which had developed near the various ironworks had now expanded and become more densely packed, reflecting the growth in population as Merthyr Tydfil became 'the Iron Capital of the World'. Two railway stations can now be seen on this map, the earlier TaffVale Station to the south of the town centre and the later Vale of Neath Station to the east of the Market Square.

To the east we see Thomas Town, named after its landowner William Thomas (1794-1858). Several of the spacious villas built at Thomas Town in the mid-1800s are named on this map, such as Primrosehill House, Brynheulog Villas, Springfield Villa and Bryn-teg House. We also see the terraced streets commissioned by groups of professionals such as Thomas Street in 1840 and Union Street shortly afterwards. The cross-shaped Workhouse with Infirmary can be seen at the northern end of Union Street, built in 1853, and Upper Union Street consisting of a terrace of eleven Union Club owned houses built to complement the Union Workhouse.

The future site of the synagogue at the eastern end of Church Street, between Primrosehill House and Brynheulog Villas, remains undeveloped at this time. This area is identified to the right in a red box.



1868-75 Surveyed 1885 Published - OS Six-inch Map (source: 'maps.nls.uk') with site of future Synagogue identified within red box

The '1873 Ordnance Survey Town Plan (published 1875)' shows everything in greater detail, with each individual page covering only a small portion of the town. The level of detail on this plan includes individual trees, curved garden paths and garden steps; all hinting at the beautiful, landscaped gardens from which the residents of the spacious, elevated villas in Thomastown would have looked out onto the town and valley below. At the eastern end of Church Street, between Primrosehill House and Springhill Villa, the synagogue site remains undeveloped. The steep, sloping nature of the site indicated by the steps at the front of the site, and at the side of the site.

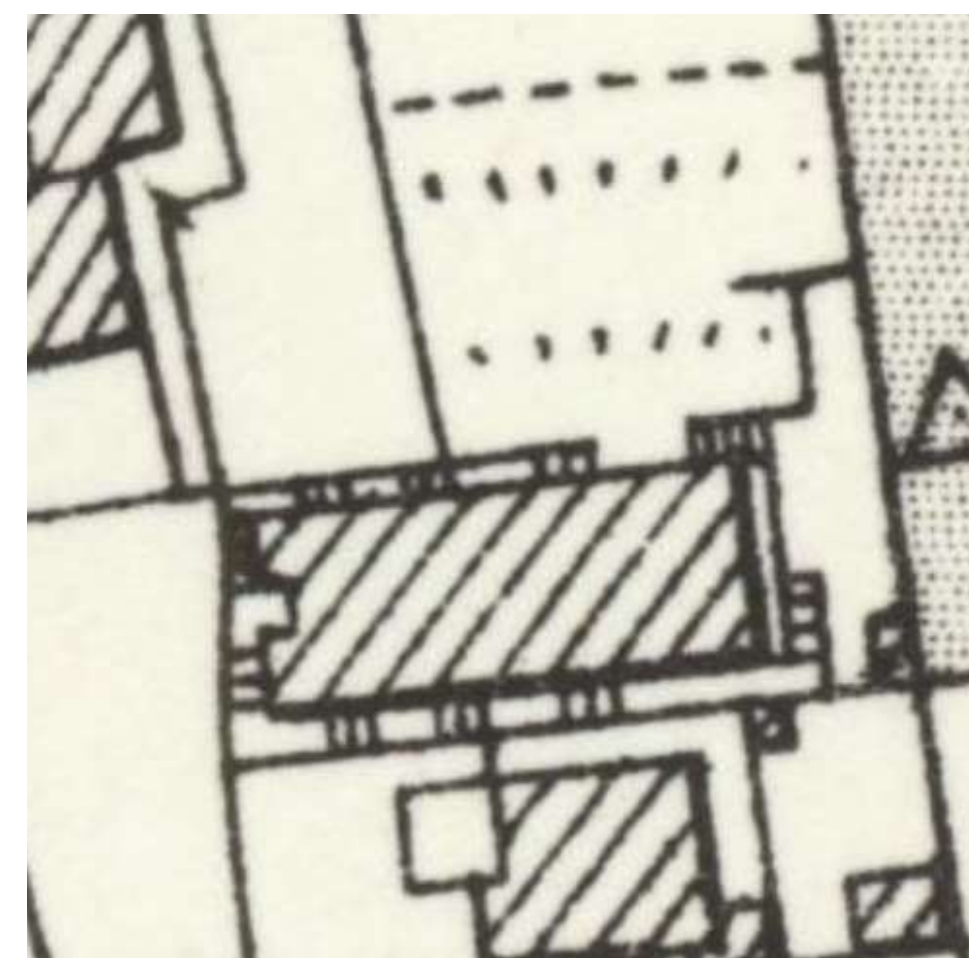
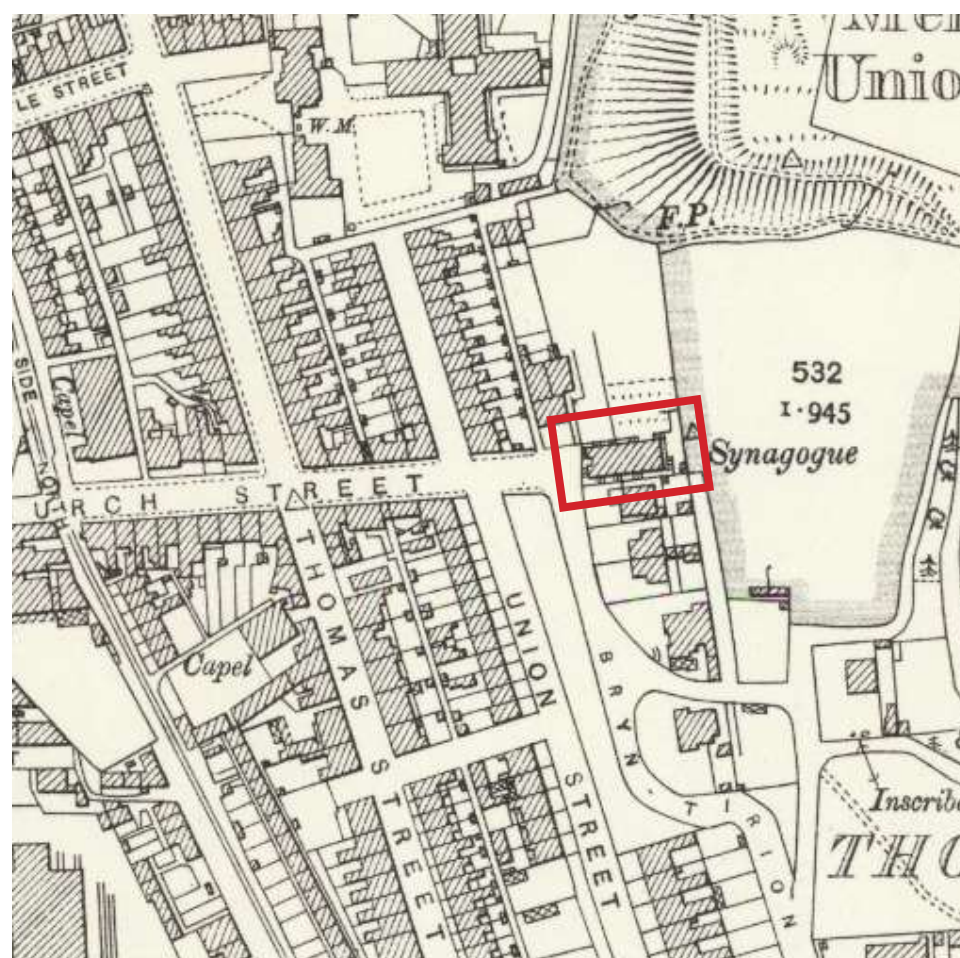
As the town grew, so did the number of places of worship. Various churches and chapels can be seen throughout Thomas Town, the Town Centre and beyond.



1873 Surveyed 1875 Published - Town Plan (source: 'maps.nls.uk') with site of future Synagogue identified within red box. Close up to right.

The '1897-98 Ordnance Survey Map 25-Inch (published 1904)' shows buildings in greater detail than the 1897-98 Ordnance Survey Map 6-inch Map (published 1901) which was also available. The synagogue, built 1876-77, can be seen at the eastern end of Church Street and marked up as "Synagogue". The building is located between Primrosehill House and Springhill Villa, although neither property is named on this map. The rectangular synagogue building completely fills the south of its site: on its western front elevation, a double staircase can be seen leading up to the entrance between the two protruding turrets; further steps can be seen on the north and south side elevations; with another flight of stairs along its eastern rear elevation. All these stairs indicating the steep slope of the site. To the north of the synagogue there remained an undeveloped area which had been set aside for the reader's house at the north-east corner of the building, and a playground at the back for the children.

The town of Merthyr Tydfil became an Urban District Council in 1894. An important expression of this new status was the building of a Town Hall in 1896-97 which can be seen to the north-west of the synagogue with its front west-facing elevation on High Street, with New Castle Street to its north and Tramroad Side to its east, although not referenced on the map.



1897-98 Revised 1904 Published - OS 25-inch Map (source: 'maps.nls.uk') with Synagogue identified within red box. Close up to right.

The '1897-1911 Ordnance Survey Map 25-Inch (published c.1912)' is essentially the 1897-98 map, just partially revised in 1911 for Inland Revenue purposes. It shows the synagogue building as unchanged. To the north-east of the synagogue, we can now see the outline of a new large building, being 2 semi-detached houses, on what had previously been undeveloped land. The most significant change to the surrounding area being the creation of Thomastown Park to the east of the synagogue on what had been the site of an old quarry and waste tips. The park opened in 1903 at a cost of £5,000 and was the first public park in Merthyr Tydfil.

The '1914-15 Ordnance Survey Map 25-Inch (published 1919)' shows no noticeable changes to the synagogue building and surrounding area compared to the previous 1897-1911 map.

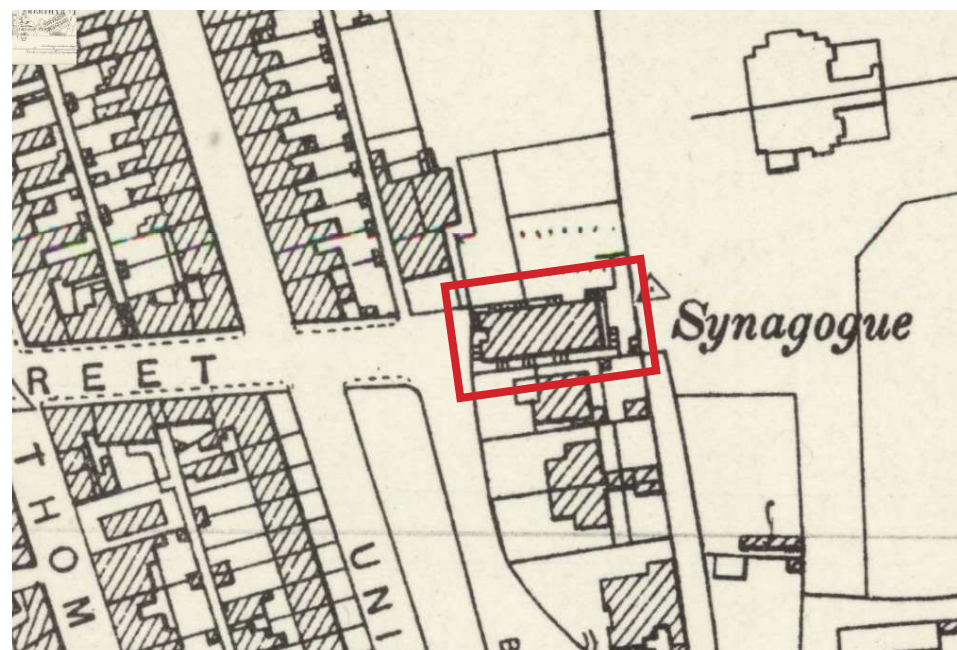
Only the '1938 Ordnance Survey Map 6-Inch (published c.1946)' was available which shows buildings in far less detail than the 25-inch maps in earlier years. The synagogue is marked up as "Synagogue" but is shown only as a rectangular building. There are no noticeable changes to the synagogue building and surrounding area between 1914-15 to 1938.

Once again, there are no noticeable changes to the synagogue building and surrounding area on the '1948 Ordnance Survey Map 6-inch (published 1951)' compared to the previous 1938 map.

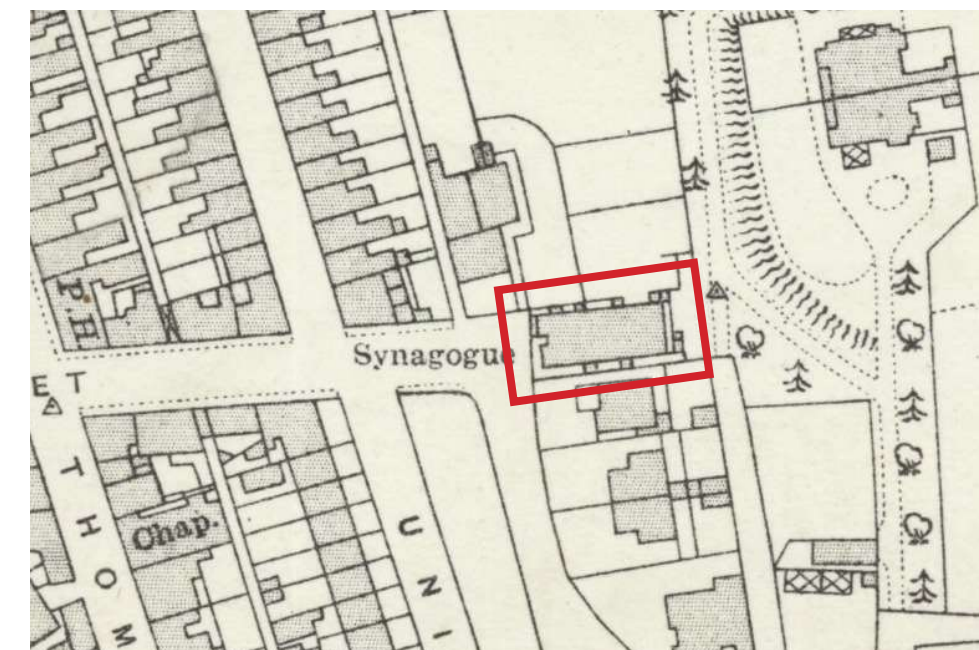
The '1945 Google Earth images' are very blurry. However, you can see that the areas immediately to the north (side), east (rear) and the north-eastern garden of the synagogue are very dark, presumably trees and woodland. The tree canopy obscuring part of the synagogue's roof to both the east and north.

The '2001, 2013 and 2023 Google Earth images' show the tree canopy becoming denser as the trees continue to grow. However, there are no significant changes to the synagogue or the surrounding area.

Please refer to **Appendix B** for a more detailed 'Historic Map Appraisal'.



1897-1911 Revised c.1912 Published (source: 'maps.nls.uk')



1914-15 Revised 1919 Published (source: 'maps.nls.uk')



1938 Revised c.1946 Published (source: 'maps.nls.uk')



1945 Aerial Photo (source: GoogleEarth)



2001 Aerial Photo (source: GoogleEarth)

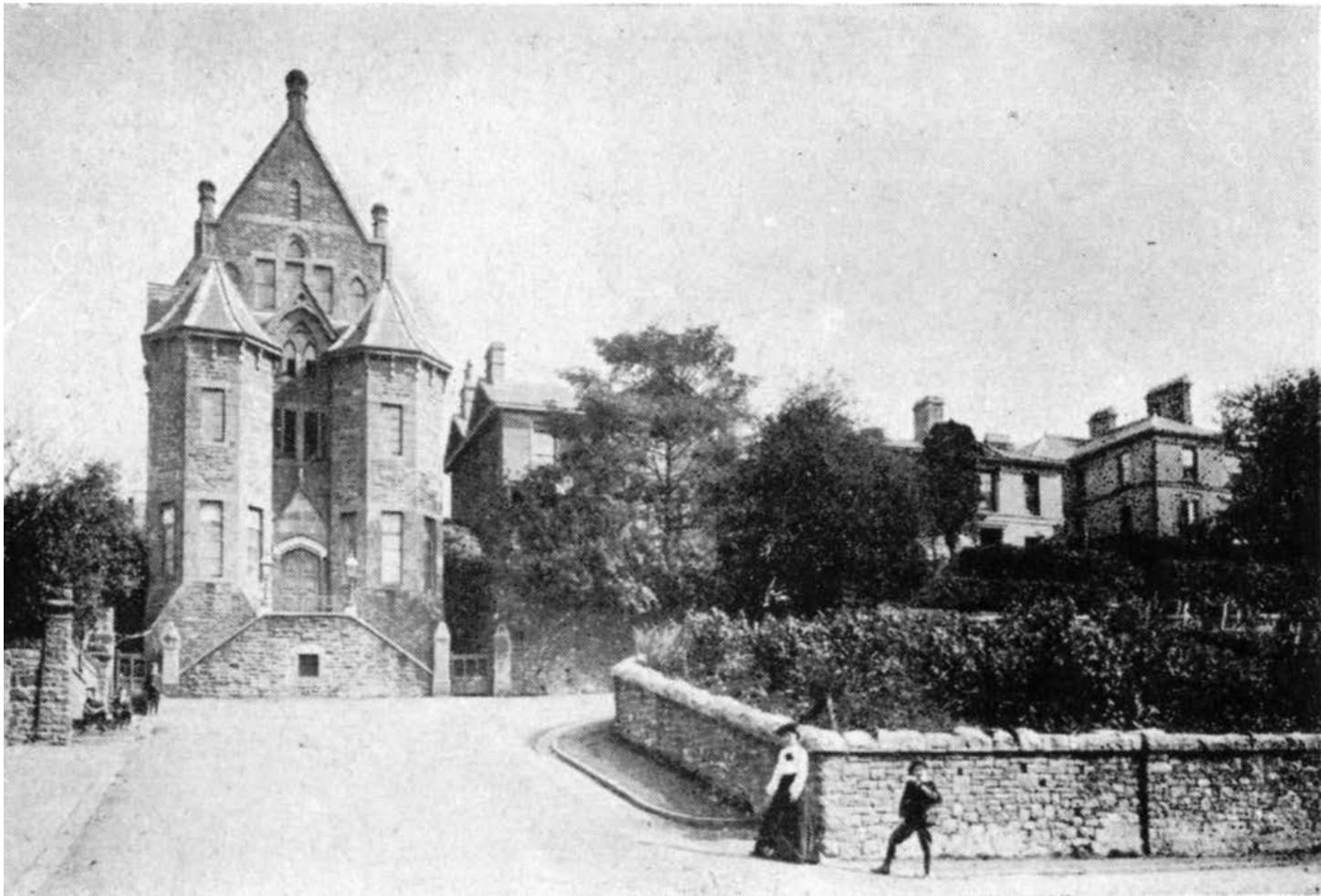


2023 Aerial Photo (source: GoogleEarth)

2.6 Historic Images of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue - Exterior



Pre-1910 view of Synagogue Front (source: National Library of Israel)

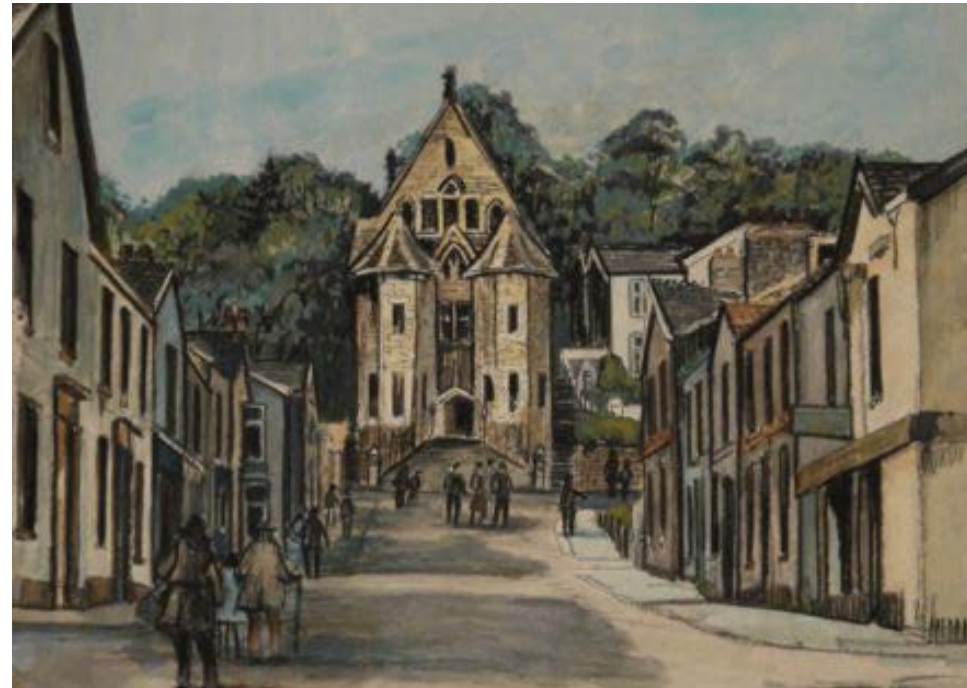


c.1904 view of Synagogue Front (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk' website)



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

2.6 Historic Images of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue - Exterior



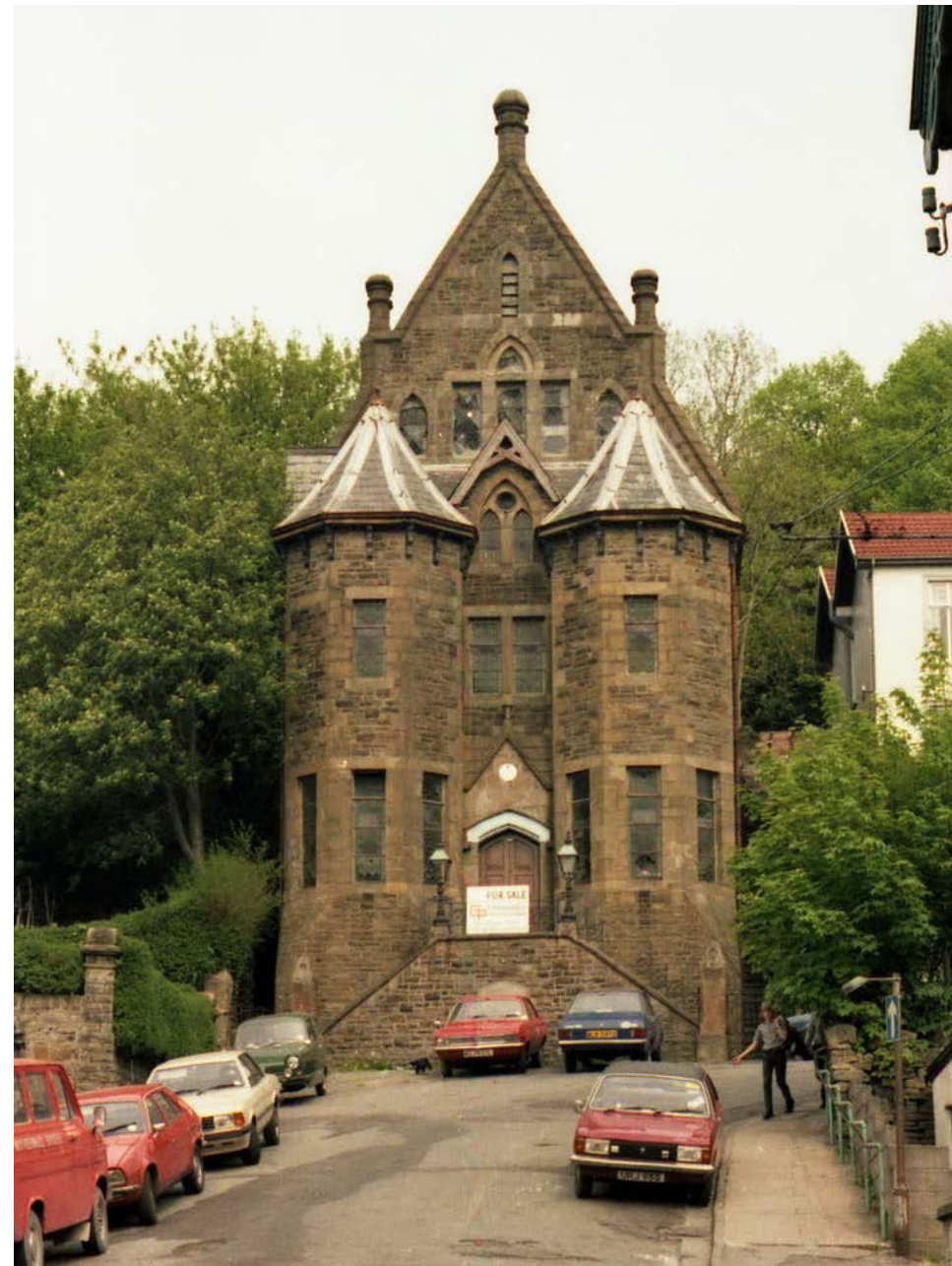
Painting by Olwen Hughes (source: 'merthyr-history.com' website)



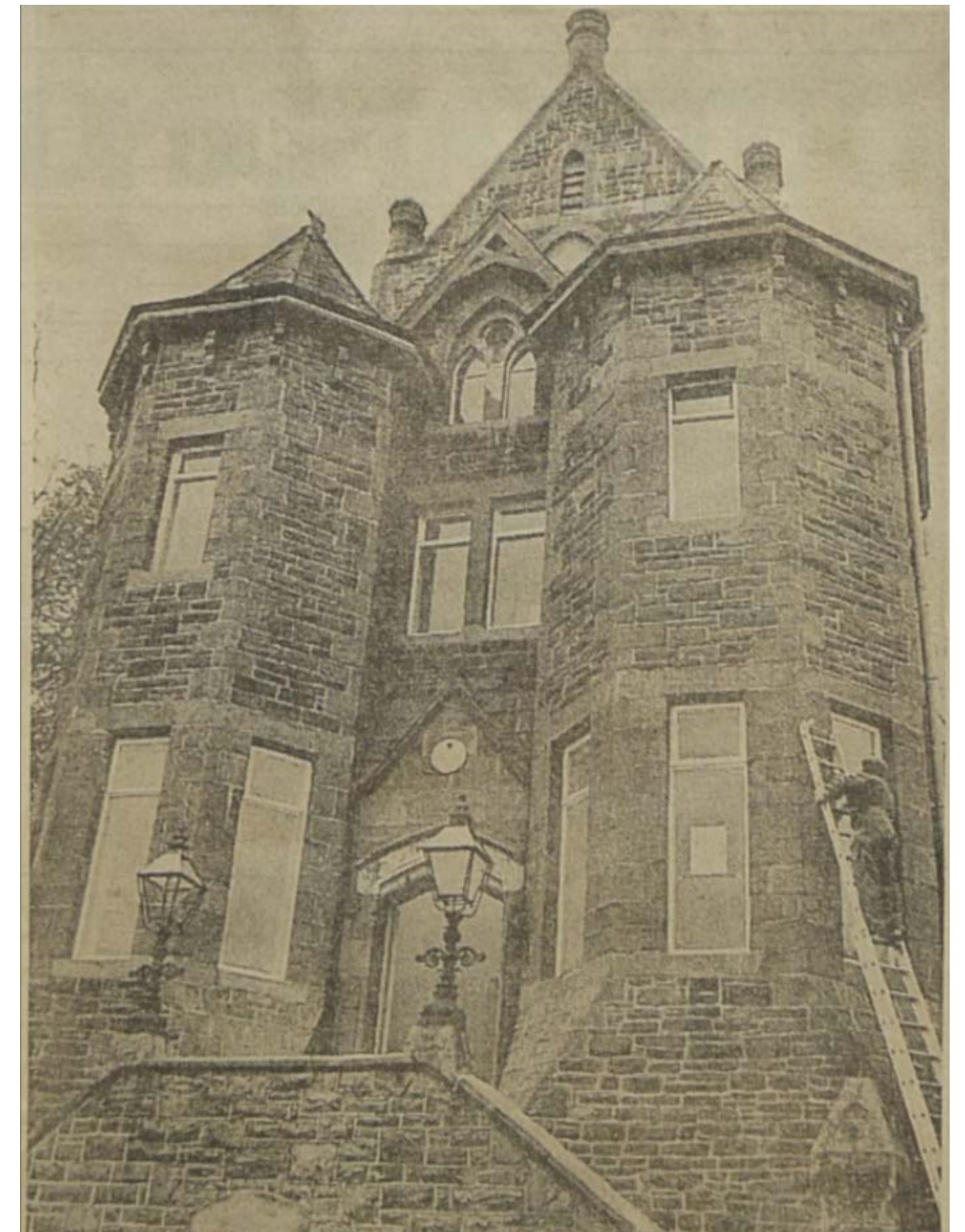
May 1978 (source: 'casgliadywerin.cymru' website)



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

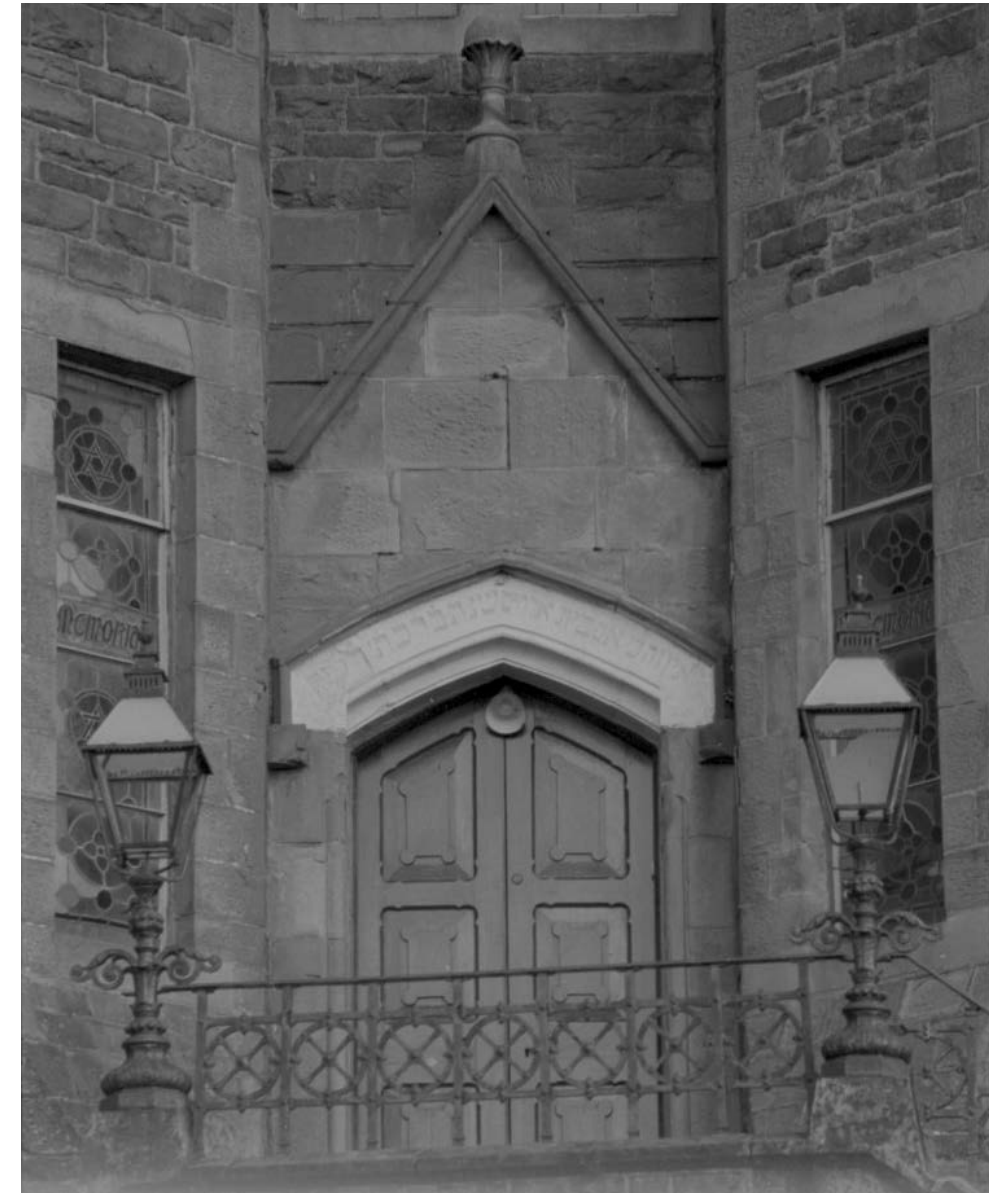


c.1978 (source 'alangeorge.co.uk' website)



1984, South Wales Echo 8 Nov 1984 (source: 'peoplescollection.wales')

2.6 1978-9 External Photos
(source: Foundation for Jewish Heritage)



2.6 Historic Images of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue - Interior - View of Synagogue space towards Ark (source: Foundation for Jewish Heritage)



2.6 Historic Images of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue - Interior - View of Synagogue space towards Ark (source: Doreen Jacob)



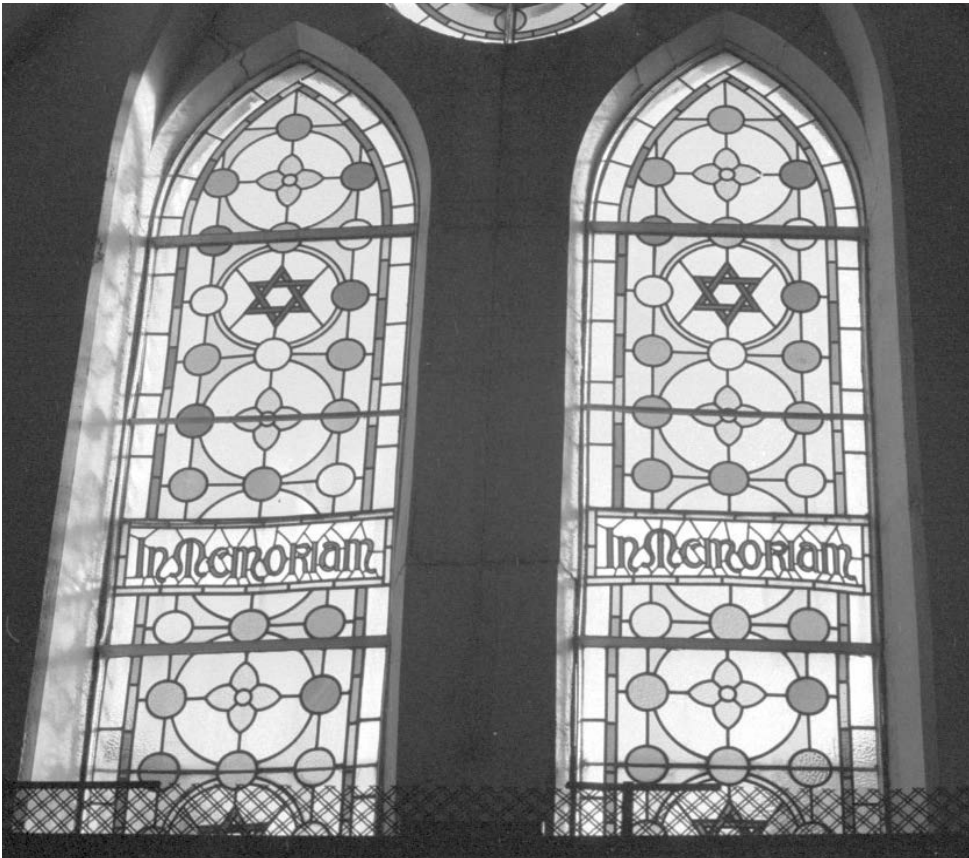
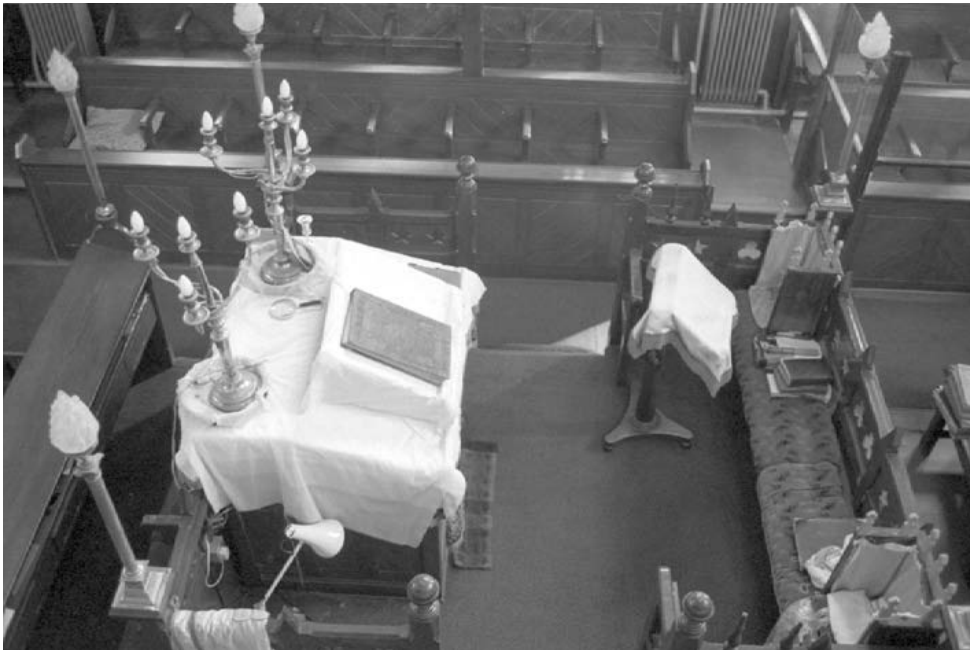
2.6 1978-9 Internal Photos
(source: Foundation for Jewish Heritage)



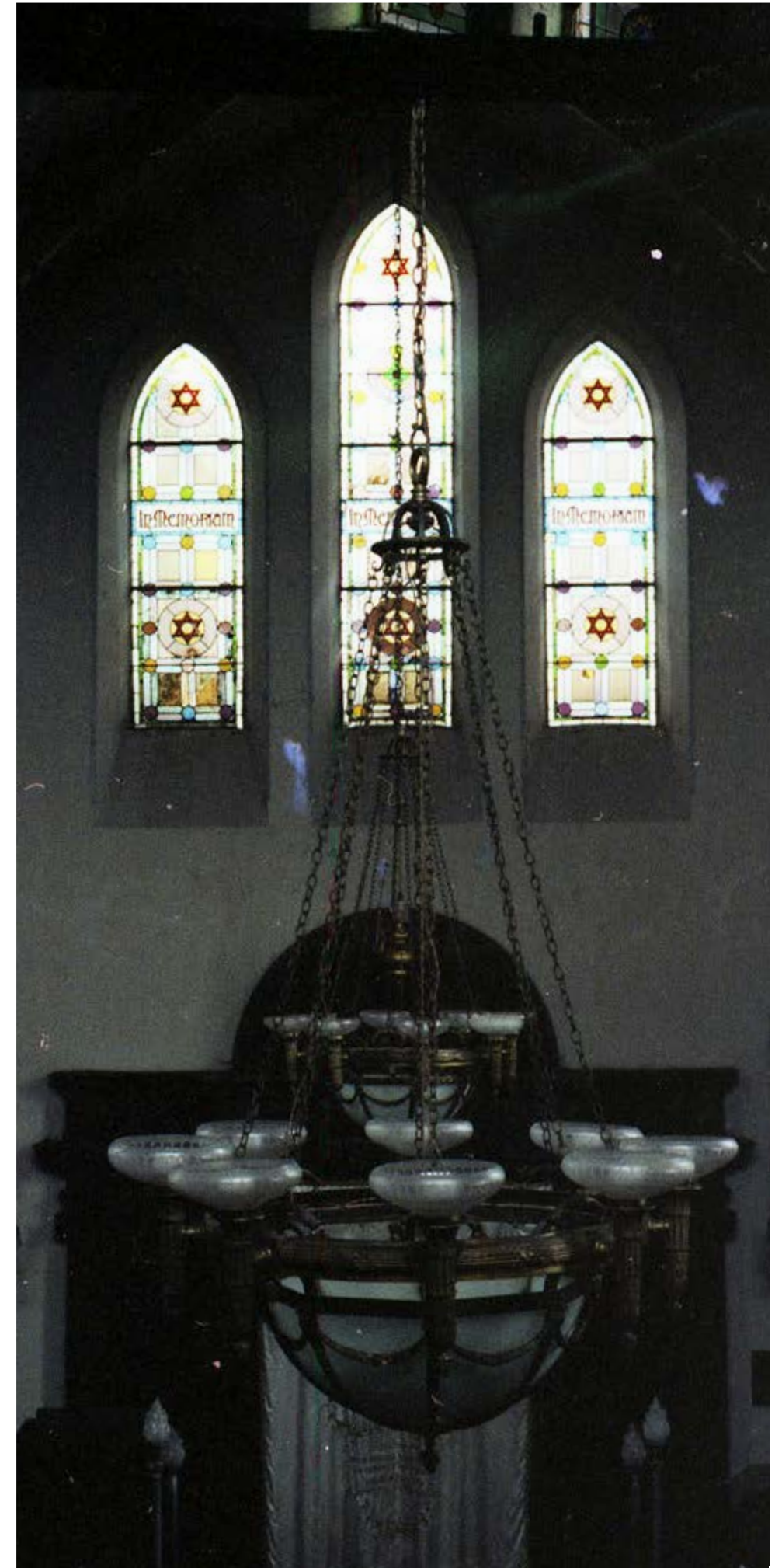
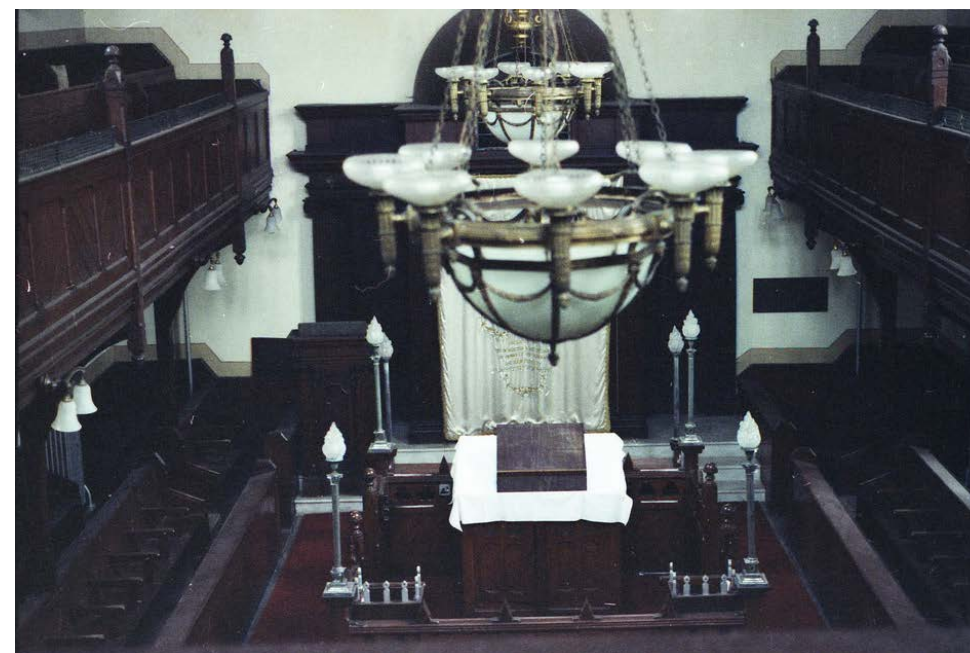
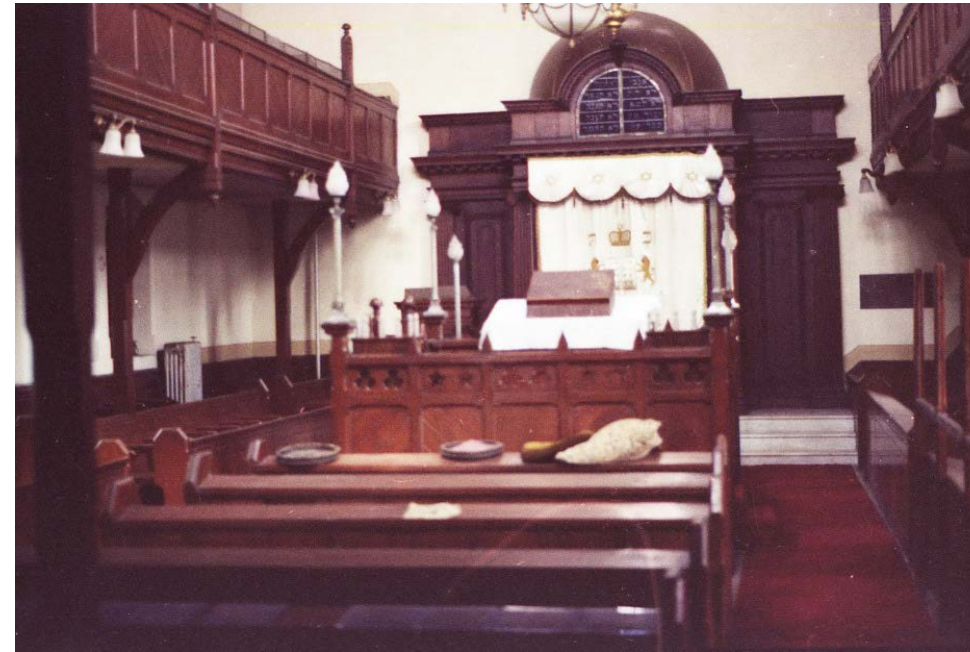
2.6 1978-9 Internal Photos
(source: Foundation for Jewish Heritage)



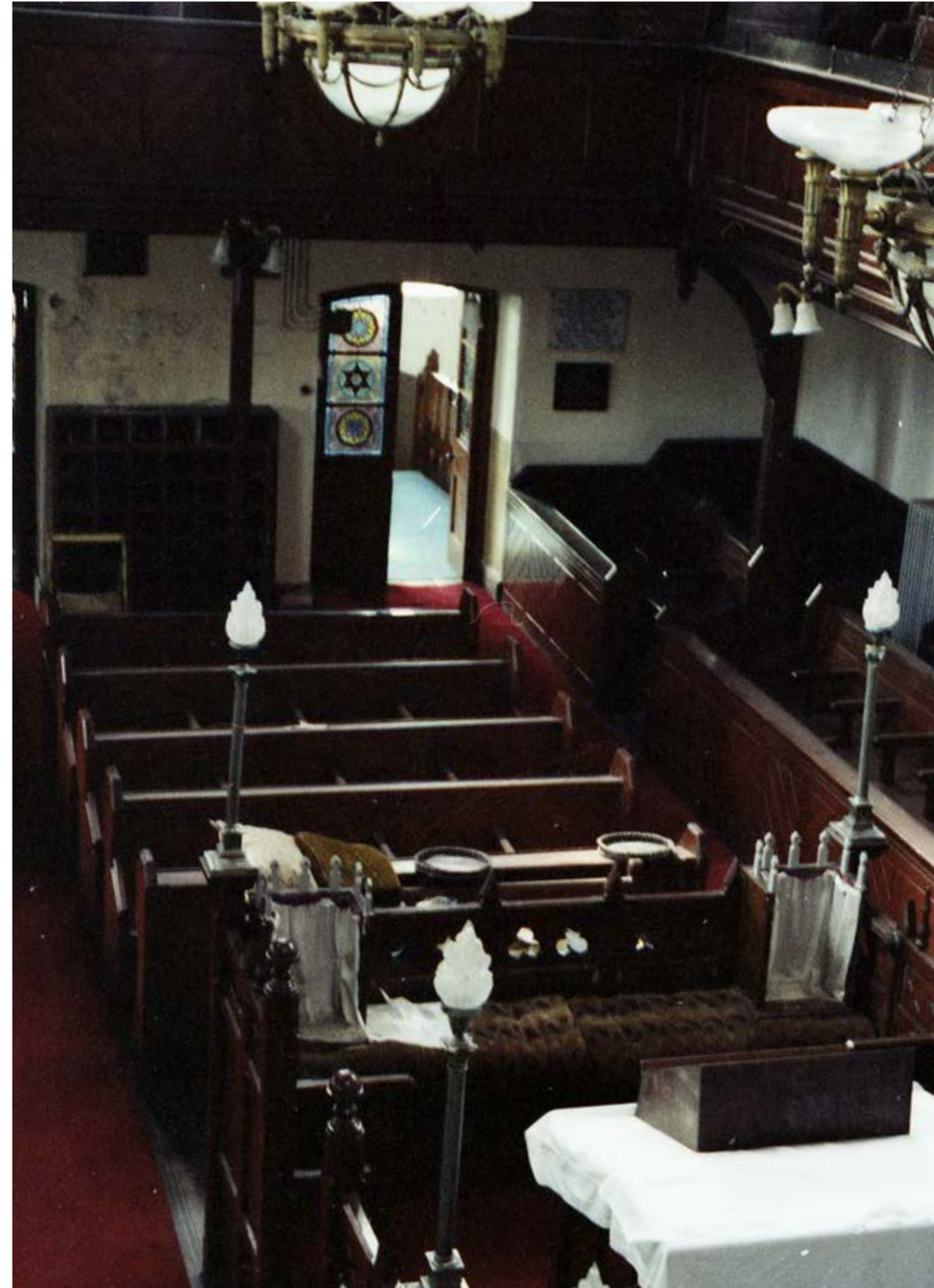
2.6 1978-9 Internal Photos
(source: Foundation for Jewish Heritage)



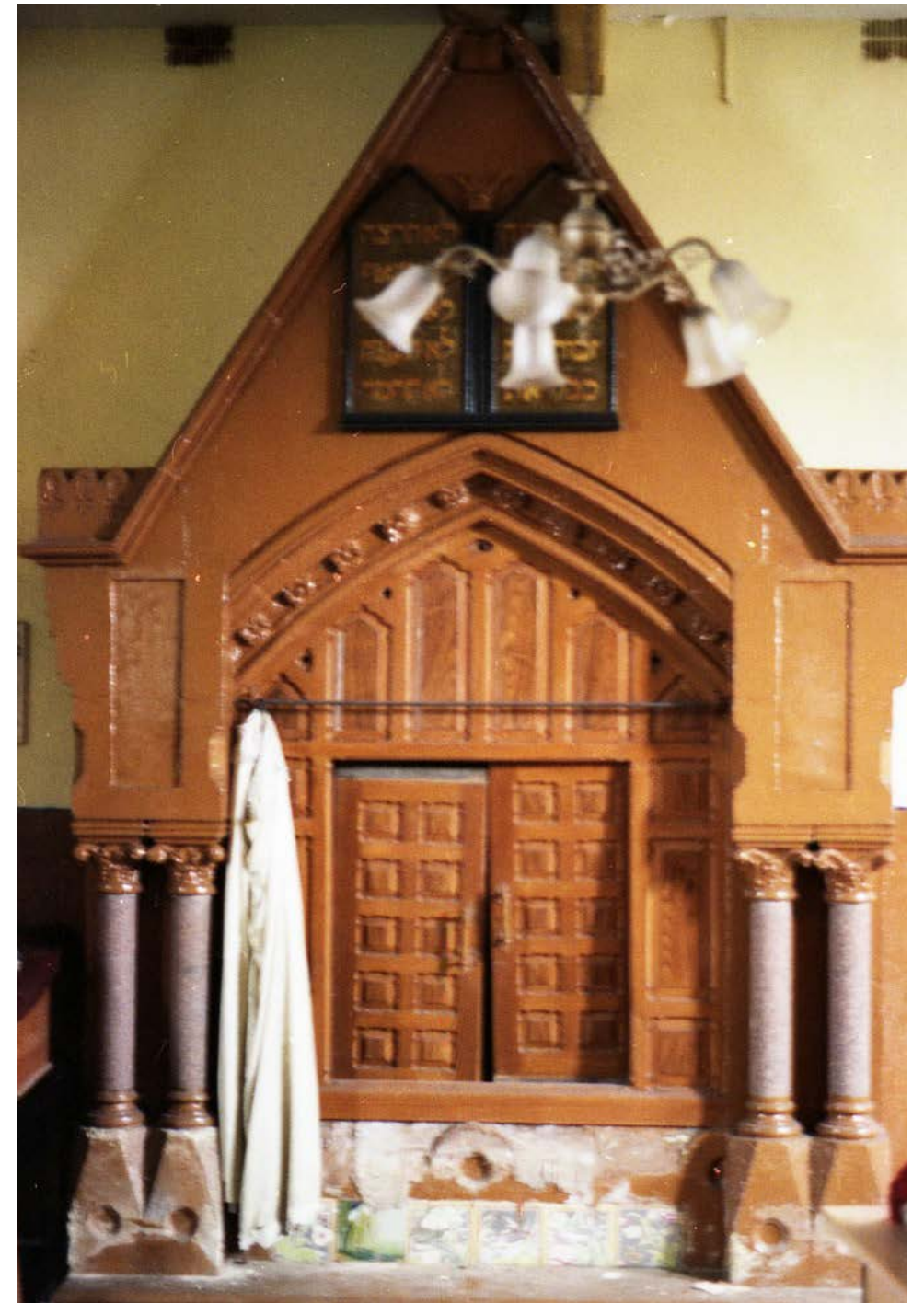
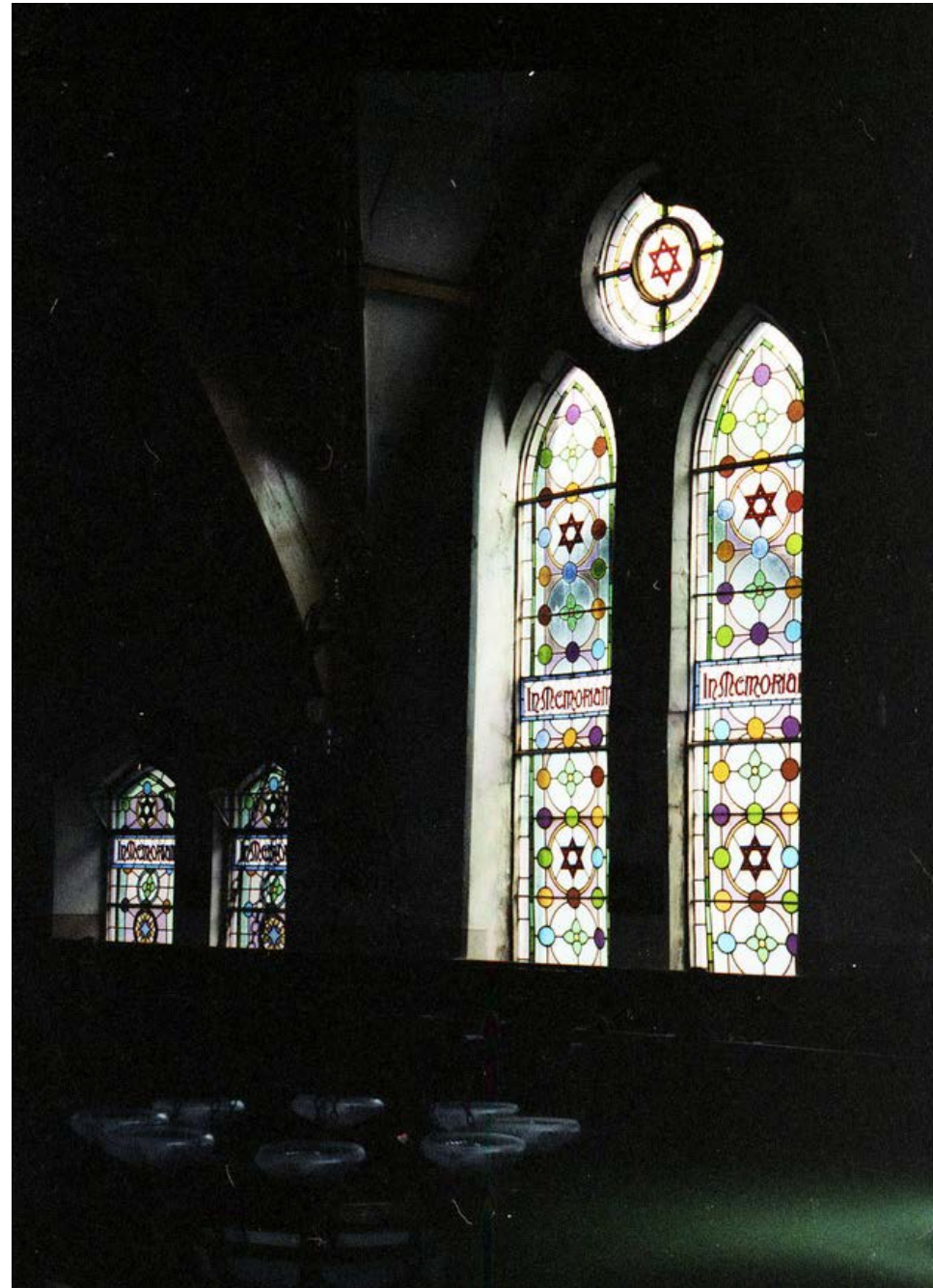
2.6 c.1978 Internal Photos looking towards Ark
(source 'alangeorge.co.uk' website)



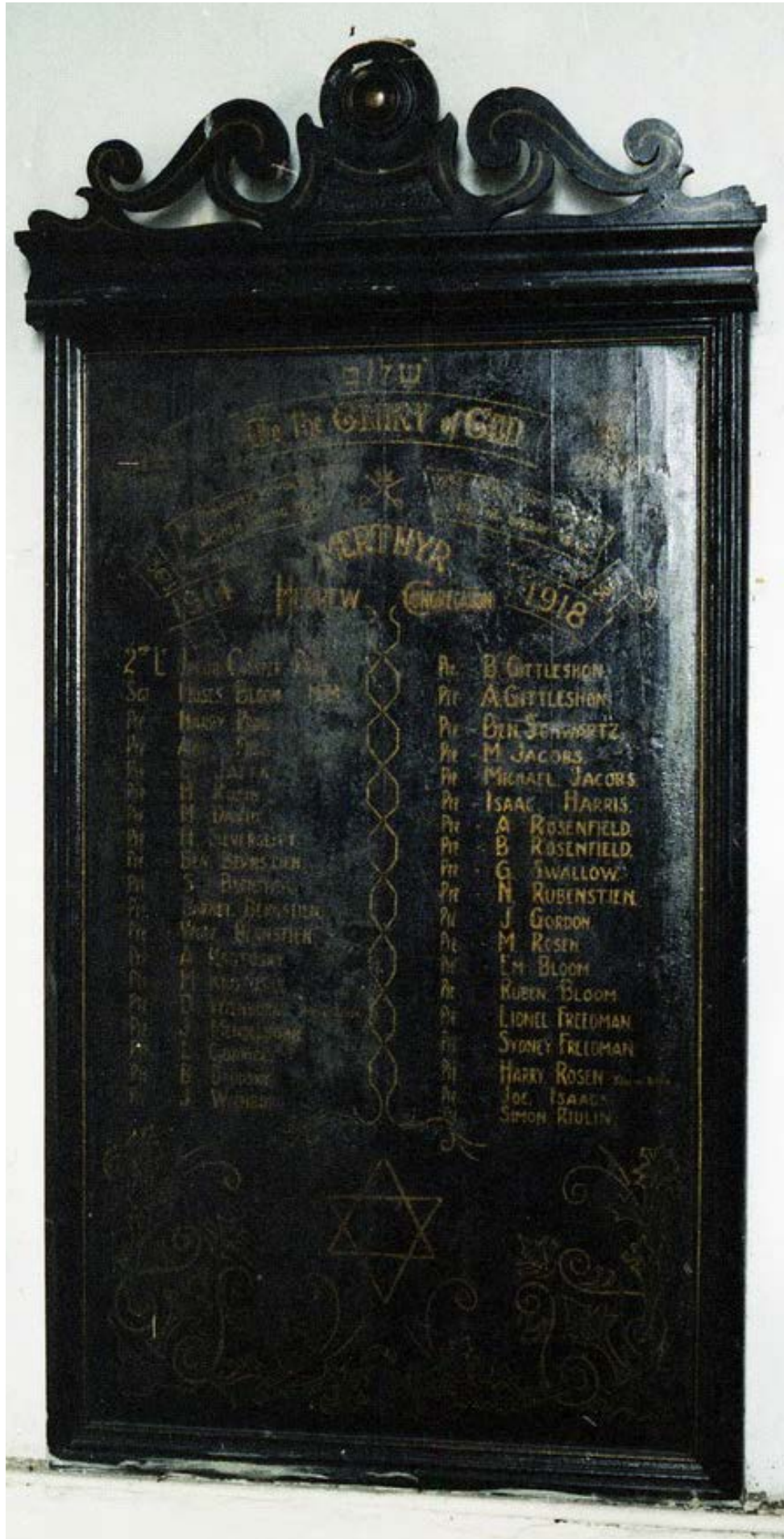
2.6 c.1978 Internal Photos looking towards entrance doors
(source 'alangeorge.co.uk' website)



2.6 c.1978 Internal Photos to various areas
(source 'alangeorge.co.uk' website)



2.6 c.1978 Internal Photos to various areas
(source 'alangeorge.co.uk' website)



2.6 Views of Mikvah at Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue

Photos below taken in 1995 by Josel Goldstein
(source: Historic England)

Photos to middle and right taken in 2023 (source: own)



2.7 Outline History & Heritage of Merthyr Tydfil

Every place has its own unique history which creates its historic character; historic character being at the heart of local distinctiveness and sense of place.

A place is shaped by the activities of people over tens, hundreds, or even thousands of years. Many of the distinctive qualities of a place result from its history in the same way that the character of a person is formed over time. These can include its origins and significant periods in its history – how and why it developed and changed. It can also include particular activities and traditions, communities and people, or events associated with a place. These elements all contribute to historic character: we can see them in the form and fabric of a place as well as in the names, stories, art and culture associated with it.

2.7.1 How Merthyr Tydfil Got Its Name

Merthyr Tydfil is said to be named after Saint Tydfil, the daughter of King Brychan of Brycheiniog, who according to legend was slain at Merthyr by pagans around 480 AD. A church was built to keep sacred the spot where Tydfil was believed to have been martyred because of her Christian beliefs. St Tydfil's Church, at the lower end of the High Street, was built in 1894 to replace the one built in 1808. However, it is thought that some form of church has stood on this spot for nearly 1,500 years.

Originally a medieval parish, Merthyr Tydfil developed into a major industrial town during the 19th century.

2.7.2 The Industrial History of Merthyr Tydfil

Until the mid-18th century, Merthyr Tydfil was 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 ironwork 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. Under the ownership of John Josiah Guest between 1807 and 1852, Dowlais rose to international fame as the largest ironworks worldwide employing 8,800 workers and producing 88,000 tonnes of iron a year. Merthyr Tydfil became the largest town in Wales and the centre of the world's iron making industry.

The demand for iron was stimulated by the wartime need for iron during the Seven Years' War (1756-63) and the American War of Independence (1775-83). Followed by the proliferation of railways, both in Britain and around the world, from the mid-1830s which ensured a hugely increased market for Merthyr iron until the end of the century. As a result of rapid expansion in industrial production and mining activities, the population of Merthyr Tydfil increased dramatically. The first national census in 1801 recorded a population of 7,000; increasing to 24,000 in 1831; 46,000 in 1851; 70,000 in 1861; and almost 90,000 by 1910.

Industry brought both prosperity and hardship to the town. Conditions in the homes of the working classes were a far cry from the luxury enjoyed by the families of the ironmasters such as the Guests and Crawshays. The working classes lived 'cheek by jowl', in dirt and squalor, where disease was rife and life expectancy low, in slums which became known as 'Little Hell'.

The Merthyr Tydfil Rising of 1831 was the violent climax to many years of simmering unrest amongst the working-class population of Merthyr Tydfil and its surrounding areas. For the first time, workers united under the red flag and effectively took control of the town for many days. It required hundreds of professional troops to restore order, with mass arrests and deaths, but the budding trade union movement had already taken a firm foothold in South Wales.

By 1870 the iron industry was under threat from two directions: local raw materials were either running out or becoming harder and more expensive to reach, and the development of Henry Bessemer's revolutionary steel-making process. Merthyr's ironmasters initially resisted the transition from iron to steel, much to their cost. Dowlais made the transition to steel production in 1865, and Cyfarthfa re-opened as a steel works in 1884, merging with the Guest, Keen & Co.'s works at Dowlais in 1902.

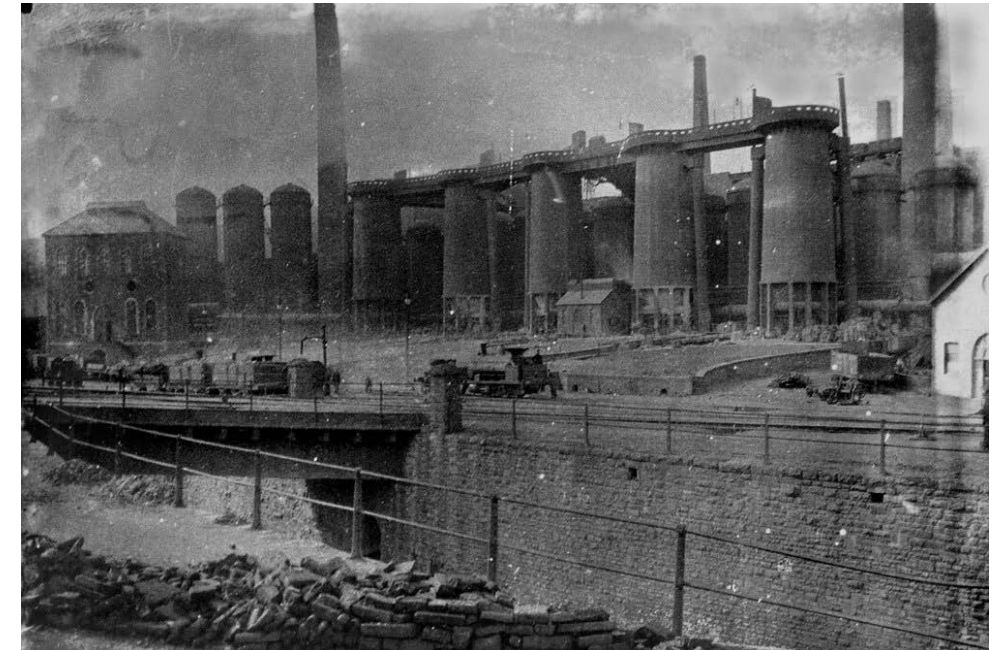
However, the mineral estates associated with the ironworks were also a valuable source of coal, and in the late 19th century it was the exploitation of coal that came to the fore and dominated the local industrial economy into the 20th century.

During the 20th century, the need for direct access to the coast became ever more important, and Guest, Keen & Nettlefolds (as the firm became known in 1902) built coastal works at East Moors in Cardiff, and then at Port Talbot, finally abandoning steel production in the Merthyr area in 1936.

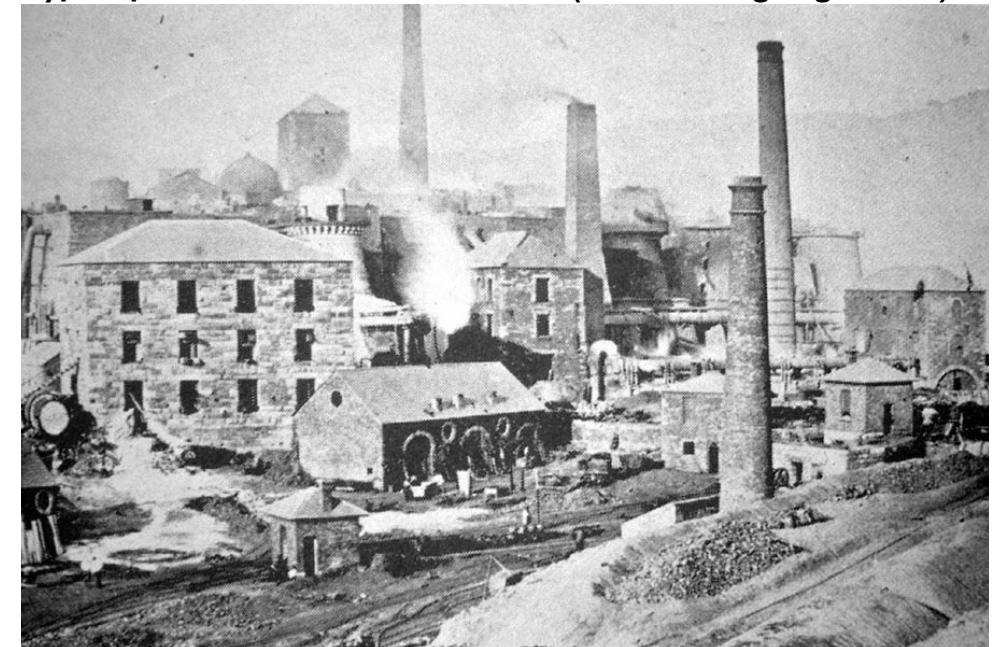
Together with the Great Depression of 1929, unemployment in Merthyr Tydfil had reached 50% by 1930, and was 62.3% by 1932. The population dropped from 80,000 in 1921 to 63,000 in 1937. In 1939, there was even a Parliamentary Report recommending that Merthyr Tydfil be abandoned, its remaining inhabitants be relocated and a reservoir built on the site of the town.

After the Second World War, a climate of renewal developed, and new light industries were established in Merthyr Tydfil such as Hoover (1948), Thom Electrical Industries (1951) and the College of Further Education (1950-2). This transformed the town's dependence on a single industry and enabled it to flourish again.

Museums, such as the Cyfarthfa Castle Museum, keep Merthyr Tydfil's industrial heritage alive.



Cyfarthfa Works Blast Furnaces c.1900 (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk')



Dowlais Works Blast Furnace Site c.1865 (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk')



Dowlais Steelworks from the air, undated (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk')

2.7.3 The Development of Merthyr Tydfil into a Town

Merthyr Tydfil originally grew up and around St Tydfil's church. However, as the value and abundance of the area's natural resources became apparent, the town expanded and developed. Industry had first call on available space with housing fitting in where it could in the pockets between land mined for its iron ore, coal and limestone, and the land used for the dumping of its waste.

As such, settlements were limited to the east bank of the river Taff; expansion to the west was restricted by Cyfarthfa Ironworks, and to the south and east by Dowlais, Plymouth and Penydarren Ironworks. These ironworks resulted in a large and growing labour force which needed to be housed close to their place of work. The ironworks became a nucleus for settlement, with the ironmasters often providing housing for key workers. Distinct residential areas developed close to individual ironworks: notably Williamstown and Georgetown for Cyfarthfa; Pentrebach for Plymouth; High Street and Church Street at Penydarren, together with a cluster of housing at Penyard, associated with the Penydarren Ironworks. Each residential area had a strong social identity, often with strong associations to particular immigrant communities.

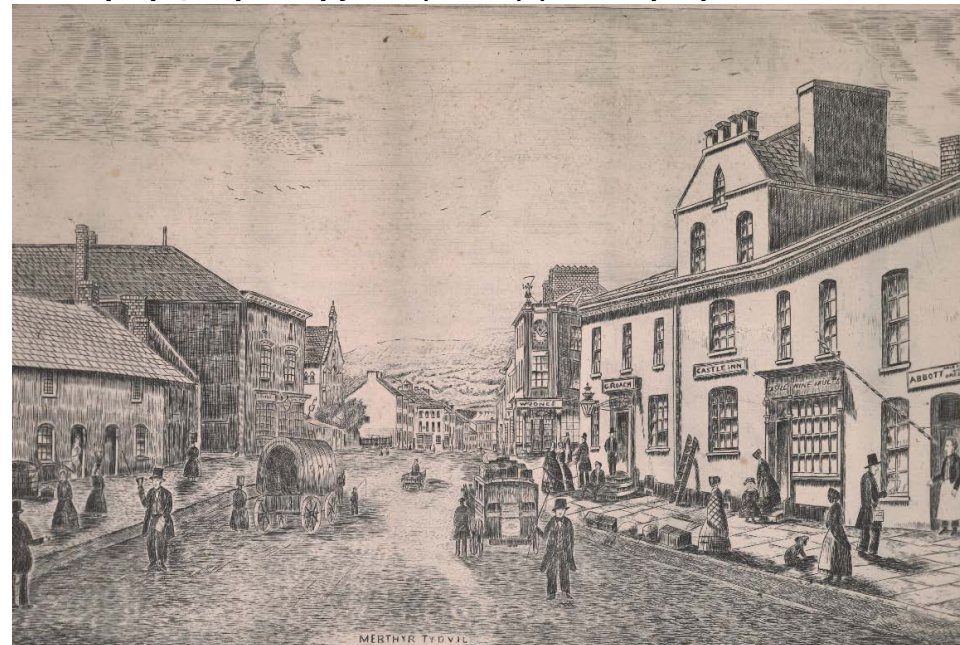
The conscious creation of a town centre took a major step forward in 1838 when the Market Hall was built overlooking a spacious square; this square became a significant meeting place. By the mid-19th century, High Street had become firmly established as the main axis in the town, dominated by shops and offices, connecting different residential districts. The town centre also boasted two railway stations, one to the east and one to the south. There was also an expanding number of churches and chapels in the town centre and surrounding residential areas.

In response to a growing population, a Board of Health was established in 1850, responsible for paving, lighting, drainage and water supply. From 1860, the Board also required building plans to be submitted for approval which would have influenced the layout and characteristics of buildings.

Merthyr Tydfil became an Urban District Council in 1894, with the building of its Town Hall in 1896-7 being an expression of its Civic Pride. It received Borough status in 1905, and County Borough status three years later. By this time, its responsibilities extended to education, planning, housing, libraries, parks, baths and public health. An important civic initiative being the creation of Thomastown Park in 1900.



'Merthyr Tydfil' by Penry Jones (c.1825) (source: 'peoplescollection.wales')



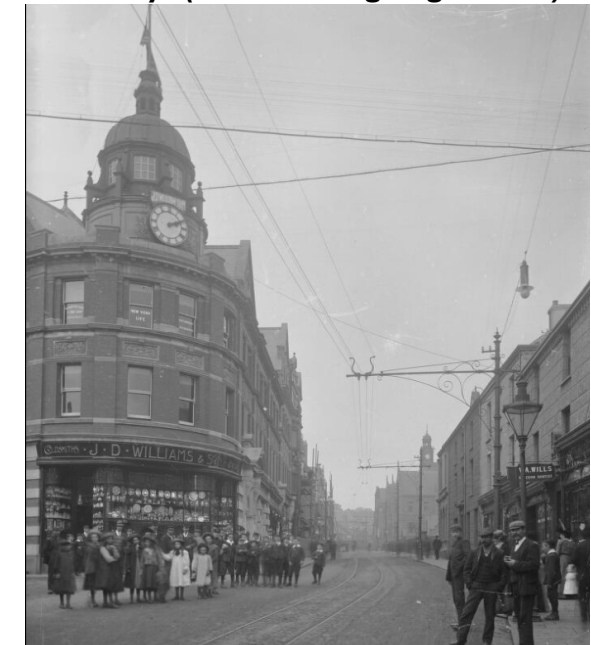
High Street, c.1850 Thomas E. Clarke (source: National Library of Wales)



Merthyr Tydfil High Street c.1905 (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk')



Market Square, Merthyr (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk')



Merthyr Tydfil High Street c.1905 (source: 'peoplescollection.wales')



Carnegie Free Library & Town Hall, Merthyr (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk')

2.7.4 The Development of Thomastown

Thomastown is located to the east of Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre on a steep slope overlooking the town and valley beyond. It is an important example of planned development from the middle of the 19th century. It is believed to be one of the largest groups of late Georgian and early Victorian style buildings in Wales and one of the first purpose-built residential suburbs in Merthyr Tydfil.

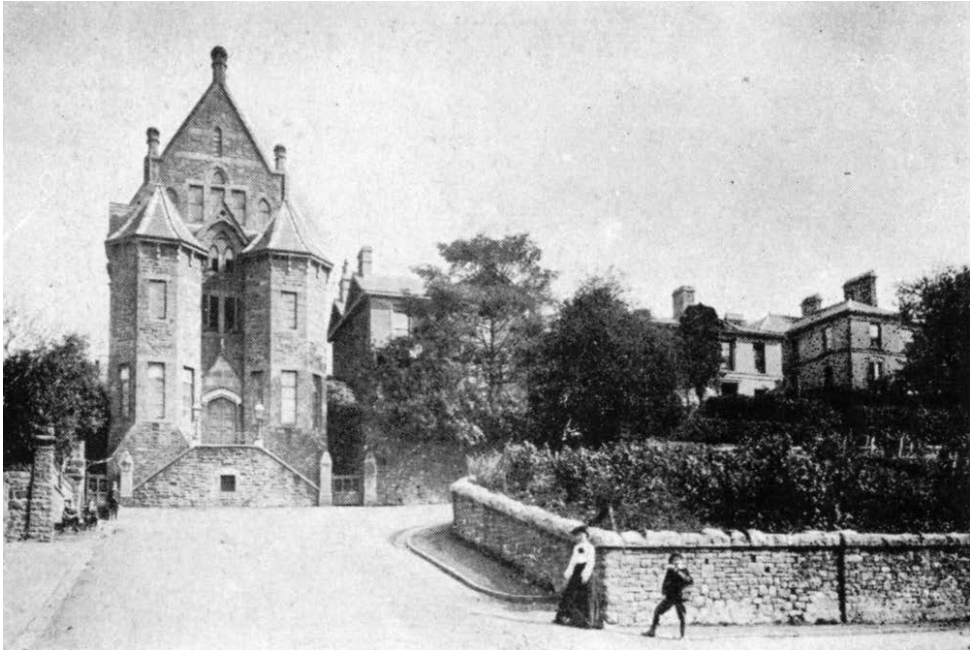
The area is named after Dr William Thomas (1794-1858), a doctor and surgeon who became a local magistrate. He owned the land on which Thomastown was built; having married the wealthy widow of Rees Davies Esq. and becoming the proprietor of the Court and Maerdy estates through this marriage.

Prior to development, the area had been made up of parcelled fields as no mineable natural resources were present.

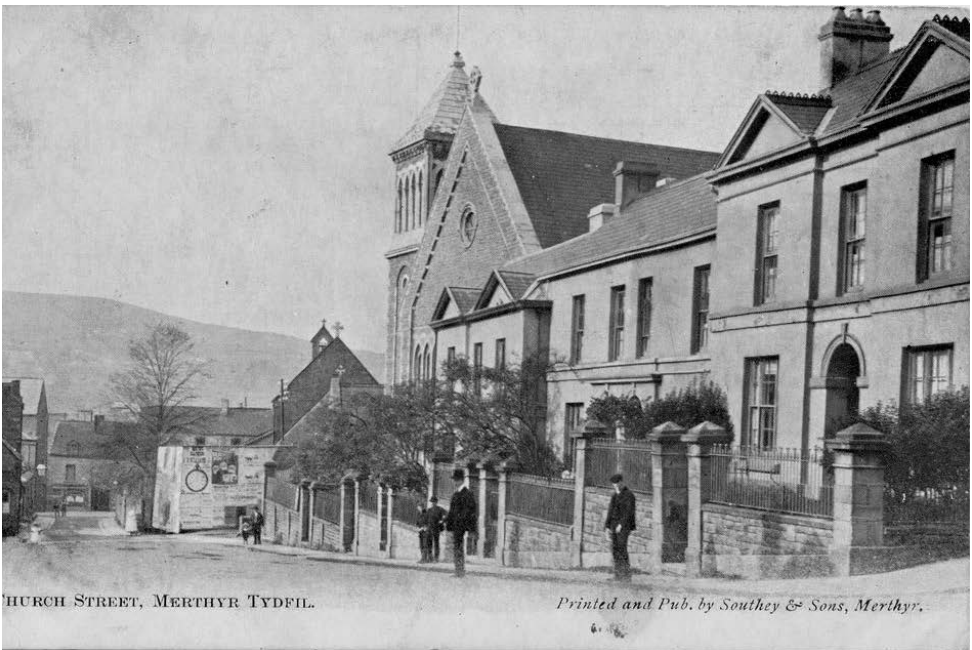
Tramroadside was the first area to be developed around 1800; closest to the town centre and characterised by workers cottages built alongside the Penydarren Tramroad. The central section was built in the mid-1800s as a middle-class residential area, dominated by larger terraced dwellings. The easternmost part followed, dominated by larger detached dwellings set among what were rural lanes overlooking the town. This included spacious villas such as The Rectory (originally known as Courtland House), Springfield Villa, Bryntirion (since demolished), Brynheulog and Sunnybank Villa all dating from the mid-1800s.

Religious buildings added a further dimension to the character of the area. These included Shiloh Welsh Wesleyan Chapel (now the Former Miners' Welfare Hall) on Church Street which is attributed to Isambard Kingdom Brunel. With Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue being built at the top of Church Street in the late 1870s.

Please refer to **Appendix C** for further information on the **'History & Heritage of Merthyr Tydfil'**.



Synagogue, Church Street & Villas c.1904 (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk')



Church Street, Merthyr Tydfil (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk')



Church Street from Merthyr Synagogue c.1930 (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk')



Church Street from Merthyr Synagogue c.1930 (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk')

2.8 History of Jews in Wales

In 1290 King Edward I of England issued his ‘Edict of Expulsion’ which expelled all Jews from England; expelled from the realm as perfidious (faithless) men. It wasn’t until the 17th century that Jews were allowed back to Britain. In 1656 Oliver Cromwell made a verbal promise, backed by the Council of State, to allow Jews to return to Britain and practise their faith freely. As a result, Jews from Holland, Spain and Portugal came to Britain and this became known as the ‘Resettlement of 1656’. However, English Jews didn’t receive formal emancipation until 1858.

Although most of Britain’s Jews lived in major English cities, a significant number of Jewish centres were established in Wales. The oldest Jewish community in Wales being at Swansea, and the largest Jewish community in Wales being at Cardiff.

The first known Jewish settler in Swansea arrived in the 1740s. The number of Jewish settlers continued to increase and evolved into a Jewish community, with a 99-year lease of land for a Jewish cemetery granted to a German-born silversmith named David Michael in 1768. By the 1770s the first synagogue in Wales had been established in David Michael’s house in Wind Street, Swansea. With the first purpose-built synagogue in Wales built in Waterloo Street, Swansea in 1859.

A Jewish community was formally established in Cardiff in 1841 when the 2nd Marquess of Bute donated land at Highfield for use as a Jewish cemetery. Around the same time, Jewish communities were being established in the South Wales Valleys at Newport, Merthyr Tydfil, Pontypool, Tredegar, Pontypridd, and Neath; all with their own places of worship, removing the expense and inconvenience of traveling to Cardiff or Swansea for religious services.

The Jewish communities of South Wales were originally established by poor immigrants from Central Europe. The original Jewish settlers from Germany, Austria, and Poland were 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 from Central Europe travelling to South Wales for economic gain. The widespread industrialisation and urbanisation of the area, with its working-class centres, provided 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 Jews tended not to be directly involved in any of the principal industries, instead they worked primarily as merchants and traders. In addition to economic opportunities, the tolerant attitude of Wales to Nonconformist religions also made it attractive to Jewish settlers.

Several Jewish immigrants transitioned from pedlar to shopkeepers, clothiers, boot-makers, jewellers or watch-makers; trade directories from the time also reveal the dominance of Jews in the pawnbroking trade of South Wales. Pawnbrokers were known as the ‘poor man’s banker’ and South Wales had a rapidly expanding working-class population in need of this service.

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. It is estimated that 1.98 million Jews left Russia during this period, with between 120,000 to 150,000 settling in Britain. Before the 1880s there were no more than a few hundred Jews in Wales, but by 1917 numbers had risen to an estimated 4,700 according to the Jewish Year Book. Merthyr Tydfil’s recorded Jewish population increased from 300 to 400 between 1904 and 1920.

Jewish communities in Wales were primarily located in the industrial cities and towns of South Wales: such as Swansea, Cardiff and Merthyr Tydfil. Followed by smaller coastal towns in North Wales: such as Bangor, Colwyn Bay, Llandudno and Rhyl. The topography of Wales is one explanation for the development of numerous Jewish communities, with its mountainous core dividing the country into two distinct parts: the north and south.

The topography of the area is most likely responsible for the large number of small Jewish communities established in south-east Wales. The mountainous landscape divided and scattered the region’s Jewish population into numerous small communities. Valley towns only a few miles apart each had their own synagogue; the towns being separated by steep mountains which made it difficult to travel from one to the other. The high concentration of Jewish communities in such a small geographical area was a unique feature of Welsh Jewry, with no other region in the United Kingdom like it. There were approximately 16 communities within an estimated area of 169 square miles, an area stretching approximately 13 miles across and in length.

Also unique to the Welsh-Jewish experience was that Wales was the only country in mainland Britain where Jews arrived indirectly. Jewish migrants from Continental Europe entered Britain at the eastern English ports of Hull and Grimsby, with smaller numbers arriving at London or the eastern Scottish port of Leith. Jews then had to travel across England in order to settle in Wales.

The Jewish population in Wales reached its peak around 1919 with around 5,000 individuals. From the 1920s onwards Jewish communities in Wales witnessed a sharp decline, especially in South Wales. The economic depression that hit South Wales during the 1920s and 1930s was the main reason for the sharp decline in the Jewish population. Although not directly employed in the declining coal and steel industries; as shopkeepers and pawnbrokers, the Jewish population relied on the indigenous Welsh working class as their customers. As industries declined and unemployment soared, people left the Welsh valleys seeking employment elsewhere in the United Kingdom. This was also unique to Welsh Jewry, with no other region in the United Kingdom witnessing such a dramatic decrease in Jewish communal life in such a short period of time. In Merthyr Tydfil, the Jewish Year Book shows its Jewish population peaking at 400 in 1928, and then falling to 175 in 1939, 100 in 1959, 40 in 1968 and 20 in 1976.

As a result, many Jewish residents of the valleys also relocated to larger nearby towns and cities such as Cardiff, to other parts of the UK or even to the USA and Canada. Whilst the first generation of Jewish settlers worked as merchants and traders, they valued education, and subsequent generations grew up with different career aspirations. A significant number went to university and entered professions after graduation such as law, finance and medicine; not returning to their hometown but having to relocate to the south-east of England for work in their chosen careers.

Please refer to **Appendix D** for further information on the **‘History of Jews in Wales’**.



Jewish Communities in Industrial South Wales (source: ‘The Jews of South Wales’ by Ursula R.Q. Henriques) - Merthyr Tydfil highlightetd in red

2.9 History & Heritage of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue

Most 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. Early settlers to Merthyr Tydfil from Poland included Solomon and Leah Bloom who arrived around 1827 and Joseph and Sarah Barnett who arrived in the 1830s; religious services may have originally been held in one of their houses. Jewish congregations existed before they had a synagogue to worship in!

2.9.1 Purpose-built Synagogues in Merthyr Tydfil

The first purpose-built synagogue in Merthyr Tydfil was built in 1848 at Victoria Street; it was small and served a Jewish population of around forty. It must have been unsatisfactory as a second purpose-built synagogue opened 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.

2.9.2 Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue, top of Church Street

An article appeared in the *'Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser – October 23, 1874'* entitled **"JEWISH SYNAGOGUE, MERTHYR, APPEAL."** which stated that there were upwards of 60 Jewish families living in Merthyr, including upwards of 70 children, in need of a new synagogue and school accommodation. The estimated cost of the building at that time was £1,800 and it would provide seating for 200 and a number of 'free seats'.

The laying of the cornerstone for the new Merthyr Tydfil synagogue took place on 15th March 1876. The site being on freehold property of the Court Estate, leased to the trustees for 99 years. The event was reported in the *'South Wales Daily News – 16 March, 1876'* in an article which said:

"The building, when finished, will be of an imposing character. It is situated at the top of Church-street, and will command a splendid view of the surrounding hills. The architect is Mr Charles Taylor, of Merthyr; and the contractor, Mr John Williams, Castle-street. The style of the building will be ancient Gothic, the approach being by a handsome double flight of steps. On the first floor will be a school-room and a class-room; the synagogue will be reached by a flight of stairs on the next floor."

Another article on the laying of the cornerstone in the *'Merthyr Express – March 25, 1876'* talked about the challenges of the synagogue site, and stated:

"The contour of the ground was most awkward, necessitating a great deal of excavation and the erection of sustaining walls before the foundations could be got in".

The cost of building the new synagogue was borne by its congregation along with other donations. The *'Cardiff Times & South Wales Weekly News – April 1, 1876'* reported that

"Baron Rothschild has contributed the handsome sum of two hundred guineas towards this place of worship".

The final cost of the synagogue increased to between £2,300 and £3,000; different research sources suggesting different total amounts. To finance its construction, a mortgage of at least £1,000 was required, burdening the synagogue's congregation with a considerable amount of debt which was still being repaid many years later. The final payment believed to have been made in 1919.

The new Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue opened at the end of June 1877. Articles on its opening were found in both the *'Merthyr Express – 23 June, 1877'* and the *'Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser – 29 June, 1877'*. The ceremony of consecration was conducted by Rev. L. Green who had previously laid the corner stone. It 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 *'Merthyr Express – 23 June, 1877'* said

"The service was conducted in Hebrew, the officiating persons being the Rev. L. Green, and the Rev. L. Abelson, the local reader. The ceremony commenced by the wardens bringing the scrolls of the law to the door of the synagogue, when the Rev. L. Green exclaimed, 'Open unto me the gates of righteousness; I will enter them and praise the Lord.' The doors were then opened, and the procession passed up through the synagogue seven times, one of the Psalms of David being recited during each circuit. At the close the scrolls were deposited in the cabinet described above which represents the ark, and after some further prayers had been offered, the Rev. L. Green delivered an address, which we should call a sermon."

The consecration of the synagogue at 3 o'clock was followed by a banquet at the Drill Hall around 5-6 o'clock and a ball around 9 o'clock.

These newspaper reports show that the 'History' within the building's 'Listing Details' is incorrect; the Listing says "Built as a Synagogue, 1872-5".

The following year, on 1st June 1878, the Jewish Collegiate School opened in the room beneath the new synagogue with space for around 60 children. This area having previously been described as

"a lofty and well-lighted School-room with class-room adjoining, to accommodate sixty children; the former, although under the main building, is admirably lighted, cheerful in appearance, and the means for securing thorough ventilation well provided for. On this floor is also a lavatory, and good entrance-hall."

The headmaster at the Jewish Collegiate School was Rev. Henry P. Levy. He was to leave Merthyr for Cardiff in 1880 according to the *'Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser for the Iron Districts of South Wales, 16 January 1880'*. The book *'The Jews of Wales'* by Cai Parry-Jones says that the school appears to have dissolved in 1880 following Levy's departure for Cardiff. This would probably have been due to a lack of funds and low student enrolment which was the case at other Jewish schools.

Membership of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue on Church Street peaked at around 400 in the 1920s, however with the rapid economic decline of South Wales in the 1930s an exodus followed, with membership dropping to 175 by 1939 and to just 20 by 1979. Attempts were made to reinvigorate membership with the reconsecration of Merthyr Synagogue in 1955 by the Very Rev. Israel Brodie, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation of the British Commonwealth and Empire. The ceremony coming after the redecoration of the 80 year-old Synagogue.

Reporting this event, the *'Merthyr Express – 15 January, 1955'* said "After the Cantor of Merthyr, Rev. A. Cohen, had expressed the hope that the Chief Rabbi's visit would put new life and vigour into their spiritual affairs, the Chief Rabbi said he was glad to feel that, as a result of his visit, the Synagogue might start a new chapter in its history as illustrious as that in the past."

However, the Jewish community continued to decline and it became no longer viable to keep the synagogue open, despite a legacy from the Abe Sherman Foundation (1963) which had helped maintain the building. The synagogue closed in the late 1970s and was sold in 1983.



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

2.9.3 Further History

The following text is taken from the 'jewishheritage.wales' website, the source being Cai Parry-Jones, author of '*The Jews of Wales: A History*' along with Susan Fielding of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales:

“Discover the history of the Merthyr Tydfil synagogue

“Merthyr Tydfil synagogue was opened at the end of June 1877, the ceremony described as ‘one of the most interesting ceremonies ever witnessed here’ and the building ‘classed as one of the finest and boldest looking buildings in the town’.

“Merthyr Tydfil sits in the heart of the South Wales valleys, within the historic county of Glamorgan and the modern Merthyr Tydfil County Borough. The area has a long settlement history with a Roman fort established on a site now in the heart of the town. The area remained essentially rural into the mid eighteenth century, an open landscape of scattered farms with a small number of developing agricultural estates, with Merthyr forming a small village of c.500 people. This changed abruptly in the second half of the eighteenth century with the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the recognition of the rich local geological resources of ironstone, coal and limestone. With an abundance of easily accessible raw materials for iron production, together with plentiful waterpower, four major ironworks were founded within the space of 27 years that would go on to establish an industrial economy that would transform Merthyr into the largest town in Wales by 1851, and the iron and steel capital of the world.

“A Jewish population is indicated in Merthyr by 1830, when a trade directory lists six clothes dealers bearing Jewish names. This presence is cemented by the building of the first synagogue in 1848. A population of c.40 Jews was served by this synagogue, among whom were those whose birth places were recorded as Austria, Poland and Russia.

“The industrial boom in Merthyr created a strong pull factor, with Jewish merchants well placed to serve a relatively well-paid workforce in a new town which lacked the usual markets and shops. Such merchants and their willingness to sell on credit made the purchase of more expensive items such as clothes, furniture and jewellery more accessible to the inhabitants of Merthyr. These first-generation Jewish settlers, often starting as peddlers before establishing fixed shops, appear in a relatively narrow range of trades; clothiers, glaziers, furniture dealers, picture frame makers, jewellery sellers, watch repairers, and boot makers. Pawn brokering was also an important activity where the wages of industrial workers fluctuated frequently. Because Jews mainly did not work in industry, it meant they did not to compete for such jobs which seems to have aided their acceptance. They served a distinct role in the local economy.

“The first synagogue was established on Victoria Street, about which little is known but it must have proved unsatisfactory as a second purpose-built building on John Street was opened in 1853. A report of the opening stated, ‘at the back of the Temperance Hall the lost sheep of the House of Israel have recently opened a pretty little synagogue ... The Rev. Mr. Green of London, ... enforced moral duties on the audience in very eloquent language. We observed about 60 or 70 Jews present, and several of the respectable inhabitants of the town who had been invited to attend.’

“In 1859 the community took advantage of the creation of a new non-denominational cemetery by the Board of Health at Cefn Coed to establish a dedicated section for Jewish burial, later adding a small brick ohel.

“In December 1866 it was reported that a school offering instruction in Hebrew had opened in Merthyr. Outside of London, it was rare to have a Jewish day school, so this was an indication of the strength of the congregation by this date. Established by Henry Barnett, the school had 20 boys and three girls, including some of Christian parentage, and was praised for its excellence of education.

“By 1870 the John Street synagogue was too small for the congregation and an appeal was issued to fund a new building. In 1874, the appeal was published monthly, alongside a list of recent Jewish and non-Jewish contributors, stating that there were 60 Jewish families living in Merthyr, including 70 children, in need of a new synagogue and school accommodation. The estimated cost of the synagogue to provide seating for 200 and a number of ‘free seats’ was £1,800. The tender for the building of a synagogue, school and minister’s house was awarded to architect Charles Taylor and builder John Williams, both local to Merthyr.

“On the 15th March 1876 the corner-stone was laid by the Rev. Green, the proposed building described as ‘when finished, will be of an imposing character... and will command a splendid view of the surrounding hills’. On the 1st April 1876 it was reported that Baron Rothschild had donated 200 guineas to the project, while another £400 was raised by the congregation. The outstanding £1,000 was taken out as a mortgage.

“The Synagogue was opened at the end of June 1877, the ceremony described as ‘one of the most interesting ceremonies ... ever witnessed here’ and the building ‘classed as one of the finest and boldest looking buildings in the town’. The report goes on to describe the building:

“ ‘The building is approached from two flights of steps rising from the entrance gates to the centre, or principal entrance, and is surmounted by a telling cast-iron railing and lamps. On entering the Synagogue, one is struck with the abundance of light provided, and the staircase, which is of pitch pine, is handsomely designed and substantially carried out. On this floor is a lofty and well-lighted School-room with class-room adjoining to accommodate sixty children; the former, although under the main building, is admirably lighted, cheerful in appearance, and the means for securing thorough ventilation well provided for ... On ascending the principal staircase one cannot but admire the workmanship, the filling-in of the ballustres, which have a quatrefoil in the centre of each panel, and sinkings at each angle.

“ ‘On arriving at the summit is the large entrance-hall, forming the main entrance to the Synagogue proper, and between the doors into it is a niche fitted with a wash-hand basin, and towel rollers on each side, for all good Jews wash before they enter their Synagogue. At the south side of the Hall is the ladies’ staircase to the gallery. The Synagogue is 50ft by 27ft inside dimensions, and has a gallery on three sides, and provides accommodation for 210 persons. The principal seats are divided, so that there can be no crowding, and under the book-boards are provided book boxes for the convenience of the occupants.

“ ‘Internally, the building has an open timber roof, ceiled at the rafters, and the whole of the fittings are of pitch-pine varnished. The lighting is beautifully diffused, the building thoroughly ventilated, indeed the architect appears to have given this science especial study. On the Gallery level, there is a large platform-hall, ladies’ cloak and retiring-rooms. Every convenience appears to have been provided and well thought out, for we find on the basement floor a bath-room (the mikvah), a waiting room, a boiler-room, and a coal cellar. The building is in the Gothic style of architecture of an early date, and the visitor is struck with its substantial and pleasing appearance.’

“On the 1st June 1878 the inauguration of the new Jewish Collegiate School within the building took place, the classroom designed to accommodate c.60 children.

“The final cost was in the order of £2,300 and the outstanding debt took the congregation some years to pay off, with various events, including balls, held to raise money towards this and ongoing repairs.

“The Jewish community, although small in number, made a significant contribution to Merthyr. 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 (his obituary in 1917 including that he was ‘greatly mourned by the Christian populace... amongst whom he was known as ‘The People’s Friend’) while Julius Prag was appointed president of a number of Merthyr organisations including the Liberal Club and local Chamber of Trade.

“The Jewish community 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.

“The position held by the community was summed up in 1926 as they ‘have been law-abiding citizens and give great assistance to charities and public causes. Their contribution to local life exceeds what one would expect from a small community’.

“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 and general emigration, hit those working in the consumer sector hard with many relocating to Cardiff or other cities with a more prosperous outlook. 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 progression of Jewish pupils to higher and university education in Wales was above the national average for the UK and instances such as Derek Prag, a Merthyr born Cambridge graduate who made his life in London in charge of an international news agency, were not uncommon. This decline became self-perpetuating as others were required to leave in search of suitable marriage partners or to be part of larger, more sustainable Jewish communities elsewhere.

“The Synagogue was no longer viable and it was sold off in 1983. ... It was subsequently used as a Christian Centre and then a gym but, by 2004, it was no longer in use and the building remained unoccupied with its condition rapidly deteriorating to the extent that it become formally classified as being at risk. The Foundation for Jewish Heritage purchased the building in 2019 and has carried out urgent repairs.”

2.9.4 The following comes from Relevant Newspaper Articles:

a) In the early 1870’s it was decided that the John Street synagogue was too small for its congregation and an appeal was put out to raise funds for a new building. An article in the ‘Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser – October 23, 1874’ stated:

“JEWISH SYNAGOGUE, MERTHYR, APPEAL.

“The Synagogue in which divine worship is now performed was built about a quarter of a century ago. At that time the Congregation consisted of only Six Jewish Families; there are now upwards of Sixty Jewish Families resident in Merthyr and Suburbs, attending divine Worship at the Merthyr Synagogue.

“The Congregation, being painfully aware of the inadequacy of the means now existing for attendance at the Synagogue on Sabbath and Holidays; also the necessity of providing School accommodation for the Jewish Children, who number about Seventy, has by its own strenuous and unassisted exertions raised amongst its own members the sum of £200.

“The sacred edifice, with all necessary fittings, including the school room, will cost an estimated sum of £1,800, and the Synagogue will be so constructed as to provide seats for 200 persons, in addition to a reservation of free seats.

“The total further amount required to meet the expectant outlay will be about £1,600, and the Jews of Merthyr believe, and hope, that the pious zeal of their co-religionists will enable them to obtain this sum without difficulty.

“It may be stated that so insufficient is the existing Synagogue for the requirements of the Merthyr Congregation, that on Festival days many persons are obliged to absent themselves from public worship, for want of the necessary accommodation.

“A cause so holy, pleads for itself to every son and daughter of Israel, and it is not doubted, that this appeal to the generosity both of the Christian and Jewish public will be liberally responded to.”

b) The laying of the corner-stone for the new Merthyr Tydfil synagogue by the Rev.A. L. Green of London was reported in the ‘South Wales Daily News – 16 March, 1876’ the beginning of the article read:

“THE NEW JEWISH SYNAGOGUE AT MERTHYR. “LAYING THE CORNER-STONE.

“Yesterday, in the presence of a large number of persons, the corner-stone of a Jewish synagogue and schools was laid at Merthyr, by the Rev. A. L. Green, of London. The building, when finished, will be of an imposing character. It is situate at the top of Church-street, and will command a splendid view of the surrounding hills. The architect is Mr Charles Taylor, of Merthyr, and the contractor, Mr John Williams, Castle-street. The style of the building will be ancient Gothic, the approach being by a handsome double flight of steps. On the first floor will be a school-room and a class-room; the synagogue will be reached by a flight of stairs on the next floor.

“The ceremony of laying the corner stone was performed at three o’clock, at which hour a large number of Jewish brethren and members of various Christian denominations had assembled. Amongst those present were the Rev.A. L. Green, Mr G. Freedman (president of the Merthyr Hebrew congregation), Mr M. Goodman (treasurer), Rev.A.Ableson (minister), Mr H. Bernstein (secretary), Mr Yantab Lebi (beadle), Mr David Hart (president of the Executive Committee), Mr Charles Taylor (architect), &c.

“After the ceremony was finished, the Rev.A. L. Green delivered an address. He said the laying of the corner stone was a proof that the small Hebrew congregation in Merthyr must have worked hard and anxiously to have brought this to such a happy consummation and result as they now saw. ...”

c) The laying of the corner stone for the new Merthyr Tydfil synagogue was also reported in the ‘Merthyr Express – March 25, 1876’ an extract below talks about its architectural features as follows:

“LAYING THE CORNER STONE OF THE NEW SYNAGOGUE AND SCHOOLS AT MERTHYR.

“The new buildings are situated upon part of the site of Mr. Cochrane’s garden at the end of and fronting Church-street, and when finished they will be an imposing pile with a noble front. The contour of the ground was most awkward, necessitating a great deal of excavation and the erection of sustaining walls before the foundations could be got in, but of course this is provided for in the plans. The style is ancient gothic, the front comprising octagonal projections with the main entrance between them, approached by a flight of stone steps on each side. The basement contains bathrooms and arrangements for heating the whole building with hot water. Above and comprising the first floor proper, there will be a spacious entrance hall, leading on the right into a classroom, 14 feet 6 inches by 8 feet 6 inches; on the left by a grand staircase to the synagogue, and behind these to the schoolroom, which measures 27 feet by 18 feet. The synagogue is placed on the second floor, and a fine room it will be, 50 feet in length by 27 feet 6 inches wide. It will be open to the roof, which will be open timbered and stained – the usual ladies’ gallery being constructed at the west end. Accommodation will be provided for 200 persons, which, according to the arrangements of a synagogue, would be equal to 500 of any Christian denomination. The reader’s house will be at the north east corner of the building, and at the back of all there will be a space left as a playground for the children. The architect is Mr. Charles Taylor, and the contractor Mr. John Williams, Castle-street. The estimated cost of the building is from £2,500 to £3,000, and when completed it will be one of the very few architectural adornments of the town”

d) The opening of the synagogue in late June 1877 was reported in the ‘Merthyr Express – 23 June, 1877’ as follows:

“OPENING OF THE NEW SYNAGOGUE IN CHURCH STREET.

“On Thursday afternoon the new Jewish synagogue erected at the top of Church Street, Merthyr, was consecrated for divine worship, the celebrant of the services being the Rev. L. Green, who it will be remembered was the officiating reader at the laying of the foundation stone. On that occasion we gave a full description of the architectural details of the building, of which Mr. Charles Taylor was the architect, and Mr. John Williams, 4, Castle-street, the builder, and it will suffice now to state that the edifice which fronts Church-street presents a commanding appearance from that street, and the interior is quite in keeping with external appearances. A double flight of stone steps leads up to what may be called the entrance lobby out of which a door on the right leads into a small office, and another in front into a commodious schoolroom whilst on the left a bold staircase leads up to a corridor on the floor of which is the synagogue itself. This is a fine handsome room, with open seats in plain vanished deal accommodating about 200 persons. The reader’s desk is placed in the middle of the floor, and at the east end of the synagogue is a neatly designed cabinet with a pointed arch supported by polished granite columns in which the scrolls of the law are kept. At an elevation of about 12 feet there is a gallery which runs round three sides of the room, and a brass lattice rail surmounts it being a great ornament and adding much to the effect. This is the ladies gallery the sexes worshipping apart in the synagogue. The floor is covered with floor cloth with manilla matting in the passages. The whole of the wood work is plain varnished, and has a remarkably neat appearance. The synagogue is admirably lighted, and, altogether affords ample and excellent accommodation which the worshippers will no doubt fully appreciate. The building has been erected at a cost of about £3,000 and is a great credit to everybody concerned in its erection.

“The consecration took place at three o’clock. In order to avoid a rush, admission was given by ticket, and this enabled the committee to allow the building to be comfortably filled, but not to excess. Amongst those present were the Rector, the Rev. Thomas Evans, Father Carr, and a large number of the male and female laity of Merthyr. Of course the members of the congregation and their families were present in force, and a considerable number of Jews from Swansea, Cardiff, and other places were also present. The service was conducted in Hebrew, the officiating persons being the Rev. L. Green, and the Rev. L. Abelsohn, the local reader. The ceremony commenced by the wardens bringing the scrolls of the law to the door of the synagogue, when the Rev. L. Green exclaimed, “Open unto me the gates of righteousness; I will enter them and praise the Lord.” The doors were then opened, and the procession passed up through the synagogue seven times, one of the Psalms of David being recited during each circuit. At the close the scrolls were deposited in the cabinet described above which represents the ark, and after some further prayers had been offered, the Rev. L. Green delivered an address, which we should call a sermon. In the course of his remarks he said that they were told on the authority of their ancient scriptures that except the Lord build the house they labour in vain who build it, the obvious meaning of which was that their work must be of heart as well hand, which was implied in other passages also showing that the Lord dwelleth not in temples built with hands, but in the sanctuary of the heart.

There were people who thought they could do without religion; but religion was one of the earliest of human wants, and it was a vain endeavour to think it could be cast away. That was a modern notion arising from the substitution of individual intelligence for the Supreme wisdom, and that was the God of modern minds. But religion was a necessity of human nature, and another necessity was that of public worship considered apart from private devotion. He did not mean to say private devotion should be restricted, but that it was not sufficient in itself to give vitality to religious convictions, because it was in its very nature selfish, and the broader spirit of public worship was needed to correct that tendency. He then proceeded to speak with specific reference to the history of the Jewish nation, whose preservation for thousands of years amongst the races of mankind as the only people worshipping the true God was the greatest of all wonders. The Jew indeed occupied a peculiar and exceptional position with regard to all men. His was the unchangeable religion, and it formed the ground work of every intelligent form of religion now existing. But this foremost position conferred corresponding obligations upon Jews for it was not enough that they should profess it, they were bound in a special degree to practice its precepts, to let the world see what ought to be the fruits of that religion. Acts, which in other professors of religion might be reproachable, would be tenfold so in a Jew, and, therefore, were they bound solemnly to let their lives be the reflex of their worship and prayers in the synagogue. The Jew who did not live up to that mark, and committed a breach of the rules which he heard in the synagogue, brought disgrace upon his nation. He remarked that they were happy in living in this land of liberty, where everyone was equal in the eye of the law; and that spirit of equality had been admirably exemplified in the fact that in all ranks of society, and in the highest positions in the State, Jews held positions with honour and credit. They were found on the Bench and at the Bar, as well as in the legislature, and the beneficial laws which enabled them to attain such positions were worthy of their deepest gratitude. They ought to show their appreciation by their conduct, and if they made their conduct in daily life the reflex of their conduct in the synagogue, they would experience the reality of the scripture in that which the Lord said. “Let them make me a sanctuary, and I will dwell in their midst.”

“The service was closed with a prayer for the Queen and Royal Family, after which Mr. M. Goodman read a statement of the causes which led to the erection of the synagogue, the amount of its cost, what sums had been paid, and so on, concluding by announcing second subscriptions from several parties, to which he himself added £10 10s., and others followed with their names for various amounts.

“At five o’clock a banquet took place at the Drill Hall, which had been prepared by several ladies of the congregation in most creditable style. A large company sat down, the Rev. N. R. Williams being called upon to preside, in the unexpected absence of the Rev. L. Green. Several speeches were made, but we regret that we are unable to do more than refer to the fact.

“Later on at nine o’clock a grand ball took place. The Drill Hall was nicely decorated ...”

e) The opening of the synagogue in late June 1877 was also reported in the ‘Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser – 29 June, 1877’ as follows:

“OPENING OF THE NEW SYNAGOGUE.

“One of the most interesting ceremonies took place in Merthyr on Thursday last ever witnessed here, namely the consecration of the New Synagogue erected by the Jews of Merthyr. The ceremony was unique to most of the present residents of the place, and considerable interest was felt, especially by the Christian population, in the forms and ceremonies in connection with the opening of a new place of worship to be used by our Jewish neighbours.

“As to the building itself, it is situate in one of the most pleasant and commanding sites in Merthyr, namely, on the top of Church-street, on the freehold property of the Court Estate, and this site has been leased to the trustees for 99 years. Originally, the site seemed most difficult to utilise, owing to its steepy character, but through the ingenuity and skill of the architect, Charles Taylor, Esq., A.R.I.B.A. of Merthyr, its physical formation was made to subserve the purposes of the congregation, and although the building is small, and the whole of the site not fully occupied, for it is intended to build a reader’s residence on the north-side of the Synagogue, yet at present it may be classed as one of the finest and boldest looking buildings in the town, and we congratulate the Hebrew congregation on the possession of so noble an edifice.

“The building is approached from two flights of steps rising from the entrance gates to the centre, or principal entrance, and is surmounted by a telling cast-iron railing and lamps. On entering the Synagogue, one is struck with the abundance of light provided, and the staircase, which is of pitch pine, is handsomely designed and substantially carried out. On this floor is a lofty and well-lighted School-room with class-room adjoining, to accommodate sixty children; the former, although under the main building, is admirably lighted, cheerful in appearance, and the means for securing thorough ventilation well provided for. On this floor is also a lavatory, and good entrance-hall. On ascending the principal staircase one cannot but admire the workmanship, the filling-in of the ballustres, which have a quatrefoil in the centre of each panel, and sinkings at each angle. On arriving at the summit is the large entrance-hall, forming the main entrance to the Synagogue proper, and between the doors into it is a niche fitted with a wash-hand basin, and towel rollers on each side, for all good Jews wash before they enter their Synagogue. At the south side of the Hall is the ladies’ staircase to the gallery. The Synagogue is 50ft. by 27ft. inside dimensions, and has a gallery on three sides, and provides accommodation for 210 persons. The principal seats are divided, so that there can be no crowding, and under the book-boards are provided book boxes, for the convenience of the occupants. Internally, the building has an open timber roof, ceiled at the rafters, and the whole of the fittings are of pitch-pine varnished. The lighting is beautifully diffused, the building thoroughly ventilated, indeed the architect appears to have given this science especial study.

“On the Gallery level, there is a large platform-hall, ladies’ cloak and retiring-rooms, & etc. Every convenience appears to have, been provided and well thought out, for we find on the basement floor a bath-room, a waiting-room, a boiler-room, and coal cellar. The building is of the Gothic style of architecture of an early date, and the visitor is struck with its substantial and pleasing appearance. The cost, including boundary and retaining walls, and drainage, has been about £2,300, which is a very moderate amount for the accommodation provided. The builder is Mr. John Williams, of Castle-street, Merthyr, and the manner in which he has carried out his contract is, we understand, exceedingly satisfactory to all parties interested the work.

“The consecration service commenced at three o’clock, when this building devoted to the worship of Almighty God was crowded by a well dressed assembly, mostly composed of Jews from Merthyr and the neighbouring towns, and many Christians, the body of the edifice being occupied by gentlemen, and the gallery by ladies. The service, the preliminary part being entirely in Hebrew, was commenced by the Rev. L. Abelsohn, who chaunted in a loud and sonorous voice the Psalms special to the occasion, after which the Scrolls of the Law were deposited in a cabinet, representing the ark. The Rev. L. Green, of London, the same gentleman who laid the foundation-stone, then delivered a most eloquent and appropriate address in English, in which he showed that forms, abstinences, and the customs which the Jewish religion imposed, although valuable as aids, did not constitute religion, but that religion was a matter of the heart and mind, and must develop itself in the reformation of the life of those who professed it. This was true of the Christian as well as the Jewish religion.

“The service was brought to a termination by a prayer for the English Royal Family, after which Mr. Moses Goodman gave a financial statement of the building fund. He stated the amount of donations received, the present liabilities of the trustees, and the promises of further donations. After offering a second donation of £10 10s. on his own behalf, other gentlemen came forward, and a very liberal sum was obtained.

“In the afternoon about six o’clock a Banquet was served at the Drill Hall. The tables were covered with attractive viands and confectionery of every imaginable kind, as well as an ample supply of wines, spirits, and aerated waters. Mr. Meredith had also, with his accustomed courtesy, lent a large number of exotic flowers, which; together presented a scene of beauty seldom equalled in Merthyr. About a hundred ladies and gentlemen sat down to the banquet. At the close, the Rev. Nestor Williams, in the unavoidable absence of the Rev. L. Green, took the chair, and a number of toasts were proposed and acknowledged.

“About nine o’clock the tables were cleared, and the large hall was opened for a ball. Although the season was unfavourable for terpsichorean exercises, yet about 200 ladies and gentlemen attended, and seemed to enjoy themselves to their hearts’ content until daylight had fully dawned on the following morning. The Cyfarthfa String Band was present by the kind permission of Mr. Crawshay. The M. C. was Mr. I. L. Jacob, whilst the Stewards were Messrs. Beirnsstein, Hollander, Gettlesohn, and Hart, all of whom did their utmost to make everyone happy, and that they succeeded was the unanimous opinion of those present.”

f) The opening of the Jewish Collegiate School on 1st June 1878 was reported in the ‘South Wales Daily News – June 3, 1878’ as follows:

“OPENING OF A JEWISH COLLEGIATE SCHOOL AT MERTHYR.

“On Saturday, the inauguration of the Merthyr Jewish School took place, a goodly number of the members of the Hebrew persuasion being present. The school, which is beneath the recently-erected synagogue, has accommodation for about 60 children, and is provided with a class-room. A Jewish school has been a long-felt want, and it is to be hoped its opening will be attended with success. Mr G. Freedman, Dowlais, was chairman of the proceedings, which he opened with a short speech, and introduced the Rev Henry Philip Levy, the head master of the school. The rev. gentleman, who was afterwards called upon to speak, said that they had been fortunate enough to build a house of prayer wherein the assembly of Israel could congregate to offer up orisons to the Almighty. But in order that those prayers might be said devoutly they had, under advice of their respected chief Rabbi, the Rev Dr Adler, caused a scholastic institution to be built contiguous to the synagogue, where the old and young would be able to receive instruction in the tenets of their sacred religion, and where they would receive interpretations of the various prayers which they uttered, so that they might be cognisant of the value of what they were articulating, and to whom their petitions were delivered. Education itself was not confined to religious instruction, but also to secular, and in the school would be imparted instruction in the Hebrew and English languages. Though the movement to provide religious and secular instruction for the children of the Jewish community of Merthyr was in its infancy, he was pleased to say that the movement had received the attention of all the members of the Jewish congregation in the town, and also of their brethren who were of a different creed. In England there was no excuse for neglecting education, since every facility was afforded for the enlightening of the mind. Many persons might say that there was such a thing as over-education, and that being the case they should have no education at all. Let him remind them that education was a good thing, and that they could not have enough of it. Having referred to many well-known advocates of education, Mr Levi asked the parents to help him in the work, by seeing that the children came to school punctually and regularly, and attended to their home studies. He concluded by inviting the blessing of the Almighty upon the good work which they were inaugurating that day, Mr M. Goodman followed in a short address, and a vote of thanks to the chairman was then proposed by Mr Thomas Lloyd, Thomas-town School, who hoped the school would be a success. This was seconded by Mr H. M. Beirnsstein in eulogistic terms, and after the chairman’s response, the proceedings terminated.”

2.9.3 Charles Taylor (1842-1919) – The Architect

A research project on 19th century Bristol-based Architects was found on the website '19cba.com'. One such architect was Charles Underwood (1791-1883) who designed the Greek revival buildings of Arnos Vale Cemetery (1836), is accredited with the design of Worcester Terrace (c.1851-3) considered to be one of the finest terraces in Clifton, designed the interiors of the Royal West of England Academy (1857), and many more. This research project lists Charles Taylor as one of Charles Underwood's apprentices, writing:

"Charles Taylor (b.1842, Bristol - d.1919, Cardiff)

"Taylor is listed within the RIBA Directory of British Architects as having been a pupil for Underwood for 5 years and thereafter, remained as his assistant, which is supported by the 1861 Census recording his occupation as an 'architect's assistant'. By the time of his marriage in 1865, Taylor lists Sketty, Swansea as his residence and thereafter he lived in Merthyr Tydfil, the hometown of his wife Amelia Lucy Thomas, the daughter of colliery owners Robert and Lucy Thomas. Taylor appears to have established an extensive practice at Merthyr Tydfil but later relocated to Cardiff. Taylor deserves a more detailed biography but falls outside of the scope of this study."

Research shows that Taylor was working 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 a highly fashionable style at the time, was incorporated into his designs for local schools such as Penydarren and Twynyrodyn. On the opening of Penydarren Board Schools, the 'Merthyr Express - Saturday 08 August 1874' said "The style of architecture adopted is what is known as subdued Gothic". Whilst on the opening of Twynyrodyn Board Schools 'Merthyr Telegraph, and General Advertiser for the Iron Districts of South Wales - Friday 08 January 1875' said "The schools are in the style of English Gothic".



Penydarren Board Schools, c.1870s (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk')

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, based on the agreed percentage, due to extra costs on a project which the School Board disputed. Taylor went on to win the legal case, 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."

Taylor was a familiar and respected figure in Merthyr. His connections and standing in the town reflected by his membership of the masonic Loyal Cambrian Lodge in Merthyr from 1868 to 1879. The following being an extract from the 'Illustrated history of the Loyal Cambrian Lodge, no. 110, of freemasons, Merthyr Tydfil. 1810 to 1914.' (p.142):

"Bro. Taylor was a well-known Architect in the town in the seventies. He came prominently before the public as Architect for the first School Board, in which capacity he designed the Caedraw, Twynyrodyn and Penydarren Schools. He was at one time in partnership with the late Bro. John Forrester – the firm being known as Taylor and Forrester, Architects, Surveyors and Valuers. This partnership was dissolved in 1884. Bro. Taylor then removed to Cardiff, where he still resides. His wife was a descendant of Robert and Lucy Thomas, of steam coal fame, Waunwyllt. She died last May. Bro. John Forrester, after the dissolution of the above partnership, continued business on his own account until his death in February 1913. Bro. Taylor was initiated in the Loyal Cambrian Lodge by Bro. J. D. Williams on September 1st, 1868, and he resigned on June 5th, 1879. During his connection with the Lodge he proved an ardent and useful Brother. He prepared plans and estimates for the conversion of Lloyd's Schoolroom into suitable premises for Masonic purposes, but the scheme was not proceeded with."

Advert for Mr. C. Taylor from 'The Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser for the Iron & Coal Districts of South Wales - November 22, 1878'



Taylor's appointment as architect for the Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue would have gained the approval of the local population and brought a sense of prestige to the project. Newspaper reports from the time describe the building as being to the 'taste of the architect, Mr Charles Taylor' suggesting that it was he, rather than the congregation, who initially drove the idea to build the synagogue in this style. His preference for a 'subdued gothic' aesthetic would have provided a sense of reassurance to his clients. They must have liked his proposals and agreed to them.

The 'Merthyr Telegraph, and General Advertiser for the Iron Districts of South Wales - Friday 26 May 1876' said

"THE NEW SYNAGOGUE. - ... The building will, when completed, be an ornament to Church-street, and a monument to the taste of the architect, Mr. Charles Taylor."

Charles Taylor's standing as an architect, within his profession and within Merthyr, also grew when he became an associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects. The 'Merthyr Telegraph, and General Advertiser for the Iron Districts of South Wales - Friday 02 February 1877' reported the event saying:

"ROYAL INSTITUTION OF BRITISH ARCHITECTS. – It is very gratifying to observe that our townsman, C. Taylor, Esq., architect, has been admitted unanimously as associate of the above Institution. This is an honour which architects highly esteem, and we are pleased indeed that our townsman's professional qualifications, and his sterling moral character, have gained for him this valued distinction."

On the opening of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue in 1877, Taylor's ability as an architect was complimented when the 'Merthyr Telegraph, and General Advertiser for the Iron Districts of South Wales - Friday 29 June 1877' said:

"OPENING OF THE NEW SYNAGOGUE. ... Originally, the site seemed most difficult to utilise, owing to its steepy character, but through the ingenuity and skill of the architect, Charles Taylor, Esq., A.R.I.B.A. of Merthyr, its physical formation was made to subserve the purposes of the congregation".

The high regard in which Charles Taylor continued to be held was again shown in an article in the 'Merthyr Telegraph, and General Advertiser for the Iron Districts of South Wales - Friday 02 November 1877' which said:

"THE MERTHYR SCHOOL BOARD'S LATE ARCHITECT.

"LAST week the plans submitted by the principal architects of the Kingdom for the judges' residence at Swansea were finally examined, and out of forty-one sets of drawings sent in, that of Mr. Charles Taylor, Merthyr, the late School Board architect, was selected, and to him was therefore awarded the fifty guineas prize. After the persecution Mr. Taylor has been subjected to at the hands of the Merthyr School Board – more especially the past School Board – this little episode is doubly gratifying, and it shows that if through strong egotism and personal prejudice those persons were blind to the weal of the ratepayers, their Swansea neighbours are more wide awake. Defeated in their legal combat with Mr. Taylor – a combat which has cost the public thousands – the School Board have now to ruefully peruse those eulogiums on their late architect, which are, if anything, worse than "gall and wormwood" to their morbid feelings."

After living in Merthyr Tydfil for many years, Taylor relocated to Cardiff in the mid-1880s where he stayed until his death. The 'Western Mail – Saturday 31 May 1919' carried a brief notice on his passing:

"MR. CHARLES TAYLOR. CARDIFF.

"Mr. Charles Taylor, architect and surveyor, died at his residence, 12, Fitzalan-place, Cardiff, on Friday. Mr. Taylor had an extensive practice until recent years, and was a well-known figure in Cardiff."

2.9.4 John Williams, Castle-street – The Builder

The contractor for Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was a local builder named Mr John Williams from Castle-street, Merthyr. In the 1860s he advertised himself as “John Williams, Builder and Undertaker” with an advert in the **‘Merthyr Express – Saturday 20 February 1869’** thanking people for their support “during the past nine years”. See to right.

Williams seems to have been a very busy man, his name appearing frequently in local newspapers throughout the 1870s associated with building plans and notices. See examples below:

‘Merthyr Telegraph, and General Advertiser for the Iron Districts of South Wales - Saturday 24 December 1870’

“Building plans and notice, viz: - From Mr John Williams, builder, Castle-street, Merthyr, of the conversion of a building in Upper Thoams-street, in Merthyr, originally erected for a chapel, into two dwelling houses for Mr David Jones.”

‘Merthyr Telegraph, and General Advertiser for the Iron Districts of South Wales - Friday 17 July 1874’

“From John Williams, builder, Castle-street, Merthyr, of a kitchen at the Bee Hive Inn, Castle-street, Merthyr, for Messrs. Pearce and Shapton, to which I see no objection.”

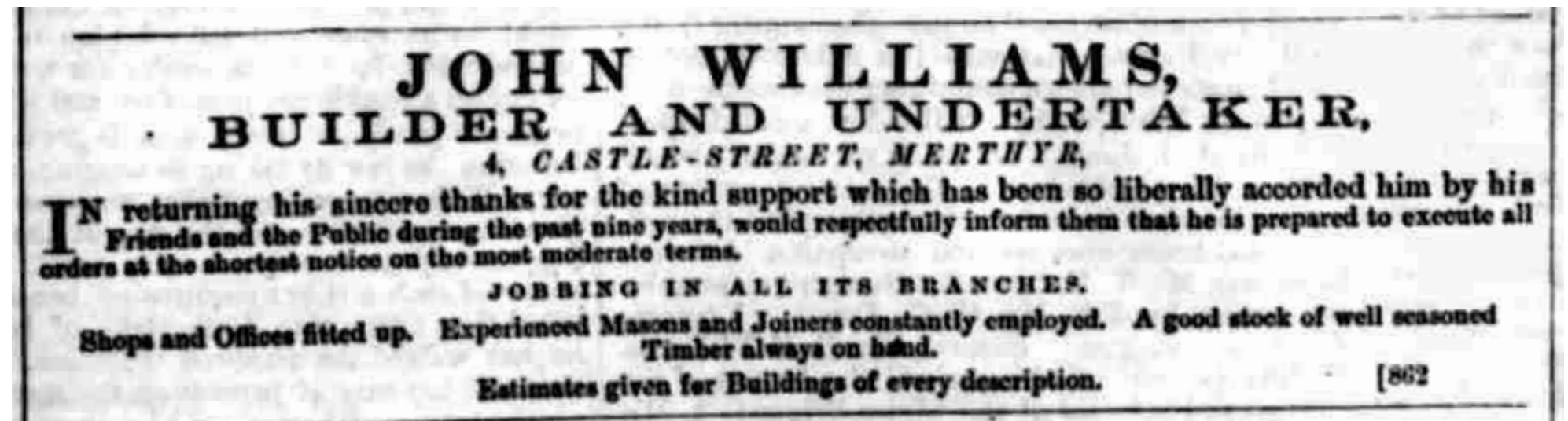
‘Merthyr Telegraph, and General Advertiser for the Iron Districts of South Wales - Friday 06 February 1880’

“Building plans and notice, viz: - From Mr John Williams, builder, Castle-street, Merthyr, of additions to the buildings upon the business premises of Mr J. E. Davies, No. 106, High-street, Merthyr, whereby the whole of the open space of such premises will be covered with buildings.”

Williams must have been a confident and well-respected person within Merthyr. A newspaper article in 1878 names him as foreman of the jury in a court case, obviously selected by the rest of the jury. He also became active in local matters and politics, with a newspaper article in 1879 listing “John Williams, Builder, Castle Street” as a candidate in the election of Merthyr Board of Guardians.

Undoubtedly, John Williams and Charles Taylor would have known each other before working together on the synagogue. Both living and working in Merthyr Tydfil in complimentary jobs, their paths must have crossed on many occasions.

Research has been complicated by the fact that John Williams is a common name, with another builder of the same name based in Morgan-town competing for the same projects.



Advert for John Williams from ‘The Merthyr Express - February 20, 1869’

2.10 Character and Architectural Design of the Synagogue

Research shows that there is no set blueprint for how a synagogue should look, their architectural shapes and interior designs varying greatly, often following the architectural styles in vogue at the time and place of construction.

Appendix E provides a summary of styles and influences in synagogue architecture leading up to the construction of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue in 1876-7.

The hallmark of the Georgian synagogue (1714-1837) had been discretion. Whereas the Victorian Era (1837-1901), with the freedom of Jewish emancipation in 1858, and the economic advancement of the Industrial Revolution, brought with it a new-found Jewish confidence. Synagogues became grand and prominent symbols of Jewish presence in a city. Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was built during this time.

The Gothic Revival style became popular in the second half of the 18th century and throughout the 19th century. The most prominent figure in the popularisation of the Gothic Revival style of architecture being the architect Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852), most famous for his work on the rebuilding of the Palace of Westminster in London (more commonly known as the Houses of Parliament), together with Sir Charles Barry.

Gothic Revival became 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. They favoured the religiously 'neutral' styles of neo-classical, Greek Revival or Italianate.

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. Although the architectural style of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is simplified Gothic Revival it is unlike most Welsh chapel architecture of the time.

The book *'The Synagogues of Britain and Ireland'* (p.90) by Sharman Kadish says the following on the architectural style of this synagogue:

"In Merthyr Tydfil, deep in the south Wales mining valleys, one encounters a double-turreted Disney-world Gothic folly of a synagogue. Dating from 1876-7 and located in Bryntirion Road, it was the second to be purpose-built in the town. The synagogue closes the view up hilly Church Street, dominating Thomastown, Merthyr's one-time Jewish neighbourhood. It even boasts a red Welsh dragon perched on the gable. The frontage is of sneaked rubble with ashlar dressings and the steeply pitched roof is hung with Welsh slates. Its visibility and individuality bear witness to the position of the Jewish community in this once prosperous Welsh mining community. The costs of construction of the synagogue, schoolroom and basement Mikveh was £3,000."

"Inspiration for the comparative extravagance of the synagogue at Merthyr may have come from a local source. In the nineteenth century, Romanticism was fashionable in Wales, where it was fused with a developing Welsh national conscience. Construction or restoration of castles of Welsh castles in the style of French chateaux is found, for instance, at Castell Coch, near Cardiff (William Burgess; 1872) and, on the outskirts of Merthyr, at Cyfarthfa Castle (Robert Luger; 1825). Cyfarthfa Castle was built for a local iron magnate in a mixture of Norman and late Gothic styles. While drawing stylistic parallels with Merthyr Synagogue may be far-fetched, it seems reasonable to assume that local precedent made indulgence in 'difference' by the wealthy Jews of the town socially acceptable."



Cyfarthfa Castle built in 1825, family home of the Crawshays
(source: 'alangeorge.co.uk')

John Crichton-Stuart, the 3rd Marquess of Bute (1847-1900), inherited Castle Coch from his father in 1848 when he was only an infant; a castle having stood on the site since the late 11th century. Lord Bute met the architect William Burges (1827-81) in 1865, and they began their long collaboration on Cardiff Castle in 1868 when the Marquess came of age.

In 1871, Bute turned his attention to Castell Coch and asked his chief Cardiff engineer, John McConnochie, to excavate and clear the castle ruin and commissioned Burges to rebuild the castle in a Gothic Revival style. Burges set about creating a magnificent medieval fantasy built around the two great towers and lofty hall of Gilbert de Clare's original 13th century fortress. Burges 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 influenced the architecture of late 19th century South Wales.



Castell Coch 1952 (source: 'rcahmw.gov.uk')

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.

It has been suggested by Cai Parry-Jones that

"the building's architecture developed with the awkward, but commanding, site on top of the hill. Castles are often built on top of hills or elevated position for a number of reasons, including defence and security, and Castell Coch, which was also being built at same time had an elevated position looking over the Taff valley."

He also says

"one thing I think is often missed is the chapel-like character of the building. If you look carefully, it's very built in the chapel-style but is narrower, taller and thinner owing to the challenging site it was built on. Had the synagogue been built on a large plot, it's likely that it would've looked more like a traditional chapel building like the Bethany Baptist Church in Risca."

Bethany Baptist Chapel was built in 1858 (to the design of architect William Gilbert Habershon) and modified in 1867 with the addition of a new choir gallery. A new facade was added in 1875 and enlarged in 1893 when the chapel's ancillary buildings were extended into the rear graveyard, the choir gallery moved over the 1875 vestry, and a large new Sunday School wing added. The building features two turrets on its front façade reminiscent of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue.

The same is true of Garn Congregational Church, Abercarn which was built in 1862, before Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue. This building also features two turrets on its front façade. Services at this church ceased in the late 1980's and the building was demolished not long after.

This unique building of the Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was identified as among the most important 16 synagogues at risk in Europe after a survey by the Foundation for Jewish Heritage in 2017. Today, it is considered one of the most architecturally important synagogues in the UK and has been awarded Grade II listed status.



Castell Coch aerial view 1947 (source: 'walesonline.co.uk')



Bethany Baptist Church, Risca (source: 'caerphilly.observer')



Garn Congregational Church, Abercarn - demolished in the late 1980s (source: 'facebook.com')

2.10.1 Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue – Exterior

A tall structure of snecked rubble facing stonework with ashlar bands and dressings, with a steep duo-pitch slate roof with red tiled ridges, the front (west) elevation is gabled with three polygonal finials rising from its sloping parapet and is flanked either side by shorter staircase turrets with conical slate roofs. The front is approached by a set of double flight steps, with stone piers.

An article in the **'Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser – 29 June, 1877'** on the opening of the synagogue tells us that:

"The building is approached from two flights of steps rising from the entrance gates to the centre, or principal entrance, and is surmounted by a telling cast-iron railing and lamps."

The cast-iron railings and lamps are now long gone, although pictures from 1978 (see one below) show the lamps still in situ at that time. It is hoped to reinstate these features.



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

Over the entrance door are inscriptions, now illegible due to erosion. Another unusual feature is the red terracotta dragon which adorns the apex of the entrance bay pediment, understood to represent the Red Dragon of Wales, given the building's Welsh context. Perhaps the only synagogue in the world to feature such a design.

To the two long, side elevations, a shorter gable projects from the centre of the main body of the building.

The rear (east) elevation is a two-storeyed gable end, with a set of double flight steps set away from the building, and a concrete bridge from the top of the steps to the threshold of a door at second floor level.

An article in the **'Merthyr Express – March 25, 1876'** on the laying of the corner stone tells us

"The reader's house will be at the north east corner of the building, and at the back of all there will be a space left as a playground for the children."

This fact is confirmed by an article in the **'Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser – 29 June, 1877'** on the opening of the synagogue saying

"the whole of the site not fully occupied, for it is intended to build a reader's residence on the north-side of the Synagogue".

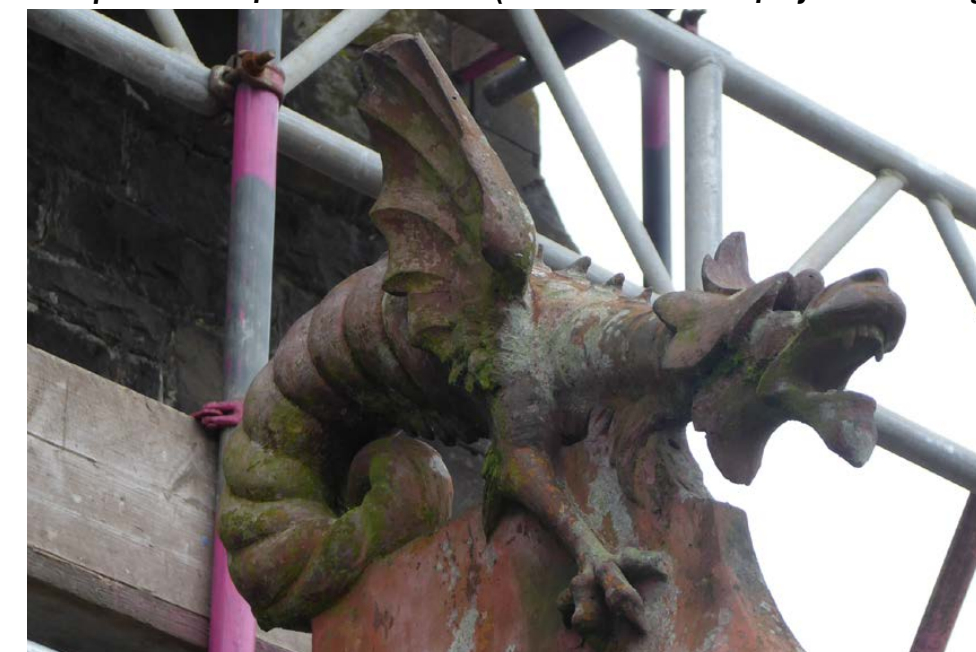
However the reader's residence was never actually built.



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



Inscription above front door in 1979 (source: Foundation for Jewish Heritage)



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



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

2.10.2 Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue – Interior

The building provided four separate floors:

Small Lower Ground Floor – “on the basement floor a bath-room, a waiting-room, a boiler-room, and coal cellar” according to the *Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser* – 29 June, 1877. What was described as a “bath-room” was most likely the Mikvah, which in Judaism is a pool of natural water in which one bathes for the restoration of ritual purity.

Upper Ground Floor – “the entrance lobby out of which a door on the right leads into a small office, and another in front into a commodious schoolroom whilst on the left a bold staircase leads up to a corridor on the floor of which is the synagogue itself.” *Merthyr Express* – 23 June, 1877. “On this floor is a lofty and well-lighted School-room with class-room adjoining ... also a lavatory, and good entrance-hall” (*Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser* – 29 June, 1877).

First Floor – “large entrance-hall, forming the main entrance to the Synagogue proper, and between the doors into it is a niche fitted with a wash-hand basin, and towel rollers on each side, for all good Jews wash before they enter their Synagogue. At the south side of the Hall is the ladies’ staircase to the gallery.” (*Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser* – 29 June, 1877).

The synagogue itself was

“a fine handsome room, with open seats in plain vanished deal accommodating about 200 persons. The reader’s desk is placed in the middle of the floor, and at the east end of the synagogue is a neatly designed cabinet with a pointed arch supported by polished granite columns in which the scrolls of the law are kept.”

(*Merthyr Express* – 23 June, 1877).

Second Floor – “At an elevation of about 12 feet there is a gallery which runs round three sides of the room, and a brass lattice rail surmounts it being a great ornament and adding much to the effect. This is the ladies gallery the sexes worshipping apart in the synagogue.” (*Merthyr Express* – 23 June, 1877). “On the Gallery level, there is a large platform-hall, ladies’ cloak and retiring-rooms, & etc.” (*Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser* – 29 June, 1877). The balcony with large central void looking down to the main synagogue is now completely floored over.

Good lighting was essential in synagogues, where reading from the Torah scrolls was central to many services. The quality of the light in Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue was repeatedly complimented in newspaper articles at the time of opening, quotes include “On entering the Synagogue, one is struck with the abundance of light provided” (*Merthyr Telegraph and General Advertiser* – 29 June, 1877) and “The synagogue is admirably lighted” (*Merthyr Express* – 23 June, 1877).

The synagogue’s interior was 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. Another feature popular in Gothic architecture was stained glass. Although historically there had been an absence of stained glass in synagogues due to a strict interpretation of the Second Commandment which condemned idolatry.

The New Synagogue, Great St Helens, Bishopsgate Street, London which opened in 1838 started a trend for other synagogues to install stained glass behind their Ark from the 1850s. However, few synagogues started life with stained glass; this was usually added later, donated by wealthy patrons. Due to the Second Commandment, synagogue stained-glass also tended to confine itself to the symbolic; employing well established symbolism, such as the Menorah (seven-branched candelabrum), Magen David (Star of David), Luchot (Tablets of the Law), or ritual connected with the Jewish calendar or insignia of the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

Not everyone was a fan of bringing stained-glass into the synagogue. The Jewish architect Delissa Joseph (1859-1927) said

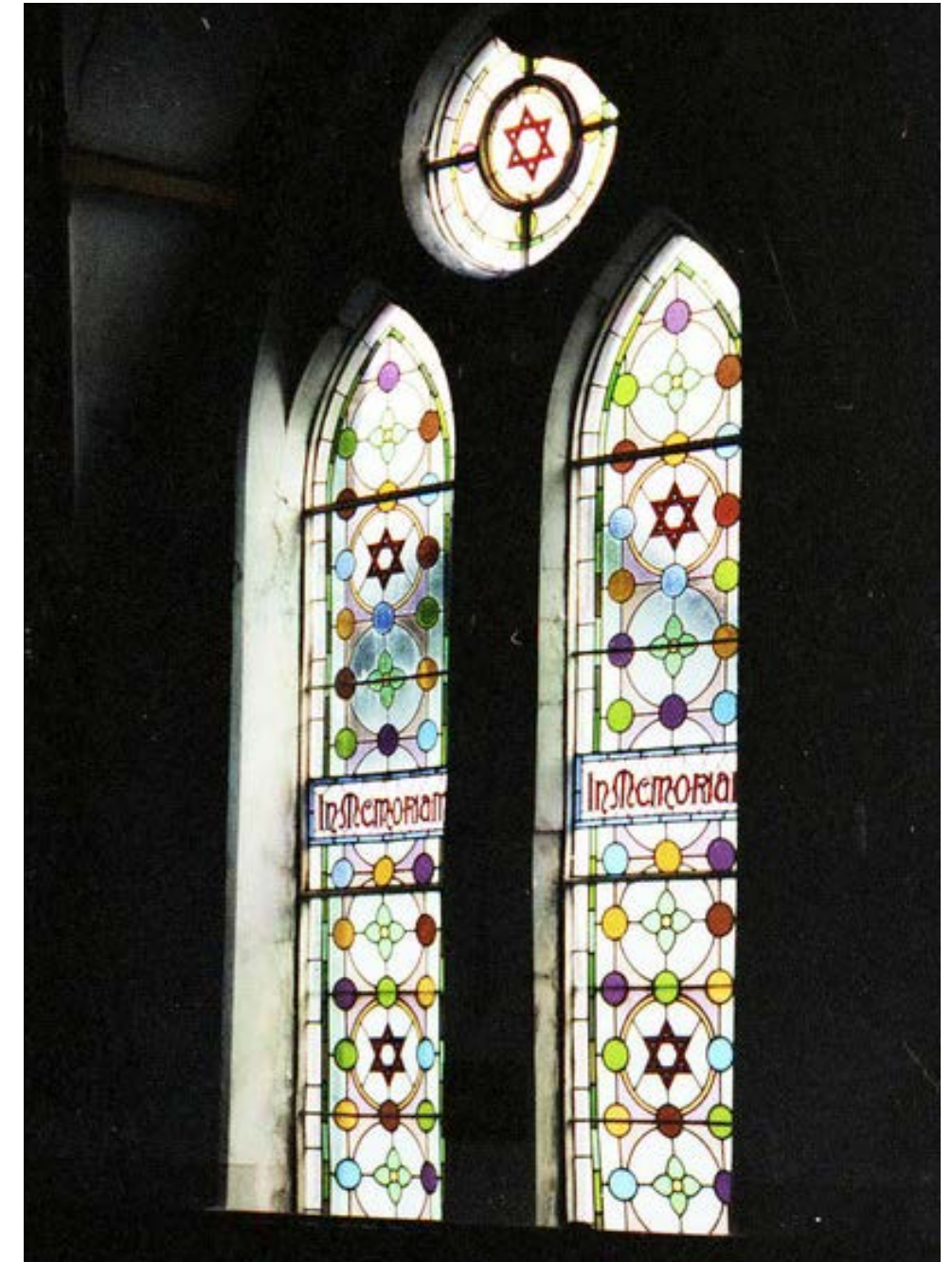
“The bulk of our synagogues have been ruined by their windows. Good buildings have been darkened and made ridiculous by the introduction of ill designed, badly coloured, or over-coloured glass, and generally speaking, a synagogue is better without coloured glass – better lighted, and freer from distracting elements.”

Please refer to **Appendix F** for further information on ‘**Stained-glass in the Synagogue**’.

At Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue, it’s unclear whether the stained-glass windows were original or added to over time. When it first opened, the synagogue had an “abundance of light” which might suggest that the original windows were of clear glass. Although photographs show that the stained-glass at Merthyr was not overly coloured so light still flooded in. Some of the stained-glass windows were dedicated to deceased members of the congregation and therefore added at a later date. We can also see that its stained-glass employed only symbolism.



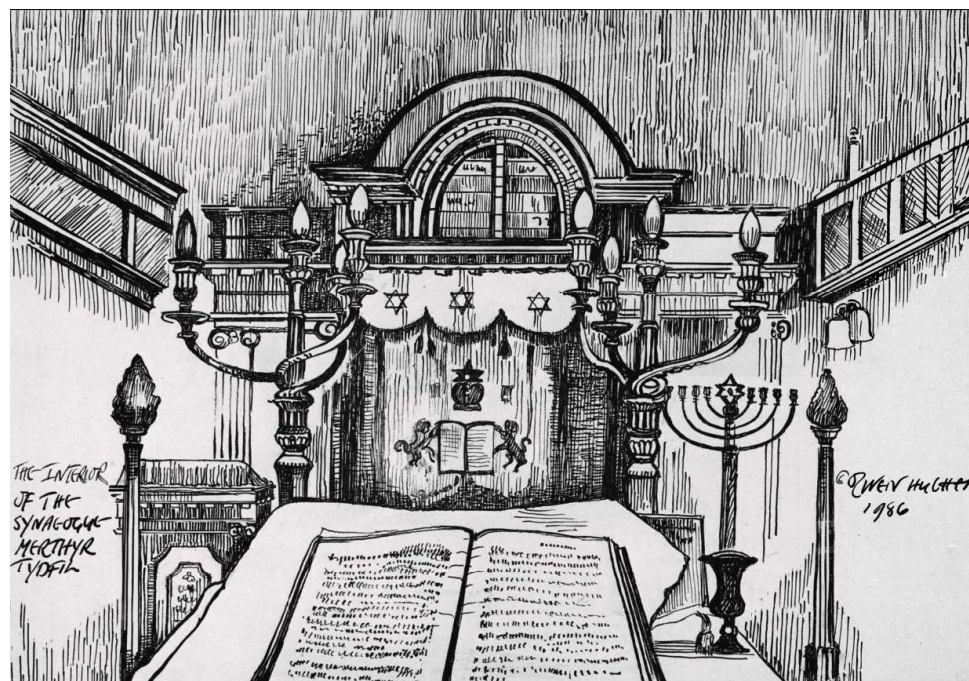
One of the few remaining pieces of stained glass in 2024 (source: own)



Images of the stained glass in c.1978 (source: ‘alangeorge.co.uk’ website)

A sketch by Owen Hughes (1986), from the collection at the Jewish Museum London, of the interior of first floor synagogue at Merthyr Tydfil prompted Foundation Chief Executive, Michael Mail, to say:

“The drawing presents the typical architecture of a traditional Orthodox synagogue with its bimah in the centre enveloped in ornate lights. From the bimah (platform), we take in the dominant aron hakodesh (holy ark) at the far wall facing Jerusalem with its richly decorated parochet (curtain) covering the cabinet that held the torah scrolls that would be read each week. There is also a shtender (lectern) where the Rabbi would have roused his congregants through his regular drashas (sermons), and a menorah on the other side of the aron echoing the overall synagogue design as reflecting the form of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem that was taken forth into the Jewish diaspora across the globe. We can also see the upstairs women’s gallery which would confirm that this is a traditional Orthodox community that separated the women from the men.”



Sketch by Olwen Hughes (1986) (source: 'jewishmuseum.org.uk')



Photo from 1979 (source: Foundation for Jewish Heritage)

The book *'The Synagogues of Britain and Ireland'* by Sharman Kadish also describes the ground floor Ark in the school-room as follows:

“Inside, the stone Ark, extant on the ground floor of the building, has a tall Gothic pediment and arch reminiscent of church door-cases in Wales. It was originally painted brown and sported large Luhot painted in black and gold (now missing). The big rectangular timber Bimah, immediately in front of the Ark, was decorated with simple openwork five-pointed stars and Gothic clover ‘cut-outs’, like those still extant on the stairs.”



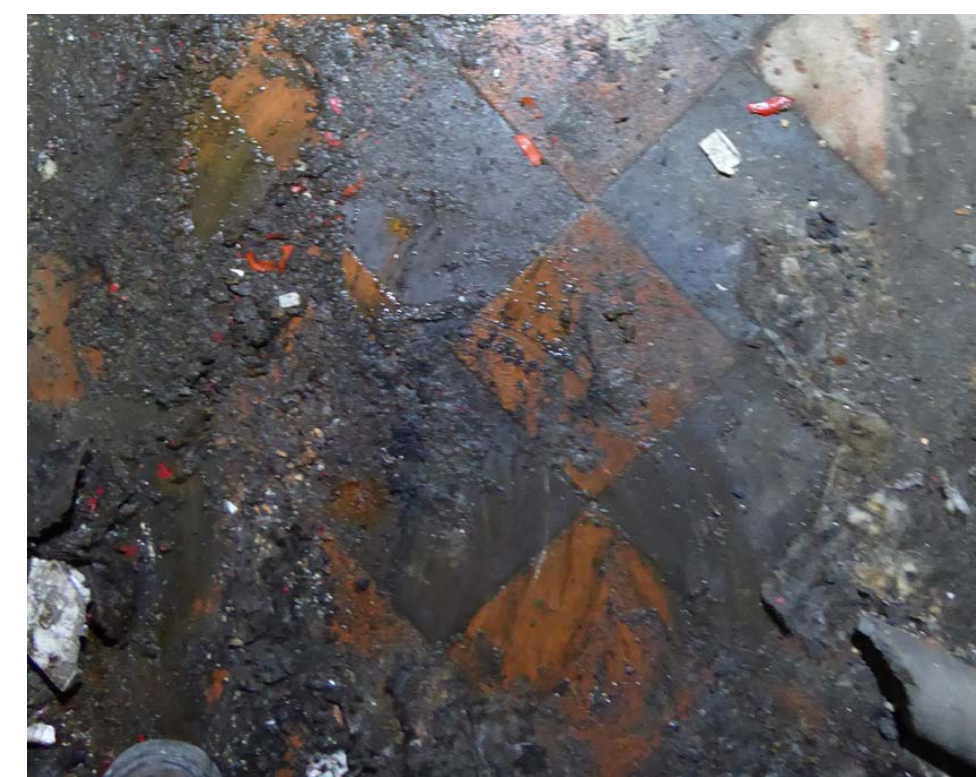
Ground floor Ark in c.1978 (source: 'alangeorge.co.uk' website)

In his thesis *'The history of the Jewish diaspora in Wales'* 2014, Cai Parry-Jones said:

“Merthyr Tydfil’s ritual bath ‘was situated beneath the shul’. The grandmother of the late Harry Sherman of Swansea regularly used Merthyr’s mikvah in the 1920s, when the Sherman family lived in nearby Dowlais. According to Harry, the room was ‘sparsely furnished with a few upholstered chairs, a couch...and a small rug. The floor gleamed with red quarry tiles. Hot water came from a coal-fired boiler at one side of the room’. Merthyr’s mikvah also catered as a private bathing facility for the Shermans, who ‘revelled in its luxury’ once a week since it was much ‘better than the tin bath in front of the fire’ at the family home.



Mikvah in 1995 (credit: Josel Goldstein; source: Historic England)



Red and black quarry tiles to Mikvah lobby in 2019 (source: own)

2.10.3 Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue – Changes it has Undergone

Communications with Cai Parry-Jones tell us that it's unclear how much change the building has undergone over the years. There was no evidence to suggest that any extensions were added or internal layouts changed whilst the building operated as a synagogue.

He also said that once the congregation's debts were cleared, they were able to undertake significant renovations at the synagogue after nearly half-a-century. In 1923, £2,000 was spent on building improvements which included installing a new Ark, decorative stained-glass memorial windows and a commemorative 'tablet in memory of the local Jews who fell' in the First World War. Subsequent renovations followed in 1937 and finally, in 1955, when a new bimah, 'carved in teakwood', was installed and the synagogue reconsecrated by the then Chief Rabbi, Israel Brodie.

After the synagogue closed, a floor was added where the Ladies Gallery used to be in the main sanctuary space when the building was used as a gym.

2.10.4 Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue – Closure & Donation of Religious Artefacts

The decline in the size of congregation and shortfall in funds required to keep the building running necessitated the sale of the synagogue in March 1982, a decision that officially marked the end of 134 years of Jewish communal worship in the town.

Committed to preserving their religious artefacts and ensuring their continued use in the Jewish faith, the Ark was donated to the Gateshead Yeshivah Ketanah, a place where it would continue to serve its function and ensure that the memory of Merthyr Tydfil would live on among the British Jewish community.

The congregation was also keen to donate the bimah to any other Jewish community that could bear the costs of transportation and dismantlement. However, despite their efforts, no suitable recipients were found, resulting in both the bimah and the Roll of Honour 1914-1918 tablet being donated locally to the Cyfarthfa Castle Museum.

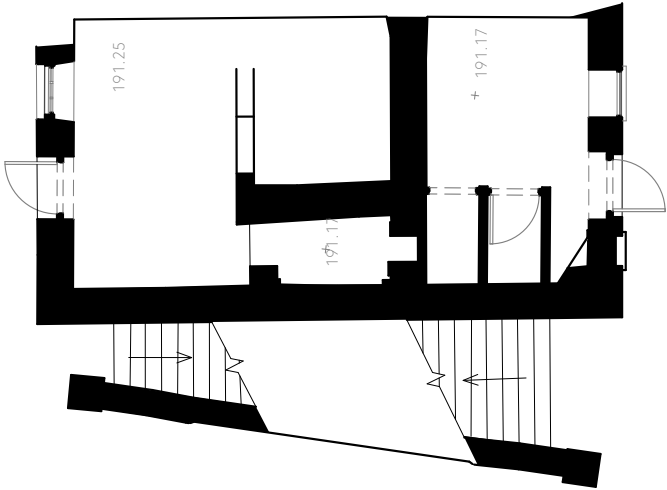
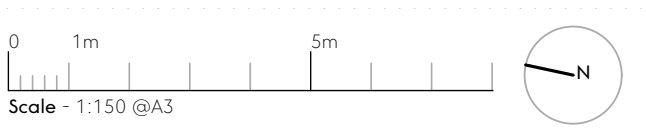
2.10.5 Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue – Recording with the latest technology

To digitally preserve the building, Wessex Archaeology carried out a comprehensive terrestrial laser scan survey of the exterior and interior. This technology captured the building and its environs with millimetre accuracy, and the point cloud dataset was colourised using the on-board 360° RGB scanner photography. This data has been used to create plans and elevation drawings of the building and will be archived in the RCAHMW's National's Monuments Record of Wales as a permanent record of the synagogue. The data can also be used to form the basis for 3D modelling and there are future plans by the project partners to create a virtual reconstruction of the synagogue as it was before it closed in 1983.

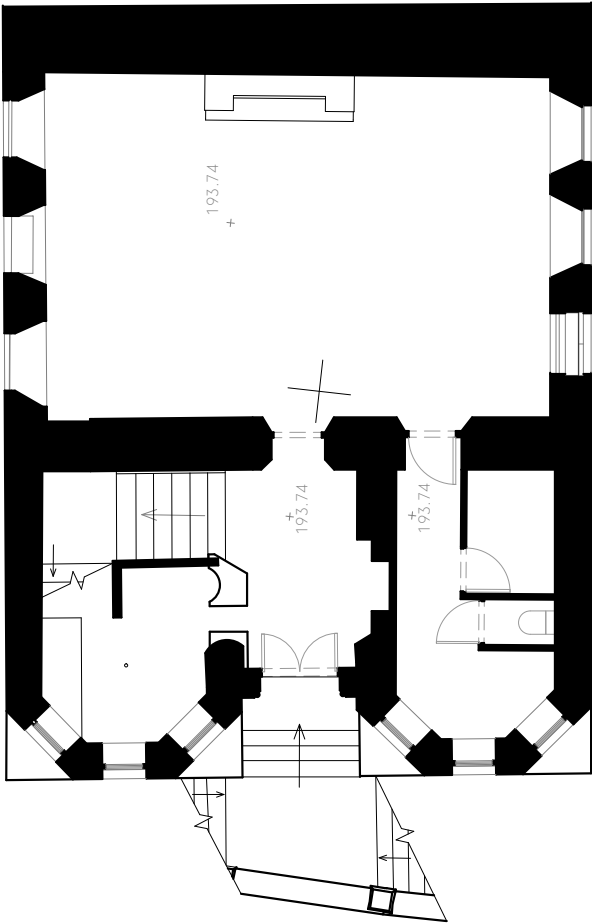


Merthyr Synagogue, Interior (source: laser scan 'wessexarch.co.uk' - copyright: RCAHMW 2021)

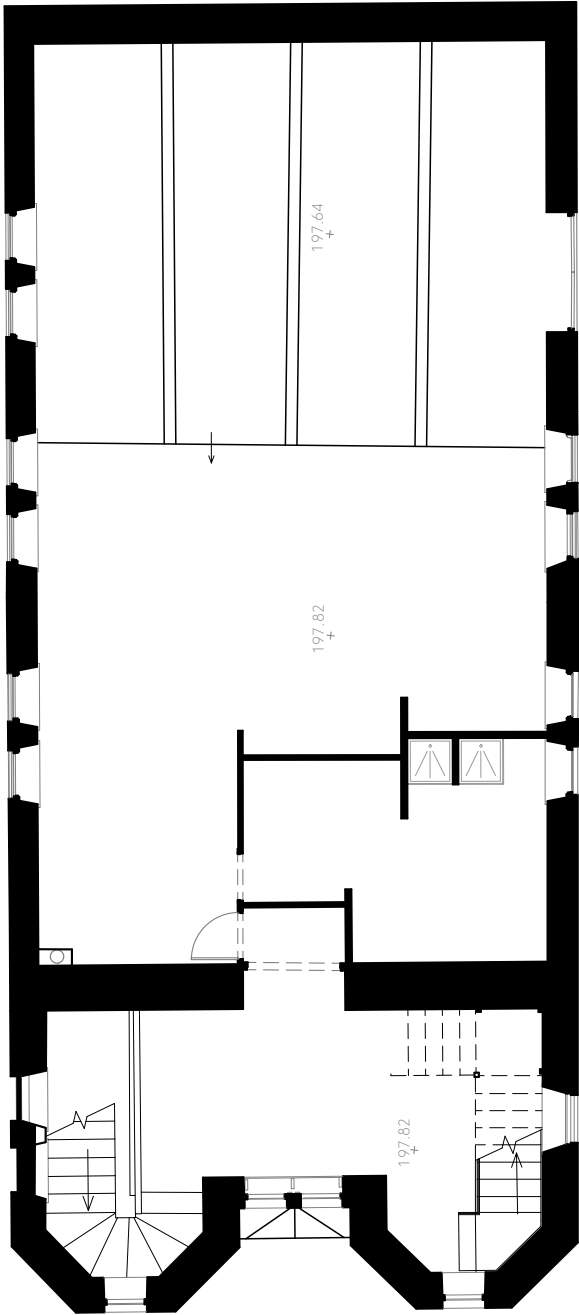
2.10.6 Existing Floor Plans



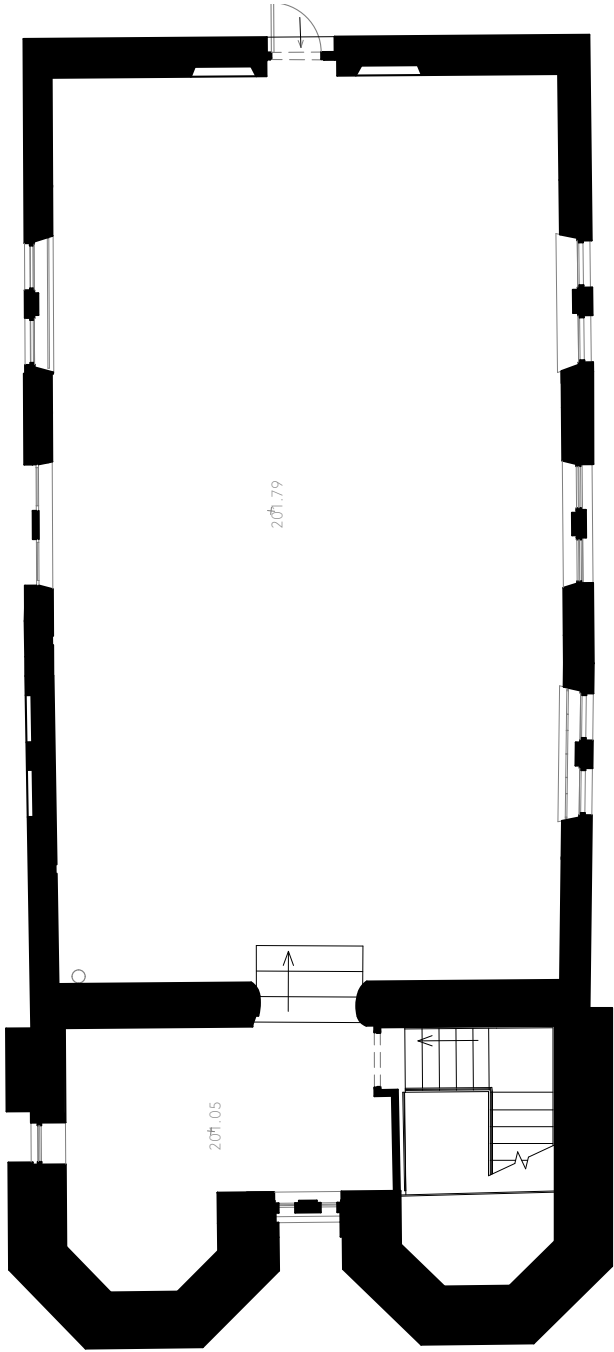
EXISTING LOWER GROUND FLOOR PLAN



EXISTING UPPER GROUND FLOOR PLAN



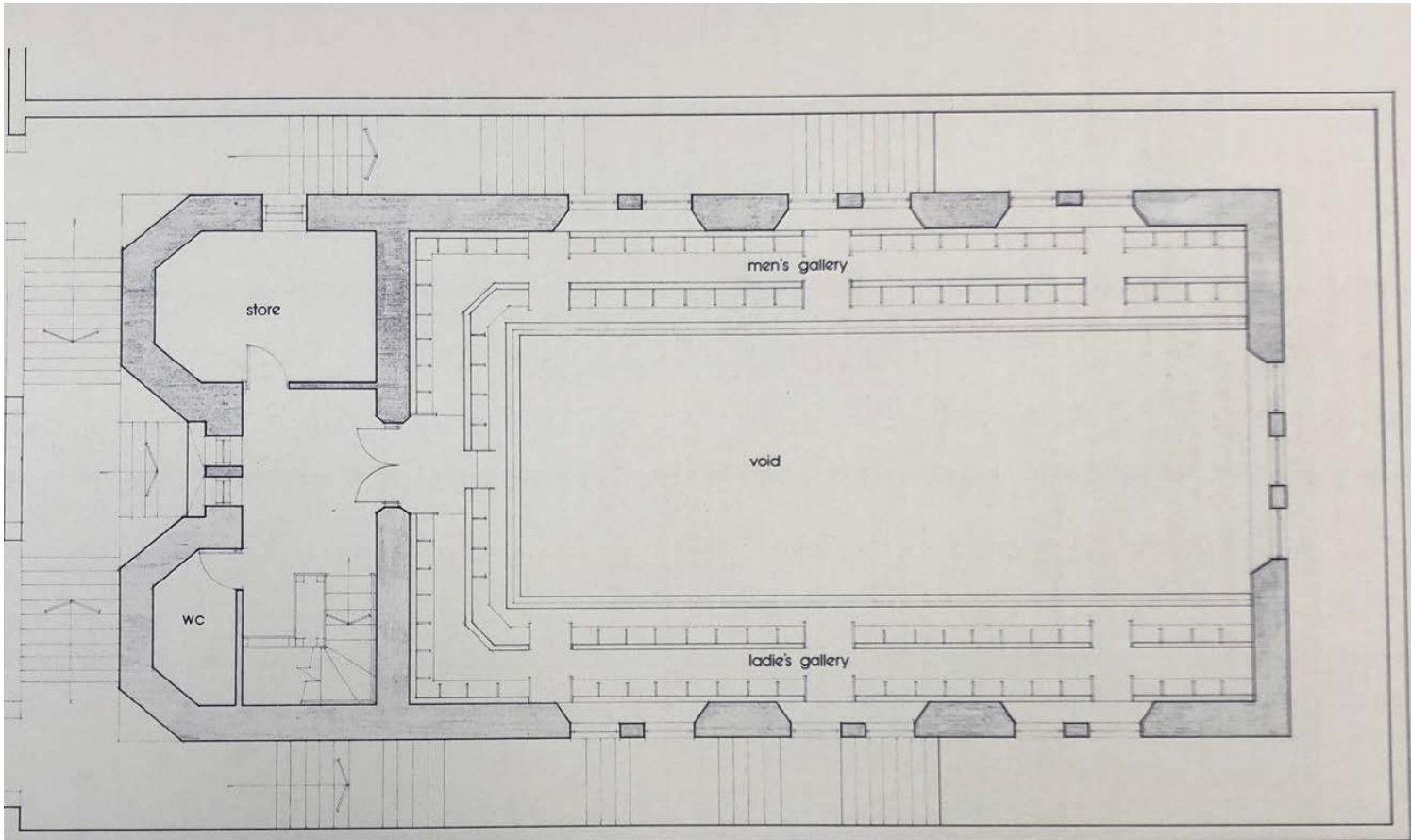
EXISTING FIRST FLOOR PLAN



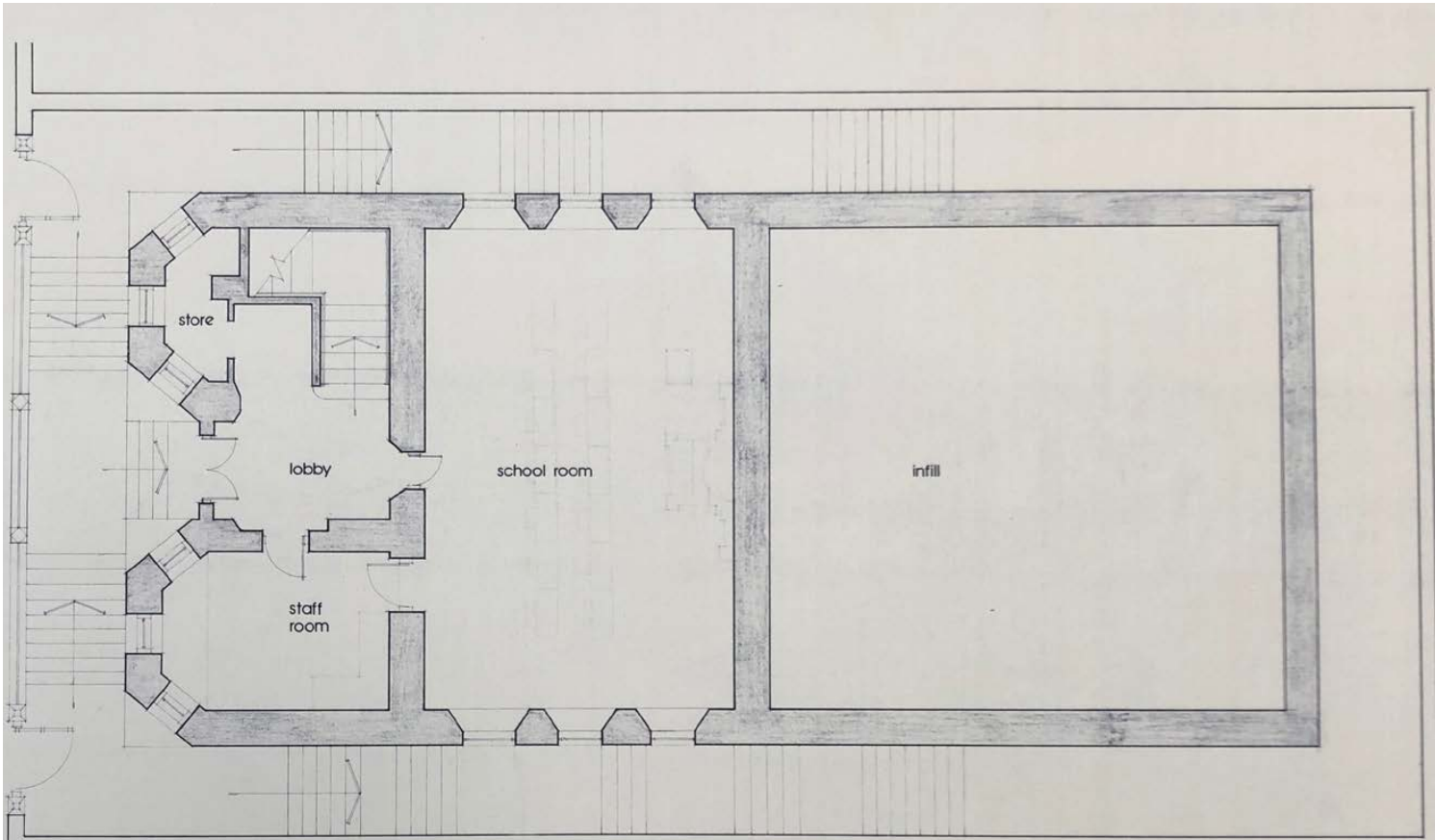
EXISTING SECOND FLOOR PLAN

2.10.6 Floor Plans of the Synagogue as it was in 1978, before it was stripped out

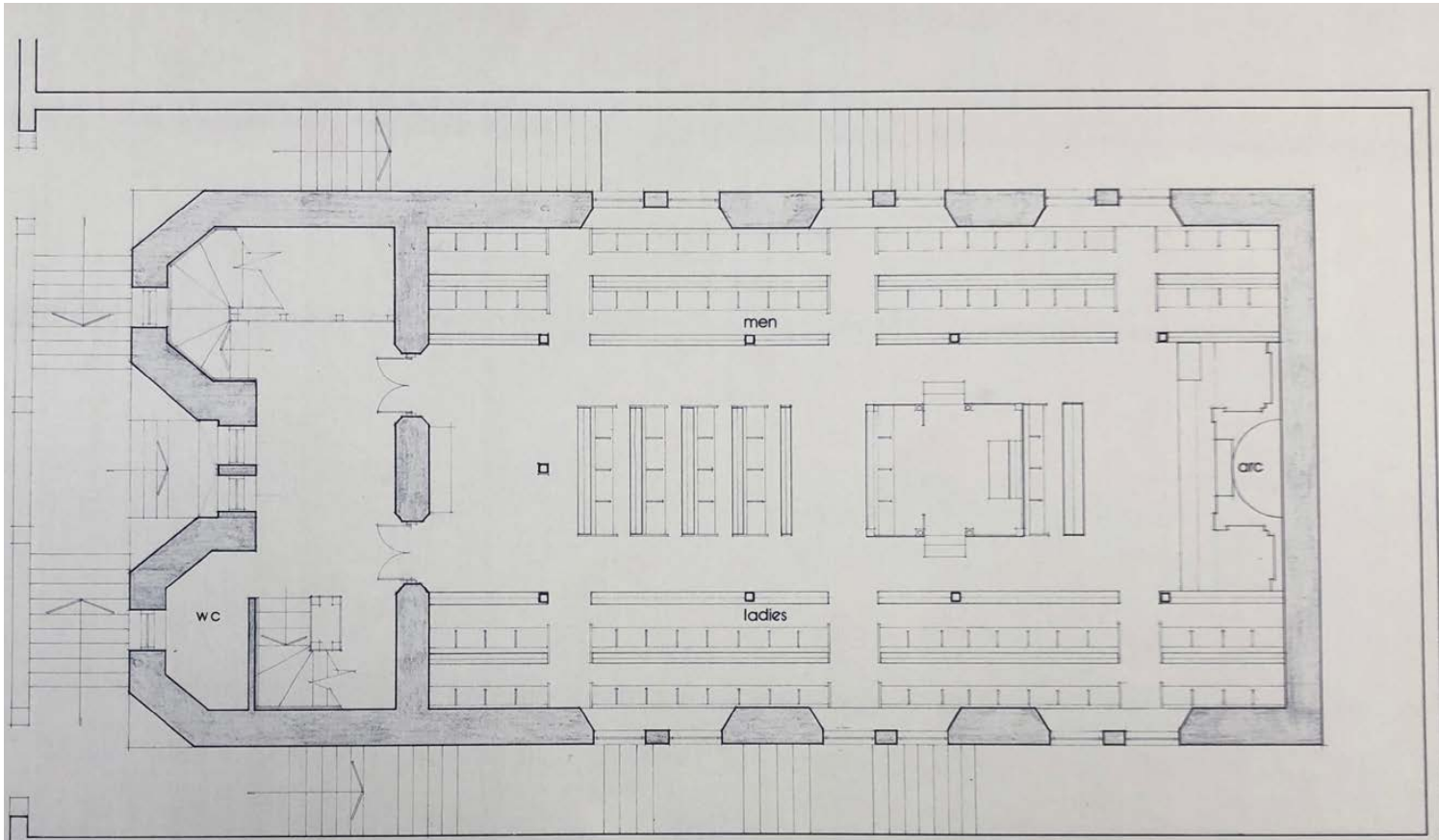
(These drawings were produced by (then) students of the Welsh School of Architecture (Chris Loyn, Duncan Lawrence and Paul Hutchison).
The drawings were kindly supplied to Mann Williams by Chris Loyn and are reproduced herein with thanks to Messers Loyn, Lawrence and Hutchison.



1978 SECOND FLOOR PLAN

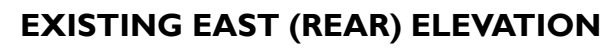


1978 UPPER GROUND FLOOR PLAN



1978 FIRST FLOOR PLAN

0 1m 5m
Scale - 1:100 @A3



2.10.6 Existing North (Woodland-side) Elevation



EXISTING NORTH (WOODLAND-SIDE) ELEVATION

2.10.6 Existing South Elevation

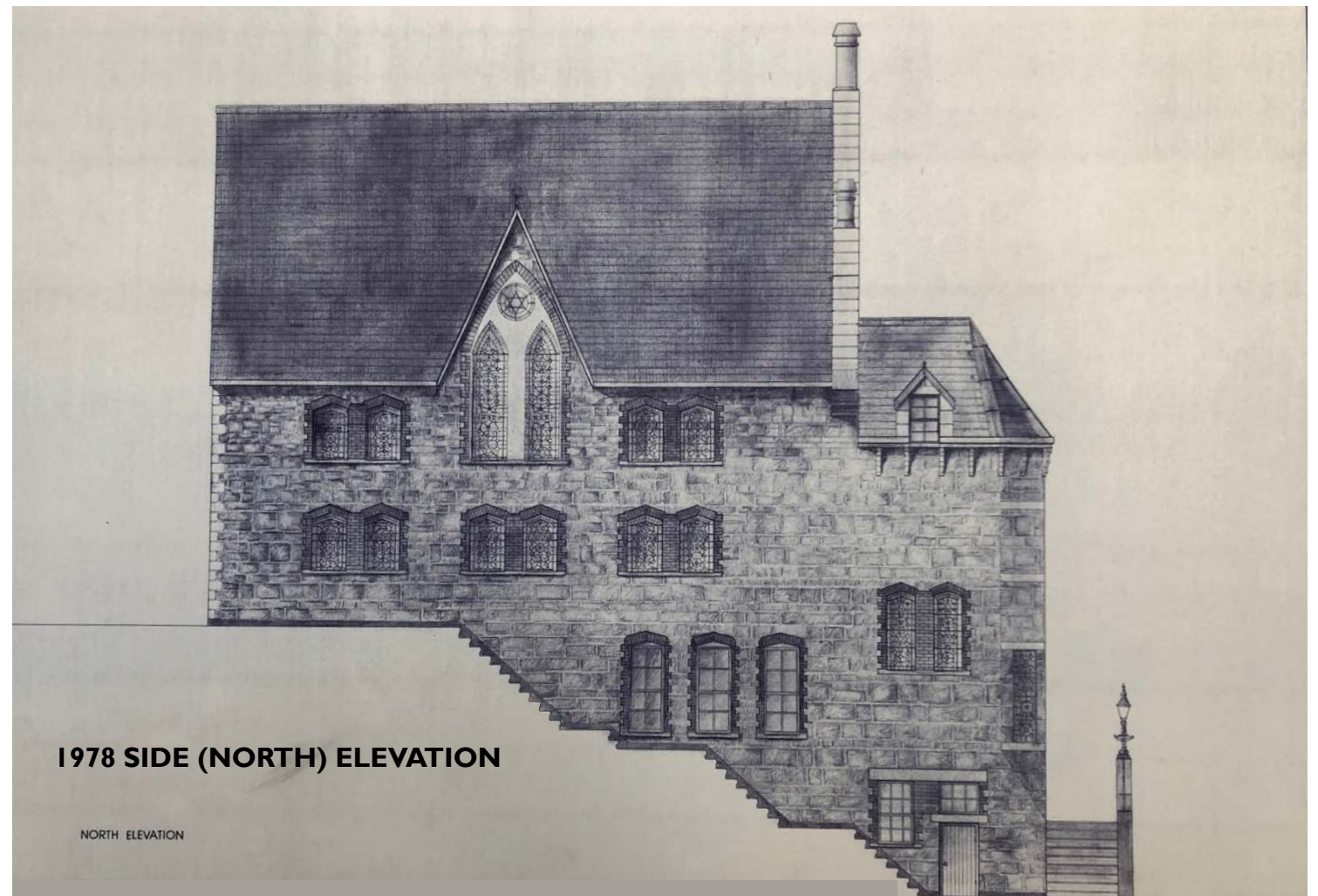
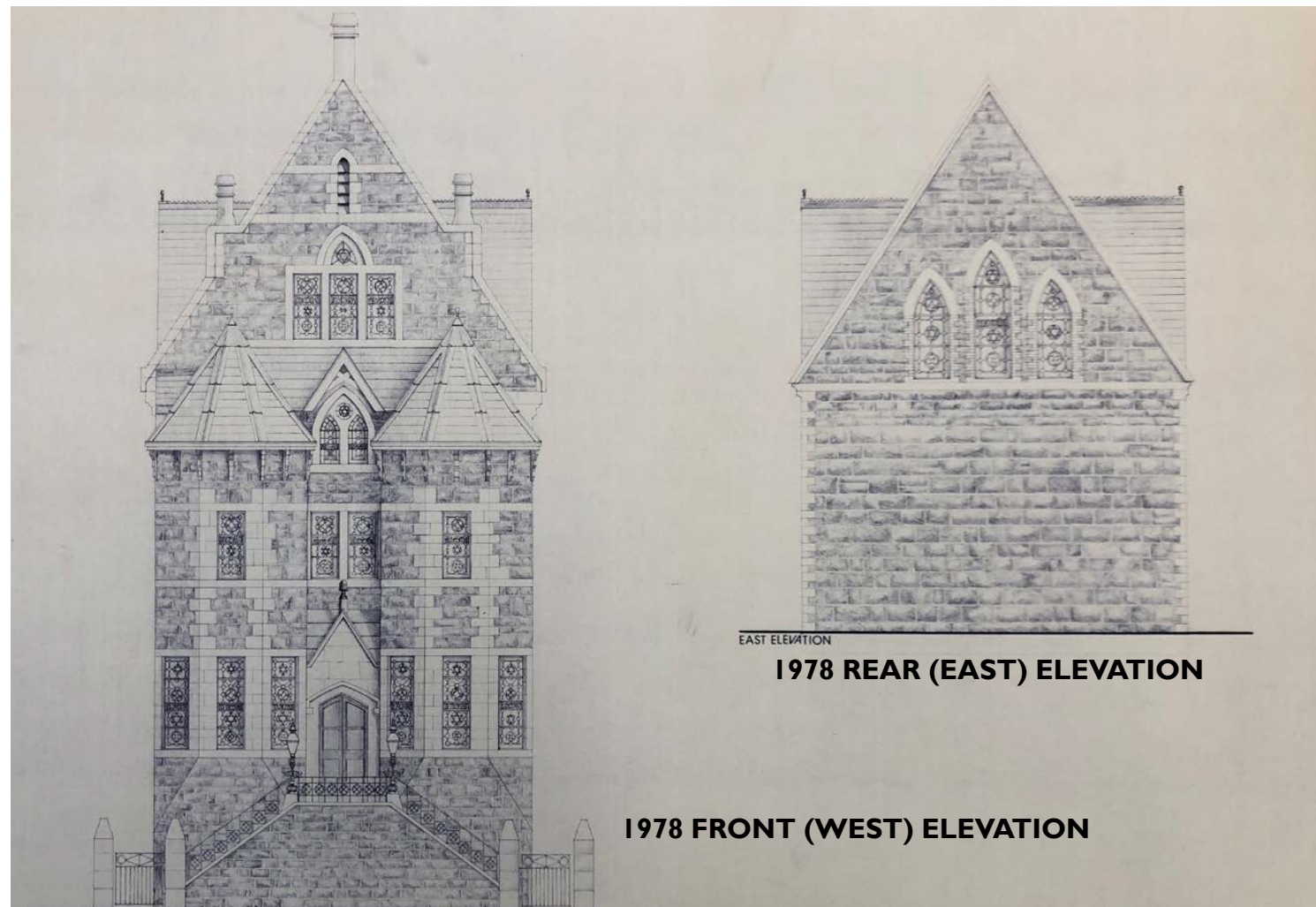
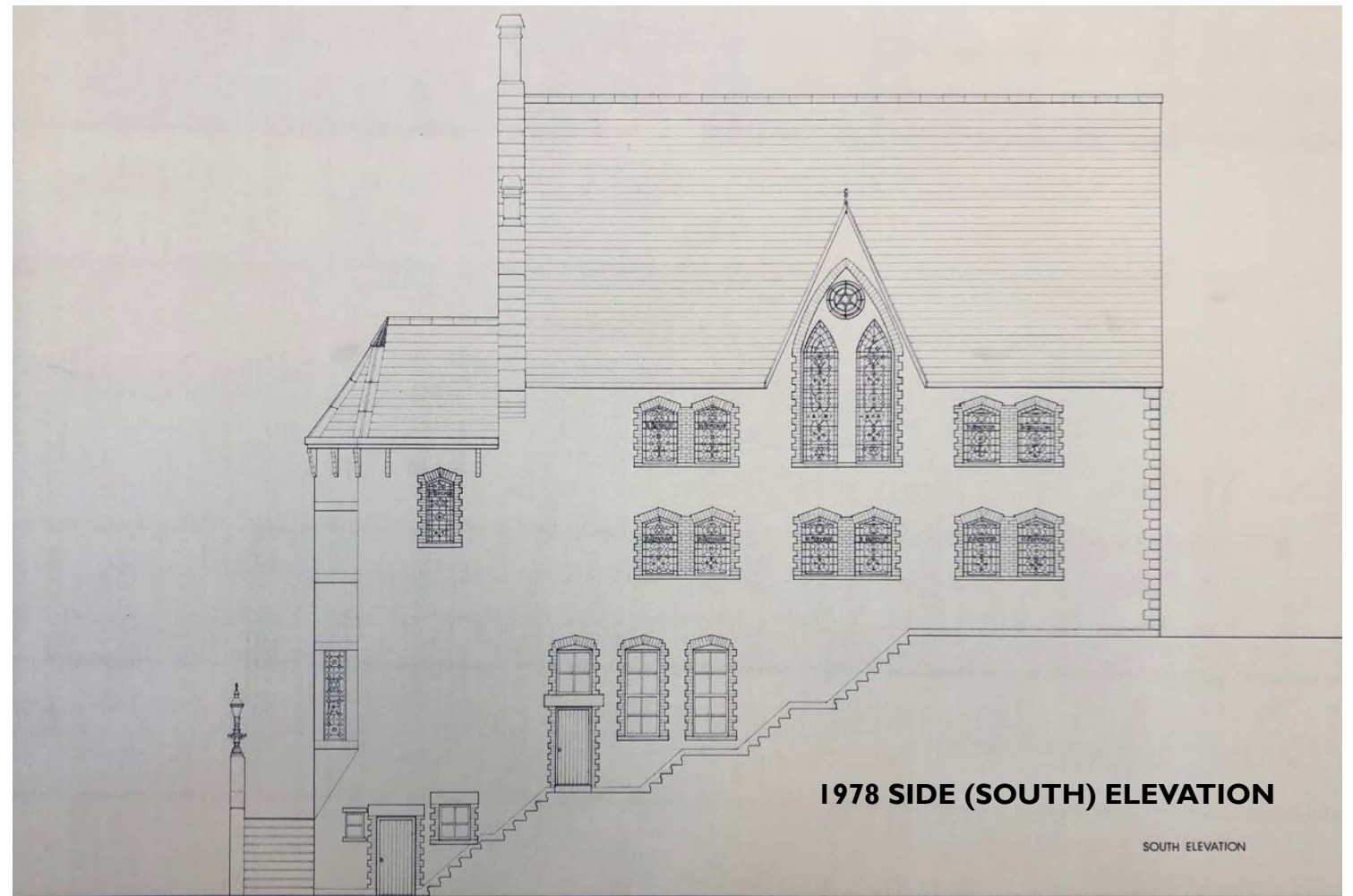


EXISTING SOUTH ELEVATION

2.10.6 Elevations of the Synagogue as it was in 1978, before the windows were lost

(These drawings were produced by (then) students of the Welsh School of Architecture (Chris Loyn, Duncan Lawrence and Paul Hutchison).

The drawings were kindly supplied to Mann Williams by Chris Loyn and are reproduced herein with thanks to Messers Loyn, Lawrence and Hutchison.



2.11 People Associated with the Synagogue

Merthyr was very much a 'provincial' community. The centre of Jewish life in Wales being in Cardiff with its most prestigious synagogue on Cathedral Road. However, there are several people associated with Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue who are of note.

The most famous name associated with Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue would be the Sherman family. Simon Sherman was a tailor from Eastern Europe, together he and his wife Rachel had 8 children: 4 boys (Isaac, Jack, Abraham (Abe) and Harry) and 4 girls, all raised in Cardiff. The brothers started a bookmaking business together in Glebeland Street, Merthyr Tydfil and went on to have another shop in Victoria Street. Having set up this business; Isaac, Jack and Harry emigrated to America during the First World War. Harry subsequently returned to Wales, and he and Abe set up Shermans Pools Ltd.

Abe and Harry Sherman made a fortune from their bookmaking and football pools businesses and were one of the largest employers in post-war South Wales. The brothers passed a significant portion of their wealth onto various charities in Britain and Israel, via The Sherman Foundation. The Abe Sherman Foundation (1963) also left a legacy to Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue which helped maintain it in its latter years. Eventually the pools business was bought by Littlewoods in 1961 and the betting business by William Hill.

Abe Sherman (1892-1965) and his wife Anne (Annie) lived at Park Lodge, Thomastown in Merthyr Tydfil; adjacent and up-hill from the synagogue and were extremely fond of their home and garden. There had a walled garden of 1.25 acres, with two greenhouses, terraced lawns, trellised arches, a fishpond. In its heyday, guests at Park Lodge included film stars such as Diana Dors and Danny Kaye, and the well-travelled Alan Whicker. Abe lived in Merthyr whilst Harry lived in Cardiff. Abe was once president of the Merthyr Tydfil Hebrew Congregation and acted as Treasurer 1950-6.

The Shermans were also patrons of the arts and donated the funds to establish the Sherman Theatre in Cardiff.



Abe (left) & Harry (right) Sherman, 1950s
(source: 'peoplescollection.wales')



Below and to right:
Park Lodge, Thomastown, Merthyr Tydfil 1938
(source: 'player.bfi.org.uk' screenshot from home movie)



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. Christie's said that places of worship featured in Lowry's paintings and drawings repeatedly throughout his career, and that "Lowry encountered this building on a visit to Wales, probably with his friend and patron, Monty Bloom". The new owner of the painting was not disclosed.

Other community members of note include:

Ben Hamilton, a highly respected solicitor and at one time coroner of East Glamorgan who was in charge on the inquests on the 144 people, mostly children, who were killed in the Aberfan disaster in 1966. Mrs Nora Bloom, a local Jewish woman was also very much involved in relief efforts at Aberfan.

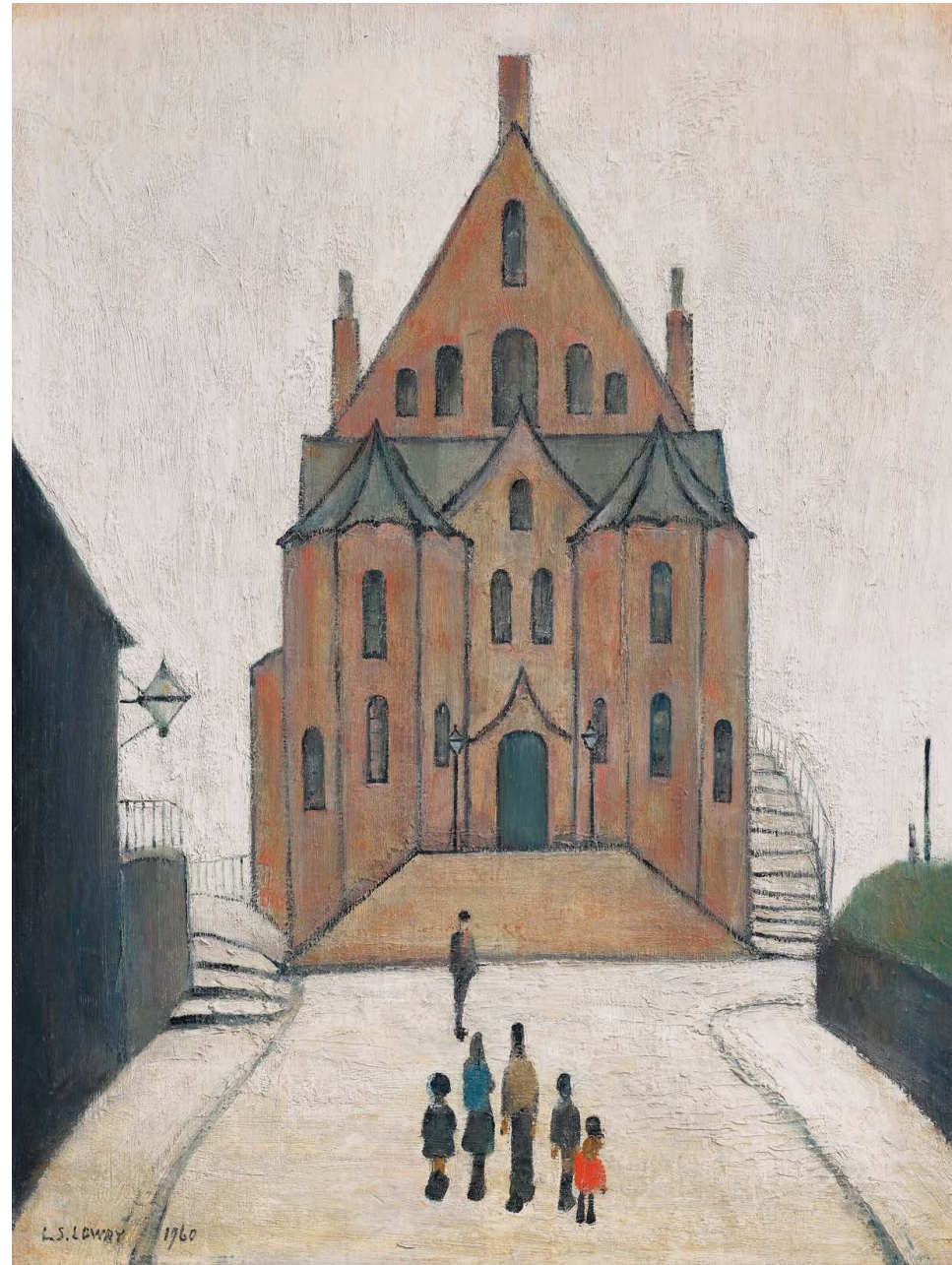
Sculptor and printmaker Bettina Adler (née Bettina Gross) (1913-93) was born in Prague and came to Merthyr Tydfil in 1939, fleeing Nazi persecution. She remained in Merthyr throughout the war. In 1947 she married Hans Günther Adler (1910-88), a recent refugee from Prague, who went on to become an eminent Holocaust historian and writer. Their marriage took place at Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue. The couple subsequently settled in London. Her work is held in UK public collections including the Ben Uri Collection, the British Museum and the V&A.

Rev. Isaiah Raffalovich (1870-1956) was a Russian Jew who emigrated to Britain in 1899, becoming secretary of the New Synagogue in Manchester in 1900. He was Rabbi of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue from 1903 to 1905. In 1905 he was appointed Rabbi of the newly reopened synagogue at Hope Place in Liverpool. He was a pioneer Zionist, someone who advocated for an independent Jewish state where Jews can live in safety. In 1924 he was appointed by the Jewish Colonization Association (ICA) to be Chief Rabbi of Brazil. He retired to Jerusalem and died there.

Rev. Eli Bloom (d.1939) was born in Riga, Latvia, and trained in Russia, London and Manchester. He moved to Britain in the late 1800s. Following ministerial roles at Cork and Wrexham, he moved to Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue in 1901. He served first as reader, and later as Rabbi, at Merthyr for 38 years and was a popular lecturer at other places of worship.

Esther Isaacs, mother of the 'Chariots of Fire' athlete Harold Abrahams came from Merthyr.

The last Jew living in Merthyr, George Black, died in Manchester around 1998.



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

2.12 Community Links with the Synagogue

An elderly former member of the Merthyr Jewish Community said that the men tended to be Yiddish speaking and focused themselves on study and life around the synagogue, whereas the women would work the markets and thus picked up both English and Welsh and made the links into the local community. Merthyr Jews integrated into town life over time, not least because their children were enrolled into the local state schools.

The links between the host community and the Jewish community went both ways, as many of the girls in the Valleys sought to go into service in Jewish homes, with the ambition that they would then be able to go and work in London, for other Jews.

Jewish industrial concerns in Merthyr, included OP Chocolates (known predominantly for the Pischinger Torte and Walnut Whirls, both plain and Coffee flavour). The factory is still in operation, next to Dowlais High Street. There was also the Welsh Button Factory, founded by German Jewish refugees.

2.13 Setting & Context of Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue

Located to the east of Merthyr Tydfil Town Centre, on a steep slope with impressive views across the town and the valley, the Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue is located at the east end of Church Street, at the top of this very steep street. The building is set dramatically against a dense section of woodland, and rises steeply up the hill, with long, steep flights of steps to both sides of the building. To the north-west of the site is Primrose Hill House and Union Street, to the north and east is Thomastown Park, to the south is housing which includes Bryn Heulog and Sunny Bank Villa, and to the west is the sloping hill of Church Street leading down to the Town Centre.

The Synagogue is located within the 'Thomastown Villas' character area of the 'Thomastown Conservation Area' (the area being the easternmost extent and most elevated part of the Conservation Area), which is recognised for its historical and architectural quality, with the local area "dominated by detached and semi-detached houses in spacious and wooded surroundings". "It is also an area where the formal layout of rectangular streets dissipates into shorter curved streets, back lanes and streets without footways. ... The area is sparsely populated and ... the individual buildings have their own character and differ to the other character areas. This area has less of a sense of uniformity than the other character areas thanks to the individually designed buildings constructed at different times. However, they are all generally large in scale, especially compared to the other dwellings in the Conservation Area and some have extensive grounds."



Aerial view of the Synagogue looking up the site (source: Foundation for Jewish Heritage)



Aerial view of the area with the Synagogue identified with a red dot (source: GoogleEarth)



Aerial view of the Synagogue looking down the site (source: Foundation for Jewish Heritage)

2.14 Condition of the Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue

REFER TO SEPARATE DOCUMENT ENTITLED:

SYNAGOGUE, MERTHYR TYDFIL - RECORD OF BUILDING AND CONDITION ASSESSMENT REPORT, WITH REPAIR PROPOSALS

3.0 Bibliography

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