

The Valleys synagogue facing a new lease of life

Lucy John reports on the abandoned heart of a once-thriving Welsh Jewish community that's being brought back to life...

THE former synagogue in Merthyr Tydfil is undeniably one of the most recognisable structures in the town.

It stands tall on top of Bryntirion Road hill as though it has magically leapt from the page of a fairytale classic. With its gothic turrets morphed from sand-coloured stone and complete with a Welsh dragon on its gable, there's no wonder it is considered one of the most architecturally important synagogues in the UK.

Its imposing exterior hints at how it once sat at the heart of a strong and booming Jewish population who, for more than a century, called Merthyr Tydfil home. However, its broken and boarded-up windows depict a very different story of its recent history as a dormant reminder of the community it once served.

The former synagogue was built just off Church Street in 1877 to accommodate the growing number of practicing Jews in the town and surrounding areas. Thought to be the third – and most impressive – synagogue established in Merthyr Tydfil, it boasted congregation numbers of around 400 during its heyday in the 1920s.

The expanding community largely – but not solely – stemmed from the town's prosperous industrial revolution, which attracted people from a diverse array of backgrounds into the centre.

According to an extract from *Jews Of Wales* by Cai Parry-Jones, in 1906 the Jewish population in Merthyr was recorded as 300. Comparatively, 100 were recorded in Pontypridd and 70 in Newport.

By 1976, shortly before the synagogue closed in 1983, Merthyr Tydfil recorded a Jewish population of 20. The dwindling population was caused by a variety of factors while the economic wealth of the town declined and families moved away to places such as Cardiff and London.

Since its official closure as a place of worship, the former synagogue has largely remained derelict and vacant. Although it was used as a gym for some years before 2004, it has been empty and decaying ever since. Plans to turn the building into flats in 2009 never came to fruition.

Although it has been abandoned for the best part of 20 years, the former synagogue and its congregation certainly have never been forgotten by those who live in and have lived in the Valleys town. Many were delighted by the announcement in July that the Foundation for Jewish Heritage had secured funding to bring the important Grade II-listed building back to life as a Welsh Jewish heritage centre.

One of those feeling particularly pleased is Rabbi Yisroel Fine, whose father – known as Rev Meyer Fine – led services at the synagogue from 1956 to 1962. Travelling down from London to visit the building before its renovation, this is the first time Rabbi Fine has stepped into the building in more than 20 years – when he last saw it as a gym.

Walking around its rubble-filled yet eerily empty interior, he feels nostalgic. He remembers it being full of life and song decades before the paint started peeling of the walls and a flock of pigeons moved in



➤ From left, Rabbi Yisroel Fine with Michael Mail and Adrian Jacobs. Right, the former Merthyr Synagogue on Bryntirion Road Jonathan Myers

and made it their home. Although it stands in a sorry state, he is comforted by the new plans which will celebrate Welsh Jewish culture.

He said: "The building is very sentimental to me because it reminds me of those good times, but it is sad knowing what could have happened to this building if these plans weren't going ahead.

"People might come past and remember there was a Jewish community, but now, by doing this, it's keeping that alive and it will inspire people to remember their roots. From my point of view it's a token of respect for my father. The years he was here will always be remembered."

Rabbi Fine, 73, moved from his birthplace in Swansea to Merthyr when his father began working at the synagogue. He was seven when he arrived before his family moved to Cardiff just after he had his Bar Mitzvah at the synagogue aged 13.

He is now retired himself as a full-time Rabbi, leading for 40 years altogether in Newcastle, Wembley and Southgate. He recalls Merthyr's supportive Jewish community of around 50 families while he grew up there.

"There were possibly 130 to 150 at the synagogue," he said. "My recollection is that the synagogue never felt empty, you always felt a real communal atmosphere. This synagogue was everything to the Jewish community in Merthyr. The beauty of these provincial communities was that it was family, even if you weren't super orthodox or observant.

"There were quite a lot of young Jewish children here, so I had plenty of Jewish friends. Even on a Saturday morning a lot of the community's children came to the synagogue and on Saturday afternoons my parents, who lived just up the hill and around the corner from the synagogue, used to host all the children of the community in our home. My parents used to give them a lovely Saturday afternoon mixture of stories and singing and so on. It was a really lovely communal feel here."

During his time at Merthyr Tydfil, Rabbi Fine said he attended Cyfarthfa Grammar School. He was just one of two Jewish pupils at the school and he looks back on his experience with fondness.

He said: "As a Rabbi, when I say I never went to a Jewish school, people look at me with a sympathetic eye. I say I never considered it a disadvantage. The staff in schools were generally religious. They were chapel-going and you felt a wave of respect for somebody who is an observant Jew."

"I remember, for instance, that there was a teacher explaining to the class what the Jewish sabbath was. I never felt in any way a minority or shunned and absolutely no anti-Semitism at all

– quite the contrary. I was a bit of a curiosity. I look back with lots of affection on those years."

Someone else who affectionately recalls the synagogue and Jewish community in Merthyr Tydfil is Adrian Jacobs. Adrian is the grandson of the late Benjamin Hamilton, the last secretary and organiser of services at the Merthyr Hebrew Congregation. He was also a solicitor and coroner who oversaw the inquests of the 144 children and adults who died during the Aberfan disaster in 1966.

Although he lived in Cardiff, Mr Jacobs regularly visited Merthyr and the synagogue while he grew up. He said his grandad coordinated services right up until it was no longer possible to source a minimum of 10 Jewish men required to attend a traditional service.

The 61-year-old said: "My grandad's brother [Isaac] was the president and he was the secretary. They both lived here and I always remember coming to visit them and the synagogue. My grandad continued at the services until they could no longer get 10 people for a service. For the High Holy days, they would arrange it in advance and people would come down from London. Those were the last services they ever had here. They would arrange it in advance with old members until there was literally nobody left. My grandad was the last person to pray here."

Like Rabbi Fine, Mr Jacobs came down for the day from London and last entered the former synagogue more than 20 years ago. Walking inside it in its current state was a shock for him.

He said: "I come to Merthyr once a year to visit my grandparents' and great grandparents' graves at Cefn Coed. We always make an effort to drive past the synagogue. It's the first time I've been in it in more than 20 years. It's very different to what it used to look like.

"It was terrible walking in. It's very, very sad that it's come to this, but I'm happy that it's still here. The future plans are really fantastic. The last time I came here it was still actually intact – the furniture was still there. My late mother arranged for all the furniture to be taken up to Gateshead where there is a Talmudical college and they used it there for a while."

The planned heritage centre at the former synagogue will present the more than 250-year history, traditions and culture of the Welsh Jewish community while also addressing contemporary issues around religious and ethnic diversity, promoting inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue while combating ignorance and prejudice.

The project has a dedicated website which indicates the 47 advisors and 16 partner agencies. Gerald Jones MP and Dawn Bowden MS are the project's special ambassadors and broadcaster Huw Edwards recently joined as a patron alongside David Baddiel and Sir Michael Moritz.

The future heritage centre aims to cover a series of themes including local history, Welsh history, Judaism, the holocaust and inter-cultural dialogue. Work is due to start soon.

Michael Mail, the foundation's chief executive, stated: "Merthyr Tydfil synagogue represents shared heritage – it is a special Jewish story and a special Welsh story.

"Through this crucial financial support, we hope to be able to save a listed building at risk, the most important Jewish heritage site in Wales, and provide a solution that will secure its future and make an important contribution to Merthyr and Wales as a whole."

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