

# Aberdare Town - Heritage and Forgotten Buildings Walk - Self Guide

## Starting at St. Elvan's Church.

**St. Elvan's** is at the centre of the town, its spire rises to 180 feet and is regarded as the "Cathedral of the Valleys". Completed in 1852 its interior contains many Victorian stained-glass windows, finely carved fittings and an impressive war memorial. (*Visit tour inside*) Leaving St Elvan's walk to High Street.

## Walk along High Street.



### Leave St Elvan's churchyard and walk to the corner with High Street.

Today, High Street hardly exists, except as a thoroughfare. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century it was one of the most important streets in Aberdare connecting the old village centre around the Parish Church to the old parish road that ran through Wind Street and the main route down the valley.

The car park besides us was once the site of the **Rex Cinema**, opened on

10<sup>th</sup> April 1939 by W.E. Willis who named the cinema after his son Rex Willis, the Welsh International Rugby Union fly half. The Cinema decorated in Art Deco style was one of the finest in South Wales with seating for 1250 and was equipped with a rare Compton Theatrone organ that rose on a lift from below the stage. The



Theatrone was first of its kind in Wales one of only a dozen built before the war.



At its opening the organ was played by Max Bruce the first organist at the Tower Ballroom, Blackpool in 1929 before Reginald Dixon. The cinema finally closed on 6th July 1983. In 1985 the Welsh Language film 'Coming up Roses' was filmed there. It was demolished in the 1990.



### Continue to walk west along High Street,

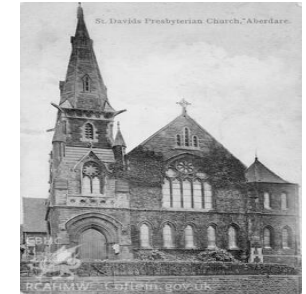
we pass a splendid building that was once the town's main **General Post Office** built in 1925 from Forest of Dean stone. Previously it was the site of the original Boot Hotel. It is now a Wetherspoons pub bearing the name **Ieuan ap Iago** (the bardic name for Evan James). It was however supposed to be named after his son James James, composer of the Welsh National Anthem who we would normally associate with Pontypridd where he and his

father both lived and worked. James James did however move to Aberdare in later life, living at 6 Hawthorne Terrace Aberdare, he died in 1902 and is buried at Aberdare Cemetery. There is a small monument at the corner of High Street.

The building next door to Wetherspoons was

## **St. David's Presbyterian Chapel.**

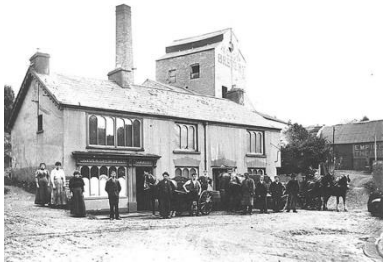
Built in 1877 and rebuilt in 1899 for English Presbyterians following a split from Trinity Chapel, with seating for 400. It once had a splendid 85ft steeple and was designed by W. Douglas Blessley, (who also designed the Prince of Wales theatre and Great Western Hotel in Cardiff). It closed in 1952 and the steeple taken down in 1960. It has gone through several changes of use over the years, it was once the main Aberdare Telephone Exchange, a mental health unit and now a gym, the front elevation however remains largely unaltered.



### Progress down High Street

The adjoining roadway leads to the Rock grounds. The present building of 1938 was a Clinic, then council offices and was once adjoined by the Rock outdoor Baths.

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The grounds are named after the **Rock Brewery** which stood on the site. It was one of several breweries throughout the town. A brewery stood on the site from around 1850 and by 1871 it had 19 tied public houses across the town. When it was sold to Allsopp's in 1921 it had over 40.

In the 1890s the brewery owners laid out recreation grounds to the right of the building to include a circus and what became the long-forgotten **Empire Theatre**.

Living pictures were first seen in Aberdare here in September 1896 and exhibited at the through the new Harvard's Cinematograph. The following year an audience watched animated pictures of Queen Victoria's Diamond jubilee procession.



**As we continue our walk** the area to the right of the BT Exchange was once the Glandare Woollen mill. It is likely it stood over an uncovered River Dare, manufacturing Welsh Flannels with a front onto 28 Canon Street. It was sold to Peter Halewood and became **Halewood's Boot & Shoe factory** in 1895 it was one of the

largest makers of footwear, with branches throughout South Wales and with many branches in the valley, it closed in the 1920s.

## Enter Library Square.

**Continue to walk through Library Square** passing the new Library built in 1962. This area was originally the oldest inhabited part of Aberdare and the original village and village green (Green Fach) in 1841 Green Fach was the most densely populated part of Aberdare.

Passing the large building that is now Bradley's but which was the once the original market house and our Town Hall, and past **Green Street English Wesleyan Methodist chapel** built in 1859 enter through the car park to St John the Baptist parish church.



**St John the Baptist** is the original Parish Church of Aberdare and was estimated to be built in 1189 and is of Norman design, making it the oldest building in Aberdare by some 600 years. The church as it stands today is not radically altered from that of the original medieval building. The church would have

been the focal point of the old village. Please visit the church and see a few original architectural features that remain, such as the Sutton stone doorway in the vestry, which was the original entrance and the octagonal font carved in Sutton stone.

**The graveyard** is of particular interest as you will find the graves of prominent families of the industrial age such as the Wayne family who owned Gadlys Ironworks, the Morgan family of Gadlys, the Roberts family after which Robertstown was named, David Davis of Blaengwawr after which Davistown was named. The oldest recorded gravestone bears the date of 1688. New burials ceased in 1864.

There are two gravestones to point out. To the west of the entrance is the grave of Gwenllian (Rhys-Jones) first wife of Caradog (1879), his father John Jones (1847) and his grandparents. Caradog himself is buried at Aberdare Cemetery. The other gravestone to note is that of Philip Rees, builder of the town from Graig House, Monk Street, who built many fine buildings in the town including St Mair's Church and the Temperance Hall.

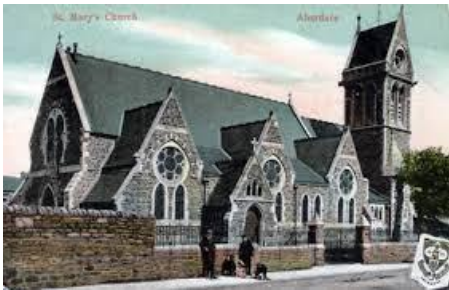
On the South Wall of the church is a sundial from 1760, which was vandalised in the 1930's

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Standing outside the main church entrance and looking up the West wall to the bellcote the left-hand bell is the ancient “**Matthew Bell**”, the inscription on the bell shows it was presented as a gift by William Matthew of the Aberaman estate in 1637 and is one of the oldest artefacts in the town. The bell was cast by John Palmer of Gloucester.

There is some mystery however as old photos of the Church show only one bell in the righthand bellcote, it is uncertain what happened to the other bell. Today we see two bells, the Matthew bell being moved to the left-hand side and the bell from St John the Evangelist, Roberstown moved to the righthand side in the 1980's and used today.

Walk through the churchyard to the North entrance glancing at the south wall you will see the old metal remains of the horse ties.



At the North entrance cast your gaze across the road from the North Entrance to Cynon Linc this is where the once beautiful church of **St Mary the Virgin, commonly known as St Mair.**

It was for the Welsh speaking congregation church in 1864 but dwindling numbers and financial pressures saw it close and sold to

Aberdare District Council in 1963 for £2500 and demolished in 1965. Many of the fittings and stained-glass windows were saved and transferred to St Mathew's and St Elvan's.

The church was designed by London architect Arthur W Bloomfield, who was assisted by his junior architect the famous novelist Thomas Hardy. It is said that Hardy visited Aberdare on a regular basis to oversee the work stayed in Monk Street, probably with Philip Rees of Graig House during its building.

## Return to Canon Street.

Canon Street represents the formal development on land owned by the Diocese of Gloucester and laid out in 1854. We look across to the impressive building on the corner which is the

**Constitutional Club** opened in 1894 on land purchased by W T Lewis and became an important place of entertainment for the town. It once housed an Edwardian Music Hall **the Palace**

**Theatre of Varieties (1909)** Later re-named the **New Empire Theatre and Cinema**. In later years it became GoGo's disco and then a club



Walking down along Canon Street the stone building on the right is the Masonic Hall and on the left is Trinity Presbyterian Chapel opened in 1867. We turn our attention to the large convenience store and flats. This was once the now demolished and forgotten **Temperance**

**Hall** built in 1858 by Aberdare builder Philip Rees and funded to the cost of £3000 by the Total Abstinence Society. It served as the town's main public hall and theatre with seating for 1200 for many years. It was later named the New Theatre and **Hippodrome.**



By 1918 it had new owners and was re-named the **Palladium Cinema**. By the late 1920s it was given a more modern look before closing in the early 1970s to become a bingo hall. The new building has reverted to its appearance as the Temperance Hall.



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Walk to the junction with Whitcombe Street the outfitters that was once the Queens Hotel (1861-1923).

## Walk along Whitcombe Street

Walk along Whitcombe Street to junction with Seymour Street, entering Maesydre the names reflect the previous ownership of the land by Dean and Chapter of Gloucester. Stopping at the junction with Seymour Street where the block of flats now stands was the old



### Memorial Hall.

The Memorial Hall and church club was a memorial to the Reverend Richard Bowen Jenkins, Vicar of Aberdare and was opened on the 29 June 1895 and paid for by public subscription of £3,296, the building was beautifully decorated with terra cotta mouldings

with two entrances. The church club contained a reading room, card rooms and Billiard room, splendid gymnasium. The Club was also the first home of the Aberdare Public Library opening in 1904. Throughout the 1950's and 1960s it was a dance hall and club. It was demolished in 1988.

## Return to Canon Street and walk to Market Street.

Retrace your steps back to Canon Street and walk to Market Street

While walking through Canon Street you'll pass by the Lloyds Bank building which was originally the old Caradog Arms. It had close connections with St Eln's through the then the **Old Brecon and Wilkins Bank**, managers Leonard Acomb became parish warden and Thomas Bowes Powell donated the brass eagle lectern seen at St. Elvan's, before continuing to walk to Market Street.

## Market Street

**Market Street** was the site of the original market hall complex built in 1853, the



very first National Eisteddfod of the modern era took place there.

What is now the car park at the side of the Market Hall

was throughout the nineteenth century a cattle yard and was also the venue for travelling theatres and shows. It was here that film pioneer **William**

**Haggar** who toured

South Wales with a portable bioscope in 1904 set up a permanent booth there (Haggar's Royal Electric Bioscope and later Coliseum). In 1914 he purchased the freehold of the drill hall opposite his market yard pitch in order to build a purpose-built cinema, **The Kosy**



**Kinema** (now the Betting Shop) a handsome building with folding seats for 700. The cinema was taken over by Willis in 1933 and renamed the Cosy Cinema, it was badly damaged by fire in June 1946 and forced to close and never rebuilt

Before leaving market street take a quick look at another fine building built in a classical style in 1914 as the new **Magistrates Court**, the date of the building is shown as Roman numerals.

**Return to Cardiff Street** Cardiff Street lay on Bute land and was probably established as a new turnpike route into the town and was probably built to supersede the old parish road through Wind Street.

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## Cardiff Street

### Walk East to the junction with Cross Street stopping near Argos



Just to the left of the Copper Kettle shop was the **Aberdare Electric Cinema**, the first permanent purpose-built picture house opened in 1912, three years before Haggar's cinemas, and with seats for 900 operated by V W Rowe. It was famous for its tiled frontage that ran longitudinally along Cardiff Street. Many local people used to say that it looked more like a swimming bath than a cinema. It was equipped in the 1930's when a Picturetone system was installed. It closed in around 1959 and demolished. It was replaced by the Coop food store and Madeley's DIY.

As we look across the road of Cardiff Street with Cross Street was the old **National School**. The National School for Boys and Girls was built in around 1829 through *The National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in Principles of the Established Church (1811)* by Dr Andrew Bell. Pupils in the National School were taught the Church Catechism and Creeds, with children expected in Church on Sundays. The land was donated by the Marquis of Bute. In 1847 the school had 100 boys and 60 girls. In 1975 the school closed and moved to the Mardy School to become Town Church.



Next door to the school is the now closed HSBC bank. It was opened in January 1858 by **The West of England and South Wales District Banking Company**. By 1880 The West of England Bank had been replaced by the National Bank of Wales later the Midland.

### Retrace our steps along Cardiff Street back to Victoria Square



As we walk back to Victoria Square we would pass along where the **Aberdare co-operative society flagship store** had stood in Cardiff Street since 1869. Fire destroyed the original store in 1919. The store was rebuilt in the 1930s occupying the corner position. The store was extended and completely modernised again in 1965 it once dominated the town centre scene and sold everything from furniture to hardware. It was demolished in 1995.

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## Walk to Victoria Square

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## Victoria Square.

The area of Victoria square was formerly known as Commercial Place and was developed on Bute Estate land. It was renamed as part of the Queen Victoria Jubilee celebrations



Where the Cenotaph now stands once stood the **Jubilee Fountain**, it was donated by W T Lewis to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. The fountain was officially dedicated on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1897.

The cast iron structure manufactured by Coalbrookdale iron company. It was probably destroyed during the second World war as raw material for the war effort.

## Walk to the top of Victoria Square



The square, which still retains its Victorian character, was dominated at each end by the former **Boot and Black Lion Hotels**. The earliest Black Lion was opened in 1811 as an old coaching inn on the old parish road, it housed the town's first mail office and was a posting house in 1828 and a Brewery.

As we return to St Elvan's we see the Square has been dominated by the statue of **Caradog** (Griffith Rhys Jones), 1920 by Sir William Goscombe John, to celebrate the famous South Wales Choral win at Crystal Palace in 1872 and 1873.

## Return to St Elvan's to conclude the walk and visit Spires Coffee shop

## List of Forgotten Buildings

1. Rex Cinema
2. Old General Post Office
3. St David's Chapel
4. Rock Brewery
5. Empire Theatre
6. Halewoods Boot Factory
7. Matthew Bell, St John's church
8. St Mair's Church
9. Constitutional Club, Palace of Varieties
10. Temperance Hall and Palladium
11. Memorial Hall
12. Kosy Kinema Cinema
13. Aberdare Electric Cinema
14. National School
15. Aberdare Co-operative
16. Old West of England Bank
17. Jubilee Fountain
18. Black Lion Hotel