

There are very few chapels of its quality left

It is rare to get the opportunity to visit somewhere after an interval of half a century. Last week I stepped through the doors of the chapel in Heol Dwr (Water Street) for the first time since I was a young boy.

Isn't it strange how the memory retains certain things, twists others, and discards even more? My recollection of the semi-circular layout was remarkably accurate, but the interior was much more compact than I had expected. I was there because Heol Dwr - one of the oldest nonconformist causes in Wales - is facing closure.

I was warmly welcomed by Marina Thomas and Molly Thomas, the two elders who have shouldered so much of the burden of keeping Heol Dwr open in a very challenging climate.

Carmarthen's largest chapel is on the brink of closure with a dwindling congregation and running costs proving too costly. The Journal highlighted the struggle of the Heol Dwr (Water Street) chapel earlier this summer. Now Carmarthenshire-born BBC broadcaster, presenter and journalist HUW EDWARDS has visited the chapel and spoken to those trying to save it. Here he writes for the Journal about the chapel and the importance it holds for Carmarthen.

"They have done a simply wonderful job but they are now facing the possible closure of the cause they love. 'Ahi', I hear you say, 'what a sad thing, but there you are, nothing we can do, it's a sign of the times.' Well, maybe. And in a town where the historic Guildhall - one of the most historically significant buildings in South Wales - recently have been sold into private hands, I suppose anything might be possible. The Guildhall was rescued at the last minute, so let's be grateful. But the episode should have sounded a very loud alarm bell throughout the county. When I recently raised the subject of Heol Dwr chapel on



social media, the message seemed to be that there are far too many chapels on the verge of closure and it is unrealistic to do anything about them. Wrong. We have to prioritise ruthlessly. Put simply, there is a small category of buildings and monuments whose importance is exceptional. There will, inevitably, be some excited debate about which ones make the grade, but we are talking about heritage assets which must be protected at all costs.

It is then for local authorities, public bodies, charities, heritage and denominational groups, and yes - local communities, to decide on a sustainable way ahead. If the will is there, it can be done.

There are many interesting Nonconformist chapels in the Carmarthen area: the list of those of exceptional historical or architectural significance

would have to include George Morgan's magnificent Baptist chapel in Llammas Street, Heol Awst Independent chapel, and Heol Dwr itself.

The process of drawing up a local list will involve some very painful decisions, but it is unavoidable unless we are to find ourselves in years to come having lost some of our treasures. And in the absence of a credibly practical national strategy, it must be down to local authorities and communities to take action to protect the things they value.

There are few towns in Wales able to boast a cultural heritage as rich as Carmarthen's, which is hardly surprising when we consider that the Romans built a fort here in around AD 75, the Franciscans had their friary on Llammas Street in the 13th century, and the borough was formally defined in 1546, becoming the most populous

borough in Wales before the coalfields drew people away in the 19th century. Today, Carmarthen is back in business as the administrative heart of the entire county.

The remarkable growth of Nonconformist worship is an integral part of the story of Carmarthen. The congregation of Heol Dwr came together in the 1740s, led by Peter Williams (who produced the first Bible printed in Wales), and the current building dates from 1819. The three-manual Blinns organ was added in 1922 in memory of those chapel members who served in the First World War.

Have you ever been inside? It's worth a look, believe me. The exterior is rather unprepossessing (the members will not mind my saying that!) but the interior is a gem. The narrow pews, with their individual doors and hinged