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The John Hughes Memorial Chapel

John Hughes, the famous Methodist minister, preached and lived at the Chapel until his death in 1854. Between 1800 and 1805 Ann Griffiths, the famous hymn writer, attended the chapel at Pontrobert, and it was John's wife, Ruth, who remembered Ann's hymns for her husband to write down after her death. John and Ruth Hughes are buried in the graveyard opposite the chapel.



John Hughes



John Hughes was born in 1775 at Y Figyn in the parish of Llanfihangel-yng-Ngwynfa. He became a weaver but later kept a day school. In 1800 he came to Pontrobert to teach at the school building that was to become the chapel. In 1814 he was ordained as a Methodist minister and the building

became a chapel. He lived in the cottage adjoining the chapel with his wife Ruth and six daughters.

Under his ministry, the chapel became a centre of Methodist revivalist activity in the area and throughout Wales. In the later years of his ministry he suffered from ill health, and so an opening was created in the partition between his bedroom and the chapel so that he could preach to his congregation. Today we can see where the opening was made as it is blocked in by a timber panel in the partition wall. He died in 1854.

Timber panel



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John Hughes and Ann Griffiths

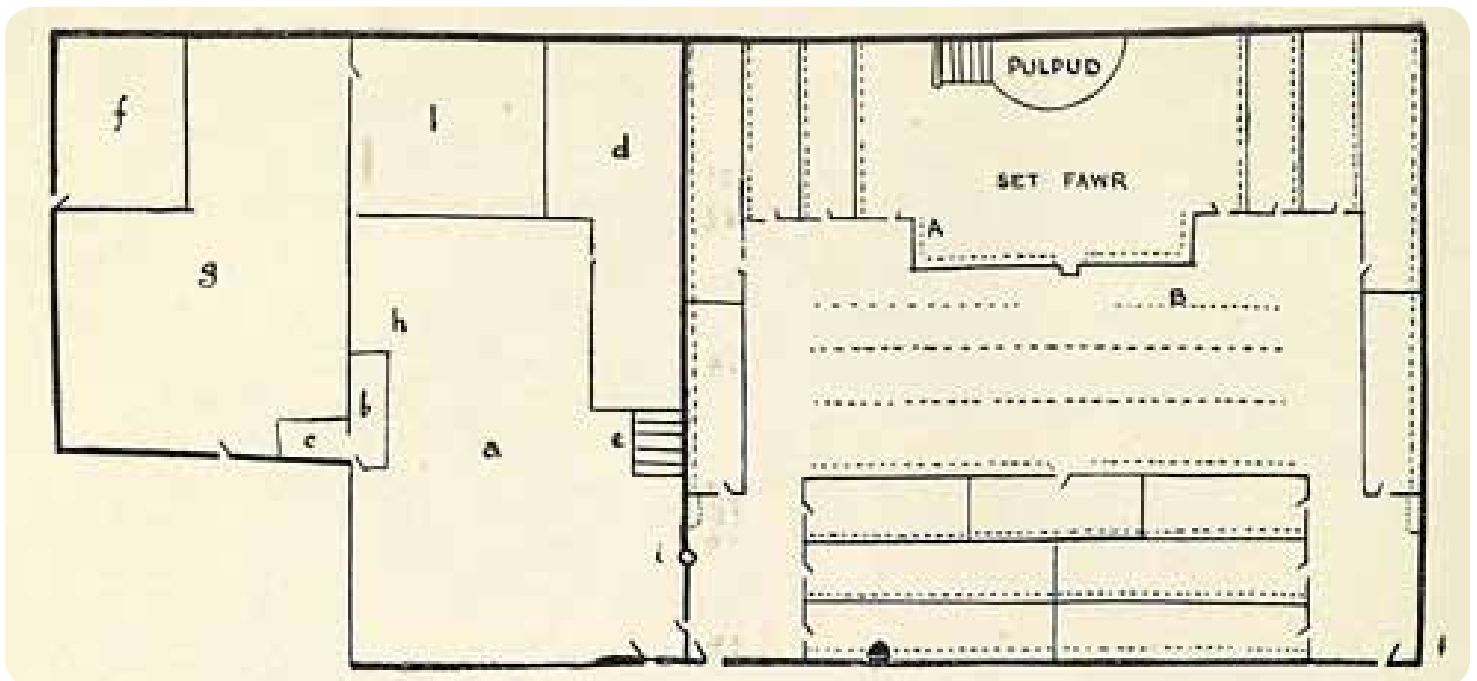
John Hughes and his wife Ruth played a crucial part in recording the hymns of Ann Griffiths. Ruth was a servant at Ann's home at Dolwar Fach in Llanfihangel-yng-Ngwynfa before her marriage to John Hughes in 1805. Ann began attending the chapel at Pontrobert in 1800 and John Hughes became her friend and spiritual counsellor.

After Ann's death in 1805, Ruth urged John Hughes to write Ann's poems down, as Ruth was unable to write. He did so, and published the first volume of her work in 1806. In 1846 he published a memoir of Ann Griffiths, which is considered the single most important source we have for her life and character. His writings are now held at the National Library of Wales. Ann is buried in the churchyard at Llanfihangel-yng-Ngwynfa.

The building

The chapel was built in 1800 as a meeting place for the Calvinistic Methodists. Until 1811, Welsh Calvinist Methodism was officially a movement within the established church, centred round local groups called *seiat* (*seiat* is the singular form). They would meet to discuss and examine their religious beliefs and experiences, and from these meetings a network of monthly and quarterly associations emerged. In the 1790's, the area around Llanfihangel-yng-Ngwynfa experienced a powerful religious revival, and in 1798 Pontrobert was selected as the best place to establish a *seiat*, as it was a more central and populated location. The chapel was completed in 1800, but closed eleven years after the death of John Hughes in 1854, and a new Methodist chapel was built in the centre of the village.

Floor plan of the Old Chapel, Pontrobert (from Cymru 1906)



The plan of the chapel is on the right, and the plan of the house and outbuildings is on the left. The dotted lines represent benches.

- A: John Hughes' place in the 'big seat' (*sêt fawr*);
- B: his place in the *seiat*.
- a: John Hughes' kitchen;
- b: the fireplace;
- c: fireplace oven;
- d: the pantry;
- e: the stairs to the loft;

- h: John Hughes' chair in the corner near the fire;
- i: round hole in the chapel wall, to enable those in the house to hear.
- f: John Hughes' cowshed;
- g: the chapel's stable;
- l: stable for the preachers' horses.

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The chapel remained empty until 1927 when it was sold to a local wheelwright who used it to accommodate his carts. Many items from the time the building was a wheelwright's remain in the chapel today. The front elevation of the chapel had double doors inserted to allow access to the carts. At the time of the sale, the chapel interior was in a state of dereliction.



The John Hughes Chapel around 1920



The neglected interior and the John Hughes pulpit before it was repaired. A clause in the deeds prevented its removal.

The chapel today

The fabric of the building continued to decay and by 1983 an appeal was launched to raise the necessary funds to buy the building from the descendants of the wheelwright in order to save it. It took eleven years to raise the money and in April 1995 the chapel was reopened as a centre for Christian unity and pilgrimage, with the John Hughes pulpit sensitively restored as a worthy link with the past.



The restored John Hughes pulpit is the focus of the interior. A covenant states that it must remain in-situ.



In 2003, children from Pontrobert school completed a collage for the National Eisteddfod held near the village. It commemorates the connection of John and Ruth Hughes and Ann Griffiths with Pontrobert. The words of Ann Griffiths are woven through the trellis work along the bottom.

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A peace garden has been created to the rear of the centre, as a place of quiet contemplation.



Churchyard

A small graveyard opposite the chapel contains the graves of and a memorial to John and Ruth Hughes.



Centre for Christian Unity and Renewal

Today the chapel is part of a network of pilgrimage sites in operation across Wales which use ancient churches and chapels as places of healing and reconciliation. Daily prayers are said throughout the year and a Plygain (traditional Welsh carol service) takes place at 6am on Christmas morning. Ann Griffiths Day (August 12th) is celebrated in various ways. The Centre is open to anyone for retreat and prayer. Further information is available from the custodian, Nia Rhosier, on 01938 500631.