

## Neath Quaker Meeting House

On the North boundary of Neath Castle is a building of late Georgian style - Neath Quaker Meeting House. It is one of Neath's most interesting buildings, because it is one of the very few remaining Meeting Houses erected by the Quakers in this country still standing and in regular use.

One Neath Quaker, Thomas Roberts, kept an ironmonger's shop on the site that is now the *Working Men's Social Club*. In 1770, he left a legacy of £40 to the Quaker cause in Neath and Swansea.

Another leading Friend to emerge in Neath was Evan Rees, who had joined Thomas Roberts in the ironmongery business. He was held in the highest esteem in all Quaker circles in the county. Minutes of all Meetings of the Society were carefully recorded, and 1759 Quakers were strong enough to hold a *Yearly Meeting for Wales* in Neath in which all Quakers in Wales were represented. The Society in Neath continued to grow and Richard Harford, ironmaster and clerk of the *Yearly Meetings for Wales*, expressed his pleasure at this in a letter to Evan Rees referring to the new influx of members from Cornwall in 1792. Cornwall had been a stronghold of Quakerism since the first missionary efforts of George Fox. Sometime before 1790, copper ore merchants and tin smelters became part of the industrial scene there and in 1791, George Croker Fox founded an iron foundry near Falmouth next to the tin melting shop owned by him. In 1792, the company decided to build a second foundry at Neath where there were supplies of coal and iron ore and local skilled labour.

An existing iron works on the banks of the River Neath, owned by Richard Parsons, was taken over. Two furnaces were established in 1793, powered by a Boulton Watts double steam engine. The first iron master at Neath Abbey was William Wood. Coal came from mines in the vicinity and iron ore from Glynneath.

In 1800, Peter Price took over from William Wood and he had extensive experience, in Pennsylvania and Maryland, of furnace construction. In 1781, he married Anna, daughter of Samuel Tregelles of Falmouth, and joined the Fox Company in Neath Abbey where an experienced man was needed. Large-scale production of engines began in 1806 and William Kirkhouse, the Cadoxton engineer sunk a deep coal pit for the Quaker company.

During his stay in America, Peter Price had met William Dillwyn, the Pennsylvanian Quaker, whose ancestors had emigrated from Brecon during the Restoration persecution. He later settled down in Swansea where the Dillwyn family became prominent in industrial and political activities.

The Society of Friends in Neath received new blood from the Cornish Quaker industrialists and in 1799 at a Half-Yearling Meeting, it was decided to appoint trustees to prepare deeds for the conveyance of land to the Society to build a new Meeting House with a burial ground. The land was part of the Castle grounds and was donated by Molly Leigh, the widow of Sir Robert Mackworth and now the wife of Capel Hanbury Leigh, the Pontypool industrialist of Quaker family background. Molly Leigh herself came from Quaker stock, being the daughter of Nathaniel Miers, the proprietor of a tinsplate works.

The new Meeting House was completed in 1800.