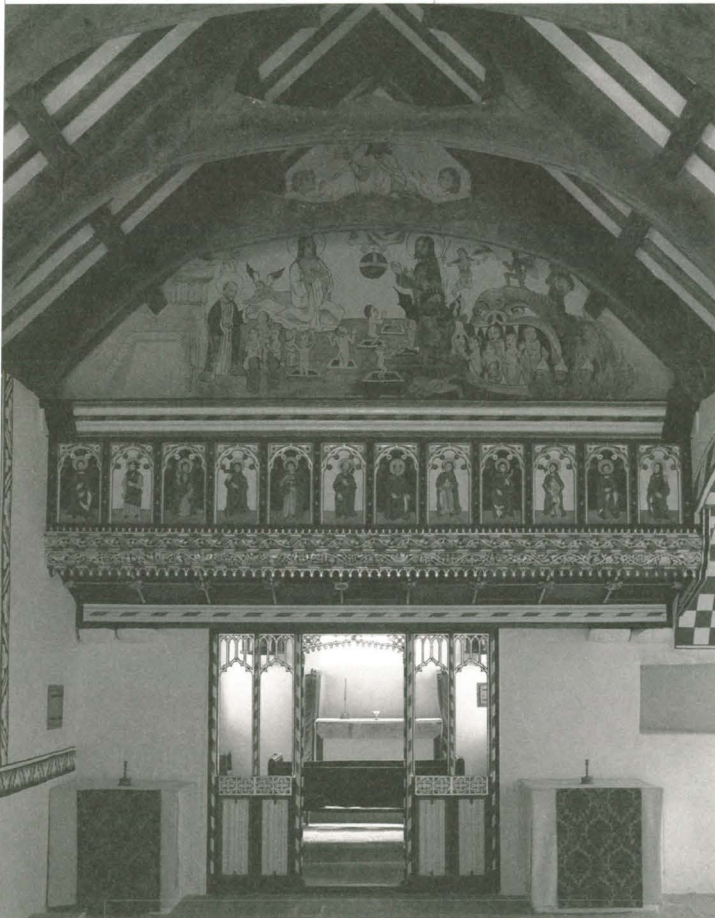


ST. TEILO'S CHURCH

by Gerallt D. Nash



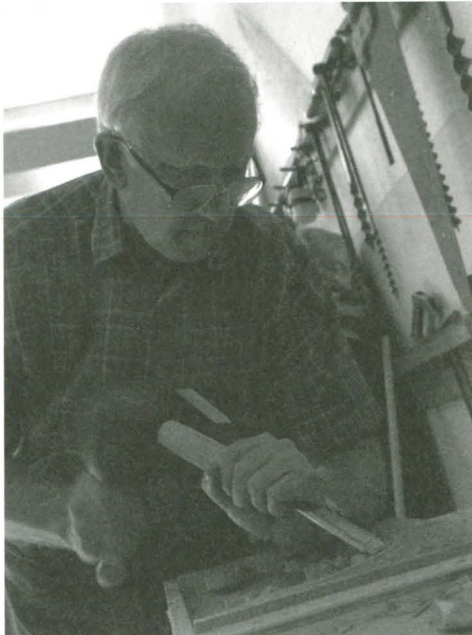
(Above) The rood screen, ornately carved by master carpenter Ray Smith, is one of the highlights of St. Teilo's Church. Photo courtesy of St. Fagans: National History Museum

(Right) The small medieval church of St. Teilo's in South Wales was re-erected at St. Fagans: National History Museum. Photo courtesy of St. Fagans: National History Museum

The open-air St. Fagans: National History Museum, near Cardiff, first opened its doors to the public in 1948. It has earned an international reputation for rescuing threatened historical buildings, which it carefully dismantles and moves to its grounds. There the structures are rebuilt and painstakingly refurbished to their past appearance. To date, the Museum has moved and saved more than forty buildings, ranging in date and type from medieval timber-framed farmhouses to a late-1940s aluminium prefabricated bungalow. One of its most prized pieces, however, is the small medieval church of St. Teilo's from South Wales.

Although the building had not been used as a parish church since 1850, services continued to be held there two or three times a year until 1970. Thereafter, it was abandoned. St. Teilo's suffered from vandalism and neglect until 1984 when church officials offered it to the Museum. Members of the Museum's specialist Historic Buildings Unit, which has a combined experience of more than sixty years, decided to restore the building to its pre-Reformation appearance from about 1530, when it would have been a Catholic church.





Ray Smith, master carpenter and wood carver, works on the rood screen he re-created for St. Teilo's Church. Smith received an Order of the British Empire, Member (MBE) award in 2009 for his outstanding work. Photo courtesy of St. Fagans: National History Museum

This task called for the expertise of master craftsmen who could deftly wield a combination of ancient methods and the latest technical innovations. Skilled masons and carpenters had to be able to weave replacement Welsh oak and new lime mortar and plaster in with the original stone and 500-year old oak timbers. But before they could even start, the restorers needed to figure out how to control the humidity levels inside the building. Unregulated, the air could become either too moist—causing the old timbers to become too damp and moldy—or too dry, in which case the new timbers and plasterwork would shrink and crack. The solution? An ingenious under-floor heating system powered by a ground source heat pump. This strategy helped keep humidity levels in check and also maintained comfortable working conditions during the winter.

The floor itself was specially constructed with layers of geotextiles and a lime-based concrete called “limecrete” (supplied by Ty Mawr Lime Ltd.). The building crew then laid the heating pipes onto this base and covered them with lime screed (hydraulic lime blended with recycled glass) and flagstones. This elegant solution blends technologies of the past and present to create a floor that keeps visitors and staff warm in cold weather.

Many of the church's original features had been lost over the years, particularly carvings, statuary, and paintwork that were destroyed or concealed as part of the Protestant reaction to Catholic imagery. One such item was the ornately carved rood screen, which divides the nave and congregation of the church from the chancel and high altar. Traditionally above the screen would have stood a carving of Christ on the cross. (“Rood” is the old English word for the crucifix.)

The Museum's longtime head carpenter, Ray Smith, readily rose to the challenge of recreating this screen. Ray served a five-year apprenticeship with a country carpenter and undertaker in Mid Wales before moving to a larger firm of builders and carpenters working along the Welsh/

English border. He joined the staff of the Museum in 1980, and for the next twenty-eight years worked on the re-erection and maintenance of historic buildings. In 2003, at age fifty-nine, he taught himself how to carve the intricately worked moldings and period details typical of medieval church carpentry. He also travelled extensively, studying examples of surviving medieval screens in South East, Mid, and North Wales, as well as in Herefordshire and North Devon in England.

Ray used these experiences to help him design and carve the new rood screen. It features two ornately carved “vine trails” along the front, as well as twelve arcaded panels on the loft above, onto which are painted depictions of the twelve apostles. This key design element both dominates and complements the church's medieval interior.

And so, through an innovative combination of traditional and contemporary skills, thorough research, and painstaking attention to detail, St. Teilo's church was rebuilt. Other aspects of the restoration, from carved statues to newly discovered remarkable wall paintings, were skillfully recreated as well. The finished building gives visitors, for the first time since the Reformation, a chance to step inside a medieval painted church and fully experience its beauty and grace.

Gerallt D. Nash is a native of St. Davids in West Wales and graduate of the Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University. He is currently senior curator of historic buildings at St. Fagans: National History Museum, specializing in traditional buildings and building techniques.