

LLANELLY CHURCH



This church of Llanelly is named for Elli, its founder. There is no direct legend locally about this founder, or anything directly connected to it, so any identification is speculative.

There are two main candidates; Elli of Llancarfan, and Elli daughter of Brychan. The former is attested to the legends of St Cadoc, or Cattwg, but the latter is elusive. Elli of Llancarfan is always spelt in this way, whereas Elli daughter of Brychan is spelt variously Ellyw, Elyw, Elieu and possibly Ellynor, Ellyned. Theophilus Jones records

this dedication, considering it erroneous, and favours the view that it is an abbreviation of Ellynedd, or Eluned who is well known; i.e. that the parish was originally called Llanellynedd. Rice Rees follows this in his description of the *'Primitive Saints'*, also unaware of any other possible identity for Elli. There is a church unquestionably dedicated to Ellyw (Llanelieu) near Talgarth, and according to legend, it marks the place where she was beheaded by a rejected lover.

Llanelly has always been a daughter church to Llangattock, and thus might otherwise refer to the relationship between Elli as protégée of Cadoc (there is of course another church founded by Elli; Llanelli in Carmarthenshire). The oldest bell and two stained glass windows all bear witness to Elli, Abbot of Llancarfan, being understood as founder.

The situation of the *clas*, without an obvious village community, appears more like a hermitage like that of Patricio by Forest Coal Pits rather than a village church like Llangattock. Both Llangenny and Llanelly are described by Jones as parochial chapels, both subject to Llangattock. He further notes that in 1608 Richard Lloyd was presented by the king, under the seal of the chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, to the vicarage of Llanelly; but by 1694, the vicar, James Valent (Valentine) was no longer resident in the parish.

The ancient churchyard is within the magnificent circle of yews, from which according to legend, the Gwent bowmen cut their yews for Agincourt. These yews were probably planted when the present Church was built, between 1175 and 1250, and are therefore at least 800 years old. It might be noted that they follow the line of the original churchyard, the path outside the eastern yews being the old boundary. The churchyard was first added to immediately adjacently, and then by plots donated across the road by Sir Joseph Russell Bailey (Baronet; 1st Lord Glanusk), and his younger brother, Crawshay Bailey whose signed names are upon the deeds of the donations.

Opposite the porch is the old preaching cross which is probably of the same age. The damaged cross which caps it today is not the original, but may have been once on top of the Church. The shaft

was also considerably taller, square at the base then octagonal up to the cross.

There were two building periods in its history; to the first, 1175-1250, belong the font, the south aisle and the tower. The north aisle was added in 1626, possibly through the influx of wealth following the foundation of the Clydach Iron Works.

The tower, of early English style, is of the fortified type, of which many specimens remain along the Welsh border. By looking at the windows inside, some idea of the width and massive strength of the walls can be gained.

Outside, in the south wall, opposite the chancel arch may be seen the low priest's door of early 13th century work.

On the right of the east window in the north aisle you will see a Piscina in good order. Here was evidently at one time a private Chapel.

Under the St Elli window is an old communion table dated 1624. The present altar is reputed to have been taken out of the cellar of Aberclydach House, perhaps donated by Edward Lewis otherwise noted as a member of the local gentry and benefactor of the church. It is the older of the two and a magnificent specimen of Elizabethan work. Around 1908 local craftsmen, the Rackham brothers, wheelwrights and millers in Gilwern whose photographs are on an old print of bell ringers taken around that time (on the wall of the belfry) repaired the table. This table was also restored in the 1980's by Chappel Conservation, Sunnybank, Maesygwartha.

The Font is without mark or lettering, dating at least from the time of the building of the Church. It is possibly older and may be Norman.

The Registers commence in 1701, noted by Theophilus Jones as being imperfect, irregular and confused. Later on, there is a record of the baptism of a distinguished parishioner, Sir Bartle Frere, 1815-1884, born at Clydach House, whose family owned the Clydach Iron Works.

He later became Governor of Cape Colony and High Commissioner of South Africa. Also of Frederick John Jane (1842) born at Pantybeiliau, later Bishop of Chester. An interesting entry is 'Ann Lewis "was bury'd" according to "ye late Act of Parliament, in sheep wool only".'

In the tower are six bells, one dated 1908, two 1715 and two 1626 (contemporaneous with the growth of the first ironworks in the Clydach gorge), but the oldest, and it is one of the oldest in Wales, dates from 1440 and was cast in Bristol by John Gosselin. It is inscribed:-

"S'CE ELLINE, THESU CAMPARA (M) SEMPER TIBI PROTIGE SANA (M)"

It might be translated "*Elinus, Saint of Jesus, ever keep thy bell safe and sound*". The Latin form *Elline* is the masculine singular vocative case, so the bell founder considered *Elline* to be male; if the benefactor to be addressed was thought to be female, it would have been written *Ellina*.

An early tombstone mentioned by Jones dates from 1636 recording the death of Jennett, wife of William Edwards. He also notes a memorial to the Morgan family, with a man and woman and ten children, seven sons and three daughters, sculpted in. On two of the tombstones may be seen the work of 17th century sculptor in a style peculiar to himself. It consists of simply rendered men and women, being distinguished from each other by the bold rendering of their costume. The inscriptions on the stones to the north and south of the table are to William and Elizabeth Parry. The hands of both are in supplicating posture. Other monuments are notable in having details of flowers and cherubic faces idiosyncratic to the area in the eighteenth century. Two are signed; one by the A (*Aaron*) *Brute* of Llanbedr, the other by *Games* of Talgarth. The *Brutes* were notable and prolific dynasty of monumental masons in the area. The same Edward Lewis of Aberclydach is commemorated by the distinctive stone monument inset with the brass plaque.

Welsh language services continued to be held here until the beginning of the 20th century; in 1713 Edward Lewis willed an

endowment of £2 3s. *per annum* given for six and four sermons in Welsh to be preached here every year, preachers to be nominated by his daughter, Elizabeth Morgan and her heirs.

In this church also ministered for some years, 1816-22, the great Welsh scholar and patriot, The Rev. Thomas Price (Carnhuanawc; he received the bardic epithet shortly after leaving the parish; it is derived from *carn – huan – awg*, meaning *ardent-man-of-the-cairn-of-the-sun*) author of the '*History of Wales*'.

More recently, after the devastation of the Great War, the village's collective memorial was built here in the Parish Church, with the commissioning and dedication of the memorial window on the north wall, inscribed with the names of the fallen. This was done to an original, modern design in 1919. The memorial was then updated after WWII, and then again more recently as more names have come to light.

We extend a warm welcome to all visitors. The Church will be open each weekend 10 am to 4 pm from May to the end of October.

(updated; summer 2014; CJB)

For more information about the saints named Elli;
W J Rees & Thomas Wakeman; 1853; *Lives of the Cambro British saints, of the fifth and immediate succeeding centuries, from ancient Welsh & Latin mss. in the British Museum and elsewhere, with English translations and explanatory notes.*

Rev Dr R D W Renn; 1976; *The Age of the Saints*, within;
David Walker (ed.); 1976; *A History of the Church in Wales*; Church in Wales Publications, Penarth, South Glamorgan.

Rice Rees (31 March 1804 – 20 May 1839; a Welsh cleric and historian.) 1836; *An Essay on the Welsh Saints or the Primitive Christians, Usually Considered to Have Been the Founders of the Churches in Wales.*

Sabine Baring-Gould & John Fisher; 1911; *The lives of the British saints; the saints of Wales and Cornwall and such Irish saints as have dedications in Britain.* Vol. III.

About the church and area:

Theophilus Jones; 1805, 1809; *History of the County of Brecknockshire*; there are three editions:

1805/9; by Theophilus Jones alone. (Two volumes). Vol.II. references here from pp. 473-84

1898; by Theophilus Jones alone. (One volume; reprint).

1909/30; including notes by Sir Joseph Russell Bailey, Bart. 1st Lord Glanusk. (Four volumes). Vol.III/IV.

About the Brute family of stonemasons:

Pitman, Liz; 2000; *Gilded Angels-The Eighteenth Century Funeral Monuments of the Brute Family of Llanbedr*; Brycheiniog, Vol. 32.

Silvester, B and Pitman, L; 1998; *Eighteenth-century stonemasons in the Black Mountains*; Church Archaeology, 2.

About the early industry of the area;

Rippin, Shirley; *The Charcoal industry of Fforest Coalpits and the Grwyne Fawr Valley*; Abergavenny Local History Society.

Life in the parish from 1816-1822:

Rev. T Price & Jane Williams; 1855; *The Literary Remains of the Rev. Thomas Price, Carnhuanawc*, Volume 2; chapter VII. pp. 61 -.

About life in the parish from 1930-1965:

Parry-Jones, D; 1975; *A Welsh Country Parson*; B T Batsford Ltd. London & Sydney.