

The ancient Parish Church of Cowbridge is Dedicated to the Holy Cross or the Holy Rood. The street which leads to it, now called Church Street, was once called Rood Street. People often hear the Church referred to as St. Mary's, and as such we see it on certain maps, but that Dedication appears to have come into use only in comparatively recent times and the old Dedication to the Holy Cross never really gave way to it.

Holy Cross is Parish Church to the town of Cowbridge. It is believed to be quite as old a Church as Llanblethian, has its own Churchwardens and Churchyard, but remains to this day a daughter Church to Llanblethian. Whoever has been Vicar of Llanblethian has also been Rector of Cowbridge. Somewhere between the years 1153 and 1183 a charter was executed by Nicholas, the then Bishop of Llandaff, conferring on the monks of Tewkesbury certain Benefices or Parishes in his Diocese, including Llanblethian with its attendant Chapelries. There is some doubt as to the identity of these "daughter Churches". One was certainly Welsh St. Donats. We would expect to find Cowbridge named as another. Instead, the others named are places much more difficult to identify. It seems that one of them was the Chapel of St. James of Llanquian. Now, part of the Church of Holy Cross is called the Llanquian Aisle. True, that aisle was only added to the Church in the year 1473, but there may have been a Chapel with an altar to St. James of Llanquian already part of the Church, and the theory is that it took the place of a Chapel at Llanquian that had earlier crumbled into ruin. It is at least reasonable to assume that Cowbridge, with its long association with Llanblethian and Welsh St. Donats, was serving its community as long ago as the others, and was, therefore, involved in the early transfer to Tewkesbury Abbey. At the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1537 the privilege of appointing a Vicar for Llanblethian and, of course, Cowbridge, passed from the monks of Tewkesbury to the Dean and Chapter of Gloucester, who continued to exercise their authority until comparatively very recent times. Now, since the Disestablishment of the Church in Wales the gift of the Living has passed to the Church in Wales.

We are indebted to researchers and scholars for the names of a long list of Clergy who have served this Parish and its Parish Church. There are many gaps which are never likely now to be filled, but it seems the name of the Vicar of Llanblethian for 1208 is known - Thomas, Vic. de Llanblethian et Decanus. He was followed in 1217 by Magister Radulph Maelog, and in 1226 by a second Thomas. Some of these Vicars have not had it easy. Eustace, a monk who was sent from Tewkesbury Abbey in 1231, was harshly used by the Llanblethian worshippers who resented being given to the Abbey. He was saved only by threat of excommunication upon the parishioners who were frightened into obedience. Sir John Grant, 1552, it seems, was once sued for debt. Probably some others were as well in the long course of our history, but his difficulties are a matter of record.

The Rev. Edward Davies, 1638, was Rector or Chaplain when the Puritans assumed power, and he was ejected from his Benefice as being loyal to King and Bishops. In 1662 he was restored to the Living a much older and wiser man, and now a Canon of the Church at Llandaff.

The Rev. John Evans was Vicar of Llanblethian towards the end of the 18th Century - 1773 to 1808. He was also Vicar in Hatherley, Gloucester, where he mainly lived, leaving the care of the Parish of Cowbridge in the hands of the Headmaster of the Grammar School, the Rev. Thomas Williams.

Why should Cowbridge not have a Rector of its own? The Borough Council promised to make available a small sum of money for a stipend. The Headmaster tried to secure a partial stipend from Queen Anne's Bounty, who undertook to make it available if such a move had the approval of the Vicar of Llanblethian. It had not! The Rev. John Evans stood firm. The correspondence is interesting and available, and this small venture towards independence lapsed.

Side by side with the Church was the Old Cowbridge Grammar School, founded in 1608. Until the last few years when Boarders' education began to be phased out, the relationship between the Church and the School was a very close one. Headmasters were almost invariably Curates or Chaplains to Holy Cross. We have evidence that one Headmaster, disappointed at the provision made for the boys, asked for a special Service to be allotted to the School on a Sunday afternoon and conducted it himself - and paid all expenses. At some period it seems all the assistant masters were also in Holy Orders, and there are records of their taking services and officiating at Baptisms, Burials and Weddings in the absence of the very often non-resident Vicar of Llanblethian. For over 350 years the Boarders came to this Church. We proudly house the memorials to their fallen from the two great Wars. There are the graves of three Headmasters in the Chancel of the Church - tablets to their memory on the walls.

MORSON, W. WILLIAMS, [EDWARD (1845)]  
THOMAS WILKINS, DAN WILKINS

The Records of the Church have been reasonably well maintained and it is generally possible to look up antecedents for those families who are interested in their family tree. Our Registers in Llanblethian and Cowbridge both begin from the 17th Century. There seem, however, to have been no entries between the years 1771 to 1785, under the Incumbency of the Rev. John Evans, and for thirteen years, 1786 to 1799, during the Incumbency of the Rev. John Williams. Indeed, it is rather in the nature of a minor miracle that they have been kept as well as they have, for many Clergy during earlier generations were non-resident. They held many Livings, and appointed and paid Curates to look after their Parishes for them. In one area, for example, there was often an absentee Vicar who appointed a Curate to serve Llanblethian, and the Headmaster of the Grammar School to look after Cowbridge as Chaplain, but who was himself possibly Rector of Coychurch or had several such Benefices and appointed Curates there, too, and whenever additional help was needed assistant masters of the Grammar School would provide it. People today are luckier than they know in the care they receive from their resident parish priest.

The Church as a Building.

The Church has been built just inside the walls of the old <sup>town</sup> City and near to its present South Gate. It bears all the signs of being part of the defences of the town. Its tower is massive, rather squat, and is unusual in being octagonal. There are those who believe it once bore a spire, a framework of wood covered by lead, which was destroyed by lightning and never replaced. [ There is a fine peal of eight bells in this tower, the only complete peal of bells surviving, and all cast by <sup>Evans</sup> William Evans of Chepstow in 1722. All the bells bear a medallion of the arms of Cowbridge with motto surround; not to be wondered at when it is known that the Borough Council of 1721 mortgaged the revenue of the town to find the money to pay for the bells and the rehousing of them in the tower. The bells themselves are inscribed with the names of certain benefactors, and the old and famous of Cowbridge are immortalised by them.

DANIEL DURRELL, Headmaster of the Grammar School.  
THOMAS WILKINS, MRS. HESPIER WILKINS, EDWARD CARNE,  
FRANCIS GWYN, EDWARD SPADLING.

2 others.

Rectors, Headmasters, Mayors, Bailiffs - as long as these fine bells continue to ring these names will never be forgotten. ]

There are those who believe that the octagonal tower was an addition to the original Church and was built in the early 1300s. Until then the Church consisted of a nave and part of the present Chancel. The nave now has a fine oak roof rebuilt totally in 1926 in what was then a mammoth piece of restoration. The old waggon roof, interior pictures of which can still be seen, was covered by a modern plaster ceiling, but was of such a weight that it had caused to lean the fine colonnade pillars joining the nave to the South aisle and was generally decayed and dangerous. It was necessary in 1926 to replace the whole roof and rebuild the pillars.

The next stage in the building of the Church is believed to have been the extension of the Chancel Eastward and the building of the Chapel we now use as a Choir Vestry. This Chapel, it seems, was used for many years as a Chantry Chapel, founded by William the Prior for the perpetual support of one priest. It was the duty of this priest to say daily Mass for the Departed, and among his other duties he probably taught the children of the district, and probably also lived on the premises. There is a smaller room attached to the Vestry which we now use as the Rector's Vestry, which once boasted a door to the outside and a fireplace.

The final stage in the building, it is agreed, was the building of the so-called Llanquian Aisle to the South of the Church. To do this the South wall of the nave had to be levelled to the ground, a colonnade of pillars erected and the Church thus increased by the addition of this aisle. The work was completed in 1473, and was the gift of Anne, daughter to the Earl of Warwick and married to Richard, Duke of Gloucester, afterward King of England. There was a doorway into the aisle which was possibly then the main entrance to the Church. Now it is blocked up from inside but can still be seen from the outside, as can the pathway which led from the Churchyard towards the town. The present porch of the Church is a later addition still - it was rebuilt anyway in 1859.

As with many old churches, there are doors no longer in use. [There are doors still visible from the outside which now cannot be seen from the inside; there are doors within the Church which now lead nowhere. There are two such doors in the Chancel. One, if it were in use, would lead from the Church to the bell tower. It is very small and we would have to stoop low to use it. The other is bricked up totally at the back and we cannot even open it, but when in use it would have led to a flight of steps and out onto one of the rood screens which were once so much a feature of Church life, from which hung a crucifix, and from which musicians often used to lead the singing. Few of these rood lofts now exist, sad to say, but nearly all the doors remain, and often times the flight of steps.]

The Church once boasted a gallery. At the West end of the Church there are clear signs of its supports, and probably it was not all that long ago it disappeared. The gallery probably housed the organ and the Choir. The present organ was built in 1892 and carefully restored in 1965. How long the Church has been able to boast of an organ and an organist is not certain. Iolo Morgannwg had, it seems, suggested that an organ was given to Cowbridge Church by Jasper Tudor, Uncle of Henry VII. We have evidence only that an organ was in the Church in 1796 because the Borough Council then provided for him a stipend of £6. 6s. 0d yearly, on condition he played every Sunday and every Holy Day and kept the organ in repair.

The Chancel of the Church is of unusual length, similar to the Chancels found in many College Chapels. The furniture of it, with the screens and pews, were all, it is believed, the gift of the Bishop Coplestone, Bishop of Llandaff, when he was living at Llandough Castle. The screen between the Chancel and the Choir Vestry has latterly been completed as a gift from the Old Boys of the Grammar School in memory of a former Headmaster, Mr. Richard Williams, the first non-clerical Headmaster.

The floor of the whole Church, we are told, is full of graves. Several Carves of Nash Manor rest beneath the pews they once occupied in Church. There are many monuments in the Church, not, on the whole, among the most noteworthy in the land, but several of which are of a certain interest. The best is the Carne Monument in the Llanquian Aisle, which must once have been beautifully coloured, but which the years of rain and dirt have tended to spoil. The roof above was defective for many years and no doubt did much damage. It dates from 1626. To the right of the doors as you enter is the monument to Judge David Jenkins, who once lived in Hensol. He was a victim of Oliver Cromwell and spent some years in the Tower, but was lucky to survive and eventually return to live in Hensol and in time to die peacefully and be buried somewhere near the monument in the Church. The Church is also the burial place of the topographer, Benjamin Heath Malkin, who lived in Old Hall, Rice Meyricke Cotterell, and Lewis Morgannwg, the poet. The Edmondes family who also lived in Old Hall, and to whom Cowbridge owes so much, have many memorials in the Chancel along with those to a Headmaster of the Grammar School.

In its silver Cowbridge Church has treasure indeed. There is an Elizabethan Chalice dated 1576. There is an attractive silver gilt cup with cover from the 17th Century, two patens or plates, one of which came from the family of Judge Jenkins, and a large silver flagon given by the Seys family in 1680. The grave of Margaret Seys, who gave the flagon, lies somewhere between the front and West door. There are also modern silver gifts of considerable beauty.