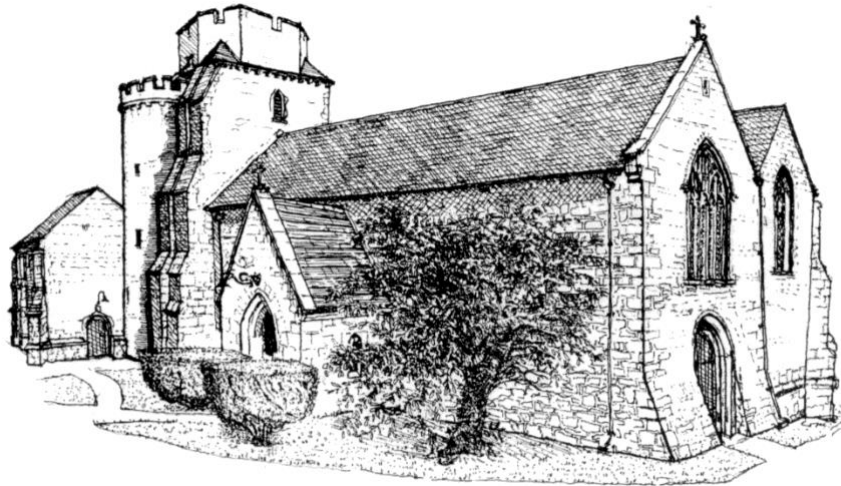


## Holy Cross Church, Cowbridge

### An investigation into the two remnants of medieval windows in the north wall of the nave.

by Robert Cope



View of the church with vegetation shown.



View of the church without the vegetation.

This view shows the architectural features. The right hand, rectangular window is bordered on both sides by the remnants of two medieval windows. These two windows are the subject of the investigation.

## **Holy Cross Church, Cowbridge.**

### **An attempt to date the portions of two medieval windows located on the north west wall of the nave.**

The windows concerned are located externally each side of the rectangular 16<sup>th</sup> century window, to the west of the church porch.

It is possible that they are Norman Romanesque, which would indicate that the building existed earlier than the present suggested date - late 13<sup>th</sup> century, (Romanesque style being classified between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries).

**The references to support this claim** (with underlining and comment by the author, Robert Cope) :

- 1). John Newman 'The Buildings of Wales – Glamorgan'
  - 1.1 P.42 '...church was built on a larger scale in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century'.
  - 1.2 P.331 '...in the nave jambs of two original lancets...'

*(R.C. comment : both of these references focus on the field of interest).*
- 2). E.M. Evans for CADW – 'Glamorgan Historic Churches Survey...Churches in...Cowbridge' (unpublished).  
Copy obtained 8th September 2015 from Helen Rowe, Royal Commission for Ancient and Historic Monuments of Wales (RCAHM):
  - 2.1). Page 2/21 paragraph 3: '...foundation date in the latter half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, with the possible exception of the blocked window in the north wall of the nave'.  
'...the fact that the nave and chancel were the responsibility respectively of the burgesses and the rector...'
  - 2.2). Page 5/21 Nave openings  
'Immediately west of the porch is a smallish blocked window, of which half of the dressings survive, including the springing of the segmental arch'.  
  
*(R.C. comment: both of the above references again refer to the field of interest, with the addition that the town had responsibility for the nave. This would mean a Norman architectural influence. However, item 2.2 referring to the 'springing of the segmental arch' cannot apply to the windows in question).*
- 3). G. R Orrin – 'Medieval Churches of the Vale of Glamorgan'
  - 3.1) Page 173 Orrin describes a 'round-headed Norman lancet in the north chancel' of Llanblethian church.

- 3.2). Page 371 John Newman (ref. 1. above) mentions a twelfth century single-light window in the north wall of the chancel at Llanblethian church.

*(R.C. comment: the window referred to is smaller than the two partial windows at Cowbridge, but on the south side of the chancel in Llanblethian are two larger windows, with sides and base of the same period, headed by a trefoil - a later addition. Here we have expert opinion, with dated assessment, at a location so close to Cowbridge, giving a significant comparison. An illustration is appended on page 6.)*

- 4). Professor David Crouch – his drawing in 1983 (appended) of ‘Holy Cross Church as it may have looked in 1500 A.D.’. He also says that when Richard de Clare granted privileges to ‘our loving burgesses of Longa Villa’ in 1254, the borough must have already been in existence.

*( R.C. comment : This drawing clearly shows two Romanesque windows west of the porch, and also two close-set Romanesque windows east of the porch. There is no evidence of the latter however. The reference to Longa Villa identifies an established community before 1254).*

- 5). Ewenny Priory, 5 miles west of Cowbridge, has fine examples of Romanesque architecture. The priory was donated to the Abbey of Gloucester in 1141; its construction must have been earlier, circa 1120. The Romanesque would therefore have been well known in Cowbridge at that time.

- 6). The windows were preserved by the architect who must have partially removed them to install the present rectangular window; this is a very important indication of their unique standing. It can be assumed that the rectangular window was installed (for improved light) in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, compliant with the architectural style. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that the window came from elsewhere, and was installed during major work by John Prichard around 1850. Certainly Prichard was a very capable architect and would have recognised the early significance.

*(R.C. comment: it is surprising that throughout the references and drawings, the Romanesque is not mentioned. Romanesque is a clearly attributable Norman style identified as 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century which preceded the Early English style).*

- 7). Helen Rowe of RCAHM in Aberystwyth (letter of September 8<sup>th</sup> 2015) states that Richard Suggett, historian, had seen Robert Cope’s account and drawing of the windows in question. He felt that Robert was ‘right about the semi-circular head being indicative of the Romanesque’, although ‘detail, including characteristic mouldings, were needed’ ..... to prove an actual date.

*(R.C. comment: This is a supportive statement of the early Norman style of architecture).*

### **To sum up the evidence:**

- i). The two professional architectural surveys by Newman and Evans indicate that a building existed before 1254, and Professor Crouch draws attention to an established community before that date.
- ii). The responsibility for the main portion of the building, i.e. the nave, would lie with the town people, and would reflect their Norman style of building.
- iii). There are notes that the window remains are an 'original feature'.
- iv). Romanesque style existed at nearby Ewenny Priory, which dates back to around 1120.
- v). A similar, but not identical, window exists at Llanblethian church, and has been dated as 12<sup>th</sup> century.
- vi). Professor David Crouch provides a drawing of the church with Romanesque style windows.
- vii). Independent expert advice from historian Richard Suggett (RCAHM) states that the windows in question as 'being indicative of the Romanesque'.
- viii). Clearly, particular effort was taken to preserve the evidence of the early medieval windows.

The absence of documented evidence is a perennial problem, but the case presented here shows the strong possibility that the north wall, and part of the west wall, of the church are much older than supposed. Certainly, they can be associated with the original building, and are therefore the oldest known section of the church. This does not exclude other parts or portions of the church also being original, such as tower and chancel areas.

Further research at Ewenny may reveal more, such as interaction with Longa Villa and comparison of architectural style.

### **In conclusion:**

Overriding this investigation is the thought that the Cowbridge Charter of 1254 would not have been instigated from a green field site. There must have been some evidence of possession and substance beforehand. The location on the old Roman road is an obvious attraction, and reflects the same endeavour employed by the Romans in securing communications and access to arable lands. In spite of the fact that 1000 years had elapsed since the Roman invasion, the Normans had the same means of transport – the speed of horse and cart were no different and required the same pitch points along the road. Indeed, it is hard to believe that the Welsh lords ignored this facility in the interim.

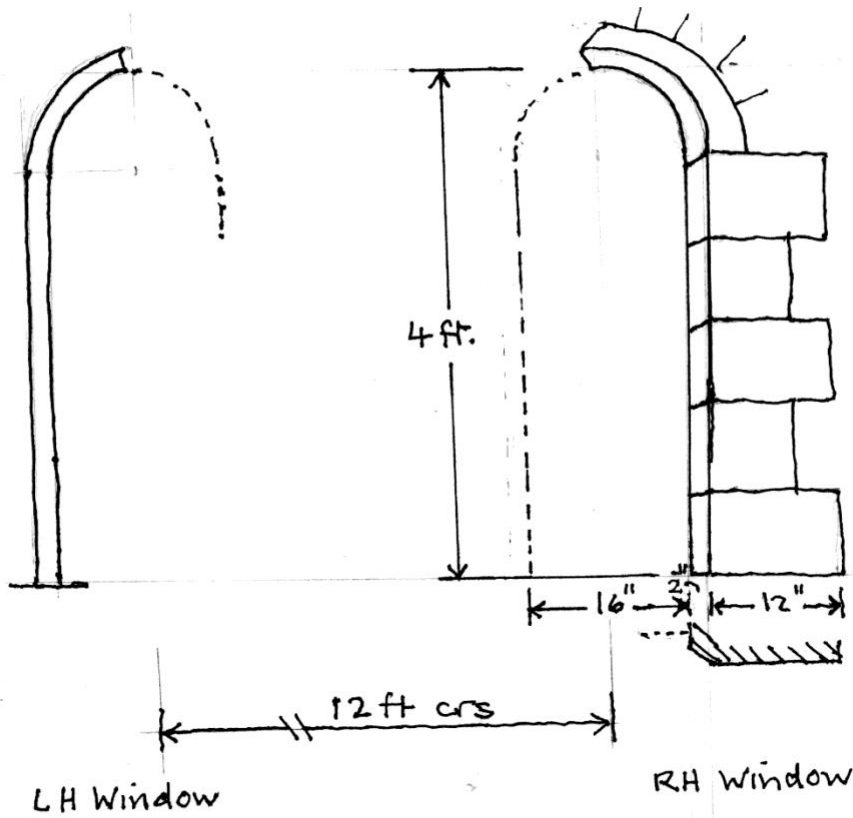
The Normans were the greatest builders of their time, fully familiar with stone masonry and the well-established Romanesque style (French Romanesque, as opposed to the English Romanesque, was active earlier and there would be little or no Saxon influence in Wales). The proximity of Ewenny was relevant to the ambition of Normans residing in Cowbridge. Access to good stone and masonry skills would have been eagerly sought, even though their early efforts may have been relatively simple. There is, for instance, no evidence of extensive early building in Cowbridge (e.g. no Romanesque arcade) but certainly at least a statement of intent.

The conflict of interest between the Welsh lords and the Norman occupation must have been, at least, delicate. Vulnerability and ambition of the Normans would have necessitated a significant defensive position, locally accessible. Much activity between Norman interests arose before 1254 (St. Quintin, Siward and de Clare – Siward with Hywel ap Meredith, lord of Miskin, rebelled, unsuccessfully, against de Clare). It should be borne in mind that a place of worship has defensive qualities, at least as a place of sanctuary amongst different people but with a shared, common faith.

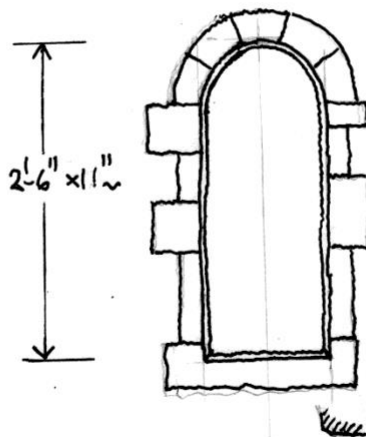
Though we have not found categorical evidence of the existence of a church or building before 1254 (nor for that matter any evidence against), we should be aware of the strong possibility of early Norman activity in the town of Cowbridge. Certainly we can be confident that the windows are Romanesque. Each Norman community in South Wales was highly active and sought to produce prestigious evidence of their claims and presence. There may yet be other discoveries in the future. It is most important to ensure the preservation of these Romanesque items. On a lighter note, the tree, which obstructed the view of the windows has recently been removed: the full elevation of the church can now be more easily viewed. The dominant Gothic style of the building is starkly contrasted by the Romanesque and Tudor features discussed in this investigation. We should all take pride in its intriguing medley.

I am hugely indebted to Brian James for his help in this investigation. His support and knowledge has been essential to me, and I also thank Betty Alden for transcribing and revising my notes into legible form.

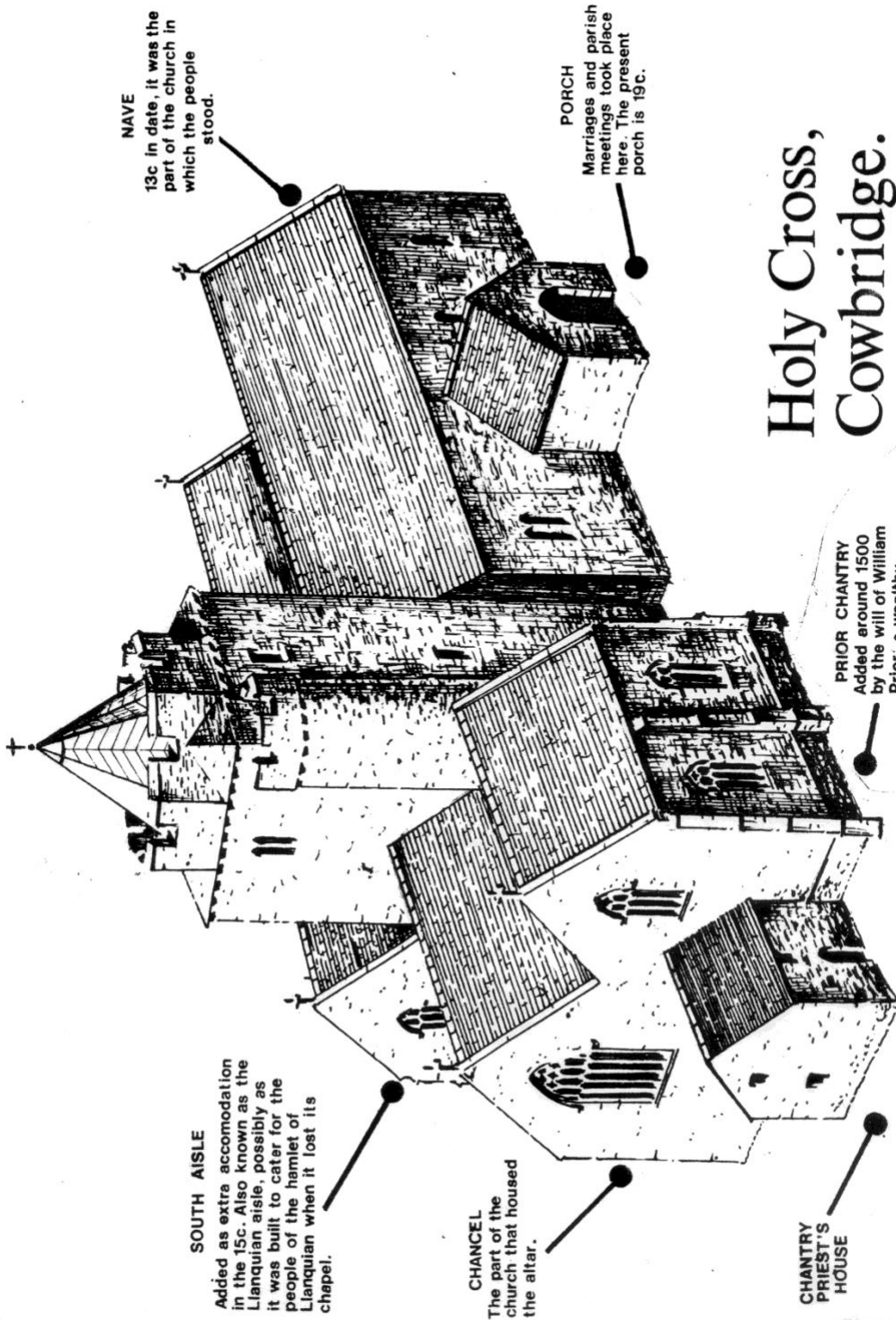
*Robert Cope, September 2016*



SKETCH (Approx.) BLOCKED WINDOWS - Holy Cross Church



SKETCH (Approx.) 12<sup>th</sup> C WINDOW - Llanblethian Church



**NAVE**  
13c in date, it was the part of the church in which the people stood.

**PORCH**  
Marriages and parish meetings took place here. The present porch is 19c.

**SOUTH AISLE**  
Added as extra accommodation in the 15c. Also known as the Llanquian aisle, possibly as it was built to cater for the people of the hamlet of Llanquian when it lost its chapel.

**CHANCEL**  
The part of the church that housed the altar.

**CHANTRY PRIEST'S HOUSE**

**PRIOR CHANTRY**  
Added around 1500 by the will of William Prior, a wealthy burgess.

# Holy Cross, Cowbridge.

as it may have looked in 1500 A.D.

Drawn by Prof. David Gough 1983

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