

Llanblethian Church

The parish church of Llanblethian is dedicated to St. John the Baptist although it was originally dedicated to St. Bleddian, the Welsh form of St. Lupus. The church was formerly known as Llanbleddian Fawr to distinguish it from Llanbleddian Fach (St. Lythan's). Llanblethian is the ancient parish church of the benefice of Llanblethian with Cowbridge and as a mother church it served a large area with chapelries at Cowbridge, Llanquian, Llansannor and Welsh St. Donat's. The earliest reference to the existence of a church at Llanblethian is an undated confirmatory charter of Nicholas ap Gwrgant, Bishop of Llandaff (1148-1183) in which we learn that Llanblethian, together with its chapels, had become a possession of St. Mary's Abbey, Tewkesbury. By the middle of the 13th century Llansannor had become a rectory, but Welsh St. Donat's remained attached to Llanblethian until the Disestablishment of the Welsh Church in 1920 when it was joined with Ystradowen.

The church of Llanblethian with its chapels was valued at 18 marks in 1254 (Taxation of Norwich) and the vicarage worth 40s was already established. In 1291 (*Taxatio Ecclesiastica*) the church was included in the same valuation as Llantwit Major and assigned to the Abbot of Tewkesbury. The vicarage was valued separately at £5. In 1535 (*Valor Ecclesiasticus*) the living was classified as a vicarage worth (including the chapel of Cowbridge) £10-12s-4d and the rectorial tithes still went to Tewkesbury. At the Dissolution of the Monasteries the patronage of Llanblethian church passed to the Dean and Chapter of Gloucester, who continued to appoint vicars until the Disestablishment of the Welsh Church. In 1603 it was styled a vicarage worth £43-6s-8d; the impropriation worth £48 was held by Anthony Mansell, Esquire, under the Chapter of Gloucester. In 1771 (Bishop Barrington's *Llandaff Diocesan Book*) Llanblethian was valued at £90. In 1835 it was a vicarage worth (with its chapels) gross £280, and the patrons and impropriators were the Dean and Chapter of Gloucester. In 1966 the parish of Llanblethian with Cowbridge was grouped with the parishes of Llandough-by-Cowbridge and St. Mary Church to form one benefice.

The church consists of chancel, nave, south chapel with crypt, south porch and western tower containing six bells. The chancel arch is Victorian, done in a pointed 14th-century style with the inner arch corbelled out at the point of spring on two little demi-caps. The east window is Perpendicular, of three cinquefoiled lights with rectilinear tracery in the head surmounted by a drip-

stone with carved heads as label stops. The stained glass in the window is a memorial to the Reverend Isaac Davies Lewis (d. 1885). The theme of the window is a text taken from St. John's Gospel (XXI, 16) which describes how Jesus gave Simon Peter the chance to cancel out his three-fold denial with the three-times repeated question, 'Do you love me?' The text of the verse is inscribed in the two outer lights and the centre light shows Jesus giving Simon Peter the post-Resurrection commission, 'Feed my sheep'.

The beautifully-carved reredos of Austrian oak is a *tour de force* in imitation of the stone sculptures which were carved throughout the church in the 14th century. The reredos depicts a scene from the Supper at Emmaus on the altar panel, flanked by two towers with pinnacles which have foliated crockets and finials. This piece, which was carved by William Clarke of Llandaff, stretches the width of the chancel and is panelled throughout with the likeness of standard and flowing window tracery. The reredos was erected in the church in 1911 in memory of Frederick William Dunn (1844-1911), People's Warden of Llanblethian church for twenty years. He was instrumental in securing the restoration of the church in 1896 and of the tower in 1907.

The chancel is lit on the south side by two broad trefoil-headed lights and the stained glass depicts the figures of Faith and Hope and was erected in 1896 in memory of Edward Charles John Nicholl (d. 1893). In the north wall of the chancel is a round-headed Norman lancet: deeply splayed, depicting the figure of Charity; it was erected in 1896 to the memory of William Thomas (d. 1892), churchwarden from 1864 to 1890, and his wife, Jane (d. 1888). The chancel has an arch-braced roof with curved windbraces between the wallplate and purlins.

The original rood-loft door still remains in the north wall of the nave. It is of oak and of 15th-century character, divided by four moulded stiles, the whole surmounted by solid carving, in the middle of which is a tracery circle formerly with eight cusps. The spandrels contain roses and leaves which are carved in the solid. There is no projection on the outside wall, but on the inside there is a staircase which ascends within the thickness of the wall to the former rood-loft.

The windows on the north side of the nave comprise a pair of two-light windows with cinquefoiled heads and labelled. The stained glass in the north-west window depicts the figure of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of children in the left-hand light and the figure of St. Thomas Aquinas, the medieval philosopher and theologian, in the right-hand light. At the top of the right-hand light an open book has the title *Summa Theologicae*, St. Thomas Aquinas' celebrated work. St. Thomas holds a book in his hands bearing the Latin Inscription 'Deus et se et alia amat' (God loves other things besides himself.) The window was erected in 1930 in memory of the Reverend William Franklen Evans, M.A., Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford, and the last clerical headmaster of Cowbridge Grammar School from 1890 to 1918. It was erected by Dr. Idris D. Evans and the Reverend John Robert Evans from a design prepared by Messrs. James Powell & Sons, Whitefriars, London. The nave is lit on the south side by a two-light cinquefoiled-headed window with square label.

The brass eagle lectern was placed in the church in 1907 as a memorial to R.

Thurstan Bassett of 'Crossways' who was one of those responsible for the restoration of the church in 1896. The pulpit is of unique design. It is composed of Penarth alabaster, red Forest of Dean stone and Quarella stone from Bridgend and the marble shafts or columns are made from red Irish marble. The panels on each of the facets are richly carved with blind tracery on a marble background and each has two trefoil-headed arches beneath an ogee arch which extends into the square head. The spandrels are filled with rectilinear-style tracery. The two arches of each panel are separated by slender pillars on the muntins, each with a fillet along the leading edge. At the head of each in the hollowed marble cornice a bunch of wild foliage splays out from the top rail. Beneath the pulpit there is a pentagonal stem abutting the north wall and the bottom rail is supported by five small marble shafts with circular capitals decorated with flowers and fruit and round moulded bases. The inscription on the pulpit reads: 'To the Glory of God and in memory of Thomas Edmond, M.A. Honorary Canon of Llandaff, vicar of this parish 1835 to 1883. This pulpit is erected A.D. 1896 by his surviving sons, F.W. and F.Q. Edmond.' It was designed by C. B. Fowler, architect and carved by William Clarke of Llandaff.

Numerous memorial monuments line the walls of the nave including a benefactions board listing the church benefactors headed by the distinguished Sir Leoline Jenkins who donated the tenor bell to the church in 1685. On the north wall of the nave is a marble monument to his father, Jenkin Llewellyn (d. January 1667) and his mother, Elizabeth (d. November, 1667). Their gravestone was rescued and the details copied by the Principal and Fellows of Jesus College, Oxford in 1763. Although this tablet was ostensibly erected to the parents of Sir Leoline Jenkins, it gives nevertheless a lengthy account of the son's honours, but says little of his parents. Also on the north wall of the nave is a white marble memorial tablet to the memory of William Bruce of Llanblethian House (d. 1768), father of the Reverend Thomas Bruce (d. 1790), rector of St. Nicholas. This monument was erected in the nave by his grandson John Bruce Pryce of Dyffryn. At the base of the tablet is a tierced shield. In the centre:—'In pale or a saltire gules on a chief of the last a martlet of the first' (Bruce). On the dexter side, quarterly: 1st quarter—'Sable a lion rampant argent'; 2nd quarter—'A chevron between three spearheads azure, embrued gules'; 3rd quarter—'Sable a chevron between three fleurs-de-lys or'; 4th quarter—'Or on a quarter gules two lions passant—guardant' (Lewis). On the sinister side 'Chequy gules and or, a fesse ermine' (Turberville). The family crest is 'A dexter arm in armour in bend grasping a sceptre all proper'. The nave has an arch-braced roof with two tiers of curved windbraces between the principal rafters and the purlins which are in the lower two of the three panels, into which the purlins divide each side of the roof.

On the south wall of the nave is a fine hatchment which has remained an enigma to antiquarians and local historians for many years. The arms are quarterly: first and fourth quarters 'Argent a chevron gules between three lions rampant sable' (Bourne); second and third quarters 'Azure three bars or on a chief three mascles of the last or' (Spurling/Stanford). The motto below is

'Nosce te ipsum' (Know thyself). The person for whom this funeral hatchment was made was descended from the marriage of a male Bourne and a female Spurling/Stanford, the female being an heraldic heiress (i.e. a woman with no brothers, or else brothers who died childless). In the 19th century many families used arms in perfectly good faith believing themselves entitled to do so when in reality the arms belonged to another family of the same name or indeed a different family altogether, because sometimes it happened that arms were passed down through a female line. Because of this, although the hatchment ought to represent a Bourne-Spurling/Stanford match, it may in fact have been made incorrectly in commemoration of some other family, perhaps one descended through a female line from the Bournes.

One of the most interesting features of the church is the south chapel with its crypt below. During the restoration of the church in 1896 the crypt was discovered under the south chapel. It is approached by a flight of nine steps leading down from the chapel floor. The chamber is lit by three small openings which had been covered up with earth on the outside. Inside it is arched with stonework from east to west giving a height of about two metres to the crown of the arch. The whole of the chamber was found to be filled with about 200 human skeletons, together with portions of stone coffin lids of 13th-century date. Writing in her book *Annals of South Glamorgan* Marianne Spencer Robertson said that the skeletons found in the crypt may have been those of soldiers who took part in the battle in 1405 between Owen Glyndwr's troops and King Henry IV's army at Stalling Down three miles away. However, 'Morien' writing in the *Western Mail* in 1896 thought that the crypt in the south transept was the ancient charnel house which was used for depositing the bones of the dead which the sexton might happen to throw up in the course of digging fresh graves. The skeletons were reverently re-buried in a large common grave in the churchyard. A priest's grave was also discovered in the crypt. It was covered with a sepulchral slab placed face downwards and contained the remains of one of the early priests, for on closer examination of the wall of the grave, a small recess was found in the south side containing a pewter chalice of Romanesque or Norman character. Other incised sepulchral slabs were also discovered at this time and were placed around the inside walls of the tower. One of them, a sepulchral slab of a lady of the early 14th century with a floriated cross in the centre, bears the following Norman-French inscription in Lombardic characters around the edge of the slab:—

DAME: EME-T: LA: FEMME: WATER: TORIG:
 GIST: ICI D(EV): (D)EL: AME: EIT: MERCI.
 (Dame Eme—t, the wife of Walter Torig lies here,
 God have mercy on her soul.)

The transept (as it was supposed to be over this crypt) proved to be a chapel,

for when the plaster was removed and the old-fashioned pews taken out, the outline of an altar with a 14th-century window above was brought to light. Also an arched sepulchral recessed tomb and a piscina with cinquefoiled canopy were discovered in the south wall. One of its jambs is constructed out of a small coffin lid which once possibly covered a stone coffin of a child.

During excavations for the laying of a drain around the south-west corner of the tower a stone effigy was found acting as a foundation to support the south-west tower buttress when the tower was added to the church in the latter part of the 15th century. The effigy is of Sutton stone and of 13th-century character, very similar to the effigy in the nave of Llantrithyd church viz. a civilian recumbent with hands clasped in prayer with a greyhound at the feet. This effigy was replaced in the recessed arch in the south chapel from where it had probably been removed four centuries earlier. The consecration stone of the church was also found in the crypt—a square block of stone with a cross very deeply cut into each side.

The south window of the chapel is of three trefoiled lights with sexfoils and a trefoil in the head, all cusped. It is surmounted by a slender dripstone. It is a 19th-century window done in a 14th-century Decorated style. In the east wall of the chapel is a two-light ogee-foliated window. The south chapel now houses the organ loft. The two-manual organ, built by Messrs. Griffen and Stroud of Bath at a cost of £250, together with the organ loft and choir screen, was presented to the church in 1907 by Lord Aberdare, in memory of his ancestors who settled at Great House in the parish of Llanblethian soon after the 1745 Rebellion. The choir screen of Austrian oak, carved by William Clarke of Llandaff, is square-framed of eleven bays including the doorway near the chancel. There is a cornice with moulded fillet enclosing a combination of patera and Tudor decoration. Each bay contains three lights between slender mullions with cinquefoiled heads beneath ogee arches. The cusping in the tracery beneath ends in little multi-lobed flowers. There are mouchettes and typical 14th-century-style piercing in the spandrels. The lower stage of the screen is plain boarded. The other part of the south chapel is divided off by a pitch pine screen and acts as a choir and clergy vestry. Above the east window of the south chapel is a sundial inscribed with the date 1811 and below, the wall is reinforced by a massive buttress. On the west wall of the south chapel is a memorial monument to Hugh Robert Entwistle (d. 1867), J. P. and Deputy Lieutenant of Glamorgan. Below the tablet are the arms of the family 'Argent on a bend engrailed sable three mullets of the first with a mullet for difference'. Crest:—'A hand fesswise coupé above the wrist proper holding a fleur-de-lys erect or' with the family motto 'Par ce signe à Agincourt' (By this sign at Agincourt).

The large south porch is built in the Perpendicular style and the outer pointed arch is surmounted by a dripstone and decorated with crockets and pinnacles. Grotesque gargoyles leer from either side of the porch. The inner south doorway is obtusely pointed and the inside walls of the porch display several interesting memorials above the stone benches. The wall of division between


the south chapel and the porch has soffits of slightly-curved widespreading arches springing from three stone corbels on the eastern edge of the ceiling which may have been constructed to strengthen the wall at that point. The modern timber roof has a crenellated wallplate. On the arch of the south doorway are vertical grooves. Local tradition has it that these marks were the results of the gentry sharpening their swords as they entered or left the church. The more likely explanation is that these grooves were caused by workmen sharpening their scythes and tools on the freestone.


The tower opens to the nave by a plain pointed Perpendicular arch whose jambs continue from the floor without interruption. An inner arch springs in the head from the jambs of the other arch from which it is corbelled out on two grotesque 15th-century figures who appear to guard the entrance to the tower. Beneath the tower stands the Norman tub-shaped font carved from Sutton stone, which rests on a circular base on a square plinth. Around the walls of the tower are several interesting sepulchral slabs placed there in 1896 after their discovery in the crypt. One dating from the 13th century has a curious cross, the arms of which end in circles.



The tower is a massive Perpendicular structure some twenty-four metres in height and was built by Anne Neville, wife of Richard III in 1477. It consists of three main stages divided by stringcourses and reinforced by five stages of clasping buttresses. The belfry is lit on each face by a three-light window with pointed head, the mullions of which intersect as Y-tracery. This is repeated in miniature in the decorative stonework in the head of each light above the transoms. The spaces beneath are crossed by thin stonework strips of openwork forming quatrefoils. The battlement is surmounted with corner pinnacles and displays two grotesque gargoyles at the corners of its south face. The south wall of the tower is further lit by a window with pointed arch and above it is a small aperture. The staircase to the belfry now opens into the churchyard by a door in the north wall of the tower. The original doorway on the inside remains but is now built-in. The west window of the tower is a typical three-light Perpendicular window with rectilinear tracery lights. The round heads to the main lights within slightly-pointed tracery owe more to the 14th century. The window depicts the figures of St. David, St. George and St. Bleddian and was erected in 1920 from a design by Robert J. Newbery of London as a memorial to those men of the parish who fell in the Great War, 1914-1918. The names of the sixteen men are inscribed on a marble tablet on the west wall of the nave and adjacent to it is another tablet commemorating the three men of the parish who gave their lives in the last war. The west doorway has several concave mouldings but in appearance is earlier in date than the tower.


The tower contains a ring of six bells which were restored and rehung by Carr's of Smethwick when the tower was restored in 1907. The cost was borne by Mrs. Frances Ann Caroline Brereton as a memorial to her parents, Birt Wyndham Rous Jenner (d. 1863) and Ann Jenner. Prior to the restoration of the tower in 1907 the bells had not been rung for twenty-two years, because of their dangerous condition. The six bells bear the following inscriptions:—



No. 1 THE REV'D MR. WM MILES, VICAR TR 1769
 CARR'S OF SMETHWICK
 RECAST ME
 1907.

No.2 MR. EVAN IENKINS BENEFACTOR T  R 1769

No. 3 WM THOMAS ESQR. JOHN WILLIAMS WARDENS
 T  R 1769

No. 4 PEACE AND GOOD NEIGHBOURHOOD EE  WE 
 1726 0
 (0 is the imprint of the obverse of a William III crown)

No. 5 NOAH NEAL NEWCOME VICAR IOHN THOMAS CURATE
 IOHN WILLIAMS & IOHN THOMAS CH: WARDENS
 W  E 1746

Tenor THIS BELL WAS GIVEN (1) (1) (2) ANNO DOM 1685
 BY SR LEOLINE JENKINS
 (1 is obverse and (2) reverse of William III crown)
 AND NOW MAINTAIN'D BY HIS BROTHER
 EVAN. EVAN EVANS   (3);
 ((3) is obverse of Charles II half-crown)

(Firebell) probably a recast Sanctus bell has inscription in two lines:
 EX DONO EV: IENKINS DE MAINDY (1)
 GEN: QVI OB: 70 APRILIS 1702 (2)
 (1) and (2) are the obverse and reverse of a Queen Anne shilling.

The tenor bell bears the date 1685, but Dr. Lemuel J. Hopkin-James, the clerical local historian, said that it must obviously be of a later date since the William III crown of which it bears the impression was first struck in 1695. The initials TR stand for Thomas Rudhall, bellfounder of Gloucester, who cast bells between 1760 and 1783, and the initials EE, WE stand for Evan Evans and William Evans, bellfounders of Chepstow, who cast bells between 1718 and 1727.

The church was restored in the years 1896-1897 when the many interesting discoveries in the south chapel described above were made. The work of restoration consisted of the removal of the old square pews and replacing them with new ones, laying down new floors, opening out the south chapel and the removal of plaster ceilings from the nave, south chapel and chancel exposing to view the original late medieval oak roofs which were carefully restored. The original low chancel arch was removed and replaced by the present one. The hatchment which hung on the south side of the chancel arch was removed to its present position on the south wall of the nave. A new doorway was opened up in the south chapel and the plaster was removed from the walls of the church. The old stonework was completely repointed. During the restoration some wall paintings were found on the north wall of the nave which represented

cinquefoils, a scourge from which blood dripped, a curious saw and a sword. These emblems, which were probably symbolic of the Passion of Our Lord, were unfortunately destroyed when the plaster was removed. Three new stained glass windows were erected in the chancel and a new window was inserted in the north wall of the nave. The present stone pulpit was also placed in the church. The restoration was carried out at a cost of £1,200 by W. A. James of Cowbridge according to designs and specifications of C. B. Fowler, architect of Cardiff. The church was reopened for divine service after restoration on Wednesday, 5th May, 1897 by the Rt. Reverend Dr. Richard Lewis, Bishop of Llandaff.

In 1907 the tower was completely restored at a cost of £550. The buttresses were replaced, the four floors repaired and the foundations strengthened. As mentioned above, the peal of six bells was restored and rehung and the old second bell was recast into a new treble. A new pipe organ was installed in the south chapel and a new brass eagle lectern was erected in the nave.

On the green to the south-east of the church is the stump of the medieval churchyard cross which rests on a pedestal on three steps. David Jones of Wallington, (1834-1890), the antiquarian and genealogist, was born at Llanblethian. He copied all the older inscriptions in the churches and churchyards in Glamorgan and made sketches of many of the parish churches.

From 1917 to 1934 the vicar of Llanblethian was the Reverend Dr. Lemuel John Hopkin-James who did much valuable research into the history of Llanblethian and his other parishes of Cowbridge and Welsh St. Donat's, the results of which he published in his book entitled *Old Cowbridge* in 1922. In 1930 Dr. Hopkin-James was made Chancellor of Llandaff Cathedral.

Although the name of Evan Jenkins, brother of Sir Leoline Jenkins, is only mentioned on two bells he proved to be an even more generous benefactor of Llanblethian church than his brother. Income from the Evan Jenkins Charity Trust amounting to £30,000 has already funded extensive restoration work on the tower. The church building will therefore be maintained without any financial constraints or anxiety to the parishioners of Llanblethian in the foreseeable future.

The church plate includes a silver flagon whose lid is inscribed 'Lamblethian Parish' and round the base 'the gift of Hester Wilkins, widow, to the Parish of Lamblethian in the county of Glamorgan, 1739', hall-marked 1738. A silver paten is inscribed on the underside 'Ex dono a Bowens ux. T. Wilkins Gen. Ao. 1714'. The registers date from 1661.



