

Guide to  
THE PARISH CHURCH OF ST. ATHAN.

Being notes collected by the Rev. S. R. Gibbon,  
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The history of St. Athan Parish Church is lost to view down the centuries, as is the case with many ancient Churches. Though the date of the first act of Christian worship at St. Athan is not known, this much is certain, the Church takes its name and existence, directly or indirectly, from the landing of one named "Tathan" about the year 540 A.D., at the port of the Roman city of Venta Silurum, known to us today as Caerwent. The landing place was originally called "Porth-is-coed," which translated means "the harbour under the wood," now corrupted to the meaningless name of Portskewett.

Tathan, according to the story, came from Ireland, was driven up the channel by winds and grounded in the shallows and on a rock off the shore at Portskewett. The governor of the city gave him hospitality. A school and monastery were founded. He was buried in what is now the vicarage orchard at Caerwent. In the first decade of this century, the then incumbent of Caerwent - an antiquarian of repute - formed an opinion as to the site of Tathan's remains. He proved correct. The remains of this "Irish Tathan" were "translated" to the South Aisle of Caerwent Church and repose under a slab recording the fact.

An ancient story tells of a second Tathan - Tathan the Younger - whose body was buried at S. Tathan, meaning the Church of St. Athan. The exact site of his remains is not known. The existence of the Church at St. Athan at that date is implied by his burial at St. Athan. There is an interesting story concerning the granddaughter of Meuric ap Tewdric, of Trebeferad, now known as Boverton. Her name was Braust, and after adventures and tragedy she retired from court to live a holy life at Llantwit Major, taking the name of Tathana. Her latter days were spent in a mud hut on the banks of the River Thaw, near the Old Mill, this side of the bridge, then a ford. She was buried at St. Athan Church. The village was called Llandathan after the old abbot, presumably the Irish Tathan of Caerwent, but the Church is referred to as Tathana's. This latter fact is established from records. Valor Ecclesiasticus 1535 and Taxatio of 1291, where the Church is referred to as Ecclesia Sancia Tathana (accent on "Tath"), while the village and parish as S. Tathan - See "The Welsh Outlook" Vol.12, No.11, for "The Legend of S. Tathana," by Mrs. Augusta F. Jenkins.

The name by which the village is known today St. Athan, and worse still St. Athans, is a corruption. In ecclesiastical spheres, a saint is indicated by "S" in the civil sphere by ST. What has happened is the full-stop in S. Tathan has been displaced one letter, giving "St. Athan". The Welsh name for the village is Llandathan, again indicating Tathan as correct, not Athan. The hymn-board in the Church is correct; also see list of Priests in South archway.

To summarise, Christian worship may have commenced any time after the landing of the Irish Tathan; that the first Church was probably built of wattle and daub. Of the period between then and the present building, we know nothing, save that the village had a Church.

Entrance to the Church is by the South porch: pausing here and looking East, midway between the Yew trees opposite the South transept stood a Cross, probably a Calvary, as in many churchyards. It is recorded as being there in Elizabethan times. It has been suggested that the Bassett tomb occupies the site.

Over the porch door is all that remains of a sundial. In the eighties of last century the Gnomon was still in position with the date 1729 or thereabouts.

On entering the porch and looking up, it will be observed that on the ridge beam where it enters the outer wall the arms of the Berekrolles are carved, indicating a 13th or 14th century date. The door steps at entrance of porch outside and inside entering the Church, also the West door, are all coffin - shaped. They are the lids of stone coffins, mostly of 13th century date and very plain.

On stepping down into the Church, the font is the first item of note. A large, circular font, probably of late Norman date, standing on a square base 3 feet high from floor, 29½ inches across top of bowl, and 12 inches deep. Cover, of Oak, 12 sides with ribs running down each angle. It is one of the few old covers remaining ( others are Gileston and St. Brides Minor ).(C.B.Fowler, 1896).

It is interesting that Fowler (an architect, I think) has in no case come across any two fonts of similar size and design.

Very early fonts have large, bold outlines, mostly circular or octagonal. Almost all are worked out of Sutton stone (quarry at the mouth of Ogmere River near Bridgend). Generally, the fonts were very low, being used for immersion. It is in later centuries that bases and steps were added. Also, the covers were often fitted with hinges and locks so that the consecrated water might not be put to base uses. Traces of the hinges will be found on the rim of the font. It was placed on the present stone slab in 1935.

Looking towards the East and up, will be seen the Wall Plates of the nave, These have been restored to their original Red and Gold.

#### THE ROOD LOFT.

Nothing is left of this. Its existence is pointed out by the little Rood Loft window, high up on the East end of the South Wall of the nave, and nails in the roof beams. The Rood Loft was often approached by a stair in the thickness of the North Wall. At St. Athan, however, the gospeller entered the Rood Loft from the Belfry by a door now concealed under the plaster but in the North side of the East Wall of the nave. In later times a gallery was erected where our rood screen had stood, and there the choirmen were placed, and the cello and fiddle played.

The tower seems to be normal for the cruciform church, it and the four members, nave and transepts, having been erected at the same time. I gather from the visiting antiquarians that this may not have been so. See notes on windows on South Transept; they are 14th century. There may have been an early tower used as a look-out for the approach of raiders, while the lower chamber was used as a place of refuge with a small church on the East side, now the chancel. This cannot be investigated as the original arches have been replaced by the present Gothic shape. Outside inspection does not assist, but there is evidence that the nave had a roof prior to the present one. The building in its present form dates from the later years of the 1200's, i.e. 13th century.

The bells are six in number, originally four. Two were added in 1919 and the old ones re-cast. Entrance to the ringing chamber is by steps in the North Transept. The memorial under these steps and on the wall is worth reading. No trace can be found of an altar in this transept, though it is called by lolo the "Castleton Aisle," which suggests that this was the Mortuary Chapel of the Nerber family of Castleton, the parent manor of East and West Orchard. The floor level here and throughout the Church was at one time lower than now. This will be seen from the level of the South Transept and the Piscina in the South Wall of the Chancel.

The Chancel. The arched recess in the North Wall is probably the resting place of the founder. These sepulchral recesses are sometimes known as "Founders' Tombs"; often there were slabs or effigies, in most churches these have disappeared.

The lancet windows are a restoration after the originals, though at one time there was a square two light Tudor window by the altar. The restoration was in 1888, and the stone string course under them is a reproduction of the original.

South Transept. The windows in the East and South Walls are original and of the Decorated period - Reticulated Tracery, 14th century. The transept was probably the Mortuary Chapel of the Berkrolles, though clear evidence is lacking to show that this was its only use, as indicated by the Squints or Hagio-scope (meaning Holy View). From the Nave, the altar, restored in 1934, can be seen, and from the South Transept, the High Altar can be seen. The original position would be a further 3 or 4 feet from the East window than it is now.

The tomb in the South Wall has survived the centuries. The tomb opposite the West window was placed there at the restoration in 1934. The base is of a later period, but the effigies seem to be the work of the same hand as that of the South Wall tomb. The colouring was restored by a descendant of the Berkerolles family. Details will be found in the "hand-frames" by each tomb.

Niche at side of the tomb of Sir Roger de Berkerolles and Katherine Tuberville, his wife, in South Transept. Similar niches are found in many churches. Their usual position is North or South of East window (on East Wall), or on side of chancel Arch. They generally held the effigy of the Patron Saint to whose honour the church was dedicated.

The base of our niche is a proper conventional 15th century Capital. The Ball Flower ornament and the four-leaf flower are both typical of the 15th century. The canopy of the niche is of solid stone and has conventional ribs. The niche has evidently been removed at some time to its present improper position. The base part does not belong to the niche at all. It is probably part of some other memorial of a much later date. The niche is probably worked from Quarella stone.

The "John Williams" memorial will be found on the East side of the South Porch.

S. Athan, May, 1948.