

The garden of Wales. 1961.

THE MANOR OF LLANBLETHIAN

by

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THERE is no reliable account of the first hundred and fifty years of Norman rule in Glamorgan, for the records of the County Court (*Comitatus*) of the Lordship of Glamorgan have, for the most part, disappeared and we have no equivalent of the Domesday Book which is such a mine of information on the conquest of England. But it is clear that after the dispossession of Iestyn ap Gwrgan, the last native ruler of this area, in the reign of William Rufus, Robert Fitzhamon and his knights swept rapidly through the Vale. The greater part of it south of the Portway (followed in general by the modern east-west main road) was retained by Fitzhamon and his heirs—the original Lordship of Glamorgan. It was let out in manors to the Norman followers of Fitzhamon, most of whom had already been granted lands in the earlier formed Lordship of Gloucester. These knights, as well as the tenants of their sub-manors, had to attend the *Comitatus* at Cardiff and were closely subject to the Lord.

The manor of Llanblethian was outside such direct control. It was one of the twelve "member-lordships" into which the rest of Glamorgan was divided—four mainly lowland areas, Llanblethian, Talyfan, Coity and Ruthin, three in the hill country, Senghenydd, Miscin and Glyn Rhothney (Rhondda), and three further west, Afan, Neath and Tir Iarll. Most of these, comprising as they did much imperfectly-conquered land, went to Iestyn ap Gwrgan's sons and grandsons, but Norman feudatories held Llanblethian and its neighbour, Talyfan. Their power was much greater than that of the knights in the body of the Lordship, including power of life and death, and there was little sub-division into small manors.

The lordship of Llanblethian covered approximately the extensive parish of Llanblethian itself and St. Hilary, while its

neighbour, Talyfan, comprised Llanharry, Llansannor, Ystradowen, Welsh St. Donat's and Pendoylan. The first lord of Llanblethian manor was Robert St. Quentin. He already held lands in Wiltshire and Dorset, as well as in Essex and Yorkshire. He or his successors, the Siwards, held Talyfan as well and the two are usually coupled together in subsequent records ; together they covered some of the richest land in the Vale and its northern extension.

How long the St. Quentin family retained its interests here is uncertain, but as late as 1205 a Herbert de St. Quentin applied for a jury in a case relating to a free tenant of his in "Llanblethyan" and up to 1218 St. Quentins appear as witnesses to a series of local charters (of course, the name may well have been adopted by retainers of the family, just as Bassett, Spencer and Stradling are frequent surnames in the Vale to this day, but do not necessarily imply descent from these Norman families). The St. Quentins may have held land near Merthyr Mawr, too, where a Quintynmede is mentioned in 1328 and there were also a Quintin's Wood and a Quintin's Barn. Incidentally, these spellings accord with the traditional pronunciation of the name, as does "Llanblythian" for the village.

The first reliable record of Llanblethian and Talyfan occurs in a survey of the lands of Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Gloucester and Lord of Glamorgan, upon his death in 1295. Possibly the St. Quentins had sold out like several of the original knights of the Vale. The direct line of their successors, the Siwards, ended with Joan Siward in Edward II's reign. But the 1294 survey just mentioned implies that already both had become manors of the Lordship of Glamorgan.

Another survey was made in 1317 upon the death of the younger Gilbert de Clare at the battle of Bannockburn in 1314. It refers to "a castle begun by the said Earl, of no value," evidently the existing gatehouse with remnants of a keep, known as St. Quentin's Castle. This raises the question as to whether there had been an earlier castle on Llanblethian Hill. In the first volume of this series Dr. H. N. Savory gives an aerial photograph of that hill, showing the defences of a hill-fort of the Early Iron Age "and, within, the possible remains of a medieval village." If there ever was a Norman castle on this site it must soon have fallen into disrepair, for the surveys of 1295 and 1317 make no mention of one. That at Talyfan (just north of the road from Maendy to Welsh St.

Donat's) similarly fell early into decay; today there is just a mound on the site. Incidentally, the Buck brothers' sketch of two Llanblethian castles made in 1741 and reproduced in Dr. Hopkin-James' book *Old Cowbridge*, and also in the second volume of this series, is obviously the product of imagination or a hazy impression of their tour; in the first place, it is not possible to see both St. Quentin's and the summit of Llanblethian Hill simultaneously from their viewpoint; secondly, they show the former as retaining substantial towers within the gatehouse whereas a 1786 drawing reproduced in *Old Cowbridge* shows little more than the gatehouse as it stands today. The castle has provided a rich quarry for local builders and probably accounts for many of the stone houses in the village; certainly this is true of Castle Cottage and Porth-y-green. The gatehouse has interesting loopholes for bowmen, reminding us that South Wales was the country of the famous long bow, so devastating at Crecy and Poitiers. The meadows below by the river have been called Bowmen's Fields and a spring near the Verlands Bowmen's Well; but whether these are authentic or mere flights of fancy it is difficult to say. It is regrettable that the ruinous condition of the stairway in the gatehouse has recently necessitated a barbed-wire fence to safeguard children from accidents, for the two chambers on the ground floor are finely vaulted. Channels for a portcullis are very clear near the double archways—double to enable the defenders to pour down boiling oil on attackers, perhaps. Of the keep inside very little remains. Below it were dungeons, often explored by venturesome boys of earlier generations, giving rise to persistent stories of an underground passage to Penllyne Castle, an undertaking that might foil the cleverest engineers considering the marsh between.

The 1317 survey makes it clear that both Llanblethian and Talyfan were run on the lines of the manors in the English shires. It gives the rents due from villein and from free tenants, both English and Welsh. Most were paid not in coin but in equivalents; Welsh sparrow-hawks were prized for falconry and many a holding was valued at "two sparrow-hawks a year," in other cases at "a pair of gloves." Such payments were made by free tenants only, "customary" tenants owed labour instead; for instance, one Llanblethian tenant was responsible for the repairs to the ironwork of five ploughs, using the lord's own iron; another must shoe one



ploughing beast and make wheels for wagons and carts. Much later, especially when the Black Death of the 14th century caused a great scarcity of labour, these duties were commuted for three shillings a year.

The manor's richest land was in arable, part of it forming the lord's own demesne. That of Talyfan was a very small area around the original castle. That of Llanblethian extended over what is now Mr. Besant's market-garden together with the fields running along the St. Athan road towards the river and the higher ground now called the Windmills. Forty customary tenants owed between them eighty-one "plough works" at the sowing of wheat and oats yearly, as well as harrowing, hoeing and reaping, and carrying the corn to be stacked. Normally, two-thirds of the arable was cultivated in any one year, the other third left fallow, sometimes enriched by grazing cattle, some belonging to the lord, some to his tenants, the number being stipulated on the manor roll in each case.

There were other open arable fields in which the tenants were allocated so many strips each, again according to their position on the manor roll, not always the same strips nor continuous. Where these fields were in the case of Llanblethian is uncertain but on the rising ground south of Kingscombe there are well-marked terraces, six or seven in number. These rather suggest the "ridge and furrow" so characteristic of such ex-arable fields in many English manors. They form a beautiful pattern of light and shade at dawn and at sunset. This system of ploughing in strips in a common field persisted in some cases right up to the Agrarian Revolution of the 18th century, when each of the families concerned was allocated one compact plot, called a "cae" or "maes" or "close" equivalent to their earlier rights. A series of ribbon-like fields west of Brynhyfryd suggest a number allocated to small holders; they must have been costly to hedge in.

Along the river Thaw, liable to flooding in winter, were open meadows where the cattle of lord and tenant grazed together in autumn and early spring until they were moved away so that hay could be grown for winter feed; here again the customary tenants must mow, cock and carry. Then there were the higher commons, valued as rabbit-warrens, giving fern for bedding and rough grazing, rights shared between the lord and his copyhold tenants. Such was Llanblethian Hill, a common that seems to have extended originally

right away to Cross Inn. Grazing rights still go with two cottages at the foot of the hill—Hillside and Danygraig—and a croft between. Within living memory they were also exercised by Breach, Marlborough and Folly farms.

A similar common was Stalling Down, the southern part of it going to St. Hilary, at one period a sub-manor of Llanblethian, and, north of the old coaching road, to Llanquian, including Aberthyn, another sub-manor, held once by Phillip de Nerber and later, for a much longer period, by the de Wintons or Wilkins whose name is preserved in "Pant Wilkin," a farm towards the end of a beautiful little valley running east from Aberthyn. It is not easy to ascertain the size of this sub-manor. Its most interesting building is Great House, Aberthyn, Jacobean in character but probably on the site of a much older house, for its out-buildings retain a 15th century appearance. Aberthyn may have been a monastic grange, farmed by "fratres" of a big monastic house. In view of the mention of Aberthyn in the ancient *Book of Llandaff* it is surprising that most of the dwellings seem to be so modern. The name of its neighbouring hamlet "Maendy" would seem to imply that stone houses were exceptional at one period; that may explain the disappearance of the earliest dwellings rather than its destruction at the Battle of Llanquian on Stalling Down in 1400 during the Owen Glyndwr rising. All this area lies within Llanblethian parish and in the clerk's pew at Llanblethian church is a nearly defaced inscription to the effect that this church was the burying-place of the Sweeting family "before the war with Owen Glyndwr." A very old house in Aberthyn, now much altered, still carries their name.

An important source of profit to the lord were the tolls paid at the corn-mills in his manor. The Thaw worked such mills at the Old Mill in Millfields, immediately north of the Cowbridge Post Office, quite recently demolished; at Llanblethian, at the foot of the Castle hill (in use up to 1947); and How Mill. There was also the windmill on the Llanblethian demesne, approached from Broadway by Windmill Lane. Most of these appear in Professor William Rees's *Map of South Wales in the 14th Century*, so would obviously have been manorial. Also of great profit was the lord's monopoly of fulling-mills, where the coarse cloth woven in the home must be taken for finishing. The same map shows one to have been sited by the river below Cae Rex; a remnant of the stone-work of



Gatehouse, St. Quentin's Castle, Llanblethian

— Photographs by Haydn Baynham, Cardiff —

The Old Woollen Factory, Llanblethian (low building on right)





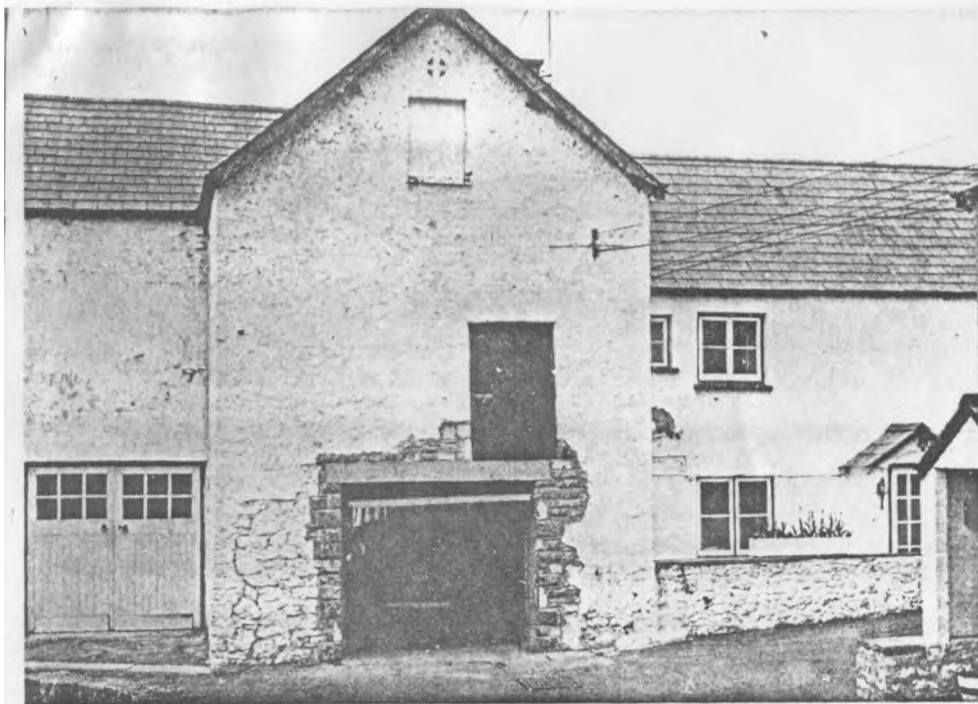
Hill House, Llanblethian



Photographs by Haydn Baynham, Cardiff

Great House, Llanblethian



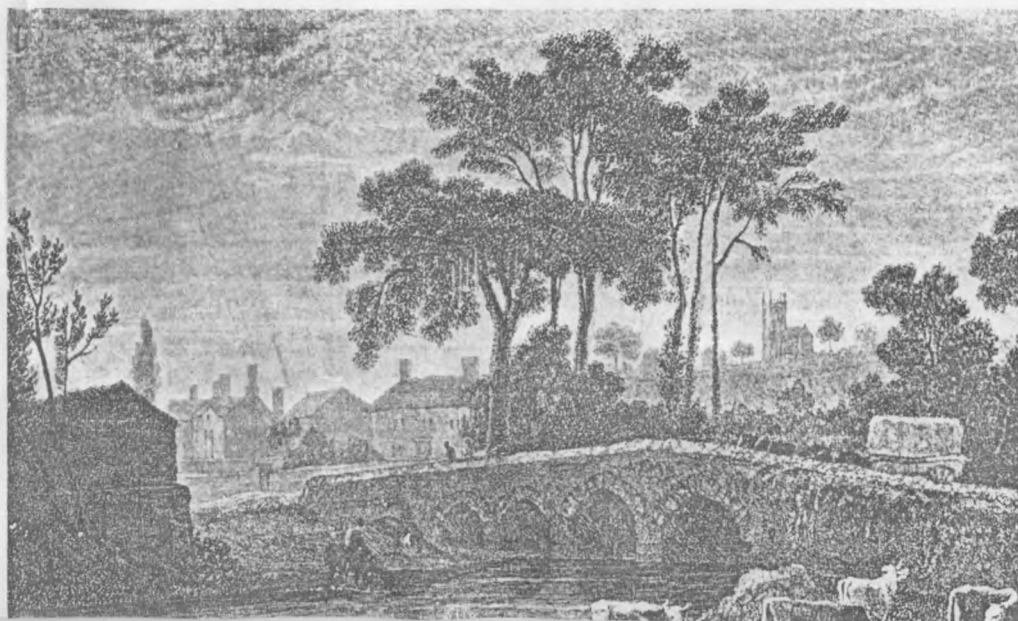


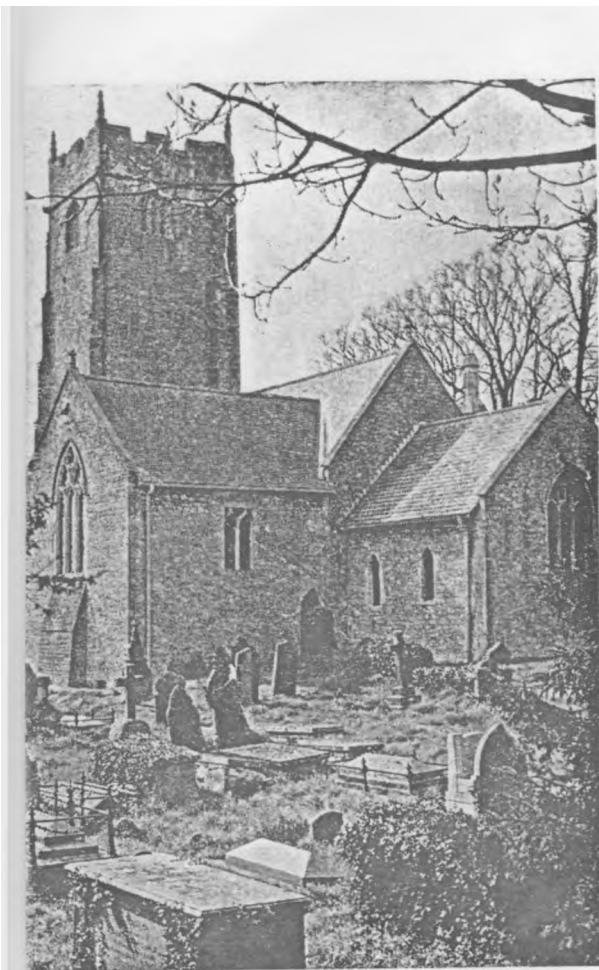
The Mill, Llanblethian

Photograph by Haydn Baynham, Cardiff

Old Bridge, Llanblethian

H. W. Bond after H. Gastineau, c. 1820



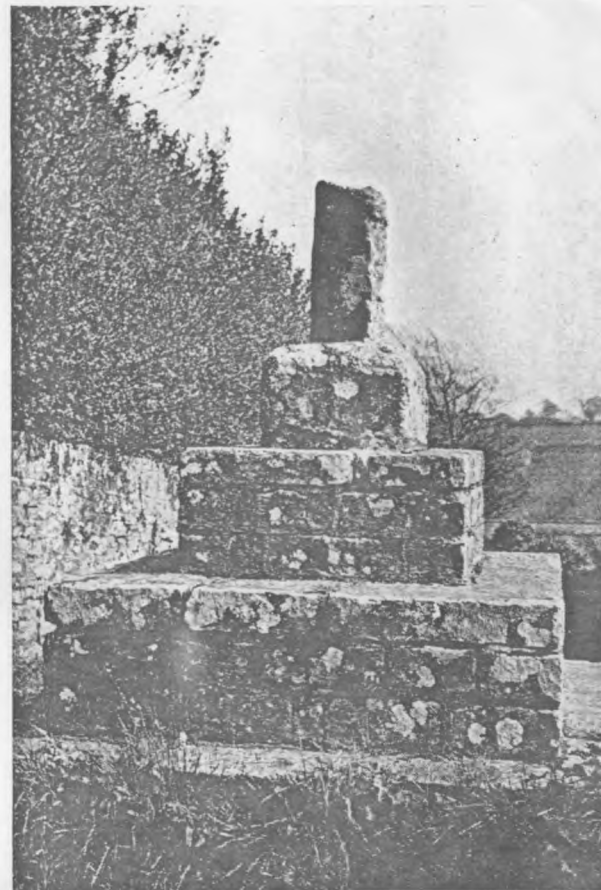


(Left) Llanblethian Church



*Photographs
by Haydn Baynham, Cardiff*

(Right) The remains
of the medieval cross,
Llanblethian



the sluice-gate still survives in line with the Verlands, but most of it was removed a few years ago as it impeded the current.

Woodlands were valued by the countryfolk as a source of fuel and of acorns for their pigs, but hunting and hawking rights were reserved for the lord. Talyfan had more wooded areas than Llanblethian.

It is significant that the lordship was originally named after Llanblethian rather than Cowbridge. Both had fords over the Thaw, later bridged, but Cowbridge only grew in importance under the tutelage of the Normans and, of course, it was on the Portway itself. By the 13th century it was at Cowbridge that evidence was taken as to manorial affairs, but, as explained in the first volume of this series, the town and its civil parish was entirely contained within the parish of Llanblethian and the village of Llanblethian is of very ancient origin. In the last half-century it has changed greatly in its social aspect ; whereas the villagers were, up to that time, entirely concerned with farming or its ancillary crafts, scarcely half a dozen of the old families are now represented. There has been an influx of professional and business people who have bought up properties, large and small, renovating and modernising them. Nearly every house faces south, turning its back or its pine-end to the road where necessary, and for its size the village has a maze of lanes ; there is no suggestion of a village green. There was always plenty of good building-stone (and the quarries were once another perquisite of the lord). Instead of the modern cavity wall the space between the outer and inner facings was filled with rubble, with an occasional larger stone as tie. An outer coating of plaster was white-washed. Indeed, in the *Torrington Diaries* describing his journey through South Wales in 1787, the Hon. John Byng remarks : "From the quantity of lime in this country most houses are whitened, which gives a gay appearance, as also the very roofs of the houses, so that my eyes were dazzled, appearing like undissolved snow." Very similar was the impression of the 15th-century Welsh poet who sang of "the white walls of Glamorgan." But not many roofs could have been whitewashed here because the normal roofing was not shingles as in the hill-country but thatch of local straw. Where these were neglected the roof-timbers were exposed to the weather and that allowed rain to percolate into the core of rubble so that the buildings gradually disintegrated. That

is why the two almshouses of 1727 north of the bridge have fallen into ruins and also the old Bridge Farm (sometimes called Llanblethian Farm) which became uninhabitable by 1930. Like Trebettin, illustrated on the jacket of this volume, and Pentwyn, this would seem to have been a development of the old Welsh "long house," of which there is an example at St. Fagan's Folk Museum, extended longitudinally as the standard of living rose.

But most of the stonework in the village is good, solid work, and it has delighted many of the newcomers to strip it of the outer plaster and expose its soft tones. It is most regrettable that the main bridge with its fine buttresses could not have been preserved by underpinning; its modern successor has neither character nor beauty. The same is true of the smaller bridges near the mill. Possibly the oldest inhabited house is the former woollen factory at the extreme western end of the village, shown in Professor Rees's map, on which Mr. and Mrs. Rhys Roberts have spent ten years in loving restoration, opening up a very solid medieval stone stairway, exposing the oaken rafters and establishing that the original building was a single storey, for the shoulder of the first roof is visible in the first floor. The detached building on the other side of the brook is (apart from its windows) almost as old as the main building where the wool was washed, carded and spun. It housed at least two looms. The mill pond was west of it, fed by a leet, now overgrown, parallel with the brook. The mill-wheel and looms are now at St. Fagan's. Even sixty years ago many of the older villagers wore the products of this factory both for underwear and outer garments, especially the "brethyn llwyd" so serviceable for country wear. The women spinners and the weavers lived in the village except in the final phase of its existence when it depended on itinerant weavers. Cloth and flannel were taken into Cowbridge and Bridgend on market days within living memory and among the customers were the cockle-women of the Swansea area for whom a special black flannel with narrow scarlet stripes was woven. The factory ceased to function before the first World War.

Great House—Ty Mawr to the old people—was originally a Windsor property. Another article in this volume tells how David Jones of Wallington lived there for twenty years and gave us such invaluable information and sketches of the district. When, most reluctantly, his mother and he left, it was occupied by a member of

the Bruce family, who kept a pack of hounds at Danygraig, ever since known as The Kennels. Great House is now occupied by Mrs. Prichard, late of Pwlywrach (a house of much the same date and design) and Mrs. Carne, late of Nash Manor. Its sundial is dated 1702. Of the same period is Llanblethian House, just below the former vicarage, long part of the Dunraven Estate. Some sixty years ago it was the home of Col. Wyndham Quin, later the Earl of Dunraven.

On the Factory Road is a large range of tall buildings used as a malt-house up to 1928. Barley was spread on the ground floor to germinate, screened of its green shoots on the first floor and finally left to ferment on the top floor. Before it was made illegal most farmers brewed their own beer ; the field opposite Cross Inn was a hop-field and so, in all probability, was the field south of the high, sheltering wall running from Castle Cottage (the site of the Castle pound) to Porth-y-Green, known as The Vineyard, for though the Vale was famed for its orchards in the Middle Ages its climate can never have suited the grape-vine.

Hill House, or its predecessor on the site, was taken for a while by Edward Sterling. John Sterling, his son, was a great friend of Thomas Carlyle who, gathering material for his *Life of John Sterling*, visited the village about 1850.

Of the parish church it is unnecessary to write here as the present vicar, Rev. Ewart Lewis, has written of it in some detail in the first volume of this series. He writes of its close connection with Tewkesbury Abbey. Neath Abbey also held land in the vicinity and the 1534-5 returns give the value of its land in Llanblethian, Talyfan and Ruthin as worth £10. At the period of the Reformation, Bishop Blethyn of Llandaff (1543-1566) thundered against the Roman Catholic loyalists—the “recusants.” There was a group of these at Llanblethian but they are not mentioned as often as those of Penllyne and Colwinston.

Both in Llanblethian and Aberthyn, Welsh was still spoken by the older villagers sixty years ago. Possibly that accounts for the establishment of a Welsh Calvinistic Methodist church at Aberthyn and for the close link between Llanblethian and Ramoth Baptist Church in Cowbridge where Welsh services were held on Sabbath mornings up to about 1912. These were attended by a large proportion of Llanblethian families who built a Sunday School-room in

their own village in 1886 (the Church School-room followed in 1889). As might be expected, a great many field-names on the Tithe Map as late as 1841 are Welsh, sometimes corrupted in form, *e.g.*, Erw Dellin near Brynhyfryd, with Cae Scallan close by, Cae Lloi (field of calves) belonging to Bridge Farm, Caer y Dynny (significantly near the ancient Iron Age fort), Tair Erw, Pump Erw, Chwech Erw and Saith Erw (three, five, six and seven acres). There are some strange hybrids, too, like Porth-y-green. And what was the true form of "Llan-ed" for the lane passing Brynhyfryd? Llanblethian Hill was called "Angell Hill" in 1630, but there is no warrant for "Mount Ida" which seems to have originated in the Grammar School; perhaps it was a whimsy of a classics master! "Cae Rex" was once the property of Anne Wrex, a fact which also disposes of some pretty theories. As for "Bowmen's Well" the 1570 version was Bumblig Well, possibly onomatopaeic from its bubbling forth. Variants have been Bamblige, Booman's Well and Bomin Well, this last most common in modern times. Alongside the woollen factory is a ford where stones made a "causeway"; Welsh-speaking folk would naturally elide the "w" so that it has become "Cowsey." And what are we to make of "Piccadilly," the lane passing the old bakehouse and the Baptist schoolroom? One elderly villager says that it was so called "because it was so pretty with trees"; if so, they have vanished.

Carlyle declared that the smallest real fact about the past of man . . . was more poetical than all Shelley and more romantic than all Scott. Certainly we find romance in reality as we trace the long story of Llanblethian and Talyfan. This is a very incomplete story—there is plenty still for future historians to explore.

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