

'Villainous' Richard III sent them



□ Holy Cross Church, Crowbridge.

○ Most school pupils have been taught that Richard III was, at best, a bad king, at worst - villainous.

Church with royal connection

by **SIDNEY R. THOMAS**

Many historians now believe he might have been very much maligned. Whatever the truth, the inhabitants of Cowbridge, South Glamorgan, have at least one good reason to be grateful to him.

The history of the little market town is long, there being some evidence that Neolithic Man lived thereabouts. Dimly, I recall the excitement caused by a "find" at nearby Breach Farm. Several barrows dating from the Bronze Age, had been discovered close to Llanblethian, a village two miles from Cowbridge.

Very recently Roman relics have been unearthed in the town itself, particularly alongside North Road.

Between the Roman period and early Norman times, development of the town seems to have halted. While Cowbridge was in a state of decline, the authority of the church at Llanblethian covered a widely scattered and busy parish.

It was during the 13th Century

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a priest

that the fortunes of Cowbridge began to revive. Its position was favourable, being on the main route from the important Roman settlement at Caerleon down to the South and West of Wales. Its situation was appreciated by Richard de Clare. He was both Lord of Glamorgan and Lord of the Manor of Llanblethian.

Selecting a spot where the River Thaw cut across the main road, he established a new town of Cowbridge. The site proved to be an excellent choice - in the centre of the Vale of Glamorgan. In fact, the town is sometimes known as "The Capital of the Vale".

The need for a church to serve the inhabitants soon became evident. As a consequence, the Church of Holy Cross was constructed in the 13th century. The sturdy stone building was actually intended to be a chapel, to be the responsibility of Llanblethian Church and its Vicar.

As the size of Cowbridge continued to increase, the people began to feel they needed a clergyman to minister to their own requirements on a full-time basis. They decided to approach the then Lord of Glamorgan. That person happened to be Richard III. He held the title through his marriage to Anne Neville, a daughter of Warwick the Kingmaker.

The King agreed to their wishes. His letter, which was dated February 27, 1484, required the Bishop of Llandaff, Cardiff, to provide a priest to officiate full-time at Holy Cross Church. He was to "administer the sacraments as often as may be necessary, to be maintained and provided for from the fruits and proceeds of the tithes and revenues paid by the same inhabitants." The "inhabitants" referred to were the people of Cowbridge.

Like most churches, Holy Cross has undergone some alterations during its 700 years' existence. In the 15th century a chantry chapel was added to the East end of the building. As was the custom with all such establishments, it was the duty of the chantry priest to pray daily for its founder. As choirboys in the 1930s, we robed in the old chantry, which was then the choir vestry.

The tower is sturdily squat and quite imposing. The top is octagonal in shape and crenellated, giving it a castle-like appearance. Some historians believe the church might have been a place of refuge in times of trouble.



□The buttressed tower of Holy Cross with its octagonal castle-like top. The wall (right) is that of the five court at the old Grammar School.

The sound of a full peal of eight bells, housed in the tower, is well-known. I recall enjoying the rare sight of those bells sitting alongside the main pathway to the church. That was in 1935, when they had been taken down from the tower for repair and re-tuning.

Another likely royal connection is also evident. The aisle, at the East end of which stands the organ, was a major addition to the original fabric.

It is known as the Llanquian Aisle, said to have been a gift from the same Anne Neville, wife of King Richard III.

Since the days when I was a choirboy at Holy Cross there have been further alterations inside the building. During Matins and Evensong I felt secure, shielded from the congregation by an ornate, carved screen. That has been removed, bringing the clergy and the people closer. Also, it allows the members of the congregation to enjoy a clear view of the chancel and the altar, which is backed by a lively stained glass window.

No-one can visit the church without becoming aware of its connection with the 17th century Grammar School, situated next door. Between the choir vestry and the chancel a screen has been placed in memory of Mr Richard Williams.

From its establishment in the early 17th century, headmasters of the school were always clergymen. Mr Williams, a familiar figure in the town when I was a boy, became its first lay head teacher.

Besides day boys, the school, now a mixed comprehensive, took in boarders until its constitution was changed in the 1970s. Those boys were regular worshippers at Holy Cross. I watched them filing into their chancel seats for morning and evening services each Sunday of the school term.

They were impressive in their dark suits and stiff white collars. The senior boys wore the latter tucked inside their

coat collars. Junior pupils wore them outside. The headmaster and the boarding masters took their turns to read Lessons during divine service.

There are other reminders of the association between the former Grammar School and Holy Cross. When the school became comprehensive, some stained glass windows, bearing various coats of arms, were transferred from the school to the church.

In the Llanquian Aisle, is a war memorial window to the old boys. Alongside it are two stone tablets, listing the names of ex-pupils who were killed in the two World Wars.

When we, as young boys, considered it a "double dare" to walk round the churchyard alone after dark we were totally unaware of the history all about us.

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