

History ~~of~~ on my doorstep. (S.W. 1959)

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TWO VALE CHURCHES LLANBLETHIAN and COWBRIDGE

by

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WHEN the road from Cardiff descends towards Cowbridge, the view westward is a noble one. In the middle of the hollow stands the squat, octagonal tower of Cowbridge, and high up on the left the Somerset-type tower of Llanblethian. Cowbridge church is so low-lying and hemmed in that, once he has reached Cowbridge, the traveller will not see it till he has sought it out in its corner between the *Duke of Wellington* and the Grammar School; it is remarkable, in fact, how many of our visitors leave without ever seeing Cowbridge's oldest treasure.

Before looking at these churches, it is well to understand their relationship. As its dedication to St. Blethian shows, Llanblethian church stands on an early Christian site. It became a mother-church serving a large area, with chapelries at Cowbridge, Llanquian, near Aberthin, and Welsh St. Donat's. In Norman times, not it would seem with its worshippers' glad consent, Llanblethian Church was held by Tewkesbury Abbey. It was a considerable ecclesiastical centre, with five or six priests attached to it; the transept now housing the organ and the vestry was a chantry chapel, and when the Victorian restorers cleared of its dead the crypt beneath it, they found a sadly battered pre-Reformation chalice, still to be seen in its glass case in the Vestry. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, Llanquian Church fell down and was not rebuilt. Cowbridge Church, already of a size suitable to the rising dignity of that place, was enlarged by a south aisle reserved for the Llanquian people, and still called the *Llanquian aisle*. At the dissolution of the monasteries, the patronage of Llanblethian passed to the Dean and Chapter of Gloucester, who continued to appoint Vicars till the Disestablishment of the Church in Wales. That event cost us our glebe, situated in the valley south of Llanblethian Church, and now part of the properties from which

the County Council derives its Welsh Church Fund. After Dis-establishment, too, the delightful church of Welsh St. Donat's was severed from Llanblethian and joined with Ystradowen.

Llanblethian Church, therefore, is the ancient parish church of the benefice of Llanblethian with Cowbridge. Cowbridge Church is quite as old a building ; it has its own churchyard and churchwardens, and is much larger than its mother church. But though treated as a parish church for all practical purposes, it is not a parish church in the full canonical sense. Whoever has been Vicar of Llanblethian has also been incumbent of Cowbridge, and only once, towards the end of the 18th century, has an attempt been made to disturb this order of things. Thomas Williams, headmaster of the Grammar School, was also curate of Cowbridge. His friends and kinsfolk on the Town Council persuaded that body to promise a contribution towards a stipend, and Williams himself made a determined attempt to persuade Queen Anne's Bounty to provide funds which would make Cowbridge an independent cure, with Williams as first incumbent. The Bounty administrators were sympathetic, but insisted on the Vicar's consent. From the Gloucestershire living which he held in plurality with Llanblethian, the Vicar, John Evans, made it very plain that he did not agree. The Town Council, when brought to the point, would not guarantee to continue its contribution towards the stipend beyond the lifetime of Thomas Williams. The whole intrigue collapsed, its one echo today is a bundle of papers preserved in the Church in Wales archives, and we remain "Llanblethian with Cowbridge" in official terminology.

The case of Thomas Williams underlines an essential feature of the history of the Church in this place. From its foundation around 1608 till recent times, headmasters of the Grammar School were nearly always curates of the parish as well, and the same thing went for many of the assistant masters. This fact, and the proximity of Cowbridge Church and the School, means that for three centuries and a half the two institutions have had the closest links, though the Church has never had legal control of the School. Like their predecessors, the boarders come to the ordinary parish services and join fully in church life. On special occasions, the whole School attends, and on November 12th, 1958, a great service marked the 350th anniversary of its foundation. We proudly house the memorials

of two great wars. We trust that boarder-choristers who Sunday by Sunday walk over the graves of three headmasters, Thomas Williams, William Williams, and Daniel Walters, do so with a proper sense of the past rather than in a spirit of youthful sadism. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this association, or to over-praise the enlightened manner in which the School's present rulers continue to foster it.

We turn from history to the actual buildings. Neither church could be called a famous example of later medieval architecture. We have no wealth of ancient decoration in stone or wood. But years passed in and around the two buildings bring home their great charm and interest. Llanblethian on its hill is the crown of a lovely village. The lane to Stallcourt gives the best view of the exterior. You are at once struck by the excellent proportions of the whole building, by a finely carved cross on the roof, and by the simple grace of the 15th century tower at the west end. Whatever the weather and light, the impression is wholly delightful. The porch retains its ancient stone seats, and the marks on the stonework surrounding the door speak of times when gentlemen carried swords and sharpened them on the way to their devotions. Much stained glass makes the interior dark, on some days very dark ; one window, given in memory of William Franklen Evans, the last clerical headmaster of the Grammar School, must be unique in an Anglican church in that it has a figure of St. Thomas Aquinas as well as one of St. Nicholas, the patron of children. W.F.E. by all account was not Thomist in his theology, and one wonders what he would say if he saw it. Still, St. Thomas was the Angel of the Schools, he laboured with recalcitrant pupils as W.F.E. did, and it was a happy thought to include the likeness of the Christian Aristotle in a memorial to a priest-schoolmaster.

St. Thomas's neighbour is a great wall-plaque of little beauty but no positive ugliness. It records the parochial charities, and is still no doubt a source of distraction to youthful or even older minds not wholly given to prayer and the Word. Alongside it is the best monument in the Church, that erected in memory of Sir Leoline Jenkins by Jesus College, Oxford, in the middle of the 18th century. Jenkins had several ties with Llanblethian. His father came from the parish and was buried with his wife in the churchyard ; their tombstone is to be seen in the porch on the left as you go in. Jenkins himself

gave our tenor bell, and his brother Evan gave the lands at Talyfan part of whose rents are still annually divided between Ystradowen and Llanblethian churches. Go past the door leading to the old rood loft, and the lectern with its *Bruce Rogers* Bible, and you enter the Chancel. It has three very pleasant small windows, and the arrow-slit shape of that on the north side is particularly attractive. There are old and handsome altar-rails, and the frontal and carpet were made from materials used in Westminster Abbey at the last Coronation. From the altar, you look down towards the great tower arch and the medieval font under it, and up to the ancient timbers forming the inner roof of the body of the Church ; and the whole is certainly a place of refreshment and peace.

Fifteen minutes' walk through fields and along the river brings you to the South Gate of Cowbridge, the Grammar School inside it, and the Church beyond. Here, the tower stands in all its bulk at the junction of nave and chancel. It has lost the spire it once boasted, but still houses a glorious peal of eight bells all cast by William Evans of Chepstow in 1722. Ringers come from far and wide, and our home band is strong and skilled. A glance is enough to show that here is a building at once larger and more complicated than its mother church. Besides the Llanquian aisle, there stands to the north of the chancel the choir vestry, formerly the Lady Chapel, and the clergy vestry beyond it to the east. There is not here the symmetry of Llanblethian ; the Llanquian aisle, which does much to make the view of the church from the south the best view, is perhaps what architects would praise most. Entry is by a Victorian porch to the North, and one at once faces the nave arcade, dating from the time of the construction of the Llanquian aisle. When the nave received its new oak ceiling a generation ago, these graceful pillars were taken down stone by stone and rebuilt. The Llanquian aisle has a striking barrel roof ; we hope one day to restore to it the bosses taken down by previous restorers and still preserved in the church. Another barrel roof is hidden by the plaster ceiling of the chancel. The chancel is of uncommon length ; it is furnished on the lines of a college chapel, it is said through the generosity of Bishop Copleston when he lived at Llandough Castle. Savage things have been said of the mosaic work behind the altar, but the emblems of the four Evangelists have a grace and vigour which lead one to hope that they at least may long survive.

The floor of the whole church is full of graves. Several Carnes of Nash rest beneath their pew, and the chancel might well be described as a mausoleum of the Edmondes family. The many monuments fascinate the local historian, but only two have outstanding artistic merit, the Carne monument with weepers on the south wall, and that to Judge David Jenkins of Hensol to the right of the north door. After his defiance of Cromwell and imprisonment in the Tower, this firm champion of Throne and Altar returned to Hensol and found burial near his monument. The church is also the burial place of the poet Lewis Morgannwg, the genealogist Rice Meyrick of Cottrell, and the topographer Benjamin Heath Malkin. Two things, it must be confessed, detract much from the beauty of the interior. The small and low chancel arch with its screen hampers a full vista. Also, Victorian zeal packed the whole church with massive pews designed for numbers rather than comfort, and creating a depressing effect which would be quite deadly were it not that the nave and the Llanquian aisle receive abundance of light from unpainted windows. We need less furniture better arranged, and then the merits of the church as a building will be much more obvious.

In their plate, these churches have a treasure indeed. Cowbridge has an Elizabethan chalice, dated 1576, which with the Llanblethian priest's chalice is our oldest piece, and now looks well after a stay in London for repairs. The 17th century is represented at Llanblethian by a most lovely gilt cup with cover, and at Cowbridge by two patens, one of which came from Judge Jenkins' immediate family, and a magnificent flagon given by a Seys. From the 18th century, Llanblethian has a beautiful standing paten, and a salver used as alms-dish which is an excellent example of early George III silver. The 19th century gave each church a further paten of identical shape and good design. The present age has added to our store as well, notably a chalice and paten and bread box with cruets made by Robert Stone, and another set of Communion vessels made by Leslie Durbin.

A final word about restoration work may be of interest. During the latter part of the 19th century, Llanblethian was thoroughly restored. There may be two opinions about uncovering the interior wall-surfaces down to the bare stone, but on the whole this restoration was careful and well executed, and we still enjoy its fruits. At Cowbridge, the Victorians did much by way of furnishing, and

gave the interior its present appearance. But the fabric of this church received little radical attention till the 1920's and 30's. The nave then received new inner and outer roofs, and the interior of the tower was thoroughly renewed, recasting and rehangng of the bells included. Since the end of the war, under Mr. George Pace's guidance, further work has begun. The whole exterior is to be repointed, and all the buttresses will receive thorough treatment involving rebuilding in most cases. This done, we have to treat the barrel roof of the Llanquian aisle, and give it a new slate roof. Work already done since 1945 includes the renewal of all the roof gutters and the repointing of the tower, the work on which has received deserved praise for its thoroughness and skill. Restoration has already cost us £6,000, and several thousands more will have to be found before the work is complete. All the money raised has been raised locally so far, and we hope that a generous grant recently made by the Churches Committee of the Church in Wales may be the forerunner of other donations from outside. But whatever happens, we shall go on till the fabric of Holy Cross is safe for future generations, and more worthy of Him to whose great Name it has witnessed through seven centuries.

