

Notes from Local Interest Group Meeting 31st August 2023

Present: Maureen Lloyd, John Price, Mike & Helen Prosser, Fran Shaw, Diana Lloyd, Joan Lloyd, Colin & Julia Price, Fr Paul & Carolyn Keown, Helen Barnett, Anne Humphries, Dawn Richards, Lynda Aiano, Jennifer Lewis, Jenny Smith, Margaret Evans, David & Anwyn Price, Victor & Cherry Williams, Celia Jones, Joan Hughes, Elsa Harflett, Bronwen Jenkins, Misha Pedersen, James & Jenny Martin, Richard Thomas, Ivor & Penny Williams, Roy Lloyd. At Church House we were met by Adela Campbell, Ann-Marie Campbell, Camilla Waters, and Harry Waters

Apologies: Den & Wendy Ozols, Howard & Ann Dean

Everyone met in Llandeilo Graban church, which was the first part of our visit. Later we moved on to Church House which is just opposite the churchyard gates. ML introduced Fr Paul Keown who is the vicar of the parish and he then welcomed everyone and talked generally about the church and its setting. He told us how Llandeilo Graban is a truly parish church, a church with a wonderful welcome.

Llandeilo Church and local area

Mike Prosser then outlined some of the history of the church and the parish - St Teilo's church, Llandeilo Graban, or the parish of the corn marigolds. Although the corn marigolds have gone there are primroses and wild daffodils instead. The village is made up of scattered farms and cottages on the eastern slope of the Wye valley. St Teilo lived in the 6th century; he was elected Archbishop of St Davids but transferred to Llandaff, and became its second Bishop. He died at Llandeilo Fawr in Carmarthenshire in about 580 A.D.

Within the parish is a remarkable wooded gorge, with a splendid waterfall and pool called Craig Pwll Ddu; this is isolated and difficult to access. Above the pool is a high crag where legend has it that a 13th century Prince hurled his enemies to the rocks below. Behind the crag is an earthwork, possibly Celtic in origin. Within the ancient woodland there are many species of plants as well as rare ferns. Overlooking the gorge is a hill, Twyn-y-garth, with an Iron Age Fort and possibly a medieval castle. Alongside is a First World War German Field Gun, erected as a memorial to the local men who lost their lives in World War I. Nearby is a 15th century farmhouse, which it is said at one time was a hostel for travelling priests.



The church, dating from the 14th century, consists of a nave, chancel and west tower. The nave has a wooden barrel roof with carved bosses and the chancel has an open roof. It is a plain building with very few memorials. The font is 14th century and the altar rails 17th century. There has probably been a church on the site since the 6th century. The wooden panels are supposed to have been made from previous pews. Although some restoration work was carried out in 1897, the Church escaped Victorian "improvement". There are three bells, which were re-cast in 1908. In 1985 the whole church was re-roofed with stone tiles, and in 1992 the broken-down churchyard boundary wall was replaced with a dry-stone wall. Some restoration took place in 1995/96 to the interior of the church and also provided a Meeting Room on the ground floor of the tower, the oak screen and kitchen. A car park adjoining the churchyard was created from a derelict garden in 2003. In 2019 the old shed at the back of the Church was replaced with a new building to house a toilet and washbasin.

Mike then went on to tell us the tale of the last dragon in Wales, which lived in the upper storey of the tower. He related the plan to kill the dragon using a dummy dragon of oak and steel, which led to the death of this dragon. The dingle between Great House and Llandeilo Graban Church is known as the Devil's Elbow and this, according to some, was where the last dragon died.



There were one or two questions and a discussion on the age of the site. As it is a circular site, it is likely that the present church was built on the site of a previous Celtic Christian site. Would the yew trees have been there in St Teilo's time? The Celtic Christian tradition enveloped Ireland, Wales and the edges of Britain, while the Romans brought their Catholic customs. At the Synod of Whitby in the 7th century, Britain agreed to follow the Roman customs rather than the Celtic practices. There are a few reminders in the Church of some ancient practices - a pole to prevent entry into the Church and the stone bowls for washing of hands. There were books laid out at the back of the church for information about the Church and the recasting of the bells in 1908. One question was about the Garth charity, was it connected with the Church? However, David Price told us that the gentleman in question decided to leave Garth Farm for the benefit of the poor, but there does not appear to be a direct connection with the Church.

The Church House would probably have been a drovers' pub at one stage, and there was another pub at the other end of the churchyard near the kissing gate, but on the other side of the road. This pub was called The Bell. Brian Pugh called the road from the church down to Pentrecaeau the Bell Road, and Jenny Smith confirmed that the top field of Pentrecaeau was called the Bell Field, obviously referring to its close proximity to the pub. The only sign of it now is a small pile of stones

near the cross roads. The Bell had ceased to be a pub before 1841 when the census starts, but it was lived in at that stage; it was uninhabited by the 1891 census. Before the 1850s there were two cottages on that site. David Price said that the Tithe Map of the 1840s showed that, at that time, there were several cottages dotted around the area. There was then a question about when the Welsh language disappeared from the community. The vicar thought it had started to happen in 1536 with the Act of Union of England and Wales as people found English helpful in central community life. However, the early Church services would have been in Latin, so Welsh would not have been so important in the early Church, but the local dialects of the language would have been much more pronounced. Radnorshire lost its Welshness quite early on because it is near the border with England. The vicar felt that the English influence is more marked in the Churches of Newchurch and Bryngwyn. Medieval Welsh would have been very different from the Welsh of today, as is Medieval English. At that time they would probably have had more similarities than the Welsh and English of today. Anwyn Price said it is surprising from the 1911 census how many people did speak Welsh; some of her family, although they were from Hereford, spoke Welsh, but it was at that time just beginning to fade, with many people feeling that the Welsh language belonged in the past.

After a look around the Church and the Churchyard, we moved on to Church House. The Bell, the pub at the other end of the churchyard, Church House and the Rhyn were in the same ownership from the beginning of the 19th century. Various members of the Pugh family lived and worked at the three properties. The Bell was inhabited by two families in 1851 and 1861. Church House was a farm up to the sale in 2018, when it was sold by Brian Pugh, although it was originally a pub, but not within living memory. In the 19th century it was occupied by the Pugh family and during the First World War Maggie May, the teenage daughter of David and Jane Pugh, entertained the locals in the dancehall on the first floor. Someone recalled their mother talking about a minstrel's gallery at Church House. The last people to live in Church House were the Watkins family and Adela told us about the initials RW engraved near the threshold; this would have been Reg Watkins.



Adela's husband, Bamber, is a builder, which was crucial to the restoration. Adela explained that they tried to renovate the house back to what had been there originally, so any bits of plaster, etc, are probably part of the original; it was as if the house told them what to do. Anything they could retain they did. The flagstones in the kitchen are original, however the floor of the living room was earth, as that end had been used as a barn, so some flagstones were purchased for that room and under-floor heating was installed. Dicken Sweet helped so much with the renovation. He was able to remake authentic joints and other pieces for the house. The windows and doors have been retained in their original positions. The kitchen appears to be the oldest part of the house. The loft on the third storey could well have been the site of the minstrel's gallery; it is now partly furnished with the end space providing a bat loft or bedroom. When Dicken was fixing the slate roof he discovered that

there had been dormer windows, so these have been restored. The fires presented a challenge, the chimneys had to be lined, with an Esse stove in the kitchen providing cooking facilities and hot water and an open wood fire in the living room. The roof had been leaking for some time, so some beams had to be replaced. As many floorboards as possible were retained, but some had to be replaced. The oldest part of the house is probably Jacobean, ie 17th century, and it would probably have been used for meetings as well as accommodation and entertainment.

The evening closed with sumptuous refreshments and a tour of the building. Many thanks for the efforts of Llandeilo Graban Church friends and Adela Campbell and family. Thanks so much to everyone who helped to make this another informative and entertaining evening.