

Local Interest Group visit to Bryngwyn, 27th August 2015

On 27th August, the Local Interest Group met at Bryngwyn Church for a field trip which took us around the important sites there. 24 members were in attendance. Chris Rose sent her apologies.

We started off in the church, which is dedicated to St Michael. Ginny Guy introduced herself as a former church surveyor for the Diocese and then she told us all about the church and its history. She said that Bryngwyn exists because of the church foundation but is now isolated from its satellite settlement at Rhosgoch, which developed later around the crossing point of a number of routeways, much as the church at Llanbedr is separated from the medieval borough of Painscastle.

On a map, it can be seen that the churchyard is almost circular and this is often the sign of an early Christian site. Additional evidence comes from an ancient pillar stone (now displayed in the chancel, but formerly sited in the churchyard) which has been dated to the 7th or 8th century. It is inscribed with five crosses and also possibly elements of an early Irish script called Ogham. Stones like this were erected to mark holy ground that had been consecrated and set aside for Christian burial. Later, when permanent churches were erected, the south side of a church continued as consecrated land for burials, whereas the north side was used in the medieval period for games and festivities on Holy Days, and also for archery practice - as it was then required of all of the men in the parish that they should be trained in this skill.

The church is essentially medieval, with surviving lancet windows dating from the 13th century, but it was partially rebuilt and re-ordered in Victorian times and so now looks very different from how it did in the Middle Ages. It is a typical Radnorshire church, simple in plan with no aisles or transepts. The elements of the medieval church - the porch, the nave, the chancel, the sanctuary and the High Altar - had specific and essential functions with the layout originally designed for clergy processions through spaces of increasing sanctity. The chancel, as the only consecrated area, was the most important space in the medieval church, where the priests performed the sacred mysteries from behind a screen. Its upkeep was the responsibility of the rector, and it was kept locked - the priest having a separate door on the south side through which he entered; it is still possible to see where this was in the wall on the outside of the church. Services were held in Latin and those non-ordained did not have an active role at this time, but people would have gathered to witness the Mass, and the original purpose of the nave area was to shelter them as they did so. What they really wanted to see was the central moment when the priest held aloft the transubstantiated host, as they believed the sight of it brought blessings and salvation, and they would do this by peering through openings in the screen.

The nave would have been quite dark with few windows as there were no prayer books or hymn books to be read, but the walls would have been plastered and painted with richly-coloured images of religious and moral significance, lit up by the flickering of candlelight. People visited the church whenever they wished and lit candles and prayed before smaller altars, statues, icons and holy relics housed in the nave. The clergy and choir had stalls in the chancel, but seating for the laity in the nave was not introduced until later in the medieval period when the preaching of sermons became more common. The nave roof dates to the Victorian restoration, but the chancel retains an ornate roof structure dating to around the late 15th century. There was no distinction between domestic and ecclesiastical architecture at this time and similar roof designs survive in some of the higher-status local houses.

At the west end, Bryngwyn has a timber bell-cote rather than a large stone tower and it houses two old bells, one of them 13th century, which is the oldest surviving in Radnorshire. Bells were rung to call the faithful to mass and also to sound at the moment of the elevation of the host so that people not in church could share in the event. The base of the belfry area was also where a coffin might lie in vigil on the eve of the funeral and where certain funerary rites were performed. In medieval times, the preliminary ceremonies of several other rites of passage, such as baptism and marriage, and the churcing of women after childbirth, took place before entering the church and so a porch was often built for shelter. Later on, when the porch was used for vestry committee meetings and for the signing of legal documents, seating along the sides would be provided. Bryngwyn's porch dates from the late 15th or early 16th century.

After the Protestant Reformation in this country, initiated by Henry VIII and then fully codified during the reign of Elizabeth I in the later 16th century, the Catholic Mass was abolished and congregational services conducted in English

were imposed. Screens were taken down to open up the chancel and the high altar was replaced by a wooden communion table sited nearer to the congregation. People now joined in the liturgy (using the new Book of Common Prayer) and, in order to get more light into the nave, larger windows were inserted.

During the 17th and 18th centuries the layout and use of the church changed again, as the 'Preaching of the Word of God' dominated and the Eucharist was only celebrated a few times a year. The nave gradually filled up with seating, usually in the form of private boxed pews, and the orientation of the seating was often altered so that the congregation faced a large pulpit sited on the north wall. The chancel lost its sacred significance and the space was sometimes used for additional seating or for storage. At this time the layout of churches and the new non-Conformist chapels was very similar.

By the 19th century Bryngwyn church was in a very poor state of repair due to dwindling church incomes. Fewer people privately funded church building projects or left money to the church in their wills. In times of economic hardship in the countryside, the vestry diverted more of the parish rate to poor relief, and the non-Conformist movement also channelled private money into the building of chapels. Eventually, extensive restoration work was undertaken, to the chancel in 1845 (funded by the rector) and to the rest of the church in 1876 (funded by the parishioners). Much walling was rebuilt, doors and windows were shifted around and new tiled floors were laid.

The building we see today is basically a Victorian church in a medieval shell, as in the mid-19th century another major rethinking of how an Anglican church should look and function was initiated by intellectual theologians. The current church layout has fossilised this Victorian hybrid form - which embodies a re-invented medieval ceremonial Catholicism crossed with reformed Protestant congregational worship. The dignity of the chancel was restored with the high altar re-established - sited on a dais and railed off - and the altar was approached by a series of steps leading from the nave up to the chancel and sanctuary (a little like a mini cathedral). New uniform open seating was put into the nave and these all faced east again. Unusually, until 1945 male and female members of the congregation at Bryngwyn were segregated.

Ginny then drew our attention to two interesting features that we would pass as we went out of the church. The first is a medieval grave slab, discovered being used as a window cill during the restoration, and which is now displayed in the porch. It dates to the 14th century and commemorates a priest, as engraved on it are a chalice and a holy book. The second item of interest is actually part of the fabric of the building. On the SE corner of the church is an engraved stone, with a woman carved on one side and a man on the other. No-one knows anything about this stone but it is a wonderful and intriguing feature.



Once we were outside the Church, Maureen Lloyd told us about Bryngwyn, the settlement. She and Ginny have done some extensive research, mainly using old Ordnance Survey maps and the 1844 tithe map schedules, as well as other sources. In the 19th century, there were five cottages opposite the church on the south side, all of which had a small plot of land. These were later demolished and the church hall was built on the same land in 1914. Sadly, this hall had to be demolished this year (2015) because it had fallen into a state of disrepair.

When the church was restored in Victorian times, the rectory was so dilapidated that it had to be pulled down. A new vicarage was built to the north east of the church; this is now a private residence. Using the tithe map, we located the possible location of the old rectory, to the north west of the church. There is a gate in the cemetery wall on the west side that was probably used by the vicar on his way to church. Also on the west side of the church is Church House Farm; this would have been very important in the past and probably tied to the church. It may once have acted as a place of refreshment for people coming to church, many of whom would have had to travel some distance on foot or horseback to get there.

High Park, which is just off the common, has been rebuilt, but is in the same position as the earlier house in which the Watkins family lived in the late nineteenth century. Three members from this family went to WW1 and unfortunately David Watkins, the youngest son, was killed in 1917. He was in fact the only casualty from Bryngwyn in the First World War. His older brother, Thomas, and his nephew, Gilbert, also went to war but they returned home safely. David's father, John Watkins, was clerk of Bryngwyn Church for thirty years. He died in the early 1900s while his mother, Eliza, died in 1918 of a heart attack when going to collect water from the well; in the newspaper report it says she had never recovered from the loss of her son in the war.

From the church, we then walked up onto the hill Common to the north of Bryngwyn to look at examples of medieval field systems. We stood on the bank which separated the arable from the common grazing land in medieval times and could see the remnants of the ridge and furrow features that are indicative of medieval arable farming. Further parallel banks running up from the road denoted the old hedged boundaries of the medieval enclosures. Some of the old enclosed fields reverted to common grazing in the 19th century – a process which can be traced on the series of old Ordnance Survey maps shown to us. Mo pointed out one old enclosed field with the site of a demolished house called Crop Short, which survives as a hedged island surrounded now by common land. From this point we could also see High Park, located to the north- west.

At the far upper end of the hillside bank there used to be another two cottages, each in fields encroaching upon the common. The field boundaries at this point make a curious V-shape, seemingly constructed around something pre-existing. On the spot now is a lovely glade of silver birches, but the interpretation of this feature was open to question. Mo also pointed out a quarry in the hill to the north west of where we were standing and postulated that this might be where the stone for the church and the cottages had come from. From here we walked towards the road from Bryngwyn to Glascwm and past another excellent example of a ridge and furrow field system.

The road was used by drovers in the past. We were told that two old houses used to be located on this stretch of the road, marked simply as Postles on the 1817 map; by the 1830 map a further dwelling was marked nearer to the village. On the 1841 census the three are named as Postles, Old House and Postles. On the 1844 Tithe schedule they are (from the north) Apostles Farm, Old House, and Apostles Inn. The census returns hint that the latter operated on a seasonal basis only, to serve the drovers and pedlars, as the occupiers also had other employment. It was noted that the road between Bryngwyn and Glascwm is not as wide as a typical drovers' road and there would have been fewer places on the roadside for the animals to graze, so it was theorized that the first set of fields they came to after the long haul were rented out for temporary grazing (a 'halfpenny field' as in Painscastle), and that the inn was established at some time in the 1820s or 30s to cater for the men. An 1856 newspaper sales notice records it as the Postles Inn, and the 1861 census as Upper Apostles - occupied by Rees Lloyd, publican. Francis Kilvert wrote in his diary in July 1870, that he walked past 'Apostles Inn', but both maps and census from about 1890 record Upper Apostles as uninhabited. The Old House had long since been pulled down; the inn disappeared off the maps about 1950 and Lower Apostles was demolished last of all.

There is evidence that Philip Powell, the long-standing churchwarden/clerk, ran the pub when he lived there in the 1840s. At various times he is also recorded as having been a tailor and a farmer, and then the schoolmaster. Later on he lived in one of the Church Cottages and strolled across to chat with Kilvert when the latter visited the church with his brother. Another Kilvert entry mentions that when the school inspectors decided to make a visit to Bryngwyn school they found Powell had closed it for the day and gone off to beat the parish bounds. The school may have been held at the back of the church, but was also possibly in one of the schoolmaster's rooms at home. John Watkins later took over from Powell as clerk.

Our group then returned to the church, where some of us took the opportunity to look at the maps and other documents provided by Ginny and Mo, and Evelyn Bally asked whether these could be left in the church for others to see. A most interesting and informative evening had been enjoyed by everyone and the weather stayed fine for us. Our thanks go to Ginny and Mo for all of their hard work in preparing such a well-researched event for us.

The evocative poem below by a local writer was penned in support of a fund-raising campaign to restore the church in the early part of the twentieth century:

1

Bryngwyn Church all Radnor's pride,
Famed for beauty far and wide;
Ways and means will soon be found
To liquidate this Million Pounds.

Church of England, now no more,
Home of Saints long gone before;
Who will help us? Echo, who,
Church of Wales will see you through.

As the Glebe and Tithe are gone,
Christian sit not still and mourn;
It is not well to live on doles,
Let's get to work in winning souls.

The ancient Church as Beacon stands,
Doing its work with willing hands,
With faithful Pastor, kind and true
Friend to the many not the few.

Your Chancel holds a curious stone,
Its date and history quite unknown;
One side the figure of the Manly race,
On other side we Female trace.

My native Village on the Hill,
Tho' absent long, I love thee still;
My dearest wish through all shall be
To spend life's eventide in thee.

And when at last Life's journey o'er,
The summons comes to leave this shore,
May I in your calm Churchyard lie
In peace, not now afraid to die.

2

Thy lovely Village has a charm,
To praise it will do no one harm;
The Rectory Home and Garden neat,
And well tilled Farms are hard to beat.

'Tis here they dig the useful Peat,
Noted for splendid glow and heat;
Fancy the price of Coal and Coke,
All hail then to our own Rhosgoch.

Walk down the lane and have a treat
To see the pretty waters meet;
"Arrow" and "Bach-Howey" here
And start for Wye to run their race.

No mushroom growth this pretty place,
Thy fields were ploughed by Roman race,
And Normans here for many years
Watered its soil with blood and tears.

Painscastle built in Conqueror's day,
The old Fitzpaynes then came to stay.
Families he saw both fall and rise,
Near Gloucester Chancel now he lies.

These Paynes had Daughter Alice fair,
Wed later to Lancaster's Heir;
A true Crusader for the Cross,
He fought and died, how sad a loss.

These lines now penned for Bryngwyn Fete
I hope will help the money gate,
And one and all your pockets search,
And pay up well to help the Church.

William Wallis, Hay. August 1920.