



Newsletter 22 – May 2013

Brecon Cathedral Church Special

Welcome to our Newsletter. We invite you to contribute articles, tips, questions and answers for others to share. Feedback is always welcome. Have you missed an edition? Read the archived Newsletters on our website.

May Meeting Review – Our May meeting comprised a guided tour of Brecon Cathedral Church of St John the Evangelist, led by Richard Camp. On 1st May, twenty members and friends gathered for what proved to be a fascinating guided tour of the cathedral building. As it was not possible to produce an audio recording of the tour, this edition of the Newsletter is dedicated to the history of this historically important Church.

The Cathedral Church of St. John the Evangelist, Brecon

The year 2013 marks the 1,020th anniversary of the building (in 1093) of the first Norman Benedictine Priory near the new castle at Brecon. Its founder was the conqueror of Brecknock, Bernard de Neufmarché, who came over from Normandy with William the Conqueror. It was his confessor, from Battle Abbey in Sussex, who persuaded him to build this first priory and church. This act was typical of Norman practice. Every Norman settlement had a castle, town and a priory/church where prayers were said for the souls of the Norman lord (Bernard) and his retinue.

The site chosen could already have been a Celtic Christian enclosure (Llan). This is suggested by the circular outline of the site. Two pre-Norman stone bowls found in the cloister garth of the priory may have belonged to an earlier foundation. If a saint was connected with any earlier foundation, that name was not re-used by the Normans. The new Benedictine priory was dedicated to St John the Evangelist.



As a daughter priory of Battle Abbey, the monks were mainly sent to Brecon from Battle and the first prior was Walter. At its height, the priory had eight monks at most and usually five or six with fifteen servants to see to their daily needs. The monks were a mixed bunch, and it was common for individuals to disobey their vows of chastity. There were scandals from time to time, with individual monks being recalled to Battle Abbey. As with all Benedictine priories, the church was shared with the community; in effect, the one building served two functions. The chancel and chapels east of the transepts, which became a kind of connecting corridor, was the monks' priory church. The nave and aisles was the parish church for the residents of Brecon. A large screen at the eastern end of the nave prevented the congregation from disturbing and intruding on the daily offices of the monks. There was a nave altar serving the spiritual needs of the congregation.

The church underwent a process of rebuilding, commencing in 1215 at the east end and concluding in the 14th century at the west end. Of the Norman period, only the font remains visible and that is of mixed age and may not have originated in Brecon. A transition of styles can be seen as we look from the east to the west end of the interior of the church building. From pure lancet early English windows in the chancel to decorated windows at the west end – early English (French) to late Gothic (decorated). The building shows no sign of the Perpendicular style of architecture (late 15th century). The Havard Chapel was the last part to be built, before the end of the 14th century.

From its establishment onwards, the priory was well endowed with property: land, mills, farms, fishing rights and the tithes from other churches, both locally and in England. Its fortunes rose or fell according to the whims of the succession of Lords of Brecknock. It was also Norman practice for chantry chapels, within the priory church, to be endowed by Norman land owners. The monks would thus be obliged to make regular offerings and prayers for the soul of the benefactor both in life and after the death of the benefactor and his family. A chantry chapel can still be seen in the Havard Chapel (now the chapel of the Royal Regiment of Wales). A "squint" slit window can still be seen giving a view of the high altar, where the chantry priest could follow the main service of mass at the high altar, whilst performing his prayers for the souls of the Havard family. The generosity of its patrons meant that Brecon possessed one of the largest churches in medieval Wales.

In the medieval nave, screens were positioned down both sides of nave to partition off the various trade chapels established in the side aisles. Based on the wool trade, there were guilds for the weavers, tuckers, tailors and corvizors or cordwainers (shoemakers). Here, in the guild chapels, business would be carried out on week days and the guilds would worship on Sundays and holy

days, in their separate chapels. Until 1995 a modern Guild of Cordwainers made frequent pilgrimages to its ancient chapel in the Cathedral. This chapel is now called St Keynes Chapel and is the only remaining guild chapel in the present Cathedral.

As the priory lacked any religious relics to attract pilgrims, in the later Middle Ages a holy rood screen was built across the east end of the nave. During the 15th to early 16th centuries, the church became known as the Church of the Holy Rood or Golden Rood. Its importance as a place of pilgrimage is attested by the fact that two pilgrimages to The Holy (Golden) Rood was equivalent to one pilgrimage to St David's in Pembrokeshire. Furthermore, two pilgrimages to St David's was equivalent to one pilgrimage to Rome. The Holy Rood of Brecon, mentioned in Welsh poetry as *Crog Aberhonddu*, was in the nave but it was the monks who received the offerings. Pilgrims were able to mount the Rood Screen via staircases in the walls of the Nave and could kiss the feet of the painted and gilded statues. The monks provided hostel accommodation and refreshment for the pilgrims.

In 1536, during the reign of Henry VIII, the 'Act of Union' between England and Wales was enforced. Wales no longer had a separate identity. The Reformation, the split with Rome started by Henry VIII, was already in force. Between 1535 and 1540, under Thomas Cromwell, the policy known as the Dissolution of the Monasteries was put into effect. The veneration of some saints, certain pilgrimages and some pilgrim shrines were also attacked. Huge amounts of church land and property passed into the hands of the Crown and ultimately into those of the nobility and gentry, in particular, to Sir John Price (ap Rice), originally from Brecknock and related by marriage to Thomas Cromwell. He is well known for having had the first book printed in the Welsh language. It is called "*Yn y Llyfr Hwn*" (*In This Book*) because the cover and thus the title, has been lost. He also preserved the priory library and many of these books are now held in national depositories. The vested interest thus created made for a powerful force in support of the dissolution.

The Dissolution was a momentous and shocking event both for the monks and for the population who worshipped at the priory/parish Church at Brecon. In 1538, the priory buildings were put into private hands and those which were not deemed of worth were pulled down or left to decay. The property holdings also passed into private hands. Fortuitously for Brecon, it being a Benedictine priory, the parish church, which served the growing populous of the area, was preserved, and as it was part of the same building as the priory church, that section was saved as well. Most outward signs of Roman Catholicism within the church were removed, defaced or destroyed. So the Holy Rood was broken up and entrances into the priory buildings from the church were blocked.

The worship would now be in accordance with the Church of England, with the sovereign as the divinely appointed head of the Church. During the reigns of Edward VI (1547-1553) and Elizabeth I, (1559-1603) the practices and laws of the Church of England developed and became more harsh on those who refused to conform – the recusants.

The Puritan regime of the Commonwealth of England period (1649 to 1660) following the Civil War also saw more attacks on the church: wall paintings were defaced or painted over and some of the memorial tombs were defaced and damaged.

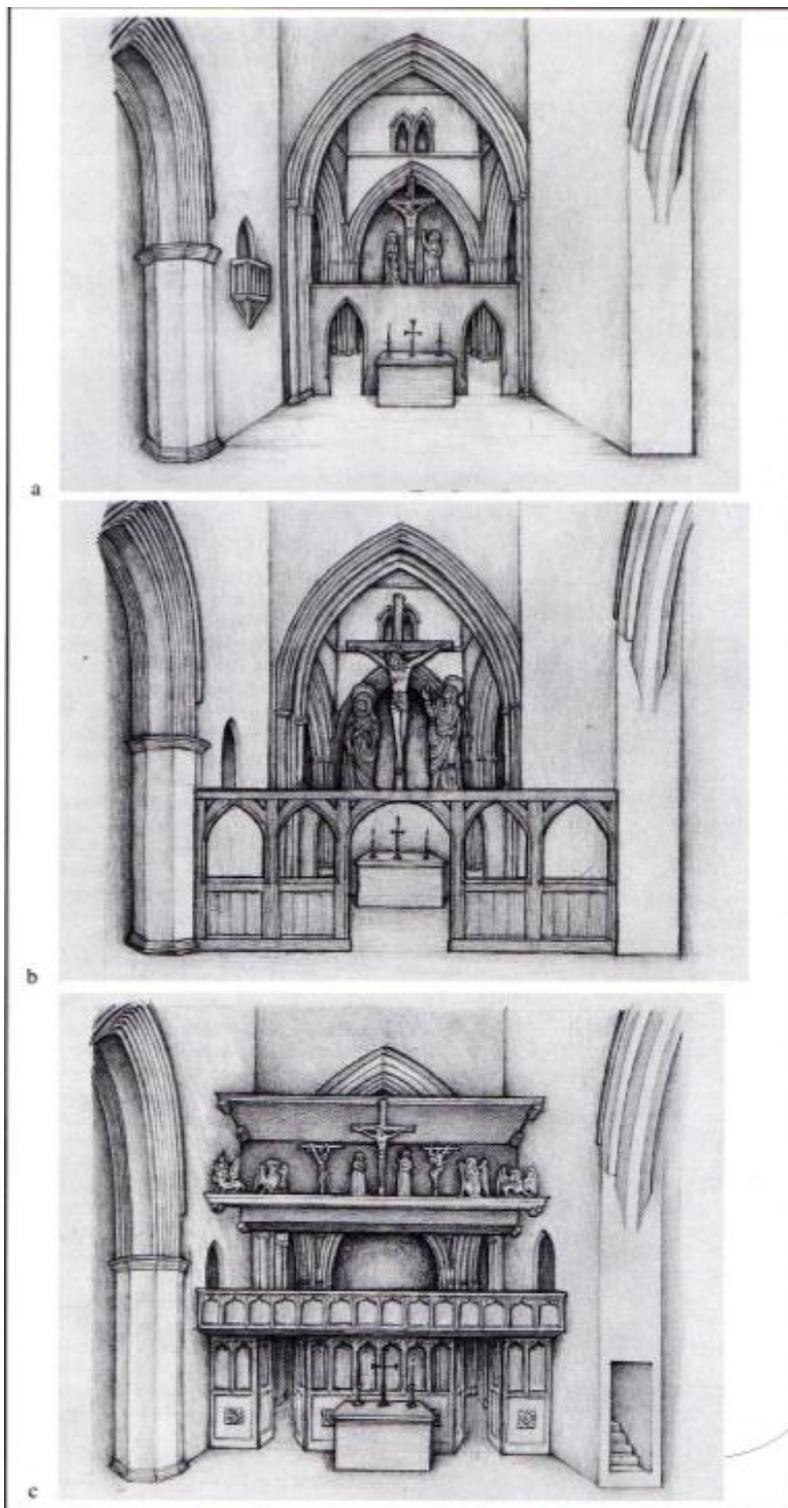
Although the parish church of St John the Evangelist was saved, the next centuries saw its fortunes rise and fall. There were periods of such neglect that parts of the building became unsafe. Boys, hunting for bats fell through the rotten roof onto the nave floor, because the lead had been sold off. Only the hardiest members of the congregation could tolerate the cold and damp in the 18th century. Many left and attended the Chapel of Ease of St Mary's in the town. The growth of Methodism and other non-conformist denominations in the 19th century led to a haemorrhage of adherents from the Church of England to the non-conformist chapels established in the town vicinity.

The Victorian era and the 20th century saw two periods of rebuilding. During the Victorian period, the Marquess Camden, a great Brecon land owner agreed to pay for the stabilisation and restoration of the chancel if the population of worshippers would pay for such work in the nave. The architect Gilbert Scott was given the commission. It was during this period, that the floor was excavated and damp proofing was installed. Unfortunately, the memorial stones that covered the floor were not replaced in their original positions and many were discarded. Memorials which disappeared at this time include the memorial to the Founder of Jesus College Oxford, Brecon-born Hugh Price (c. 1495-1574) who was probably buried here, but his memorial has not survived. Thomas Coke and his family were buried in the Havard Chapel, but no memorial now exists and his effigy was removed. He was the first Methodist Bishop and is known as the Father of Methodist Missions. Simple crosses inlaid into the floor, marking the burials of the monks, also disappeared

The next period of refurbishment was undertaken by William D. Caroe in the early 20th century. His restoration was sensitively accomplished and in keeping with the church. Mistakes in the Victorian refurbishment were corrected as well as new features added.

Following the disestablishment of the Church in Wales from the Church of England in 1920 a new Diocese of Swansea and Brecon was created and in 1923, Brecon priory church became the

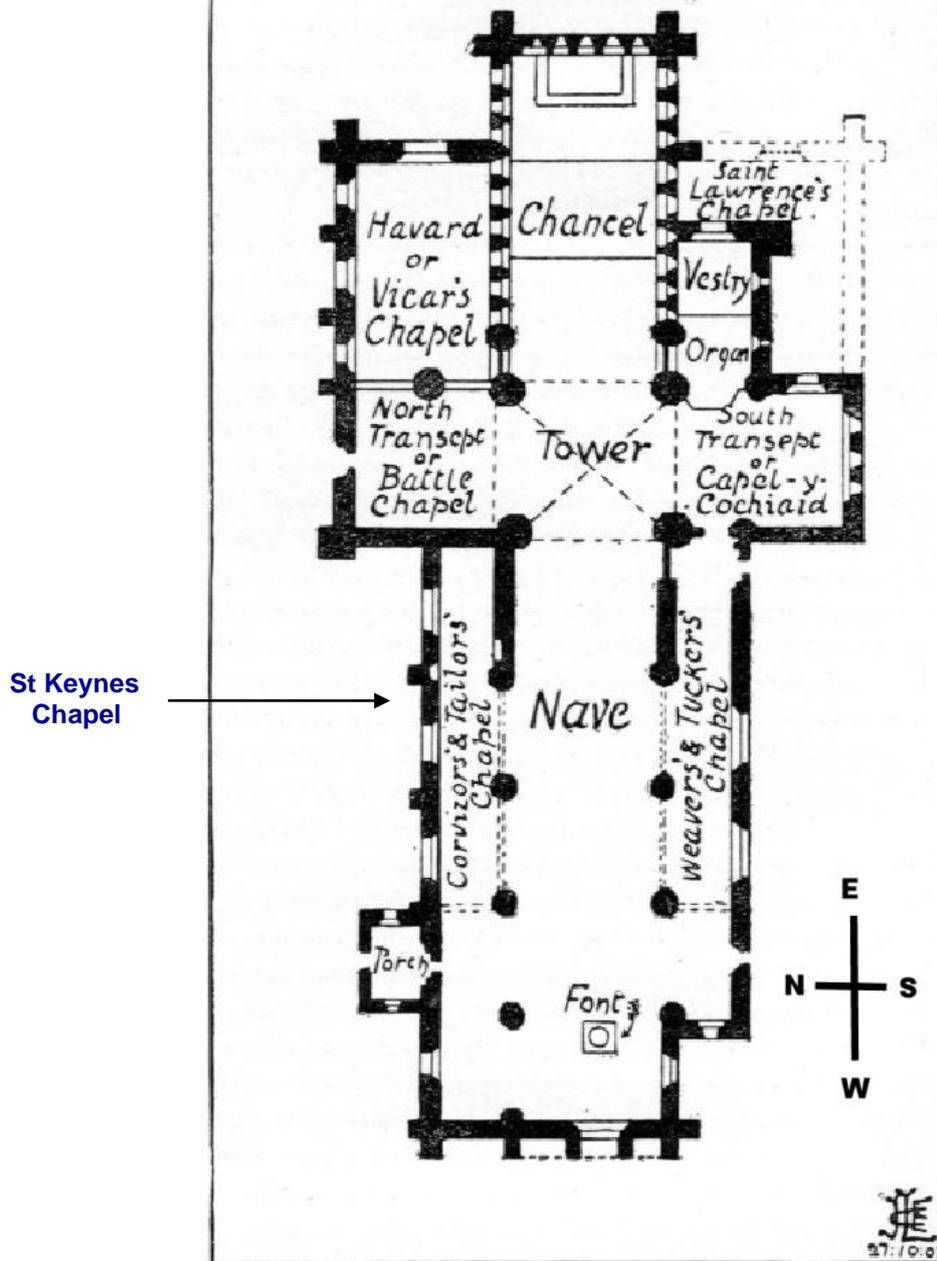
Cathedral Church of this new Diocese. The Bishop is known as the Bishop of Swansea and Brecon and his "palace" (actually a 1970s large house) is within the remaining walls of the Castle area of Brecon. The Church in Wales remains a part of the family of Anglican Protestant Churches. The remaining buildings of the original cloister and priory have been returned, by purchase or by gift, to the Cathedral Church and are now used for Diocesan and local church administration as well as being home to the resident Dean and some other clergy.



Above: Conjectural reconstruction of the rood in (a) the 13th century (b) the 14th century and (c) the 15th century.

Illustration from: RCAHMW: An Architectural Study - The Cathedral Church of St John the Evangelist, Brecon. Pub Friends of Brecon Cathedral 1994

*Ground Plan, of the PRIORY CHURCH.
BRECON*



*Drawn and given by Mr. C. J. E. Large, J.P.,
Churchwarden of S. John's, 1921-22*

Look out for the following additional features when walking around the cathedral, from the main entrance on the north wall

- North aisle – the mason marks on the first aisle pillar; the 16th century Flemish wooden cabinet; the windows; the screen on the nave is what remains of the original screen which separated the chancel from the nave; the Gam family tomb effigy.
- St Keynes Chapel – the remaining guild chapel to the corvizers; the entrance screen is modern, donated by a Guild member. (see the Thompson mouse on the screen); the 14th century tomb effigy
- Nave (east end) – note the corbels on both north and south walls, which would have helped to support the Holy Rood Screen; the doorways half way up both walls which would have been the access to the Rood from the pilgrims stairs; the post-1680s walls paintings of the

black bird (possibly a symbol of St John the Evangelist) on the pillar and opposite the cope (arms of Brecon Town); the Cathedra or Bishop's throne.

- Chancel – high altar and stone reredos (by Caroe); stained glass window; the ancient stone medieval altar piece set in the north wall (slightly defaced by the Puritans); on south wall, the triple sedila (seat) and triple piscine (historically for washing altar vessels).
- North Transept leading to Havard Chapel – note the floor memorials, many with trade tools engraved on them; the wall memorials, many by local sculptor John Evan Thomas; the smaller 18th century Bevington Organ, once in Hay Castle, is mentioned in the diary of the Victorian cleric, Reverend Francis Kilvert.
- Havard Chapel – note the signs of the conversion of two original chapels into one during the 14th century, by the inverted V shaped roof marks above the entrance to the Chapel; the windows; altar and painting; the 14th century Awbrey tomb, which was originally in Christ College Chapel in Llanfaes area of Brecon and was moved to this site for security during the Commonwealth period; the “squint” window giving sight of the high altar (this was a chantry chapel to the Havard Family); the memorials to the Royal Regiment of Wales.
- South Transept leading to St Lawrence Chapel – the wall memorials; floor memorials, the bronze effigy of Bishop Bevan, the 20th century benefactor of the Cathedral; the elaborately carved 15th century cupboard; the Tudor cope chest; the windows;
- St Lawrence chapel – the roof by Caroe; the windows.
- South aisle – the floor and wall memorials; the tomb effigies, especially the alabaster effigy of the Williams family; imagine the trade guild working from these partitioned off enclosures or chapels.
- Baptistry – the Cresset stone for lighting oil; the font is the oldest object in the building, more floor and wall memorials, note the small window above the great west window. This church was not built with a great west door, as many great churches have.

Websites

An armchair visit to the Cathedral can be made by exploring the following websites:

- The stained glass windows – <http://stainedglass.llgc.org.uk/> and search for Brecon Cathedral.
- Various images – click to the right hand arrow next to each picture to see a wonderful collection of Brecon cathedral photographs
http://www.flickr.com/photos/sheepdog_rex/6410645053/in/photostream/lightbox/
- Robert (Mouseman) Thompson –
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_%28Mouseman%29_Thompson
- Sir John Price – <http://wbo.llgc.org.uk/en/s-PRIC-JOH-1502.html>

Books

Selection of Books about/with articles about St John the Evangelist Cathedral Church, Brecon

- RCAHMW: *An Architectural Study - The Cathedral Church of St John the Evangelist*, Brecon, Friends of Brecon Cathedral, 1994
- Jones and Walker: *Links with the Past – Swansea & Brecon Historical Essays*, Swansea, Christopher Davies, 1974 – “Brecon Priory in the Middle Ages” p 37-87
- Articles in a variety of editions of “*Brycheiniog*”, the annual Journal of the Brecknock Society and Museum Friends. These include:

Vol XXIV	Brecon cathedral c1093-1537 the Church of the Holy Rood p 23-38
Vol XXV	Stonemason' Marks in Brecon cathedral. P27-30
Vol XXVII	Brecon Priory Church: Rebuilding the Nave p43-52
Vol XXVIII	The Priory Church of St John the Evangelist , Brecon, 1782-1808
Vol XXXI	The Latin Epitaphs in Brecon Cathedral p31-42
	Sir John Pryse of Brecon p49-63
Vol XXXV	Crog Aberhodni p19-38 (this article is in the English language)
- Theophilus Jones: *A History of the County of Brecknock* Glanusk Edition 4 Volumes 1909-1930 (contains transcripts of the monumental inscriptions on the floor and walls of the Church).

- Powys Family History Society: Breconshire MIs from 16th and 17th Centuries (includes the Cathedral MIs)

NEXT MEETINGS

Date and time: Wednesday, 5th June 2013 at 2.00pm
Venue: Brecon Library
Annual General Meeting, followed by
Subject: Roy Davies, "Working with Tithe Maps" – Roy produces wonderful parish maps based on 19th century tithe maps.

Date and time: Wednesday, 3rd July 2013 at 2.00pm
Venue: Brecon Library
Subject: Geoff Brookes, "Welsh Stories in Stone" – tales behind the inscriptions on some Welsh gravestones.

BLFHS WEBSITE: Our website address: www.blfhs.co.uk

CONTACT DETAILS:

If you wish to respond to or comment on an item in this newsletter, or contribute to the next newsletter or to our website, please contact our Chairperson:

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