

St Mary's Church in Brynmawr, (it's trials and tribulations).



Some time ago I had the chance to read the booklet "The Undaunted Spirit" on the History of St Mary's Church, Brynmawr written by the then vicar Rev. W. D. Jenkins. It's very interesting and I urge everyone to seek out a copy to read. (In fact there are a number of books about the various religious establishments in Brynmawr and all give a good idea of what life was like here in the 1800s and early 1900s). Reading "The Undaunted Spirit" about the early history of the church in Brynmawr made me take a look again at some of the information I had either researched or been told.

There were quite a few chapels built in Brynmawr during the early 1800s, Rehobeth was opened in 1827, Calvary in 1833, Tabor in 1835, Libanus in 1848, Bethesda in 1850 and many others followed. One building that was missing was a church, (Church in England as it would be then) and Brynmawr didn't belong entirely to the dissenters.



It seems that the earliest Church meeting room was in the British School that was situated somewhere around the old railway station, (the station was where Blaen y Cwm School now stands). The British School had been opened in 1846 and the use of the school room, on Sabbath days, was granted

gratuitously to the Brynmawr members of the Church of England for divine worship as long as required whist they looked for a suitable place to build their own church. In the Undaunted Spirit the Rev. W. D. Jenkins mentions the school, as being the Board School and that it was where Joe Lyons Garage is today by the bus station. There is also a mention in

the booklet that suggests they may have met at one time in a butchers shop with the butcher's block being used as the pulpit though sadly it does not mention where the shop was situated. The photograph shows Joe Lyons Garage as it is today, (28/09/2020)

There was another church connected with Brynmawr, but as it was situated at the lower end of the town, it was thought the increasing population required accommodation in a more central part. The church had been provided by Crawshay Bailey on a site that would be easy for Nant y Glo and Brynmawr worshippers to attend. The church in fact was well used as this snippet from: The Cardiff Times. 10th September 1859 shows:

Brynmawr Festival. On Friday, the 2nd, the lovers of harmony had an excellent opportunity of enjoying a rich treat at the Brynmawr church. About half-past ten in the morning carriages and vehicles of various descriptions began to arrive at the church gates, and very soon a large assemblage of people was on the spot; not to seek admission to the concert (the price of the tickets for the morning performance being 5s. and 3s., so that not many of the working classes could purchase them), but their curiosity appeared to lead them there to witness the arrival of the musicians and other personages. A little after eleven o'clock the front seats were pretty well filled with the elite of the neighbourhood, and very soon the powerful notes of the new organ attracted the attention of the audience, and told them that the voluntary had commenced. In the evening of the same day the working classes were favoured with a second performance of the same music, at a reduced price.

The Brynmawr church people though were determined to get their own church and also that it should be in the diocese of St. David's, Breconshire, but to build that church they needed money. There was quite a community feel to some of the events organised such as a picnic on Gilwern Mountain which was recorded in the Monmouthshire Merlin on 1st July 1865 under the heading "A Monster Picnic":

On Wednesday last, a picnic took place on the Gilwern Mountain. The place selected for the gathering was opposite the Sugar Loaf one of the most picturesque spots in Breconshire. The view extended over an area of eleven parishes. The scenery and the weather were alike beautiful. The object of the picnic was to raise funds for the new church in Brynmawr. Arrangements had been made with the Railway Company to convey the public to and fro at 6d per head and about 600 people attended, and a very pleasant afternoon was spent. Mr. Prosser, confectioner of Brynmawr, had the contract for catering and the Brynmawr Quadrille Band did the musical part; a variety of games were entered into.

I'm not quite sure where the train stopped to let the travellers off to gain access to the mountain side or whether they took the Abergavenny train or the Blaenavon train. Raising the money was important as a site had already been chosen, a committee had been formed and plans adopted for the new church and the spot chosen "in a meadow opposite the



Griffin Hotel, a very central and pleasant spot” ⁽¹⁾. It was referred to as an Iron Church ⁽²⁾, and it would be in the parish of Llanelly. This meadow was at the top of Queen Street where the old Church School used to be and is now (at the time of writing) a derelict plot of land. Plans had been drawn up and a contract arranged with a building firm. It was also referred to as “by the side of the Llangattock railway” which would be the tramroad that ran along Clydach Street. This

is the site as it is today: (28/09/2020)

The opening of the church was quite a grand affair and reported in the Monmouthshire Merlin. 4th June 1864:

On Thursday last the new church which has lately been erected the top of Queen Street, in a meadow adjoining Llangattock old railway was opened for public worship. The church is built on a substantial stone foundation. The shell of the structure is composed of iron and wood on the inside, lined with thick canvas and painted white. It has a neat appearance and it is calculated to seat about 360 persons. The Rev. Thomas Griffiths, vicar of Llanelly, deserves special commendation for his perseverance and unremitting attention in its erection. The tradesmen of the town closed their respective establishments during the day and many attended the opening services. The choir of the Crickhowell Church conducted the musical portions of the services in a most efficient manner.... The sacrament of the Lord's Supper was administered at the close of the morning service to all the clergy and communicants. A luncheon was provided at the Griffin Hotel and a large number of the clergy and visiting friends sat down to the repast. A few complimentary toasts were proposed and responded to, and the company repaired to the afternoon service, which was conducted in English and a Welsh service was held in the evening. Liberal collections were made at the close of the service on behalf of the building fund.

At last, the Brynmawr people had their own church but the euphoria was not to last very long. This being Brynmawr you never really know what the weather is going to be like and sadly in December 1865 what they didn't expect was a horrendous gale. This happened just eighteen months after the church had been opened. The Monmouthshire Merlin reported the incident on the 2nd December 1865 and gives quite a detailed account of the structure and who the builders were:

Brynmawr, like most other places, has suffered considerably from the fury of the late storm. During the raging of the wind, missiles of various kinds were falling about the streets, so that people were afraid to venture out of their habitations. But no serious

damage was done, except to the new church, and that structure, we regret to say, is destroyed- The building, it will be remembered by many, was opened for Divine service last summer it stood on an elevated piece of ground, behind the Police- station, and was constructed of iron, wood, and canvas. The contract was taken by a Birmingham firm and the materials sent from there. We understand the building cost about £350; it consisted of a frame work of iron, cased externally with wood and internally with canvas. It is now a complete wreck. The east end transept, after being well shaken, kept its position; but the body of the church was blown over and split to pieces. Persons could walk in through the chasms at the sides as easily as through the proper entrance. Before the gale had reached its height people saw the building oscillating. The news soon spread, and a large crowd gathered around but they had no power to avert the disaster. At length, with a tremendous crash, the structure fell over. Previously to this, some brave fellows got inside, and secured the harmonium, books, and a considerable portion of the seats and slates were preserved but so far was the church injured, that the authorities have determined upon erecting a substantial stone building upon the same site. A subscription list has been opened, and already a considerable amount has been promised. The new curate very nobly set an example, by giving £50 himself.

Since the collapse of the church the congregation moved to worshipped at the Corporation Hall. The proposed new church was not going to be on the same site but on a piece of land behind the Prince of Wales Inn that had been donated freehold, by The Duke of Beaufort. The land in question had been used previously by the town's people to hold fairs etc. In August 1870 came an important event, laying the foundation stone of a new church. It was reported in the Cardiff Times, 13th August 1870:

This event came on Monday last, in the presence of a large concourse of people. The present building is intended to serve instead of the iron one, the roof of which was blown away some time ago. The proceedings of the day commenced with the delivery of a sermon by the Rev. F. Jayne of Jesus College, Oxford, at the Corporation Hall, after which a procession was formed to the field where the church is situated. The Stone was laid by Mr. Crawshay Bailey. After the ceremony had been gone through, the company adjourned to a tent which was in the adjoining field to partake of luncheon and amongst those present were a great many clergymen and the principal inhabitants of the neighbourhood. After the removal of the cloth, the chairman, Mr. Crawshay Bailey, proposed several toasts. He was supported by the Archdeacon of Brecon, who made a most practical speech. Several other addresses were given, and the meeting was altogether of a most enthusiastic character.

Finally, the people of Brynmawr would have a church that would serve them for many years to come, or so they thought.

It was not to be, the new church was found to be structurally unsafe and would be pulled down. By 1899 (according to the Evening Express) the contract for the erection of a new

parish church at Brynmawr has been let to Mr. J. Jenkins, builder, of Brynmawr, at £2,661 from designs by Messrs Nicolson and Hartree, Hereford the structure being adapted for future extension⁽⁵⁾. (Mr J. Jenkins also had the contract to build the Carnegie Library but that's another story, look in the News Update of our website). In the meantime, yet again more fund raising had to be done to meet the cost of the new building. The Bishop of St. David's made his first official visit to Brynmawr on a Sunday (reported in the South Wales Daily news. 30th November 1898) in connection with special services on behalf of the new church building fund, towards which his Lordship has promised to contribute £10 a year for five years. Similarly:

A three day grand bazaar was held in the National Schools, Brynmawr in aid of the proposed new parish church, under the patronage of her Grace the Duchess of Beaufort, Lady Bailey (Glanusk), Lady Llewellyn (Penllergaer), the Hon. Mrs. Wood (Gwernyfed), Mrs. Dunning Tucker (St. Leonards-on-Sea), Mrs. Woodman (Maescelyn), the Right Hon. Lord Tredegar, and the Right Hon. Lord Llangattock. The various rooms were most effectively decorated with fruiting and flowers, and the stalls were well managed by the following- ladies :— Mrs. Greenham, Mrs. Judd, Miss Webber, Mrs. J. Bloor, Mrs. A. Jones, Mrs. Southern, Miss K. Morgan, Miss Morris, Mrs. Phillips, Mrs. Lewis, Miss Tong, Miss Jones, Miss Williams, Mrs. Lowe, Miss Powell, Mrs. H. Jones, the Misses Jones, Miss Coombes, Miss Allen, Miss Parry, Miss Judd, Miss Evans, Miss E. Jones, Miss Francis, Miss Jenkins, Mrs. Lewis, and Mrs. Tong. During' the day capital entertainments were given by the National School children under the supervision of the teachers, consisting of operettas, waxworks, &c., and amongst the many who rendered assistance were the vicar and curate, the two churchwardens (Messrs. Tong and Judd), Mr. P. M. Greenham (hon. treasurer), Messrs Carl Virgin (Griffin Hotel), W. T. C. Lock, and L. Lewis (joint hon. secretaries), Dr. M'Lachland, and Mr. W. A. Evans. The bazaar was opened by Sir Joseph Bailey, the lord-lieutenant of the county, and a brisk sale commenced. The town was prettily decorated with bunting for the occasion ⁽³⁾.

That's quite a line up of dignitaries that today would be very hard to do, but the money raised went towards the church building fund and finally:

The new Parish Church of St. Mary at Brynmawr was on Wednesday consecrated by the Bishop of St. David's. With an extended area, the building, which has cost £3,000, occupies the site of the old church, built in 1872, which had to be pulled down in consequence of structural defects arising from atmospheric conditions and other causes. Its design is of the Decorated period, after the manner of the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries. The bishop was met by a large number of the clergy from his own diocese and from that of neighbouring places in the Diocese of Llandaff, among many others being the Ven. Archdeacon of Brecon; the Rev. T. J. Bowen, Llangattock, rural dean; the Rev. S. T. Phillips, a former vicar of Brynmawr (now of Pembroke Dock), and the Rev. D. Griffith, the present vicar of the parish. A procession of

the clergy, churchwardens, and choir was formed at the National School and led his lordship to the church (where a large congregation had assembled), singing "The Church's one foundation." Upon entering the sanctuary, the registrar of the diocese (Mr. T. W. Barker) read the petition for consecration which was delivered to the bishop by Mr. W. J. Tong, one of the churchwardens, and in due course the decree of consecration was signed and ordered to be registered. The sermon was preached by the bishop, who said the responsibilities of the National Church were especially great. Her work had been sadly hindered, especially in Wales, by distracting controversies and unhappy divisions, but he trusted that she would rise to the level of her high calling. A collection was afterwards taken in aid of the building fund, upon which there still exists a debt of £1.000. Subsequent to the service there was a luncheon in the Drill-hall.⁽⁴⁾

The church still stands (probably due to them finally using a Brynmawr builder) but what about the tower that was supposed to be on the western end of the church. I was told many years ago that the tower could not be built because of stream(s) that run underground and if you lie on the path leading up to the church door and press your ear to the ground you can hear the waters running. Didn't anybody know of the parable of the man who built his house on unsteady ground and could there be something prescient about the song they sang as they entered the church during the opening ceremony? We will wait and see.

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Sources: The Undying Spirit by Rev. W. D. Jenkins and the following newspapers unless stated in the article.

- 1) The Cardiff Times. 12th December 1862).**
- 2) Monmouthshire Merlin, 13th December 1862**
- 3) Evening Express. 12th April 1894**
- 4) Evening Express. 26th July 1900**
- 5) South Wales Daily News. 26th July 1900**