

Llanhamlach Church - more than meets the eye!

David Morgan

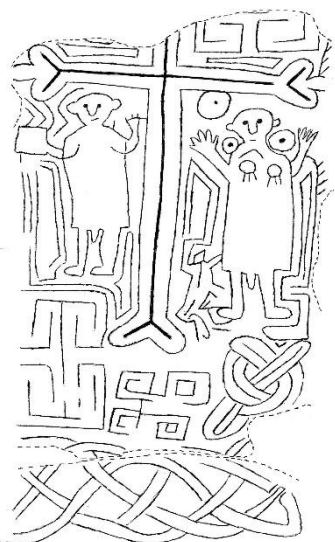
The church of SS Peter and Illtyd in Llanhamlach looks ordinary enough from the outside, and appears typical of many churches in this area - a rather plain tower of the fifteenth or sixteenth century (the Perpendicular style), and a nave rebuilt in the nineteenth century. But further investigation produces many oddities.



The Neolithic chambered tomb above Llanhamlach, long known as Ty Illtyd because it was believed to have been a hermitage of the saint.

Even the dedication is suspect. It might well be assumed that the Celtic St Illtyd was the primary dedication, with the "Roman" St Peter added by the Normans or later. This is a natural assumption, not least because the name of Illtyd was well-known in this area by the seventeenth century and doubtless earlier. However, all the early references to the church, from the fifteenth century on, refer only to St Peter, and the first known mention of a dedication to Illtyd is not until 1887. Furthermore, the Brecknock historian Theophilus Jones (1809) who expresses considerable interest in St Illtyd, fails to mention him entirely when dealing with Llanhamlach church. It does look therefore as if the attribution of Illtyd to the church may be a nineteenth century academic affectation.

The name Llanhamlach may mean the enclosure (*llan*) of *Anlach* (recorded as the father of Brychan) or *-milich*, both Irish names, which would push the site back to the sixth century and the spread of the Irish settlers eastward along the Usk valley. The Roman road along the Usk valley passed only a few hundred metres north of the church, and was probably still useable. A pre-Norman presence is also implied by the curvilinear churchyard, and confirmed by the Moridic stone in the nave and another pre-Norman carved stone built into the outside wall of the tower, visible at knee level.



The Moridic stone in the nave presents a puzzle (see the drawing). It is a memorial stone of the 10th or 11th century with the top broken off. The inscription along the right-hand edge reads in inaccurate Latin IOHANNIS / MORIDIC SUREXIT HUNC LAPIDEM (*Moridic erected this stone*). IOHANNIS belongs to a separate part of the inscription now lost, perhaps "for the soul of Iohannes" or "the cross of Iohannes". Speculation about the identity of the two figures on the front, male and female, has given experts much innocent pleasure. Early assumptions were a depiction of Adam and Eve, with the circle

representing the apple. Probably the likeliest is the Virgin and St John (who may be holding a book), but another suggestion is that the female figure may be St Eluned, and the circle her emblem of the sun. Certainly a field elsewhere in the parish carries her name. None of this explains the presence of one or two small animals (dogs?) by her right leg!



There is another early gem in the nave. The recumbent memorial effigy of Jane Walboeuf dates from around 1330, and is notable for her attire. She wears the garments of an aristocratic lady of the time, a veil and wimple, a tunic, surcote, and cloak. Note the row of buttons on the tight-fitting sleeves of her tunic - very fashionable! The surcote is long as usual, and in real life she would have had to lift the front when walking. Her feet are resting on a small dog.

The first incumbent, William de Capella, is recorded around 1200AD, so a building of some sort was certainly present on the site by then, probably of wood like virtually all churches in Wales at the time. Giraldus Cambrensis is vitriolic about William's son (who became the next incumbent), whom he accuses, in impressively virulent language, of fraud in obtaining the post. Giraldus did have a personal axe to grind against this man however, since he considered that he, as tutor to Giraldus' nephew, had turned the nephew against the uncle.

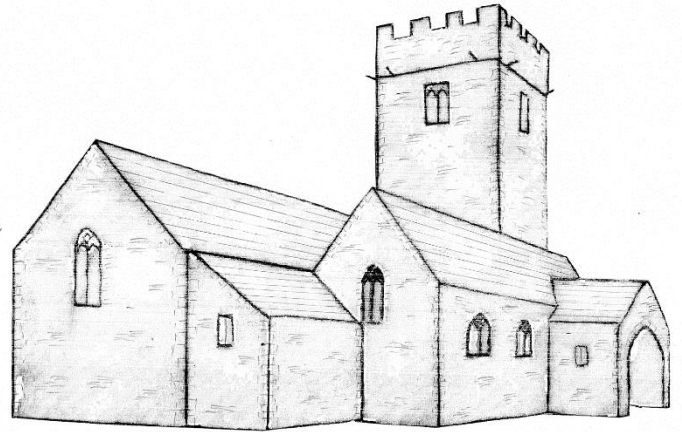
The first building in stone may not have been until around 1450-1500AD, and the tower, in essence, dates from then. It and the rest of the building may have been paid for by the Walboeuf family, who lived in the predecessor of neighbouring Peterstone Court, were patrons of the church, and were certainly wealthy at this time. The church once had a north aisle, initially presumed from Colt Hoare's watercolour and subsequently confirmed by the discovery of its foundations in a pipe trench in September 2019. By about 1600AD the church would have looked like that of St Paulinus at Llangors, with a side aisle shorter than the nave but just as wide.



Watercolour of the original church by Sir Richard Colt Hoare, 1802. (This illustration is copyright of the Partners of C.Hoare & Co. and further reproduction is strictly forbidden)

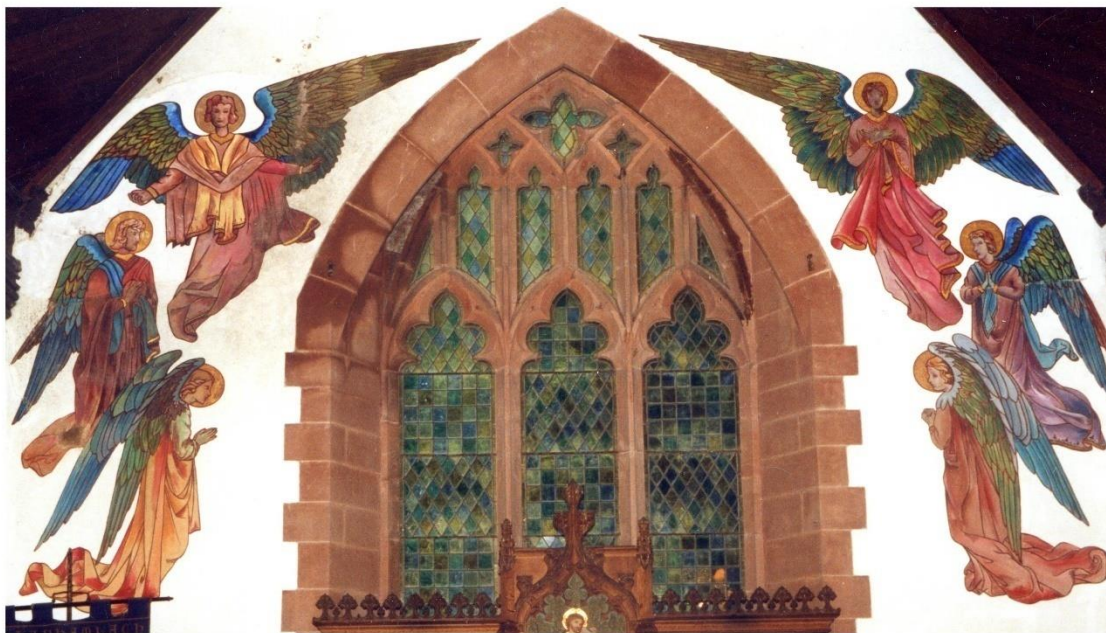


The foundations of the demolished wall of the north aisle, seen in the 2019 pipe trench



The probable appearance of Llanhamlach church around 1600AD

By 1802 the nave was virtually ruinous. It was rebuilt - not at all well - entirely by parish labour. A number of mid-nineteenth century descriptions of the church exist; most are quite neutral, but there is the occasional barbed comment - "windows of the poorest modern gothic". The bells were a further problem. There were originally six bells, but an inspection in 1825 revealed that four of them were cracked. There was a great deal of discussion, not to say procrastination, by the vestry officers, until an ultimatum from the bishop forced their hand. The bells were replaced in 1832 by a frame of four, but the unfortunate carrier who had brought the bells from Bristol and hung them was not paid (except in ale, apparently!) until 1834. Only the tenor bell remains now, the others having been removed in the 1960s when the frame was deemed insecure



This photograph from 1970 already shows water damage on the upper left angel and on the window surround

By the 1880s, the nave was again in a bad way. This time a professional job was made of it: the existing nave was removed and a new one built. The most striking features of the reconstructed church - the ones which draws every visitor's eye - are the angels which were painted on



A newly-painted angel

the east wall of the chancel soon after the rebuild. They became a symbol of the church - "the church with the angels on the wall" - but all was not well. The roof began to leak, and by 1970 water was lifting the plaster and damaging the paint. The entire roof was replaced in 2003 with the aid of a Heritage Lottery Grant and generous private donations. Professional opinion was that the angels could not satisfactorily be saved, and so in 2007 they were carefully photographed, measured and traced, and samples of the paint were taken from the wall. The entire wall was then stripped back and re-plastered with lime plaster, and complete replicas were painted by well-known local artist Robert Macdonald.

Perhaps the biggest puzzle of all at the church is the tower. A study of the interior makes it clear that there have been major internal reconstructions. At least one floor was removed (see photograph) and another repositioned, quite probably when the bells were installed. Perhaps the tower was raised to accommodate a new bell chamber. We do not know when this was, but many churches were acquiring bells in the late 1500s after they became readily available at the dissolution of the monasteries. One thinks again of the wealth and patronage of the Walbeoufs at this time.



The missing floor in the tower - note the 'forlorn window' on the north face.



The 'forlorn window' is only slightly below the belfry window and clearly belongs to an earlier phase of construction.

The Walboeuf tombstones in the porch are worth a second glance, if only to find the emblem of the family, three beef cattle - a pun on the family name? In the churchyard don't miss the most astonishing gravestone near the NE corner of the nave, the "murder" stone, which names not only the unfortunate victim but also his killer!

A detailed study of the church is kept in the church. If you borrow it, please return it!