

**LLANFIHANGEL-Y-TRAETHAU**  
**YNYS**  
**THE PARISH CHURCH and PARISH**

LECTURE GIVEN TO THE MERIONETH HISTORICAL AND RECORD  
SOCIETY 30<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2007, repeated 12<sup>th</sup> APRIL 2008

*Croeso cynnes iawn i Eglwys Llanfihangel-y-traethau. Gobeithio y bydd ein pnawn yma yn ddiddorol.*

*Yn ôl y rhaglen, bydd y sgwrs yn Saesneg yn bennaf. Ond rydym yn astudio ardal a chymuned Gymraeg, felly wna i ychwanegu ychydig o Gymraeg i'r sgwrs.*

Welcome. I hope that you will enjoy this afternoon's event: I look forward to it, as I find I always learn a lot from occasions like this. I am not a professional historian and it will be obvious that there are many gaps in the information that I have. Questions and further information will be very welcome after the talk. Leaflets summarising the lecture are available in Welsh and English at the back of the church.

This talk will be mainly in English, but we are dealing with a very Welsh setting, so it is fitting that some of the talk should be bilingual.

Introduction

I have a strong personal interest in this church. My parents moved here in 1947 and although I was away at college most of the time, this became my home. I was hoping to enter the ministry but as I was not a native Welsh speaker I could not be accepted by the Bishop of Bangor, so I trained in England. After a career in the Church of England and as a student counsellor in the University of Birmingham, I moved back here in 1988 while working as a freelance researcher and consultant. I served as Vicar of Harlech and Rector of this Church and of Llanfair from 1994 to 1999. My parents and my father in law are all buried here and my father served as churchwarden for many years. My father was the novelist Richard Hughes and most of his post-war work was written here.

In preparing this talk I have drawn on several sources which I would like to acknowledge. Firstly, my wife Sheila was a student at Coleg Harlech in 1990 and 1991. For the Long Study which was a part of her course she researched and wrote a study of this parish over the past 120 years and I have unashamedly drawn on much of what she put together. Secondly, in the Transactions of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society Volume 3, 1958, there is an article on Llanfihangel-y-traethau by John Lloyd on which I have drawn. An Introductory Leaflet to this church was written by my father when he was churchwarden and expanded by me when I became Rector. I am also very grateful indeed to Brian and Gwenda Paul of Tŷ Fry in Penrhyndeudraeth for the information they have given me about the unfortunate Rev William Jones, who lived at Tŷ Fry and served as curate here and was drowned in 1769 while crossing the estuary.

The Church

*Yn ôl ysgriflen sydd i'w weld yn y fynwent, adeiladwyd yr Eglwys yn Nheyrnasiad y Brenin Owain Gwynedd sef 1137-1170 - rhyw 150 o flynyddoedd cyn dechrau adeiladau Castell Harlech yn 1283.*

**THIS CHURCH IS MORE ANCIENT THAN IT LOOKS.** A few yards from the porch you have seen a unique memorial, a monument surviving from the days long before marking graves became common practice. It is a square, narrow, weather-

worn monolith, a pillar with a 12<sup>th</sup> century inscription in its four faces. It reads (with the contractions expanded):

HIC EST SEPULCHRUM WLEDR MATRIS (H)ODELEV QUI  
PRIMUM AEDIFICAVIT HANC ECCLESIAM IN TEMPORE EWINI

HERE IS THE GRAVE OF WLEDR MOTHER OF HOEDLIW WHO FIRST  
BUILT THIS CHURCH IN THE REIGN OF KING OWAIN GWYNEDD  
(*inscription transcribed and read by W J Hemp, FSA*)

Owain reigned over Gwynedd AD 1137-1170: these walls are a century and a half older than Harlech Castle's Norman masonry. Little is known about how the Church looked then; it was altered several times over the years and was re-built in 1871 (the vestry was added around 1883). It is said that there was a small gallery for "gentlefolk" at one time (possibly the Holland Thomas family of Caerffynnon or the landowners of Glyn Cywarch?). A possible clue may be the cut off beams projecting from the wall at the back of the church – or did they support an earlier and lower roof? In common with the rest of the area, the church was lit by candles and lamps until at least 1953, when electricity first came to Yr Ynys.

### The Parish

Llanfihangel-y-traethau means "St Michael's on the Beaches". A chain of these ancient dedicated 'St Michael's Mounts' can be traced all along the shores of the Celtic world from Brittany to Scotland (there is another on the other side of the estuary, at Treflys, above Morfa Bychan). At the time that this church was built, it was, like many of the others, a rocky tidal island - a good vantage point for St Michael and his angels to keep watch over the coast. The name of the village here – Ynys – means just that: island. *Er hynny roedd y tir yn isel ac o dan effaith y llanw ar bob ochr.* Depending on the state of the tide, the worshippers would assemble by boat or coracle, on foot or horseback, across the sands. In those days the parish covered all the neighbouring coastline from the mouth of the Glaslyn to the borders of Llandanwg (the Church just south of Harlech, in whose parish Harlech lay), including the Penrhyndeudraeth-Portmeirion peninsula, where the remains of a very ancient pre-Norman castle are hidden in the woods above the Hotel. *Yr oedd Penrhyndeudraeth yn nodedig iawn am y cocos ac yn adnabyddus fel tref cocos. Fe'i disgrifiwyd fel "ychydig o dai wedi eu gwasgaru ymhlith tomennydd o faw a chregyn cocos." Os dymunai'r cocoswyr fynd i'r eglwys, defnyddient gwch, gorwgl neu fferi, neu ar lanw isel ar droed neu ar gefn ceffyl i deithio i Eglwys Llanfihangel-y-traethau.* Penrhyndeudraeth itself was a settlement of cocklegatherers with a bad reputation for knife fights and only became a parish in its own right in 1897, when a church was built there.

In the late Middle Ages the sea receded from the land between here and Harlech but not until 1810 (following an Enclosure Act of 1806) was it shut out altogether by the sea walls from Tŷ Gwyn in Ynys to the 'mainland' near Glan-y-wern and from Glan-y-wern to what is now Bont Briwet (the Toll Bridge). Talsarnau, which had been a small sea-shore farm, became a flourishing village which housed the people drawn to work the recently-won extra land. In 1856 a meeting at "The Ship Aground" pub in Talsarnau planned the draining of the flat marshland between there and Harlech and the eventual building of the lower road to Harlech through Ynys. The embankments did not always succeed, however: in 1927 and in 1936 the "Llanw Mawr" (the Great Tide) reclaimed the farmland around Talsarnau, drowning many animals and causing serious damage to the railway and buildings.

In addition to sea-faring (of which more later), the parish supplied labour for the developing slate quarries in and around Blaenau Ffestiniog (the Census of 1871/81 lists 32 slate quarrymen and 13 mariners). Up to the end of the First World War there were also manganese mines up in the hills and small mills on the afon Glyn above Glyn Cywarch. Transporting the manganese ore required horses and the same Census lists 3 blacksmiths and 2 wheelwrights who must have been kept busy. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the quarrymen lived near the quarries for the working week and returned home for Sundays only. In the mid-war years, the labour force in the quarries increased but daily transport became available (either a bus from Glan-y-wern, or the “trên bach” from Penrhyndeudraeth). Since then, the decline in slate quarrying and increased mechanisation on farms (tractors began to appear in the late forties) have led to a drop in population (1871/1881: 734, 1971: 383, 1981:451).

The village of Ynys itself is older than Talsarnau, but really consists of one street, dominated by what was a warehouse, Storws Tŷ Gwyn, and another large building, Tŷ Gwyn Gamlas, since demolished. *O amgylch harbwr bach Tŷ Gwyn Gamlas a Charreg-y-ro ac yn Aber-iâ (heddiw Portmeirion) adeiladwyd beth bynnag 14 o longau hwylio cefnfor. Ond yn fuan iawn fe ddaeth Porthmadog yn fwy poblogaidd.* Before Porthmadog developed its shipyards, no less than 14 ocean-going ships were built at Tŷ Gwyn Gamlas (see, for example, the painting by Cornelius Varley in 1802. Varley also painted one of the ferries which plied across the Traeth Bach in 1826). Ships were also built at Carreg-y-ro in Ynys, and at Aber-iâ (now Portmeirion). Tŷ Gwyn y Gamlas was for many years the port for supplying Harlech Castle (“Gamlas” means canal and in John Speed’s map of 1610 a water inlet starting from Tŷ Gwyn is shown almost reaching the castle, possibly the remains of the old course of the river Glyn (and, it has been argued, the Dwyrdd).

*Cyn Rheilffordd Ffestiniog cludwyd llechi o’r chwareli mewn cychod gyda gwaelod fflat i’w llwytho i’r llongau mawr. Defnyddient y cei, sef Cei Newydd, sydd i’w weld o ffordd Maentwrog hyd heddiw.* Before the Ffestiniog Railway was constructed, slates were brought to Cei Newydd and other quays on the Dwyrdd river below Maentwrog, loaded onto special shallow draft boats and carried to Porthmadog for transfer to ocean-going ships. These boats too were built locally.

### The Churchyard

*Nid yn annisgwyl, roedd yr eglwys yn un o bwys i forwyr hyd at yr ugeinfed ganrif.*

Not surprisingly, this was a sea-farers’ church right into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the cemetery you will find many gravestones of seamen (14) and sea captains (26). Other notable graves include Mari’r Fantell Wen (Mary Evans, who founded a sect based on her claim to be the Bride of Christ, died in 1789), Lewis Holland Thomas, of Caerffynnon (died 1888), rags-to-riches seafarer and trader, Gwyneth Vaughan (1852-1910), author of *O Gorlannau’r Defaid* and *Plant y Gorthrwm*, Richard Hughes (1900-1976) author of *High Wind in Jamaica*, *In Hazard* and other novels and plays and Lord Harlech (1918-1985), Ambassador to the USA at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, whose funeral in Llanfihangel was attended by Senator Edward Kennedy, Jacqueline Onassis and other members of the Kennedy family. Ellis Wynne of Las Ynys, the famous Rector of Llanfair and author of *Gweledigaethau’r Bardd Cwsg* (*Visions of the Sleeping Bard*), was married in this Church in 1698 (this was his first marriage).

### The Church today

There are two modern stained glass windows in the Church: the East Window was given by his daughters in memory of Robert Jones-Morris, organist of the Church for 70 years (1958) and a window to the right in the Choir was designed and made by the

artist Polly Hope in memory of her friends, the author Richard Hughes and his wife Frances (1988). Richard Hughes was a churchwarden of Llanfihangel for many years.

### Changes in Church use

*Newidiwyd statws yr eglwys hon dros y canrifoedd oherwydd llanw a thrai poblogaeth yr ardal.* Population and land development changes have altered the status of this church. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Llanfihangel was a chapel of ease to the church of Llandecwyn, in the hills to the south east. In those days, there was little activity round the church on the island, whereas the number of small farms in the hills was much greater than it is today. In 1623 it was reported that there was only one service annually in Llanfihangel and 2 to 3 in Llandecwyn: possibly the Reformation had reduced the availability of clergy in the area? Later the number of services increased, and there is a record of the Rector applying to the Church Council for extra fees because of the hardship of riding up to Llandecwyn to conduct an afternoon service after ministering at Llanfihangel: he was refused! For part at least of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the curate ministering to the two parishes lived at Tŷ Fry outside Penrhyndeudraeth and it is believed that the Reverend William Jones of Tŷ Fry was drowned (with his horse) while crossing the Traeth Bach to take a service in 1769. Correspondence that has survived shows that, although he had a degree in Theology from Jesus College, Oxford and warm testimonials as to his pastoral diligence, William Jones was refused further ordination - from deacon to priest - because the Bishop of Bangor found his knowledge of the Bible insufficient. Later, the Rector of Llanfihangel-y-traethau lived in Tyddyn Eglwys, a purpose-built house close to the Church, for which funds were raised in 1834. Llandecwyn Church is now only used occasionally for services (but also as a meditation centre in the summer months), whereas Llanfihangel has services every Sunday and a flourishing Sunday School. The parish is now part of the Harlech Group and the Rector is based in Harlech, whose church, St Tanwg's, was built some 170 years ago.

This building may not be all that remarkable. Its walls do not look old, and there are no outstanding architectural features. But it has served as the centre of a vibrant community for centuries, and for centuries farmers and servants, seafarers and grandees have worshipped here – and you can feel their presence.

My father ended his leaflet introducing this Church with words which I will repeat now:

*Mae'r fangre hon yn addoldy gweddi hynafol. Cofiwch fod cenedlaethau o Gristnogion wedi gweddio yma dros gyfnod o wyth canrif neu fwy. Cofiwch amdanynt ger bron Duw a gweddiwch yma yn eu cwmni.*

**THIS IS AN ANCIENT HOUSE OF PRAYER.** Remember that this is a place where Christians have prayed, generation after generation, for eight centuries or more. Remember them before God and say a prayer here in their company.

Bob Hughes