

Victor Jones History project,
St Brynach Church, Llanfrynach
By Jack Organ



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Contents

Introduction	Page 3
The religious History of the location	Page 4
The church site (graveyard)	Page 4
The Church Building	Page 6
Listed Status	Page 15
The people living in Llanfrynach in the 1800's	Page 16
The Church today	Page 17
The Church in the future	Page 17
Conclusion	Page 18
Bibliography	Page 19

Introduction

Llanfrynach is a village 4 km South East of Brecon in Powys, the church can be found in the centre of the village, it is open to everyone who wishes to go there. I have lived in Llanfrynach for 4 years. We bought our house from the Diocese of Brecon and Swansea (who manage the Church and its affairs locally), it was the old Rectory where the vicar used to live. Most of the rooms in our house overlook this beautiful church and its graveyard. This is the reason I have chosen the church as my history project.

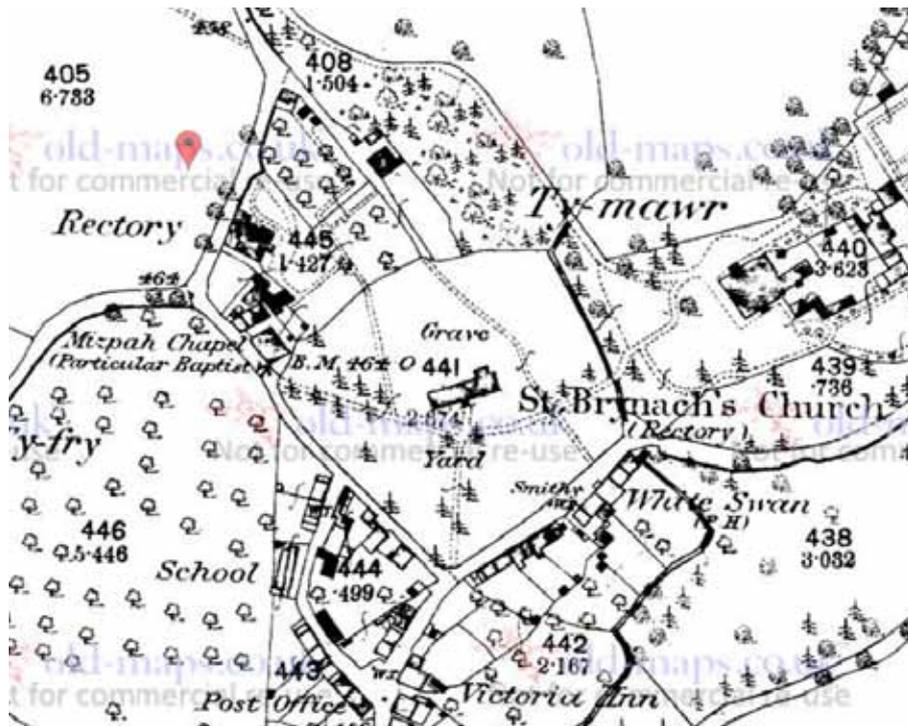
This history project includes; the church's history, the land on which it is built, how the building has evolved and the people who have used it in the past and who might use it into the future.

The religious history of the location

Within the Brecon Beacons there is evidence of religious history going back many thousands of years. Examples of this include standing stones, circular sites, bronze age cairns (burial tombs) and stone circles all suggesting that people worshiped here thousands of years before Christianity began. By the 4th century Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire. There is evidence that the Romans settled in Llanfrynach and that it was one of the wealthiest places in central and Northern Wales. It was probably a wealthy Trader or landowner who decided that Llanfrynach was the perfect place to build a luxurious bath house. Where it used to be, there are now public toilets 'Ty Bach Llanfrynach Loos.'

The Church site (graveyard)

Llanfrynach church has the largest churchyard in Breconshire or Radnorshire. The map below, hand drawn in 1887, indicates the graveyard and the church. It is the same size now as it was then.



Llanfrynach in 1887 (old-maps.co.uk)



Llanfrynach in 1990 (old-maps.co.uk)

In 2010, the community Payback Scheme organized a big renovation job to clear brambles and weeds, also a local appeal payed for new gates at the end of the yew walk.

The Church Building

The church is named after the Celtic Saint, Brynach who founded the church in the 4th century. St Brynach church was originally thought to have been built in the 14th century, however, the earliest reference to this church dated back to 1281. Parts of it including the chancel, nave and porch were rebuilt during the Victorian period, 1885 by William Jones of Brecon. The tower for instance is much older than other parts, perhaps 13th century or earlier. It has 5ft thick walls and a parapet 48ft high. It is thought by local historians that the tower was designed as a fortress to defend against invading attackers. See figure 1 below for an early drawing of the church with it's tower.



Figure 1, the church before it was rebuilt.

Looking at the church today you can clearly see the difference in construction between the tower and the rebuilt parts. A floor plan, at figure 2 below, I have redrawn a plan found on the wall of the church, this shows the difference in walls thickness. This plan of the church shows that the tower's walls are thicker than the rest of the building. I thought this might also be because the tower is taller than everything else so would need more support.

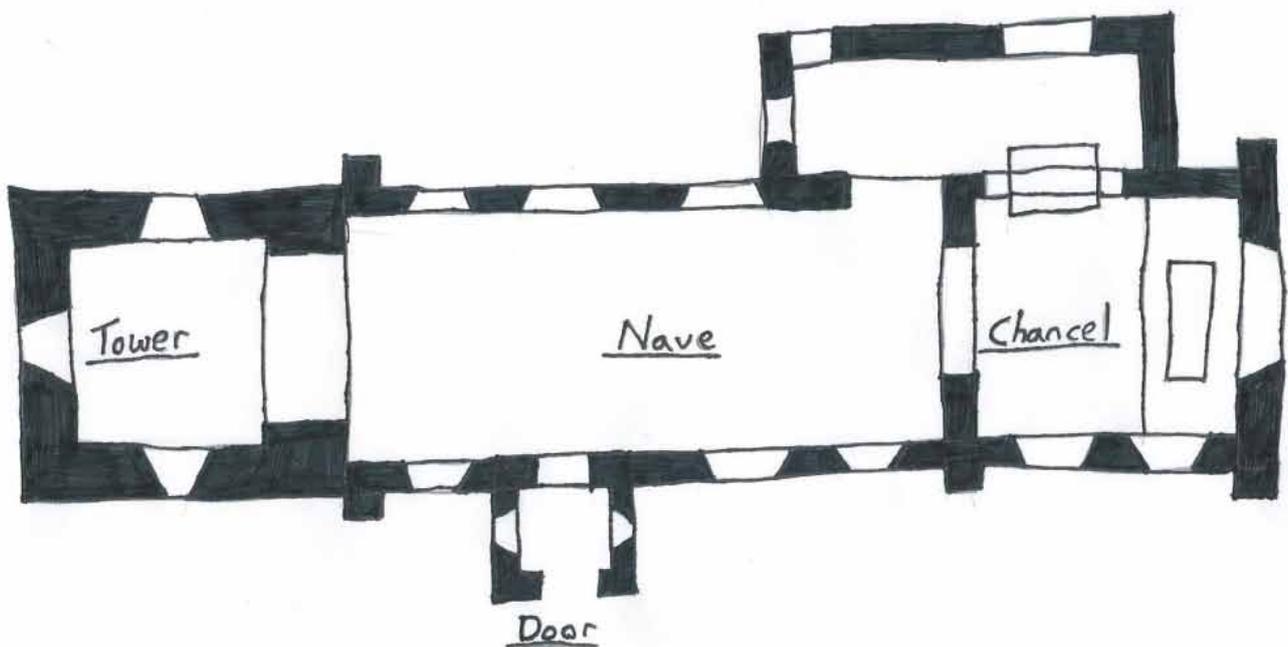


Figure 2, Floor plan not to scale, drawn by Jack Organ

You can also notice that different parts of the building have different stonework depending on when they were built.



Tower stonework with smooth pointing



Nave stonework, which is more square and neater with pronounced pointing. Interestingly these walls are the same as the back of our house, which suggests that it (the former Rectory) may have been extended at the same time.

All written evidence suggests that the church was only extended or rebuilt once. However, the part behind the organ is built very close to one of the windows, covering the fine stone detailing around it. This suggests to me that was built later or maybe as an afterthought. Why carve the shaped stone at the side and then cover it up? See figure 3 below.



Figure 3, rear lean-to built awkwardly up to a Nave window

The Interior

On my first visit I found the church a little confusing. The tower which has windows at high level has no staircase or obvious means of access to the upper levels. This means that you can't easily care for the bells or go on top. We couldn't see a trapdoor or anything that might be a substitute for stairs.

My research has uncovered that the stair up to the first and second floors was demolished when the church was rebuilt and an arch into the base of the tower is now in the stairs place. Unfortunately, I have not been able to get into the top of the Tower as I am interested to know what might be up there. Other than the Bells of course!



Figure 4, the internal large arch into the tower where the stair used to be.

Inside the church there is Victorian decoration painted on cut-out tin sheet. A picture (frieze) of stenciled floral design, is along the chancel wall plate. There are two large angels with a greenery background on the chancel east wall. Along the Nave there are inscriptions at wall-plate level saying, 'The Te Deum ' and 'Sanctus', Te Deum is an early Christian hymn of praise, Sanctus is another holy hymn, also carved are the ten commandments. All of the interior, the Chancel and the Nave have thin scissor rafters rather than trusses. My Dad (who is an Architect) says that a more modern version of these are used to form house roofs today.



Figure 5, scissor rafters

There is an oak eagle lectern to Mr. W. De Winton, 1823-1907, who read the lesson daily for 36 years. Also there are pews dating back to 1865, these are memorial to J.J De Winton, died 1863. The De Winton family have been associated with Llanfrynach and Brecon since the 17th century, they have donated lots to the community including land for the school and church. They owned many properties and land in Llanfrynach because of they were a wealthy banking family. Wilfred Seymour de Winton of Ty Mawr (a large estate in Llanfrynach) was a Director of a bank and one of the church's most generous financial donors, Wilfred decided to leave his entire estate to the church. This meant that his descendants had to find the money to buy it back. Wilfred's donations helped the church fulfill one of his greatest wishes, that the Priory in Brecon should become a cathedral.

The organ

The organ was made in 1872 by Gray & Davison. We have organ's in churches because the organ is played when we sing hymns and until recently Llanfrynach had its own choir. The Reverend Peter Sims and his family lived in the Rectory at Llanfrynach for 23 years. As Rector he would lead the church services. He was known to have a magnificent singing voice and when there was no one to play the organ he would announce that he would sing the first two lines of the hymns and then everyone else should join in afterwards, thus

giving them the right note to start the congregation off! It is said that the unaccompanied singing was wonderful!

The Font

The font is medieval though it has been recut, it has an octagonal bowl on top of an octagonal deep base. It is also retooled.

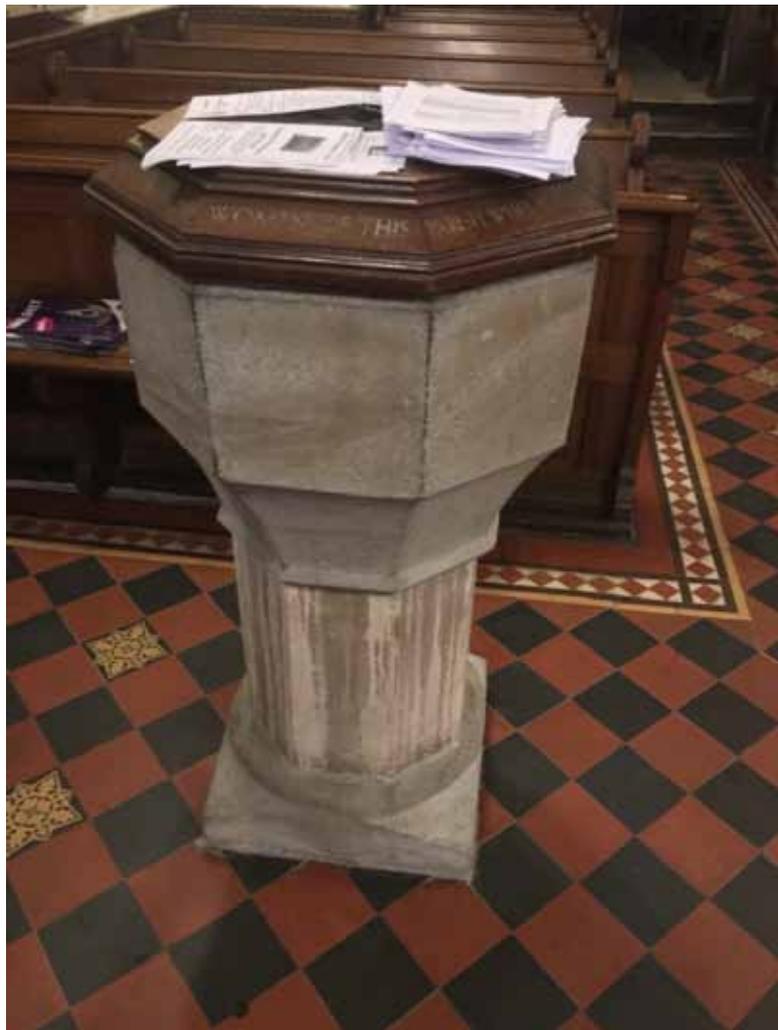


Figure 6, the font

The Llanfrynach Cross

The most interesting historical feature of this church is thought to be a 10th century cross slab, this is at the west end of the church. When I went to look for this I found that it is very worn but you can just see a figure with upraised arms at the top above a Maltese cross with a small bird beneath it.



Figure 7 Cross Slab

Listed Status

Listing is when a building is protected by the government, this means no one can touch it, make any additions to it or take anything away without getting written permission.

The listing text gives the reason for listing, it is listed for its special historic interest as a parish church with good surviving medieval W tower, 19th century fittings including stained glass and memorials by J. E. Thomas.

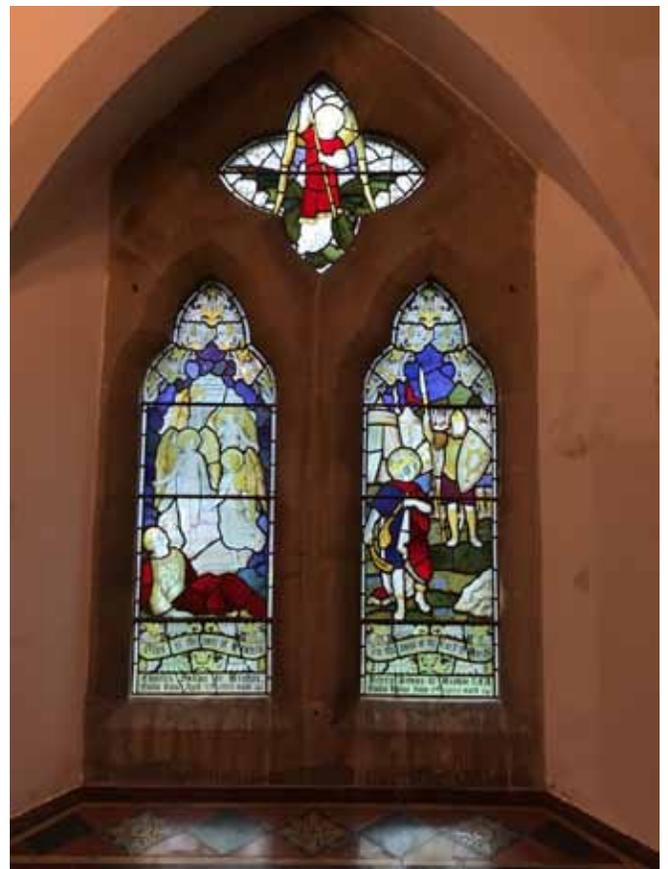


Figure 8, stained glass windows

The people living in Llanfrynach in the 1800's

In 1841, during Queen Victoria's reign, the census tells us who lived in Llanfrynach then, their names and what they did for a living. As well as farmers, farm workers and servants, there were many others living and working in the village. This included two gardeners, three millers, two carpenters, three shoe makers, two blacksmiths, a cooper, a tailor, a dress maker and a miner. There were two pubs in the village, the Victoria Inn and the White Swan which is still open today. There were 350 people working in the village.

Around the 1800 and 1900's, everyone in the village would have gone to church each Sunday, in fact it is known the services were held at 8am every day and on a Sunday. There were four services, one of them in Welsh. Sundays (the Sabbath) were strictly considered a day of rest and worship, no-one was allowed to work, it was considered a sin. Even to sew or knit was discouraged! No matter how good the weather was, farmers weren't allowed to plough, sow or make hay.

The Church today

On Sundays and on religious occasions such as Christmas and Easter the church bells are heard throughout the village. Numbers of people attending Sunday church services have sadly reduced significantly over the past few decades. However throughout the year there are many people attending funerals, weddings and Christenings.

The Church in the future

In the past the church was considered the heart of the community, but now it faces huge challenges to increase the numbers in attendance. Across Wales churches are closing and falling into disrepair. The church in Cathedine for example, has not been refurbished as there is not enough people using it to justify the cost. Some are sold for development, others are used by the community for other shared activities in an attempt to raise money and create interest.

I do wonder how Llanfrynach church will stay open as it is only used occasionally. Perhaps the church could be used for other activities as well. It is the best building in our village and it should be enjoyed. Other activities could include a meeting hall, play groups, concerts and perhaps even as a climbing

centre. I understand that pop up restaurants are becoming popular in churches (there is one in Hereford). St. Mary's church in Brecon also has a café and it is a lovely place to go to have lunch. I think that churches are amazing places to bring friends together.

Conclusion

In my opinion the church is a beautiful building and should stay in Llanfrynach for years to come, carrying on all the things it does. The church was a great thing to do for my history project, because of all the interesting things about it. It also has informed me about my own home, the people who lived in it and when it was extended. I only wish we could still see the Roman Baths. It is also very interesting looking at how history can educate me about life in my village today and how families who still live here helped create this building at the heart of the village. In conclusion, we all need to make sure we look after it, so it is still here for future generations to enjoy.

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Resources

Brecon Library