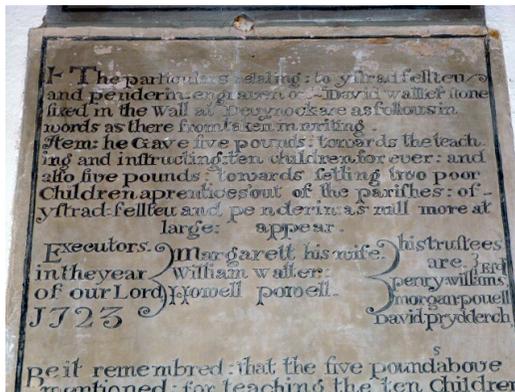


Among the plaques around the walls is one to the right of the rederos, which records a will in which a gentleman of the Parish leaves property for the poor of the parish. This charity still exists having been incorporated into the Llewellyn, Lewis and Morgan Charity that at the present raises over £1000 annually in rents and investment.

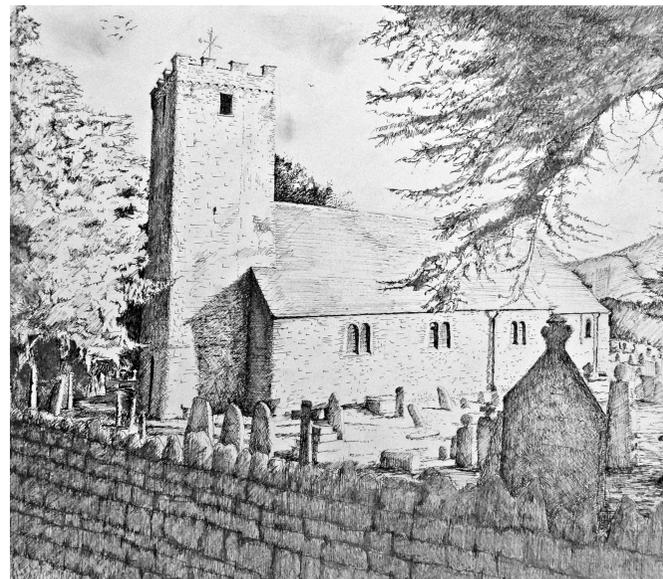
After an initial report in 2006, the community came together around a vision to make the church hall a superbly equipped focus for local and visitor activity the year round. The work was substantially funded by a grant from the Welsh Assembly and in 2011 the very significant works were completed.

In recent years the church has tried to return to preach and practice a simpler Biblical faith. Such faith goes back to the faith of the Apostles, based on the personal relationship between God, revealed in Jesus Christ and both the individual and the corporate body of Christians. We seek to reach out in the power of God's Holy Spirit and we have begun to see people healed and renewed under this ministry. No longer is the church seen as something that just looks to the past. It looks rather to our future in our Lord and Saviour and ultimately in the glory that He promises. A renewed trust in God has led to the generosity of members and others being increased, as witness the labour freely given in tidying the churchyard and a Harvest Supper free of charge to the whole community each year.



# ST MARY'S CHURCH, YSTRADFELLTE

WELCOME TO THE VILLAGE CHURCH OF YSTRADFELLTE!



THIS COMMUNITY HAS BEEN WORSHIPPING ON THIS SPOT FOR ALMOST 1000 YEARS, AND ONE OF THE YEW TREES HAS BEEN DATED AS 1400 YEARS OLD! BOWMEN FROM THIS VILLAGE, WITH BOWS MADE FROM THESE YEWS, FOUGHT AT AGINCOURT IN 1415. THIS CHURCH IS AT THE HEART OF A FARMING COMMUNITY AND WE THINK IS ONE OF THE MOST SCENIC VALLEYS IN WALES, WITH AMAZING WALKS, CAVES, A DISAPPEARING RIVER, A BLUE LAGOON, AND WATERFALLS YOU CAN WALK BEHIND! HERE IT IS EASY TO SEE THE WORK OF A CREATOR GOD AND TO FEEL HIS PRESENCE! WE PRAY YOU WILL ENJOY YOUR VISIT AND TAKE GOD'S REAL PRESENCE HOME WITH YOU.



(original text and research by Howard Martin; drawings by Stephen Waldron)

## Before Christianity

Nestling in the beautiful Mellte Valley, surrounded by rolling heather covered moors and rich green farmland pasture is the attractive and historic parish church building of St. Mary, Ystradfellte. By piecing together available information we can assemble an image of the earliest history of this church building.

Before Christianity came to Wales the people followed various pagan religious cults. The sun, moon and sources of continuous fresh water were revered as controllers of man's prosperity and destiny. Upon the death of a member of the tribe the spirit of the deceased was offered to their god and the remains interred. The early Celts, in common with civilizations throughout the world, either cremated or buried their dead in a "special place". This was often a site of a megalithic barrow or a place with earlier ritualistic associations. In Wales such burial grounds were ringed with stones, low walls of turf, or defined by hedges. At their centre was an open area forming an oratory.

## The Romans

In 55 B.C. the Romans came to Britain and by the end of the second Century A.D. had established marching camps, roads and forts throughout South Wales. The Romans too had their pagan gods. Christianity slowly spread through the Roman Empire, no doubt influenced by the soldiers who had served in the Holy Lands. With the passing of the first edict of toleration in A.D. 311 and the conversion of Emperor Constantine the Great in A.D. 312 Christianity enjoyed a certain acceptability. Evidence has emerged throughout Britain of Roman pottery and metal objects bearing early Christian symbols. Ystradfellte lies beside Sarn

Helen, the Roman Highway which passes through the parish from the fort of Y Gaer, at Brecon, to the coast near Neath, a fascinating walk for ramblers.

Around 550 A.D. the Celtic leader Brychan, with his cousins the brothers of Tybion, fought his way south from Scotland and gained the lands around Cader Arthur, now known as Pen-Y-Fan, as the spoils of war. This area became the Lands of the Brychan, Brycheinioc, later to become Breconshire. There followed several Welsh princes, who were Christians, called Brychan Brycheinioc. Brychan's sister Lia was a Christian and it is believed she lived, and probably worshipped in the parish. The mountain peak named after her Fan Lia, overlooks the village from the North.

## The Original Church Building

Buildings of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries were constructed of mud and wattle or of rough walls of drystone. When a building fell into decline the stones were often removed and used elsewhere. This is probably why there remains no archaeological evidence of an earlier building on the site of the present church building, although the roughly circular shape of the graveyard hints at its pagan origins.

Much of the present building was constructed by Cistercian monks, at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century and, as was their practice, they dedicated it to St. Mary. The stones for the building were probably floated down the river from Plas-y-Gors, to the north of the parish, where they were quarried. At that time the river may have meandered much closer to the site.

In this original building the arch divided the nave from the very small chancel, which extended no further than the window now set in the south side. The interior walls were simply plastered and were probably decorated with colourful paintings of religious scenes, as was the practice at the time. This small church building has undergone considerable alteration to produce what we see today.

After Owen Glendwr had broken the Marcher Lordships there was a period of relative peace and prosperity. The population had steadily grown and the church was very much the focus of the community. At that time several priests and their attendants would occupy the chancel to participate in patronal festivals of con-celebration. Both the chancel and nave were proving to be too small and so the church was considerably enlarged.

## Enhancements

The rood screen was introduced during the 15<sup>th</sup> century enlargement. This decorated open screen of timber construction, divided the church building in front of the chancel arch and while permitting the congregation to participate in the service, it kept the ever present village dogs from wandering into the chancel. Surmounting the screen was a balustrade and a gallery, which was about four feet wide. Prominently displayed on top of the screen was the rood, or crucifix, flanked by life size painted figures of Mary, mother of Jesus and John, the beloved apostle and a row of large candlesticks used to illuminate the figures on occasions of festive services. The gallery was sufficiently wide to allow boys of the parish to sit and sing during services. Between 1649 and 1660, the period of the Commonwealth, these "papish reminders" were removed from churches throughout the land. The rood screen was destroyed. All that remains today are the two doors beside the pulpit through which access was gained to the balcony. A stairway still exists between them, built into the wall.

The final addition to the building was the construction of a bell-tower during the Restoration. This simple tower with pyramidal timber roof and battlemented parapet is in pleasant proportion to the



extended church building. At the time, bell-towers had become very fashionable. A break in the masonry of the west wall shows where the tower was constructed and this gap was necessary to prevent the effects of oscillation.

The original Norman building had an entrance in the south side and from the graveyard one can clearly see where this has been bricked up. A similar entrance in the north wall was infilled when the later west door was constructed.

The present 17<sup>th</sup> century font replaces the original, which is held in the tower.

In 1882 the interior of the building was considerably restored and the pews were installed to give a seating capacity of 280. Around 1900 the beautiful carved oak rederos and altar, together with eight stained glass windows were given to the church by Ann Jones of Hepste Fawr, in memory of her parents David and Elizabeth Walters. The carved oak pulpit was a gift of the same donor in memory of her late husband.

The church hall was built in 1913 at a cost of £738. It was designed to seat two hundred people and was the gift of Mrs. Napier Higgins in memory of her ancestor Sir David Williams. A Native of the parish Sir David had been Judge of the King's Bench between 1603 and 1612. Following the recent collapse of the original roof timbers the church hall has been extensively restored. Costs were kept to below £20,000 by the use of voluntary labour and, at the finishing stages, a Christian builder who gave much of his labour free. Following the closure of the then existing Post Office a new Post Office was incorporated into the rebuilding. The present Vicar is the titular Sub Postmaster!

## Modernisation



In 1960 an evening service was filmed, St. Mary's being chosen as an example of a typical Welsh church building. It is believed the resulting film was shown in "many countries of the Commonwealth".

On top of the rederos is a mother of pearl cross of interesting origin. In the 70s a party of boys from Abercwmboi travelled overland to the Holy Land. Thinking of holidays they had spent in Ystradfellte they purchased the cross and on their return presented it to the church. In 1997 the John Scott, the Vicar was enabled by the congregations of this Benefice to visit a church in revival in Pensacola, Florida. A small oil lamp containing olive oil for anointing was given to John that now sits on the sill of the East window. Oil is used in anointing for ministry and for healing and this particular oil and its container were given by the Spanish interpreter at that church in Brownsville, Paloma Gonzalez. It serves as a link between a church of over 5000 members and one of under 15 but also as a symbol of her faith, that revival would soon break out again in Wales as a result of a similar anointing to that experienced in Pensacola.