

Parish Church of Saint Mary the Virgin, Caerau

by R. M. WOOLS and J. GUY

St. Mary's Church stands on a hill about half a mile south of the main Cardiff to Cowbridge road. It is built inside an early Roman Encampment, called by Ptolemy, the Roman historian in Britain, Iupupania, but known to the Welsh as Thef-Iwbwb, both names meaning The Town of Wailing, the significance of which has now been lost. Alongside this are the oval earthworks of a yet earlier camp, dating from the Iron Age. From the summit of these earthworks an extensive view of Cardiff and its surrounding districts, including Llandaff Cathedral, the Civic Centre and Castell Coch, may be seen.

St. Mary's however, as far as can be ascertained, was not the first church upon this site. In 1913 there still remained slight evidence of an earlier church to the north of the present building, recorded in *Archaeologia Cambrensis*. It is thought that this church was dedicated to St. Gweirydd ab Brochfael, King and Confessor, who was a King of Morgannwg about 900 A.D. St. Gweirydd, however, is a very hazy Saint, unknown outside the Vale of Glamorgan, whose existence is something of a legend.

St. Mary's is not mentioned in the Norwich Taxation of 1254, which shows that it had not then been built. The inhabitants of the village had, therefore, to walk to Began, then a small village complete with church, probably dedicated to St. Leuder (another hazy Saint) but now only a farmhouse, called Began Farm. It is likely that the construction of St. Mary's started about 1260, for it is first mentioned in the *Taxatio Ecclesiasticus* of Pope Nicholas IV (1288-1292) in 1291, when it was valued at four pounds. At this time, Caerau was called Kayer, and the church is recorded as being in the Deanery of Newport. The earliest known spelling of Caerau was in 1190, when it was Kayre.

THE BUILDING

St. Mary's, when built, consisted of a western tower with a saddle back roof, the nave, and the chancel. Except for the porch, added a century or two later, and the vestry, added in 1959-60, this is the church today.

THE TOWER

The tower, built in the Early English style, now contains three floors, but originally there were at least four. The arch from the nave to the tower, on the ground floor, was inserted in 1885-6, replacing one earlier and smaller. The door at the west end of the tower, leading into the churchyard, was blocked up before 1848. The ground floor room of the tower has now been made into the Baptistry, the Norman font being raised on a concrete base, and standing just inside where the west door was. The first floor is reached by a stone staircase on the north wall of the nave, and entered through a Transitional Romanesque-Early English arch, contemporary with the rest of the tower. From this chamber the bell is rung, and it is also used as the choirboys' vestry. A wooden ladder leads to the belfry, where the original bronze bell, upon its ancient wheel, hung until stolen in 1959. The present bell was a gift to the church by Mrs. Gridley, daughter of the late Sir Herbert Merrett, of Cwrt-yr-Ala.

The records as regards St. Mary's are silent from 1291 until 1535, when it is recorded that the tithes

of Caerau, with those of Llandogo, a parish in Monmouthshire, were paid to the Prebendary of Caerau in Llandaff Cathedral. This Prebendary, the earliest recorded was Doctor Gwent, Canon of Caerau from 1535-1561. (Note: A Prebend is the name given to the revenue received from one manor or benefice of the cathedral estates, and which supplied a living to one of the members of the cathedral chapter who was known as the Prebendary. In the 19th century the title Canon replaced it in general usage).

In 1537, King Henry VIII made the breach with Rome, but the Reformation did not really reach England until the accession of Edward VI in 1547. During this reign, the over-zealous Protestants wrecked the interiors of most churches, and St. Mary's did not escape. The Rood Loft was ripped out, and destroyed, along with statues and the mural paintings which covered most of the walls, a remnant of which was found in October, 1959, by Mr. R. M. Wools on the south wall of the nave and on the chancel gable. They had been covered with whitewash and replastered over. The premature death of Edward VI in 1553, and the accession of his sister, Mary I, saw a temporary restoration of the jurisdiction of Rome, and a cessation of the pillaging of churches, but not before all St. Mary's Church vestments had been removed and sold. These were:

"It'm. One newe cheseble of crymsyn vevet wth branches and Images of golde, price vijli (6/2).

It'm. One other cheseble of white and redde silke, price vjs (6/-).

It'm. One crosse copper gilte and ij candlesticks of brasse, p'ce xxxs (30/-).
The sale realised £2 2s. 2d.

The Roman Catholic Curate appointed at St. Mary's in 1554 was Hugh Pritchard, who was also Rector of Wenvoe. At the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558, Pritchard was deprived of both these livings, but his successor is not recorded, at Caerau, but one is at Wenvoe.

In 1591, the sum of 1/- was left by Howel Jenkin towards his "mistithings" in the "p'ishe of Cayre." He also said:

It'm. "I doe give towards the rep'acion of the p'ishe churche of Cayre xijd. (another 1/-).
He also left a shilling to Llandaff Cathedral.

In 1615, Howell Adams was appointed Rector of Wenvoe and Caerau, livings which he held until his death in 1641.

In 1648, the decisive Battle of St. Fagan's took place during the Second Civil War, and local legend has it that some of Cromwell's troops hid in the church during the battle.

In 1645, the most famous of all Caerau's Canons was appointed. This was Hugh Lloyd, who was born in Bettws in Carmarthenshire, and went to Oriel College, Oxford, where he became a B.A. in 1611 and M.A. in 1614. He became a B.D. in 1628 and a Doctor of Divinity in 1664. He married Catherine Jones, daughter of the Rector of Llanmaes, by whom he had a large family. In 1616 he was made Rector of St. Andrew's Major, and in 1626 acquired the extra

living of St. Nicholas, where he was very popular. In 1645 he became Prebendary of Caerau. In 1649 the Commonwealth deprived him of both his livings, and during this period he served as Archdeacon of St. David's, until in 1660 he was elected Bishop of Llandaff, the only Caerau Canon that ever achieved a Bishopric. He died, still Bishop, in 1667.

SOUTH PORCH AND NAVE

Above the outer doorway of the south porch there was, in 1881, a niche, similar to the one at Wenvoe, which was designed for an image of the patron saint. This was destroyed in the 1885-86 restorations, and no trace of the niche now remains. The porch contains two stone benches, common in the Vale of Glamorgan, a relic of the days when part of the marriage service was conducted there, also parochial business, and the teaching of the church's children. It also contains a list of Canons and Incumbents of St. Mary's, compiled by the authors of this history, and executed by Mr. D. Bryn Richards, Art Master of the High School for Boys, Cardiff.

On the ground floor of the tower may be seen the font, which is tub-shaped, and late Norman in style and date. Its exterior is decorated with four fleur-de-llys. Its large size is because in mediaeval times, total immersion of the baby was practised.

In the north-east wall of the nave an interesting feature may be observed. It is the remains of an oven, the base of which can still be seen, and the flue of which still opens high on the north wall of the tower. The oven was used to bake the wafers for the Mass and to heat the charcoal for the incense burner. A similar oven may be seen at St. Lythan's Church.

The door in the north wall leads to the modern Priest's Vestry. This room now completes the cruciform shape of the church. In 1848, a stone bench like those in the porch, existed on this wall. This was removed in 1885. The only church now exhibiting this feature intact in the Vale is at Llanfrynach.

In 1881, a visitor, describing the nave, stated that "there was a shapely pointed arch between the dilapidated nave and the much restored chancel. Across this arch was a heavy beam, and the mark of the Rood-Loft." All these were destroyed in 1885.

THE CHANCEL AND SANCTUARY

The only ancient remains here are the simple piscina in the south wall of the sanctuary and the base of an Early Norman lancet window under the base of the more modern two-light window (visible on exterior only). The Altar is a new addition, being made of local stone, and commemorating in its front the dates of the original foundation and recent restoration.

On the outside, high on the south wall of the tower, may be seen a tablet, until recently thought to commemorate the 1885-86 restoration, but on inspection by the authors was found to be a memorial plaque dating from 1720, and placed there to block the belfry window on that side.

The church seems to have needed constant repair and attention, and even in 1771, £30 was expended on repairs to the structure. The principal was bequeathed by a Mrs. Stephens, the interest of which was to be distributed amongst the poor. Therefore, after 1771, the poor got nothing.

The poverty of the parish is emphasised by the fact that it received a total of £1,200 from Queen Anne's Bounty, a payment to augment the stipends of poor clergy. At this time Caerau was a curacy in the parish of Llandaff.

Caerau, like all other parishes, suffered from non-resident incumbents and pluralism, the holding of more than one benefice by a clergyman. By 1800, Llandaff Cathedral was a ruin, and the Canons non-resident. The Canon of Caerau at this time, William Birkin Meackham Lisle, was, for example, Rector of St. Fagan's, and Vicar of Llantilio Pertholey, St. Mellons and Llandedeyrn, all at the same time. The Curate of Caerau, William Davies, was non-resident in the parish, being also Rector of Llangibby in Monmouthshire. Another example of pluralism can be seen in 1734 when the Curate of St. Mary's, Philip Hawkins, also held the Rectory of St. Nicholas, which is many miles distant from Caerau. In the 19th century several Acts of Parliament were passed in an attempt to regulate the number of livings held by any one clergyman, but these were all repealed under the terms of the Pastoral Reorganisation Measure of 1949. The great shortage of clergy in the Church today has meant, not the revival of pluralism, but the grouping together of several old parishes to form one new parish, sometimes consting of as many as five churches.

By 1835, Caerau was raised from a Curacy to a Perpetual Curacy, the first Perpetual Curate being William John Thomas, Curate from 1824-1844. He was replaced by the Rev. Charles Emerson (until 1851) perhaps an ancestor of the Emerson family, now the owners of Sweldon Farm, Cyntwell, once a Manor belonging to a cadet branch of the Mathew family of Llandaff. In 1886 the Perpetual Curacy* became vacant, and remained so until 1869, when Caerau was joined to the village of Ely, which had no church, and was made into the Parish of Caerau-with-Ely, and this living was presented to the Rev. Ebenezer John, whose grave can be seen at the east end of the churchyard near the sanctuary window. (*A "perpetual curacy" is in practice the same as a benefice, but the incumbent obtains possession of his benefice by license from the Bishop, and does not have to be instituted or inducted.)

Shortly after this, St. David's Church was built, in 1871, and the present Vicarage erected. This replaced the earlier Parsonage, a single storey building, surrounded by its own orchard, garden and yard, which had stood in Church Road, Caerau, opposite the present Post Office.

Around this time the population of the village was 131. The earliest recorded census in 1882, said that there were 43 inhabitants in the village. The last census taken independently of the City of Cardiff was in 1911, and records 237 inhabitants. This large number is the result of the building of the Brick Works in the 1890's.

In 1885, St. Mary's was restored at a cost of £760, a very large sum in those days. Most of the windows were replaced, the only originals now remaining being that by the pulpit, and the two-light window in the south wall of the nave. The Chancel arch was renewed and the remains of the ancient Rood-Loft taken down, the Tower arch replaced by a bigger one, and the Tower steps repaired. These repairs are dis-

tinctive for the use of the yellow Bath-stone. All the roofs were replaced, and the Tower crosses added. During the early stages of the rebuilding of St. Mary's in 1959, when the roof was off and the nave and sanctuary filled with tons of rubble from the broken walls and gables, the evening sun came behind the Tower Cross and cast its shadow on the wall where the altar is now. It seemed to be a sign that the church would rise again from the rubble and ruin, and became the inspiration which kept the small band of voluntary workers going in the face of much criticism and pessimism.

An interesting event took place in 1888, when a visitor to the church records that the Sexton, a Somersetshire man, who had been living in Caerau for less than a month, found a skeleton and some silver buttons of the 17th century, with a coin of the same date, while he was digging near the Yew tree. These articles were given to various members of the parish. The visitor had one; Mr. Hill, then Lord of the Manor, had two. No sign of the grave can be found, no grave in the churchyard dating before the 18th century.

Although the church is so small, it did once have a Crypt beneath the nave. The existence of such a chamber came to light during the recent restorations. The Curate, the Rev. Victor Jones, while clearing rubble in the nave, came across some stone steps leading down into the ground. After clearing away more of the earth, he unearthed many human bones. In order to preserve this grave intact, and another grave which was found in the sanctuary, the whole of the floor was re-levelled and cemented.

The churchyard, originally one rood and two perches in extent, according to a tithe map dated 1804, was enlarged in order to accommodate more graves in 1910. Now, however, only about two or three graves are open for interment. To the south of the churchyard lie the remains of a once magnificent Yew tree, said by experts to be 2,000 years old. On the sixth of July, 1937, this tree was found burning by Miss Macbride of Ivy Cottage, Caerau. It was feared that the tree would fall upon the church, but by a stroke of good fortune it fell to the south. It was reported in the local press, which stated that the Vicar, the Rev. R. C. Evans, who had been clearing tombstones out of the way, had to run from under the falling tree. He told the press of the vandalism which was then being directed

at the church. The church plate, a small silver chalice, and paten, two silver mounted glass cruets, the Altar-ornaments and the contents of the offertory box, had recently been stolen. To the right of this Yew, lies the remains of the churchyard cross. It consists of a large stone base, with a square indentation for the shaft. It is not in its original position, but it is of great age.

In 1937, another new church, the Church of the Resurrection, a building of the Byzantine style, was erected in the Grand Avenue, Ely, and yet another on the housing estate which had grown up around the old village of Caerau, the church-cum-hall of St. Timothy's. In the year that St. Timothy's was opened, 1957, St. Mary's Church was closed down, and St. David's Church at the lower end of Ely became the acting parish church of Caerau-with-Ely. Terrible vandalism was directed at St. Mary's for the following year, and it was decided to make the ancient parish church into a ruin. The roof was taken off and the windows and doors bricked up. For the very first time in its 700 years history there were no services at the Church of St. Mary. While the church was in this ruined state vandalism and hooliganism increased, and the wall at the north east corner of the nave was pulled down almost to the ground. A huge hole was made in the tower wall overlooking the nave, and through this hole the ancient bronze bell was dropped by unknown thieves, and has not been recovered since. The Communion rail alone remained in its place, and it was the sight of this that made two men decide to do everything they could to rebuild the old church. In the summer of 1959, the Rev. Victor Jones and a band of men from St. Timothy's Church, began the seemingly impossible task, and they were soon joined by many young helpers, even by some who had been responsible for the vandalism. Roman Catholics and Non-Conformists also came to give a hand that and the following summer, working together with Anglicans to rebuild the church under whose roof they were once able to worship together, and under whose roof they may yet be able to worship together again when all our prayers for Re-union are answered.

Now, at the beginning of 1961, the impossible has been achieved, and the church stands as a tribute to the faith of a few, and as a continual reminder of the Presence of God in our midst.

