

THE HISTORY OF ST MARY'S CHURCH, HAVERFORDWEST

ST MARY'S CHURCH UNTIL THE REFORMATION

Haverfordwest was the only town in Wales to have three parishes within its boundaries, indicating how, early in its history, the town developed its wealth and therefore importance. The parish structure was set up by the Normans. A community was focused on the Parish Church which had responsibility for the spiritual care of its inhabitants. The parishioners and wealthy burgesses built, decorated, expanded and maintained their parish church, went there to worship, be baptized, married and buried.

It is accepted that the St Martin of Tours is the earliest of the town's parish churches and the foundation of the church dedicated to St Thomas a Becket can be dated towards the end of the 12th century as its dedicatee was canonized in 1173.

The original church of St Mary the Virgin probably dates from the first few decades of the 12th century. The thickness of the south wall (4'2") and traces of round headed windows in the interior of the building supports the view that St Mary's church is probably of Norman foundation and therefore of much the same age as the castle. On the north wall of the chancel it is possible to see corbel tables which could have been the outer wall of a church with no aisle. The church was dedicated to The Blessed Virgin Mary, a familiar Norman dedication.

In 1188 Baldwin, the Archbishop of Canterbury, spent time travelling through Wales with Giraldus Cambrensis, preaching and raising money and recruits for the Third Crusade. Giraldus recorded that "a great crowd of people had assembled, some of them soldiers, others civilians" had attended, and it is possible that this could have happened either within, or in the vicinity of St Mary's Church. He preached in Latin and French and declared "those who could not understand a word of the language were just as moved to tears as the others, rushing forward in equal numbers to receive the sign of the Cross".

In 1220 Llewelyn the Great "burned Haverford up to the castle gates" and no doubt St Mary's was seriously damaged. Following this, in the second and third decades of the 13th century, a comparatively peaceful period in the area, the original church was repaired and rebuilt. It was also expanded by the addition of two porches, a tower and the North Aisle. So the arcade, chancel arch and east and west windows belong to the first half of the thirteenth century.

The Augustinian Priory on the banks of the Cleddau was established c. 1200 by the Community of monks who lived by the rule of St Augustine. Priors had already been established by the same order at Carmarthen (1127) and Llanthony (1180). It is likely that there would have been a Prior and twelve canons in Haverfordwest Priory. At some stage in the 13th century Robert of Haverfordwest gave the three town churches to the Priory which then enjoyed a rich income from the tithes of these appropriated churches. The Priory would

have been responsible for appointing a vicar or chaplain or one of their canons to serve in the three churches.

Records in 1405 and 1409 of ordinations of brethren from the Priory held at St Mary's provide evidence of the close link between the two establishments. In 1534 the Lordship of Pembroke was held by Anne Boleyn and under her patronage a new Prior, William Barlow, was appointed. He strongly opposed papal authority, and he and his five Canons subscribed to an oath under the Act Of Supremacy. While in Haverfordwest, at the time a lively and cosmopolitan town with astute and literate men, he would have exerted an important influence and must have had involvement in the local community as he advised Thomas Cromwell of local opposition to reform of the church. Barlow became Bishop of St David's in 1536.

In 1535 the priory was valued at £133. It was dissolved in 1537. The ownership of St Mary's Church eventually passed to Queen Elizabeth I. Haverfordwest was near to the routes to St David's Cathedral taken by medieval pilgrims and a pilgrim's effigy can be seen near the back of the church.

The area around the church would have been very busy and crowded as the population increased due to an expansion of agriculture, trade and commerce. The right to hold a Sunday market and an annual fair was authorized by King John in 1207; the town's market, selling local and imported goods, was held in and around the churchyard from the earliest times. The administration of justice and local government was based around the vicinity of the church; the Guildhall was built in the late 13th century just to the east of the church (now the site of the South African war memorial). At the time that the faces were being carved in stone in the nave and chancel of St Mary's the population would have been quite cosmopolitan. Perhaps the faces are those of English, Welsh, Flemish or Norman French inhabitants of the town.

In 1479 Haverfordwest was granted a Charter of Incorporation and given the status of a county. Civic pride and the prosperity of the town was reflected in the size and grandeur of St Mary's, the Corporation church and centre of civic life. Burgesses and wealthy merchants made grants in order to beautify the church. John Miles gave two seats in the north aisle in 1488 and in 1509 William Dier gave two candlesticks, to be placed in the chancel in front of the High Altar.

In 1488 Richard Smyth, described as Chaplain of St Mary's was appointed Master of Haverfordwest Grammar School, the start of 500 years of close links between the school and St Mary's Church..

In the early 16th century, following the accession of the Pembroke- born Henry VII to the throne, the increasing prosperity of the town and its environs was reflected in extensive alterations to the church. The north aisle was widened, the north wall with perpendicular windows was added, and the clerestories were added in the nave and chancel. The outstanding oak roofs, the parapets on the exterior walls, and a large room with a groined roof in the tower all date from this period.

FROM THE REFORMATION TO 1700

In 1534 Henry VIII broke with Rome and became Head of the English church. With the closing of the Priory the supply of vicars or chaplains to St Mary's would have ceased and the total removal of images from places of worship ordered by the Privy Council meant shrines, jewels, and church plate were seized by the Crown. Statues and wall paintings were destroyed or covered with whitewash; it is probable that this was the fate of the fine capitals of the arcade of St Mary's Church. The right of the Priory to the benefice of St Mary's was transferred to the Crown and eventually came into the ownership of Queen Elizabeth I who ascended the throne in 1558.

In 1560 the Queen, who as patron was responsible for the repair of the chancel, ordered that the Mayor, Sheriff, Bailiffs and Burgesses should have timber from the forest of Coedrath (in the south of the county) for the repair of the chancel. She then gave the Corporation the Rectory of St Mary's together with the advowson of the Vicarage. (The legalities of the grant took over fifty years to settle satisfactorily.)

From this time the Town Corporation took on responsibility for St Mary's Church and the surviving records of the Corporation provide details of expenditure made for the church. The records for the year 1565 show the account of Hugh Barnerd and George Michael, collectors of the priest's wages, who paid Raffe Saviour, the curate £7-3-4, and John Leyo, Parish Clerk £2-13-4. Money was raised by a parish rate and payments by the guilds of glovers, tailors and weavers in the town. In the same year Jenkin Davids and Moris Howell younger, Proctors of the church, received from Morrys Walter £1-15-4, part of the sum raised by selling cups from the church. The sum of £5-1-4 was raised by the sale of a chalice. Repairs to the church cost £2-11-6. Also in the records are numerous details of repairs to the bells and other works in the church. In 1581 David Hoer was paid to make seats in the church, and two and a half yards of "lynsye wollsy" was purchased for the mayor's pew. In 1589 a communion book was purchased, together with four yards of silk and a button to cover it. In the same year payment was made by the churchwardens to Mr Holland, possibly Robert Holland, author of several books, who had other local collections.

The account of Thomas Warren & Thomas Eynon, churchwardens for 1589, includes purchasing a baldron for the bells and a new key for the wicket door of the church, mending a pew door and making bars for church windows, providing a prayer book for the church and oiling the bells. They also met the cost of making the bill and the putting in of the same at the Archdeacon's visitation, purchasing one quart of sack at Whitsuntide for Mr Mayor and his brethren to receive the communion, mending the clapper to one of the bells, washing two surplices and the communion table cloth at Whitsuntide, obtaining horse hide to make baldrons for the bells, mending the 4th bell's clapper, cutting new surplices and supplying gloves to the ringers.

In 1588 William Nichol was burned at the stake in High Street when Queen Mary ascended the throne and papal authority returned to the country for a while.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century St Mary's continued to be at the centre of the town. The Guildhall was just to the east of the church and housed the Great and Quarter Sessions and borough courts. The Council Chamber was established above the north porch of the church, and water was drawn from a conduit close to the South porch. Much of the market, said to be one of the best in Wales, was held in the churchyard. The Town Corporation continued to organize and pay for the running of the church. Regular attendance at church was obligatory but difficult to enforce. In 1630 an order was made; *If any person above 21 years shall absent himself from his parish church during divine service or sermon or be found loitering or playing any game....and after divine service ended in his own parish church shall not resort to the public lecture at such other of the churches of the town where it shall be appointed to be, he shall forfeit 12d. at the least at the discretion of the mayor and common council.*

The Prayer desk and pulpit were now the central point of the church as the emphasis was on the preaching of the Word. Box pews would have been installed and seating arrangements reflected the social class of the parishioners. An Order for the orderly placing of men and women in the church, dating from c1636 lists the occupants of the pews, with females in separate pews to the men. The Mayor also ordered that *"Wheras heretofore the usual manner of decency and kneeling in St Maries church was that aldermen's wives, the better sort of women and other women according to their degrees and calling s did kneel in pews and their children and servants as were not married at or near to the pew doors, which continued for many ages until of late maids and such as are unmarried have, without authority, crept into the pews, insomuch as the seats are so full that there is no room for the women to kneel, much less if they have friends to bring with them. It breeds disorder and contentions. Give notice that maidens and such as are unmarried shall forbear to kneel in seats on pain of punishment."*

Puritan sympathies in the town were reflected in the appointment of lecturers and preachers to provide sermons for the congregation. Based on information gleaned from the Corporation archives, the Vicar's Board names eight preachers at St Mary's Church between 1600 and 1679. In very few cases were these permanent appointments. Stephen Goffe (1620) was better known as the Puritan Rector of Stanmer, Suffolk. (His son William, baptized at St Mary's in 1618, became one of Cromwell's favourite officers. It seems his intervention prevented all the lead being stripped from the roofs of St Mary's by Cromwell's army)

Edmond Orford was named as lecturer in 1624 and William Ormond in 1630. In 1642 the Commonwealth was established and Parliament launched a determined campaign to Puritanise the country. It seems that Edward Warren, who was paid a stipend as a lecturer in 1643/4 was in fact Dean of Ossory Diocese in Ireland, seemingly a Protestant refugee from Ireland.

In 1650 An Act for the Better Propagation and Preaching of the Gospel in Wales delegated authority to 71 Commissioners, (one of whom was Sir Erasmus Philipps of Picton Castle) who were able to eject clergy from their livings for pluralism, ignorance or use of the prayer book. In Haverfordwest Richard Longstreet was appointed Lecturer in 1650.

In 1652 unsuccessful attempts were made to appoint the lecturer, Mr Freeman, to be Minister of all the three parishes in the town. Mr Stephen Love is described as “minister of the gospel in the town” in correspondence regarding a serious outbreak of bubonic plague in the town.

Following the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 the Anglican church was re-established. In 1662 the use of the Book of Common Prayer was revived and communion tables were restored to the east end of the church. Adam Hawkin, William Williams, Roger Lloyd, Arnold Bowen, Joshua Powell and Thomas Davids ministered to the congregation of St Mary’s during the remainder of the seventeenth century.

Civic pride and the prosperity of Haverfordwest was reflected in the size and grandeur of St Mary’s Church. The importance of the burgesses, merchants and other wealthy inhabitants is indicated by the monuments which record them, and several date from the seventeenth century.

In the chancel are monuments to William Walter, William Bowen and John Davids. On the west wall Richard Knethell, William Mayler, Thomas Smyth, attorney, and Thomason Howell have monuments. In the north aisle is a tablet for James Scourfield who died in 1614. In 1607..William Vawer, merchant and Alderman of Bristol, but a native of Haverfordwest provided in his will for the mayor to appoint and procure a learned person to preach a sermon at St Mary’s Church on the 4th Sunday after the Feast of St James (25 July) pay him 5s 8d and invite him and five almsmen to dinner.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

This period saw a dramatic growth in Nonconformity. In Haverfordwest the Albany Independent Chapel on St Thomas’ Green is believed to have been one of the earliest Nonconformist Chapels in Pembrokeshire and as early as 1655 Revd Stephen Love was listed as a member there although he had been Vicar at St Mary’s only a few years before. John Wesley made visits to the town and in 1772 the Wesleyan Chapel was built. In 1774 Tabernacle and in 1789 Bethesda chapels were built. The Moravian Church in the town was founded in 1763.

St Mary’s continued to be the civic church, closely linked with the Town Council (which had built its Council Chamber above the north porch in about 1660), and important families of the town and county. Many of them are commemorated in monuments in the church. One such was the Ayleway family. William Ayleway was Sheriff in 1702, and Mayor in 1714. Daniel Ayleway was mayor in 1731 and William Ayleway, surgeon was Mayor in 1761. Charles Ayleway MA became Vicar in 1772. He died in 1805 having been Vicar for 32 years. Stephen Morris, Mayor of Haverfordwest in 1744, also has a monument in church.

Several wealthy patrons left money for the good of the church and its parishioners. In 1715 John Laugharne of St Brides left £20 annually for the Vicar of St Mary’s to read prayers daily

and instruct children in the church catechism. In 1723 Owen Phillips gave £40, the interest on which to be given to a poor burgess, or widow of a burgess, of good character

Several items of church plate were donated to the church at this time. In 1731 Edward Henry Edwards presented a tankard-shaped flagon of silver gilt to the church, and John Williams, vintner, gave a credence paten. John Phillips, Mayor in 1733, presented St Mary's with a service of silver gilt chalice, paten cover and credence paten in 1765.

In 1737 a new organ was installed, the cost of over £600 having been raised by public subscription. One of the large oak beams used in repair to the nave roof at this time can now be seen lying at the west end of the nave. It records the names of the Mayor, Minister and Churchwardens in 1739 (William Edwards, George Phillips, John Phillips and Stephen Morris.) Rev George Phillips was the vicar between 1728 and 1772, a period in which the church benefitted from many gifts and bequests. As an example, in 1751 an anonymous donor sent the vicar £100 for investment, the interest to be spent to support poor insolvent debtors confined in the town jail. In 1749 Martha Bowen left the vicar £50 for the relief of the poor.

Essential restoration continued under the control of Philip Hoare and George Bowen, churchwardens in 1745. In 1765 the Corporation resolved to renew the town clock in the tower.

In 1773 the Bishop instructed the churchwardens to stop anyone buying and selling goods in the churchyard which meant the town's market, which had long been one of the best in Wales, had to move away from the immediate environs of the church. A plaque in the North Aisle records repairs to the roof in 1745. In 1785 the Vestry Meeting ordered "*that the door in the old tower be shut off and an opening made from Tower Hill- into Bridewell- and that all entrances into the churchyard be shut up except for four, viz., the passages from Shut Street, Shoemaker Street, High Street and also that facing the White Hart – it is likewise ordered that the churchwardens purchase the iron gate now at Castle Hall, provided it does not exceed two pence per pound.*"

In February 1797, following the failed invasion near Fishguard, seven hundred French troops were imprisoned in the church. Notable memorials from this century are those to Hussy Jones (1791) and Elinor Phillips, the wife of John Phillips (1758).

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In 1802 the spire was removed from the tower. In 1805 following the death of Rev William Ayleway, Rev James Thomas, Headmaster of the Grammar School, was appointed vicar. In 1810 Fenton described the church as "*a venerable cathedral-like building*".

The first few decades of the 19th century saw a transformation of parts of the parish from a collection of small medieval streets to wider thoroughfares. The old wooden drawbridge across the river was replaced by a new stone bridge which provided an impressive entry into the commercial centre of the town. The Guildhall was pulled down, and large new houses were built in Georgian style along the High street.

In 1828 the Corporation sold land at the top of Barn Street to the churchwardens for nominal sum and a new cemetery was consecrated by the Bishop of St David's. The first burial was George Morris of the poorhouse in October 1828. A truss in nave roof marked 'I.A. +1832' 'T Edwards 1832' was part of an extensive restoration of the roof at this time. On this occasion one of the churchwardens was declared bankrupt as the church rate collected was insufficient to pay the cost of the repairs.

With the passing of the Municipal Reform Act in 1835, power passed to the middle classes as the vote was given to all ratepayers. Within a few years the interest in the Living of St Mary's had to be sold by the Corporation. Rev Thomas Watts, who was at the time Master of Codrington College, Barbados, purchased the advowson and moved back to the county in 1843 to become Vicar of St Mary's. The following year he appealed for public donations to a fund for providing new pews in the nave as well as a new gallery for the organ. The old oak stalls were replaced by high gothic pews. The architect, Thomas Rowlands, also designed a new gallery for organ. The church received a grant of £150 from the Church Building Society and many fund raising events helped to raise the required sums. Responsibility for the church had moved from the Town Corporation to the parishioners and members.

The 1847 "Blue Books" Education Report includes reference to St Mary's Sunday School, which pupils from the other churches of the town attended. It had been established in 1822, had seven male and five female teachers with seventy male and sixty female pupils. The Scriptures were read and memorized, and the catechism and hymns taught.

The 1851 Religious Census recorded the population of parish as 1590, with 294 Free seats and 506 reserved and paid for. On census Sunday a congregation of 333 attended in morning and 495 in the evening. The Sunday school had 81 present on that day. By 1862 there were over 400 children in Sunday school with singing classes and large and successful choir led by WL Harding.

In 1857 Rev James Henry Alexander Philipps purchased the advowson of the church and became Vicar of St Mary's. He had inherited the large Picton estate and moved to live at Picton castle. He was Vicar until 1875 and relied very much on his curates to run and administer the church. In 1859 an appeal was launched for funds to repair the roof, demolish the town council chamber and improve the environs of the church by forming an entrance from High Street. The architect initially was WH Lindsay, who died in 1863, then C E Giles, who designed the rearrangement of the North porch. Public pressure forced the 1869 Vestry Meeting to declare letting of and payments for seats in the church illegal. A weekly offertory was established in order to raise money to run the church.

Rev Philipps was succeeded as vicar by Rev Joshua Booth Wrenford. In 1883 Revd Charles Frederick Harrison was appointed. During his incumbency he guided the work of extensive restoration in the chancel, nave and roofs. This was based on a structural report made in 1882 by Ewan Christian, consulting architect to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. The organ was moved to its current position in the chancel and expanded with a new console, the 1844 gothic style pews in the nave were replaced by finely carved oak pews and a new heating system was installed. The work was praised for carefully preserving old features. Until 1892 there had been no vicarage for church; this was rectified when a house at the top of Hill Lane was purchased.

By the end of the 19th century the church was the focus of many groups. Sunday school, church choir, sports, Men's Society, GFS, visitors to the poor, ladies groups such as the Dorcas Society which made garments for distribution to the poor, and the Ladies Home Mission Working Party which organized a sales of work at the Masonic Hall in aid of Home Missions. A branch of the Mothers Union was formed in the parish in 1892.

In 1898 on the four days preceding Good Friday there were four services each day; 8am Holy Communion. 11am Matins with reading, 5pm Evensong and 8pm Special service with address. On Good Friday there were three services, each with a sermon. There were 130 communicants on Easter Day.

FROM 1900

By 1901 the population of the parish had reduced to 1,100. There were three services on Sundays, the church could accommodate six hundred and seven people, and there were two hundred and five communicants on the church list. The Sunday school was attended by 160 pupils who were taught by twelve teachers.

St Mary's remained the Civic church, being the venue for assize services until they were discontinued. Until mid-century members of the Town Council and local organizations attended the annual Mayoral Service in the church.

Social activities promoted by the church continued. A Football team, scouts group, Church Lads Brigade flourished in the first few decades. The Cymru'r Groes group existed for the young people of the church in mid-century. The church choir thrived under a succession of organists and the Sunday School prospered. The fine acoustics have made St Mary's Church an ideal venue for concerts and recitals throughout the century.

In 1925 the Assembly Rooms in St Mary's Street were leased to the church and became the Church Hall until the 1980's when the poor condition of the building led to its sale.

Restoration continued to be an essential element of church life, with fundraising achieved by a variety of events. Between 1901 and 1903, under the direction of architect WD Caroe, the nave roof was restored, the arcade was cleaned and repaired, the nave floor renewed, and some of the clerestory windows repaired. Rev John Henry Davies oversaw the restoration of the nave and reseating it with fine oak pews which were designed by Caroe.

In 1948 the asphalt roof of the nave was replaced by a copper roof and the three westernmost clerestory windows repaired. In 1954 similar work was carried out to the chancel roof. Then death watch beetles attacked the chancel roof. There were further roof repairs in 1964; one of the large timbers removed now lies at the back of the nave. In 1979 work began to repair chancel windows and the south wall. The organ was refurbished and the bells and their fittings repaired.

Over many years church members, who see themselves as stewards of the church for the current generation and wish to hand down this fine church in good repair, have volunteered to carry out various aspects of maintenance of the building and grounds.

In 1996 the **Friends of St Mary's** was established as a support group, made up of individuals and organizations from the town. It aims to promote St Mary's as a building of great architectural importance in its own right, and of strategic importance to the town by virtue of its commanding location.

In 2005 major restoration of the roof was carried out under the direction of architects Caroe and Partners when the whole of the copper sheet covering the nave roof was removed and replaced by lead. The cost of the work was over £700,000. With substantial grant aid from HLF, CADW, HCPT, and the generosity of numerous donors combined with many fundraising events we raised this huge sum. The need for continued restoration of this fine historic church is inevitable.

The Friends of St Mary's also fund the website maintained by the church www.stmaryshaverfordwest.org.uk where a gallery of images and fuller details of the history and features of the church can be seen. It also provides details of current personnel and events.

In 2005 St Mary's Church joined with other local parishes to form the Haverfordwest Collegiate of Parishes, designed to allow us to work more closely and enjoy the support of our fellow Anglicans in the town and district. At the same time the church transferred to the Deanery of Daugleddau.

Pat Barker 2009