

## **Report on the Cambrian Archaeological Association's Easter Conference, 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> April, 2014, Llangollen on the subject of 'Church Monuments in Wales'.**

The Cambrians Easter Conference, 11-13<sup>th</sup> April 2014, on 'Church Monuments in Wales' was based at The Wild Pheasant Hotel, Llangollen. The Conference had been planned by Dr Lawrence Butler who was sadly not able to attend. During his illness however, Heather James and Frances Llewellyn had progressed with the organization of the Meeting on a subject in which Lawrence's deep knowledge and many contributions were frequently mentioned. Although numbers attending were not great, thirty six in all including speakers and non-residents, the Meeting was generally felt to have been both enjoyable and stimulating. We were well cared for by the hotel staff and enjoyed substantial lunches and dinners in convivial surroundings. Many of the speakers were able to be resident for most, if not the whole of the Meeting and they all contributed to the questions and discussion both after the lectures and on the site visits, and members were able to fully participate in all of this.

Members who were able to arrive in Llangollen by early afternoon on Friday made their way to St Collen's Church, where we were met by the Revd Charles Stallard, father-in-law of the present vicar, who gave us an introduction to the St Collen and the church. Conference delegate Suzanne Evans, honorary curator of Llangollen Museum and currently studying for an archaeology degree at Bangor, explained that (to everyone's surprise) there had yet to be a definitive study of the church's greatest glory: its fifteenth century roof. Attention was drawn to the 1937 relief portrait monument to Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, 'The ladies of Llangollen'. Members also examined the fine triangular monument in the churchyard to the ladies and their loyal housekeeper, erected in gothic style after the latter's death in 1809. We were then provided with tea and cakes, through the good offices of Mr Mike Connolly, in St Collen's well-appointed church hall and offices.

After dinner, Dr Rhianydd Biebrach opened the Conference lecture programme with a sparkling and erudite lecture on '**Effigies of Bishops in south Wales**', concentrating on the six medieval Episcopal monuments in Llandaff Cathedral. She first outlined the vicissitudes that the medieval cathedral has undergone, first built by Bishop Urban in the early twelfth century but with substantial work in the succeeding medieval centuries. Part ruinous by the early eighteenth century, an extraordinary neo-classical 'temple' was built within it in 1752, which may have preserved some monuments by walling them up. The cathedral was virtually rebuilt in the mid nineteenth century, but sustained bomb damage in 1941. Finally restoration work in the late 1940s and 1950s produced the building we see today. Not surprisingly therefore surviving monuments are not in their original positions and these can only be guessed at and their identities have been the subject of much debate. Only Bishop William de Braose's thirteenth century effigy has an identifying inscription. The architectural and monumental styles of Wells cathedral where a series of thirteenth century effigies were commissioned of their founding saints influenced work at Llandaff – and St Davids. The three effigies at Llandaff have traditionally been identified as the three founding saints of the early medieval period, Teilo, Dyfrig and Euddogwy and may have been similarly commissioned. Rhianydd then showed how uncertain traditional identifications are with the lack of saintly and archiepiscopal attributes in the tomb sculpture. Two effigies have in fact been identified as Dyfrig which she distinguished as 'clean-

shaven' and 'bearded' Dyfrig. Much of the discussion after her lecture centred on the intriguing and puzzling unique facial objects on the faces of 'bearded' Dyfrig a similarly styled effigy also in the north aisle. Though weathered, these may represent a heart or an ivy leaf coming out of the mouth of the effigies, symbolizing the ascent of the soul. Her general conclusion that undoubtedly applies to other Episcopal and secular effigies in Welsh cathedrals is that all too often the naming of who is commemorated rests only on 'traditional' identifications.

The President, Dr Sian Rees, who chaired all the lectures, pointed out that whilst V. E. Nash-Williams' *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales* (1950) and Colin Gresham's *Medieval Stone Carving in North Wales* (1968) remain seminal works, research and new ways of looking at the monuments have moved on. Thus the first two lectures of the morning provided well-presented and detailed examples of progress made and newer methodologies.

Dr Mark Redknap, National Museum of Wales, entitled his lecture: '**Post Nash-Williams – the new Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales**'. With the publication in 1993 of Volume III of the Corpus (North Wales) by Nancy Edwards, this massive twenty year project has reached completion. The range of disciplines required for full study of the monuments is evident in the collaborative nature of the Corpus volumes – archaeological, historical, art-historical, linguistic, epigraphic and geological. Yet, he stressed, new discoveries and interpretations continue to be made, aided by the Corpus, for monuments which are central to the Welsh Cultural Heritage. The Corpus has drawn on the work of many earlier scholars and antiquaries and Mark illustrated this in the first half of his lecture with striking images of early transcriptions and drawings from Edward Lhuyd in the seventeenth century and Iolo Morgannwg in the late eighteenth through to the great scholars of the nineteenth century, some well known, such as John Obadiah Westwood or Sir John Rhys, others less so such as Richard Rolt Brash, a pioneer in the study of ogam. Most of these men were Cambrians and the development of the subject can be fully followed in the pages and illustrations of *Archaeologia Cambrensis*. All this work was collated and presented by Nash-Williams who saw the monuments principally as evidence for the arrival and dissemination of Christianity in Wales by missionaries from Gaul. Corpus authors now argue for survival of Christianity from Roman Britain. Mark then outlined the many areas of new thinking in the Corpus volumes – too many to summarise here! We now have a new classification of ornament and a new terminology for instance to describe interlace, on 'Linnaean' lines. The late Giffard Charles Edwards (an accomplished calligrapher and epigraphist) showed how letter forms developed from late Romano-British scripts. We now look at the 'biographies' of the monuments themselves – an aspect which Nash-Williams' succinct entries did not allow. Finally Mark's lecture covered the changing methods of recording the monuments themselves – the valuable early drawings and photographs, through to modern tracing, night photography and now 3D digital recording and laser-scanning. His own work on Volume II for south-east Wales with John Lewis reinforced his admiration for the skill of museum technicians in the first half of the twentieth century in making plaster casts of the monuments and their enduring value for fresh study – often the only record of letter forms or decoration now more weathered.

Brian and Moira Gittos gave a joint presentation on **‘Gresham revisited: recent research on the medieval monuments of North Wales’** which dealt with new work – a kind of ‘Part II’ to the paper ‘Gresham Revisited: a fresh look at the medieval monuments of north Wales’ published in the latest Vol. 161 (2012) of *Archaeologia Cambrensis*. There they had identified a number of monuments not included in Gresham’s Corpus and noted some omissions and errors in recording. More substantially they presented revised dating and questioned the definition of a ‘North Wales School’ of monumental sculptured tomb slabs and chests. This Conference Report must perforce select two examples of their meticulous photography and rigorous approach to looking at north Wales monuments from their wide framework of reference. Moira Gittos began with the ‘Princess Joan’ tomb slab from Beaumaris which Gresham had dated to 1237 and which they conclusively showed must be closer to c. 1280, and might even post-date the Edwardian Conquest and is unlikely therefore to commemorate Princess Joan. This well-known monument has a veiled female half effigy in low relief holding her hands in the ‘orans’ pose, the remainder of the slab carved with a highly decorative ‘Tree of Life’. Interesting parallels for the orans pose were shown from Kilkenny, Ireland, fourteenth century and at Bangor Cathedral and a c.1484 female brass at Isleham (Cambridgeshire). Looking in detail at the decoration of the ‘Tree of Life’ the similarity of the triple leaved terminals to late thirteenth century metal work at Westminster Abbey (1293/4) and Chester Cathedral was striking. An illuminated mss illustration of the Peridoxion tree from a mid 13th century Book of Beasts also provided iconographic parallels and finally, other examples of the ‘biting dragon’ at the base of the tree were to be found in the area. The scriptural and theological references would be understood by many contemporaries. The subject exciting the most discussion in Brian Gittos’s half of their lecture was the high numbers of monuments, notably including knightly effigies having bas-relief inscriptions identifying the member of the (mainly) native Welsh gentry being commemorated. These were in Lombardic script and exclusively in Latin at a period when similar examples in England might also use Norman-French. Ninety nine of the monuments had inscriptions, some 37% of the total – which could be contrasted, for example with Cumbria where a mere 9% had inscriptions. Here then is a distinctive and unique north Walian trait – perhaps (as suggested in discussion) due to the great emphasis in native Welsh society on genealogy.

After a break for coffee, the President introduced Dr Maddy Gray of the University of South Wales who moved our period focus from the medieval period into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – something of a departure for herself as well, as she explained, her main period of work being on medieval religious iconography and practice. She explained how a chance discovery had led to her work on **‘Catholic symbols on some post-Reformation tomb slabs’**. A wall mounted eighteenth century ledger stone at Grosmont Church had been taken down and a visitor to the church had noticed that there was an earlier inscription and decoration on the reverse – of late sixteenth century date (i.e. post-Reformation) but with the IHS trigram and a cross, initially taken to be an overtly Catholic symbol. By the time Maddy had received the photograph the slab had been replaced on the church wall precluding detailed examination. Following this discovery she, and her students, began looking for more examples – and found many in south-east Wales, particularly at Abergavenny, Brecon, Llangattock, Dyffryn, Usk and Llanwytherin. She made a plea to the conference for people to look out for similar examples in other parts of Wales. South-east Wales also has a number of other early modern cross slabs, in a range of styles. Cross slabs are very unusual in England after the Reformation. The cult of the holy name of Jesus was very popular in the later medieval period and then in the early sixteenth

century the monogram in classical lettering with additions had been adopted as the badge of the Jesuits. Clearly the many examples she has found are not all tomb slabs of Jesuits and whilst some – or many? – may commemorate ‘closet Catholics’ it is unlikely that all do so. Perhaps, she suggested, there was a stubborn liking for traditional modes of commemoration even amongst those who espoused the new Anglican Protestant beliefs – perhaps feeling freer to do so during the Laudian archiepiscopacy with its Arminian beliefs. In fact, she argued, this case study serves as corrective to more ‘black and white’ views of pre-and post-Reformation changes – personal beliefs were, as always, much more complicated

Fortified by a substantial lunch, the Conference then boarded one of Wrexham’s GHA company coaches for the short journey to **Valle Crucis Abbey**. Here the party assembled to view the West Front where Brian Gittos drew attention to inscription in Lombardic script high above great west window : ADAM ABBAS FECIT HOC OPUS IN PACE QUIESCAT AMEN (Abbot Adam carried out this work; may he rest in peace. Amen). The Adam commemorated was abbot between 1330 and 1344. Not only therefore do we have another example of the predilection noted by Brian and Moira Gittos for inscriptions (in Lombardic script) on fourteenth century knightly effigies and cross slabs in this area of north Wales but also a firm date for the inscription. Then, with excited anticipation, the party made their way upstairs to the Monks’ Dormitory which had been converted in the late fifteenth century to the Abbots Hall and Chamber. Here a large collection of decorated grave slabs from the Abbey have been gathered together for their better preservation – but what awaited the Cambrians was the unusual sight one of the wooden trapdoors at one end of the Dormitory lifted up to reveal more grave slabs awkwardly placed over the top of the vaulting of the arched passage below. Thanks to a request by the President and the good offices of Gwilym Pritchard of Cadw, the site custodian Roger xx had , with considerable effort, opened up this long-closed cover specially for the occasion of the Cambrians visit. Unfortunately the other trapdoor had clearly resisted all efforts to open it. Two of the grave slabs which were revealed beneath the floor were immediately recognisable from Gresham’s drawings but two very worn coped slabs were not. A possible third coped slab has been used as a lintel over the window in the east end of the dorter, and fragments of cross slabs have been built into the dorter stairs and two of the windows. This all appears to be medieval reuse. Much debate ensued: Maddy Gray felt that the coped slabs could be of twelfth century date, and pre-date the foundation of the Abbey but Brian and Moira Gittos remained confident that the coped stones (like the ones on display in the dorter) were from the period immediately after the foundation of the abbey. It was a great treat to see them.

Our obliging coach driver parked the bus hard against the side of the busy and some of the party got out and crossed into the adjacent field to view **the Pillar of Eliseg** guided by Professor Howard Williams. He pointed out the areas recently excavated and aspects of the siting of the monument which he was able to develop more fully in his lecture the next morning. The party then travelled on to **Corwen church** where we were met by Bob Silvester who began by leading a walk around the exterior of the church. Everyone was struck by the remarkable number of eighteenth and nineteenth century grave slabs in the churchyard; the folk tradition that the circular indentations in the tops of the line slabs alongside the path from the lych gate to the church door were intended for penitential kneeling was discounted. Bob then spoke about the A good view was gained of ‘The College’ on the edge of the churchyard, an eighteenth century bulding originally almshouses for the widows of clergymen. We then paused to examine, hear

Bob's talk and subsequent discussion on the cross-shaft of tenth to eleventh century date. The cross, the large churchyard, focal to the settlement at Corwen, the fact that it was a 'portionary' church and the dedication to St Mael and St Sulien and probably its cruciform plan were all, Bob explained, indicators of Corwen's early medieval importance, probably as a 'mother church'. The cross shaft is mounted in a large circular stone but was originally free-standing; there are antiquarian records of its now lost cross-head but interlace survives on the collar. Whilst the outline cross in high relief on the recut shaft is clearly visible the runic letters at its base are much fainter. Bob was less than flattering about the Victorian work of the church interior. Brian and Moira Gittos then progressed to the well preserved grave slab in its wall recess of a chalice-holding priest in sunk relief and dating from around 1340. His inscription identifies him as 'Iorweth Sulien' but, unfortunately, nothing is known of him. His fringed chasuble relates him to the military effigies at Llanarmon yn Iâl and Gresford and the layout of the inscription, to the slab of Agnes de Ridelegh in Chester. Unfortunately, by late afternoon, the weather turned rather wet and cold but even so the coach trip back through the Horseshoe Pass was enjoyed.

After dinner, the final lecture of the day was given by Andrew Davidson, Director of the Gwynedd Archaeological Trust. Andrew presented his recent research on the patronage exercised by the descendants of Efnfyfed Fychan. He identified a hiatus in church building in north-west Wales after the conquest of 1283 in areas lying outside the influence of the Edwardian boroughs. Two stone memorial slabs and a related group of east windows of late fourteenth century date indicated an end to the hiatus in Anglesey, led in part by Gruffydd ap Gwilym (d. 1405) descendant of Tudur ap Efnfyfed Fychan. Gruffydd's son Gwilym inherited considerable lands, and acquired more through his marriage, becoming one of the most powerful and wealthiest men in north-west Wales. Emerging from the Glyndŵr revolt with his estate largely intact, he acquired yet more lands, including Penmynydd, where it is probable he rebuilt the church shortly after 1400. A later north chapel with a tomb built into the wall is known as the 'founders chapel', and it was suggested this was built to commemorate the death of Gwilym ap Gruffydd in 1431. The Tudor coat of arms, a chevron with three helms, is much in evidence throughout the church. After the death of his first wife Gwilym married a member of the influential Stanley family, and moved from Penmynydd to Penrhyn, where he built a new hall house, his heirs adopting the surname Gruffydd. His daughter married William Bulkeley, founder of the Baron Hill estate. Patronage of a different sort is indicated by the presence in Penmynydd church of an alabaster tomb bearing two effigies usually thought to be Goronwy ap Tudur (d. 1382) and his wife Myfanwy. Goronwy was father-in-law to Gwilym ap Gruffydd through his first wife Morfudd. The tomb originally lay at the Friary of Llanfaes, and was only moved to Penmynydd after the dissolution. The tomb is carved to a high standard, and reflects the international status held by Goronwy, recorded by the poets as having fought in France and possibly having led the Welsh archers at Agincourt. It was noted that there were only three other alabaster tombs in north-west Wales two of which commemorated the son and daughter of Gwilym ap Gruffydd, whilst the fourth commemorated a later descendant of the Gruffydd family.

The first talk on Sunday morning was given by Bob Silvester, Deputy Director of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust on '**The Brute family and other country masons in eighteenth century Brecknock**'. He focused on the painted wall memorials to be found on the walls of

churches around the Black Mountains where Breconshire, Monmouthshire and Herefordshire meet. Usually these eighteenth-century monuments are associated with the Brutes, three generations of a family of stonemasons living at Llanbedr near Crickhowell in the Usk valley, but Bob set out to demonstrate that a number of other masons in the region were also producing distinctive memorials from local sandstone in the period from the first quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century through to the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Some churches contained only one or two such memorials but others such as Llanfilo (Brecons) and Cymyoy (Monms) had over thirty each. While it was the Brutes who produced the most highly decorated monuments, other masons such as Thomas Games of Talgarth and James Jones of Abergavenny created monuments in their own distinctive styles. Such stylistic differences, coupled with the fact that a fair number of the masons signed their works, meant that it was possible to trace how far these memorials were traded, some travelling more than fifteen miles between workshop and church. Bob ended with the example of Giles Duke, a mason in the Cymyoy area, who in the 1780s incurred the displeasure of his client, as a pair of monuments reveal by their design.

We were most grateful to Professor Howard Williams who stepped in at very short notice to give the next lecture since Ned Scharer was unable to attend due to illness. Professor Howard Williams' subject '**The Pillar of Eliseg's Topography of Memory**' not only fitted extremely well into the Conference's theme but developed and informed the delegates' interest aroused by visiting the site on the previous afternoon. He explained that his main purpose was to consider the Pillar's location and thus provided only a brief, though succinct, introduction to the antiquarian records of this ninth century memorial pillar to a Prince of Powys, which had been re-erected (almost certainly in its original position) in the late eighteenth century by the local landowner on a burial mound. Contemporary excavations on the mound found traces of burial thought to be the grave of Eliseg himself. Professor Williams also outlined the work of Professor Nancy Edwards, one of his co-directors on the recent excavations in reconstructing, as far as possible the now very worn and illegible extended latin inscription on the Pillar using the thankfully reliable transcriptions by Edward Lhuys and in Vaughan's Commonplace book of what was visible in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The inscription on the round shaft of the pillar once surmounted by a cross was created by Concenn, ruler of Powys to honour his ancestors particularly the legendary Eliseg, founder of the dynasty. Howard outlined the principal results of the small scale excavations carried out between 2010 and 2012 on the mound by staff and students of the Universities of Bangor and Chester. Clear evidence of secondary Bronze Age burials were found but no finds or structures of the early medieval period and, as a Scheduled Ancient Monument, it was neither possible nor desirable to have excavated below the Pillar itself. The re-use of Bronze Age burial monuments is now well recognized in many areas of Britain possibly to appropriate or inherit the power of ancestral rulers. Turning then to his main theme he stressed the dramatic siting of the Pillar on a prominent spur above the valley floor of the R. Dee with the steep slopes of mountain ridges rising from the valley floor on either side. We should consider the possibilities of assembly, display and indeed recitation (of the inscription) and performance in such a setting with many characteristics of a natural amphitheatre. The difficult 6 km journey, dragging the stone from its quarry source to be erected on the mound must have been a momentous, and long-remembered, public event in its own right. The monument was certainly 'referenced' in name by the twelfth century Cistercian Abbey of Valle Crucis. Recent work on Cistercian sites in Wales has led us to question whether they were in fact all on virgin sites – often there are traces of an earlier ecclesiastical importance; this

may be the case at Valle Crucis and have some association with the Pillar itself. The Pillar also stands in a very prominent and visible position in what is an ancient route corridor from the Cheshire plains through mountain passes to Gwynedd. Nor, Howard pointed out, must we forget that this would have been a contested landscape – the Pillar is close to Offa's Dyke, the frontier between Mercia and Powys. Concenn was thus making an important statement of power and territorial control in the ninth century struggles between Mercia and the Welsh kingdoms. Professor Williams also described the apparent paradox of little or no archaeological evidence (from geophysical survey) in the immediate environs of the mound but significant finds of ninth century metalwork and Northumbrian coins from the vicinity.

The final lecture of the Conference was given by Richard Haslam on **'Renaissance tomb sculpture – an introduction to the Myddleton Monuments at Chirk'**. After lunch a visit was made to Chirk Church where Richard pointed out the salient features of the monuments and began to formulate a new opinion on their original siting. This he has written up as a short paper and kindly agreed to its reproduction as an Appendix to this Meeting Report. Brian and Moira Gittos and Dr Maddy Gray were intrigued by a small effigy which commemorates a heart burial that they were able, on stylistic grounds, to date to c. 1340.