

## **Cambrian Weekend in South Meirionydd**

Despite the generally fearsome weather across these islands and the rising floodwater in the Dyfi, we were relatively unscathed. Friday afternoon for our walk around Aberdyfi the rain stopped, the sun came out and the roads dried. We admired the front, visited the parish church and the Literary Institute and various tea shops and picked up two members from the train, a circuitous but quite efficient journey from Llandudno Junction to the Dyfi via the Ffestiniog Railway link.

In the evening Toby Driver managed to reach us despite the closure of the Machynlleth bridge and gave us a splendid air photographic introduction to the area, with amazing aerial views of Castell y Bere and a lot of new crop mark evidence from the Dysynni valley. We then had a good dinner in the Macdonalds Resort's Y Garth Restaurant and retired to bed in our various very comfortable and well-appointed cottages.

It was pretty wet in the night and the morning was grey as we set out for Tywyn Station to get the 10.30 train to Abergynolwyn (as our Cambrian predecessors had done in 1866). As we travelled east in our reserved carriages, the weather improved and it was sunny when we reached the quarry village of Abergynolwyn. Our bus from Lloyd's of Machynlleth was waiting beside the railway line – a 29 seater (and luckily – after a recount – there were just 29 of us). Numbers had been up and down like a yoyo in the previous week. We went up to the village to collect our very good picnic bags from Caffi y Ceunant (luckily they, too, were able to deal with our flexible numbers) and look at the photographic exhibition in the Village Hall.

We then set off for Castell y Bere where most of the party opted for the castle and others went down to Llanfihangel y Pennant church to see the Mary Jones exhibition and the very fine and unusual 3-D embroidery map of the Dysynni Valley. One of the creators of this map, Jane Whittle, had come along specially to speak to our members there.

At the castle we were led by Dr Sian Rees, latterly of Cadw and influential in getting some of the hazards of the ruin mitigated for us. There was however some useful discussion of the contrast between the wonderfully secure new steel entry staircase and the really very awkward access to the inner court past the inconveniently sited mediaeval well. The access to the South Tower is equally awkward, if not downright dangerous, and it is hoped that we may be able to persuade Cadw to make a few improvements for visitors to this wonderful site. Perhaps we might get a plaque on the wall: "If you're survived your visit – thank the Cambrians".

From the castle we couldn't drive straight down the Dysynni Valley but had to return to Abergynolwyn and go to Brynchrûg and Llanegryn to reach Peniarth where a very warm welcome awaited us from Mr William Williams Wynne, the direct descendant of those who had featured so prominently in the Organising Committee for the 1866 visit. Peniarth is a very fine 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century house on older foundations, once the home of some of the most important manuscripts of Welsh literature and still containing a very fine library and a fascinating collection of family portraits and political cartoons. There we met up with some CAA members who had not come on the train, and with Gruffudd Antur and Daniel Huws of the National Library of Wales, the foremost authority on the mediaeval manuscripts once housed in the Peniarth library. With great generosity nearly all the rooms of the house were open to our inspection and members really enjoyed the great privilege of seeing these treasures and discussing them with their current owner, himself an extremely knowledgeable art collector.

At Peniarth we met up with our member, Haydn Rees, now of Cardiff, but a proud native of Llanegryn, who was our extremely knowledgeable guide to the parish church of Llanegryn where we saw the memorial to our second President, W W E Wynne who had been the owner and saviour of the manuscript collection (and also of Castell y Bere which he cleared and partially excavated in the 1850s). We also examined the famous late mediaeval rood screen, under Mr Rees' expert guidance. This is one of the finest surviving in North Wales and has connections with others on Lley and in Montgomeryshire.

We then drove to our last visit of the day – the great parish church of Tywyn with its massive 12<sup>th</sup> century nave and large re-built tower. Our chief interest there was the enigmatic 'Tywyn Stone' a 9<sup>th</sup> century memorial, carved on all four sides (rather badly one has to admit) with half uncial lettering recording the successive burial nearby of four individuals. The great significance of these inscriptions is the fact that the language is neither Latin (as the earlier ones are), nor pan-European Celtic or Brythonic, but Welsh – recognisable by the loss of 'case endings'. Sadly, our current President, Prof Nancy Edwards – the great expert on these matters -- was not able to be present to guide us through these complexities. She was not well and sent her sincere apologies.

When we emerged from the church the weather had finally turned against us as we walked back to our cars at the station to return to Plas Talgarth, Pennal. There we were privileged to hear Daniel Huws talk to us about Robert Vaughan of Hengwrt who had been the initial collector and owner of the 'Hengwrt' manuscripts – a collection of mediaeval bardic writings which encapsulate the early culture of Wales and the development of the Welsh language. He spoke of his approach to his collection, his understanding of its crucial importance at a period (early 17<sup>th</sup> century) of cultural change and his creation of a Catalogue to the collection – something almost unknown at that period. This catalogue ensured that the original content was known and – during the less careful stewardship of his descendants – the losses and the history of some manuscripts can be reconstructed. He brought the fascinating history of this often vulnerable collection to an end at the point when it found a safe home when W W E Wynne inherited it in the 1850s and built a new extension to his library to house it, and other 'Peniarth manuscripts' collected by the Wynne family, at Peniarth. Subsequently it was bought by Dr John Williams and formed part of the foundation collections for the National Library created in 1911 at Aberystwyth.

On the following day we visited the village of Pennal itself. Situated at the highest tidal point of the Dyfi river it had been a significant crossing point since the Romans established a fort there in 70 AD.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century a small motte defended the area. This motte stood close to the drive to Plas Talgarth and over the weekend its silted ditch became clearer and clearer as water encircled the mound. In the early 15<sup>th</sup> century it became a notable centre for Owain Glyndŵr, the place from which he addressed his famous Letter to Charles VI of France and outlined his plans for an independent Wales. We went down to the church at 9.30 and were met by Hugh Ramsbotham who explained the historical significance of the church and the later social history of the area embodied in the numerous fine monuments.

When we emerged the rain had miraculously stopped and David Hopewell of Gwynedd Archaeological Trust was waiting to lead us up to the Roman Fort under Cefn Caer farmhouse. In 1866 the Cambrians had done some excavations (or poking about) during their visit but we, instead, looked at the results that David had achieved by geophysical survey, which had not disturbed any of the archaeological evidence in the fields surrounding the farm.

As we looked over the one surviving rampart we gasped at the extent of the flooding below! Those planning to go south were particularly dismayed -- and, indeed, the Machynlleth bridge was closed again. But by the end of the day everyone was safely home!