

St.Dennis Church

by Adrian Wilson

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St. Dennis parish church built by the Normans close to 1,000 years ago inside an Iron Age hill Fort, known in Cornish as a Dynas, had by the middle of the 1800's fallen into a state of disrepair.

St. Dennis parish had for about 500 years been a daughter church with St. Stephen in Brannel of St. Michael Carhayes 12 miles away near Mevagissey and had been served for many years by Curates from St. Stephen who came to officiate at baptisms, weddings and burials. This situation persisted until 1852 when along with the reorganisation of the structure of Cornish parishes, largely due to expanding populations in mining areas, St. Dennis was appointed its first resident incumbent, a Liskeard man, the Reverend John Glynn Childs.

Before the Rev. JG Childs arrived the church was extensively rebuilt in 1847 but in such a dreadful way that its interior was considered in later years to be one of the most ugly buildings among Cornish churches.

Its two aisles, north and south, were taken down and merged into one open space, the original roof profile of the two aisles could be seen after the 1985 fire. Their supporting columns, known as an Arcade were removed and taken to Nanpean.

The interior was left as open and plain, described as a "barn like structure reminiscent of early non-conformist meeting houses", beams hidden by a heavy low flat plastered ceiling, wooden sash windows and bare whitewashed walls.

By the 1890's the building was in need of a lot of work, the wooden windows were rotting as were the wooden box type pews. The pews were still available to be paid for so that your family had reserved seating at services.

The Rev. John Glyn Childs, his nephew, Rev. George Borlase, and niece, Miss Charlotte Childs, resolved to address the situation and it was agreed after talking to parishioners that either the church be restored, which "sentiment would favour", or a new one be built, preferably down in the village to save parishioners climbing the hill in all weathers.

In February 1893 the Rev. John Glynn Childs received a visit from Mr. George Halford Fellowes Prynne, the architect restoring St. Stephen in Brannel parish church, who gave the Reverend a report on what he felt could be done.

In April of that year he stated that the cost of restoring the existing church would be £3,000 and to build a new church would cost £4,500 (or £384,000 and £576,000 respectively in today's money). The church now had to consider what funds it could raise, consult with "the people", elect a Building Committee and raise appeals for funds. They were spurred on by the recent renovation of Roche

parish church, another plain whitewash and plaster interior transformed into, in their words, a beautiful building.

It seems however that Mr. Prynne was not the architect who transformed the interior of St. Dennis church because a dispute appears to have arisen regarding his consultation fees of February 1893 which amounted to £130 and which resulted in a High Court of Justice case in 1899 which saw Mr Prynne, the Plaintiff, versus the Defendants, the Rev JG Childs, churchwardens, James Key, Richard Varcoe, John Reed and William Kent, Rev GB Childs, Miss Charlotte Bowling (nee Childs) and Michael Williams to obtain the £130 due. It's not known why the fee was withheld or the outcome of the case.

Local events were soon undertaken to raise money for the "Building Fund". On Easter Monday and the following day, April 1893, a Grand Bazaar and American Fayre was held in the Church Day School Room (now CLAYTAWC) raising £60. An evening of dramatic and musical entertainment had already raised £10 in January 1893

There were other events held in the coming months and years, for example an evening of "dramatic and musical entertainment" was held in the Assembly Rooms in St. Austell (in Truro Road) on 5th April 1894, which raised £7, also a Grand Bazaar in August 1894 at St. Dennis Church School. The annual St. Dennis Feast Week Dramatic and Musical evening, held in October 1894 at the church school, raised £10/1/6 (£10.07 today) with those proceeds going to the Building Fund.

In April 1894 it was noted that "we are negotiating for the purchase of a suitable site for the new church in a central part of the village but our experience is that the Cornish system of land tenure is not favourable to speedy transference".

In 1895 after a meeting of the Arundell Trust it was agreed to ask the Charity Commissioners to sell Well Close for the purposes of building a new church. Well Close was a field off Well Lane, later Wellington Road, which became Kent's Coal Yard in the last century and eventually Kent Close.

The Arundell Trust administered the church lands following an endowment from Sir John Arundell in 1558 to the "Trelaver Estate in the Manor of Enniscaven", the "Trelaver Estate" now came under the parliamentary protection of the Charity Commissioners.

But that cautionary reference to the difficulties of land transference in April 1894 seems to have led to the abandonment of building a new church and thoughts turned to refurbishing the existing one, because from late 1896 onwards events raising money were noted as for "the Restoration Fund" not the "Building Fund" which had been noted before.

Fund raising events continued over the next couple of years and eventually in March 1899 the restoration work under architects, Cowell & Cowell of Newquay, began.

The East end was raised and a chancel formed across which a fine wooden screen was placed, a new altar table provided, the organ moved from the West end to the East side of the Chancel, the old pews were replaced by new pitchpine seating, and carved granite mullions replaced the wooden windows.

The "hideous" low plaster ceiling was taken down exposing the rough roof beams which were encased and stained and the previously hidden Tower Arch was opened up to be seen once again.

The church organ had been installed in 1885, previously there had been a "minstrel gallery" at the West end of the church after the 1847 refurbishment (evidence of which was seen after the 1985 church fire) where a few instruments, violins for example, were played, until St. Dennis schoolmaster and churchwarden John Reed would carry a harmonium up to the church to provide music for services in the decade before the organ's arrival.

Seats were now to be free “ending the illegal traffic of by-gone days when the seats were sold to the highest bidder with parishioners afraid of sitting in somebody’s seat”.

A notice was placed in the South Porch declaring that following the restoration of 1899 “All seats in the church were now free” although it was noted a few months later that “in a few isolated cases an attempt has been made to restore this feudal idea”. Old habits die hard!

The cost of the renovations totalled £1,060 or about £140,000 in today’s money.

The church was opened on 5th April 1899 followed by a lunch in the Church Day School Room in which £25 was raised. That addition “almost defrayed the whole cost of the scheme” it was reported.

The first wedding took place on 26th April 1899, that of Edith Brewer of Prazey, St. Dennis and Henry Solomon of Bodmin.

And finally on Feast Thursday, October 1899, the Bishop of Truro preached in the parish church, he was unable to attend the opening service being abroad in Florence, Italy, and commented on “his pleasure at seeing the edifice so beautifully restored”.

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