

Llangynwyd church has arguably been in existence for over 1,500 years, but this is not the reason people there call it “The Old Parish”!

The Old Parish

Much of the hilly interior of Bridgend County lies within the parish of Llangynwyd which takes its name from a Celtic Saint called Cynwyd who is claimed to have established the first church here in the 6th century. As with so many of our minor saints in Wales when it comes to hard fact very little is known about him, and what information survives is unreliable. Cadrawd Evans in his *“History of Llangynwyd Parish”* (1887) quoting from an earlier source claims that Cynwyd and his five sons were originally chieftains in “North Britain”, but took to religion and migrated to South Wales where they entered the monastery at Llancarvan in the Vale of Glamorgan.

From here Cynwyd then made his way into the mountains of the interior and settled in the Llynfi Valley where he established a church at Llangynwyd. He chose his spot well. Llangynwyd stands near the summit of a hill in the valley which, at a time when most of the land here was covered by forest, would have been something of a landmark upon which track-ways from all parts of the valley converged. In addition it was one of the few places in the valleys of South Wales where it was possible to raise a crop of corn, so areas of the southern slope, on which the church stands, would have been under cultivation.



Llangynwyd Village and Hill from Margam Mountain

The word 'llan' used as the first element of a place-name is extremely common in Wales and is then normally followed by the name of the saint who is credited with being the founder of the church there.

This often leads strangers into believing that the word means "church", though this in fact is not the case. The Welsh word for 'church' is 'eglwys', and whilst the derivation of 'llan' is not entirely certain, it appears to be something like 'sacred enclosure'.

It is indeed a characteristic of early Welsh churches that they tend to stand at or near the centre of roughly circular churchyards which are presumably the 'enclosures' referred to. One theory is these in turn were originally the sacred circles of the earlier pre-Christian religion which were often marked with standing stones. The finest examples of these are Aylesbury and Stonehenge in Wiltshire, but throughout Britain there are literally hundreds of smaller examples some with and some without associated standing stones.

Locally, at Llangewydd near Laleston a field known as Cae yr Hen Eglwys ("Old Church Field") marks the location of a pre-Norman church that was deliberately demolished at the end of the 12th century. Whilst no trace of the church remains therefore, the site is still marked by two standing stones that were presumably standing here before it was built.

Cynwyd may therefore have appropriated a similar pre-existing pagan temple when he first arrived at the place to which he was to give his name, or maybe he just created such an enclosure himself so that the local people, unfamiliar with Christianity, would immediately be aware that this was now a site of religious significance.



This stone was discovered during renovations to the church. It is believed to have been made to house the shaft of a crude wooden cross from the first church on this site.

His church flourished and down the centuries was rebuilt and improved up to the present day. It therefore proudly boasts a record of some 1,500 years service to its community, but this has nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that the inhabitants today affectionately refer to Llangynwyd as “Yr Hen Blwyf” - “The Old Parish”. This is a tongue-in-cheek claim stemming from a story that has been told in the area for many years. Whether it is true nobody knows for certain. The chances are that it is not, but we are rather fond of it and as it is one of those fragments of our heritage that mark us out as a bit different from our neighbours, we tell it anyway!

There are several variations of the tale, but I will stick to the one I first heard as a boy which concerned the death of a local man at the young age of 28. A coffin was duly ordered for his burial, and as was the custom his name and age were to be inscribed on the lid. Unfortunately the carpenter who would normally have carried out this work was away, so the task was undertaken by his apprentice who, whilst fully conversant with his letters was not so hot on figures, and could not for the life of him recall how to write “28”.

At last, in an inspired moment, he recalled from his boyhood days in the classroom that “four sevens equal twenty-eight”, and so very carefully he carved on the lid “7777”.

The officiating priest at the funeral was from another parish, and when he caught sight of the inscription asked how long the deceased had lived at Llangynwyd.

“Born and died in the parish”, he was assured.

“Good Grief!” declared the priest, “This must be a **VERY** old parish!” – and the name has stuck with us ever since!



Llangynwyd Church today.