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St Wddyn's Church

St Wddyn's Church has a unique history, as it was built to replace the church flooded when Lake Vyrnwy was created. Very little of the earlier church was incorporated in to the new one, as it had to be ready for use only a week after the old one was flooded. It seems odd now that no real attempt was made to save the fabric of a building that had stood at the heart of the Llanwddyn community for over six centuries, but the feelings and associations of those living within the village seemed to have been given little regard. A different attitude prevailed towards the graves of those who died in the village; they were all reburied in the new churchyard opposite the church.

St Wddyn

Wddyn is thought to have lived at the beginning of the seventh century. He was a holy recluse who lived in a cell on a rock by Ceunant Pistyll, a waterfall about half a mile southwest of the submerged village of Llanwddyn. Wddyn may have been sent to the area by St Dogfan of Llanrhaeadrym-Mochnant, as a spring near the flooded village is named Ffynnon Dogfan after the saint. According to another legend, he was a soldier from an earlier period, who fled from the battlefields between the Welsh and Romans, taking refuge amongst the rocks. He was discovered the next morning by a sympathetic individual who exclaimed "Ow-ddyn ai yma Ile 'r wyt ti!" (O, man, is it here you are!). St Wddyn (or Owddyn) founded the first church in Llanwddyn.



St John's Church, Llanwddyn

During the thirteenth century, after acquiring the Manor of Llanwddyn, the Knights Hospitallers of St John of Jerusalem founded a second, stone church, on the site of the earlier wooden structure. This church remained at the centre of the community until 1888 when it met an unusual and dramatic end as it was dismantled and submerged under Lake Vyrnwy. As well as the church, the ruins of two chapels, forty houses, three inns and a school lie under the water.



A sketch of St John's Church, Llanwddyn by Thomas Hancock in 1874 following the restoration of 1847, from the Montgomeryshire Collections Volume 7.

A photograph of St John's Church before the village was flooded. The east end window and stone bell turret are clearly visible. The hotel on the right of the picture is the Powis Arms Hotel. The three women sitting outside the hotel are thought to be the Davies sisters, who later went on to run the newly built Lake Vyrnwy Hotel.



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The new church of St Wddyn

The new church of St Wddyn was built by the Liverpool Corporation under the terms of the 1880 Liverpool Corporation Waterworks Act. Building began in 1887 and the church was consecrated in 1888, a week after the old church of St John's had been flooded by the swelling waters of the new Lake Vyrnwy.

It is interesting that the new name of the church was Wddyn, rather than John, and may have been used to establish a link with the more distant foundation rather than the recently demolished church in the valley.



The brass plaque fixed to the lectern marks its association with the old church.

The name was not the only thing to be left with the old building; the lectern is one of the few objects to be saved from the old church, and even this probably dates from the mid-Victorian restoration.



The only other objects thought to come from the old church are the finely carved choir stalls and the carved timber panels behind the communion table.

Architecture



The new church is built in a free Arts and Crafts interpretation of Early English style, to the design of the architect F W Holme. It consists of a nave (the main body of the church), chancel (the east end of the building) with transepts and a pentagonal apse, and is built in the same blue grey stone as the dam and other village buildings constructed by the Liverpool Corporation.



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The site on high ground is typical of new Victorian churches and gives the appearance on approach of the church emerging from the ground. The bell turret above the chancel arch is similar to the turret visible on old photographs of St John's Church, and may have been designed to reference the old church. An attractive, partially timbered south porch is the main entrance to the church. Inside the porch is an inscription which commemorates the construction.

Interior



The interior of the church remains unaltered and it contains many items of interest. The polished black slate shaft columns either side of the central window in the apse give a powerful focus to the east end.

An interesting and unusual feature of the interior lies in the southwest corner. An old DC electric installation from 1902 is fixed to the wall. As a condition of the Act, the Liverpool



Corporation had to provide free hydro-electricity to the church. St Wddyn's was one of the first churches to receive electricity.



Many of the stained glass windows are memorials to people associated with the new church or the building of the dam. The Rev'd John Williams was vicar from 1890 to 1916, and George Frederick Deacon was the engineer responsible for designing the dam. Appropriately, the window in memory of Deacon depicts Moses striking water from a rock. The text beneath reads: "whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again, but whosoever drinketh of the water I shall give him shall never thirst".

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Churchyard

The churchyard is separated from the church by the country lane that goes to the Lake Vyrnwy Hotel. It slopes away from the church and fills most of the cleared land on the hillside. A unique feature of the churchyard is the number of graves relocated from the graveyard of St John's Church



before it was flooded. As the water from Lake Vyrnwy was destined to provide the people of Liverpool with drinking water, it was essential that it was not contaminated. The graves were moved to their final resting place as much for reasons of Health and Safety as out of respect for the dead. The gravestones were moved with them, and so the churchyard provides a greater link with the community of the flooded village than the church itself.



Further information

For further information about the building of the dam and the flooding of the village, two excellent booklets are readily available: The 'Policeman's Story' (2003) contains the reminiscences of Special Constable David Jones (edited by David Rowlands), who came to live in the old village just as construction on the dam began. 'Llanwddyn & Lake Vyrnwy', also by David Rowlands, tells the story of building of the dam.

Further information about tourism in and around Lake Vyrnwy is available from the visitor complex by the dam, where there is a 3D 'virtual tour' of the estate and leaflets with details of all the activity trails on and around the lake.

