

A Grand Day Out



A cycle pilgrimage should have set out on June 6th from St Davids to Brecon, as part of the national inter-cathedral relay, but as there didn't seem to be anyone in Brecon expecting us, I proposed a more modest peregrination around a few of the many lovely historic and holy sites in Dewisland to celebrate the event.

A band of three (team leader, mechanic and lanterne rouge) comprised our miniature pilgrimage. We had tried to recruit a few others, but encountered a fairly sturdy resistance. The Dean had a bad back, the Precentor was taking a funeral, the choristers had selfishly returned to school for exams and the organists and choral scholars cited complete exhaustion after the cathedral's music festival last week. The senior lay clerk had no choice in the matter since he's married to me and kindly consented to be team leader.



We met at mid-day outside the cathedral for the lighting of the cycle pilgrimage candle and a Decanal blessing before setting off for St Non's chapel and holy well. It's about a mile to this atmospheric clifftop ruin, with one stiff little incline to start with and then an easy ride to the sea along a lane bordered by wildflowers.

The maiden Non was ravished by the (insufficiently) noble Sant, a princeling of Ceredigion and cad, who abandoned her to her fate. She subsequently gave effortful birth

to St David on the site of the ruined chapel dedicated to her. A miraculous spring gushed forth at the hour of his birth – it lies fifty yards or so to the east of the chapel, marked by a stone-built arch. Its waters are reputed to cure infirmities, but if symptoms persist, best consult your GP.



Returning along the flowery lane, we turned left at the Porthclais road for an easy freewheel down to the harbour to visit the site of St David's christening. Porthclais is exceedingly picturesque and contains a delightful booth selling ice-cream and coffee, but since we'd been on the road for less than 20 minutes we could justify buying neither. Instead, our team-leader hacked his way through the undergrowth at the far end of the car-park with an

improvised machete in order to reach the ferny grot wherein St David was baptised. The baptism was conducted by the blind St Elvis of Munster who, having bathed his eyes in the baptismal waters after the ceremony, miraculously recovered his sight. I forget whether a miraculous spring gushed forth at that moment, but I wouldn't be surprised.



Back to the road, then, and onward and upward (markedly) towards Clegyr Boia, a distinctive rocky outcrop where dwelt the pagan chieftain Boia, whose chief amusement consisted in irritating the life out of St David and his holy monks in the valley. When he wasn't harrying, raiding and



burning things, he was sending down his pagan wenches to cavort about naked in the river Alun to distract the monks from their duties. This, apparently, was his wife's idea. It didn't end well.



We continued down from Clegyr Boia to the Porthstinian road, turning left to go down to the lifeboat station and the ruins of the chapel dedicated to St Justinian. The chapel is on private land, but if you would like a comprehensive look at it, the groundsman will give you access. St Justinian was a contemporary of St David and acted as his confessor (or maybe vice-versa). In any case, he found St David's regime (no meat, no strong drink and a lot of standing about in cold water to mortify the flesh) far too lax. He persuaded a few of the sterner monks to accompany him to Ramsey Island for a properly ascetic life. Disappointingly, the monks quickly became dissatisfied with domestic arrangements

on the island and rudely decapitated the saint. Justinian promptly picked up his severed head and strode back across the waters of Ramsey Sound, depositing it on the ground at the place where his chapel now lies. At that moment a miraculous spring gushed forth and continues to flow to this day, but I couldn't find it.

The route then took us back up the hill as far as the little Bethel Calvinist chapel and old school-room on the right. It's now a private dwelling, but a plaque outside gives a neat history of the place. We then turned left along the





lane to Treleddyn – this becomes a fairly rough track for a couple of hundred yards before you continue straight on to the road behind the golf course, parallel to the sea. We had our sandwiches (peanut butter and crab-apple jelly, since you ask) at the side of the clubhouse, looking down towards the beach at Whitesands, and the site of the medieval chapel of St Patrick. Archaeologists have excavated this fascinating place at the rear of the beach a couple of times in the past decade, but in order to protect the ancient graves and stonework, the whole site has been re-covered and is now invisible. Also, um, it's quite a climb back up the hill from Whitesands if you're only going down there

for a quick photo of some sand.

At this point, the team mechanic had to leave us to go and open his bike shop for the afternoon, so a depleted pilgrimage crossed the Whitesands road over to Lleithyr, and then headed across the beautiful iris-studded little moor before turning north onto the road to Llanrhian.

After half a mile or so, we turned right for Treiago Farm and then right again for Carnhedryn at the fork in the road. This is utterly lovely leisure cycling. The countryside looked gorgeous, there was hardly any traffic and the road does no more than gently undulate.



The church at Carnhedryn is another that's been converted into a private dwelling – the exterior is still wholly ecclesiastical, though, and gloomily imposing as you approach it from the lane. It was originally dedicated to St James, and although the building looks very solidly Victorian, there was apparently a medieval foundation here once.

Carnhedryn was the only point where we had to go on the main road, but as it was for something less than 20 yards, I can hardly complain. A quick left then right, and we were on the road to Llanhowell, which is the pattern and picture of a perfect country church.

Llanhowell church is dedicated to St Hywel, the most glamorous of all the local saints, being not only a member of the ruling dynasty of Cornouaille in Brittany but also, legendarily, a nephew of King Arthur and an ally in Arthur's conquest of Gaul. Hywel spent his youth in exile with the King of Dyfed in the late 5th century and was said to have founded Llanhowell then, being revered by a local cult as its patron saint. The church and churchyard are both exquisite – it feels very remote from the 21st century, and authentically holy.





We had to return along the track from the church before turning left for Middle Mill and the downhill ride to the Baptist Chapel there. There is, incidentally, a lovely tearoom at the working mill by the little river Solfach, and we were at that stage of the journey where frothy coffee and cake are absolutely necessary. The Middle Mill chapel is austere and pleasing – founded in the mid 18th century, it has an impressive baptismal pool outside, but we weren't able to go inside. I confess I didn't hunt too hard for a keyholder – the cake was speaking to me.

Any worthwhile pilgrimage should involve some hardship. I suppose.



A wholly inadequate square of chocolate was shared while sitting next to the river at Middle Mill, before tackling the Cat 1 climb up to Whitchurch and the pilgrim chapel of St David at the top of the hill. The interior of the chapel is very like Llanhowell - an elegantly simple medieval church unobtrusively restored in the 19th century, but the setting is very different. Llanhowell sits tucked tight into its bosky grove, whereas Whitchurch stands exposed on a hill-top, pounded by unsympathetic winter gales. Anyone who has ever had the care of a grave here will have glumly watched a succession of planting withered to the roots each year.



It used to be the last main stopping-point for pilgrims on their way to the cathedral in the middle ages, and so it was for us. All that remained was the ride home past the old war-time airfield and Fachelich and one last little climb to St Davids up a narrow lane ridiculously pink with campion and foxglove. Smashing.