

# The Shrine of Saint David

The Shrine of Saint David: restoring a sacred focus By PATRICK THOMAS

Most English cathedrals now demand an entrance fee, which might be regarded as a form of non-violent mugging. At least we

haven't stooped that low in Wales yet.

I have visited the Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin, the sacred centre of Armenian Christianity, three times.

On the first occasion I was overawed by the atmosphere of the building, the splendour of the liturgy and the haunting quality of Armenian religious music. At the heart of the cathedral is the Altar of Descent where, according to the historian Agathangelos, Christ himself appeared to Saint Gregory the Illuminator, the Apostle of Armenia. Hence the name of the Cathedral: Etchmiadzin means 'Where the Only-Begotten Descended'. In front of the altar are a Cross and a Gospel Book. I knelt down and kissed them, following the example of the crowds of Armenian pilgrims.

My second visit was rather less numinous. I had been busy examining the breath-taking collection of khatchkars (cross-stones)

in the Cathedral gardens, when I noted an excited crowd. They were heading towards the path that leads from the Residence of

the Catholicos (the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church) to the Cathedral. I had seen on the local television news the previous night that a group of Iranian Shi'ite Islamic scholars were visiting Armenia as part of an attempt to cement the relationship between the two countries. They were now visiting Etchmiadzin and the Catholicos had invited them to observe the Armenian Liturgy in the Cathedral as his guests. He was now escorting them there.

The combination of bearded Islamic scholars with their white turbans and flowing robes and Armenian vardapets (celibate doctors of theology) with their Mount Ararat-shaped cowls and impressive copes was so improbable that I pushed my way through the throng of spectators to get a photograph of them. I succeeded to get one that included a smiling Catholicos Karekin himself. Unfortunately by doing so I must have attracted the attention of a couple of local pickpockets, who clearly recognised a dim and distracted foreigner when they saw one. As I followed the procession into the Cathedral a stocky Armenian suddenly blocked my way, while his companion niftily lifted my wallet. After which I found it very difficult to focus on the service.

One shouldn't be too hard on the Armenians. Crowds (and cathedrals) attract thieves in every country. A friend of mine had

his best umbrella purloined in Llandaff Cathedral (he wrote to the then Bishop to complain), while the former Dean of St Davids warned me never to leave anything around in our Cathedral as it was sure to disappear. I'm told it's even worse in England, where another acquaintance was mugged at knife-point during a mid-week Communion service in a highly respectable church.

Everything was made up for by my third visit to Etchmiadzin Cathedral. I was treated as an honoured guest. It helped that I was in the company of Baroness Caroline Cox, who is regarded by Armenians as a national heroine and living saint (it is said that the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem has put in a bid for her bones after her death, to be displayed as relics in his Cathedral - fortunately she's in robust health at the moment). I was given a chair in a place of honour next to Catholicos Karekin's splendid mother-of-pearl encrusted throne. The service, though very long by our

standards, was like heaven come down to earth. The only drawback was the bewildered Church of England clergyman sitting on the other side of me, who kept on whispering, "What are they doing now? What are they doing now?" After an hour or so I got tired of giving explanations and hissed (with shameful lack of Christian charity) "I'm sorry, I haven't the faintest idea."

My pilgrimages to Holy Etchmiadzin brought home to me the importance of having a particular focus for prayer and devotion in

a holy place, particularly a cathedral dedicated to a country's patron saint. In Etchmiadzin that function was clearly fulfilled by the Altar of Descent, with its links to Saint Gregory the Enlightener and Christ. Was there something or somewhere in St David's Cathedral that could carry out the same function? The answer would soon come from a project initiated by the new Dean, the Very Reverend Jonathan Lean.

Visitors to St David's Cathedral sooner or later find themselves in the Holy Trinity Chapel behind the High Altar. There they discover a mysterious wooden casket, protected by a metal grille. The contents of this reliquary have been the subject of considerable disagreement over the years. That Dewi Sant was buried at St Davids seems beyond question. That the community which he founded was later the subject of devastating Viking raids in the second half of the eleventh century is well documented.

Gerallt Gymro (Giraldus Cambrensis), that would-be successor of Saint David whose ambitions were repeatedly thwarted, refers to a period when St Davids was left desolate for seven years and became so overgrown that it took a determinedly devout cleric seven days to cut his way through the thorns and brambles to reach the patron saint's tomb.

Around the year 1090 the reliquary of Saint David was stolen and the gold and silver removed from it, though the chronicler

who records the fact makes no mention of what became of the saint's relics. In a detailed essay examining their history, the

ecclesiastical historian F.G. Cowley argues strongly that Saint David's bodily remains had disappeared by the beginning of

the twelfth century. Nevertheless it was in that century that Bishop Bernard managed to persuade Pope Calixtus that

two visits to St Davids would secure the same blessings for pilgrims as one to Rome. By the end of the twelfth century the

Cathedral also boasted another relic: the "Imperfect Gospel". This was a copy of Saint John's Gospel which Saint David had

been working on when he was called to prayer. He abandoned the column that he had been writing, and when he returned

discovered that it had been completed in golden letters by an angel. Then, as often seems to have happened with relics,

someone had a vision. John de Gamages was a thirteenth century Prior of Ewenni in Llandaf Diocese, and seems to have been a

rather down-to-earth monk with a gift for administration. Nevertheless, Christ appeared to him and pointed out where he could

find Saint David's body. It was duly disinterred and removed to St Davids, where a shrine was built for it in 1275.

Cowley suggests that there may have been financial and church political motives behind the unlikely visionary's fortunate

windfall. Such considerations did not, however, influence the first important visitor to the new shrine. Edward I turned up

in 1284, two years after the death of Llywelyn Ein Llyw Olaf. The English king had already purloined part of the True Cross

(Y Groes Nawdd) from Gwynedd, now he sought an important relic from West Wales. He set off back to London taking the head of

Saint David and other assorted bones with him. St Davids Cathedral had to make do with what the monarch left behind. In

the fourteenth and fifteenth century these remaining bits of bone were often taken around the diocese on fundraising tours.

The Reformation put an end to such entrepreneurial activities. In 1538 the new ultra-Protestant Bishop of St Davids, William

Barlow, got his hands on the relics, which the Cathedral clergy had rashly exposed on Saint David's Day. He

lists them as 'two rotten skulls' (apparently those of Saint Caradog and Saint Justinian, as Edward I had already stolen that

of David himself ) and two arm bones. There was also 'a worme eaten booke covered with sylver plate', which was presumably

the 'Imperfect Gospel'. No one knows what became of these. They may have been burnt or buried or sent to London to be

destroyed there. However, given that there were major relics of three saints (David, Caradog and Justinian) preserved in St

Davids Cathedral, Bishop Barlow's haul seems very meagre indeed. One can't help suspecting that the clergy who so boldly

upset their prelate by displaying the relics, also kept back some smaller items in a safe place.

And that brings us to the wooden casket in the Holy Trinity Chapel. In 1866, while the Cathedral was being restored and repaired, a niche was discovered behind the High Altar. In the niche were some bones which had been set in mortar. They were

put in a wooden chest and buried in front of the niche (sadly, the often-told story that the then Dean kept them for years in

a cardboard box under his bed turns out to be a myth). However by 1919 the Church in Wales was caught up in the trauma of

Disestablishment. The finances of the church in general and cathedrals in particular were under threat as

ancient endowments were taken away and divided between the University of Wales and the Welsh county councils. William

Williams, the new Dean of St Davids, decided to boost morale by unearthing the bones, declaring them to be the lost relics,

and putting them in the wooden casket in their present position.

In 1996 Dean J. Wyn Evans, an archaeologist and distinguished church historian who is the world authority on St Davids Cathedral, succumbed to the desire for scientific proof and had some of the bone fragments from the casket carbon-

dated. The

conclusion was reached that they dated from between 1000 and 1200. It was suggested that they might possibly include relics

of Saint Caradog, but Saint David himself was ruled out. Not everyone was convinced by this. We live in a post-modern age

where we have to admit that even science gets it wrong sometimes. It certainly still seems possible that

some relics may have been hidden away in their very special niche in one of the most sacred spots in the Cathedral to save

them from Bishop Barlow and Thomas Cromwell.

In a remote valley in Montgomeryshire, the shrine of Melangell, the gentle woman saint who rescued a hare from Prince Brochwel Ysgithrog and his huntsmen, has been lovingly restored in recent years and now attracts an increasing number of

pilgrims. Over the border in Hereford Cathedral the shrine of Saint Thomas Cantilupe has also regained its medieval splendour. In St Davids Cathedral the shrine of our patron saint is a grey wall with three arches above some empty niches. A

few carved heads, randomly gathered from elsewhere, have been stuck on to it by a fairly recent restorer in a desperate attempt to liven it up a bit. Pilgrims to the cathedral of our national saint are disappointed by his shrine, if they notice it at all.

It is therefore extremely heartening that the latest Dean of St Davids, the Very Reverend Jonathan Lean, has decided that to

restore the Shrine of Saint David.

Surviving descriptions indicate that the arches once contained pictures of three saints. Two were Saint David and Saint Patrick, the third was possibly Saint Denys of France, though more probably Saint Andrew, to whom the Cathedral is also dedicated. Icons of the three saints are being commissioned, as well as two additional pictures of Saint Non and Saint Justinian (or Stinan) to go on the back of the shrine. The wooden canopy that was originally above the three portraits will be restored. Two of the empty niches below the icons will contain the relics at present in the wooden casket. The third will

contain an illuminated Gospel of Saint John to replace the 'Imperfect Gospel' destroyed by Barlow. The result

will be a focus of prayer, devotion and pilgrimage worthy of Dewi Sant and Tyddewi.

For further information about the restoration of the shrine please contact the Dean of St Davids :

The author is greatly indebted to F.G. Cowley's 'The relics of St David: the historical evidence', in

ST DAVID OF WALES:

CULT, CHURCH AND NATION, edited by J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007) for much of the background information for this article.