

The Friends of Friendless Churches: St Mary the Virgin, Llanfair Kilgeddin, Gwent

by

MATTHEW SAUNDERS

In celebration of the Working Agreement that the Ancient Monuments Society enjoys with the Friends of Friendless Churches, it is intended to include articles about the churches owned by the Friends in successive editions of the Transactions. The series began in Volume 39, 1995, with a piece on St John the Baptist Church at Papworth St Agnes in Cambridgeshire and continues now with a description of one of the most important buildings for which we are responsible.

The church of St Mary the Virgin at Llanfair Kilgeddin, although close, as the crow flies, to the A40, lies in a remote location close to the River Usk just over a mile north-east of the village. It is typical of many Welsh churches in its external simplicity. There is no tower or spire and the plan is conventionally two-cell with a nave and south porch and a lower chancel with north vestry (Fig. 1). What makes it important is the rebuilding in 1875-6 by J.D. Sedding, the distinguished architect associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the remarkable scheme of interior decoration carried out between 1888 and 1890 by Heywood Sumner.

Sedding was commissioned to attend to the church by the Reverend William John Coussmaker Lindsay. Originally from Ireland, he had been educated at Eton and Trinity College, Dublin and had previously been rector of Llanvaches, also in Gwent. How the two men met is not known but as Lindsay was clearly a man with strong artistic sensibilities the coming together of this client with this architect offers no real surprises.

John Dando Sedding (1838-91) was a pupil of G.E. Street, whose office proved a powerhouse for the nurturing of talent. His other pupils and assistants included William Morris, Philip Webb and Norman Shaw, all of whom Sedding knew well. In 1865 he left the office to join his brother, Edmund, also an architect, in Penzance. Himself a keen churchman, he became architect to the Diocese of Bath & Wells

Matthew Saunders is Secretary of the Ancient Monuments Society and Hon. Director of the Friends of Friendless Churches.



Fig. 1
Llanfair Kilgeddin, Gwent

and established a strong presence in the south-west. In 1876 he met Ruskin who told him that he should 'always have pencil or chisel in hand if he were to be more than an employer of labour on commission' and he easily and willingly entered into the spirit of the Arts and Crafts Movement. As the Memorial volume published soon after his death makes clear, he believed passionately in the totality of his designs and took infinite care over the smallest of details. He turned his hand to gardens, furniture, needlework and metalwork as well as buildings and proved himself particularly sensitive to local characteristics and building materials. He declared that a church should be 'a design by living men for living men' and 'wrought and painted over with everything that has life and beauty—in frank and fearless naturalism, covered with men and beasts and flowers'. His greatest works are churches—head of the list must be Holy Trinity, Sloane Street, just off Sloane Square in Chelsea, narrowly saved from demolition in the 1960s, but followed closely by St Clement's, Boscombe in Bournemouth, and that grand statement of the Italian Byzantine in Islington, the Church of the Holy Redeemer in Exmouth Market, Clerkenwell. One of his more impressive Welsh commissions, St Dyfrig in Cardiff, begun in 1889, and embellished later with superb fittings, was demolished in 1969.

Sedding's approach at Llanfair Kilgeddin was respectful of the fabric which he had to treat. He did take down the bulk of the simple medieval church but he incorporated in his rebuild the medieval chancel roof with a net of ribs and bosses,

the original early Norman font and the late medieval chancel screen where the marriage of his work and that of the original is very hard to detect. The four-light south window and the two-light plate tracery north window of the chancel are both medieval, whilst the north nave windows and much of the north wall are also in original stonework. Although the west elevation and the bellcote are very largely Sedding, he retained quoins dated 1634 and 1664, both inserted at the time of seventeenth century repair campaigns. Almost hidden within the internal stonework of the south nave wall near the pulpit is a reused or retained three-sided medieval fragment with a moulded label stop. He resited medieval glass fragments within the north chancel window (Fig. 2) and retained a number of earlier monuments.



Fig. 2

Llanfair Kilgeddin
Fragments of medieval stained glass

These include an eighteenth century wall tablet which records the repair of the chancel in 1799 (by the Reverend James Birt, Rector, and Josh Davies, Curate for thirty-five years, and the Churchwardens, Thomas Hooper and William Harris) and a tablet of 1756 which commemorates the two sons and daughters of James Yorath. A series of seventeenth and eighteenth century floor slabs survives in the space behind the organ chamber.

In the churchyard itself, beside the pathway leading to the south porch, he retained and repaired a medieval churchyard cross on a stepped stone plinth and polygonal stone stem, adding his own, appropriately designed top. (This cross, listed Grade II in its own right, does not belong to the Friends but, like the remainder of the churchyard, is the responsibility of the parochial church council.)

Presumably Sedding's hand alone lies behind the richly coloured alabaster and marble reredos, the iron and brass altar rails, the tiles on the floor, and the pulpit with its rather naively carved timber depictions of the Four Evangelists and four saints under floreated ogee arches, all with clearly visible chisel marks. No doubt not by him but adding very much to the nineteenth century atmosphere are the oil lamps suspended from chains in the nave, and their bronze equivalents on the pulpit, with swan necks.

The organ of 1876 is by Telford and Telford of Dublin. The glass on the south side of the chancel, which the Friends rereaded as part of the 1994 repair campaign, is signed 'J. Jennings, Glass Works, Clapham Road, London'.

The porch retains one of the most evocative groups of handbills surviving in any of our churches. These include 'The Rules of Kindred and Affinity', issued by the Church in Wales on the statutes relating to incest and marriage; a painted wooden inscription put up by the Incorporated Society for the Building of Churches which 'granted £60 in A.D. 1876 towards enlarging and restoring this church' and a printed poster issued by Mowbrays, dated 1890, described as 'The Succession of Bishops from the sending forth of the Apostles to the Present Time'.

As an evocation of nineteenth century piety, given reality by a distinguished architect, St Mary's would be worthy of preservation. What would have made its demolition scandalous would have been the obliteration of the sgraffiti panels introduced into the church between 1888 and 1890 by Heywood Sumner. And it is to these remarkable works that we must now turn (Fig. 3).

Once again, the client was William Lindsay who commissioned the work in memory of his wife, Rosamund Emily (née Mundy), who had died in 1885. Sumner and Sedding were good friends so the reason for the choice of artist may need no further explanation, but the very interesting recent research of Mr Gordon Le Pard has shown that Heywood's grandfather, Charles Sumner, was Bishop of Llandaff for two years between 1825 and 1826 and during this time rented a house at 'Llansanfraed', described as being between Abergavenny and Monmouth. He suspects that the house may have been Llansantffraed Court which is only a mile from St Mary's on the other side of the Usk. Despite his short residence, Charles Sumner made a strong impression in the Diocese, not least because he was the first Bishop for centuries to deign to live within his own diocese. It seems highly likely that the name of Sumner still commanded respect among local clergy fifty years later. Whatever the reasons, it was fortunate that Sumner was the choice.

Heywood Sumner (1853-1940) also came from a distinguished ecclesiastical background. A great uncle became Archbishop of Canterbury. His father was Bishop of Guildford and his mother, from whose maiden name he took his christian name, was founder of the Mothers' Union. After a training in law at Christ Church, Oxford

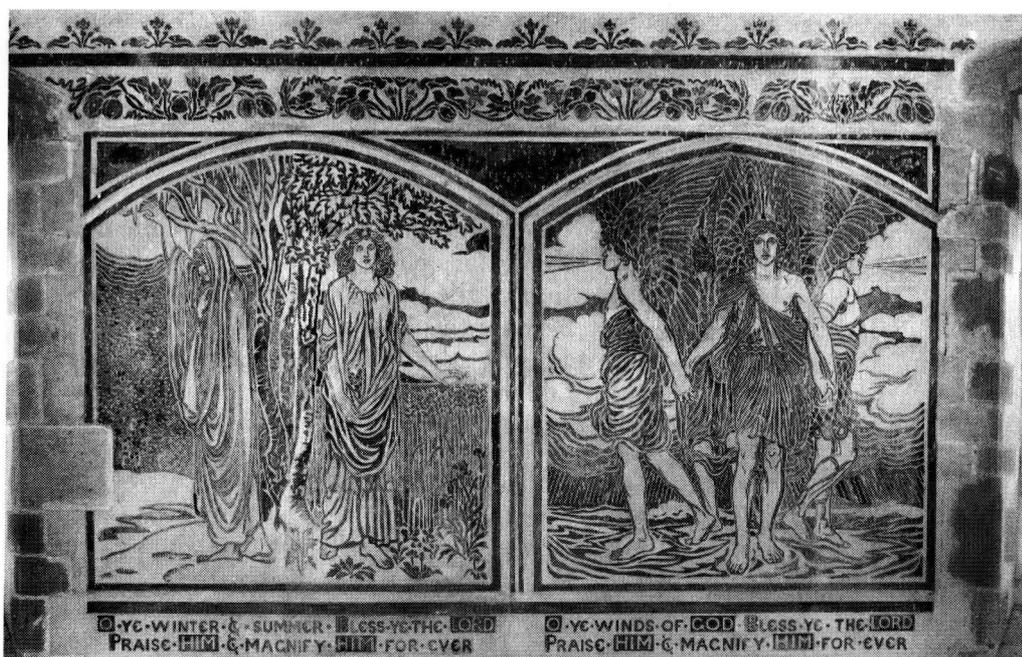


Fig. 3

Llanfair Kilgeddin

'O ye winter and summer' and 'O ye winds of God', Heywood Sumner, 1888-90

and Lincoln's Inn, he decided in his twenties to devote himself to art. In 1883 he had married Agnes Benson, sister to the Arts and Crafts metalworker, W.A.S. Benson. The two played a crucial part in the early years of the Century Guild founded by Arthur Mackmurdo and he became a Master of the Art Workers' Guild. In 1888 he, Benson, Walter Crane and others organized the first Arts and Crafts exhibition at Crane Street and at about the same time set up the Fitzroy Picture Society, which had as its purpose the production of pictures, usually with morally uplifting themes, for dissemination, in print form, to hospitals, prisons and schools.

By this time Sumner had also developed a keen interest in the technique of plaster decoration known as sgraffito and the Llanfair commission offered him the first occasion for a large-scale exploration of the media. Alan Crawford, writing in the catalogue to the exhibition on Sumner organized by the Winchester City Museum in 1986, summarizes the technique as follows:

In the studio, prepare a full-size cartoon and prick small holes along the outlines. On the site, strip the wall back to brick or stone and cover it with a coat of coarse plaster; fix up the cartoon with register nails and mark the pricked design onto the plaster. Cover with a second coat of plaster in up to five distemper colours butting up against each other. Then lay a third, thin coat of light coloured plaster to cover as much of the wall as can be worked in a day, replace the cartoon on the register nails and mark out the design again. Later the same day, when the plaster is firm

enough, cut the design out of the thin layer to reveal the ground of colours below. An assistant would prepare the walls, lay on the plaster, remove it at the end and clean up; whilst Sumner would prepare the cartoon, mark it out on the plaster, and execute the final cutting. The process was one to delight any member of the Arts and Crafts Movement, it was so earthy, so simple, so resistant to refinements of detail; and so much depended on that last, quick and all but irreversible cut.

Sgraffito was known to the ancient Romans and in Renaissance Italy. It was revived by Semper in Hamburg in the 1840s and then later by Henry Cole in South Kensington. There its most obvious manifestation is in the Henry Cole Wing of the Victoria & Albert Museum and at the Royal College of Organists, close by the Albert Hall. Its characteristic effect, best appreciated in an oblique view enhanced by the sunlight, is one of recession and projection, the colours appearing to stand out in layers from the wall surface. Like fresco painting, this technique requires quick and resolute action on the part of the artist. Sumner described his own working method—his assistant would arrive at around 7 a.m. to apply the top coat of plaster. He would then arrive about 8 a.m. to mark out the design and start cutting. By midday the plaster was too dry to cut and any areas left uncut had to be completely chiselled away. In the afternoon the area for the next day's work was marked out and the layers of coloured plaster applied, to be allowed to dry overnight. The timescale means that he almost certainly must have stayed near to the church.



Fig. 4

Llanfair Kilgeddin

'O ye children of men', Heywood Sumner, 1888-90

Sumner's inspiration at Llanfair was the Benedicite, the hymn of praise to God's creation. The viewer is taken on a full internal circuit of the church, following the sequence of panels which begins with a triumphant Christ in Majesty over the chancel arch. Gleeson White, writing about the Llanfair murals in *The Studio* in 1898, refers to Sumner 'planning his work so that it tells a story which an inmate of the nursery can read as it runs... Mr Sumner seems to show not merely his wit but his faith'. There is indeed a childlike directness in the approach and an inclusiveness in the subject matter. 'O Ye Children of Men' shows a young boy with a hoop (Fig. 4); 'O Ye Whales and All that Move in the Waters' includes two fat walruses; whilst 'O Ye Mountains and Hills' brings in the Usk, the Sugar Loaf and the tower of the nearby church at Llanvihangel Gobion (Fig. 5). The feel of an artist relishing his work is irresistible.



Fig. 5
Llanfair Kilgeddin
'O ye mountains and hills', Heywood Sumner, 1888-90

After Llanfair, Sumner carried out further sgraffiti campaigns at other churches, including St Mary's, Sunbury on the Middlesex/Surrey border, Christ Church, Church Crookham in Hampshire, St Agatha's, Landport in Portsmouth, All Saints,

Ennismore Gardens in London (now the Russian Orthodox Cathedral), St Paul's, Winchester and the Church of St John the Evangelist in Miles Platting, Manchester. However, this work has not fared well—the church at Manchester and the Lady Chapel at Portsmouth have both gone.

Sgraffito was by no means Sumner's only artistic medium. The Art Nouveau treasure house at St Mary the Virgin, Great Warley, near Brentwood in Essex, contains stained glass by him, whilst Victor Horta chose Sumner wallpaper for the Tassel House in Brussels of 1892-3, one of the most powerful expressions of European Art Nouveau (now open to the public as a museum). In his earliest writing and drawing he showed great interest in archaeology and this became the principal passion of his later years. The depiction of the Roman potter's hut at Islands Thorns in the New Forest is just one example of the many delightful drawings that this enthusiasm fostered (Fig. 6).

THREAT AND RESOLUTION

There was a time in the early 1980s when it seemed unavoidable that St Mary's would be destroyed. As early as 1971 the parish had received a pessimistic professional report on the building's structural condition and this was followed by another of 1982 which reported the risk of settlement and the need for very extensive underpinning. The church authorities reacted by closing St Mary's and commencing the redundancy procedure. As a result the Victorian Society drew up a report on Llanfair and the threat facing redundant Welsh churches in general. They commissioned an alternative assessment by the distinguished London-based structural engineer,

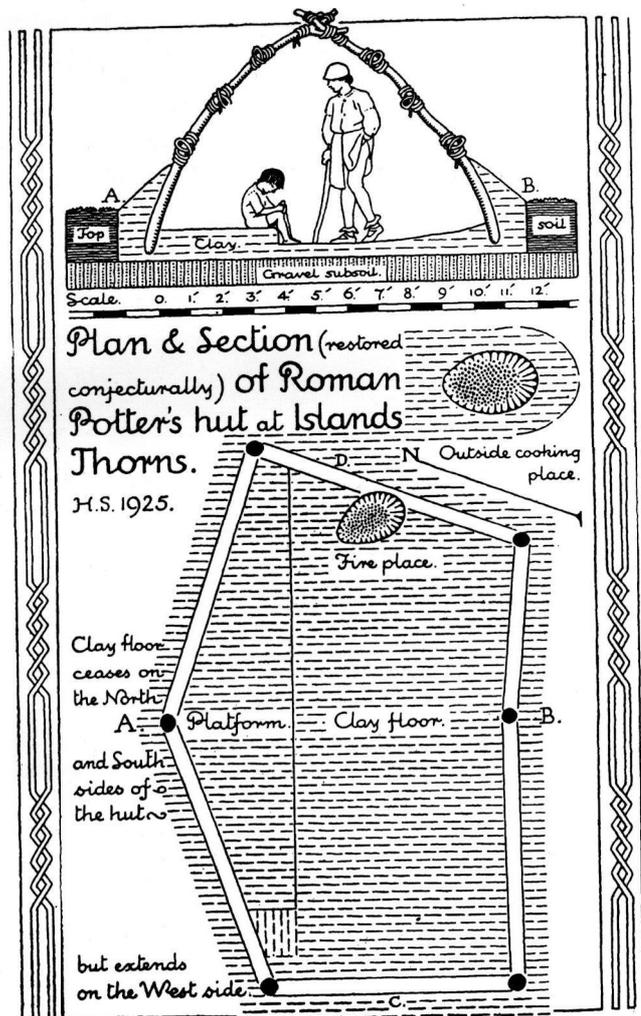


Fig. 6

Heywood Sumner's plan and section of a Roman potter's hut, 1925

Brian Morton, which was far less pessimistic. It was then that the Friends were approached and Ivor Bulmer-Thomas and the Executive Committee agreed that the destruction of St Mary's would be unthinkable and that the building should be vested for long-term preservation with the Friends, provided that the full cost of repair was met by Cadw (the Welsh equivalent of English Heritage). This was agreed and, after some delay, the conveyance was effected in 1987 after repairs had commenced. Both campaigns of repair, those of 1986-8 and the one recently completed in 1994-5, cost in total about £23,000, very considerably less than had been predicted during the sabre-rattling over the building's future in the early 1980s. Brian Morton was the architect for the first phase of repairs and Michael Bartosch for the second. The builders on both occasions were Capps & Capps.

The passing of this wonderful church into the hands of the Friends was celebrated in a service in St Mary's on 4th June 1988, the memory of which will remain with all those who were able to attend. The service was conducted by the Reverend John Stacey, the rector of Bettws Newydd, and the address was given by the Very Reverend F.G. Jenkins, the Dean of Monmouth, a very welcome indication that the church authorities were committed to the benign resolution of the problem. The service was also used to commemorate, in a typically erudite touch by Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, the 400th anniversary of the translation of the Bible into Welsh and the 400th anniversary of the Defeat of the Spanish Armada. Perhaps the two chief highlights were the unaccompanied singing in Welsh and the reading of part of the great poem of 1832 on the Armada when the news of victory was passed from hill to hill, from beacon to beacon:

Like volcanoes flared to heaven, the stormy hills of Wales
Till twelve fair counties saw the blaze, on Malvern's lonely height
Till streamed in crimson on the wind the Wrekin's crest of light...

The service was a quiet victory too for those local people who had fought so strongly for the preservation of St Mary's, among whom Roger Pemberton stands high. St Mary's owes its survival to them, to Cadw's great generosity, to a change of heart on the part of the Church in Wales, and to the raw anger at the prospect of demolition which was translated into positive action by Ivor Bulmer-Thomas and the Friends.

For further information, see:

G.P. Bankart, *The Art of the Plasterer*, (1908).

Jane Barbour, 'Heywood Sumner—A Very Private Person', *The Hatcher Review*, 3, 29.

Margot Coatts and Elizabeth Lewis, *Heywood Sumner, Artist and Archaeologist, 1853-1940*, (Winchester City Museum, 1986).

Barry Cunliffe, *Heywood Sumner's Wessex*, (1985), (for Sumner the archaeologist).

Peter Howell, 'Winds and Whales', (on Llanfair Kilgeddin), *Country Life*, (7th December 1989).

The Victorian Society, *Llanfair Kilgeddin and the Problem of Redundant Churches in Wales*, (1986).

St Mary's is kept locked but details of access are given on a notice in the church porch. All the photographs apart from Figure 2 are by Christopher Dalton.

The first of these was the fact that the building was not a simple rectangular structure, but a complex of interconnected spaces. The second was the fact that the building was not a simple rectangular structure, but a complex of interconnected spaces. The third was the fact that the building was not a simple rectangular structure, but a complex of interconnected spaces.

The fourth was the fact that the building was not a simple rectangular structure, but a complex of interconnected spaces. The fifth was the fact that the building was not a simple rectangular structure, but a complex of interconnected spaces. The sixth was the fact that the building was not a simple rectangular structure, but a complex of interconnected spaces.



The seventh was the fact that the building was not a simple rectangular structure, but a complex of interconnected spaces. The eighth was the fact that the building was not a simple rectangular structure, but a complex of interconnected spaces. The ninth was the fact that the building was not a simple rectangular structure, but a complex of interconnected spaces.