

Memories of Kempley

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Based on notes provided by Mrs Wilkins in 2015

St Mary's Church: Its Frescoes and Wall Paintings

I first saw the paintings in 1946 when I was 8. I really didn't understand what was so important but I think I caught my uncle's excitement. Coming from industrial South Wales I thought the chancel walls looked like coal, black and shiny. I liked strange new words so words like 'fresco' and 'tempera' were very exciting and I especially liked the word 'shellac'. Uncle Dan (Rev. Canon Daniel Gethyn-Jones) took us to see wall paintings in other churches and I enjoyed that but I don't think my parents had the same enthusiasm!

We visited Kempley often in the following years either for a day trip or a holiday. As the years went on I realised the difficulties my uncle was having in persuading the church authorities to attempt a restoration, which of course would be expensive and disastrous if it went wrong. It was exciting when he finally achieved his aim and Mrs Baker completed the removal of the shellac in 1958.

Our visit to Kempley in the autumn of 1958 was exciting, the paintings had been revealed. By this time I was studying Italian Renaissance art as part of my degree at university in Wales. I had also been to the Sistine Chapel and knew a bit more about frescoes. My uncle had a great idea! Because I was artistic he decided I could trace two of the disciples so that an upright painting could be made for visitors to see the details more clearly on the ground. With large tracing paper and a ladder I climbed up into the chancel. At this point my uncle and my parents were going on elsewhere and said they would see me later. So alone in the chancel ceiling I very gently traced two disciples. These days Health & Safety and English Heritage would have a fit! While I was up there, alone, there was a terrific thunderstorm but I was in good company! I noticed that the disciples had a variety of shades of eye colour, so the artists were attempting to make them real people. As you will know all the disciples are looking directly at the face of Christ in the ceiling centre and as a result some of the heads are at strange angles; my uncle's favourite was the one right at the end he called "Johnny Wry Neck"!

I completed the tracing and was eventually collected by my family! I can't remember if I did the painting or perhaps someone else did. They were on display for a while. At this time my uncle was trying out different shades of lighting to show the frescoes to advantage, the best seemed to be an apricot coloured bulb. What a privilege to be involved, something I've appreciated more as the years have gone on. The Kempley frescoes have a quiet compassion. Full details of the efforts to reveal the frescoes are in the book *St Mary's Church and its Paintings* by Rev Eric Gethyn-Jones.

Kempley and the Vicarage

I was very excited to visit Kempley in 1946; we travelled to Gloucester by train and my uncle collected us. The landscape around Kempley was beautiful and quite flat, so different from the narrow industrial valleys of South Wales. The vicarage was very large with lots of rooms to explore. I was intrigued by the room service bells in the kitchen. Another point of interest was the stairway. There were Assegai spears and shields on the walls with a rather incongruous large illustrated print of the song "Widcombe Fair" (Uncle Tom Cobley and all!) half way down the stairs. I never asked about these even when I was older. The dining room was wonderful – it had a huge table which my uncle said had been made in the room, I don't think it could have got in there otherwise. Uncle said it could seat 36 people. At the end of the room was a splendid fireplace with a large window directly above it. Visitors often questioned "how this could be" but it was just a simple offset chimney that must still be there.

The garden was very large with an orchard. In the orchard was a huge dark tank, which was apparently a swimming pool. I didn't like the look of that! There was a cottage on the roadside with a garden backing onto the vicarage garden. A lady called Miss Morley lived there and she had a parrot. Across the road, almost directly opposite the church, was another cottage where a very kind, gentle couple lived. I was always sad for them, as their son had not returned from the war. Eventually a more manageable vicarage was built and that was a very nice house not far from the old vicarage. And, of course, the fields of daffodils and daffodils in the woods were wonderful. I'm delighted you still celebrate this floral treasure.

Rev Canon Daniel Gethyn-Jones

Daniel Gethyn-Jones was my great uncle; he was my grandmother's brother. The family lived in a house 1000ft up a hillside just outside the village of Old Ynysybwl. It was very rural, surrounded by meadows and woodland with sheep farming higher up. Ynysybwl was lower in the narrow valley, much larger and industrial. My earliest knowledge of a young Uncle Dan was a postcard he sent to his father from Carmarthen College in 1905 where he was training to be a teacher. I still have this card, he asks his father to send two village boys to the station to meet the following morning train. The card was dated April so he was probably coming home for Easter and needed help with his luggage. There were many very steep slopes from Old Ynysybwl Halt before he would get home.

I had no idea where he was ordained until I read the book about Kempley and its paintings where my uncle Eric, his son, mentions he was trained and ordained at Llandaff Cathedral. He went as a curate to Abertysswg in North Wales. He was married by then to Edith James, daughter of a vicar. While at Abertysswg they took in 13-year-old Myfanwy Griffith as what would be called an "au pair" today. "Vanny", as she was known, became a very special part of the family. "Vanny" was Welsh speaking and a really joyful person. She was a good

organiser and a great cook. She must have been a huge help and support to Uncle Dan. She loved gathering objects for the church jumble sales, these brought in much needed funds. Uncle Dan and Auntie Vanny organised various social events for the church including “magic lantern shows”. She was a much-loved part of our family.

He served as chaplain in the latter part of WW1 and was honoured with a French medal. I once asked him how he got the medal and he said he had encouraged some despondent French people to sing and cheer themselves up! The only other thing he ever mentioned was that he had met war artist and fellow Welshman Augustus John in the trenches and that he was a jolly chap!

They all moved to Kempley in 1921. I think he took up the challenge of the frescoes immediately and really became quite obsessive about them, and rightly so. I don't know the date as the situation was not mentioned very much but he lost his wife and newborn baby daughter, Jocelyn. There is a memorial window to them in the chancel of St Mary's church. I don't know how he kept his faith and had the strength to carry on. He ran a school for boys at the vicarage (St Edward's School). I loved looking at the text books and some of their exercise books. I think he enjoyed his challenge with the paintings – he must have met some interesting people. In 1958 the paintings were restored and he retired in 1960. He had succeeded!

He bought a cottage in Dymock and fortunately still had Vanny to look after him. He named his cottage “Y Bwthyn”, Welsh for “The Cottage”. When I last visited Dymock in around 1998 I was delighted to see that the cottage was called “The Canon's Cottage” – how lovely.

For quite a few years after WW2 Uncle Dan and Vanny came to Ynysybwl for holidays with us. He visited old friends and family and was obviously fond of his old home. In his youth he was a keen photographer, I have his glass negatives of views around Ynysybwl. My son has printed these and we've sent them to cousins in Ynysybwl.

When Vanny eventually died he moved to live with Eric and Vivienne at Berkeley. He had a fine apartment in one wing of this big historic Queen Anne house and we had some happy holidays with him there. Both he and Eric had a huge influence on my life: they showed me historical sites and old churches. I still visited old churches until recent years and we have a splendid Tudor one in our village. Uncle Dan and Uncle Eric took me to many interesting churches in Gloucestershire and the aspect of churches that interested me most was heraldry, which became my life-long hobby. In 1962 I joined the Heraldry Society, I passed their examinations and went on to teach courses in Heraldry. I gave just over 600 talks about it around East Anglia to a variety of organisations and I usually managed to mention Kempley at each talk! It has been a wonderful hobby: I met so many interesting people and visited many interesting places.

Rev Canon Eric Gethyn-Jones MBE

Vicar of Dymock, another historical place perhaps especially famous for the “Dymock Poets”. He met the American “Dymock Poet” Robert Frost when he returned for a visit.

He was born in Wales. He was educated at the St Edward School, then the Crypt school and Pembroke College Oxford. He was an enthusiastic sportsman and played international hockey for Wales, as did his wife Vivienne. During WW2 he was chaplain of the 5th battalion Gloucestershire regiment and was awarded the MBE for bravery at Dunkirk. In 1960 he was appointed Assistant Chaplain General of the Territorial Army and honorary Chaplain to the Queen. He was a Canon of Gloucester Cathedral. He wrote many books, was always very busy and great fun.

He moved from Dymock to become vicar of Berkeley where he lived in the very large Chantry, the home of the Smallpox immunologist Edward Jenner. This was quite a remarkable place. I did some illustrations for his books and helped in his research of the Jenner family because they were related to the Genour family of Essex. Their estate was in Dunmow not far from where I live. By sheer luck, I came across a lady who had fully researched the Genour family and put her in touch with Uncle Eric.

He liked Grandfather clocks; at Berkeley he had eight in the hall and stairway - the noise on the hour was quite something! While at Berkeley he always hoped that a new smaller vicarage could be built and that The Chantry could be turned into a Jenner museum and education centre. He was visited by two Japanese immunologists and explained his plans to them; very shortly a very generous cheque arrived from Japan. A great deal of money back in the 70's. The church agreed to the plans and the Chantry was bought from the church and the Jenner Centre established. He was successful!

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I feel very privileged to have known Kempsey and its two remarkable churches. Kempsey and its surroundings are beautiful and in South Wales, the coal industry and the coal tips have gone; and the valleys are green and lovely again.