

A Johnian Society Pilgrimage to North Wales



(William Morgan. Imaginary portrait. T Prytherch 1907)

Our Pilgrimage arose from a discussion about absence. The College's History of 2011 makes no reference to one of the foremost Welshmen of the Tudor period, Bishop William Morgan (c1545 - 1604), translator of the Bible into Welsh in 1588, who graduated B.A. in 1568, M.A. in 1571, B.D. in 1578 and D.D. in 1583.

Morgan has achieved hero status in Wales for this work, as the one man who, more than anyone, laid the foundations for the language's survival and its relevance to his own and to future generations. There are many who believe that without this translation, there would be no Welsh language today. The College Chapel has a plaque in his memory. The History of the College makes no mention!

So we decided that this pilgrimage would visit places in north Wales which had strong associations with Morgan and the College:

- his birthplace and home at Tŷ Mawr, Wybrnant;
- Gwydir Castle, one of the finest Tudor houses in Wales, home of the Wynne family, Morgan's patrons and one of the most influential families in Tudor and Stuart Wales;
- Cochwillan Hall, a magnificent late 15th century estate house in Llandegai, the last home of another famous Johnian, Dr John Williams, Archbishop of York, former Lord Chancellor and Lord Privy Seal, scion of the Cochwillan, Penrhyn and Wynne families, benefactor and builder of the College Library;
- The church of St. Tegai in Llandegai, where John Williams was buried, where his effigy rests, with epitaph by his biographer Hacket.

We would also invite members of the academic community at Bangor University and St. John's, together with the current owners of Gwydir Castle and the National Trust's Custodian at Tŷ Mawr to guide and enrich our pilgrimage:

- Dr Huw Pryce, Professor of Welsh History, Bangor University;
- Frances Lynch (Mrs. F.M.Llewellyn), Honorary Research Fellow, School of History Bangor University, who lived for many years at Cochwillan Old Hall;
- Dr Lowri Ann Rees, Lecturer in Modern History at Bangor University;
- Dr Mark Nicholls of St John's College.
- At Gwydir Castle and Tŷ Mawr, Wybrnant, Peter Welford and Gerwyn Edwards respectively, as our guides.

We recruited 22 Pilgrims, fourteen Johnians, eight partners, two minibuses and three cars – and glorious spring weather for our journey!

Our first venue was Llandegai Parish Church, the burial place of Archbishop John Williams (1582-1650). Williams entered College in 1598. He became Dean of Westminster in 1620, Archbishop of York in 1641 and spent the last years of his life in his native north Wales, initially supporting the royalist cause in the Civil War, but eventually coming to an accommodation with the local parliamentarian commander in 1646.

At Llandegai, the Vicar, Father John Matthews, gave us a brief history of the building and its surroundings, particularly its association with Williams, the local Welsh community and the Penrhyn family, after which a short trip took us to Plas Cochwillan (Cochwillan Old Hall), Williams' last home, where Frances Lynch Llewellyn was our guide.



(John Williams' Effigy, Llandegai. Photo: John Wyn Owen)



Onward to Gwydir Castle, where Peter Welford and his wife Judy Corbett gave the Pilgrims a delightful tour around the house and gardens, recounting how they had rescued it from years of neglect and decay after they bought it in 1994.

The Castle is closely connected with four former members of the College:

- John Gwynn, lawyer and placeman, elected a Fellow in 1548, who provided in his will to maintain three Fellows and six scholars, among whom were
- his nephew Owen Gwynn, Master of the College 1612-1633, Vice Chancellor of the University of Cambridge 1615-1616, and
- Owen's cousin and pupil John Williams, who gave £2000 towards the building of the college library while Owen was Master.
- In addition, William Morgan, the son of one of the estate's wealthier tenants, was educated at the castle with the family's children.



(Top: Pilgrims at Cochwillan, Bottom: Lunch at Gwydir Castle. Photo: Jan Lewis)

Our last port of call was Morgan's birthplace at Tŷ Mawr, Wybrnant, where Gerwyn Edwards, the Custodian, gave us an inspired introduction to the house and its collection of memorabilia and Bibles (in over 100 languages and dialects from all over the world). Here, amongst other religious texts, two copies of Morgan's original Bible of 1588 are on display, as is William Salesbury's Welsh translation of the Book of Common Prayer of 1567.



(Bibles at Tŷ Mawr. Photo: Jan Lewis)

Morgan held vicarages at Llanbadarn Fawr (1572), Welshpool (1575) and Llanrhaeadr ym Mochnant (1578), where he completed his translation. In 1595 he was consecrated Bishop of Llandaff, in 1601 Bishop of St. Asaph, where he died in 1604.

Our guest speakers made a very valuable contribution to our day of discovery and reflection:

- Dr. Lowri Rees introduced us to the local landed estates of Penrhyn, Cochwillan and the Gwydir Family;
- Dr. Mark Nicholls invited us into the fascinating College world of the 16th and 17th centuries.
- Professor Huw Pryce linked the establishment of the Welsh universities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the building of the National Museum and National Library, to the growth of national self confidence, highlighting the financial contribution made by the Welsh working classes to the building of these universities (ceiniogau'r werin – the workers' pennies).

Our pilgrimage spanned the centuries, from a youthful St John's College to the young university Colleges of Wales, both places where, crucially, local benefactors enabled the poor and needy to acquire a university education. We wonder if there are messages here for those who might help today's Morgans and Williamses?

With grateful thanks to John Wyn Owen for his meticulous planning.

Huw Lewis (1961)