

## **Why did Henry Williams, the Glasbury bellfounder, cast bells for Llanwenog in Cardiganshire?**

Frederick Sharpe, one of the most respected historians of campanology, undertook a number of surveys of church bells, plus their fittings and bell-frames, on a county basis in Britain. In so doing he discovered bells by otherwise unknown founders, including Henry Williams of Glasbury and his successor: TP.

In 1932, during his survey of Cardiganshire, Sharpe found 'an interesting 15<sup>th</sup> century oak bell frame' in the tower of St Gwennog's church at Llanwenog in the Teifi valley, downstream of Lampeter. He surmised that in it 'the medieval bells swung'. Those bells no longer existed at the time of Sharpe's survey, although it held two bells by Taylor of Loughborough dating from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The main portion of the church at Llanwenog, which is regarded as one of the finest in Wales, was built in the fourteenth century. The tower, however, dates from the late fifteenth century and was built to commemorate the Battle of Bosworth, fought on 22 August 1485. This battle ended the Wars of the Roses and brought a Tudor, Henry VII, to the English throne.



*Llanwenog church with its late fifteenth century tower. (Photo by author)*

Details of the Tudor family do not concern us here, except that Henry Tudor spent much of his young life in Brittany under the protection of Duke Francis II, who owed allegiance to the King of France. From Brittany, Henry made two attempts to seize power in England. The first was foiled by a storm that disrupted his ships but on the second he and his followers (who included mercenaries supplied by the French king), landed near Dale in Milford Haven. From there they marched through west Wales, via the Teifi valley, gathering support as they did so.

At Llanwenog in the Teifi valley, Henry Tudor was joined by Rhys ap Thomas and his men before proceeding through the marches and into England and battle. At Bosworth the Plantagenet King, Richard III, was cut down by Henry's men. The fatal of many blows was struck by Rhys ap Thomas, for which he was Knighted.

The church tower at Llanwenog not only expresses gratitude for victory at Bosworth but includes, over the exterior of the entrance, a plaque/stone with the coat of arms of Sir Rhys ap Thomas: 'a chevron inter three martlets or ravens with legend on a gutter'.

*A plaque built into the exterior of the west wall of the tower carrying the arms of Sir Rhys ap Thomas. (Photo by author)*



Sharpe (1965, 90) recorded that the fifteenth century bell-frame inside the tower at Llanwenog: 'consists of heads, head struts, king-posts, main braces and cills. There is evidence that it formerly had rope transoms also. It was made to contain two bells...rung by the "deadrope" method'. Those medieval bells no longer existed when Sharpe examined the frame.

*Fifteenth century oak bell frame at Llanwenog in Cardiganshire, with bells by Taylors of Loughborough. (Photograph from Sharpe, 1965, 97)*

The Taylor bells probably replaced two earlier bells whose inscriptions had been recorded by Meyrick (1910). Sharpe (1965,96), quoting Meyrick, stated that the lettering on the smaller of the two bells read:

IENKIN LLOYD OF LLANFECHAN  
GRIFFITH DAVIES OF DDOLWEN CH  
1677. HW

The lettering on the larger of the inscribed bells read:

GLORIA SIT DEO HENRICVS WILLIAMS  
ME FECIT ANNO DOMINI 1677

Meyrick did not record whether or not either of these bells carried a founder's mark or whether they replaced earlier bells. The inscription on the larger bell indicates that it was made by Henry Williams in 1677. The smaller bell was also presumably cast by the same founder in the same year. Meyrick also reported that there had been a larger third bell, of which he gave no details. Sharpe suggested that, if that bell had existed, it may have hung in a separate frame, of which there is no trace.

The ceiling of the room at the base of the tower presently has four apertures. The ropes for the existing Taylor bells, which are chimed for services, pass through the two most westerly apertures. These bells were chimed from a level higher in the tower until recent decades. The apertures saved persons sounding the bells from having to ascend the tower. They do not necessarily imply the former existence of more than two bells at Llanwenog.

Henry Williams is best known as “The Glasbury bellfounder” and the two bells at Llanwenog are the first known to have been made by him (Lewis, 2012). Glasbury is in the Wye valley in the east of Wales, Llanwenog is located on the western side of the Teifi valley, some seven miles south-west of Lampeter in west Wales and in the Diocese of St David’s. Although there is no obvious reason why a bellfounder from the Glasbury area should cast bells for Llanwenog, the answer probably lies in clerical pluralism and the holding of at least two benefices by The Reverend Alexander Griffith.

Although Dawson (1919) asserted that Alexander Griffith, ‘a local man’, was the vicar of Glasbury who signed a Petition to the Bishop of St David’s in 1660, she appears to have confused him with a clergyman born in north Wales. Alexander Griffith was born c. 1601 at Llysfaen in Caernarvonshire, educated at Oxford and instituted to the living of Trefeglwys in the Diocese of Bangor, near Llanidloes, in 1622 (Richards, 1959).

In 1633 Griffith was instituted to Llanwenog in Cardiganshire in the Diocese of St David’s before being instituted under the Patronage of the Bishop of Gloucester (Wood, 1904, xii) to Glasbury in St David’s Diocese in 1639. Glasbury, being a marcher parish, had English as well as Welsh roots as is still reflected by the membership of the present tower in two different bellringing Guilds, one English (Hereford Diocesan) and the other Welsh (Swansea and Brecon). In the 1600s, as at some other times, it was not unusual for clergy to be pluralists, holding office in more than one parish at the same time. Griffith was an undoubted pluralist.

The decade after Griffith became Vicar of Glasbury (the 1640s) was a time of great turbulence in the history of Britain and Ireland. A standing army was founded in 1645 (the New Model Army), King Charles I was executed in 1649, the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland was founded in 1649, the Church of England was retained but the episcopacy was suppressed and tithes were no longer paid to meet clergy stipends and parochial expenses.

In 1650 an Act was passed ‘for the Better Propagation of the Gospel’ in Wales. Under this Act clergy and schoolmasters could be ejected from their livings if deemed unsuitable by Commissioners appointed under the Act, and replaced by men nominated by stipulated Commissioners. Many clergy and schoolmasters must have felt insecure in Wales in the 1650s, especially since the Act opposed pluralism.

Alexander Griffith opposed the propagation policy and other matters and did so in a number of pamphlets. Griffith seems to have been a Royalist and firm adherent of the Church of England. As such, it is not surprising that he was denounced by various Commissioners and on 7 June 1650 ejected from his living at Glasbury and then from that at Llanwenog.

The reasons given for the denunciation of Griffith and which centred on his supposed personal life, were probably figments of fevered and jealous imaginations. In 1660, at the Restoration of the Monarchy, Griffith was restored to both livings.



During the 1650s, if not before, the parish church at Glasbury was severely damaged by flooding by the River Wye and its tributaries (Dawson, 1919, 288; Lewis, 2021, 937). In 1660, following his restoration as Vicar, Alexander Griffith supported by Sir Henry Williams of Gwernyfed (the main local landlord) and almost 100 other petitioners, sought permission from the Bishop of St David's to 'draw down' what was left of the flood-damaged parish church and save any materials useful for building a new church above flood level. Permission was granted.



*The River Wye, Old Vicarage and Tithe Barn, and Church remains at Glasbury.  
(Drone photo by Claire Alexander)*

*While meandering across its flood plain, probably in the first half of the seventeenth century, the River Wye intercepted a stream that drained from the Ffynon Gynydd uplands above Glasbury. That stream had divided the former parish church from what is now the Old Vicarage and the main portion of Glasbury village (which was built on a rocky base and is above main present flood level). The stream had provided water for the village and had joined the Wye on the floodplain downstream of the main village. Oral memory records that the church was reached from the village via stepping stones prior to the stream being overwhelmed by and transformed into the channel of the River Wye. A similar process of stream meandering and avulsion is presently taking place downstream of the remainder of Glasbury.*

*The drone photo shows the Old Vicarage and Tithe Barn, (from which Alexander Griffith had been ejected in 1650 but was reinstated to in 1660), to the right of and sheltered by a modern flood-defence wall on the left bank of the River Wye. The grassed-over mounds opposite and somewhat upstream of the Old Vicarage, are the remains of the former parish church and graveyard.*

*Some of the flood- channels that cut into that complex (and in doing so exposed human remains and undermined the steeple), are visible to the right of and in the foreground below the mound. The River Llynfi, a major right-bank tributary of the Wye which now joins the main stream below the Old Vicarage complex, may just be seen between the trees at the base of the photograph.*

The new church was consecrated on 29 June 1665 on a site donated by Sir Henry. There is no known record of whether bells from the damaged church were saved or installed in the new church. Nevertheless, the Visitation records relating to the new church in 1704 state 'bell ropes to be in decay' so there must have been at least two bells in the building considerably before then. The record for October 1714 indicates that the church then had four bells although there is no record of the founder (Lewis, 2021, 937).

By 1714 Henry Williams, who then lived in the Glasbury area, was respected as a bellfounder and had cast at least 24 bells. He may well have cast others in previous years, including some for the new church at Glasbury and thus been well known to, and respected by, Alexander Griffith the Vicar of Glasbury. Williams may even have removed bells and/or saved bell-metal from the flood-damaged parish church before that was 'draw-down'.

Alexander Griffith died at Glasbury on 21 April 1676. *The Registers of Glasbury 1660-1836*, transcribed by T. Wood, record that he was buried there on 24 April 1676 and that he was 'Vicar of Glasbury and Rector of Llanelieu' (page 8 of *The Registers*, they do not state that at his death he held office in any other parish/es).

Did Griffith commission and pay for the two Henry Williams bells at Llanwenog as a posthumous gift from himself to one of his former parishes? Were the bells paid for and installed in his memory by his former parishioners and/or churchwardens? Did Griffith recommend that the churchwardens of Llanwenog commission Williams to cast bells for their church?

The above questions are unlikely to be answered in the absence of documentary evidence. Nevertheless, it is likely that the Henry Williams' bells at Llanwenog resulted from personal knowledge of the bellfounder by the pluralistic incumbent of both Llanwenog and Glasbury.

Before his death, and after the Restoration of the Monarchy, Griffith also became Rector of Llyswen and Rector of Llanelieu ('Llanelieu' in the Glasbury burial register). His son took over from him at Llyswen (Richards, 1959).

There are fundamental questions relating to Henry Williams, the bellfounder, that remain unanswered. Where and when did Williams acquire his skill as a bellfounder?



His founder's mark, which he cast on many of his bells, was a shield with a bell within a caliper (which is an instrument for measuring distance) and the letters HW above and on either side of the shield, plus marks below the shield. The caliper suggests that Williams designed, measured and laid-out the bells that he subsequently moulded and cast. Who was Henry Williams?

*The founder's mark of Henry Williams  
(From Lewis, 2012)*

There was a Henry Williams who Matriculated from Queen's College Oxford in 1651 (Lewis, 2021). He was the second and younger son of the Henry Williams of Gwernyfed who obtained a baronetcy in 1644 and he was probably born in 1635 or 1636. Did this son become the bellfounder? Did this son of the owner of the Gwernyfed estate become interested in bells and ringing while at Oxford during a formative period in the development of ringing (Eisel, 1987)? Did he undertake further studies after matriculating, perhaps in foundry work and even in bell design?

In particular, did Williams learn skills from other bellfounders who worked in his area during his lifetime, such as the Penningtons of Monmouth, the Evans of Chepstow, the Purdues and the Coveys? Who was Henry Williams and what secrets are hidden in the grave in which he was buried in the churchyard at St Peter's in Glasbury on 10 March 1722?

Visitors to the church at Llanwenog will be rewarded by the sight of finely carved woodwork, a superb barrel-vaulted church ceiling, an intriguing carved stone font, and in the churchyard outside the tower a finely carved replica of a memorial stone that originally probably dated to the fifth or sixth centuries and contains ogham script, as was widely used at that period in Ireland (*Llanwenog Church Guide*, nd).



*Replica ogham stone at Llanwenog. The original is in The National Museum of Wales in Cardiff.  
(Photo by author)*

Ringers visiting the Glasbury area might consider going to Clyro, for which Henry Williams cast and hung a ring of five bells in 1708 (Sharpe, F., 1947). Two of those bells survive, although one (bell number two) is cracked. Bell four, apart from some possible retuning, is as Williams intended it to be. Be warned, however, ringing at Clyro presently involves more than normal effort!

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