

STORY OF OUR LADY OF CARDIGAN

by the Reverend Silas M Harris, M.A. (1952)

THE beginnings of Cardigan Priory are obscure, and the exact time of its foundation cannot be known with certainty. It was a cell of the great Benedictine abbey of St. Peter, Chertsey, Surrey, and is first heard of after Rhys ap Gruffudd, Prince of South Wales, had recovered Cardigan from the Normans in 1165. A charter given by him, probably soon after that date, grants and confirms to Chertsey "the cell of Cardigan with all its appurtenances." The priory, with its church of St. Mary of Cardigan, and the chapel of St. Peter in the castle, were already in existence at that time, being expressly mentioned in the charter.

Some have claimed that an earlier priory existed at Cardigan before this daughter house of Chertsey, that it formed a cell to Gloucester abbey and that it was transferred to Chertsey by Rhys ap Gruffudd. But the records show nothing more than that Gloucester formerly possessed a church there, known as Llando or Holy Trinity, in the ordinary way in which monastic houses owned the revenues and advowson of so many parish churches. Some time between 1115 and 1130 Gilbert de Clare gave Llanbadarn to Gloucester in order that they might erect a priory there, and with it "the church of Cardigan." In Henry I's confirmation of the grant this is styled more exactly, "the church of Holy Trinity of Cardigan," and in a privilege of Pope Alexander III (1159-81) it appears as "the church of the Holy Trinity which is called Llando."

This seems to have been the original parish church of Cardigan, but there is no evidence for the assumption that it was a monastic priory. Lando or Landov represents the Welsh Landou, i.e., Llandwyf or Llandwy, church of God; in the twelfth century it was natural to render this, "church of the Holy Trinity," for that was the time when dedications under that form were becoming general. About 1160 the possession of this church was in dispute between Gloucester and Chertsey. Earl Roger de Clare decided that Gloucester should retain it, but ultimately Chertsey succeeded in its claim, and it was attached to its priory of St. Mary at least from the time of the charter of the Lord Rhys. It has long ceased to exist and its situation is uncertain, but it was probably somewhere near the well known as that of Holy Trinity, about three-quarters of a mile east of Cardigan.

Cardigan was always a very small priory and it probably never housed more than a few monks - when Leland wrote about 1536 there were only two. The names of most of the priors are unknown, save for a few of the later ones; they were evidently all English monks sent from Chertsey to fill the position. The priory appointed to St. Mary's, Cardigan (which was a parish church, though it was also the priory church), and served the chapel of Tremaen and the Castle chapel; it also had an interest (together with Talley Abbey) in the benefice of Verwick. There are surprisingly few references to the house during the four centuries of its existence, apart from some confirmations of the original charter; it figures of course in the Taxatio of Pope Nicholas in 1291, but it appears in diocesan records only in connection with appointments to the parishes it possessed, and when the prior was charged from time to time with the collection of tenths from a part of the diocese.

With the spoliation of the monasteries by Henry VIII Chertsey was forced to "surrender" its possessions to the king on July 6th, 1537, and normally this would have sealed the fate of Cardigan too.

There was, however, a brief respite for the abbey and its priory. The Augustinian abbey of Bisham, Berks, had been precipitately given up to the king as early as 1536 by its Prior, William Barlow, who was significantly made Bishop of St. Asaph, and later of St. Davids, that same year. For some reason Henry re-founded Bisham as a Benedictine Abbey on December 18th, 1537, and the abbot of Chertsey and his monks were established there, the priory of Cardigan also being continued under the new house. But by the following year the unstable king had again changed his mind, and both Bisham and Cardigan had to be "surrendered" anew on June 19th, 1538, by the last abbot, John Cowdrey. The end came swiftly for Cardigan, for a week later an order was issued to remove the prior from office and to confiscate the priory and its belongings. There was in the priory church a notable shrine of Our Lady which was clearly of some fame and importance, but it is known only from proceedings with regard to it taken in 1538, when Thomas Hore was prior. The William Barlow already mentioned was at this time bishop of St. Davids. Generally described as "of unenviable notoriety," he was one of the most unprincipled and debased of the new Protestant bishops; "the calamity of his see," he ruined the noble episcopal palace at St. Davids by removing the lead from its roof in order to sell it for his own advantage. This practice he continued in his new diocese of Bath and Wells, to which he was later appointed, uncovering there "the goodly hall covered with lead" and the ancient Chapel of Our Lady, "a place of great reverence and antiquity." He alienated much of the property belonging to St. Davids, including the valuable manor of Lamphey, which he made over to the king, doubtless by previous arrangement. Early in 1538 he was in his diocese, and on March 31st that year he addressed a long and obsequious letter to Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's lay "vicar general," giving some account of his proceedings. In this we hear of the Cardigan shrine, and of his efforts to suppress some features connected with it which he stigmatised as "superstitious."

He relates that he had visited St. Davids itself just before March 1st, where he had attempted to prohibit the celebration of St. David's Day at the cathedral and to prevent the customary veneration of the Saint's relics on the occasion. But the canons and people had withstood him, and the festival was observed with the usual solemnity, much to Barlow's chagrin. He afterwards, however, confiscated part of the relics, and servilely asked Cromwell for instructions as to their future disposal.

A little earlier apparently, and probably before the end of February, he had gone to Haverfordwest, seemingly on Cromwell's orders, and there had "done reformation" with regard to "the taper of Haverforde West." Nothing more is known of this, but it may have been connected with a shrine somewhat similar to that of Cardigan, possibly in the Dominican priory there. Barlow goes on to say to his patron, "But sythene I chaunced upon another taper of moch greater credyte and of more shamefull detestacion called Our Ladyes taper of Cardigan which I have sente here to your Lordship with convenyent instructyons of that develish delusyone."

He enclosed for Cromwell a document he had drawn up in which he set forth the "examinacion" to which he had subjected certain witnesses at Cardigan. He dates his injunctions March 16th (1538). Our knowledge of the shrine, which was of great antiquity and a centre of pilgrimage for the country around, rests on this relation, to which all other extant references evidently go back. Burnet refers to Our Lady of Cardigan, and says that it was the shrine which drew most pilgrims and offerings in those parts, but for the rest his short account is dependent on Barlow's report. The prior of Cardigan at this time, the last of the series, was Thomas Hore, and he only, apart from the vicar of St. Mary's parish, was interrogated by Barlow; he must therefore have been almost alone at the priory at this time. Barlow was bullying and hectoring in his methods, and his great object was to represent anything he objected to as "superstitious" and a "develish delusyone," so the account we have is a distinctly hostile and prejudiced one, expressly designed to bring the Shrine and its custodians into disrepute.

To come to the "examinacion." The shrine consisted of a figure of Our Lady with the Holy Child, an extinguished "taper" (i.e., candle) having been held (at one time) in her hand. The prior was interrogated as to the story connected with the shrine, and he related the traditional legend concerning it, which he had learnt on coming to Cardigan five years previously. As summarised by Barlow his account was as follows :

Item, Item, that the image now situate in the church of Cardigane, whiche ys used for a greate pilgremage to this present daye, was founde standinge upon the ryver of Tyve, beinge an arme of the see, and her sonne upon her lappe, and the same taper burnynge in her hande.

Item, that the same ymage was caryed thens unto Christes Church of Cardigane, and the sayd ymage wold not tarry there, but was found thre or fowre tymes in the place where now ys buylded the church of our Lady, and the taper brunnyng in her hande, which contynued styll burnynge the space of nyne yeres without wastynge, untill the tyme that one foresware hymselfe thereon, and then it extinted and never burned after.

Item, that sence the ceasinge of burnynge of the sayd taper, it was enclosed and taken for a greate relique, and so worshipped and kyssed of pylgremes, and used of men to sweare by in difficill and harde matters, whereof the advauntage admounted to greate sommes of money in tymes passed, payenge yerely of the same xxii. nobles for a Pencion unto thabbot of Cheresey.

Barlow's concern at this time was with the " taper " or candle, rather than with the shrine itself. This candle had evidently long been removed from the figure at the shrine, had been encased in a wooden covering, and was venerated as a relic. The prior had stated that he had never seen it save at the nether end, "where it appered wood unto his judgement." The taking of oaths upon it in great issues represented ordinary Welsh practice, once it was regarded as a relic, and is in accord with the prominence given to swearing on relics in the various Welsh legal codes based on the laws of Hywel Dda. In another part of the report there is a reference to "cloths, figured wax and shrouds" which were connected with the devotion to the Shrine; the cloths and shrouds were articles brought into contact with the shrine or relic, while the figured wax probably refers to wax tablets on which a representation of the shrine was impressed.

The only other person questioned by Barlow was "Syr Morgan Meredith, vicare of Our Lady churche there." He had been secular vicar of the parish for twenty-one years, and his evidence manifestly confutes Barlow's assertions and suspicions as to deceit and fraud. He agreed with the prior's relation of the legendary story to account for the origin of the shrine, but was able to explain from personal knowledge why the socket of the candle was of wood. Thus he deposed :

Item, that prior John Frodshame tolde hym that because the people toke the waxe awaye, he put the tree beneth, that the people shulde not dyminesh the substance of the taper.

This was within his own memory and therefore not more than twenty years before, so that any protection to the candle was given only very late in its history. By that time probably most of the wax had been "diminished," so that Barlow could refer to it contemptuously as "a pece of olde rottene tymber," when he wished to denounce it as "abbominable idolatry and disceatfull jugglinge" on the part of the predecessors of the then prior and vicar.

According to Barlow's letter, he took away the candle itself, or what remained of it, and sent it to Thomas Cromwell, who was gathering in more important relics at this time from all parts of the kingdom. What happened to the shrine with its figure of Our Lady and Child does not appear. But it could only have remained in the church at Cardigan for a few months longer at most, for in 1538 Cromwell ordered all the principal images of Our Lady, "whereunto any common pilgimage was used," to be sent to London for destruction, and in the autumn of that year Our Lady of Cardigan doubtless suffered that fate, in common with Our Lady of Penrhys and other notable shrines which were pilgimage centres. Some features of the Cardigan story have their counterpart in legends concerning other figures of Our Lady, e.g., the removal of the image to the site where it was to be permanently enshrined. But there does not seem to be an exact parallel to the burning and unconsumed candle. The nearest is a curious devotion at Arras, Pas-de-Calais, France. The story told there recounts that in 1065 a candle (cereus) was dropped by the Blessed Virgin (possibly from her image) from the topmost vault of the choir of the cathedral into the hands of two jocalatores, or act Froude has a characteristic passage with regard to it: "The story of Our Lady's Taper at Cardigan has a picturesque wildness, of which later ages may admire the picturesque beauty, being relieved by three centuries of incredulity from the necessity of raising harsh alternatives of truth or falsehood." Nevertheless, a frank examination of all the evidence, however the legend itself may be regarded, can lead only to an endorsement of the judgement of Dr. Maynard Smith, when, after scrutinising the records, he wrote of Prior John Frodsham's action with regard to the venerated candle: "In spite of Barlow's representing this as an imposture, there is no evidence of fraudulent intent." While as to the Welsh devotion to Our Lady of Cardigan, and the pilgimage in her honour, this was in complete accord with the traditional piety of the whole of Christendom towards the beloved Mother of the Saviour.