

## **The New Church at Betws Garmon and the Pennant Family**

Ongoing provenance work with the rare book collections in Aberystwyth University recently unearthed a series of letters relating to the rebuilding of Betws Garmon church in the 1840's and throw an interesting light on conditions of the local church and clergy at the time. Several volumes from Samuel Lewis – *Topographical Dictionary of Wales*, and the equivalent title for England, from the 1830's, came to the University Library from the collection of Professor David Williams, Professor of Welsh History at Aberystwyth, who died in 1978. He acquired a number of interesting books relating to Wales over the years and these particular sets came from the Downing Library of the famous Pennant family. David Pennant died in 1841 but he had used the Lewis volumes as an informal index to appeals he had received relating to church repairs and building work, inserting correspondence alongside entries for the appropriate location. The original circular and two subsequent letters from St. George Armstrong Williams make interesting reading:

### **Circular Relating to Betws Garmon Church**

We the undersigned, the clergyman and Church Wardens, on behalf of the inhabitants of Bettws Garmon, have long found reason to lament that our Parish Church, which was erected many centuries ago, is in a state of great decay and that it is so damp and cold as to prevent many especially in the Winter season, from attending public worship. After much deliberation, we have thought it desirable to pull down the old dilapidated edifice and to build a new church on a plan which has been prepared by a young artist of superior talents, and of which the Bishop of the Diocese and the Dean have expressed their entire approbation.

The estimated expense of the building will be three hundred pounds. Mr. Morgans of Corsham, Wilts, whose property is in the parish but small, has already offered half an acre of land for the enlargement of the Burial ground, together with a contribution of ten pounds. The two church building societies will give a grant of fifty pounds. As the inhabitants of the parish are totally unable to make up the sum that will be required, we take the liberty of earnestly appealing to the generosity of the Landed Proprietors, and of those to whom the sacred interests of religion are dear, and who esteem it among their highest duties to assist, so far as they are able, in extending and perpetuating the usefulness of the established church in Wales.

St. George Armstrong Williams M.A. Incumbent

The mark of X John David, Ystrad

The mark of X William Thomas, Bron fedw. Church Wardens.

### **Correspondence between St. George Armstrong Williams and David Pennant**

Sir, Pardon me for submitting this circular to your kind consideration. I feel I have no claim upon your benevolence excepting as a fellow worshipper of the Lord Jesus Christ. I have much need therefore to apologise for this intrusion. My little parish lies at the foot of Snowdon, on the Beddgelert road from Carnarvon, in a very mountainous district, where there are no resident gentry. My flock consists mostly of poor farmers, who cannot contribute much towards any good work. I am also poor as Lady Emma Pennant well knows, the incumbency rarely exceeding £60 per annum; and I have no one to assist me in this holy cause, unless I appeal to the benevolent feelings of those friends of the church who reside at a distance. Yet, Sir, I cannot calmly look on "the place of my

fathers' sepulchres lying waste" without making an effort to build up its walls. I earnestly entreat you, then, to give me a helping hand in this goodly "work and labour of love", and be assured that the smallest donation will be most thankfully received by, Sir, your obedient humble servant St. George Armstrong Williams. From W. Caernarvon. 28 Jan 1841.

To this appeal David Pennant replied with a £10 bank bill in February 1841 provoking this effusive letter of thanks.

From Feb 4 1841.

Dear Sir, I have to acknowledge the receipt of a most benevolent letter from you, enclosing me £10 towards my little church of Bettws Garmon. I know not how sufficiently to thank you, for my heart is full. God bless you and yours is the frequent ebullition of my feelings, and comes readiest to my pen; and when I tell you that I shed tears when I opened your letter, you may form some idea of the value of your contribution in my eyes, and not the less so for the very kind manner in which it was sent. I am in hope that I shall yet be able to rebuild my beloved church, although I have many discouragements, even from those who ought to assist me. But it is God's own work. I will therefore "cast my burden on him, and he will sustain me". I have had many things to distress me, some of a pecuniary nature, and I am likely to encounter as much suffering and despondency as my poor father. My dear wife had a fortune of from £200 to £300 per ann. Of this she has been almost entirely deprived, and that most unjustly. Yet the Lord has raised us friends, amongst who Lady Emma Pennant stands most prominent; so that amidst all my heart rendings I can exclaim with the poet – "With shine or shade – with spring or fall, mercy is mingled with them all". Pray excuse me for thus opening my heart to you. I have thus been insensibly led to it by your extremely friendly letter. Oh, Sir, if you knew all you would pity me. Craving your pardon for thus attending myself on your notice, and wishing you and yours every happiness, both temporal and spiritual, I have the honour to subscribe myself, dear Sir, your most obliged humble servant. St George Armstrong Williams.

#### **Extract from Samuel Lewis. *A topographical dictionary of Wales*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition.1850**

This later edition of Lewis demonstrates that the Bettws Garmon appeal was successful:

The living, usually styled a perpetual curacy, is vicarial, and is endowed with £600 royal bounty and £200 parliamentary grant; net income, £62 10s; patron, the Bishop of Bangor; impropiator Lord Newborough. The great tithes have been commuted for a rent charge of £16 13s 1.5d, and those payable to the perpetual curate for one of £14 6s 4d. The church dedicated to St. Garmon, and romantically situated in a vale bounded by lofty mountains, has been rebuilt under the superintendance of Mr. George Alexander, architect, of London, at an estimated expense of £350, chiefly received from persons unconnected with the parish. It is a neat small edifice, surmounted by a belfry and cross, with a two light widow beneath.

#### **A note on the individuals involved**

The church was rebuilt in 1841-2 by George Alexander (1810-1884/5), although the font and Rowlands brass from the earlier church were retained. He was a London architect who also worked on Llanwnda and Penrhos churches locally. He seems a fairly obscure figure, although we know that he was elected as a fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1840, and was a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. David Pennant inherited the Downing Hall estate after the death of his naturalist father, Thomas, in 1798. He died in June 1841, shortly after answering the Bettws Garmon appeal. His widow, Emma Pennant, also referred to in the correspondence, was Emma Brudenell,

daughter of the Earl of Cardigan. She retired to Pennant Lodge in Brighton after her husband's death and died in 1846. There is an 1829 portrait by William Egley that is available on the web.

St. George Armstrong Williams was another son of a more famous father. Eliezer Williams (1754-1820) was a clergyman and scholar, himself son of Peter Williams (1723-1796), who was one of the early leaders of Methodism in Wales and an important biblical scholar. Eliezer served in several parishes and eventually became vicar of Lampeter in 1805 and opened a school there, preparing students for the church. He was memorialised by his son in *The English works of the late Rev. Eliezer Williams*, published by Cradock and company in 1840, featuring a lengthy biography alongside Eliezer's published works. St. George Armstrong Williams was born in Chadwell around 1804/6, graduated from Jesus College Oxford in 1827, and was ordained as Perpetual Curate in Betws Garmon in 1828, a post he held until 1841, when he moved to become vicar of Pwllheli until 1849. He was subsequently rector of Llangybi and died in 1886. He also served as chaplain to the county gaol in Caernarfon. He married his first wife, Anne Jones of Castellmai, in Llanrug in November 1827 and there were five children. There was also a subsequent marriage in the 1870's after Anne's death. There seems to have been a long running legal dispute about Anne's inheritance that is possibly referred to in the letter of February 1841. Certainly there was a Chancery court decision in an action between Jones and Williams in 1844 which touches on the Castellmai estate.

Bill Hines – August 2019