



**St Dyfrig's Parish**  
**Registers & Archives**  
**Document 06**



**The Treforest Roman Catholic Church and Parish of St Dyfrig**  
**(Documents from *circa* 1994)**

***Original Content:***

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A 12-page handwritten manuscript documents the story of St Dyfrig's up to the untimely death of parish priest Canon Thomas Crowley in 1956. The document was written by parishioner Carol Jenkins (R.I.P. 2007), based on an earlier document of her father's reminiscences. Together with the manuscript were 2 sides of a word processed document "At the time of the Reformation..." and a short handwritten note of 2 paragraphs, "Land on which church..."

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Some typographical errors have been **corrected** and outdated facts **glossed** during digitisation. Otherwise the digitised document is styled and punctuated as in the original.

*Digitised by parishioners Teresa de Ste Croix and Margaret Priest, and Rev Gareth Leyshon, Parish Administrator*

***For Further Information***

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### **At the time of the Reformation (word-processed document)**

At the time of the Reformation, local worshippers belonged to the parishes of Eglwysilan (which also included Caerphilly), Llanilltud Faerdre and Llanwynno. In the absence of priests and places of worship, local Catholics after the Reformation had to decide whether to conform to the official church or suffer penalties for Recusancy. In Eglwysilan parish in about 1595 about a dozen people were fined as Recusants, i.e. for refusing to attend the parish church. There is some doubt whether a Catholic priest had been working in the area and had reconciled them to the Church or whether they belonged to a Puritan congregation such as the Baptist one that met in a farmhouse at Nantgarw. During Penal Times practically the only Mass centres were the private chapels of the landowning class who remained Catholic. There were almost no “big houses” of this sort in the area, so any Catholics wishing to practise their religion would have had a very hard time. Most priests and laity wouldn’t want to leave traces of their Catholic practice at this time, and the habit of secrecy remained even after the anti-Catholic laws fell into disuse, so the records of these times are very few and far between. In the Monnow Valley near Monmouth there was a “secret” headquarters of the Jesuits, for instance, and we know that missionary priests were put to death in Cardiff (where the bank is at the end of Crwys Road).

In the late 18th century a priest riding from Merthyr to say Mass in the little town of Cardiff might sometimes say another Mass at Bridgewaterarms or Newbridge, later known as Pontypridd, for the few Catholics of the area. There was an increasingly diverse Catholic community in the Valleys, even before the 1840’s drove many people to seek a livelihood in the local industries. The writer George Borrow, who spent part of his childhood in Ireland, and spoke a little Irish, met an Irishwoman on the road between Merthyr and Ponty with whom he had an entertaining conversation. At this time, Trefforest was bigger and more important than Pontypridd itself, so a little chapel was built for Catholics in a very constricted site on the corner of Bridge Street and Wood Road: known later as The Institute, it is still there, distinguished by a pointed doorway and a small window with a pointed arch. This was the original St Dyfrig’s. You can tell how badly-off the community was at the time: building stone (probably from the quarries on the hill behind the White Tips) was cheap enough, so that even the neighbouring “Oddfellows Hall”, built by a Friendly Society, was in cut stone. There were no other adornments at all as far as I can see, apart from a carved cross on the gable end. It is also obvious that, unlike today, almost nobody turned up for Mass in a vehicle, as you can’t turn even a horse and cart very well in the very small street area. So many Catholics lived in Meadow Street that it was dubbed “Little Ireland”, though quite a few Catholics must have walked in over the mountains from neighbouring villages.

### **Land on which church (handwritten note)**

Land on which church, hall and presbytery built purchased from either Forthergill or Crawshay.

In early 1800s, masses held in various places including a room in the Bridge Hotel. Another was a house in Saron St – the occupant was a Mrs Brooks, maiden name of Ellen Larkin. Her parents had come over from Ireland during the famine and had settled in Treforest. The father worked in the old ironworks then situated where Parc School and Taff Vale Park are now, and the works were controlled by the Fothergill family of Taff House. This man was the great, great, grandfather of Dominic’s father on his mother’s side.

## **The Treforest Roman Catholic Church and Parish of St Dyfrig (main manuscript)**

At the beginning of the eighteenth century Pontypridd was more a scattering of little groups of cottages and was then known as Newbridge. This name was given because of the single arch bridge built by William Edwards across the Taff River in 1750. Leland, the sixteenth century traveller, visited the area and reputedly stayed at the Swan Inn, later the Old Masters Arms, now demolished. This old inn was near the old ford, crossing the river, and was built on the site of the old mud house which gave Pontypridd its name. Francis-Grose another traveller of that period describes a visit which he made to that area in his "The Antiquities of England and Wales" of 1775 and mentions "the river aspect of the area with whitewashed houses near a picturesque bridge, with fields of oats and large, leafy trees." The earliest recorded mention of the locality is in a manuscript found in the Heath Abbey, which mentions Gellifanaches (The house below the nunnery) which was written early in the thirteenth century. The old farm of Lan above Graigwen also indicates an association with a church or saint. Continuation of the road near these places lead to the old monastery of Penrhys and its ancient well of Our Lady.

The town of Pontypridd straddles the old and very ancient parishes of the pre-reformation times, the Parish of St Illtyd at Llantwit Fardre, of St Gwynno at Llanwonno and the Parish of St Ilan at Eglwysilan.

In 1794 Crawshays of Merthyr bought the Forest Estate and built the large tin plate mills near Rhydyfelin, which in 1806 became one of the largest in the kingdom.

Fothergill's of Hirwaun owned a rail-mill on the Broadway from about 1850 to 1900 and in 1806 Brown and Lennox started their cable and anchor works which became the largest chain making concern in the world.

Collieries and drifts were worked in the Pontypridd area at the Lan, Craig-y-Rallt, Pen-y-Rhiw, Gelliwion, Rhydyfelin and Dynea long before coal was mined in the Rhondda.

In 1832 Walter Coffin, son of a Bridgend tanner, sank a shaft near a level he was then working at Dinas and struck a rich seam of steam coal. The Rhondda Valleys were at that time heavily wooded gaps in the mountains with crystal clear water in the rivers, with salmon, sewin and trout. At Tonypany there were a few cottages and a woolmill and at Pentre fields of corn and sheep grazing.

With rapid growth of the valleys and the building of the Taff Railway in 1841 and its extensions up the Rhondda, Pontypridd became, with its own industries, a hub of commerce and trade.

The market held at Llantrisant since the Norman days fell into disuse by the numerous toll gates surrounding the ancient town and farmers and traders resorted to holding a market in Treforest on the ground where the Castle Square Chapel is built. This little market grew to the larger nationally known Pontypridd Market.

From 1815 to 1825 Irish colonies had grown up in Dowlais, Pontypool, Newport and Swansea. In 1773 there was an estimated 750 Roman Catholics in the whole of Wales and in the 1798 only one Roman Catholic lived in Merthyr Tydfil. By the 1851 census, over ten thousand Irish people were living in the Glamorgan area and another ten thousand in Newport and the Monmouth valleys. These figures show a general indication of the rapid increase of Irish settlement. Settling in an area devoid of any provision for worship and occasionally being visited by a priest, it was very difficult to practice their religion, but despite open opposition and contempt of the community around them, their faith was kept alive. The earliest visitors were made to the valley areas by Benedictines until the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, which secured the right of Catholics to worship in their own way. The influx of Irish immigrants during the recurrent famines of the 1800s, and the terrible impact of the "Great Hunger" of 1845 to 1850, caused a periodical influx of the Faithful. This and the Emancipation Act were the key stones of the resurgence of the Faith in the country. Ecclesiastical organisation was begun which was ultimately to change the state of supply of clergy and to the building of churches and creation of parishes. In 1840 the Western Vicariate was divided into two and Dr Thomas Joseph Brown, Prior of Downside, was appointed titular Bishop of Appolonia with charge of North and South Wales, Monmouthshire and Herefordshire, and ten years later the diocese of Newport and Menevia was constituted consisting of the South Wales counties with Dr Brown as Bishop. He was succeeded by

Bishop Hedley in 1881 and when Menevia was subdivided in 1898, Hedley became Bishop of Newport. For a long time these Roman Catholic Bishops had to rely on members of monastic orders, particularly the Benedictines, for their clergy, because of the shortage of secular priests. In 1850, Bishop Brown's chapter consisted entirely of members of this order and 1881 Bishop Hedley had only thirteen secular priests in his diocese. The church had to rely upon rural areas of the diocese for their priests and to Ireland and Scotland. Much progress was made after 1860 to provide churches and schools so that by the end of the century, the area was adequately supplied with places of worship.

About 1868 the Treforest Church of St Dubricius was built, the mother church of the valleys, and it was not until 1886 that Tonypany had a church. It is recorded that even to the beginning of the twentieth century Canon McManus had to walk over Eglwysilan Mountain to visit the Catholics of Senghenydd, Abertridwr and Caerphilly. In the first year of his pastorate a number of his flock were killed in the Albion explosion which took a toll of 276 lives. The Senghenydd explosion took place in 1913, and again this took a number of Catholic lives in its total death roll of 439 lives. The lack of places of worship made it imperative for a rapid building programme and the creation of parishes and nearly sixty churches were built and parishes formed in a century. Thirty four churches were built in the first fifty years after the Emancipation Act. In the early 1820 period a number of Irish names are to be found in the marriage register of Eglwysilan and Llantwit Fardre but not of baptism registrations. It may be that to legalise the unions until a Catholic priest could be contacted to solemnise the marriage in the rites of the church, couples would use the Anglican marriage ceremony.

The first Irish settlers in Treforest area during this period were visited by priests from Ross-on-Wye and Usk, and Mass was often said at this time in the parlours of a Catholic household and by hearsay given me by grandfather fifty years who was had this knowledge given him by his grandmother who was one of the first Irish families in the area. Two houses still in existence, one in Saron Street, the other in Paul Street were two of such places. The residents were the Larkin and Moynaghan families. Some of the earlier Catholic families to settle in the area were the Egan, Kelly, Cullen and O'Brien in Cilfynydd; the Caulfield, Egan, Lynch, McCarthy, O'Shaughnessy, Doran, Shannon and O'Connor families in Treforest; the Brewer and the Mead families who later in the century settled in Abertridwr; the Fahey family in Rhydyfelin and the two families of O'Keefe in Trallwn. Families of Cummin, Regan and Lucy settled in the Pantygraigwen area and the O'Shea family in Graig-yr-Helfa. Some of the descendants of these families to the sixth, seventh and eighth generations are pupils in St Michael's School, some with very Welsh names. It was said by Canon Boulton, when priest of the parish, that the earlier Catholic families had inter married so much that nearly all present families were related. Through the almost complete contempt and isolation by the community around them and hostility to their faith, there was little social contact. Consequently there were very few mixed marriages prior to the Second World War. People in Treforest requiring Baptismal Certificates between 1854 and 1868 had to visit St Joseph, Aberdare.

Early in 1860 a school was initiated in a building next to the old St Michael's School in Wood Road during the pastorate of Father Thomas Murphy who describes himself as a missionary apostolic. In 1884 Father James B Moore built the old St Michael's School with Mrs Kiely as Headmistress and this remained the parish school until 1970. In 1969 the building of the present school was started when Canon O'Carroll was parish priest and in 1971 the premises with accommodation for 280 pupils were officially opened.

The sisters of Nazareth House purchased a double-bayed window house on Wood Road in 1882 for an orphanage. Sister Morgan and Sister Catherine cared and tended the orphans who came as far afield as Pontypool. During 1892 when Father Alphonsus van den Heuval was the first resident priest of the parish the Nazareth House, now the Treforest Central School, was built for the then large sum of £4,000. There were difficulties about a chaplain and in 1930 the Mother General directed that the orphanage should move and in that year they went to the Swansea area. Many of the older parishioners will remember the Homes children attending the old St Michael's School as fellow pupils with their distinctive uniform. Also remembered is the Silver Band which they had and their visits to the homes of various Catholic families in the parish and prominent Pontypridd businessmen, to play carols on Christmas morning. The donations received paid for their Christmas dinner.

Father Van, as he was known, was only parish priest for five years, but even for that short period he did a lot of work and many of the older past generation remember him with affection.

In 1894 Father Michael Joseph McManus, a Scotsman by birth, became parish priest until 1927 when he retired due to failing health and eyesight administered to the congregation. A man of tremendous energy and vitality during his more pristine days, he was very conspicuous walking through Treforest and Taff Street, the main shopping street of Pontypridd. Always, even to the middle nineteen twenties dressed in Victorian frock coat, high hat and thick walking stick he was equally known and respected by all denominations as to his own flock.

From the time Father McManus assumed responsibility for the parish he had to contend with grave financial difficulties. Many of his parishioners were employed through strikes and lockouts in the mining industry. The Rocking Stone, or Logan Stone, on the Common overlooking Treforest became the scene of many meetings of the strikes and political agitators, and in one instance "ten thousand men gathered" to listen to their leaders. The impact of the industrial unrest resulted in many businesses closing and there was general poverty. Colliers wages at that time were 19/- per week of 12 hours per day. A stoker in ironworks or tin worker received 15/-.

In 1902 The Education Act of Lloyd George's Liberal Party abolished school boards and denominational schools were forced with closure if their finances were not sufficient to keep them independent. There were only two church schools in the area and St Mary's, Glyntaff, gave in to the circumstances and their schools was taken over by the Pontypridd Education Authority. Mr Milton Jones, the local Director of Education, and a friend of Father McManus, advised him on a procedure to adopt and after a period of very difficult times, one instance was in 1905 when the teaching staff received no pay for nearly the whole year, a conclusion was reached. The council took over the payment of teachers and the supply of equipment, the rest of the costs and expenses had to be borne by the parish.

In 1899 a few men in the parish served in the army when hostilities in South Africa in the Boer War started. Two such men were Dominic's maternal grandfather William Collins, an old boy of the Nazareth Homes and Patrick Brewer. Both men were recalled at outbreak of the First World War, 1914 – 1918, as regulars and on reserve, and Brewer lost his life. Children were reared by Nazareth Homes.

By the turn of the century it was becoming obvious that the church was too small for the congregation and a larger building was needed. The annual St Patrick's Ball was held at the old Town Hall now known as the Lesser Town Hall, or at the old Drill Hall behind the Broadway. Fairs and bazaars were also held with the hall tastefully decorated in the Papal colours, with generously endowed Irish Harp compliment. In 1903 the Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta was produced by parishioners at the Lesser Town Hall which was highly successful. The First World War of 1914-1918 intervened and any plans for the future had to be shelved. The congregation at Mass during these years seemed composed of women with a sprinkling of uniforms of those home on leave. Immediately after the war Canon McManus restarted energetically to expedite his plans for a new church. By 1923 the Memorial Hall was built and Lord Treowen performed the opening ceremony. The foundations were dug during the 1921 strike and many of the unemployed men of the parish freely gave of their labours. Costing £3,500 it was the centre of the parish social activities and a source of income to the parish. The Presbytery cost £2,750, was built at the same time and it is interesting to note that at present property costs a comparable figure for a house of its dimensions would be in the range of £40,000 to £50,000!

By 1926 the General Strike took place. The general stoppage was of short duration but the miners stayed out for six months. Destitution and near starvation was so rampant that soup kitchens were opened and most schools had facilities to feed their pupils whose parents were unemployed. St Michaels' ran such a scheme and Catholic and non-Catholic business people gave generously to augment the expenditure of the project. From 1926 until the end of the thirties long queues at the unemployment exchanges were a regular pattern of life around the Pontypridd area. The depressing effects of years of unemployment had a moral and spirit breaking effect. Many local businesses and shops closed and give added emphasis to the sense of dereliction.

In such an atmosphere Canon McManus still indefatigably worked to bring his dreams of a new church to fruition! On the 14<sup>th</sup> November 1927 his labours materialised and on the feast of St Dyfrig the church was dedicated and opened by the Most Reverend Francis Mostyn, Archbishop of Cardiff. Built in the Byzantine style of brick with a high nave and choir balcony with furniture of long bench seats it has ample accommodation for the parishioners. Unfortunately after celebrating Mass for three Sundays following the dedication Canon McManus retired owing to failing eyesight after thirty years as parish priest. He was led to the pulpit because he could not see clearly and "remarkable scenes were witnessed when many members of the crowded congregation sobbed as the parish priest resigned." The foregoing is an excerpt from the South Wales press report of the scene as he announced his retirement. An episode of significant achievement ended in the Parish of St Dyfrig. The old Church and the new were known as St Dubritius and dedicated in the Latin form of St Dyfrig.

Father William Boulton, then serving in Abersychan, was appointed to Treforest following Canon McManus. St Dyfrig was the place of Conference for the Deanery which comprised of the Parishes of Treforest, Tonypany, Ferndale, Abercynon, Ynyshir, Mountain Ash, Caerphilly, Sengenhydd and Treorchy with Father Boulton as the Very Reverend Dean. This is a very large and scattered Deanery and the Parish is a large Parish. Pontyclun, Talbot Green, Llantrisant and Miskin to the south; Trehafod in the Rhondda and Ynysybwl; Cilfynydd to the North and Upper Boat in the Taff valley. Almost immediately Father Boulton was appointed Parish Priest, Father Lightbound was sent here as Curate, the first of over thirty assistant priests to serve in this parish, sometimes two together at one time.

The years of the depression that followed the strike and lockout of 1926 continued until the latter end of the thirties. These were very grim days in the finances of the parishes and Father Boulton had a grim time. The first couple of years he had to overcome a certain amount of resentment and opposition which any priest taking over after Canon McManus would have received. The debt on the parish £14,500, a large, frightening sum in those poverty stricken days, and it was only by diligent accountancy and an ever watchful eye on expenditure that the interest on the loan was met and a little paid annually off the capital debt. Even when working, the colliers only worked two or three days per week, with the miners receiving the "dole" for the workless days.

Twice weekly dances and whist drives were held in the Memorial Hall and the women of the parish organised jumble sales, sales of work, lotteries and Christmas Draws, and to the women of the parish must go much credit for obtaining the finances of the church in those difficult times. During those years unemployment was rampant and it was a general condition that many boys would leave school and not find work until he was twenty four or twenty five years of age. Many left the area to find work at Birmingham, Coventry, Slough (then a new town), London and Cowley, Oxford. Eastertime was an event when these migrants returned home for the holidays. The church was full at the eleven o'clock Easter Sunday morning Mass and afterwards Father Boulton would be outside to talk to them. It was a habit of his every Sunday after eleven o'clock Mass to be outside the church doors to chat to his parishioners particularly the teenagers, in whom he had a particular interest. At the start of his pastorate he initiated the Catholic Young Men's Society and would attend every meeting. Football and cricket teams whenever playing at home, he would be present at the matches. The Children of Mary was another society which he started and many catholic marriages took place through these socialities. The Quarant Ore, the May procession and Corpus Christi procession, the annual visits of the missionary priests of the Redemptionists and Passionist orders always found the church full to the doors. During the thirties the Treforest Industrial Estate was built and the employment procured there helped a little to keep the youth in the parish. There was a change of title from St Dubritius to St Dyfrig during the thirties. In 1939, the Second World War started and the old church, now called the Institute, and the memorial hall were taken over by the government for billeting troops. English troops were housed first then American troops until the landing on French soil. Many Catholics were among these troops and there were many present at the Masses during the week, particularly on Sunday on their Church Parade. Stations of the Cross were particularly well attended with often packed churches. Three altar servers became priests during Father Boulton's time and two girls became professed nuns.

After twenty four years as parish priest in April 1951 he moved to Barry and at this time the debt was reduced to £9,750.

Father Crowley then became parish priest of St Dyfrig's, coming here from The Immaculate Conception at Treorchy. He was born in Newtown in Cardiff, one of the traditional Irish refugee quarters of Cardiff and had been in his youth a close friend of James Driscoll and also of Jim O'Sullivan, the Cardiff and Welsh international who later became full back for Wigan Northern League rugby football team and broke all world records for goal scoring in the post First World War years.

Immediately he devoted his entire energies to improve and make alterations to the church, the hall and presbytery. A new organ was installed at a cost of £2,000; the old heating of the church which had been by coke boiler was replaced by thermostatic controlled gas. The hall which had the old coke and water heater system was also changed to gas and the interior decorated and the electric lighting renewed, both of which had not been touched since the hall had been built. A very popular priest with the Italian parishioners, he met influential members of the fraternity to induce them for their help. The Italian settlers in the area had grown from one family, the Bracchis who were the first in 1880, to over twenty in the post Second World War years. A number were interned during the war and three Italian members of the parish who were being shipped to Canada for internment there, lost their lives when the ship was torpedoed by a German submarine off the northern coast of Ireland. Even though inclined to be isolated and self-contained and introvert as a "section within the parish", the church was a common denominator, and the Catholic Youth broke all barriers of nationality, culture and language. Promising to undertake the interior decoration of the church, they generously gave to cover all expenses. The sanctuary was first decorated and a new carpet laid, then the walls and ceiling of the nave. Then the entire floor was scoured and repolished. A debt of £9,500 still remained and by organising football pools and weekly draws of a lottery with over seventy members of the parish, members acting as collectors, and a secretary and treasurer, Father Crowley paid off the debt, and all expenses accrued in decorations and alterations to the hall, presbytery and church.

Some alterations were also made to the school to comply with Ministry of Education requirements, but it was becoming obvious that a new school was badly needed. To keep it in repair, the old school building was a continual drain on the parochial financial resources. Father Boulton had, during his time as parish priest, foreseen this contingency, and has started negotiations for the Meadow Street field. The owners of the field, the Great Western Railway, prolonged the discussions and the ground was still in their possession when he left the parish.

The church was built on leasehold ground, the owners seemed adamant when approached, that they did not wish to sell. Archbishop advised a Novena to Our Lady for her intervention and help. After nine consecutive monthly first Fridays, when hundreds of parishioners received Holy Communion, the whole parish waited anxiously but not desperately for the answer. Within two months the Novena was answered and the freehold was in the possession of the parish. The power and efficacy of prayer! The way seemed now clear for the consecration of the church. The parishioners rejoiced when Father Crowley was made an Honorary Canon for his estimable work and all within such a short period of five years!

A short while afterwards, barely six months, he died on a visit to Ireland and after a Solemn Requiem in St Dyfrig's Church, which was packed to its doors with sorrowing parishioners and friends, he was laid to rest in Cathay's Cemetery in Cardiff. He is remembered by Masses and prayers. Father Torney carried on the duties of priest-in-charge.