

# Llanelwedd Cyn Y Sioe

## Llanelwedd Before The Show

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The current parish church of Llanelwedd is called St Mathew's, and, from the evidence of its 14th century tower, it has been a feature of the village for centuries. So you might wonder where Llanelwedd's, Church of St Elwedd, comes into the story.

The answer lies about half a mile north of St Mathew's, on a knoll forming the highest point of Livestock Hill. There, the now scarcely visible remains of Cae Henllan Church, dedicated to St Elwedd, may be found. It almost certainly pre-dates St Mathew's, but its exact age is unknown although it may have been the "church of St Elwedd in Llanelweth" mentioned in 1283.

A geophysical survey in 2004 plotted the church and its graveyard and showed evidence of two periods of building on the site. Unusually, it seemed to have had a nave without isles and a chancel separated from it by a wall, possibly removed at some point to enlarge the church.

There are suggestions of a possible circular graveyard, a shape common in very old churchyards to prevent corners where the Devil could hide! This might pre-date, and is outside of, a larger, possibly later, graveyard. The interior was partially excavated in 1910, when flooring and wall foundations were found.

The story of what is now the Showground does not emerge from the mists of time for another 300 years. The original timber framed Llanelwedd Hall was built in the mid1500s where the current RWAS offices now stand.

The Hall's early history has been lost, but since the 1630s and the days of Roderick Gwynne, followed by George Gwynne and Sir Rowland Gwynne, Llanelwedd Hall has been the home to branches of the Gwynne family. Subsequently, there are so many mentions of a Marmaduke Gwynne in this story that I have, for clarity, numbered them in this potted history of the Hall and estate's ownership!

Let's begin with Judge Marmaduke Gwynne (1) of Garth (b 1643). He was a man, wealthy through marriage, but a rogue. He bought the Manor of Builth from Sir Thomas Williams by 'trickery, deception and betrayal'. He was agent for Sir Thomas's estate and depreciated estate values and exaggerated the difficulties in collecting rents for his own gain.

His claims were supported in court by his father, Rees Gwyn, who repeatedly appeared as foreman in the local court leet. He persuaded Sir Thomas to sell the estate to his creditors. Gwynne seized the whole lot for himself at a knock down price.

By his death Marmaduke (1) owned not only the Manor of Builth, but almost all the surrounding area, the so-called Hundred of Builth (as in Hundred House). His son

Marmaduke (2) had predeceased him and it was the judge's grandson, Marmaduke Gwynne (3) (b about 1691), who inherited the estate, including Llanelwedd.

He also married into a wealthy family and is remembered as an early convert to Methodism. His wealth might be judged by the fact that at Garth he had kept his own personal chaplain and twenty servants. Rarely were there fewer than ten to fifteen guests. His daughter Sarah Gwynne (1726-1822) married Charles Wesley.

Marmaduke's (3) eldest son, Howell (b 1718), inherited, but squandered, his fortune on unsuccessful mining and other ventures. He took up residence about 1768 in Llanelwedd Hall, mainly for economic reasons. He had previously been MP for Radnorshire in 1755 and Lord Lieutenant a year later.

Howell's son Marmaduke (4) (b 1741) married a wealthy widow, Mrs Frances Parry, but father and son both left the country to escape their debts and Marmaduke (4) didn't return, except for burial in London. Llanelwedd then became home to John Gwynne, Marmaduke (4)'s illegitimate son. However, with no legitimate heir, the estates passed to Marmaduke (4)'s cousin, Marmaduke Gwynne (5) (b 1749). He was known as 'Duke of Llyswen'.

Financial problems continued on all the family estates after Marmaduke Howell Thomas Gwynne (6) (b 1777) son of Marmaduke (5) inherited and, by early 1823, the Garth estate was sold to pay off the family's debts. The family retained just Llanelwedd Hall and its one thousand acres of land, a considerable reduction from the 100,000 acres held by the extended Gwynne family in their heyday.

Marmaduke (6) married Eliza Ann Lawrence after the death of his first wife, Mary. Eliza was a daughter of Charles and Jane Lawrence, whose family also lived at Llanelwedd Hall from the late 1790s to the mid-1830s, during which time almost all the Lawrence children, Eliza, Thomas, Jane, Lewis, Morgan and Matilda were born. Marmaduke's (6) wife Eliza gave birth to one child Marmaduke Gwynne (8) (b 1816). They were both given lifetime occupancy, but no rights of succession to Llanelwedd Hall.

A sad story surrounds 39-year-old Matilda Lawrence and her mother Jane. By 1853 they were living in Dolfach, one of Matilda's father's properties, with two of her sister Jane's children, Charles aged about 18 and Rosa Jones who was about 16, together and two maidservants. Dolfach was a smallholding on the banks of the Duhonw River, at Llanddewi'r Cwm, just south of Builth. Her father also owned nearby Wern-Wyn and the associated Tucking Mill (Dye Works).

On the night of July 9th 1853, after a spell of hot summer weather, a massive storm began with torrential rain. It was followed by four to five inches of hail, causing streams to flood, sweeping away about twenty bridges in the area, including the one at Llanddewi'r Cwm close to Dolfach. Eight people in the area lost their lives and sadly six of these were from Dolfach.

While the inhabitants of the cottage slept, the fork in the Duhonw brook above the cottage became jammed by debris. It formed a dam, which directed the water directly at the cottage. A neighbour, living on the opposite side of the brook, was

woken by the sounds of the flood waters and saw that Dolfach had been almost completely washed away, together with its six inhabitants.

Mrs Jane Lawrence's body was found the next day, 18 miles away down the River Wye. Matilda's body was found a week later ten miles downstream and the remaining four bodies were found near Builth. Early death was a frequent occurrence in Victorian times, but such was the horror of this tragedy that Francis Kilvert (of diary fame) heard people talk about it more than twenty years later.

Back at Llanelwedd Hall, Marmaduke Howell Thomas Gwynne (6) was succeeded by his daughter from his first marriage, Annie Howell Gwynne, and her husband Thomas Howell. Then it passed to their sons, Howell Gwynne (b 1820) and later Marmaduke Gwynne Howell (7) (b.1825).

Marmaduke (7) died in 1915, had ten children, the eldest George Thomas Howell (b 1863) inherited Llanelwedd and died there in 1938, as did his brothers, Roland in 1933 and Marmaduke (9) in 1901. Edmund, one of the ten siblings of Marmaduke (7), gained three caps for Wales as a footballer between 1888 and 1891 – a first for a Builth man!

The estate was broken up in June 1922, when the 412 acres of the Llanelwedd Hall Estate were auctioned at the 'Kino' Theatre in Builth Wells. However, the Hall and associated land was retained by the family. Two of the younger siblings, Anne Gwynne Howell and Mary de G Gwynne Howell, were the only residents of the Hall recorded in 1939.

Their niece Bridget (Biddy) Gwynne Howell gave the Hall as her address in 1946. Bridget, with her mother Gertrude and father Major General Frederick Duke Gwynne Howell, (the youngest of Marmaduke (7)'s ten children b 1883), occupied the Hall from 1943 to 1955. Then, this originally Elizabethan, 14 bedroomed mansion was partially destroyed by fire in February of that year.

The family remained in the undamaged part of the house until the early 1960s, before moving to nearby Dolyffin, where Bridget lived until her death in 2019. The Royal Welsh Agricultural Society made the Llanelwedd estate its permanent home in 1963, after purchasing it for £39,000 in 1962, the decision to buy the site having been made by the Society in December 1960.

There was one event at the turn of the century which was almost an overture for the arrival of the Show some half a century later. The Builth Wells Historical Pageant, with the permission of the then occupier of Llanelwedd Hall Mr Reginald Gilbert and the owner Marmaduke G Howell (7), was held in the Hall's grounds on 11 August 1909. It was staged by the then vicar of Llanelwedd, the Rev D E Owen.

Special trains were laid on to bring more than 5,000 people to see at least 1,000 performers. P B Aberly, a professional photographer from Builth, produced an impressive photographic record of the day which is preserved in the National Library of Wales archives and available at <https://www.library.wales/discover/digital-gallery/photographs/p-b-abery/#?>

When you next tread the twenty-first century avenues of the Royal Welsh Showground, spare a thought for those who have walked this way before. Their present is now our past and part of the fascinating story of 'Llanelwedd before The Show'.



A fragment of the old Llanelwedd Hall still visible on the current RWAS offices