



St Drogo's Church Appeal



Many churches have on-going appeals for funds, usually for a new roof. Often there is a hand-made thermometer board outside showing the target required and the mercury indicating how much (or little) has been raised so far. St Drogo's church in Llantrogbach has one such appeal, but for a rather unique reason. To help the fundraising the parishioners have issued booklets of charity stamp seals.

St Drogo's Church was built in 1248 on the banks of Afon Diferuau, named after the colour of the river carrying the rich peaty waters off the Berwyn mountains, where it flows into the Afon Carthffosiaeth. Nothing much has ever happened there until 2004 when a few sheep strayed into the churchyard. No-one knew who owned them and no-one claimed them. So they were left alone helping to keep the length of the grass low between the graves. However these were soon joined by a flock of feral sheep led by an enormous and very scary ram, and these were neither timid like normal sheep nor tolerant of people like the original sheep. They took over the church, sleeping on the pews and altar at night. The younger rams in the flock soon started butting church-goers and before long no-one dared walk the paths in the churchyard yet alone enter the church itself. A fully grown ram can be a formidable opponent and those in this flock were bigger and more street-wise than usual. For those interested, the full story can be found in the Spring 2005 edition of *You and Ewe* magazine.

Something had to be done. A vet from the legendary Bo Peep Sheep Sanctuary was called in to pick off the ringleaders with tranquiliser darts. He managed to hit two before he was attacked en-masse by the rest of the flock, butting and biting in a frenzy. He was hospitalised for 9 months with serious injuries, and both the Bishop and the Druid Court became involved. They jointly decreed that the sheep would have to be evicted by peaceful means; in other words they would have to be persuaded to leave by their own volition. Hence the fundraising effort, to fly in the world renowned Sheep-Whisperer, Ellis McDaniels, all the way from New Zealand.

Why are the sheep there and behaving like this? There are several proposed ideas, but all defy scientific reason.

Are they drawn there by the spirit of St Drogo, patron saint of lost sheep, who prophesised on his deathbed that he would return one day? St Drogo became deformed during his many pilgrimages early in life, and spent 40 years alone in a cell attached to his church. But his miracle was that he could bilocate; be in two places at once. He would be praying in his cell, and be seen at the same working in the fields. Hence a cult evolved based on his being able to bilocate through time and would appear at a church dedicated to him. Perhaps the sheep are awaiting him. Huw Puw Caru planned to write an oratorio based on the life of St Drogo, in which the two parts would be performed simultaneously at two different locations. Thankfully this never came to fruition.¹

¹ Caru's face was well known to the patrons of the Black Lion in Llantrogbach. His photograph remained behind the bar for many years as a reminder and warning to the bar staff following 'the incident'. Having forgotten his lifetime ban he turned up one day, and when his photo was pointed out to him behind the bar under a notice saying Do Not Serve This Man he offered to autograph it.

Alternatively, others say that the church is built over the site where Ceredig Longhorn, the great ram of Welsh History, died and was buried. It was in the year 672, and the Saxon invaders of England were threatening to overrun Wales too. But the Welsh Princes played their trump card, using a battalion of sheep-riders to outflank the invaders. The embarrassment of this defeat stayed the Saxon advance and led directly to the Mercian king Offa constructing the dyke named after him along the border of England and Wales. But Ceredig paid with his life in the final minutes of the battle while leading his flock into the midst of their opponents. His ghost in half-human form is reported to appear floating within the church on the anniversary of his passing. These modern day sheep may be direct descendants of Ceredig and his many ewes.

Then there are those who point to the church being built on the intersection of several major ley lines, the Welsh equivalent of ordinary ley lines. These link the major sites of Welsh mythology, often curving in sweeping circles. It is claimed that these feral sheep are drawn to this centre of spiritualness to await their destiny.

Or how about the entry in the unexpurgated Book of Taliesin, the medieval collection of Welsh verse. In Darogan Katwalladr ("Prophecy of Cadwallader") mention is made of a rising new kingdom one day where the animals will rule people; a bit "Animal Farm" but without the political allusions. Interestingly though, this has been linked to one of Nostrodamus' verses where it mentions the "land of grey and drizzle" and a white hoard at the place of the Hideous One. This has been taken as references to Wales, sheep and the deformed Drogo.

Even UFOlogists have got into the act by claiming these sheep were descended from those affected by the Berwyn Roswell Incident where UFO is alleged to have crashed into the nearby mountains, or even that they are indeed alien sheep who survived the crash. Several members of the Welsh Cryptozological society were arrested while trying to capture one of the sheep in order to investigate this theory.

Whatever the reason these stamp booklets went on sale early in 2007, originally priced 50p. They have steadily risen since then to £2 as increased cost of air flights has ensured that no matter how much is raised the cost of the flight is increasingly further away each year. Luckily I managed to get hold of a batch of old 50p booklets for Welsh Oddities collectors.

Anyway there are four seals per booklet in a two by two set-tenant arrangement. They show scenes associated with the history of the church. First there is a medieval fresco inside the church showing the remains of St Drogo in his tomb with a rather strange medieval substitution, and another showing what is considered the best photographic evidence of Ceredig's ghost, though it may be an artist's impression. The true appearance of the ghost in some circumstances is not apparent in ordinary daylight. Then there are two stamps showing the church and graveyard occupied by sentry sheep. Hope you enjoy them.