

**Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidiog
St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society**

**A Childhood in the Close
Christmas Dinner Speaker - Tom Halliwell**



Christmas would be spent in the Principal's Residence at Trinity but during the Easter holiday my Dad took on his Canon-in-Residence duty at the Canonry in the Close, and in the Summer holidays we lived out at the family home at Whitesands. So throughout the early 1950s, after returning home from Prep School at Easter Time, we would all decamp to the Canonry - lock, stock and barrel, complete with pets and belongings. Dad would drive us down in his pride and joy - a dark blue Austin 16, often accompanied by Aunt Mabel - who many years later was to marry local boatman Jenkin Davies.

On arrival at the Canonry I would be assigned the small bedroom above the Porch. It was a nice light room - you can see it if you take a peep into the Canonry Garden from the Close - but most of rooms were quite dark and some very spooky (in particular the bedroom in the Tower which my younger sister Paula occupied. One year, around 1953 or 1954 - in the middle of the night - my sister awoke to feel something or someone pressing down on the bedclothes. Terrified she hid under the bedclothes for a while till the ghostly presence went away and the pressure lifted, then ran through to awaken our parent's from their sleep in their bedroom. After that she flatly refused to sleep in the tower room again, and my two sisters then had to share the other large bedroom across the landing from my parents' room for all our future residences!) The Canonry itself was dark and gloomy with very few lamps - and those only glowed faint yellow. Indeed the ground floor loo at the bottom of the Tower had to be found in total darkness because of the absence of light switches - the only illumination being through a narrow slit window.

The furniture throughout the house was large, Victorian and Mahogany - massive to our small selves. Huge Wardrobes which could easily conceal small children during games of hide and seek - possibly never to be found again if the locks had clicked shut (rather 'Lion, Witch and Wardrobe'ish'). The whole house was cold, there was almost no heating upstairs save for a single bar electric fire in the main bedroom which my parents' had, and not much more downstairs. The only really warm room was the kitchen, with its coal fired Rayburn. This range was regularly stoked, night and morning, by George Harries - the Cathedral Verger and Groundsman at the time, and one the kindest people you could ever hope to meet. George would also lay a fire in the Drawing Room for Sundays, but otherwise the House was devoid of heating. I don't recall that we ever ate in the large Victorian Dining Room except on Easter Day, but we dined happily enough around the table in the warm kitchen for our meals.

Each day would begin early with my father often taking the Early Services in the Cathedral at 7 or 8am. As young children we were not expected to go to services in the week - but I would sometimes accompany my Dad to Evensong, undoubtedly the loveliest service in the Prayer Book, especially when sung. The first big change at the Canonry was arrival of the Organist Peter Boorman and his family in 1953 which had necessitated dividing the building into parts - the Organists largely comprising the former Servant's Quarters. I soon became best friends with Adrian Boorman who is the same age as me, and we instantly formed our own gang of two outlaws, in true "*Just William*" style - as we prowled around the Close, wandered up and down the river Alun, and explored the cellars and parapets of the Bishop's Palace. Home-made catapults in hand, we took pot-shots at the jackdaws, and tried to tickle the numerous trout in the river. The trout always saw us coming and hid under the bank until we had gone - and the jackdaws had no difficulty avoiding our badly aimed missiles.

But, and it was a bit of a but, the Easter holiday for me was somewhat marred by the Cub Scouts' Bob-A-Job week. My father had become County Commissioner for the Scouts in the 1940s, and he was very pleased when I became a Cub at Prep School, and he was determined that this annual 'chore' should result in a decent donation towards the Scouts' good causes. At age 8 as far as I was concerned, holidays were for holidays, so I was often rather grumpy when I had to set off to explore the employment opportunities afforded to an 8 year old in the Close. Most of the Close's other occupants seemed to be either elderly spinsters or elderly widows. In Brecon House were the 2 Miss Owens (daughters of Bishop Owen) and in the Archdeaconry there were apparently 5 Miss Balls (though I only ever recall 2). Mrs Thomas, of the Cathedral Builders, lived in the Cloisters, Mrs

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Checkland Williams in the Treasury, and Mrs Watcyn Morgan at Wayside. So bright and early in the morning of the Week after Easter, these ladies, would suddenly find a small red-headed boy appearing at their door with the strange request that they find him a simple job to do - and hand over one of their scarce shillings in return. Now a shilling - or a 'bob' - was colloquial term for twelve old pennies or one twentieth of a pound - reduced today to an almost valueless 5p coin. But converted into the value of the Pound in 1953 - the shilling of 1953 or 4 is the equivalent of £5 in today's much devalued currency. A sum in other words which was more than a not very well off pensioner would want to part with for the doubtful labouring efforts of a reluctant 8 year old, and in consequence, I was not always well received! The Miss Owens quite often would not open the door at all, unlike the Miss Balls who would open the door and then peer at me through small round glasses, they were so tiny we were almost at eye level (I was then 4 feet tall and weighed 3 stone 6lbs) but all would soon confirm they had no jobs that needed to be done. On the other hand there was always a very warm welcome from Mrs Thomas at the Cloisters, who would find me a biscuit and a lethally large hatchet, and set me to work to chop kindling for the fire. And I recall that Mrs Chekland-Williams at Treasury was equally kind - though what tasks I undertook for her have faded into the mists of time!



The Easter holiday at the Canonry was very much governed by the timetable of the Cathedral Services. Being Easter there was the solemnity of Holy Week, and the Three Hours Devotion on Good Friday. Given my fidgety inattentiveness in almost all services, I (and my sisters) were not required to stay for the whole three hours, but we were expected to stay for at least the first hour. Indeed my Father used to say that - referring to me in Church - he had never seen a young child so completely oblivious to his surroundings as I was! Sometimes Canon Harris (the very distinguished father of Llywela Harris) would be in command. I recall two things about him - his great shock of white hair and his love for the Litany. You could always tell that you were in for the Litany - and thus an additional twenty minutes to be added to the normal service length, by the arrival of the kneeling lectern in the centre of the Nave. Now Canon Harris loved the Litany which he used to intone with great feeling and passion. However the words used to trouble me considerably as an 8 year old - in particular being required to say repeatedly: "have mercy upon us miserable sinners". Whilst I could be pretty miserable at times at my Prep School, I did not think I had been around long enough to be all that much of a sinner, and did not feel this continuous repentance, for things I had not yet done, was very fair. After all - as a child fairness is all important!

Easter Day itself required attendance at the Eleven O'clock Service and also at Evensong, but there was always the pleasure of the Easter Lunch followed by the Easter Eggs which were piled up high on the piano in the Canonry Drawing Room awaiting our combined attack. Chocolate only came off rationing in 1954! Easter Eggs were a very considerable treat indeed.

But soon enough Dad's Canonry Duties would come to an end, and the Austin 16 would-be packed with all our belongings for the return journey to Trinity. There would then be the annual reckoning of my Bob-a-Job total, hastily improved by a donation from my parents! And then it was back to Carmarthen, the packing of the School Trunks for the next term ready to be sent off a few days ahead of start of term with the removers Carter Paterson.

The Easter holidays in the Close were an ordered but happy time, populated by the curious characters who lived there. And so every year we returned to the Canonry for 4 weeks right up until 1965 when my parents then retired to the Close - to Wayside - which was to be their home until 2000 when my Mum moved up to the Hafan. Indeed Wayside and the Close were also my home during my student days from 1965 to 1970, when I worked as an Articled Clerk with Jimmy Eaton Evans in Haverfordwest, and also had the great pleasure of singing in the Cathedral Choir under Peter Boorman.

With Thanks to Tom Halliwell for his comprehensive talk script, basis for this report.