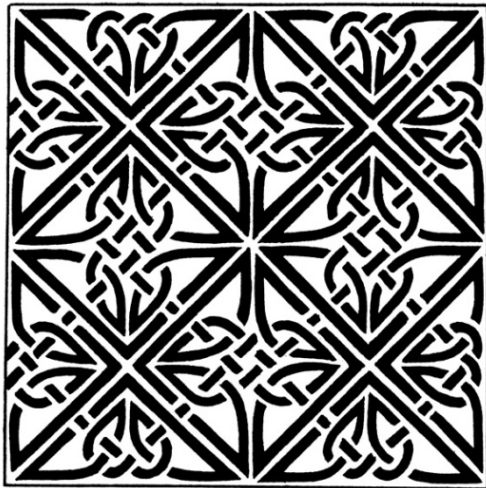


The church of Llanelly began in the distant past, before things were commonly written down and records kept. In that distant time, someone decided to begin a house, a community of people living together, who would live and work, pray and worship together in the woods high up the valley side above the river Usk. They chose a site with a spring of water close by, and a good view of the area. There they consecrated a piece of land, called a *llan*, and founded the community house, called a *clas*. The person who did that is now remembered by the name *Elli*. That place is now the church yard and church of St Elli. The trouble is that no one knows for certain exactly who *Elli* was; it is not even known for certain whether *Elli* was even a man or a woman.

Now there are two stories which might describe how the parish of Llanelly was founded; one is about *Elli ferch Brychan*, and the other is about *Elli Llancarfan*.



## Hanes Elli ferch Brychan

*(The story of Elli daughter of Brecon)*

According to legend, *Elli ferch Brychan* was a granddaughter of *Brychan*. Now *Brychan* was a chieftain from Ireland. His father was *Anlach mab Coronac* (*Broccan, mac Anlach, mac Cormac*), and his mother a princess from Wales called *Marchel* whose father was king over *Garthmadrún*, a small kingdom around the area of *Talgarth* and *Llangorse Lake* (in Welsh, *Llyn Syfaddan*). When *Brychan's* parents died, he

went back to the land of his mother. There in Talgarth he ruled and had a huge family. He married three, maybe four times, and three names of his wives were; *Prawst ferch Tydwal*, *Banhadlwedd ferch Banadi* and *Gwladys*. From his wives, and his grandchildren he had many descendants, among whom were many called saints. There may have been sixty three men and women called the children of Brychan. Some others of Brychan's family are still well known; *Tudful*, *Eluned* or *Eiliwedd*, and *Cenau* were other daughters of Brychan and have churches called by their names near here.

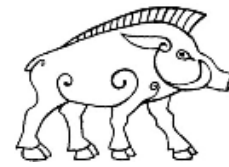
So *Elli* might then have been his granddaughter. She may well have gone to school, perhaps at *Gwenddwr* towards Builth Wells, and learned to read and write, and become a Christian as a child. Many of her sisters and cousins were famous for their faith and were founding churches, so maybe she followed their example. Perhaps she used her wealth and influence to give the land to people who wanted to pray together; or maybe she herself wanted to live in that community; or even alone, as a hermit. In time she died, according to legend killed by a jealous suitor, and her name was remembered in the church that she helped to found.



# Hanes Elli Llancarfan

(The Story of Elli of Llancarfan)

Now, one of Brychan's daughters called *Gwladys* was very beautiful, and a neighbouring king, *Gwynllyw Milwr* (*Gwynllyw* the warrior) of *Gwynllŵg* wanted to marry her. Brychan did not like him, since he was a greedy, violent and dishonest man, who loved thieving, fighting and raiding. He tried to steal her away when she was bathing in a waterfall, but *Brychan* came after and fought for her. The battle was resolved by *Arthur*, and his warriors *Cei* and *Bedwyr* who supported *Gwynllyw*. Later on in his life, he saw that his way of life was wrong, and lived out his old age as a hermit and became known for his long beard (*Gwynllyw Farfog*). One of *Gwynllyw*'s children with *Gwladys* was a man called *Cadoc*, known as *Cadoc Ddoeth* (the wise), and another was *Gynidr*. Both of them founded churches in the Usk valley, and would thus have been cousins of *Elli ferch Brychan*.

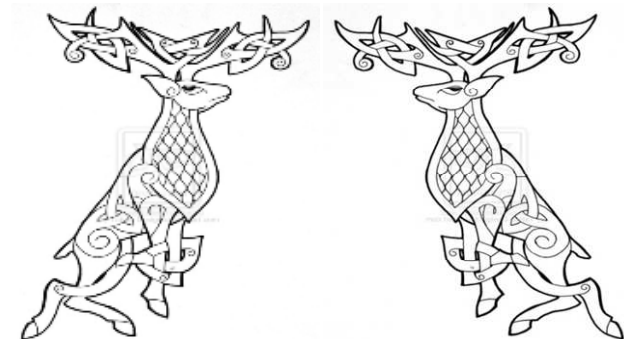


About the time of *Elli ferch Brychan*, *Cadoc* grew up in the south, towards the coast. He too was grandchild of *Brychan*. Once, being chased through the woods by a herdsman, he escaped a great white boar, which disappeared.



He was led to the spot again by a stag, and his uncle, *King Pawl Penychen* gave him the land, where he founded a great house, a monastery.

It became in time a large and important house of learning and prayer, and many famous scholars and saints came from there. First though he went to Ireland to study, and when he returned found the place in ruins, and furiously began to rebuild it, making the monks work with their hands. In this he was helped by two stags, hence the name; *Llancarfan*, the *llan of the stag*. It became a great house, with a thousand monks.



When he was old, he had a close friend and pupil, an excellent disciple of the excellent master, and asked him to become abbot after his retirement. This was *Elli*.

Now *Elli's* father was a wealthy lord, whose wife was barren. Cadoc visited there on his travels, and was asked by the woman for his prayers, that she might bear children. His prayers were answered and she bore a son, *Elli*, who she then dedicated to God as she had promised. When Cadoc returned three years later, she presented *Elli* to Cadoc, and Cadoc was delighted, and carried him on his own shoulders, and cared for him as tenderly as if his own son. They went back to Llancarfan. He grew up and became respected for his own good character, ability and learning. *Cadoc* loved him, and gave him one of three stones brought back from Jerusalem. When *Cadoc* wanted to rebuke and warn his own father, *Gwynllyw Milwr*, of the error of his ways, he entrusted the mission to *Elli* and two others, *Finnian*, and *Gwafan*. It succeeded, and the violent thief and pirate *Gwynllyw* changed his ways, and became known for his beard (*Farfog*), not his fighting (*Milwr*). When Cadoc went up to Scotland to strengthen the church there, he left *Elli* in charge of the house at Llancarfan. When Cadoc was old, he retired to *Beneventum*, and there *Elli* visited him each year till he died. He faithfully kept the house afterwards, and gave Cadoc's family, the humble and old *Gwynllyw Farfog* and *Gwladys* annual provisions in his memory.



The question remains as to which of these *Elli's* was the founder of this parish church of Llanelly? How can we tell? We might look at other churches around and see who they are named for:

Over the river Usk at Llangennau there is the church of *Cenau*, another daughter of Brychan, so maybe *Elli* was a daughter of *Brychan*? Maybe she came here because one of her cousins or aunts was already near here?

Upriver from Llanelly, on the same side, in Llangattock is a church named for *Cadoc Ddoeth*, close by. Next to that, further upstream, is a church named for *Gynidr*, *Cadoc's* brother. Llanelly church has always been close in spirit as well as place to Llangattock church; is this because *Elli* was like son to *Cadoc*?

How can we tell? On the oldest bell, which was cast in 1440, there is an inscription to *Elline*, asking for his prayers. *Elline* is written in Latin, and is the way of writing the name that you would use if you were asking a question of a man called Ellinus. If you were asking a woman, it would be written Ellina, so whoever wrote that thought that Ellinus was a man. But maybe it was wrong?

Maybe it means both of them; maybe *Elli* and *Elli* knew each other and decided this was good place? Maybe it is impossible to be sure? We can be sure that people have been coming here to pray and worship for a very long time, since the sixth century; for about 1500 years, and we still go up there to the same place; the place near a freshwater spring, with a good view of the valley.