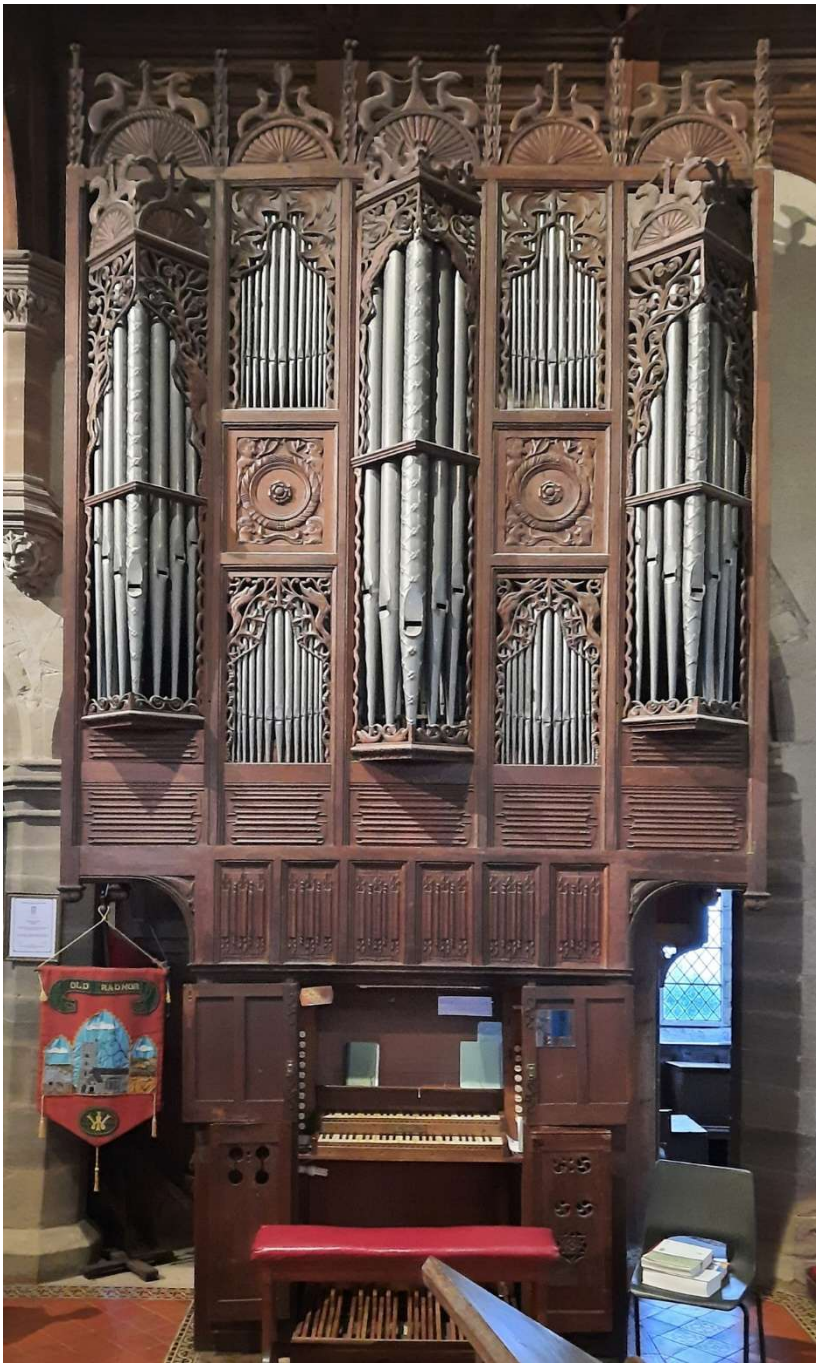

St. Stephen, Old Radnor

by Stephen Bicknell

The Parish Church of St. Stephen, Old Radnor, contains the oldest organ case in the British Isles. It can hardly have been made later than Henry VIII's dissolution of the religious houses in the 1530s, but as it includes much early mannerist detail it can't be a great deal earlier either. A date of 1500-1530 is usually assumed.

Today I drove from Aberystwyth on the Welsh coast, (where I have been staying with friends for a few days, to London). Old Radnor was near my route so I thought I would stop over and have a look *(I have not seen the organ in the flesh before).*

The case, empty and derelict, was first noticed by Sir Henry Dryden in the middle of the 19th century; he brought it to the notice of Revd. F. H. Sutton, who published a monograph on it in 1868, and arranged for its restoration in 1872 by the woodworkers Rattee & Kett of Cambridge, to contain a new organ by J.W. Walker.

But what on earth is something so sumptuous doing in such an out-of-the-way place? This question has always been the first to be asked by the antiquarian-minded organ scholar. It is a small organ case - the largest front pipe now speaks 6' F sharp - but richly decorated and wonderfully made. The existence of something so unlikely and unusual in a village with only ten houses has caused some to doubt that it is even genuine. The Late Lady *(Susi)* Jeans thought that it was a nineteenth-century concoction, perhaps even a 'spoof' cooked up by the Victorian restorers out of odds and ends of domestic woodwork, the story invented, not out of a desire to deceive, but perhaps out of a genuine wish that something so rare might be found in a forgotten mediaeval church.

This was exactly what I was wondering as I drove down off the Cambrian Mountains this morning. Here I was, in one of the loneliest *(and most beautiful)* parts of the British Isles, on a pilgrimage to An Icon of Organ Art. Why this place in particular? How had the village of Old Radnor come to be blessed with this curiosity?

I drove towards the church up a winding lane, flanked with moss-covered stone walls, themselves standing on grassy banks covered with snowdrops. I parked the car in front of the church.

What no-one had told me before is that Old Radnor, though small, is not an ordinary place at all. Geographically the position is more than spectacular. The church is on a ledge on the side of a hill. It overlooks a small, flat, fertile plain, roughly circular in shape, and about five miles across. Round the entire circumference are ranges of hills, the highest rising to about seven or eight hundred feet above the fields, all of them steep, some of them wooded, some of them rocky. The only exits from this natural bowl are the Welsh mountain passes to the west and a pair of tightly winding river valleys to the east. It is an area of natural richness; the low-lying centre would be attractive to any settler, for the soil is damp and rich; the hills around give it seclusion and intimacy and provide excellent natural defenses. The whole scene is worthy of Tolkien - this is surely Hobbit country.

There are other clues that the area is somehow 'important'. Behind the church is the outline of a large square building in the grass, surrounded by a moat. In the valley below are two exceptionally large barrows - ancient burial mounds. Other irregular bumps in the landscape suggest occupation or activity in the distant past. The church itself is mostly 15th and 16th century (though there was a church before then) and is not built for show - but it is curiously solid and just one degree more impressive than one might expect for such a small place.

The Normans came here, and what they may have found of an indigenous population or culture has been pretty much wiped out. The living of Old Radnor was in the hands of the Norman Mortimer family by the early 13th century, cementing it firmly into the hierarchy of the new regime.

Histories of the British Isles are inevitably written from the English point of view, and the Welsh (and other outlying peoples) are conventionally portrayed as barbaric, the Normans civilised. There is rarely any suggestion that the Celts might have maintained a culture of any intellectual pretension.

I don't know quite what to make of the heap of contradictory clues I picked up on this visit (some from background reading in Aberystwyth), but let me present some of them to you.

Wales flowered at various times in early mediaeval times. Long after the Romans had gone, the Welsh used Latin as a language of stone inscriptions, which they wrote in two alphabets, one using conventional Roman characters, and the other a rune-like script, carved always on the edges of standing stones, called 'Ogham'. The knowledge and appreciation of Latin allowed some words to creep almost unaltered into the Welsh language, like the Welsh 'bont' for bridge (from the Latin stem 'pont-'). And, of course, there grew the Welsh traditions of music and poetry, which are alive today in modernised forms. Few people realise how rich Welsh poetry is, for few outside Wales itself have ever bothered to learn the language (and a tongue in which the letters DDUALLT are pronounced theee-ACHT is not especially enticing). In fact, Welsh has a vocabulary so rich and complex that the bard's art consists partly in choosing words for musical or alliterative value, resulting in forms that are uniquely Celtic and uniquely euphonous.

All this suggests a culture of some richness, and the fragmentary tales that we know of the Welsh kings and princes tend to give romantic quasi-credence to this hope. In a similarly romantic vein, I wonder if we should consider Old Radnor as an important site in Welsh history.

The archaeological evidence is there - though I do not know whether excavations have ever been made. The church is dedicated to St. Stephen, but, as the guide book points out, this is the one and only authentic dedication to St Stephen in the whole of Wales (one other commemoration is a place name in southern Powys: Llansteffan); in fact, the name is much more likely a corruption of St. Ystyffan, a Welsh saint who was a member of the ninth century royal family of Powys. Inside the church the most obvious early object is the massive rock-hewn font, obviously Norman or earlier and, according to some experts, perhaps even pre-christian. In the centre of the nave, just in front of the mediaeval screen and the chancel steps, is a stone slab in the floor decorated with a florid carved cross. This is normally assumed to be the tomb of a member of the Mortimer family, but I can't help wondering if it does not indicate (or merely symbolise) an earlier important burial.

The solidity of the church, the richness of the carved oak screens, and certain other evidence (for instance the fact that there appear once to have been five altars) lead most to assume that this was, until the Reformation, a collegiate church: in other words the chapel of a residential community of priests. A 'college' might be lower than a monastery, priory, abbey or friary. It could just be a small community, it could be dedicated to learning (like the colleges of Winchester, Eton, Oxford and Cambridge), or indeed, (if suitably endowed) it could be dedicated to the saying (or singing) of masses for the soul of some notable departed person ....

Perhaps the Normans did indeed find at Old Radnor a community already in existence, and perhaps they had the sense to maintain local traditions while applying certain 'modernising' trends. Perhaps Old Radnor was of particular significance to the Celts. Where, for example, were the royal residences of the Kingdom of Powys? And where were the Kings and Princes buried?

If this was what was done, then a learned community could well have been maintained in the centuries after the Norman conquest, and vestiges of that learning might even have survived the Reformation. Does this explain why Gruffudd *(Griffith)* Hiraethog, one of the great bards of the 16th century, came from Old Radnor? Does this explain why John Bull, of the Chapel Royal, the first Gresham Professor of Music, and later the organist of Antwerp Cathedral, was born in Old Radnor in 1563?

Examination of the organ case is also revealing. Far from being cobbled together from bits, what stands at Old Radnor today is a magnificently preserved and conservatively treated object of great integrity *(illustrated in the usual books: Sumner, Clutton & Niland, Blanton, and mirabile dictu, Bicknell)*. The case is almost complete, and empty mortices and slots show the precise positions of a few missing back and side panels. Some of the carving has been repaired or replaced where missing,

and some panels have been introduced where they were lost - and it must be admitted that some of these last are not quite 'right'. But the remains have been treated with great care and sympathy, and even the organ building work has been most carefully executed so as not to interfere with the original material in any way *(most remarkably for the nineteenth century: the Great Organ occupies the old case very neatly and the Swell and Pedal are in an entirely separate enclosure behind)*.

The positions and sizes of the front pipes must follow the original layout quite closely: some of the pipe supports with their half-moons are original, and so is at least one of the tip blocks (treble end upper flat). Now that we know a little bit about the Tudor organ from a couple of surviving soundboards, it seems almost certain that the front represents 45 notes of a Principal stop with a bottom note of 5' speaking length (the top 26 notes being duplicated in the upper flats). It is also clear that the stops were operated from the treble end of the organ - the slot survives where the slides would have stuck out the end of the case.

Two of the major questions about Old Radnor are now answered in my mind. First, that the case - undoubtedly genuine - was not over-restored in the 19th century, but survives in as near its original state as one could hope. I will visit again to measure and record when I next go to Wales. Secondly, that the village itself is far more important than we organ-buffs have been led to believe *(and on this too I hope to do some more work)*.

But now, far more fascinating, a third question has sprung in my mind *(for no-one ever told me before that John Bull was born in Old Radnor)*: was this the organ on which John Bull learnt to play?