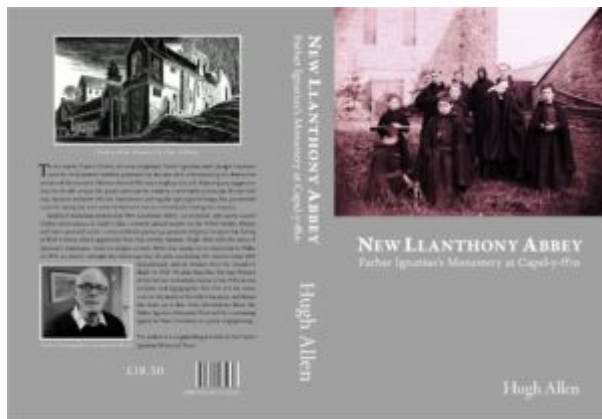


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Hugh Allen, *New Llanthony Abbey: Father Ignatius's Monastery at Capel-y-ffin, Tiverton* (Peterscourt Press) 2016.

Those who visit this web-site will, no doubt, be familiar with the name of Fr Ignatius. Much has been written over the years on him – true, much was written about him by himself – and whilst the biographies by the Baroness de Bertouch, Donald Attwater, Arthur Calder-Marshall and Peter Anson have much to say about Joseph Leycester Lyne the man, little has been written about those who passed through the monastery at Capel-y-ffin, what went on there on a daily basis, and how Eric Gill came to lease the property in 1924.



Hugh Allen (b.1948) has known Llanthony since childhood, having been taken there on a family drive to places of interest from his Catholic boarding school in Monmouthshire during a Parents' Weekend in the summer of 1958. The monastery at that time was long run-down, Ignatius's chapel was a crumbling ruin, and his name a distant memory in the minds of those who lived in the locality. One is tempted to say that this was the expected legacy of a man who was, to say the least, something of a Peter Pan, hopelessly inadequate at both finance and administration, oscillating between high sacramentalism/Ritualism and the evangelical hot gospel (although he seems to have held the two together), living in a medieval dream-world that had never existed with little or no relevance at the end of the nineteenth century, with the "lost boys" who came – and soon left – Capel-y-ffin to serve as novices being drawn from the higher lower class and the lower middle class of late Victorian England. Fortunately, he had his own "Wendy", in the form of Jeannie Dew (b.1866), known at Capel-y-ffin as Sister Mary Tudfil.

JESUS ONLY (always in capitals) was Lyne's motto. It appeared above the altar in the chapel (one is tempted to say "the High Altar", but though he planned for a much larger building, it never expanded from its aisle-less chancel); it was on the inside covers of the community's breviaries and on the dormitory bed-spreads. It was his rallying-cry at the end of his fund-raising missions and, whilst one has no doubt that he firmly believed in the slogan, it was probably also his undoing for, had he spent less time travelling to give more effort to structured fund-raising, there is a slight, albeit a very slight, chance that his monastery at Capel-y-ffin might have succeeded. Then there is the miracle of the apparition of Our Lady amidst the rhubarb plant, though the only miracle to me, it seems, is that the community lasted for almost forty years (1870-1908).

Hugh Allen's book is a masterpiece, embracing decades of research, full of detail relating to the day-to-day running of Capel-y-ffin, how it was staffed, the order in which the various sections of the complex were built and, of greater importance, detailed biographies of the many confused teenagers who came and went as novices. In fact, it covers everything which de Bertouch, Attwater, Calder-Marshall and Anson brushed over in their accounts of Fr Ignatius, probably because, unlike Hugh

Allen, they did not have the time to devote to such exhaustive research. By the time that one reaches the end of the book the reader would probably have already summed-up why the venture failed: Ignatius looked for vocations from those who came with adolescent aspirations, received little spiritual guidance and were too frequently admonished for the smallest of transgressions. In short, one cannot build-up an adult religious community by only taking in children and trusting (hoping, rather) that they would develop into medieval monks through rigorous training and strict discipline.

The book is perfectly structured, taking the reader chronologically through Lyne's childhood, his early years in the Church, his failed attempt to start a Benedictine Priory on Elm Hill, Norwich to his arrival at Llanthony in November 1869. As Peter Anson recorded, Fr Ignatius was convinced that it was his vocation to restore the cloistered Benedictine life in the Church of England. But my goodness, what a time it took to get it into motion! On 22 August 1872 Fr Ignatius laid the foundation stone of his great church. Ten years elapsed before the choir was completed. The nave was never started. And cash-flow was never high, what little money there was coming from Fr Ignatius' endless preaching tours, as a result of which the handful of monks, mainly novices, at Llanthony were frequently without their spiritual director, suffering the privations of unheated dormitories, harsh winters, spare food (though Ignatius always breakfasted and dined like a prince when in residence) and little to occupy themselves with other than the daily round of offices and services. Is it any wonder that the dwell-time of these aspiring religious was hardly more than six months?

It would be unfair if I was to relate the complexities of the numerous comings and goings of nuns, priests and monastery boys during the thirty-eight years of Llanthony's existence, and their subsequent history after they had left, for it is this which forms the majority of the narrative, making it a book which it is difficult to put down. In a more enlightened age Fr Ignatius would not have escaped the attentions of a public enquiry. He was a martinet and, yes, cruel in his treatment of the children under his care, a "favourite" soon becoming an outcast, such as the incident when one ravenous child had the audacity to consume a strawberry to stave off his hunger.

Even so, Llanthony became a place of pilgrimage, many wanting to see this strange Benedictine abbot and his medieval community. Visits dramatically increased following a "mystic" appearance of Our Lady in a rhubarb crop some 200 yards from the chapel on 30 August 1880. She appeared again on 4th September, although it was not until 15th September that Ignatius saw the apparition for himself. For ever after 30th August was kept as "The Feast of the Apparition of Our Ladye of Llanthony". Ignatius himself composed a long eleven-verse processional hymn for the occasions, whose sixth verse runs

'Mid Llanthony's silent Valleys,

O'er the meadows cool and green,

Mary comes from Heaven in Beauty,

Haloed as the Angels' Queen.

Raising up Her hands in blessing,

Thus God willed Her to be seen.

In the fullness of time, a Carrara marble statue of Our Lady, her right hand raised in blessing, was erected on the site of the apparition, which remains the focus of an annual pilgrimage to this day.

In 1881 Fr Ignatius' small community of nuns moved from Slapton to Llanthony, taking up residence in what can only be described as an army hut, it being a single-storey structure of timber with a corrugated iron roof. This was "The Convent", housing four nuns, one of whom was designated as Mother. In fact, the community rarely grew above four nuns, and who could blame them, bearing in the mind the conditions in which they were expected to live?

Fr Ignatius died on 16th October 1908 at his sister's house in Camberley. His funeral, attended by the community and those priests who, over the years, had been wont to say Mass there, took place on 22nd October, the office being sung by the Rev'd W M Magrath, formerly Brother Dunstan. He was buried in front of the chancel step, his grave being twelve feet deep, and the space above the coffin filled with solid masonry and cement. Eighteen months later a tiled cross from Doulton's of Lambeth was laid, inscribed HIC JACET IGNATIUS JESUS OSB HUIUS DOMUS CONDITOR PRIMUSQUE ABBAS. He lies there still, in the silence of the Black Mountains, now and again punctuated by the bleating of sheep and the call of the night owls.

The community struggled on for another three years but, without a leader of the calibre of Ignatius, it floundered, and most of the surviving brothers annexed themselves to Aelred Carlyle at Caldey. In 1911 Carlyle secured the freehold of the Llanthony property and, finding it surplus to requirements as a monastic institution, it was used by Caldey for a number of purposes, mainly as a holiday home for members of the community. In August 1924 Eric Gill leased the property, and in September 1931 the church, monastery and nine-and-a-half acres of land was purchased from the Caldey monks by Mary Gill for £400.

As Peter Anson was to observe,

"Such was the end of one of the most curious manifestations of the Catholic and Gothic Revivals in the Church of England. The ruined church is symbolic of the failure from the human point of view of Fr Ignatius, ending as it did with the handing over of his beloved monastery to secular owners. There is something inexpressibly tragic about Llanthony."^[1]

Sitting on my bookshelves is a black-bound breviary, 240mm x 190mm, hand-written in English and Welsh, and illustrated by Jeannie Dew (b.1866) who, as Sister Mary Tudfil, entered the Llanthony community as its last nun on 15 February 1898, making her final profession in January 1906 by which time the Llanthony phenomenon was drawing to its close. Rather than take up residence with another Anglican community, Mother Tudfil (as she was by 1910) decided to return to the secular world, continuing to live her monastic vows as a private individual. For the rest of her life she lived in her old family home in Ventnor, dying at the age of 94 on 9 August 1960.

Hugh Allen has written an outstanding book, the photographs being exceptional in their own right. Indeed, one doubts if there is anything further to say about Llanthony, thus it deserves a place on the shelves of all of those interested in the history of the monastic revival in England.

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Copies of *New Llanthony Abbey: Father Ignatius's Monastery at Capel-y-ffin*, may be had of the author at 3 St Peter's Court, Tiverton, Devon EX16 6NZ at £18.50 + £1.50 p&p. Cheques should be made payable to **R.W.H. Allen**.

^[1] P Anson, *The Call of the Cloister*, London (S.P.C.K.) 1958, 72.