

## Vicar of a country parish

Last updated: 10 March 2007

Moelwyn Merchant (1913-1997) was an academic, novelist, sculptor, poet and Anglican priest. He was also Professor and Head of the Department of English at Exeter University. Five years before he was due to retire in the mid 1970s he became vicar of Llanddewi Brefi, when he made a film for the BBC.



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#### John S Batts, once of Hay on Wye

Yes, I do remember Moelwyn Merchant, though my recollections of him date back over forty years when he was a member of the English Department at what was then University College, Cardiff, University of Wales. A few moments ago I viewed the BBC film he made at Llanddewi Brefi; he appeared not to have aged significantly from my undergraduate days when he lived in Penarth and invariably wore a clerical collar. If memory is to be trusted, he was during my time at Cardiff much excited by three academic items: his book \*Shakespeare and the Artist\* then taking final shape or about to be published; secondly, his Reynard Edition of Wordsworth poetry which we were encouraged to use; and, thirdly, his admiration for the poetry of R.S. Thomas (also a country clergyman). MM had a reputation of being something of a High Churchman, probably unusual in someone whose first language was Welsh. On a more personal level, I recall MM's enthusiasm for joint readings aloud (by Faculty & Honour students) of sundry Shakespeare plays, about the closest one ever got to a social encounter with staff.

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## Memories of Moelwyn Merchant

Last updated: 09 March 2007

Moelwyn Merchant (1913-1997) was an academic, novelist, sculptor, poet and Anglican priest. Five years before he was due to retire in the mid 1970s he became vicar of Llanddewi Brefi. In March 2007 his daughter, Christina Shaw wrote about her memories of her father:

- [BBC film about Moelwyn Merchant...](#)

"William Moelwyn Merchant (5 June 1913 - 22 April 1997), was an academic, novelist, sculptor, poet and Anglican priest. He was born in Port Talbot, Glamorgan, and his first language was Welsh. He was educated at University College, Cardiff.

He was also dad to me and Paul, married to lovely, gentle Lynne, who was a wonderful cook and hostess at his many dinner parties for the likes of Peter O'Toole and Siân Phillips.

I first remember him as Priest-in-charge in the tiny village of Llanhennock near Caerleon - known for its Roman Amphitheatre - where Paul and I were born.

My dad was then teaching at Caerleon Training College and he used to cycle up to Llanhennock church with me in a little seat on the back of his bike. It was during that period that I overheard a mother threatening her misbehaving child with the words: "If you don't behave, Mr Merchant will baptise you again!"

From there he moved to the English Department of Cardiff University and later became Professor of English at Exeter, as well as Chancellor of Salisbury Cathedral, thereby fulfilling his interests in the interaction between Art, Music, Literature and religion, notably expressed in his major critical work *Shakespeare and the Artist*, published in 1959 and which I helped him to proof-read.

I also remember accompanying him to Tennessee for a Summer School he was running there in 1960 and meeting Martin Luther King and his family in his chapel in Alabama.

This was an unforgettable experience, as was singing "We shall overcome ..." in the car on the way there and back.

In the mid-70s, when he felt the need to retire from the bureaucratic side of academia, he decided to go back to his roots in Wales and took up the post of vicar of Llanddewi Brefi.

Some residents will probably remember that he used his contacts in the arts to start the Llanddewi Brefi Festival, as well as conducting services in Welsh and occasionally in English.

I particularly remember the early morning Plygain services there and the very happy times the whole family spent in Llanddewi at Christmas with our children. That is why the ashes of both my parents are now scattered in Llanddewi.

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He was a remarkable man who both taught us a great deal and also expected a lot from us, not easy in many ways. He seemed to be successful at whatever he attempted, a difficult father to emulate.

One of his last works was called Seeking Perfection, which perhaps sums him up.

However I am very grateful that in 1994 he published a book of his sermons under the title Preaching the Word, some of which I have had the privilege of reading aloud in my local church during a recent interregnum.

They were much admired and it has been therapeutic to be able to admire him again, as I always did when I heard him preach and lecture.

Article written by Christina Shaw

#### your comments

**Bernard Pearson**

I remember this wonderful man in semi-retirement preaching in Leamington Spa and today being Pentecost it seems appropriate to remember the fire and wisdom he brought to the pulpit. He was a source of great spiritual solace to me at the time and I am so grateful for having heard him preach.

Mon Jun 1 10:33:35 2009

**Sheila Badham, Llanhennock**

I loved reading about your dad and yourself, the picture of you riding up to St Johns Church on the back of his bicycle and the wonderful Achievements he made in his lifetime have a site on Llanhennock.com.uk telling many stories of past residents and recently the evacuees that were here in 1939-41 have been in touch and ave requested a reunion.I would very much like to add your Fathers story to the site if you agree I am sure it will bring back fond memories to the children that knew him/Thankyou for sharing this story with me.

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