



Alice Abadam's Welsh Sketchbooks

By Margaret Vaughan (née Morris)

Alice Abadam was the youngest of the seven children of Edward Abadam of Middleton Hall, Llanarthney. She was born there in January 1856, and there passed a happy childhood, as anyone who has

visited the National Botanical Garden of Wales on the extensive and beautiful estate that was the site of her old home can well imagine. Surrounded by her six older brothers and sisters, their ponies, beautiful countryside and

many friends in the Towy valley, her life must have been idyllic.

As was customary for girls of her background, she did not go to school, but was educated in the usual feminine accomplishments at home, learning much from discussions with her father, who was himself a knowledgeable man, interested in archaeology, heraldry and foreign literature among other things. He employed both French and German governesses for his daughters' education.

Her uncle William Abadam went to live in France with his wife, and their two daughters both married Frenchmen, so she visited this branch of the family on several occasions. One of her cousins considered that Alice's knowledge of the language was such that one would not know she was not French.

She was an accomplished musician, taking a very active interest in eisteddfodau, both national and local. She played the organ and directed the choir at her local church, St Mary's, in Union Street, Carmarthen, for she became a Catholic in her twenties, and did much to promote that church in Wales.

She had a mitre made to her own design, which she presented to the Catholic Bishop of Menevia at the time of his inauguration. She was also responsible for bringing a Breton order of nuns, the White Sisters, to Wales, to escape persecution in their own land, for she felt that the Welsh and Bretons had much in common besides their Celtic language and roots. They helped to run the Catholic school in Carmarthen for many years.

She also showed signs of ability as an artist from an early age 'drawing fierce lions and cats prancing on one leg' as she wrote in old age to a distant cousin in the USA. She told him she regretted never having trained as an artist, adding, 'I was young when people of our class thought it beneath their dignity to have a profession. What folly that seems to us now ...'

Nevertheless she used her skill to fill many small books with delightful watercolour sketches of places she visited, views, details of architectural structures, and a few portraits.

They perhaps fulfilled, for her, the rôle of our cameras today. In them she





Probably Middleton Hall grounds



recorded what she saw on her travels in this country and abroad, and on visits to relatives and friends. Sadly, they are mostly undated.

Her childhood was not without sadness, however. In 1866 her eldest brother Edward Hamlin died of a fever at the age of twenty-three. Though only ten years old at the time Alice could remember the distress of her father and the sadness at Middleton Hall.

In 1873 her second brother Condrade, married to Susannah Saunders of Court Henry, was killed by an accidental shot-gun wound while on a hunting trip in Iowa, USA, leaving his two little daughters fatherless.

Then in 1875 Edward Abadam, her beloved father died, and she and her mother moved from Middleton Hall, which was left to her sister Lucy Lawrence, to Bryn Hawddgar, one of several properties on the Middleton Estate.

Edith, the sister nearest to her in age, married Edward Harold Morris of Bryn Myrddin, Abergwili, just across the Towy valley from Middleton, and Alice spent much time with them and their children.

After her mother's death she moved into a house in Carmarthen, in The Parade. It was at about this time that she met her close friend Dr Alice Vowe Johnson, then working at the Carmarthen Asylum, and later, when Dr Johnson moved to an appointment in London they went together to Upper Norwood and later to Hamilton Terrace in London.

Her main claim to fame was her work in the cause of women's suffrage. She was a constitutional suffragist who believed that women should get the vote by democratic, peaceful means rather than by militancy. She travelled all over the country speaking for this cause, often giving two lectures in a day.

'Her commanding presence and her remarkable eloquence were of immense help in bringing the movement to a victorious conclusion,' wrote Herbert M Vaughan (author of *The South Wales Squires*) in her obituary.

She belonged to a number of different suffrage societies and was founder and president of the Feminist League.

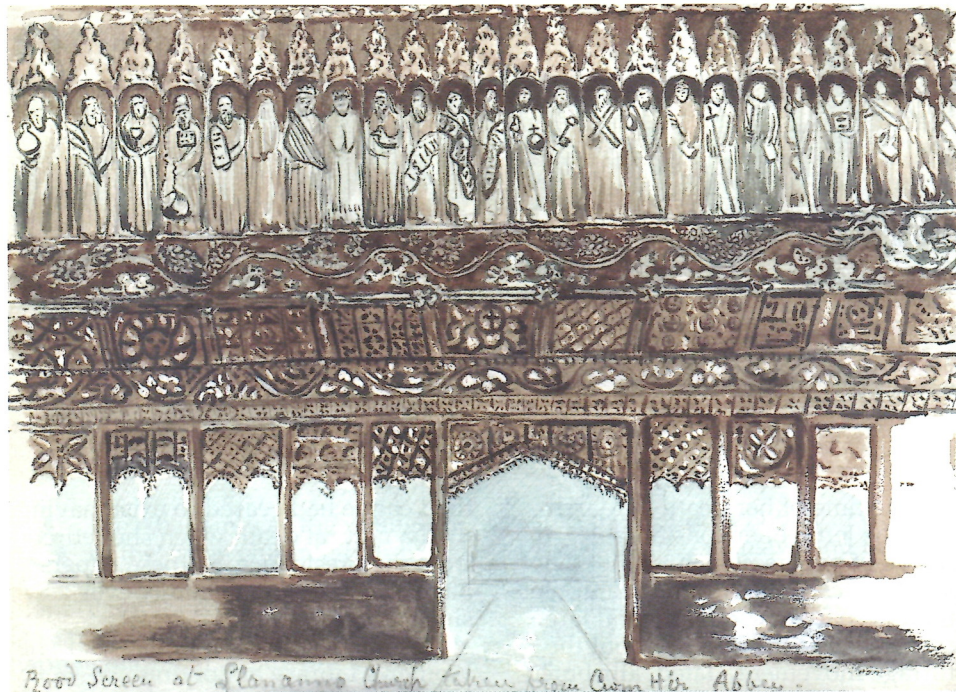
At the time of her death in March 1940, she left all her considerable archive of papers, which included her lecture notes, many printed pamphlets and newspaper articles, several large scrap books with cuttings about the Suffrage movement, dated, attributed and pasted in with great precision, to the Feminist League. Alas, by this time

the League had ceased to exist, having died a natural death when she retired from the presidency. So these papers have remained in the family ever since.

They have now been donated to The Women's Library at London Metropolitan University, where they will eventually be catalogued and



Bridge at Llangollen



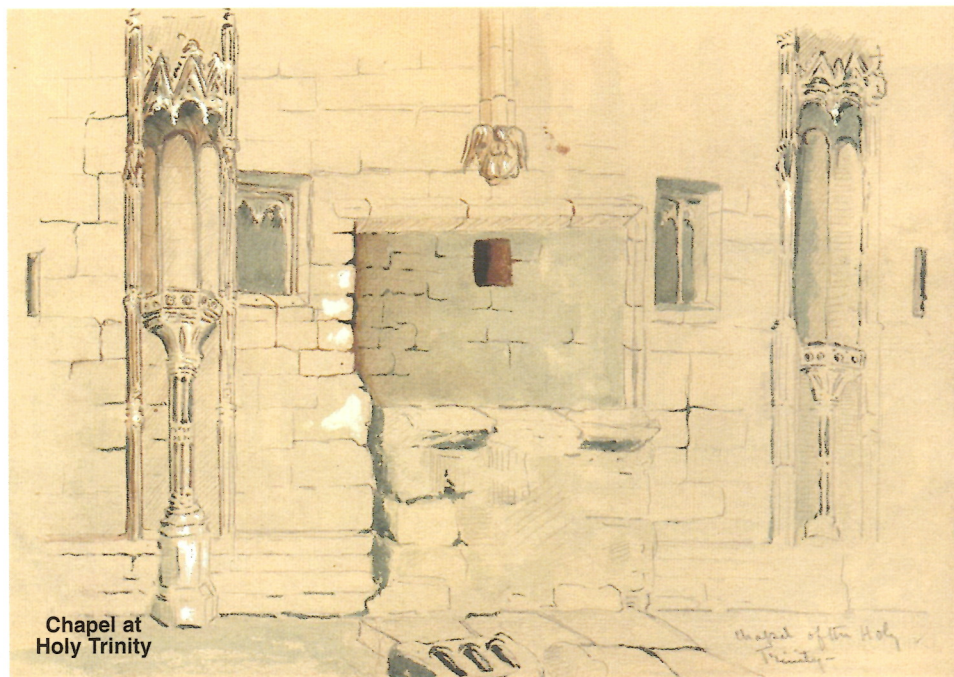
Rood Screen at Llanarmon Church taken from Convent Abbey.



Piscina at Kidwelly



Mangold Window in the Palace.



Chapel at Holy Trinity

made available to the public.

Meanwhile, an annotated list has been sent to the Carmarthen Archives, where any readers of this article who are interested will be able to consult it. Eventually when the cataloguing is complete, it will be possible to access this material on the website of the Women's Library at www.londonmet.ac.uk/the-womenslibrary/searchthecollections/.

My own memories of Alice Abadam, who was my great-aunt, her sister Edith being my grandmother, are inevitably scanty as I was not yet five and a half when she died. Nevertheless they are very vivid.

To me she seemed beautiful with most attractive eyes, very tall and imposing and not at all bent despite the fact that she was in her eighties. She was usually dressed in long skirts to the ankle in dark colours, and had a splendid head of pure white hair.

I can clearly remember picking bunches of lilies-of-the-valley with my mother which we wrapped in damp moss and posted off to her when she lived in London. She wrote me a lovely thank-you letter in which there was a picture of a lily-of-the-valley plant with its leaves, and every little white bell had a smiling face.

I found this letter when I was tidying up my bedroom before going back to boarding school at perhaps the age of eleven or so, and thought 'this is special I must keep it carefully' but alas I have no idea what happened to it.

She often spent her summer holidays at Bryn Myrddin, but in 1939, at the outbreak of the Second World War she moved there for good. We all used to gather round the grand piano there while she played and sang and we would all join in.

She was particularly fond of 'Bonnie Charlie's noo awa', and I also remember going for a walk in the garden where at one point we were walking along parallel paths, and she spontaneously broke into 'You'll take the high road and I'll take the low road and I'll be in Scotland afore you' from 'Loch Lomond'.

On another occasion she showed me some of her jewellery, including an imposing amethyst ring of her father's. I sat beside her at lunch and was allowed to sample some lemon jelly provided specially for her, by then, rather delicate stomach.

Then came a time when we had to be very quiet for she was ill and eventually, after about a month, she died. I attended her funeral and was given a sprig of 'rosemary for remembrance' to throw into her grave.

Throughout my childhood we never went to church, at St. Mary's, Union Street Carmarthen, without visiting her grave: a rather lovely white marble stone with a carving of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which she shared with her friend Dr Johnson.

It was appropriate that she died and was buried in her beloved Wales, even though much of her active life was spent elsewhere.