

## *Exploring the Sacred Sites Along the Cistercian Way in Wales*

The **Cistercian Way** in Wales is a pilgrimage route rich in history and spiritual significance, following the footsteps of the Cistercian monks who shaped the religious landscape of the region. This path connects a remarkable collection of **churches**, **abbeys**, and **holy wells**, each contributing to the region's deep spiritual and cultural heritage.



Along the Cistercian Way, you'll find **churches** such as **St. Asaph Cathedral**, **St. Mary's Church in Llanfair Caereinion**, and **St. Tudno's Church in Llandudno**, which serve as reminders of early Welsh Christianity and the monastic presence that once flourished in these areas. These sacred spaces, some with roots dating back over a thousand years, were once central to the lives of Cistercian monks who sought to live a life of prayer, labour, and contemplation.

The **holy wells** along the route are equally significant, with places like **St. Winefride's Well** in **Holywell** and **Ffynnon Dyssilio** near **Bryn Eglwys** offering a sense of continuity with the ancient practices of healing and pilgrimage. These wells, often associated with saints like **St. Trillo**, **St. Dyfnog**, and **St. Beuno**, were places of spiritual renewal and physical healing for medieval pilgrims and remain sites of devotion today.

The route also passes near the ruins of important Cistercian monasteries like **Tintern Abbey** and **Strata Marcella Abbey**, where the monks lived and worked. These monasteries, along with other smaller sites such as **Gwydir Uchaf Chapel** and **Aberconwy Abbey**, stand as poignant reminders of the once-thriving Cistercian presence in Wales, marking key points in the monastic journey.

Together, these **churches**, **holy wells**, and **monastic ruins** form a powerful network of sacred sites that embody the spirit of the Cistercian Way, offering insight into the deep religious practices that shaped the region's history. Whether for reflection, healing, or historical exploration, the sites along this ancient pilgrimage route continue to attract visitors seeking to connect with Wales's spiritual heritage.

The Link below will take you to the Map of the Cistercian Way with all the places mention on there to easily locate their position and directions to get there.

<https://tinyurl.com/Exploring-Cistercian-Way>

## *Llantarnam Abbey: A Strategic and Spiritual Foundation*



### **Founding and Early History**

Llantarnam Abbey was founded in 1179 by Hywel ab Iorwerth, King of Caerleon, as a daughter house to Strata Florida Abbey. Its establishment during the high point of the Welsh revival in the 12th century underscores its importance both politically and spiritually. While some early records refer to it as “Caerleon Abbey,” there is no evidence that the abbey was ever located within or near Caerleon itself. This name may reflect its initial ties to Hywel's broader territory.

### **Strategic Importance**

The abbey's placement at the southern and eastern fringes of Hywel's domain likely served multiple purposes. By granting large swaths of contested borderland to an explicitly Welsh monastic foundation, Hywel ensured that these lands remained under Welsh control. The abbey also functioned as a buffer against Norman expansion, an ever-present threat in the borderlands during this era. This strategic positioning exemplifies the dual role of monastic sites as both spiritual centers and tools of political resilience.

### **Cistercian Characteristics**

As a Cistercian house, Llantarnam adhered to the order's principles of simplicity, self-sufficiency, and devotion. Its connection to Strata Florida reinforced its role within the broader Cistercian network, a system integral to the spiritual and agricultural development of medieval Wales.

### **Later History and Legacy**

The abbey's prominence waned following the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16th century, yet its historical and cultural significance remains. Today, Llantarnam stands as a testament to the resilience of Welsh religious and political identity during a period of intense external pressure.

This rich blend of spiritual devotion and political strategy makes Llantarnam Abbey a fascinating starting point on the Cistercian Way, offering insights into the medieval interplay of faith and power.

## *St Gwynno's Church Llanwonno*



St Gwynno's Church is an isolated medieval structure that retains a significant portion of its original fabric, with later additions in the Gothic Revival style during the 19th century. Christian worship has taken place at this site since at least the 6th century, and its founder, St Gwynno, is also commemorated in Llantrisant and Vaynor. The exact date of the church's construction is uncertain, but it is a medieval building of great historical value.

The church underwent a major restoration in 1894, funded by Miss Olive Talbot of Margam. Significant changes included the addition of a belfry and west doorway, as well as larger windows featuring impressive stained glass. A new doorway was also added to the porch, and in a niche above the doorway stands a figure of St Gwynno, inspired by a medieval stained-glass window from Llanwynog in Powys.

Inside the church, visitors can find an ancient font and a fragment of an early Celtic cross, likely dating from the 7th or 8th century. St Gwynno's Church is also located along the Cistercian Way, a long-distance footpath connecting historic Cistercian sites across Wales.

The churchyard features the oldest grave, dating back to 1167, but it is perhaps best known for the grave of Griffith Morgan, the legendary 18th-century runner. Known as Guto Nyth Bran, he died in 1737 after completing his final and most remarkable race—running 12 miles in just 53 minutes. After being congratulated by his sweetheart, he collapsed and died shortly after. His grave, located near the western porch, attracts visitors from around the world to honour his memory.

## *Our Lady of Penrhys Shrine: A Place of Pilgrimage and Devotion*



### **Historical Background**

The Our Lady of Penrhys Shrine, located in the Rhondda Valley of South Wales, is a site of great religious and cultural significance, particularly for Welsh Catholics. The shrine is dedicated to *Our Lady of Penrhys*, a Marian devotion that traces its origins back to the 15th century.

The shrine's history is intertwined with the legend of a statue of the Virgin Mary that was believed to have been placed on Penrhys Mountain in the 15th century. The statue is thought to have been brought to the site by a Flemish or Spanish pilgrim, and over time, the mountain became a place of pilgrimage. The statue was revered for its ability to perform miracles, particularly in healing, which contributed to its growing popularity.

### **Destruction and Rediscovery**

Sadly, the original statue was lost, and by the late 18th century, the site fell into disuse. However, the devotion to Our Lady of Penrhys persisted, especially among local Catholics. In the 20th century, the shrine was revived with the construction of a new statue, which was erected at the site in 1955. This modern statue of Our Lady of Penrhys was designed to resemble the lost original, and it has since become a focal point for pilgrimage, prayer, and reflection.

### **Pilgrimage and Significance**

The Our Lady of Penrhys Shrine is a place where people come to pray, reflect, and seek the intercession of the Virgin Mary. Pilgrim's travel to the site for various reasons, including petitions for healing and spiritual renewal. The shrine has also become a symbol of Welsh

Catholic identity, representing the resilience of faith in a region that has historically been shaped by both industrial change and religious devotion.

In addition to its religious significance, the shrine is set in a picturesque location on Penrhys Mountain, offering stunning views of the surrounding valleys. This scenic backdrop enhances the spiritual atmosphere of the site, making it not only a place of religious devotion but also a place of natural beauty.

### **Cultural Impact**

The devotion to Our Lady of Penrhys is particularly significant in the context of Welsh history. It represents a strong Catholic presence in Wales, where Catholicism had long been in the minority. The shrine continues to be a symbol of hope and faith for Welsh Catholics, and its revival in the 20th century played an important role in the renewal of religious life in the region.

Today, the shrine attracts pilgrims from various parts of Wales and beyond. It holds a special place in the hearts of the local community, and it remains an enduring testament to the faith and devotion of the people of the Rhondda Valley.

### ***Ffynnon Fair (St. Mary's Well), Penrhys: A Sacred Site of Welsh Devotion***



### **Historical and Religious Significance**

Ffynnon Fair, or St. Mary's Well, located near the Penrhys Shrine in the Rhondda Valley, holds significant historical and religious importance, particularly for the local Catholic community. This sacred well has long been associated with healing and spiritual cleansing, and it has a deep connection to the Marian devotion of Our Lady of Penrhys. The well is believed to have been a place of pilgrimage for centuries, predating the establishment of the shrine itself.

The well's association with the Virgin Mary is reinforced by its Welsh name, *Ffynnon Fair*, which translates to *St. Mary's Well*. Many locals and pilgrims have visited the site over the years, seeking divine intervention for various afflictions, particularly ailments that are believed to be healed through the blessed waters of the well. Its continued significance in the region is a testament to the lasting influence of Marian devotion in Wales.

### **Healing Waters and Pilgrimage Traditions**

The well has been a site for healing for centuries, with local folklore suggesting that the waters of Ffynnon Fair have curative properties. It was often visited by those seeking miracles or recovery from illness. This tradition of seeking healing at the well is part of a larger European phenomenon of sacred wells, where natural springs were believed to be imbued with special powers. As with many holy wells, pilgrims would approach the site with a sense of reverence and hope for divine intervention.

In addition to its association with healing, Ffynnon Fair holds significance in the wider context of the Cistercian and Marian pilgrimage routes across Wales. The site forms part of a broader spiritual landscape that includes the nearby Our Lady of Penrhys Shrine, strengthening its role as a key stop for those following the Cistercian Way of pilgrimage. The practice of visiting such sacred sites continues in the modern day, attracting both local visitors and tourists seeking spiritual reflection.

### **Cultural and Community Importance**

St. Mary's Well is not only a religious site but also a cultural symbol for the local Welsh community. It represents the enduring faith of the people in the Rhondda Valley and their deep connection to the land and its spiritual history. Throughout history, the well and the shrine have been focal points for the local Catholic community, providing a sense of identity and continuity amidst the changing industrial landscape of the valley.

The well also serves as a reminder of the region's religious heritage, particularly in a time when Catholicism was often marginalized in Wales. Pilgrims visiting the well and the Penrhys Shrine continue to maintain these traditions, making the site an enduring symbol of faith, hope, and the community's connection to its Marian past.

### **Contemporary Significance**

Today, Ffynnon Fair continues to be a place of pilgrimage for many, especially those drawn to the area because of its religious and historical importance. Efforts to preserve the well and its surrounding site help maintain its sacred status, allowing future generations to experience its spiritual significance. The location remains a quiet but powerful marker of the intersection between Welsh culture, Catholic devotion, and the natural beauty of the region.

## **Margam Abbey: A Norman-Founded Powerhouse of Faith and Politics**



### **Establishment and Patronage**

Founded in 1147 by Robert Fitzroy, Earl of Gloucester, and illegitimate son of King Henry I of England, Margam Abbey stands as a testament to the interplay between Norman ambitions and Cistercian spirituality. The foundation marked a significant gesture of Norman consolidation, with its first monks arriving directly from Clairvaux, the house of St. Bernard of Clairvaux himself. This connection underscored Margam's spiritual significance within the Cistercian order.

### **Land and Strategic Gifts**

Robert endowed the abbey with over 5,000 acres of land between the Kenfig and Afan rivers. However, much of this territory remained in Welsh hands at the time. Robert's promise of land—"when I get it, you shall have it"—served as both an incentive for monastic prayers for his military success and a declaration of his intent to assert control over the region. This dynamic showcases the symbiotic relationship between Norman expansionism and ecclesiastical influence.

### **Welsh Engagement**

Despite its Norman origins, Margam quickly gained the favor of local Welsh rulers, who began to make substantial land grants to the abbey. These rulers sought spiritual benefits, including burial within Margam's consecrated grounds, reflecting the abbey's growing prominence as a sacred institution in both Norman and Welsh communities.

### **Architectural Grandeur and Cultural Impact**

Margam Abbey became one of the richest and most influential Cistercian establishments in Wales, known for its impressive Romanesque and Gothic architecture. Its cultural and spiritual influence extended far beyond its lands, bridging Norman and Welsh interactions during a turbulent period.

### **Legacy**

Following the Dissolution of the Monasteries, Margam Abbey's buildings were largely dismantled, though some remnants survive, including the grand abbey church's west

doorway. Today, Margam Country Park preserves the site's heritage, inviting visitors to explore its historical significance.

As an early stop on the Cistercian Way, Margam exemplifies the fusion of Norman ambition and monastic spirituality, a theme that resonates throughout the pilgrimage.

### **Lady's Well, Margam: A Sacred Spring of the Past**



#### **Historical and Cultural Context**

Lady's Well, located in Margam parish, near the site of Margam Abbey, is one of the sacred wells in Wales traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary. Its name, *Lady's Well*, places it among a group of wells linked to Christian saints and holy figures. According to Welsh tradition, wells named after saints were often regarded as sources of healing and divine intervention, and this well is no exception. It is part of a broader network of "Class A" wells, a category defined by scholars like Jones (1954) as springs with strong Marian or saintly associations.

#### **Physical Description**

The well itself is a spring of fresh water that emerges from below a small drystone wall, measuring approximately 0.25 meters square. The water flows out between two short sections of drystone walling, around 0.2 meters to the north, providing a tranquil spot that retains its historical charm. This layout, simple yet functional, reflects the practical and symbolic importance of these sites in medieval and early Christian Wales.

#### **Geographical and Religious Significance**

Lady's Well lies adjacent to the ruins of Margam Abbey, a significant religious site founded in the 12th century. This proximity suggests that the well may have had a connection to the abbey's monastic community, likely serving both as a source of fresh water and a spiritual landmark. Like other Welsh wells dedicated to saints, Lady's Well would have been a destination for pilgrims and local worshippers seeking healing or divine blessings, particularly as the well is situated in an area of historical religious significance.

### **Modern Relevance**

Today, Lady's Well stands as a quiet testament to the spiritual heritage of Margam and the surrounding area. Though its use as a pilgrimage site has faded, the well still holds historical.

### **St Michael's Well at the Gnoll**

St Michael's Well at the Gnoll, near Neath, is a notable historic site located within the grounds of the Gnoll Estate Country Park. The well is part of the rich heritage of the area, which blends both industrial and ornamental history. The park itself, renowned for its 18th-century landscaping, is a place where several significant features have been preserved or restored, including cascades, follies, and a grotto.

While specific historical details about St Michael's Well are scarce, it is likely connected to the long tradition of sacred wells in the region, which were often dedicated to saints and considered places of spiritual significance.

Wells like St Michael's were frequently located near churches or used for religious purposes, adding another layer to the site's historical context visitors to the Gnoll Estate today can enjoy the well as part of a wider exploration of the park's scenic beauty and its importance in local heritage. The site is currently undergoing a restoration to improve facilities and provide better access to the public, ensuring that these historic features are preserved for future generations.

### **Neath Abbey: A Jewel of Welsh Monasticism**



### **Founding and Norman Ties**

Neath Abbey, established in 1130 by Richard de Granville, a Norman knight, stands as one of Wales's most significant Cistercian foundations. Situated in the verdant Vale of Neath, the abbey was strategically located to consolidate Norman influence in South Wales while fostering spiritual growth. The foundation was supported by monks from Savigny Abbey in

France, reflecting the Cistercians' international reach and adherence to the reforming ideals of simplicity, self-sufficiency, and agricultural innovation.

### **Architectural Splendour**

Neath grew into one of the largest and most architecturally sophisticated abbeys in Wales. The complex boasted an impressive church, cloisters, chapter house, and a variety of domestic buildings. The design harmonized with Cistercian principles, emphasizing austerity and utility while maintaining a sense of grandeur that reflected its economic and spiritual importance.

### **Economic and Cultural Hub**

Beyond its religious function, Neath Abbey became a thriving economic and cultural hub. It managed extensive estates, engaged in agriculture, and even operated ironworks. The abbey played a key role in the local economy, employing lay brothers and workers, and interacting with the broader community.

### **Welsh Connections**

Although founded by Normans, Neath gained the support of local Welsh lords, who provided lands and resources. This cooperation highlights the abbey's dual role as both a religious institution and a mediator between Norman and Welsh interests during a time of frequent conflict.

### **Decline and Legacy**

Like many monastic houses, Neath Abbey faced dissolution in 1539 under Henry VIII's policies. Its buildings were repurposed and fell into ruin, though significant remains can still be seen today. The site is managed by Cadw, offering a window into the architectural and cultural achievements of the Cistercians in medieval Wales.

As part of the Cistercian Way, Neath Abbey provides a powerful glimpse into the spiritual and temporal worlds of the Cistercian order, illustrating the lasting influence of these remarkable communities.

## *Capel y Baran*



Baran Independent Chapel was founded following a schism at the nearby Gellionnen Chapel, with members dissatisfied by the growing Unitarian influence at Gellionnen. While the lease for Baran dates from October 1, 1805, the chapel was already built and in use for services by that time.

The original chapel was a single-story building heated by a fireplace, likely situated at the far gable end near the entrance. In 1830, a gallery was added to accommodate a growing congregation, and in 1895, renovations costing around £85 further improved the structure. In 1906, original box pews were removed, and a wooden floor was installed.

The chapel's current layout features a gable-entry design, with two large windows on the left elevation indicating the pulpit's location. To the right of the building, a lean-to schoolroom and vestry were added.

Baran Independent Chapel is situated near the point where both the Cistercian Way and the St Illtyd Way cross paths, making it an important stop for pilgrims following these historic routes.

This location further ties Baran Chapel to the rich heritage of religious and cultural pilgrimage in the region.

## *St Cyndeyrn's Church*



**St Cyndeyrn's Church**, located in the village of Llangyndeyrn, Carmarthenshire, is a medieval church with a rich history dating back to at least the 14th century. It is associated with the Deanery of Kidwelly and was granted to New College, Leicester, in 1355-1356, alongside nearby chapels. Historically, the parish of Llangyndeyrn also included several medieval chapels.

Architecturally, the church has undergone significant restorations, especially in the late 19th century. The most notable restoration took place between 1883 and 1888 under the direction of architect J.P. St Aubyn. This included lowering the floors, replacing windows, and extensive renovations to the roof and walls. During this restoration, 497 skeletons were discovered, underscoring the church's longstanding role as a burial site.

The church features a tall, narrow, tapering west tower, a distinctive feature not commonly found in the region. The tower, which was constructed from an earlier 15th-century porch, is characterized by simple slit windows for lighting and a crenellated parapet. Inside, visitors can find a 17th-century font and several memorial slabs dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries. A notable architectural feature is the low, panelled screen between the chancel and the north chapel, which dates to 1676.

The churchyard is home to a medieval cross base, further enhancing the church's historical importance. The surrounding landscape contributes to the site's deep historical and cultural significance, solidifying St Cyndeyrn's Church as an integral part of the heritage of Llangyndeyrn.

## *St Peter's Church, Carmarthen*



**St Peter's Church** is one of the largest parish churches in Wales, renowned for its substantial size and impressive architecture, constructed from local red sandstone and grey shale. Its recorded history dates to 1107, when it was conferred by Henry I to Battle Abbey. However, there is evidence to suggest that an ancient Celtic church occupied the site long before this, possibly as early as the 6th century. The circular shape of the churchyard is indicative of early Celtic religious sites, though no structural remains of that original building have been found.

The church's foundation lies even deeper in history, as it stands on the location of a 1st-century Roman gateway, built to defend the Roman fort of Moridunum, the precursor to modern Carmarthen. The presence of this gateway highlights the strategic importance of the site in antiquity, and this long-standing history of occupation and use is a testament to the region's enduring significance.

St Peter's underwent significant changes after the Normans' conquest of southern Wales in the late 11th century. Initially, the church was under the control of Battle Abbey, but by 1125, it was transferred to the Bishop of St David's. In the same year, Bishop Bernard of St David's gave it to the Priory of St John (Carmarthen Priory), and it remained in the hands of the Priory throughout the medieval period. The church continued to thrive during the Middle Ages, and in the late 14th century, a chantry chapel was established, further enhancing its role in the religious and cultural life of the community.

St Peter's Church remains a significant landmark in Carmarthen, rich in historical layers that reflect the transitions from Roman, Celtic, and Norman influences, making it an important site for both architectural and historical exploration.

## *St Michael's Pilgrim Church*



**St Michael's Church** has medieval origins and is located within a rectangular churchyard approximately 350 meters southeast of Trefenty farmhouse (NPRN 17858). Situated around 400 meters from the River Cywin, which forms the historic boundary between the parishes of Llanfihangel Abercowin and Llandeilo Abercywin, the church was abandoned as the parish church in 1848. At this time, the construction of New St Michael's Church (NPRN 54624) two miles to the north, near the newly developing population center along the A40 turnpike road, shifted the focus of the community.

The church is about 600 meters southeast of Castell Aber Taf (NPRN 304187), a motte-and-bailey castle believed to be the precursor to the nearby Trefenty farmhouse. Local tradition suggests a roofed passage once existed in front of Trefenty, which allowed funerals, weddings, and congregants to pass on their way to the church, though no physical trace of this remains today. The church is also located approximately 370 meters southwest of the Treventy Stone (NPRN 304157), a standing stone that further enhances the area's historical significance.

Six gravestones, locally referred to as 'Pilgrims' Graves,' are located to the south side of the churchyard, dating to the 12th–13th centuries. Two of these stones are in the distinctive hog-back style, while the others are flat and feature depictions of human figures, three of which are female. These slabs are adorned with short, circular-headed stones at both ends, each engraved with an equal-armed cross within a circle and surrounded by intricate patterns such as cable, chevron, or diamond designs. One grave is said to have contained the bones of a youth, along with small shells, before 1938. Local legend claims that neglecting the graveyard would lead to a plague of snakes in the parish.

St Michael's Church is known to have been poorly attended in its early years as a parish church. A local anecdote recounts a time when the congregation consisted only of the vicar, Mr. Evans of Llandilo (whose own church was in disrepair), and his sheepdog. The vicar is said to have prayed, "O Dduw, maddeu i ni ein tri; Ifans Llandeilo a finne a'r ci" ("O Lord, may forgiveness for us three be found; Evans Llandeilo, myself, and the hound"). An almost identical version of this story is attributed to St Teilo's Church in Llandilo Abercowin.

Now a Scheduled Ancient Monument, the church is in ruins, with the south and east walls still standing to roof height, while the north wall remains up to around 1 meter. Visible entrances can be found in the south and west walls, and a modern concrete structure occupies the southwest corner of the nave.

### **Caldey Island and Its Role on the Cistercian Way**



Caldey Island, located off the coast of Pembrokeshire, Wales, has been a place of spiritual significance for well over a millennium, playing a central role in the religious history of the region. It is currently home to a community of Cistercian monks, also known as Trappists, who follow the strict observance of the order. The island's rich religious heritage dates to the fifth century, when it was first established as a monastic site, likely known as Ynys Pyr. According to tradition, Pyro, a disciple of St Illtud, founded the original monastery, marking the start of Caldey's long history as a centre for Christian monasticism.

The island's early monastic life is closely tied to the life of St Samson of Dôl, one of the leading figures in early Welsh Christianity. St Samson sought refuge on Caldey when the bustling and worldly environment of the larger monastic community at Llanilltud Fawr (Llantwit Major) became overwhelming. He attempted to reform the lifestyle of the monks on Caldey but, facing opposition, he was eventually driven out. After retreating to a cave and living as a hermit, St Samson left for Brittany, where he later founded the abbey of Dôl, which became one of the prominent religious centres in the region.

The monastic life on Caldey was disrupted several times over the centuries, notably by Viking raids, which forced the monks to abandon the island for a period. It was during these

raids that the island acquired its present name, "Caldey," though its earlier Welsh name is still debated.

Caldey's deep-rooted history continues to resonate in the present day. In the 12th century, the island became home to a Cistercian community that played a significant part in the spread of the Cistercian movement across Wales and Europe. The Cistercians were known for their strict adherence to the Rule of St Benedict, and their monasteries were founded in remote locations to ensure contemplation, self-sufficiency, and a rigorous monastic life. The Trappist community on Caldey Island today continues this tradition of silence, prayer, and hard work, in keeping with the Cistercian way of life.

As part of the Cistercian Way, which is a modern long-distance footpath linking Cistercian sites across Wales, Caldey Island holds a place of great historical and spiritual importance. Pilgrims and visitors walking this route can trace the footsteps of past monastic communities, following in the traditions of faith, dedication, and peaceful retreat that have shaped the island for centuries. The island's historical and spiritual legacy, coupled with its tranquil and isolated setting, makes it a key site for understanding the spread of Christianity and the Cistercian order in Wales.

### *St Deiniol's Well*



St Deiniol's Well is a significant historical site located beside a lane leading toward the ruins of what is thought to have been St Deiniol's Chapel, situated within the grounds of the former Penally Abbey. This well is notable for its association with the early Christian monastic traditions of the area, although little is known about its specific legends or the traditions surrounding its use.

The well itself is large and has been a source of interest due to its proximity to both the chapel ruins and the wider Penally area, which has a rich history of early Christian activity. Notably, the village of Penally is named after St Teilo, and there is some speculation that the well historically associated with St Deiniol may in fact be the same as the well dedicated to St Teilo, which was located on the village green. This adds an intriguing layer of local legend and significance to the area, as both saints are pivotal figures in the early Christian history of Wales.

Despite the lack of detailed records, the well's location near the ruins of Penally Abbey, which was once a major monastic site, suggests that it may have had spiritual importance for the monastic community that lived there. The well could have been used for ritual purposes or for the daily needs of the inhabitants, continuing the centuries-old tradition of sacred wells associated with saints in Wales.

Though the exact origins and uses of St Deiniol's Well remain somewhat elusive, its connection to the early Christian period and its proximity to Penally Abbey make it an important site for understanding the religious and cultural landscape of the area. As with many sacred wells, it may have been a place of healing or pilgrimage, continuing a long tradition of local devotion.

For those following the Cistercian Way or interested in Welsh history, St Deiniol's Well stands as a quiet reminder of the deep spiritual roots of the region, offering a glimpse into the enduring religious practices of early Christian Wales.

### ***St Lawrence's Church***



St Lawrence's Church is steeped in a rich spiritual and historical legacy, built adjacent to three holy wells, each renowned for their healing properties and attracting pilgrims for centuries. These wells were thought to possess unique therapeutic qualities, with each

offering different curative waters: one containing spring water believed to heal ailments of the legs, another rich in chalybeate (iron-rich) water for the hands and arms, and a third with sulphurous water used to treat eye conditions. The presence of these wells highlights the longstanding tradition of sacred sites in Wales, where the natural environment was often integrated into religious practices.

The church itself likely stands on the site of an earlier Christian chapel, with the west porch of the current building believed to incorporate elements of the original structure. The present church, primarily dating from the 12th to 14th centuries, represents the architectural evolution of the region during this period. It is most notable for its imposing, multi-storied tower, which was added in the 15th century, characteristic of the Pembrokeshire style. This addition helped define the church's silhouette and served both religious and defensive purposes during a time of political turbulence in the region.

Over the centuries, St Lawrence's Church has become not only a place of worship but also a historical landmark, encapsulating both the spiritual and architectural heritage of the area. The church's location near the holy wells emphasizes its role as a focal point for healing, both physically and spiritually. Today, St Lawrence's remains a significant site for visitors interested in Welsh religious history and the enduring traditions of sacred wells.

### **St Elidyr's Church, Ludchurch**



St Elidyr's Church is built on the site of a much earlier *llan*, or pre-Norman temple, reflecting the long history of religious significance in the area. The church was granted to the Knights Hospitallers of St John of Jerusalem in 1150, who had a Preceptory at nearby Slebech. This transfer marked the beginning of a significant chapter in the church's history. The original church was rebuilt in the 13th century and underwent further reconstruction in the late 15th century, likely under the direction of John Elliot of Amroth Castle. According to local

tradition, he built a chantry chapel over his family vault, a testament to the church's importance as both a place of worship and a family memorial.

In 1855, the church underwent another substantial restoration, though it retains many key elements from earlier periods, including the Amroth Chapel, the walls, vaulted roof, and the tower. One of the church's most notable historic features is the late Norman font, intricately carved with a foliage design. This font stands on the inverted basin of an earlier font bowl and is topped by a fine modern cover carved in a late Gothic style, creating a blend of historical and contemporary craftsmanship.

### **Who Was St Elidyr?**

The identity of St Elidyr remains uncertain, and there are several theories surrounding the name. One possibility is that he refers to St Elidur de Stackpole, who is said to have accompanied Archbishop Baldwin on his 12th-century crusade through Wales. Alternatively, he may have been a 12th-century pilgrim known as Elidyr the Courteous. There is also the theory that the name might be the result of a clerical error, originally referring to St Teilo, who was sometimes known as Eluid. Despite the ambiguity surrounding his identity, the church's dedication to St Elidyr reflects the enduring importance of pilgrimage and religious tradition in this part of Wales.

### ***Whitland Abbey: The First Cistercian Foundation in Wales***



### **Founding and Early History**

Whitland Abbey, founded in 1140, holds the distinction of being the first Cistercian house in Wales, marking a pivotal moment in the spread of the Cistercian order across the country. Established by a group of monks from the renowned Abbey of Clairvaux in France, Whitland became the mother house for several Cistercian foundations in Wales, including the well-known Strata Florida Abbey.

### **Strategic Location and Development**

The abbey was founded in a fertile valley near the River Taf, taking advantage of the area's agricultural potential. Whitland's early years were focused on establishing a self-sustaining monastic community based on the Cistercian ideals of simplicity, agriculture, and self-

sufficiency. The surrounding land, granted by local Welsh lords, was crucial to the abbey's economic success, allowing the monks to cultivate crops, raise livestock, and later expand their influence.

### **Spiritual Significance and Influence**

Over the years, Whitland became an important religious centre for the region, attracting pilgrims and benefactors. Its status as the first Cistercian abbey in Wales made it a symbol of the order's spiritual and monastic influence. The abbey's wealth grew, and by the 12th and 13th centuries, Whitland had become an influential hub of religious and intellectual activity. Monks from Whitland were instrumental in spreading the Cistercian way of life throughout Wales and beyond.

### **Decline and Ruin**

Like many Cistercian houses, Whitland Abbey suffered during the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII in 1536-1540. The once-thriving abbey was abandoned, and its buildings dismantled. However, despite the destruction, significant archaeological remains still exist at the site, including parts of the church and other monastic buildings, providing a glimpse into the scale and grandeur of the abbey.

### **Legacy**

Today, Whitland Abbey remains an important historical and archaeological site, managed by Cadw, and is recognized for its role in shaping the Cistercian landscape of medieval Wales. As part of the Cistercian Way, it offers valuable insight into the early spread of the Cistercian order and its lasting impact on Welsh monasticism. The abbey's early foundation and its connection to Clairvaux set the tone for the establishment of other key Cistercian sites in Wales, reinforcing its central role in Welsh medieval history.

### **Geler Holy Well**



Ffynnon Geler, located near the village of Llangeler, is close to the route of the Cistercian Way, a long-distance footpath linking the historic Cistercian sites in Wales. Although it is not explicitly stated in most records that the well was specifically part of the Cistercian pilgrimage routes, its proximity to the Cistercian Way strongly suggests that it could have been a point of interest for pilgrims traveling this path.

The Cistercian monks, known for their monastic traditions of prayer and pilgrimage, often set up their abbeys near significant natural landmarks such as healing wells, and these sites were frequented by both locals and pilgrims alike. Given Ffynnon Geler's healing reputation and its location near the well-established Cistercian Way, it is plausible that pilgrims on their journey may have visited the well for its reputed curative powers. The site's role as a place of healing, combined with its location near other notable Cistercian abbeys, adds to the likelihood of its use by those traveling along the Cistercian Way.

Additionally, local traditions, such as the belief in the well's medicinal powers, might have also attracted pilgrims who were seeking physical healing or spiritual benefits, which would align with the Cistercian practices of integrating natural and sacred spaces for worship and healing.

In short, while no direct evidence connects Ffynnon Geler to the specific rituals or practices of the Cistercian monks, its location close to the Cistercian Way and its association with healing strongly suggest it may have been visited by those traveling the route.

### ***St Michael's Church Rhos y Corn***



St Michael's Church in Llanfihangel Rhos y Corn, Carmarthenshire, is a significant medieval church with origins dating back to at least the 13th century. Set in a picturesque, elevated location, the church is surrounded by a stone-walled churchyard and is a Grade II listed building. Its historical importance is not only due to its architecture but also because of its

proximity to the Cistercian Way, a medieval pilgrimage route linking various Cistercian monasteries across Wales.

Initially a chapel of ease for Llanllwni, St Michael's became a parish church by 1833. The church retains much of its medieval character, including a simple nave and chancel, as well as a late medieval south aisle. The 15th-century bellcote and the overall layout reflect the region's architectural heritage. While the church underwent restoration in the mid-19th century, including significant work in 1907, it still preserves many original features, such as the octagonal font and the 18th-century pulpit.

Though not a primary Cistercian site, Llanfihangel Rhos y Corn's location along the Cistercian Way places it within the historical framework of religious and cultural exchange that shaped the development of the region. The church's rural and elevated setting, combined with its medieval architecture, makes St Michael's an evocative stop for pilgrims and visitors exploring the spiritual landscape of Carmarthenshire.

### **St Peters Church, Lampeter**



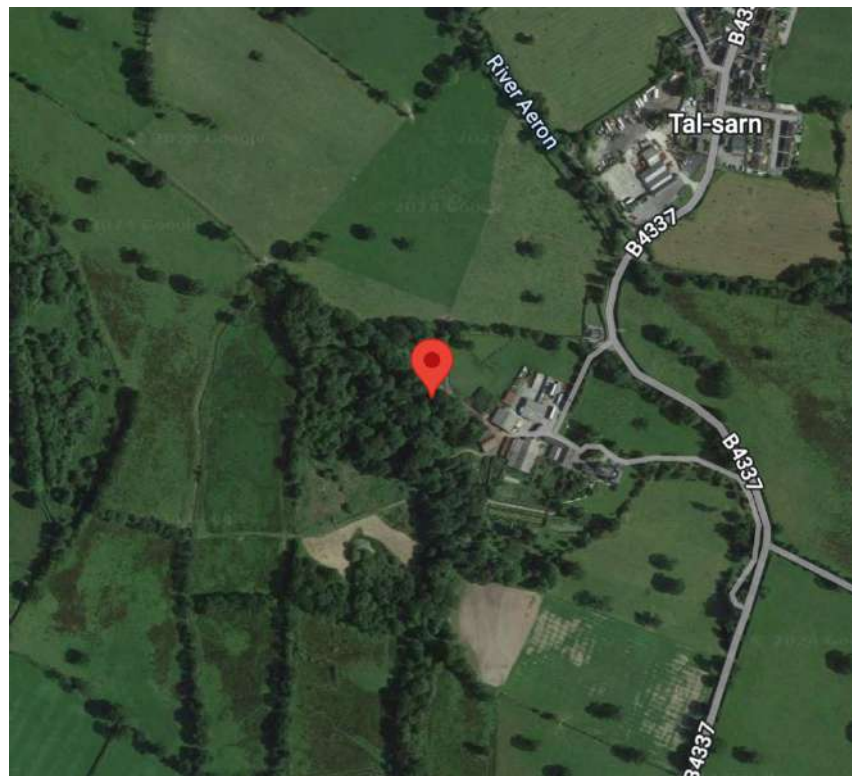
St. Peter's Church is situated on an elevated site at the top of Church Street, surrounded by an extensive churchyard that serves as a cemetery. This church was constructed between 1867 and 1870, replacing an earlier structure built in 1821-22, which itself had replaced a medieval church first documented in 1291. Remnants of these earlier buildings can still be seen in the graveyard immediately south of the current church, which occupies a historically significant enclosure approximately 40 meters in diameter, noted by Meyrick and illustrated on the 1843 Tithe map. This site may have once housed the rectory or vicarage.

Regarded as the finest Victorian church in the county, the current St. Peter's Church was designed by architect R.J. Withers and is built in the High Victorian Gothic style, characterized by its geometric plate-traceried windows. The church is constructed from grey, brown specked rubble stone with ashlar dressings and features green slate roofs, terracotta ridge tiles, and coped gables topped with stone cross finials.

The layout includes a nave, a three-bay lean-to south aisle, a tall three-stage south-west tower capped with a pyramidal roof over the porch, a lower chancel, and a lean-to south vestry. The interior maintains a simple yet tall proportionate High Victorian Gothic aesthetic, with significant kingpost and collar trusses in the nave and denser scissor-rafters in the chancel. Notable furnishings include an original carved circular stone font, a pulpit, and a stone reredos adorned with mosaic panels.

The church boasts an extensive collection of stained glass, created between approximately 1875 and 1950, including distinguished works by artists such as Wilhelmina Geddes, who was influenced by the style of Harry Clarke, as well as by Kempe & Tower and R.J. Newberyation.

### *Llanllyr Abbey*



Llanllyr Abbey, a Cistercian house for women, was founded in **1190** by the powerful **Lord Rhys**, the ruler of **Deheubarth**, a kingdom in southwestern Wales. This abbey, located in the beautiful **Ceredigion** region, holds a significant place in Welsh monastic history. As with other Cistercian foundations, Llanllyr followed the strict religious and communal ideals of the Cistercian order, but the involvement of women in this order was always complex and fraught with challenges.

The position of **women's houses** within the Cistercian order was historically **ambivalent**. Unlike their male counterparts, female Cistercians were never granted full status as members of the order. Women were only reluctantly accepted into the order, and they were often seen as subordinate to the male houses. This created a distinctive hierarchy within the Cistercian community, where nuns were considered second-class members, restricted in their activities and roles within the broader Cistercian network. While Cistercian monks were known for their self-sufficiency, living by the principles of prayer, labor, and communal living, the strict enclosure imposed on female members of the order severely limited their ability to participate in the same way.

Unlike the monks, who cultivated large estates and farms to support their communities, the nuns were confined to their abbey grounds and often relied on the charity of others to sustain their livelihood. This dependency contrasted with the order's ideal of self-sufficiency. The women were required to live a cloistered life, with the abbey's buildings designed to ensure that they never left the premises except for rare and special occasions. This strict enclosure meant that, although the nuns of Llanllyr Abbey adhered to the Cistercian ideals of piety and devotion, they were unable to contribute to the physical labour and agricultural success that defined Cistercian male monasteries.

Llanllyr Abbey's community of women was thus restricted both in its physical freedom and in its capacity to fully embrace the self-sufficiency that was central to the Cistercian way of life. The abbey, nevertheless, played an important role in the religious landscape of Wales, offering a place for women to live in devotion and in close community, albeit under difficult circumstances. The nuns of Llanllyr were an integral part of the spiritual and social fabric of the region, despite the limitations placed upon them by both the patriarchal structure of the order and the physical constraints of their enclosure.

The founding of Llanllyr Abbey by **Lord Rhys** also reflected his political and religious ambitions. As a ruler, he sought to cement his power and prestige by aligning with the influential Cistercian order, and his establishment of a women's house at Llanllyr was part of this broader strategy. His support of religious houses, both male and female, was common among medieval Welsh lords who understood the importance of religion in solidifying their rule and legitimizing their authority.

Though the abbey no longer stands in its original form, Llanllyr remains a symbol of the nuanced role women played within the larger framework of the Cistercian order. The legacy of these women, whose contributions to the spiritual life of the community were often overlooked, can still be felt today in the history of the Cistercian Way in Wales.

### **St Gartheli Church Betws Leucu**



St Gartheli's Church, located in the village of Gartheli, is a historical Welsh church dedicated to a local saint named Gartheli. Originally a chapel in the parish of Llanddewi Brefi, this church has deep roots in Ceredigion's ecclesiastical history. By the eighteenth century, it had fallen into disrepair but was subsequently rebuilt in 1810. The present structure, however,

dates from 1875, reflecting a simpler design that mirrors many rural parish churches built in Wales during this period.

One of the church's most notable interior features is a stained-glass window from 1950 by Celtic Studios. This window, which depicts the Risen Christ, adds a unique touch of modern Welsh artistry to the church's historical ambiance, celebrating the continuity of faith through art. Celtic Studios, a well-known Welsh stained-glass studio, incorporated vibrant colours and symbolic detail to add depth and reverence to the piece. The churchyard and structure, while modest, offer insight into the changing architectural styles and devotional practices over centuries in this rural community.

Given the church's proximity to Llanddewi Brefi and its historical context, one might wonder if St Gartheli's Church shares any connections with the Cistercian way, which had a strong influence in the region. While there is no direct evidence of the church being part of the Cistercian tradition, its location near Llanddewi Brefi, a place with its own ecclesiastical significance, suggests potential indirect ties to the broader religious and monastic landscape of Wales during the medieval period.

The church's history, including its dedication to a lesser-known Welsh saint and its connections to Llanddewi Brefi, contributes to its cultural and historical significance within the region.

### ***St David's Church Llanddewi Brefi***



St. David's Church, located near the Afon Brefi, has a rich history that intertwines with early Christian heritage in Wales. It is believed that the church stands on the site of an ancient Bronze Age barrow and may have originally been an early monastic settlement. The oldest inscribed stone associated with the church, Llanddewibrefi 1, dates to the sixth century, marking its significance in early Christianity.

The church is first mentioned in the 11th century when it was noted by Rhygyfarch as the site of the Synod of Llanddewi Brefi around 550 AD. At this synod, St. David is said to have vanquished St. Cadoc's revival of Pelagianism, with the church's location supposedly elevated miraculously to aid in this victory. This historical synod highlights the church's importance in theological debates of the time.

St. David's Church boasts a remarkable collection of Early Christian carved stones, with six notable examples, making it the largest concentration of such stones in Ceredigion. These include Llanddewibrefi 2 to 6, ranging from the seventh to ninth centuries. The church served as a parish church in the medieval period and was part of the Deanery of Sub-Aeron, holding patronage under St. David's. In 1287, Bishop Bek re-founded a college of secular canons at the church, which lasted until the Reformation.

The church structure is a Grade II listed building\*, made primarily from Llanddewi Brefi rubble stone and features yellow oolite and grey sandstone dressings. Architecturally, it consists of a three-bayed nave, a two-bayed chancel, and a prominent three-storied central tower added in the 15th century. The original medieval layout was cruciform, like the monastic church at Llandadarn Fawr.

Several significant restorations have taken place over the years, including major reconstructions in 1832 and 1874, led by architect R.J. Withers. The 1874 restoration introduced an octagonal oolite font and included substantial updates to the nave and chancel, reflecting the non-conformist tradition. The church was further restored in 1913, with enhancements that were largely superficial, although a boiler house may have been added at this time.

### **St Caron Church Tregaron**



St Caron's Church stands in an elevated, central position in the town, occupying a site that is believed to rest on an ancient Bronze Age barrow. Enclosed within a roughly circular churchyard, the church grounds once held three Early Christian cross-incised monuments, as well as a 6th-century stone with a Latin inscription that was originally built into the church's south wall. During the medieval period, St Caron's Church was a prominent parish within the Deanery of Ultra-Aeron.

By 1339, a portion of its tithes had been appropriated to Strata Florida Abbey. In 1406, the benefice, under the patronage of the Bishop of St. David's, was assigned as a prebend of the collegiate church at Llanddewi Brefi. At the Dissolution, the Abbey's three bells were sold to St Caron's Church, although only one bell remains today, dating from 1889, with an earlier predecessor dating from 1859.

The current building is a Grade II listed structure, fashioned from local rubble stone with yellow oolite dressings added during an 1877 restoration. It features a five-bayed nave and chancel, a two-story vestry and boiler house to the south of the chancel, and a prominent three-story west tower. The 12th-century heptagonal font, adorned with lobate angles, sits on a circular stem and square base, representing one of the church's oldest surviving features.

The tower, constructed around 1500, boasts medieval openings and a barrel-vaulted ground floor that connects with the nave through a plain, two-centred arch. Evidence of a former 18th-century gallery staircase remains in the form of blocked internal sockets along the tower's south wall.

Throughout its history, the church has seen numerous renovations. In 1805, the roof was rethatched, while a new pinnacle was added to the tower in 1810, and further repairs followed in 1820. Around 1826, the church's windows were replaced with sash windows, and the building was reconstructed in a non-conformist style, though it retained its medieval foundations. During this period, the main entrance was likely situated in the south wall of the nave's west end.

The most extensive restoration took place in 1877, under the direction of architect A. Ritchie of Chester. This renovation included a slight repositioning of the north wall, the addition of the vestry and boiler house, and the blocking of the south door. The tower openings were partially rebuilt, and the church underwent reroofing, reflooring, reseating, and refinishing.

Today, St Caron's Church is a testament to its layered history, blending early medieval elements, such as its ancient font and west tower, with 19th-century restorations that reflect Victorian sensitivities to tradition and design. Its position within the community, enriched by its deep ecclesiastical ties and historical foundations, continues to make it a cherished landmark, reflecting the evolving architectural and religious heritage of the area.

### ***Strata Florida Abbey: The Spiritual Heart of Medieval Wales***



### **Founding and Early History**

Strata Florida Abbey, established in 1201 by the Cistercians, stands as one of the most significant monastic sites in Wales. Founded by the Welsh prince, Rhys ap Gruffudd, the abbey was built to rival the powerful Norman monasteries of the region and to provide a spiritual anchor in the heart of Wales. It was originally founded as a daughter house of Whitland Abbey, and it became one of the most prominent Cistercian foundations in the region.

### **Architectural and Spiritual Significance**

Strata Florida is renowned for its stunning location in the picturesque Teifi Valley, which provided the monks with fertile land for agricultural work, a core tenet of the Cistercian lifestyle. The abbey's construction followed the Cistercian model, with an emphasis on simplicity, austerity, and the integration of the natural landscape. The church, cloisters, and other monastic buildings were arranged to facilitate a life dedicated to prayer, work, and reflection. The abbey's architecture blends Gothic and Romanesque elements, with significant remains still visible today.

### **Role in Welsh Identity and Politics**

Strata Florida's role extended beyond spiritual matters—it became a powerful symbol of Welsh autonomy and resistance against English domination. The abbey was closely linked to the Gwynedd dynasty, and several important Welsh figures were buried within its grounds, including members of the royal family. The abbey was seen as a key cultural and political site, reinforcing Welsh identity in a time of intense conflict between the Welsh and the English.

### **The Abbey's Decline**

The abbey faced significant challenges during the English Crown's suppression of monasticism in the 16th century. Strata Florida was dissolved in 1536 during the reign of Henry VIII, marking the end of its spiritual and political influence. However, it remains a remarkable site, with its ruins offering insight into the grandeur of Welsh monasticism.

### **Legacy and Modern-Day Importance**

Strata Florida remains one of the most evocative sites on the Cistercian Way, offering a glimpse into the spiritual and political life of medieval Wales. The ruins of the abbey and its surrounding landscape are now protected as a historical site, drawing visitors interested in the rich history of Welsh monasticism and the Cistercian order.

The abbey is also noted for its connection to Welsh language and culture, with Strata Florida often cited in the poetry of the medieval Welsh bards. In the modern era, it continues to inspire both scholarly interest and cultural pride, embodying the enduring spirit of Welsh resistance and heritage.

## St. Mary's Parish Church Strata Florida



St. Mary's Church in Pontrhydfendigaid is a historic site located just 20 meters north of the ruins of Strata Florida Abbey, renowned for its connections to medieval Welsh heritage. This Grade II-listed church is situated in an irregularly shaped churchyard bordered by roads to the north and west, and by the abbey to the south. A distinctive feature of the churchyard is a southern bank, possibly a remnant of an earlier churchyard boundary, as well as a prominent yew tree to the north, which, according to local tradition, marks the grave of the medieval Welsh poet Dafydd ap Gwilym, a significant figure in Welsh literature.

The churchyard also houses several intriguing gravestones. On the south side of the church, there is a headstone dedicated to Henry Hughes, a cooper who had his left leg and thigh buried there in 1756 before emigrating to the United States, where the rest of his body was interred upon his death. Additionally, a flat gravestone near the northern churchyard wall marks the burial of an unknown traveller who reportedly died of exposure at Teifi Pools after ignoring local warnings. The inscription poignantly captures his fate: "Unknown; He died upon a hillside drear; Alone where snow was deep; By strangers he was carried here; Where princes also sleep."

The original St. Mary's Church is believed to have functioned as the abbey's chapel, depicted as such in an engraving from 1741. The current church was constructed in 1815, consisting simply of a nave, chancel, and west bellcote, and has since undergone significant restorations, including one in 1875. In 1914, G.T. Bassett led a further renovation, and during the 1960s, four stained glass windows were added, crafted by Powell and Sons, London, and funded by the James Pantyfedwen Foundation. These windows add a modern touch to the church's historical character and reflect the community's ongoing investment in preserving the site's spiritual and historical significance.

## *St Mary's Well Dolgellau*



St Mary's Well, located near Dolgellau, holds a fascinating historical and spiritual significance. Although situated some distance from the town, the well is closely associated with Dolgellau Parish Church. In the early Victorian period, it served as an essential water source for the town, reflecting its practical importance. Beyond this, the well also had a spiritual dimension, being used for bathing by pilgrims who sought its reputed healing and restorative properties.

The discovery of coins near the well, including two Roman coins, suggests that it may have been a site of significance long before the Christian era. Such finds highlight the well's longevity as a place of reverence and practical use, indicating that its sacred or symbolic value may have deep roots in the region's history.

A notable figure, Beti Dafis, spearheaded efforts to repair and enhance the well in the 1840s, showcasing its continued cultural relevance during that time. Her work underscored a local commitment to preserving this landmark, even as urban development progressed. Despite these efforts, by 1890, the well was reported to be in a neglected condition, raising concerns that it might be lost to history.

Given its historical use by pilgrims and its role in the spiritual practices of the area, one might wonder if St Mary's Well was also visited by those traveling along the Cistercian Way. The Cistercian tradition, known for its emphasis on simplicity and spiritual reflection, often valued such sacred natural sites. While there is no direct evidence linking the well to the Cistercian Way, its historical association with pilgrimage, healing, and reverence suggests that it could have been a stop for medieval travellers seeking both physical and spiritual rejuvenation.

## *Cymer Abbey*



The foundation of the abbey in 1158-1159 marked a significant development in the spiritual and cultural landscape of medieval Wales. Dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the abbey was established under the patronage of Maredudd ap Cynan ab Owain Gwynedd (d. 1212), the Lord of Merioneth and grandson of Owain Gwynedd, one of the most renowned rulers of medieval Wales. Maredudd was joined in this endeavour by his brother, Gruffudd ap Cynan, Prince of North Wales (d. 1200), further cementing the abbey's prominence through its royal connections.

This monastic institution was a daughter house of Abbeycwmhir in Powys, itself a key centre of Cistercian monasticism in Wales. As part of the Cistercian network, the abbey adhered to the order's strict spiritual practices, including an emphasis on manual labour, self-sufficiency, and devotion to prayer. Its dedication to the Virgin Mary reflects the widespread Marian devotion characteristic of the Cistercian order during this period, highlighting the abbey's role in promoting this central tenet of medieval spirituality.

The involvement of such high-ranking patrons not only provided the abbey with land and resources but also ensured its integration into the broader socio-political framework of Gwynedd. The abbey's establishment under these influential figures underscores its importance as both a spiritual sanctuary and a symbol of regional power and prestige during the height of the Cistercian expansion in Wales.

## *Ffynnon Elan*



Ffynnon Elan is a renowned healing well located in the picturesque village of Dolwyddelan. Steeped in local folklore and spiritual tradition, the well has long been reputed for its miraculous properties. It is said to have the power to heal paralysed limbs and restore health to sickly children, making it a significant site of pilgrimage and hope for those seeking physical and spiritual healing.

Situated adjacent to the historic Cistercian Way, Ffynnon Elan likely held a special resonance for medieval pilgrims traveling along this monastic route. The Cistercian tradition often emphasized the sanctity of natural elements, such as water, which was seen as a divine source of purification and renewal. The well's proximity to the Way suggests that it may have served not only local communities but also travellers and pilgrims, offering a place for rest, prayer, and healing.

The well's enduring reputation highlights its importance in the spiritual landscape of the region, blending Christian reverence with older, possibly pre-Christian, traditions of sacred waters. Ffynnon Elan continues to be a reminder of the deep connection between faith, nature, and community in Wales's rich cultural heritage.

## *Gwydir Uchaf Chapel Llanrwst*



Gwydir Uchaf Chapel, located near Llanrwst, is a remarkable historic gem that holds a unique position adjacent to the Cistercian Way. This 17th-century chapel, originally built as a private place of worship for the Wynn family of Gwydir Castle, is celebrated for its exquisite interior and cultural significance.

The chapel's painted ceiling is its most striking feature, adorned with vibrant panels depicting biblical scenes and intricate decorative motifs. This artistry reflects the blend of Renaissance and local styles, making it a rare example of such craftsmanship in Wales. The chapel's architecture, while modest from the outside, embodies the spiritual and aesthetic values of its era, offering visitors a glimpse into the religious practices and tastes of the Welsh gentry.

Situated close to the Cistercian Way, Gwydir Uchaf Chapel would have been accessible to travellers along this historic route. Although primarily a family chapel, its proximity to the monastic trail suggests it may have served as a spiritual waypoint for pilgrims or other wayfarers. The Cistercian Way, known for connecting sites of religious and cultural importance, aligns with the chapel's spiritual heritage and underscores its place in the broader ecclesiastical landscape of the region.

Today, Gwydir Uchaf Chapel stands as a testament to the rich interplay between personal devotion, artistic expression, and the communal faith traditions that shaped Wales's history.

## *St Grwst Church and Gwydir Chapel*



**St Grwst's Church and Gwydir Chapel** are historical treasures located in Llanrwst, offering visitors a glimpse into Wales's rich ecclesiastical and cultural heritage.

St Grwst's Church is notable for its beautifully preserved **15th-century rood screen**, a fine example of medieval craftsmanship. This screen is intricately carved, with one particularly charming detail featuring pigs eating acorns—a motif that speaks to the medieval connection between art, daily life, and faith. Such carvings served both decorative and symbolic purposes, connecting the sacred with the natural world.

The adjacent **Gwydir Chapel**, built in 1633 by the Wynn family, houses one of its most fascinating artifacts: a massive stone coffin reputed to be that of **Llywelyn the Great**, one of Wales's most revered historical figures. Llywelyn, Prince of Gwynedd and a unifier of Wales in the 13th century, remains a symbol of Welsh resilience and pride. The presence of his coffin in the chapel adds a layer of national significance to the site, attracting visitors interested in both history and legend.

Together, St Grwst's Church and Gwydir Chapel offer a captivating blend of medieval and early modern Welsh history, artistry, and legend. Their location in Llanrwst makes them an essential stop for anyone exploring the region, especially for those traveling along routes like the **Cistercian Way**, which celebrates the deep spiritual and cultural roots of Wales.

## *Aberconwy Abbey & St Mary's Church: A Site of Spiritual and Political Importance*



### **Founding and Early History**

Aberconwy Abbey, established in 1186 by the Cistercians, was one of the most significant religious houses in medieval North Wales. It was founded by the powerful Welsh prince, Llywelyn the Great, in the town of Conwy, a region known for its strategic importance. The abbey was intended as a foundation to strengthen Welsh influence in a time when English domination was expanding. Aberconwy was initially dedicated to the Virgin Mary and served as a spiritual centre for the region.

### **Strategic Location and Role**

Aberconwy Abbey was positioned near the River Conwy, benefiting from fertile land and a prominent location in the kingdom of Gwynedd. It was not just a place of spiritual worship but also a site of considerable political significance. Llywelyn the Great's patronage of the abbey helped solidify his authority in the region, and it became closely linked to his court. The abbey was also a centre for the arts, learning, and Welsh culture, becoming a prominent site of religious practice and a hub for royal patronage.

### **Architectural Features**

The abbey was designed following the Cistercian architectural style, which prioritized simplicity and functionality. While little of the original structure survives due to later destruction, the ruins still reflect the grandeur of its medieval past. The abbey church was built with a large nave, a chancel, and a distinctive layout, typical of the Cistercian monastic plan.

### **Decline and Dissolution**

Like many Cistercian houses in Wales, Aberconwy Abbey faced decline during the 16th century. In 1283, after the conquest of Gwynedd by Edward I, the abbey suffered a significant blow when its land and power were diminished. The final blow came with the

Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536, when Aberconwy was abandoned, and its buildings dismantled.

### **Legacy and Modern-Day Significance**

Today, the site of Aberconwy Abbey, now marked by ruins, serves as a poignant reminder of the cultural and religious history of Wales. Though it no longer stands as a functioning abbey, it remains an important historical site, drawing attention from visitors and scholars interested in Welsh monasticism and the region's medieval past. The abbey's connection to Llywelyn the Great adds a layer of historical significance, linking it to one of the most famous and influential figures in Welsh history.

The abbey's role in both the religious and political life of North Wales highlights its integral part in the development of Cistercian monasticism in the region.

### ***St. Tudno's Church***



Perched dramatically on the Great Orme in Llandudno, **St Tudno's Church** is a historic site steeped in charm and tradition. Though originally built in the **12th century**, the church has undergone significant restoration over the centuries, leaving little of the original structure intact. Despite these changes, St Tudno's remains a deeply spiritual and picturesque landmark, embodying the enduring legacy of early Christian Wales.

One of the church's most beloved traditions is its **outdoor services**, held on **Sunday mornings during the summer months**. These gatherings are renowned for their welcoming atmosphere, drawing both locals and visitors to worship in the open air, surrounded by breath-taking views of the sea and the Great Orme's rugged landscape. In a delightful touch, even dogs are invited to join the congregation, often lending their voices to the hymns in their own unique way!

The church is dedicated to **St Tudno**, a 6th-century Welsh saint who is believed to have brought Christianity to the area. Its location on the Great Orme, overlooking the bay, makes it a serene and inspiring place of worship, perfectly aligned with the spiritual traditions of early Celtic Christianity, which often celebrated the natural world as part of divine creation.

Whether attending a service or exploring its tranquil surroundings, **St Tudno's Church** offers visitors a chance to connect with the spiritual and cultural heritage of Wales while enjoying the stunning natural beauty of the Great Orme.

### ***The Holy Well and Chapel of St Trillo***



Nestled on the picturesque shoreline at Rhos-on-Sea, **St Trillo's Chapel** is a truly unique and remarkable site, celebrated as the **smallest chapel in the UK**. This diminutive yet deeply spiritual place can accommodate just six people on its simple stone benches, yet it continues to serve as a site of active worship and reflection, with services still held here today.

At the heart of the chapel is its ancient **natural spring**, which flows beneath the altar. Covered by a modest piece of wood, this spring has long been regarded as a **holy well**, its waters associated with the blessings of St Trillo himself. The saint, a **6th-century Celtic monk**, is believed to have chosen this site for his hermitage, using the spring as his water source while spreading Christianity in the region.

Despite its modest size, the chapel is imbued with a profound sense of peace and sacredness. Its simple design, set against the backdrop of the sea, offers a glimpse into the humble and contemplative life of early Celtic Christianity. Visitors often find the chapel an inspiring place for quiet prayer, reflection, or simply to admire its historical and spiritual significance.

The **Holy Well and Chapel of St Trillo** not only stands as a testament to the enduring legacy of Wales's early saints but also as a reminder of the power of simplicity in connecting with the divine. Whether you visit for its historical importance, its spiritual atmosphere, or its unique charm, this tiny chapel leaves a lasting impression.

## *St Asaph Cathedral*



Commonly known as St Asaph Cathedral, this remarkable building is located in the historic city of St Asaph in Denbighshire, North Wales. As the episcopal seat of the Bishop of St Asaph, it serves as a central place of worship and spiritual leadership for the Anglican Diocese of St Asaph.

With a history stretching back over 1,400 years, St Asaph Cathedral is one of the oldest religious sites in Wales, its origins linked to the early Christian period in the 6th century. The cathedral's original foundation was established by Saint Asaph, a Welsh bishop and scholar who is said to have founded a monastic community at the site.

While the current structure dates from the 13th century, it has undergone several stages of construction, restoration, and expansion over the centuries. The cathedral features a mix of Romanesque and Gothic architectural styles, reflecting the evolving design trends of its time.

Today, St Asaph Cathedral stands not only as a place of worship but also as an important symbol of Welsh religious heritage, offering a space for reflection, music, and community events. Its peaceful atmosphere and historical significance make it a must-visit landmark in North Wales, embodying the enduring spiritual legacy of the region.

## *St Beuno's Well -1*



### St Beuno's Well, Tremeirchion

Nestled in the serene landscape of Tremeirchion, St Beuno's Well is a sacred site with deep historical and spiritual significance. A small door in the surrounding wall grants access to a narrow ledge that encircles the well, offering visitors a chance to step closer to the waters that have long been revered for their healing properties.

Steps descend into the well, suggesting that it was not only a site for spiritual healing but also a place for baptisms, likely performed by St Beuno, the 6th-century Welsh saint who is believed to have established a monastic community nearby. This sacred well was known for its association with healing rituals, particularly for eye complaints, with the waters thought to have curative powers for those suffering from such ailments.

The well's waters continue to be a symbol of spiritual renewal and purification, linking the ancient Celtic tradition of sacred wells with the Christian practices brought to the area by St Beuno. The site remains a place of pilgrimage and reflection, where the natural beauty of the landscape enhances the feeling of peace and connection with the past.

St Beuno's Well stands as a living testament to the enduring faith and traditions of early Christian Wales, drawing visitors seeking both physical and spiritual healing in a setting that has nurtured generations for over a millennium.

## ***Ffynnon Beuno -2***



### **Ffynnon Beuno, Tremeirchion**

This sacred well, named after **St Beuno**, lies in the village of **Tremeirchion**, approximately a mile north of Bodfari, nestled between the **A55** and the **A541**. Positioned directly on the historic **pilgrims' trail**, Ffynnon Beuno served as an important stop along the route that followed the journey of **St Winefride** from Holywell to Gwytherin, a testament to the enduring connection between these early Christian saints.

Although there is little in the recorded lives of **St Beuno** to directly associate him with Tremeirchion, local tradition suggests that one of his pupils may have established a religious foundation here, continuing the legacy of his teachings. The first recorded mention of a church at Tremeirchion dates to **1240**, though it is highly likely that earlier churches or chapels occupied the site, rooted in the early medieval period when Christian faith flourished in Wales.

Ffynnon Beuno holds deep spiritual significance as part of the **pilgrimage tradition**, with its waters believed to have been used for healing and spiritual renewal. The well and its surroundings invite contemplation, evoking the ancient practice of seeking solace, purification, and connection with the divine at holy wells.

Today, **Ffynnon Beuno** remains a tranquil and evocative site, linking visitors to the region's rich Christian heritage and its role in the spiritual journeys of countless pilgrims throughout history.

## *Basingwerk Abbey*



By the mid thirteenth century, the abbey buildings at Basingwerk conformed to a standard Cistercian plan. The most prominent structure was the cruciform or cross-shaped church, set out on an east-west alignment. To the south, the monastic buildings were arranged around three sides of a large open square known as the cloister.

Elsewhere lay the monks' infirmary, guest houses, and many other structures related to the daily life and agricultural economy of the abbey. The whole monastic complex would have stood within an enclosed precinct. Initially, the church and the east range of monastic buildings seems to have been completed first, and in the middle of the thirteenth century the monk's refectory was constructed on a new north south alignment.

In the later fourteenth century, a new arcade was placed around the four sides of the cloister, and towards the end of the Middle Ages the southern end of the east range was refashioned, most likely being used as a domestic apartment. In the late fifteenth century, the abbey was roofed with lead and ornamented with glass windows, and new houses for guests were built. Following the dissolution, lead from the abbey buildings was taken to repair the castle at Holt, and some was transported to Ireland for use at Dublin Castle. Basingwerk gradually fell into ruin.

## *St Winefride's Well*



Known as the “*Lourdes of Wales*,” **St Winefride’s Well** in Holywell is one of Britain’s most revered and enduring pilgrimage sites. Its history is deeply rooted in the dramatic and inspiring story of **St Winefride**, a 7th-century Welsh saint whose life and legend continue to captivate believers and visitors alike.

According to tradition, Winefride was the devout daughter of a local Welsh chieftain. She caught the attention of a noble suitor, **Caradog**, who became enraged when she rejected his advances to pursue a religious life. In a fit of fury, Caradog beheaded her. Miraculously, where her head fell, a spring of clear, healing water burst forth from the ground. In some versions of the tale, her uncle, **St Beuno**, restored her to life through divine intervention.

After her eventual death, Winefride was interred at her abbey and quickly venerated as a saint. Her well, which became known as **St Winefride’s Well**, has been a place of pilgrimage and healing for over 1,300 years, making it the only site in Britain with a continuous tradition of public pilgrimage for such a span of time.

The current well structure dates largely from the **late 15th century**, featuring a beautifully preserved **Perpendicular Gothic canopy**, built by Margaret Beaufort, the mother of King Henry VII. The waters of the well have long been associated with miraculous cures, drawing

pilgrims seeking both physical and spiritual healing. The well pool remains a central part of the site, where visitors can immerse themselves in its sacred waters, continuing a practice that spans centuries.

Today, **St Winefride's Well** is not only a shrine to the saint but also a vibrant cultural and historical landmark. Its serene atmosphere and storied past offer a profound connection to the spiritual heritage of Wales, making it a must-visit destination for those seeking inspiration and peace.

### **Ffynnon Fair – Ysceifiog**



**Ffynnon Fair** (Mary's Well) in **Ysceifiog**, Flintshire, is a site steeped in historical and cultural significance, even if its specific traditions of healing or miraculous cures have not survived in local memory. The well was mentioned by **Edward Lhuyd** in his late 17th-century *Parochialia*, highlighting its importance as a source of freshwater and its likely sacred heritage.

The dedication to **St Mary**, the Virgin, suggests the well's association with an ancient and holy providence. Wells named after Mary are widespread in Wales, with **Francis Jones** documenting at least seventy-six such dedications. While there are no direct legends linking Mary herself to Flintshire, her veneration as a spiritual figure has deep roots in Welsh religious traditions, dating back to the **4th century**.

Francis Jones proposed that wells dedicated to the Virgin Mary were particularly popular in areas of **Anglo-Norman influence**, as is plausible in the region of **Tegeingl**, where Ysceifiog is situated. However, Mary's prominence in Welsh devotion extended far beyond such influences, as evidenced by the enduring reverence for her name and associated sites across the country.

According to **Samuel Lewis**, Ffynnon Fair was highly regarded, even described as being "reverenced," before the disruptions of the **16th-century Reformation**, when many holy wells fell out of active use as sites of pilgrimage or worship. Beyond its spiritual associations,

the well was of practical importance to the village, serving as the principal source of **freshwater** for the community.

Today, **Ffynnon Fair** stands as a quiet reminder of the layered history of Welsh spirituality and daily life. Its enduring name pays tribute to the Virgin Mary's central role in the religious imagination of Wales, while its practical legacy as a village water source connects it to the lived experiences of generations past.

### *St Dyfnog's Holy Well*



Wales's early saints held water in high regard, often attributing sacred and healing properties to springs and wells. Among Denbighshire's many holy wells, **St Dyfnog's Well** stands out as a site of both spiritual significance and natural beauty. Alongside **St Winefride's Well** in Holywell and **Ffynnon Fair** in Ysceifiog, it forms a trio of revered sacred springs in the region.

**St Dyfnog's Well** is tucked away behind **St Dyfnog's Church**, accessible via a charming woodland path. This serene location is steeped in history and legend. The well itself is

reached by descending steps into the sacred pool, which was believed to have healing properties. However, its icy waters were also associated with penance; according to legend, **St Dyfnog** himself would stand in the freezing pool as an act of devotion and penance.

The church nearby is notable for its stunning **Jesse window**, a masterpiece of stained glass depicting the lineage of Christ. This precious artifact was hidden underground during the **Cromwellian period** to protect it from destruction, a testament to the community's reverence for its sacred heritage.

Visitors to St Dyfnog's Well are captivated by its tranquil setting and the spiritual aura that surrounds it. While the icy waters may offer a bracing experience, they serve as a poignant reminder of the saint's devout practices and the enduring legacy of holy wells in Welsh culture.

Whether seeking healing, history, or a moment of peace, **St Dyfnog's Holy Well** remains an evocative destination, blending natural beauty, legend, and the sacred traditions of Wales.

### **St Saeran's Church**



St Saeran's Church, located in the picturesque village of Llanynys, Denbighshire, is a site of great historical and spiritual significance. Dedicated to St Saeran, a 6th-century Celtic saint, the church has long been a focal point for worship and community life in this tranquil part of North Wales.

The origins of the church are ancient, tied to the early Christian period when St Saeran, one of the lesser-known Welsh saints, founded a religious settlement here. The saint is often associated with healing and teaching, and the church continues to reflect the enduring legacy of his faith and service.

The building itself showcases a blend of architectural styles, reflecting its centuries of use and adaptation. The current structure, which dates largely from the 15th century, retains significant medieval features, including a fine rood screen and carved wooden fittings. These elements highlight the craftsmanship and devotion of past generations.

The churchyard, with its weathered gravestones and peaceful surroundings, adds to the site's timeless charm. St Saeran's Church is more than a historical landmark; it remains a living place of worship, connecting visitors and parishioners to the deep spiritual traditions of Wales. Its tranquil setting, rich history, and ties to early Welsh Christianity make it a meaningful destination for those interested in the heritage and faith of the region.

### ***Ffynnon Dyssilio***



Ffynnon Dyssilio located in the parish of Bryn Eglwys, Ffynnon Dyssilio is a holy well associated with St Tyssilio, a 7th-century Welsh saint renowned for his dedication to the Christian faith and his foundational role in spreading Christianity across Wales. The well takes its name from the saint and is closely linked to the nearby church, also dedicated to St Tyssilio, as recorded by Edward Lhuyd in his *Parochialia* of 1690.

Like many sacred wells in Wales, Ffynnon Dyssilio would have been regarded as a source of both spiritual and physical renewal, with its waters believed to hold healing properties. Such wells were often centres of local devotion, visited by those seeking cures, blessings, or a closer connection to the divine.

The church, an important historical feature of the parish, serves as a reminder of St Tyssilio's enduring legacy. As a patron saint, Tyssilio is known for his association with the *Book of Tyssilio*, a medieval Welsh chronicle that contributed to the development of historical and genealogical traditions in Wales.

While details about specific traditions or rituals associated with Ffynnon Dyssilio may not be well-documented, its presence reflects the deep veneration of holy wells in Welsh culture, where saints and springs often became intertwined in both faith and folklore.

Today, Ffynnon Dyssilio remains a poignant symbol of the early Christian heritage of Bryn Eglwys, evoking the enduring reverence for water as a sacred and life-giving force in the spiritual life of Wales.

### **Valle Crucis Abbey**



Valle Crucis Abbey nestled in the idyllic Vale of Llangollen, Valle Crucis Abbey stands as one of Wales's most evocative monastic ruins, offering a glimpse into the spiritual and cultural life of the medieval period. Founded in 1201 by Madog ap Gruffydd Maelor, the prince of Powys Fadog, the abbey was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and became a significant centre of Cistercian monasticism in Wales.

Its name, "Valle Crucis", or "Valley of the Cross," derives from the nearby Pillar of Eliseg, an ancient stone cross thought to commemorate early Welsh rulers.

The abbey's architecture reflects the characteristic simplicity and austerity of the Cistercian order, which sought to create a space for contemplation and devotion. Despite its humble beginnings, Valle Crucis grew into one of the wealthiest monasteries in Wales, supported by extensive landholdings and the labour of lay brothers.

The abbey church, with its soaring pointed arches and beautiful traceried windows, is a testament to the craftsmanship and devotion of its builders.

The monastery thrived for over three centuries, weathering the tumult of Welsh-English conflicts and the political upheavals of the medieval era. However, like all monasteries in Britain, Valle Crucis fell victim to the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII in the 1530s.

The abbey was suppressed, and its lands and treasures were seized, leaving its buildings to slowly fall into ruin.

Today, the abbey's preserved ruins include the chapter house, cloisters, and parts of the refectory, offering visitors a sense of the monks' daily life. The restored west front of the abbey church, with its iconic rose window, is particularly striking and provides a vivid reminder of the abbey's former glory.

The surrounding landscape, tranquil and lush, adds to the contemplative atmosphere of the site. Valle Crucis Abbey remains a powerful symbol of Wales's rich monastic heritage and the enduring influence of the Cistercian order. It invites visitors to explore not only its architectural beauty but also the spiritual and historical legacy of a bygone era.

### **St Collen's Church, Llangollen**



**St Collen's Church**, set in the heart of the picturesque town of **Llangollen**, is a remarkable site of spiritual and historical significance. Named after **St Collen**, a 7th-century Welsh saint and reputed hermit, the church reflects centuries of devotion, community life, and architectural evolution.

According to legend, St Collen lived as a hermit in a cell near the present church site. His name, derived from the Welsh word "**collen**" (meaning hazel tree), ties him to the natural world and the sacred traditions of early Welsh Christianity. The church was likely established in his memory, becoming a focal point for worship and pilgrimage.

The current building dates primarily from the **13th century**, though it has undergone significant alterations and restorations over the centuries, most notably in the **19th century** under the renowned architect **George Gilbert Scott**. The structure blends medieval elements with Victorian-era enhancements, creating a rich tapestry of architectural styles.

Inside the church, visitors can admire its **hammer-beam roof**, intricate **carved woodwork**, and a **rood screen**—a striking reminder of its medieval origins. St Collen's is also home to **stained glass windows** that tell stories from scripture and local history, adding a vibrant sense of artistry and reverence.

The **churchyard** is equally captivating, with ancient gravestones and a tranquil atmosphere that invites quiet reflection. The church's elevated position offers stunning views of **Llangollen** and its surrounding landscapes, enhancing its connection to the town's heritage.

St Collen's Church remains a living place of worship and a significant cultural landmark, hosting services and events that connect the community with its historic roots. It also serves as a gateway to Llangollen's rich tapestry of history, from the legend of its saintly namesake to the vibrant present-day life of this charming Welsh town.

### ***Strata Marcella Abbey***



**Strata Marcella Abbey** located near the River Sever in **Powys**, **Strata Marcella Abbey** was a significant Cistercian monastery founded in **1170** by **Owain Cyfeiliog**, Prince of Powys, as a centre of spiritual devotion and monastic life. The abbey's Latin name, meaning "Marshy Valley," reflects its location in a low-lying area near Welshpool, where the surrounding landscape once provided a serene environment for contemplation and agricultural labour.

Strata Marcella was a **daughter house** of **Whitland Abbey**, the mother house of Cistercian monasticism in Wales. True to the Cistercian ethos, the monks here lived a life of simplicity, prayer, and self-sufficiency. The order's emphasis on manual labour and agriculture saw the abbey thrive economically, with its lands supporting sheep farming and other ventures.

The abbey became a prominent religious institution in medieval Wales, and its ties to the Welsh princes gave it a unique position in the political and spiritual landscape. **Owain Cyfeiliog**, the founder, was a notable patron of Welsh culture and a poet himself, creating a link between the abbey and the literary traditions of the time.

Despite its importance, Strata Marcella, like other monasteries in Britain, fell victim to the **Dissolution of the Monasteries** under Henry VIII in the 16th century. The abbey was suppressed, its buildings dismantled, and its lands sold off. Today, only scattered fragments of the abbey remain, with its foundations barely visible beneath the grassy terrain.

The site's proximity to the **Cistercian Way**, a modern pilgrimage trail celebrating the legacy of the Cistercian order in Wales, ensures that the memory of Strata Marcella continues to inspire reflection and exploration. Though much of the abbey has been lost to time, its history remains a testament to the spiritual and cultural richness of medieval Wales.

### **St Mary's Well, Llanfair Caereinion**



**St Mary's Well, Llanfair Caereinion** nestled in the charming market town of **Llanfair Caereinion** in Powys, **St Mary's Well** is a historic and sacred site with deep connections to the local community and the traditions of Welsh Christianity. As its name suggests, the well is dedicated to the **Virgin Mary**, one of the most venerated figures in Christian theology, whose association with holy wells throughout Wales underscores their spiritual significance.

The origins of **St Mary's Well** are shrouded in history, but it is thought to date back to the early medieval period, when wells were often sanctified as sources of healing and divine blessing. These wells served not only as places of spiritual devotion but also as practical sources of water for nearby communities.

**St Mary's Well** likely played a role in local pilgrimage traditions, with travellers seeking its reputedly healing waters and offering prayers to the Virgin Mary. Wells dedicated to her were particularly popular in areas influenced by Anglo-Norman and early Christian cultures, reflecting her widespread appeal as a symbol of purity, compassion, and intercession.

The well's setting, amidst the rolling hills and serene landscapes of **Llanfair Caereinion**, enhances its tranquil and reflective atmosphere. Although much of its original structure has been lost or altered over time, the well remains a poignant reminder of the sacred traditions that have shaped the region's cultural heritage.

Visitors to **Llanfair Caereinion** can still explore the legacy of **St Mary's Well**, contemplating its historical significance as a site of faith and healing. Whether as a place of pilgrimage or a quiet retreat, **St Mary's Well** continues to evoke the enduring connection between nature, spirituality, and community in Wales.

### **St Mary's Church, Llanllugan**



St. Mary's Church in Llanllugan has a rich history that dates back centuries. Founded before 1188 and closely associated with the Cistercian nunnery established by Maredudd ap Robert, the church may also occupy the site of Llorcan Wyddel's sixth-century foundation.

The existing structure, which is predominantly constructed from grey sandstone with elements of red sandstone and large pebbles, reflects the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The church comprises an undivided chancel and nave, a south porch, and a distinctive overhanging wooden bellcote situated on the west wall.

The late medieval roof structure has been preserved, along with a significant amount of original fifteenth-century-stained glass adorning the east window.

The church's south porch appears to have been added during the nineteenth century as part of restoration work, while the wooden bellcote now in place replaced a bell turret that was removed during renovations in the 1960s.

There are intriguing indications that the blocked-in doorways on the north and south walls might have connected to the cloister and claustral buildings of the former nunnery, which remained until the Dissolution in 1536. However, the exact location of these structures remains a subject of debate, as no visible remains exist.

St. Mary's Church, Llanllugan, stands as a testament to the area's historical and architectural heritage, offering a glimpse into the religious and cultural history of the region.

### **Cwm Hir Abbey: A Quiet Monument to Welsh Monasticism**



#### **Founding and Early History**

Cwmhir Abbey, located near the village of Abbey Cwmhir in Powys, Wales, was founded in 1143 by the Cistercian order. It was established by the Welsh prince, Madog ap Maredudd, who was a significant figure in the medieval history of the region. The abbey was intended as a spiritual centre for the local community, and like many Cistercian foundations, it followed the order's strict monastic rules, focusing on prayer, manual labour, and self-sufficiency. Cwmhir Abbey was initially founded as a daughter house of Strata Florida Abbey, another prominent Welsh Cistercian site.

#### **Architectural Features and Development**

Cwmhir Abbey was originally constructed in the Cistercian style, with a simple, functional design that emphasized harmony with nature. The site featured a church, cloisters, and various monastic buildings arranged around a central courtyard. The church was the focal point of monastic life, serving as the place for daily prayers and religious services. Over time, the abbey expanded its grounds and buildings, though much of the original structure has been lost. Today, the abbey is known for its substantial earthworks and the remaining stone ruins, which provide valuable insight into the layout and scale of the monastic complex.

#### **Economic and Cultural Influence**

Cwmhir Abbey was an important part of the local economy during its time, with monks engaged in agricultural activities such as farming and livestock raising. Like other Cistercian abbeys, it maintained a self-sustaining lifestyle, with an emphasis on producing its own food and goods. Additionally, Cwmhir played a cultural role, serving as a centre for religious learning and as a repository for sacred texts. Its location in the Welsh heartland made it a key spiritual site for the local Welsh population, and it gained prominence through the patronage of local Welsh lords.

### **Decline and Dissolution**

The abbey, like many other Cistercian houses in Wales, began to decline after the conquest of Wales by Edward I in the late 13th century. During the 16th century, the abbey suffered further during the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII. In 1536, the abbey was formally dissolved, its assets seized, and its buildings dismantled. However, some parts of the abbey's church and other buildings have remained, though much of the site is now overgrown.

### **Legacy and Modern-Day Importance**

Today, Cwmhir Abbey's ruins are a peaceful and evocative reminder of the Cistercian presence in Wales. Although the site is not as well-known as other Welsh abbeys, it offers a more tranquil experience for visitors interested in Welsh medieval history. The ruins of Cwmhir Abbey, including its earthworks and remnants of its buildings, remain an important historical and archaeological site managed by Cadw.

The abbey's connection to the Cistercian way of life and its role in the Welsh monastic tradition make it an essential part of the Cistercian Way, a route that links the major Cistercian sites across Wales. Today, the site stands as a poignant reminder of the region's monastic heritage and the importance of the Cistercian order in shaping medieval Welsh religious life and cultural value. It serves as a reminder of the deep connection between the Welsh landscape, Christian devotion, and the healing power ascribed to natural springs in medieval Wales.

### ***Church of Holy Trinity, Bettws***



St Michael's is a late Victorian church retaining a 14th century roof, medieval carved figures and rood screen. This church was a favourite place of diarist Rev. Francis Kilvert. This remote chapel stands far from its village, on the slopes overlooking the Wye Valley.

The small, simple building, also known as Capel-Bettws, served as a chapel of ease for Clyro, with the village almost 3 miles to the south. It has never been a parish church and still serves as a chapel of ease for the Clyro parish. The first written record comes from 1566, when it is referred to as 'y bettws', or 'the prayer house'.

## *Church of St. Mary the Virgin (Capel y Ffin)*



In the remote and picturesque landscape of the **Black Mountains** in **Powys**, **Capel y Ffin**, also known as the **Church of St. Mary the Virgin**, is a strikingly serene and historically rich site of worship. The church is renowned for its peaceful, rural setting and its deep connections to both local history and Welsh spirituality.

The **church's foundation** dates to the **13th century**, with later renovations adding layers of history to its structure. The present building is a product of **Victorian restoration**, which preserved its medieval charm while enhancing its structural integrity. The church's simple stone construction and slate roof allow it to blend harmoniously into the natural surroundings, creating an intimate and sacred atmosphere for worshippers and visitors alike.

One of the most remarkable aspects of **Capel y Ffin** is its association with the **famous Welsh poet and clergyman, R.S. Thomas**. Thomas, who spent the later years of his life at the nearby rectory, is known to have drawn inspiration from the remote and tranquil landscape surrounding the church. His presence in the area imbues the site with an added layer of literary and cultural significance, attracting visitors who appreciate both his poetry and the unique atmosphere of the place.

Inside the church, visitors are greeted with a **simple yet beautiful interior**, featuring a traditional altar, pews, and stained-glass windows that filter soft, ethereal light into the space. The woodwork, though unadorned, reflects a deep sense of craftsmanship, with the altar and pulpit evoking a sense of reverence and history. While modest in design, the church's interior exudes a peacefulness that encourages contemplation and spiritual connection.

The churchyard, surrounded by **stunning views of the Black Mountains**, offers a sense of timelessness, where centuries of history and nature converge. The graves of former parishioners rest peacefully on the grounds, adding to the sacred character of the site.

**Capel y Ffin** remains an active place of worship and a popular destination for those interested in Welsh history, spirituality, and literary heritage. Its tranquil location and rich associations with both faith and poetry ensure that it is more than just a church – it is a living

testament to the enduring spirit of Welsh culture and the power of the natural world to inspire both faith and creativity.

For visitors seeking to connect with Wales's deep spiritual and poetic roots, the **Church of St. Mary the Virgin (Capel y Ffin)** offers a rare glimpse into the heart of a remote yet profoundly meaningful corner of the country.

### *Llanthony Abbey*



Set within the dramatic beauty of the Black Mountains in Powys, Llanthony Abbey is one of Wales's most evocative and atmospheric ruins. Founded in 1108 by William de Lacy, a Norman nobleman, this Cistercian abbey is renowned for its tranquil location, steeped in history and legend. The abbey's name, Llanthony, derives from St. Anthony, the patron saint of hermits, reflecting the early monastic roots of the site as a place of solitude and prayer.

As one of the first Cistercian houses in Wales, Llanthony Abbey was established to follow the austere monastic lifestyle of the Cistercians, focusing on simplicity, self-sufficiency, and contemplation. The abbey flourished in its early years, benefiting from its fertile surroundings and the patronage of local Welsh nobility. Its monks were involved in agriculture, sheep farming, and wool production, which contributed to the abbey's prosperity.

The abbey reached its peak in the 12th and 13th centuries when it became an important spiritual and cultural center. Its influence extended across the region, attracting pilgrims and scholars who sought its quiet retreat and revered its religious significance. The monks also established a significant library and were involved in the preservation of religious texts. Llanthony Abbey also played a role in the early conflicts between the Welsh and English, with its strategic location in the borderlands making it a site of occasional tension.

However, like many other monasteries, Llanthony Abbey suffered during the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1536 under Henry VIII. The abbey was closed, its wealth confiscated, and its buildings dismantled for building materials. Despite this, the ruins still stand as a powerful testament to the enduring legacy of monastic life in Wales.

The abbey's impressive ruins today reflect its former grandeur. The church, though in partial ruin, retains fragments of its arched windows, tower, and nave, offering visitors a glimpse of

its former majesty. The remains of the cloisters, the chapter house, and various monastic buildings evoke a sense of the daily life once lived within these walls. The surrounding grounds, set against the backdrop of the dramatic Black Mountains, add to the site's profound sense of peace and isolation.

Llanthony Abbey is a popular destination for history enthusiasts, pilgrims, and those seeking to experience the profound beauty of this ancient spiritual retreat. Its remote setting, coupled with its deep historical and cultural significance, makes it a unique place to explore the history of monastic Wales.

Today, the site is managed by Cadw, the Welsh heritage organization, ensuring that this important landmark remains protected and accessible for future generations. Visitors to Llanthony Abbey can walk in the footsteps of monks who once sought solace and contemplation in the beauty of this isolated valley. It remains a place of spiritual significance, attracting those who are drawn to its serene atmosphere and timeless connection to the past.

### **St. Martin's Church, Cymyoy**



In the serene countryside of **Monmouthshire**, Wales, **St. Martin's Church** in **Cymyoy** is a charming and historically rich site that exudes the timeless spirit of rural Welsh ecclesiastical life. Located in a peaceful valley near the village of **Llanvihangel Crucorney**, the church is renowned for its picturesque setting and its deep connection to the history and heritage of the region.

The church dates to the **12th century**, with evidence suggesting that a place of Christian worship has existed at this site even earlier. Its simple yet evocative architecture reflects its long history, with notable features such as a **Norman-style doorway** and **stone construction**. The building's design and the **round-arched windows** contribute to its ancient, humble character, offering visitors a glimpse into medieval religious life in Wales.

A key feature of **St. Martin's Church** is its remarkable **leaning tower**, which has become one of the church's most iconic features. The tower, which tilts dramatically to one side, is the result of centuries of settlement in the valley floor, and its slight angle adds to the church's unique charm. It is often cited as one of the most distinctive church towers in Wales, and its slant gives the church an endearing and quirky quality that sets it apart from other historical buildings in the region.

Inside, the church offers a calm and reflective atmosphere, with simple wooden pews and a traditional altar. The **church's interior** showcases **medieval craftsmanship**, with ancient wooden beams and stonework contributing to the timeless character of the building. The church's **font**, thought to date from the **13th century**, is a particularly noteworthy feature, offering a glimpse into the church's continued role as a place of baptism and faith throughout the centuries.

The churchyard is equally historic, with numerous **weathered gravestones** marking the resting places of local families, many of whom were instrumental in the development of the surrounding area. The tranquil, rural setting, with its sweeping views of the surrounding hills, invites visitors to take a moment to reflect on the generations of people who have worshipped, lived, and passed on in this serene part of Wales.

St. Martin's Church has been a continuous place of worship for centuries and remains an active parish church today, offering services and welcoming visitors from all over the world. The church is part of the **Diocese of Monmouth**, and it continues to serve as a spiritual anchor for the community, despite its remote location.

With its historic charm, strikingly unique leaning tower, and peaceful setting, **St. Martin's Church, Cymyoy** is a wonderful destination for those interested in Welsh history, architecture, and spirituality. The church offers a peaceful retreat for those seeking a quiet place to connect with the past, and its tranquil atmosphere makes it a beloved landmark for both the local community and visitors alike.

### *White Castle Well*



Tucked away near the impressive ruins of **White Castle** in the rolling hills of **Monmouthshire**, **White Castle Well** is a serene and captivating site, rich in both historical and spiritual significance. Set against the backdrop of the majestic **White Castle**, this hidden gem is a quiet, peaceful location that draws visitors seeking reflection and a deeper connection to the land's sacred past.

The well is situated near the **White Castle** site, a medieval fortress built in the late 11th century, which is part of the trio of castles (along with **Skenfrith** and **Grosmont**) that were strategically constructed by the Normans to control the region. Though the well itself may not

have been a central focus of historical records, it is deeply embedded in the landscape of this ancient area, which is rich in legends, history, and spiritual significance.

The **well** is often associated with local folklore and the practice of healing, with many believing that the waters possess curative properties, particularly for ailments related to vision or general well-being. This is not uncommon in Wales, where the healing power of natural springs has long been a cherished part of the cultural fabric. Though the specific history of the well's healing tradition is not fully documented, its proximity to the **White Castle** and the surrounding ancient lands suggests that it could have been used by both locals and travellers alike, possibly even pilgrims journeying to the castle or nearby sites.

The **water** from the well is clear and cold, and while it may have once served a practical purpose for the local community, over time it has also come to symbolize renewal and spiritual refreshment. The **well** is encased in a simple stone structure, with a stone-lined basin that reflects the enduring nature of Welsh holy wells. It stands as a testament to the ancient reverence for natural springs, which were often believed to have protective or healing qualities, both physical and spiritual.

The surrounding area is peaceful and tranquil, with beautiful views of the nearby **White Castle ruins**, which rise dramatically against the landscape. The well's location, slightly away from the main castle site, provides a quiet and reflective space, ideal for contemplation or simply appreciating the beauty of the Welsh countryside.

Although **White Castle Well** may not be as widely known as some of Wales's other holy wells, its location near the historic and scenic **White Castle** makes it a hidden treasure for those who seek out lesser-known gems of Welsh heritage. The well offers a serene retreat for visitors interested in Welsh history, folklore, and spirituality, offering a peaceful moment to reflect on the centuries of human presence in this captivating landscape.

Today, **White Castle Well** remains a cherished part of the local landscape, accessible to all who wish to experience its beauty, peace, and the enduring connection to the sacred natural springs that have long been a part of Welsh tradition.

### *Penallt Old Church - St. Mary's*



In the picturesque village of **Penallt**, near the banks of the River Wye in **Monmouthshire**, **St. Mary's Old Church** is a tranquil and historically rich site, offering a serene escape into the heart of Wales's spiritual past. Surrounded by rolling hills and scenic woodlands, this ancient church is a true hidden gem, steeped in history, local folklore, and architectural charm.

Dating back to the **12th century**, **St. Mary's Old Church** is one of the oldest surviving places of worship in the region. The church is thought to have originally been built as a **Norman-style chapel**, and its enduring presence in the village speaks to the deeply rooted religious traditions of this rural community. Although the church has undergone significant changes over the centuries, much of its early charm remains, making it a wonderful example of medieval Welsh ecclesiastical architecture.

The **stone-built church** is small but evocative, with a **simple nave** and a **chancel**, both of which have been preserved to maintain the church's authentic medieval character. The **timbered roof** and **arched windows** contribute to the historical atmosphere, with their unembellished simplicity providing a stark contrast to the grandeur of later churches in the area. A key feature of **St. Mary's** is its **ancient stone font**, which has been in continuous use for baptisms for centuries, linking the church to generations of worshippers.

One of the most fascinating aspects of **Penallt Old Church** is its **historic graveyard**, where visitors can find several weathered and moss-covered headstones. The gravestones reflect the long history of the village and its surrounding community, with many dating back to the **17th and 18th centuries**. This churchyard, set against the backdrop of the stunning Welsh countryside, offers visitors a peaceful place for contemplation, connecting the past to the present in a timeless way.

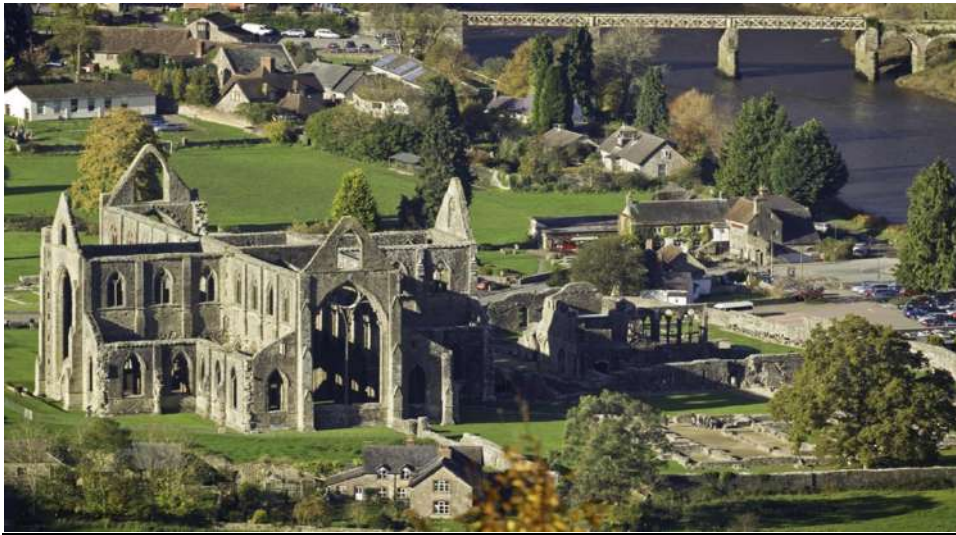
The **chancel** of the church is particularly striking, with a beautiful altar space framed by **intricate stone carvings**. The church retains its connection to the local community, serving as a place for occasional services, seasonal events, and special gatherings, ensuring that its long history continues to resonate with those who visit. While the church is not always open for regular worship, it remains a significant part of the spiritual life of Penallt and the surrounding area.

**St. Mary's Old Church** is located near the picturesque **Penallt village**, a charming settlement that has retained much of its old-world character. The church's location, amidst the natural beauty of the Wye Valley, adds to its quiet charm and allure. Whether you are visiting to appreciate the **historic architecture**, soak in the **peaceful surroundings**, or simply reflect on the centuries of worship that have taken place here, this hidden sanctuary offers a memorable experience.

Though **Penallt Old Church** may not be as widely known as some of Wales's more famous churches, its **timeless beauty**, **historical significance**, and connection to the **Welsh landscape** make it a rewarding destination for history lovers, those interested in Welsh heritage, or anyone seeking a moment of quiet reflection.

Today, **St. Mary's Old Church** stands as a testament to the enduring power of faith and history in Wales. It remains a place where the past and present converge, offering visitors a chance to step back in time and immerse themselves in the rich spiritual life of this beautiful part of the country.

## **Tintern Abbey: A Monument of Cistercian Grandeur and Romantic Inspiration**



### **Founding and Historical Significance**

Tintern Abbey, one of the most iconic and well-preserved Cistercian ruins in Wales, was founded in 1131 by Walter de Clare, a Norman lord, and his wife, Agnes. The abbey was established as a daughter house to the great Cistercian foundation of Clairvaux in France. Its location on the banks of the River Wye in the picturesque Wye Valley provided both strategic and spiritual advantages. The abbey grew to become a prominent center of monastic life, known for its impressive architecture and significant contributions to the local economy, particularly through agriculture and wool production.

### **Architectural Grandeur**

Tintern Abbey is celebrated for its stunning architectural design, which reflects the Cistercian commitment to simplicity and functionality, yet also incorporates elements of Gothic elegance. The abbey church, with its soaring nave and grand, pointed arches, exemplifies the transition from Romanesque to Gothic styles. The impressive ruins, including the remnants of the church, cloisters, and chapter house, continue to attract visitors from around the world. The abbey's layout adheres to the traditional Cistercian model, focused on providing space for both communal worship and contemplative life.

### **Cultural and Religious Influence**

Tintern Abbey played a vital role in the spiritual and economic life of the Wye Valley. Its monks were engaged in extensive agricultural activities, including the cultivation of land, sheep farming, and the production of wool, which was a key export. The abbey also became a place of pilgrimage, drawing worshippers and benefactors from across Wales and England.

### **Decline and the Dissolution of the Monasteries**

As with many Cistercian abbeys, Tintern Abbey suffered a significant decline in the late medieval period. Following the dissolution of the monasteries in 1536 under Henry VIII, the abbey was abandoned, its lands seized, and its buildings dismantled. The once-thriving monastic community came to an end, and the abbey was left to fall into ruin.

### **Romantic Influence and Legacy**

Tintern Abbey gained worldwide fame through its association with the Romantic poet

William Wordsworth, who visited the site in 1798. His poem *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* reflects the deep emotional and philosophical resonance the abbey held for him. The abbey's picturesque ruins, set against the backdrop of the surrounding hills and river, became a symbol of the Romantic movement's appreciation of nature, the passage of time, and the search for spiritual meaning.

Today, Tintern Abbey remains a powerful symbol of both Welsh history and the enduring appeal of the Romantic ideal. Managed by Cadw, the abbey is one of the most visited heritage sites in Wales, offering a fascinating glimpse into the Cistercian way of life and the cultural legacy of medieval monasticism.

It has been a genuine pleasure researching and writing the article on exploring the sites along the Cistercian Pilgrim Way in Wales. I hope that anyone who reads it finds as much enjoyment in discovering these remarkable places as I did in creating it.

Graham Tudor Emmanuel 2024