A Guide to the Churches and Chapels of Wales

Edited by
Jonathan M. Wooding
and Nigel Yates

University of Wales Press

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Notes on Contributors

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Jonathan Wooding (JW) is senior lecturer and director of the Centre for the Study of Religion in Celtic Societies at University of Wales Trinity Saint David. He specialises in the study of the archaeology and history of the early church in Britain and Ireland. He has published widely on medieval settlement history and on the cult of saints. He advises on tourist information and guiding for Welsh churches.

Nigel Yates (NY) was professor of ecclesiastical history at the University of Wales Lampeter (now Trinity Saint David), where he taught a module on Christian worship and church buildings. Between 1981 and 1991 he was an expert member of the Executive Committee of the Council for the Care of Churches, giving evidence at a number of consistory court hearings into liturgical reordering. He published widely on church furnishings and liturgical arrangement in the post-Reformation period and in 2008 completed a new book on Scottish church interiors since 1560. He died in January 2009.

The entry for the Greek Orthodox Church of St Nicholas in Cardiff has been contributed by Dr Andreas Andreopoulos (AA), lecturer in Orthodox theology at the University of Winchester.

Guide to Entries

All entries in the six sections of the guide that follow are arranged in a standard format.

(1) The name of the place, normally in the Welsh form approved by the (now defunct) Board of Celtic Studies. In certain cases where the English variant of the name is in common usage that form has been preferred. In the case of places with both English and Welsh names, both have been used, for example, Brecon/Aberhonddu.

(2) The title and denomination of the church or chapel. In the case of buildings no longer in use for worship, the original denomination has been given, followed by the present ownership or custodial arrangements.

(3) The local authority within which the building is situated according to the following code:

Mid Wales	*Cere.*	Ceredigion
	Powys (B)	Powys (pre-1974 Breconshire)
	Powys (D)	Powys (pre-1974 Denbighshire)
	Powys (M)	Powys (pre-1974 Montgomeryshire)
	Powys (R)	Powys (pre-1974 Radnorshire)
North-east Wales	*Denb.*	Denbighshire
	Flint.	Flintshire
	Wrex.	Wrexham
North-west Wales	*Angl.*	Anglesey
	Conwy	Conwy
	Gwyn. (C)	Gwynedd (pre-1974 Caernarfonshire)
	Gwyn. (M)	Gwynedd (pre-1974 Merionethshire)

South Wales	*Bridg.*	Bridgend
	Cardiff	Cardiff
	Merthyr	Merthyr Tydfil
	Neath PT	Neath Port Talbot
	Rhondda	Rhondda Cynon Taff
	Vale Glam.	Vale of Glamorgan
South-east Wales	*Mons*	Monmouthshire
	Newpt	Newport
	Torfaen	Torfaen
South-west Wales	*Carms*	Carmarthenshire
	Pembs	Pembrokeshire
	Swan.	Swansea

(4) The main entry text giving a brief description and evaluation of the building concluding with the initials of the contributor drafting the entry as listed in the notes on contributors.

(5) Details of location in relation to main roads and towns.

(6) Details of access. Where buildings are not open outside service times the times of services are given.

Although all details were correct at the time of going to press the editors cannot accept liability for their continuing accuracy as changes may have occurred in the meantime.

Introduction

The Church prior to the Reformation

Church organisation

The first Christians in Wales arrived during the period of Roman rule in Britain (AD 43–*c*.406). Wales was then a remote part of the – itself remote – Roman province of Britannia. Christianity would most likely have first arrived in Britain as the private faith of mobile individuals. We imagine that such early believers tended to congregate in towns more than in the countryside, though some country villas in England have been found to contain Christian mosaics and artefacts. This was not a world of public churches; worship was mostly outside the public gaze, in private houses and rooms, sometimes practised furtively on account of the periodic threat of imperial persecution. A strong tradition, found as early as the writings of Gildas in the sixth century, holds that Aaron and Iulius, two of Britain's early Christian martyrs, were martyred in Wales at the Roman town (*civitas*) at Caerleon (Newport), perhaps in the magnificent amphitheatre still visible there.

The Edict of Milan (313) and the subsequent conversion of Constantine (325) brought Christianity into a more central role in Roman society. How far Christianity penetrated the largely rural society of Wales under Roman rule remains controversial. Roman rule in Britain ended in the early 400s and Germanic settlers subsequently occupied most of what is now England. There the Romano-British church disappeared under the rule of non-Christian Anglo-Saxon kings, though it continued to exist in western Britain. The continuity of the post-Roman Welsh church with its Roman predecessor may possibly be seen in the proximity of early medieval monasteries to former Roman villas at Llantwit Major and at Llandough, near Penarth (Vale of Glamorgan).

Many of the older churches in Wales claim origins in the period, the early Middle Ages (*c.*400–1000), which immediately followed the Roman period. This is usually because the dedication of the church is to a saint whose career is traced to this period – popularly referred to as the 'Age of the Saints'. Often the dedication is embedded in an early medieval place name, such as *llan* + the name of the saint: Llangadog (church of St Cadog), or Llanbadarn ('church of St Padarn'). One should be wary of taking these dedications as definite evidence of foundation *by* the saints (who after all would not dedicate churches to themselves). There are cases where we can see that a site has come to be named after its incumbent or its owner, but dedications to saints very often have nothing to do with the presence of the saint him- or herself at the site, being simply evidence that the founder of a church was particularly devoted to the cult of a particular saint. Claims of early medieval origins for many Welsh churches are, however, likely to be correct, as the decline of Roman rule and the advent of monasticism, occurring in this period, almost certainly led to a reshaping of settlement patterns while Christianity established itself as the dominant faith of Wales. On many sites, burials and early Christian monuments (ECMs), in Latin or Ogham script, attest to an early medieval date.

In the decades leading up to the Roman withdrawal from Britain the Church began to establish an infrastructure for ministering to an increasing Christian population. Our written records of this process are limited to a few sources, almost all written outside Britain, although archaeology can add to their testimony. This was, broadly speaking, a church centred on the Roman political map. Bishops ministered to the people from bases in the main towns. The texts are mostly silent concerning the specific situation in Wales. The handful of demonstrably early written sources, such as the *Life* of the Welsh-born bishop of Dol in Brittany, St Samson, and the early charters in the Book of Llandaff, present a picture of a church evolving out of the Roman model. There were no parishes. Ordinary priests could be married and have families. Churches belonged to their own regions and states; bishops were more or less local appointments – a situation that changed only with the Gregorian Reform in the eleventh century. Bishops did consecrate other bishops, and rulings of councils of bishops constituted a body of canon law separate from everyday law, but the idea of the Church as a structure separate from the state was at best embryonic.

Churchyards and church buildings were not separately the property of the Church as a corporation, and could be owned by private persons or lords.

In early medieval Wales priests might be found in monasteries and in private churches, with parishes not introduced until the arrival of the Normans. Dioceses are often assumed to have been coterminous with kingdoms but, in the *Life of St Samson*, the bishop Dubricius (St Dyfrig) appears to exercise authority across more than one kingdom. When Asser (d.908), the biographer of King Alfred, and a member of the episcopal family of St Davids, describes his native diocese he speaks of the *monasterium et parochia Sancti Degui*. The bishop, Asser's kinsman, thus ministers from a *monasterium* – probably a 'mother church' of monastic origin and collegiate character – over a territory defined by the sphere of influence of the saint's community. A text known as the 'Seven Bishop Houses of Dyfed' further suggests that around the ninth century each constituent *cantref* of Dyfed had its own local bishop. These are the barest glimpses of an evolving pattern across a millennium.

As the first millennium drew to a close, communities of non-celibate priests (*claswyr*) are seen ministering to large territories, working out of mother-churches (*clasau*). Some of the larger churches with *clas* communities, such as Clynnog Fawr (Gwynedd) and Llanbadarn Fawr (Ceredigion), although the present structures date from after the *clas* period, reflect in their size and decoration a status second only to cathedrals in this pattern of organisation. The *clas* seems to have been in origin a monastic community, with the inherited abbacy later often held by a layman or secular priest. It is perhaps inevitable that this development would come to be condemned by later writers as a corruption of the monastic ideal. Gerald of Wales was incensed at the idea of a titular abbot bearing a spear, but such scenes were, it must be said, consistent with the mentality of the armed crusade that Gerald had himself come to preach. The *clas* was a dynamic response to the particular circumstances of the time and place. It is in the former *clas* churches that some of our richest medieval architectural remains are to be found. Liturgical change has often seen such churches stripped of transepts, screens and other medieval features, but medieval windows, vaults, arches, fonts and ornamentation dating from the eleventh through to the thirteenth centuries are still to be seen in many churches.

There were also monasteries that explored the more traditionally austere side of monasticism. The first monastic impulses had arrived from Gaul in the fifth or sixth century and writings by the British churchmen Gildas and Finnian provide glimpses of the spirituality of sixth-century monastic founders such as St Illtud of Llantwit Major and the more ascetic St David, a spirituality that also inspired monastic leaders in Ireland. While the *clasau* came to replace older monastic foundations, the contemplative life had a resurgence in the second millennium. Eremitical communities (*colidei*) are identified at Bardsey (Ynys Enlli) and Beddgelert by Gerald of Wales in the twelfth century, around the same time that continental impulses for monastic reform began to penetrate Wales. The Augustinian Canons, following a rule attributed to St Augustine, formed a new body of churches with celibate canons, but providing team ministries from a central church in some ways comparable to the *clasau*, and taking over some *clas* churches.

From the late eleventh century onwards these new monastic impulses were joined by the reformed Benedictine orders. These orders had their genesis in the Cluniac order (founded in 909) in France, though the Cistercian order (founded 1098) would have the greater impact in Wales. When the reformed Benedictine orders first came into south Wales, under the influence of Norman settlement, their failure to achieve abbey status in many cases meant that these 'alien priories' were isolated and lacking in influence. The Cistercians, by contrast, founded fourteen abbeys and came to control thousands of acres of Welsh farmland, enjoying patronage of both the Norman settlers and the native princes. Their intensive methods of agriculture, developed in France and brought to Wales, shaped the Welsh uplands as well as contributing the grand abbey buildings that mostly now stand ruined in the Welsh landscape.

Though these 'foreign' orders are often typically contrasted in popular works with the 'native' Celtic monasteries, patronage of the Cistercians by the Welsh princes arguably made them as 'Celtic' as their predecessors. The monastery of Strata Florida (Ceredigion), the most important Cistercian foundation in Wales, was founded under the patronage of the native ruler Rhys ap Gruffydd of Deheubarth (d.1197). It was at times a meeting place for government, the burial place of rulers (it is sometimes described as the 'Westminster Abbey of Wales'), and was the place at

which the 'Chronicle of the Princes' (*Brut y Tywysogion*) was written, amongst other works of Welsh literature.

The Welsh Church came in time more or less completely to adopt the same territorial model as had emerged in England. The older, possibly non-territorial, episcopates such as Cynidr and Llandeilo Fawr disappeared around the end of the first millennium, to be replaced by the four territorial bishoprics of St Davids, Bangor, Llandaff and St Asaph. At least two of these, Bangor and St Davids, were based on dioceses of a much earlier date, so the new organisation must be understood as being as much a development out of native institutions as an imposition by Norman invaders. The *clasau* gradually declined in significance and the *clas* churches were in time mostly reduced to the status of parish churches, or in some cases were absorbed into the new collegiate structures of cathedral chapters and the religious canonries of the Augustinians. The *clas* at St Davids was turned into a college of secular canons by Bishop Bernard (1115–48) and four archdeaconries were established. In the late twelfth century prebendaries were created. Similar patterns were followed in the dioceses of Bangor, Llandaff and St Asaph in the thirteenth century.

Church buildings from late antiquity to the end of the Middle Ages

We can presume, on analogy with other parts of the empire, that the first church buildings in Britain were former public meeting houses and other Roman civic structures, which in time became dedicated church buildings and chapels. The dead, according to Roman custom, were mostly buried outside town walls in 'extramural' cemeteries, which themselves sometimes became the sites of churches commemorating the earliest Christians – in the same way as the early churches on the Appian Way in Rome began. The burial monument of the sixth-century man named Carausius, now in the parish church of Penmachno (Gwynedd), states that he lies 'in this heap of stones' (*hoc congeries lapidum*). This short inscription evokes a world in which monuments to the earliest Christians were visible in the wider landscape, by roads and in fields, as well as at sites of formal worship.

Monasticism had inspired a conscious retreat from the settled world into empty places (*deserta*) analogous with the eastern desert fathers, creating further Christian churches and monuments in the rural landscape. Although these were conceptually 'outside' the everyday secular world, monastic churches, in colonising the emptier and remoter parts of the landscape, brought the possibility of pastoral care to a wider range of people than before. The location of the cathedral at St Davids, almost hidden in the bottom of a deep, damp valley, is a product of its monastic origin. The removal of the bishop's palace from St Davids to Carmarthen in the later Middle Ages was a response to the tension between the historic origins of the site and the changing needs of the diocese. In Llandaff the medieval episcopal seat in the countryside came to be absorbed into the suburban development of the modern city of Cardiff.

Churches thus can have their origins, variously, in 'secular' churches attached to early settlements, monastic churches founded away from settlements, and mortuary chapels. Nothing much survives of the church buildings of the late Roman and early medieval period. Place names, early monuments, sometimes the very shape of the site itself, may be of early medieval origins but, with the exception of some culturally Anglo-Saxon masonry at Presteigne (Powys), no standing church building in Wales can be confidently dated much before the year 1100. The earliest buildings, whether of wood or of stone, have not survived the demand for frequent and wholesale rebuilding to accommodate a living and growing faith which periodically reshaped its ideas of liturgy and worship.

What then can we see of these different communities of Christians in our church sites today? The setting and form of the site itself may be artefacts of early date. One early artefact may be the name of the site. The world *llan*, prefixed to another name, very often indicates a first-millennium date (though antiquarian examples, or 'back-formations', of such names can occur). The Welsh name of the village of Llanilltud Fawr (English: Llanwit Major) means 'the great church of Illtud' and commemorates St Illtud, a monastic leader of the sixth century who probably did indeed live at the site. Where a saint's name occurs with *llan*, however, it is as likely that the church is a foundation by 'cult' venerators of the saint after the time of the saint him- or herself, especially if the saint in question is well known. Hence the many Llanddewi churches are

likely to reflect the later spread of influence of the church at St Davids, rather than the travels of Dewi Sant himself. Most of the *llan-* names themselves are likely to be early in date, if not coincident with the initial foundation, but the names doubtless mask layers of history. At Llanllŷr (Ceredigion) an ECM (in private hands) shows the ownership of the site by the cult of a different saint (Modomnóc) to the saint (Llŷr) named in the place name, and, moreover, records that the site was earlier named after a third person, the hermit Ditóc.

ECMs will be the earliest structures on many church sites. From at least the sixth century onwards early Christians in Wales were commemorated with stones inscribed in either the Roman script (broadly the same as our alphabet) or in the Ogham script (a cipher based on lines cut on the edge of a stone and used to write the Irish language). These tend to be memorials to named individuals and, depending on the history of the site being visited, may commemorate abbots, benefactors, proprietors or prominent *claswyr*. Although these are found now inside buildings – often built into walls of churches, or functioning as window sills or lintels – it is clear that most once were standing pillars in churchyards, where many are known to have stood within living memory, or as recorded in pictorial or written record. These stones are amongst our best evidence for early Christianity in Wales. The use of formulaic phrases such as HIC IACIT (*hic iacet*: 'here lies') indicates the origins of this type of monument in Roman models of commemoration. The earliest stones show mainly familial or regional affiliations, but a movement towards more overtly Christian formulae is seen around the seventh and eighth centuries. This, along with the emergence of *llan* names around the same period, may mark a new focus of burial on now established Christian sites with churchyards: one meaning of *llan* is 'enclosure'. The Ogham stones are regional groups, confined to the very south-west (the early medieval kingdom of Dyfed), around Brecon (the early medieval kingdom of Brycheiniog) and in Gwynedd. These distributions correspond to early Irish political groups living in Wales, and are very likely to reflect monuments to early Irish Christians.

The predominant building method of the early Middle Ages was in wood. The proliferation of stone churches dates from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, with Gruffydd ap Cynan (d.1137) recorded as a prolific

builders of churches – his Welsh biographer describes Gwynedd in his day as 'bespangled with lime-washed churches as the firmament is with stars'. The very large number of church buildings, around nine hundred in total, which date from the second half of the Middle Ages is the product of a variety of cultural influences and pastoral models. The typical ground plans of these churches fall into three key categories: cruciform, twin cell and single cell. Attempts have been made to assign these ground plans to the taxonomy of 'mother' and 'local' churches, but it is clear that this is not a simple matter. We cannot determine in all cases if extensions of simpler buildings reflect real need for space or simply the degree of patronage of the church. Certainly, many churches that are in origin *clas* churches are cruciform in plan, such as Clynnog Fawr (Gwynedd), Llanbadarn Fawr and Llanddewi Brefi (Ceredigion). Other *clas* churches, such as Aberdaron and Llancarfan, are twin-nave structures. Some of these churches attained their present extent only after the *clas* period, however; changing patronage and growth in pilgrimage in the period around 1500 accounts for the present scale and quality of churches such as Beaumaris, Clynnog Fawr, Holyhead and Llanelian. The expansion in size of many churches was also a response to liturgical change. Increase in the practice of burial inside churches led to the widening of aisles, and liturgical change, beginning in the later first millennium, saw the gradual addition of side altars at which private devotions could take place or masses held separately from the main altar. Large and elaborate fonts are a regular survival from this period. As churches increased in size and complexity there was increased division of the interior spaces by screens, with the nave becoming not just a place for communal worship but, in the larger churches, a place for non-ecclesiastical meetings and even for the transaction of commerce.

The dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s under Henry VIII saw most of the monastic communities broken up and their possessions confiscated. The size and character of the Cistercian buildings meant that few of them would be reused as parish churches, though the church at Margam (Neath PT) is one example where this has happened. However, through the reuse of some Benedictine buildings, for example, at Ewenny (Vale of Glamorgan), we can experience the flavour of the monastic as opposed to the secular architectural vision, with its limited use of

windows and clear division of internal space preserved even through much alteration. These are reminders of how our medieval church sites, although often similar to the eye today, are of diverse origins.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, in the richer or more anglicised parts of Wales, very large churches, comparable with those in England, began to be built. There are good examples in Mid Wales at Guilsfield, Montgomery, Old Radnor and Presteigne, the last two being ecclesiastically part of the English diocese of Hereford; in the north-east at Denbigh, Gresford, Holt and Wrexham; in the north-west at Conwy; and in the south at Abergavenny, Cardiff (St John's), Carmarthen, Grosmont, Haverfordwest (St Mary's), Laugharne, Magor, Skenfrith and Tenby. These were all either places near the border with England or towns in which English influence was strong. In the rest of Wales the building of churches that were relatively small, though frequently rich in terms of architectural detail, continued through to the Reformation and beyond.

The post-Reformation churches in Wales

The Reformation which swept across Europe from the 1520s transformed the religious landscape of Wales, though the precise nature of its operation was almost entirely determined by political events in England. The Welsh monasteries were the first casualty, all dissolved and their estates sold off in the late 1530s. This had a profound effect on the parishes as many had been appropriated to the monasteries which had either served them personally or appointed vicars to do so. Their patronage and, in many cases, the bulk of the parochial income fell into lay hands and this accounted for their subsequent poverty in the post-Reformation period. Although Wales was, like the northern and western parts of England, religiously conservative, it had one of the earliest reform-minded bishops in the notoriously unpopular William Barlow of St Davids (1536–48) and there were no disturbances in Wales, as there were in Cornwall, when the first English prayer book was introduced in 1549, even though the new services must have been as unintelligible to the Welsh-speaking population as the Latin services that preceded them, and without the latter's familiarity. There is, however, some evidence that there was considerable support in Wales for the temporary restoration of

Roman Catholicism under Queen Mary (1553–8). However, one of the Welsh bishops, Anthony Kitchin of Llandaff (1545–63), was the only bishop in England and Wales to take the oath to Queen Elizabeth and thereby acquiesce, admittedly rather passively, in the Protestant religious settlement of 1559, and this settlement was successful in Wales whereas it was not so in Ireland. The reasons for this were twofold: the first was the appointment of exceptionally able men as the first Protestant bishops, notably Richard Davies of St Davids (1561–81) who was instrumental in ensuring that the Welsh Church was provided with its own translation of the Bible and Book of Common Prayer. The second was the popularity of these new texts in the native language. The prayer book and New Testament in Welsh were published in 1567 and the complete Bible in 1588.

As a result, most of the parishes in Wales seem to have been fully conforming to the new Protestant church by the 1570s, although the widespread survival of rood screens, and some rood lofts, in parts of Wales suggests that there was an enduring conservatism among both clergy and laity, seen in a reluctance to dispose of traditional church furnishings. There was also a strong survival of popular religious customs, such as ceremonies attached to funerals, recourse to holy wells and the continuance of certain liturgical traditions such *Mabsant* and *Plygain*. These, however, did not indicate any lack of support for the established church which, even in the new high-church Anglican outlook it adopted in the 1620s, was able to count on the loyalty of the vast majority of the population of Wales. Two of the finest examples of high-church Anglican architecture of the seventeenth century survive in the private chapels at Gwydir Uchaf and Rûg. Surviving Roman Catholic families were very small in numbers and largely confined to the border counties of Flintshire and Monmouthshire. Protestant dissent from the Anglican Church, in the form of Baptists, Independents, Presbyterians and Quakers, was no stronger in Wales, and if anything slightly weaker, than it was in England in the late seventeenth century. During the early years of the eighteenth century, Protestant dissent in Wales was further weakened when a number of Independent and Presbyterian congregations became Unitarian rather than Trinitarian in doctrine. Unitarian congregations were, and still are, particularly strong along the Teifi valley in northern Carmarthenshire and southern Ceredigion.

The growth of Nonconformity in Wales, which was such an important feature of the principality by the middle years of the nineteenth century, was almost entirely the result of the Evangelical revival within the Anglican Church, which began in Wales in the 1730s with the preaching of Howel Harris and Daniel Rowland. By the 1760s, there were flourishing communities of Evangelicals throughout south Wales, many of which had built their own chapels. They did not regard themselves as separatists but merely as 'societies' within the Anglican Church. Their leaders were mostly Anglican clergy although they permitted laymen to preach in their own chapels. They continued to attend services and the sacrament of Holy Communion in their parish churches but used their own chapels for more informal services, which involved much hymn singing, of a type not provided by the Book of Common Prayer. The attitude of the Anglican bishops and clergy towards these new Evangelical groups, generally known as Methodists, varied. Some clergy openly supported them and even some bishops such as Richard Watson of Llandaff (1782–1816) and Thomas Burgess of St Davids (1803–25) were not unsympathetic. Others, however, saw the Methodists as undisciplined, potentially heretical and politically radical, and, by the 1790s, with the outbreak of revolution and extreme anti-clericalism in France, this was the majority position within the Anglican Church. There is, however, no doubt that Methodism had an enormous attraction, particularly the hymn singing and emotional preaching, for many ordinary people in Wales. From the 1780s, under the leadership of Thomas Charles of Bala, an Anglican clergyman, Methodism became as strong in north Wales as it had become in south Wales a generation earlier. Pressure on Charles from Methodists who were enraged by the attacks on them from Anglican bishops and clergy eventually led to his agreeing, very reluctantly in 1811, to the ordination of some of the lay preachers so that they could celebrate Holy Communion in their own chapels. This was the beginning of the formal schism that resulted in the setting up of the Presbyterian Church of Wales a decade later.

Even before this individual Methodist congregations had seceded from the Anglican Church to join one of the older Nonconformist bodies, so that the Evangelical Revival in Wales did not just create a new denomination and a severe weakening of the Anglican Church, but also