

Who built the first church alongside a ford across the Ogmore River at Aberkenfig, and why?

LLANSANTFFRAID

As its name suggests the church at Llansantffraid is dedicated to St Bride or Bridget and is one of two such in our area. The other is at St Brides Major on the coastal plain and there are, or so I understand, as many as thirteen such dedications to this saint in Wales, which is somewhat strange because Bridget was not a native of our country, she was Irish.

Reputedly the daughter of an Irish King in the 6th century, she chose, against all his efforts to dissuade her, to become a follower of St Patrick and to help in the work of promoting the new Christian religion he was introducing to her country. Part legend, part fact, much of the popularity of her cult undoubtedly stemmed from her association-by-name with the Celtic Goddess Bridget, and many aspects of the latter became bound up in the stories and legends attached to her name.



A theory has been put forward that the dedications to Bridget and other Irish Saints here in Wales were introduced in the 13th century by the descendants of the original Norman conquerors as an act of contrition for the desecrations committed by their forebears against Celtic churches. What basis this theory rests upon I know not, but I do know for certain that in the case of St Brides Major, that church was certainly in being in 1141 – twenty-eight years before any Norman invader ever set foot in Ireland!

From what I have seen the 'Irish churches' in Wales seem to reflect the ready interchange of clergy between the two nations following the Irish conversion. Their form of Christianity, which the Roman Catholic Church considered heretical, was spread throughout the peoples of the so-called Celtic Fringe from Brittany and Cornwall in the south to Scotland in the north. Its agents were priests who habitually undertook long and arduous journeys throughout these lands until their activities were severely curtailed by the prevalence of Viking pirates from the end of the 9th century onwards.

There is no reliable record of the work of these early priests or the churches they founded, so we can only speculate as to how and why the first church at Llansantffraid came into being. It is probably no accident that it stands overlooking an ancient ford across the River Ogmore where it was crossed by a prehistoric track that descends from the top of Cefn Hirgoed on the east, and then ascended Cefn Cribwr on the opposite bank to continue its way westward. The importance of this crossing as late as the Tudor Period is indicated by the fact that a bridge is mentioned here as early as 1538, a time when such structures were few and far between.



The little spur upon which the church stands on the eastern bank has two springs supplying fresh water, and was sufficiently elevated to be above the level of any floods when the river was in spate. Here then, perhaps as early as the 6th century, a priest (presumably of Irish origin) built a small wooden chapel, offering shelter to travellers whose journeys were interrupted when flooding blocked the ford, and perhaps too offering a little missionary work to while away the long hours until the water subsided. Celtic Christianity was far less rigidly organised than its Roman Catholic counterpart. Priests founded a chapel where they thought it was needed, and if their choice proved a sound one, then after their day somebody would duly arrive to take their place.

With the arrival of the Normans the Celtic form of Christianity was suppressed and Llansantffraid incorporated within the framework of the Roman Catholic Church, becoming the centre of a newly created parish on this bank of the Ogmore River. Its new status saw the small wooden chapel that had served the needs of worshippers hitherto replaced by a larger one of stone – the font and the earliest masonry identifiable in the present building apparently dating from the 12th century.



So the little church at last entered the light of recorded history and went on to develop into the building we see today.

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For anyone wishing to know more about the church an informative little booklet entitled "A History of Llansantffraid" written by Maria Lalic was produced a few years ago. I believe this is now out of print, but local readers should be able to obtain access to a copy via their public library.