

Great Archaeological Sites in Cardiff



5. BISHOP'S PALACE AT LLANDAFF



A couple of minutes' walk up the hill from their cathedral is the home of the medieval bishops of Llandaff (ST15557812). As well as being responsible for the churches and clergy in their dioceses, bishops were also landowners, in a structure that paralleled the feudal system of their secular counterparts. So important was this that, in a dispute about lands with the bishops of St David's and Hereford, the 12th century Bishop Urban compiled a massive compendium of all the charters he could find relating to gifts of land to Llandaff from the 6th century to the 11th century in order to present his case to the pope. He had also in dispute with the Norman barons who had seized lands from the church as part of their conquest of Glamorgan and handed them to monasteries in England and Normandy. In order to resolve this particular disagreement, Urban came to an agreement with Robert of Gloucester, Lord of Glamorgan, by which he and his successors were granted the rights to a lordship around Llandaff in recompense.

As important magnates, the Bishops of Llandaff needed a suitable residence to emphasise their status. We can see this in the remains of the palace at Llandaff. It dates to the century after Urban, and was built by one of his successors. Judging by

some of the architectural details which are similar to those in Caerphilly Castle, this was probably William de Braose, bishop from 1266-87. He was an aristocrat, related to the noble families that ruled Brecknock and Gower. The bishop's palace takes the form of a small castle, although we do not know whether this was actually needed for defensive purposes or whether William adopted it because a castle was appropriate to his rank. At all events, it is just the defences that have survived, consisting of the gatehouse and the curtain wall with its towers in the southern and eastern corners. There would have been residential and service buildings inside, but very little of these survives, just traces in the northeastern corner of the hall and solar. These were at first floor level, above a vaulted basement, and had windows overlooking the River Taff. On the other side of the castles southwestern wall survives up to and including the wall-walk. There are traces of a more elaborate wall walk on the north curtain wall, linking the hall with the gatehouse. The gatehouse is a proper defensive structure, with projecting towers complete with arrow loops and a portcullis, and there would have been a room over the gate itself.

By the end of the Middle Ages, successive bishops preferred to live in the more up-to-date and comfortable palace at Mathern near Chepstow, which at that time was also part of the diocese. The old palace at Llandaff was leased to secular tenants and gradually fell into disrepair and ruin.

You can view our 3D model of the palace at <https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/the-bishops-palace-llandaff-a3033e6b456045139a1e1acd6855638f>

The Bishop's palace is on Cathedral Close at the corner of Cathedral Green, postcode CF5 2ED. There is some on-street parking on Cathedral Green. The nearest railway station is Fairwater, on the line between Cardiff Central and Radyr. Maps: OS Landranger Series sheet 171, Explorer Series sheet 151.

Timeline (the asterisks indicate the time-span)



You can learn more about this site, and other similar archaeological sites in Wales, by going to <https://www.archwilio.org.uk/arch/>. Please read and observe the Conditions of Use. Llandaff Cathedral has the PRN (Primary Record Number) 00133s, and the Bishop's Palace is 00148s. You can search for other similar sites here too. You can contact us via social media or through the methods given at the bottom of the page.