

Great Archaeological Sites in Torfaen



2. LLANDDERFEL CHAPEL



Photos: Madeleine Gray

On shelf in the hillside above Cwmbran stand the remains of the chapel of St Derfel (ST 2639 9528), a pilgrimage site belonging to the Abbey of Llantarnam. It is first mentioned in 1412, but it probably went back long before the Cistercians came to Wales – whereas they dedicated their foundations to the standard saints recognised by the Roman calendar, Llandderfel it was dedicated to the Celtic St Derfel. According to legend, Derfel the Strong was one of King Arthur's knights, and it was his strength that allowed him to survive the Battle of Camlan in which Arthur was mortally wounded. Derfel is said to have become a monk or a hermit after the battle, and was later revered as a saint.

All that is left of the buildings is the bottoms of the walls which are so covered by earth and vegetation that the little of the stonework which formed them can be seen. They mark out an L-shaped complex, with a north-south wing divided into two rooms,

and an east-west wing which abuts it. The east-west wing is not divided up, and would have been the chapel itself. The other part would have been accommodation for the resident chaplain – a document of 1254 mentions a chaplain called David – and for visiting pilgrims, who were apparently well looked after there.

The buildings stand in an enclosure which has been variously described as ‘semicircular’ and ‘pear-shaped’ – at all events with the curved sides that many people consider to be another indication that it went back to before the Norman conquest. Burials are said to have been found there in 1933.



The site is on the Llantarnam to Risca section of the Cistercian way – details at <http://www.cistercianway.wales/directory/l/llantarnam-risca/>. The nearest railway station is Cwmbran, on the Newport to Crewe line. Maps: OS Landranger Series sheet 171, Explorer Series sheet 152.

Timeline (the asterisks indicate the possible 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. Llandderfel church has the PRN (Primary Record Number) 00106g, with the surrounding enclosure 08319g and the burials 08320g. 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. See more about sites in South Wales connected to Christianity at http://www.ggat.org.uk/cadw/historic_christian/pages/index.html.