Great Archaeological Sites in Monmouthshire

6. TINTERN ABBEY

In 1131, Walter fitz Richard, lord of Chepstow, grant land at Tintern to Cistercian monks from L'Aumone Abbey in France. The Cistercians were a new force that had broken away from the old monastic orders to live a simple austere life far from the distractions of the world, relying on the labour of their own hands for their livelihood. The new abbey that they were to found at Tintern was only their second in Britain, and was to become rich and important. The remains are the most complete in Wales and still impressive by any standards.

Their new foundation was on the banks of the River Wye (SO 5330 0003), and this led to some changes to the standard layout of a Cistercian monastery. Normally the cloister lies to the south of the church, to allow the monks the maximum amount of light for the reading and writing that went on there. However, the shape of the site at Tintern meant that the cloister had to be on the north side of the church. The church was the centre of monastic life, where the daily round of services took place for the most prestigious group of the abbey's inhabitants, the choir monks. The others were the lay-brothers who were responsible for work on the abbey's lands and were therefore only expected to attend a minority of services. Around the cloister were the main buildings used by the choir monks – their dormitory on the upper floor of their day room, their refectory, and the chapter house where they met every day to hear a chapter of their monastic rule read out and to arrange the day's business. The lay-brothers had their own separate accommodation, next to the gatehouse that led from the cloister to the abbey's outer precinct to the northeast of the cloister. West of the

cloister, and secluded from it by another courtyard was the infirmary for sick monks with its own chapel where they could still hear mass being said even if they were too frail to attend the church. The abbot's lodging was also separate.

Only a small proportion of the original Norman buildings still survive. There was a major rebuild in the late 12th to early 13th century in the early English style, which can still be seen in the fine buildings on the south side of the cloister, but even more beautiful are the buildings that came later in the 13th century and the start of the 14th, particularly the church.

Like other monasteries, Tintern suffered when Henry VIII abolished all religious houses. However, from the 18th century onwards, it has been visited by people who admire the beauty both of the buildings and their setting.

Tintern Abbey (NP16 6SH) is a guardianship site run by Cadw, with its own car parking facilities. See the Cadw website for opening times and entrance charges. Maps: OS Landranger Series sheet 162, Explorer Series Outdoor Leisure sheet 14.

Timeline (the asterisks indicate the time-span)

5000 BC	4000 BC	3000 BC	2000 BC	1000 BC		1000 AD	2000 AD
Mesolithic	Neolithic		Bronze Age	Iron Age	Romans	Early Medieval	Medieval / Post-medieval

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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. Tintern Abbey has the PRN (Primary Record Number) 00713g, and individual structures in the abbey complex have been given the PRNs 00714g – 00721g, 09603g - 09604g. 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.