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PRN 47273



01/04/96

WHITLAND ABBEY

OPENING CEREMONY OF THE RESTORATION AND LANDSCAPING WORKS AT THE ABBEY CHURCH SITE

4TH OCTOBER 1996

PROGRAMME

Commencing 2.30 pm

Introduction

Richard Meade, Head of Strategic Services, Carmarthenshire County Council

Brief History of Abbey and the project

Don Benson, Director Cambria Archaeology (Dyfed Archaeological Trust)

Short address and prayer in Latin and Welsh

Very Rev Canon S Cunnane, Catholic Diocese of Menevia

Short address and unveiling of information panel

Councillor D T Davies OBE MM DL, Chairman, Carmarthenshire County Council

Guided tour of Abbey Church

Peter Crane, Cambria Archaeology

The opening will be followed by a buffet at Whitland Town Hall

List of invitees :

1. Cllr.D.T.Davies, O.B.E., MM, DL Chairman of Carmarthenshire County Council
2. Cllr. Howard Jones, Vice-chairman of Carmarthenshire County Council
3. Cllr.K.A.Rees Chairman of Economic Development Committee
4. Cllr.T.D.Bowen Vice-chairman of Economic Development Committee
5. Cllr. Roy Harris Chairman of Planning, Property & Technical Services Committee
6. Cllr. Dr. Margaret Evans Vice-chairman of Planning, Property & Tech. Services Committee
7. Cllr. Roy Llewellyn Local Member for Whitland
8. Cllr. John Gibbin Local Member for Llanboidy
9. Mr. Roderic Morgan Chief Executive of Carmarthenshire County Council
10. Mr. Gerald Phillips Director of Economic Development & Leisure
11. Mr. John Rees Director of Planning, Property & Technical Services
12. Mr. Allan Jones Director of Legal & Administrative Services
13. Mr. Richard Mead Head of Strategic Services
14. Mr. Andrew Lewis Architect in Consultancy Section
15. Mr. Rick Turner Regional Inspector of Ancient Monuments, Cadw
16. Mr. Gareth Beynon Cadw
17. Lt.Col. W.K.Buckley Member of Dyfed Archaeological Trust
18. Mr. D.P. Bown Member of Dyfed Archaeological Trust
19. Mr.W.D. Brace Member of Dyfed Archaeological Trust
20. Mr. Robert Kennedy Member of Dyfed Archaeological Trust
21. Mr. Chris Delaney Member of Dyfed Archaeological Trust
22. Mr.Don Benson Director of Dyfed Archaeological Trust
23. Mr.Peter Crane Archaeologist with Dyfed Archaeological Trust
24. Mr.Terry James Royal Commission on Ancient & Historical Monuments of Wales
25. Cllr.Hubert Phillips Chairman Llanboidy Community Council
26. Cllr.S.B.Thomas Vice-Chairman Llanboidy Community Council
27. Cllr.Ron Jenkins Mayor Whitland Community Council
28. Cllr.Bill Allen Vice-Chairman Whitland Community Council
29. Cannon James Cunnane Catholic Church (Our Lady of the Taper), Cardigan
30. Sister Catherine Sisters of the Holy Cross Abbey, Whitland
31. Sister Sisters of the Holy Cross Abbey, Whitland
32. Sister Sisters of the Holy Cross Abbey, Whitland
33. Dr. Roy Allen President of Whitland & District Heritage Trust
34. Mr.Gerwyn Willimas Vice-President of Whitland & District Heritage Trust
35. Mr.Ken Kendall Secretary of Whitland & District Heritage Trust
36. Mr. David Peterson Chairman of Antur Cwm Taf
37. Mr. Wyn Williams Secretary of Antur Cwm Taf
38. Mrs. Joan Asby of SPARC (formerly T.C.R.I.)
39. Mr. of SPARC
40. Mr. Gethin Lewis Whitland Abbey Home Farm
41. Mrs. Gethin Lewis Whitland Abbey Home Farm
42. Mr. Gwyn Lewis Cilpost Farm
43. Mrs. Gwyn Lewis Cilpost Farm
44. Mr Eddie Phillips Contractors
45. Mr. Contractors
46. Mr. John Howells Trinity College
47. Mr. John B. Allat Whitland Abbey Heritage Trust
48. Mr.Haydn Lewis Hywel Dda Memorial
49. Ithel Parry Roberts Whitland Abbey Heritage Trust (former district cllr.)
50. Parch J.Towyn-Jones President of Carmarthenshire Antiquarian Society

WHITLAND ABBEY - Outline History

Whitland Abbey was a house of the Cistercians - known from their white clothing as the White Monks- an order founded at Cîteaux in central France in 1119 AD. Cistercian abbeys were generally established in remote rural areas in order to sustain a reforming severity of moral and intellectual life and hard manual labour. Ironically, their success in estate management and the concentration on sheep farming led to creation of vast wealth and power, reflected in the aggrandisement of abbey churches and associated buildings, and also, in political influence.

First established at Trefgarn, Pembrokeshire, in 1140 AD, the monks moved to a new site at Whitland in 1151, to land granted by John of Torrington. Although earlier monastic communities had been established (Neath, 1130, Tintern, 1131, and Basingwerk in the north, 1132), Whitland attracted the support of the Welsh princes, initially due to the rise to power of the Lord Rhys, and became the premier Cistercian House in Welsh Wales. As a result, from Whitland there developed seven daughter Abbeys in Wales, and two in Ireland.

During the 12th and 13th century struggles for political and military supremacy in Wales, the Abbey at Whitland had to maintain a fine line between its feudal allegiance to the English Crown, its obligations to its Welsh patrons, and its loyalty to its Welsh kinsmen and culture. This impossible dilemma resulted in attacks on the Abbey in 1258 from English supporters and conversely, as a result of later support for the English Crown, in considerable damage to the Abbey in the late 13th century during revolts against Edward II's conquests.

In the 14th century there was a national decline in monastic wealth, exacerbated by the Black Death in 1349. It appears that the Abbot of Whitland at the time may have himself died as a result of the pestilence which seriously affected the Abbey's agricultural labourers with drastic effect on the Abbey's economy.

The Abbey supported the Glyndwr rebellion of 1403 and suffered accordingly. By 1440, the Abbot of Whitland complained that whereas at the time of its foundation the abbey could house 100 monks, it could then only support 8 monks and household servants.

This placed the abbey in a weak position at the time of Henry VIII's general Dissolution of 1536. It survived briefly, due to a payment of perhaps £400, but in 1539 was finally suppressed and the buildings sold into private hands.

There then followed a period of authorised (and no doubt, unauthorised) pilfering. Some of the materials from the site, eg the fine Bath stone, were removed to embellish Sir John Perrot's redevelopment of Laugharne Castle into an Elizabethan residence.

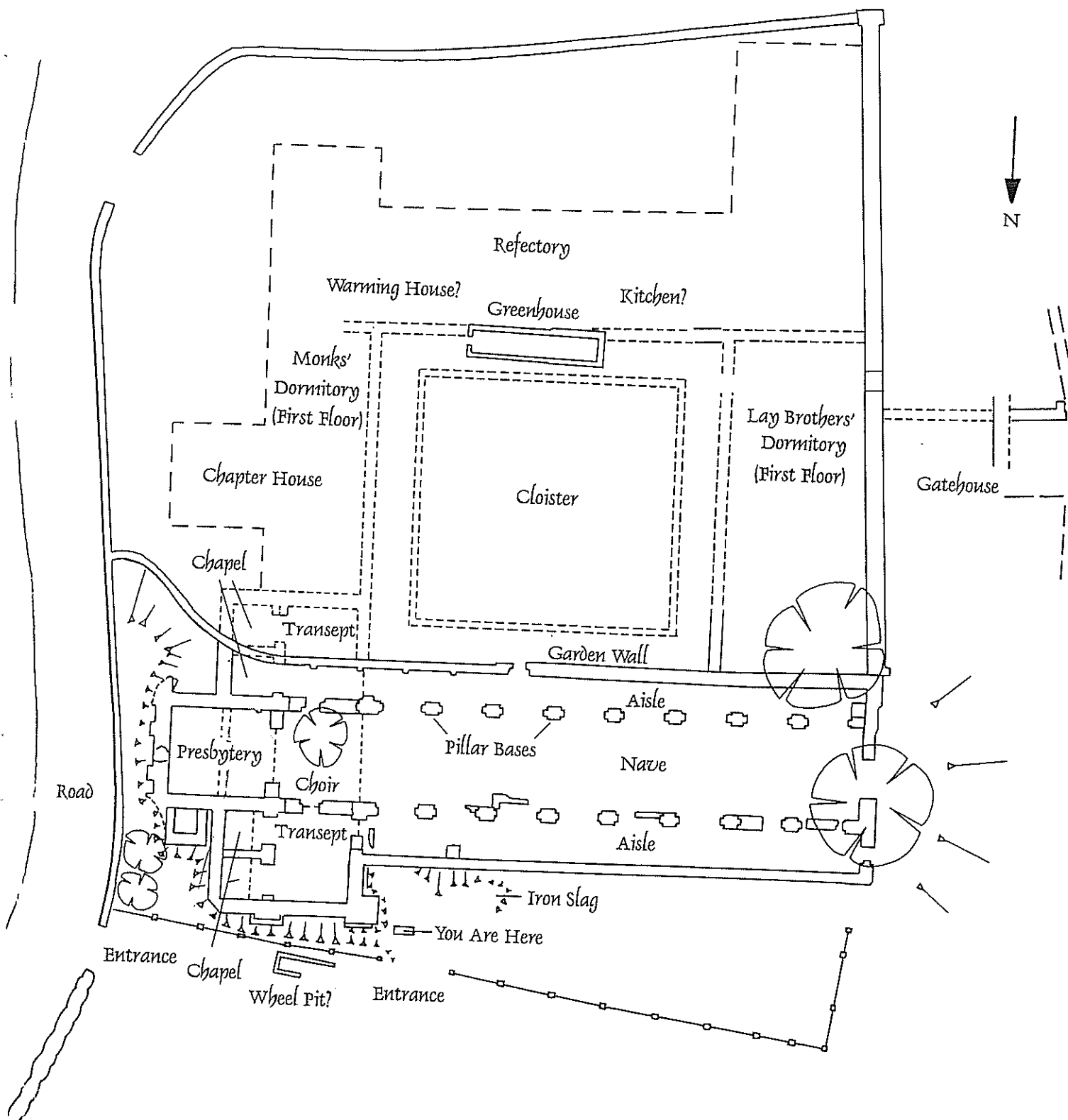
By the middle of the 17th-century, the Abbey site was being used as an important iron forge, utilising the monastery's former water courses for power. In the 1640's, cannon shot was produced for the Cromwellian forces during the Civil War. The forge was rebuilt in the 18th century, by the Morgans, finally ceasing production in 1808.

Through marriage to a Morgan heiress the estate passed into the hands of the Yelvertons. Stone from the abbey and forge was no doubt used in the building of the mansion ("Whitland Abbey") and in the garden wall built *circa* 1836. The abbey site seems to have been partially investigated at this time and more extensively in 1926-8. Some limited re-excavation by Dyfed Archaeological Trust, in conjunction with Trinity College, Carmarthen, took place 1994-5, prior to the consolidation and landscaping of the Abbey Church.



- ◆ Daughter Houses
- Holdings of Whitland Abbey

Daughter Houses settled from Whitland



PROJECT HISTORY

Whitland is probably the least well-known, least investigated and least well-preserved (above ground) of all the Cistercian Abbeys in Wales. Nevertheless its remains are of extreme historical and archaeological importance.

Over the last ten years there has been a renewed interest in the conservation of the site and its enhancement for the benefit of the general public. Parts of the site had long been in separate ownership and in 1986, in response to the proposed sale of Abbey Home Farm, there were local moves to purchase that part of the complex. A Draft Feasibility Study was prepared by Dyfed Archaeological Trust and steps taken to form a Whitland Abbey Heritage Trust. Following the collapse of attempts to secure the whole site, interest subsided, although the proto Abbey Trust provided the stimulus for the establishment of a broader-based Whitland Heritage Trust.

The establishment of the Taf and Cleddau Rural Initiative and the Whitland Community Association revived interest in the Abbey. The need for presentation of the site in conjunction with the development of the Landsker Border Footpath route was accorded a high priority in the Community Association's programme, supported by Carmarthen District Council.

In 1993 Carmarthen District Council took the enlightened and critical step forward in negotiating a 21 year lease of the site of the Abbey Church from its owners, the Trustees of the Catholic Diocese of Menevia. Both the Church and the Council were anxious to improve the management of the site and develop a sensitive scheme of consolidation, interpretation and public access to part of the remains.

Partial and largely unrecorded archaeological investigations 1926-8 had left the church site as a confused jumble of piles of stones and spoil heaps. The site was overgrown and unintelligible both to the lay public and professional historians and archaeologists. In a preliminary report, the Dyfed Archaeological Trust advised an initial archaeological investigation and evaluation to determine the likely extent and costs of clearance of the church site and to provide more detailed proposals and estimates for its treatment and interpretation for visitors. The investigations, funded by Carmarthen District Council, were carried out in 1994, with the assistance of the Department of Archaeology, Trinity College, Carmarthen. Subsequently, detailed proposals for the future treatment and management of the site were accepted by the Council.

A programme of archaeological clearance, levelling, consolidation and landscaping commenced in 1995 under the Trust's direction and was concluded in 1996. The clearance and levelling work was again assisted by Trinity College students whilst the consolidation and landscaping work was contracted to Eddie R S Phillips, Building Contractors, of Clynderwen. Funding for the project, totalling some £60,000, was provided by Carmarthen District Council and by grants from Cadw:Welsh Historic Monuments. In April 1996 responsibility for the on-going project was transferred to the new Carmarthenshire County Council. The site also now lies within the area covered by the St Clear's based Antur Cwm Taf Rural Initiative.

THE RESTORATION PROGRAMME

The treatment of the site presented a number of problems and challenges. Of the remains of the Abbey, only the site of the Abbey Church fell within the Council's lease: the larger part of the Abbey remains, including the site of the cloisters, domestic ranges and gatehouse, were and remain in private ownership and not accessible to the public. For the church itself, the initial field evaluation established that the original medieval floors were in a very poor condition and only a few stretches of upstanding medieval masonry survived.

Extensive archaeological excavation, extremely expensive in itself, would have created significant extra consolidation and restoration costs without necessarily enhancing the effective display of the site. The challenge therefore was how to maintain and protect the archaeological integrity of the monument and at the same time, make it sufficiently intelligible as a cultural and educational amenity? Further requirements were that the existing tranquillity of the whole Abbey complex be maintained, and that a solution be found which involved low future maintenance and management costs.

An innovative approach was devised whereby following removal of the earlier 20th century spoil tips, the floor levels of the church were reconstituted some 30cms above the original latest medieval levels, thus preserving archaeological horizons for posterity. Those portions of original medieval masonry exposed above the new levels were consolidated using traditional mortar mixes and capped with turf as a protection against erosion. Elsewhere, based on the archaeological evidence, the wall lines of the church were marked out by constructing turf banks and in some areas, by earthen banks faced with upright stones so as to be readily distinguishable from the original medieval masonry.

The 19th-century garden wall, which overlies the south wall of the church, was extensively repaired and consolidated. Finally, the remaining spoil heaps outside the north wall-line of the church were levelled, covered with topsoil and re-seeded. The hedge bounding the south side of the enclosure was laid to provide a more open aspect, and a plinth and interpretation panel provided.

VISITING THE SITE

A Guide to the Abbey Church

Enter the church down the pathway from the information panel, turn right and walk down to the bottom (western) end of the site. From here you can best appreciate the vast width and length of the Abbey Church.

The original main doorway to the Church is in the centre of the field boundary at the bottom end of the site. This was the doorway which, in 1258 it is recorded, the English king's supporters, Stephen Bauzan, Nicholas Lord of Cemais, Patrick de Chaworth Lord of Kidwelly and the Lord of Carew with a band of armed knights, battered in at night, belaboured the monks, stripped the lay-brethren, took the abbey servants into the monastic cemetery and killed them. On leaving, the raiders took with them all the horses and abbey valuables except those in the church. The Abbey's support for Llewellyn ap Gruffydd was the reason behind this attack.

In the field behind you are earthworks and a large portion of upstanding masonry which represent one of the gatehouses to the Abbey. The garden wall to your right represents the south wall of the church. On the other side of this wall were the 'domestic' buildings of the Abbey arranged in a quadrangle around the cloister. The lay brothers' dormitory would have been on the first floor on the west range of the cloister. In the right hand corner, at the junction of the garden wall with the church enclosure there would have been the 'night stairs' by which the lay brothers would have come down into the church, for services starting at about two o'clock in the morning, (for Matins, and continuing with the offices of Lauds and Prime) until nearly seven 'o clock.

Looking down the nave towards the east end of the church you can picture the sweeping columns and arcades rising from the pillar bases dividing the nave from the aisles. The bases of the columns are of the best Bath stone. Shorter stubs of wall on the left hand side survive from post-dissolution structures built within the remains of the church. The floor of the nave and aisles appears to have been stone flagged.

Moving up the nave, you reach the step up into the crossing (choir), entered originally through the chancel arch, across which there may have been a screen. Here you enter the area reserved solely for the regular monks - lay brothers were confined to the Nave. The crossing - the central area of the cross formed by the junction of the Nave, the North and South Transepts and the Presbytery, may have been surmounted by a central tower. From limited archaeological excavations it is evident that the crossing was floored with alternate green and yellow tiles arranged in a chequerboard fashion. The choir stalls may have originally extended down into the nave.

The North and South Transepts each had their own pair of chapels. These chapels would have been private chapels for distinguished families, but the associations are unknown. One is likely to have been the family chapel of the original patron, John of Torrington.

Within the North Transept, the steps up to the chapels and chapel altars were discovered to have the original tiled floors mainly intact. The South Transept, which partially extends under the garden wall has not been excavated, but is likely to have been extensively damaged.

Returning to the choir, a step leads up to the first level within the Presbytery. The two stubs of walls projecting inwards from the north and south walls seem to indicate the position of a later

chancel arch. On the right, a drop in level of the top of the south wall indicates the position of the Sedilia, the masonry seat for the principal officiator at the services. Two further steps lead up to the Altar.

The area of the Choir and Presbytery was an area of increasing sanctity leading up to the Altar: to be buried in this area confirmed the status of individuals in their own lifetime and hopefully assured them of perhaps superior salvation in the life thereafter. As befits a great medieval Welsh Abbey, many important persons in terms of Welsh political and cultural history were buried here, probably lying beneath the Choir and the Presbytery. Amongst recorded or attributed burials at Whitland are notable princely figures such as:

c.1186: Cadwalader, son of Rhys 'openly slain in Dyfed and he was buried at Whitland'.

1191: Owain, son of Prince Rhys and brother of Gwenllian

1271: Maredudd ap Rhys Gryg 'a brave powerful man, died in his own castle at Dryslwynand his body was taken to Whitland, and was honourably buried in the great church on the steps in front of the altar'

Gwenllian, daughter of Rhys ap Thomas died 1400 at Pentre Dafis, near Dryslwyn Castle

Burials of famous bards, reflecting Whitland Abbey's role in the cultural history of Wales, include those of Dafydd Nanmor, buried 1460, and Rhys Nanmor, buried 1480.

Thus you are treading the steps of history.....

To the left (north) of the presbytery, there are the walls of a post-medieval building. The function of this is uncertain, but is probably to be associated with the period when the Abbey site was utilised as a forge.

The South Transeptual Chapel is bisected by the later garden wall. Little is known of this south transept and the eastern range of abbey buildings to the south. These latter buildings would have included the Chapter house and the Monk's dormitory. On the south side of the Cloisters would have been the Refectory and perhaps the Warming House and Kitchen. All these lie within the present walled garden which is privately owned and not accessible to the public.

The buildings of Abbey Home farm, across the road from the church site, may incorporate, or be on the site of ancillary Abbey buildings. Up the valley to the north of the church, and also to the west and south west, are traces of former Abbey mill/fishponds and their associated leats.

Finds from Whitland Abbey

The earlier limited and piecemeal investigations of the site were not well-recorded. Some architectural fragments and tiles from the 1926 -8 excavations found their way into Carmarthen Museum, and the British Museum also has some Whitland tiles. The 1994 exploratory excavations prior to clearance and levelling recovered more architectural and tile fragments from the earlier spoil heaps, but little in the way of other medieval finds.

Medieval tiles from Whitland include both embossed and moulded patterns, the latter being later in date. Some tiles probably incorporate the heraldic devices of influential patrons, but these devices remain to be further studied. Undoubtedly the most famous Whitland tile design is that incorporating the Lamb and Flag device - the *Agnus Dei* - Lamb of God. This tile is unknown from any other Abbey in Western Europe and its only other known occurrence is at Haverfordwest Priory.

Numerous post-medieval finds were recovered from the spoil heaps, but in terms of the history of the site, the most significant are those which may be associated with its later use as a forge. A substantial dump of iron slag remains uninvestigated near the site entrance. Analysis of samples taken from this may shed light on the iron works technology.

