

St Mary, Llanfair-ar-y-Bryn, Carmarthenshire (PRN 3856)



ST MARY,

LLANFAIR-AR-Y-BRYN,

CARMARTHENSHIRE (DINEFWR)

Dyfed PRN 3856

RB No. 2998

NGR SN 7698 3517

Listed Building No. 10967

Grade I listed (1998)

Listed Grade I. First Listed in 1966. Last Amended in 2004.

Reason for Listing: Graded I as a substantial medieval church with intricate history of building and change from the C12 to the C16, with fine W tower and high degree of survival of medieval architectural features.

SUMMARY

Medieval church; 100% pre-19th century core fabric.

A 3-cell church, medium sized. Consists of chancel/nave, without structural division, 8 bays; west tower, 3 storeys; medieval. South porch, 18th century. Vestry (north of nave), 1 bay, early-mid 19th century. Organ chamber (east of vestry), 1 bay, 1880. Local rubble construction, including some re-used Roman brick/tile. Internal early plaster with wall-paintings. Slate gable roofs; vestry/organ chamber with slate lean-to roof; west tower roof not seen.

Windows including tracery, doors, blocked doors including ?rood-

loft door, tower openings, vault, gargoyles, fireplace and arch, piscina, tomb-recess(es)/Easter sepulchre, stoup, blocked arch, medieval, some openings 12th century. Other windows and doors from 1880, 1906 and 1913, neo-Gothic, with ORS and yellow oolite dressings.

(Some 17th century loose fittings.)

Roofs: ?1723 and 1913. Floors: 1913. Finishes: ?late medieval – 1913.

Condition – good.

Archaeological potential – excellent. Pronounced, D-shaped platform beneath 50% of church, primary; medium-depth, earth-cut drain around 40% of church; shallow, concrete-lined drain around 50% of church; former components beyond 20% of church; floor raised in 50% of church; floors formerly suspended over a void in 50% of church; below-ground floor in 5% of church; external memorials significantly close to 60% of church.

Structural value (pre 19th century) – excellent. 100% medieval core fabric; medieval windows including tracery, doors, blocked doors, tower openings, vault, gargoyles, fireplace and arch, piscina, tomb-recess(es)/Easter sepulchre, stoup, blocked arch; 18th century roof and porch.

Group value – high. Important medieval landmark church with tower, in hilltop location; within Roman fort site; C18 lych-gate; associated good masonry buildings.

Phasing:

Phase 1 – Chancel/nave, C12.

(Phase 2 – Former south chapel, c.1290).

(Phase 3 – Former south porch, C14?).

Phase 4 – West tower, late C15.

Phase 5 – South porch, early C18?.

Phase 6 – Vestry, early-mid C19.

Phase 7 – Restored 1880, medium impact.

Phase 8 – Restored 1906 and 1913, low impact.

DESCRIPTION

The present church

St Mary, Llanfair-ar-y-Bryn, is a 3-celled church, of medium size. It retains approximately 100% pre-19th century core fabric.

The present church consists of a 8-bayed chancel/nave without structural division past or present, a south porch, a 4-storeyed west tower, and a vestry and organ chamber north of the nave. Construction is in local mixed rubble; brick and tile derived from an underlying Roman fort can be seen in the facework of the east and north walls. There are many medieval dressings, in Roman tile, limestone and Old Red Sandstone; other dressings are in yellow oolite, from 1880 and neo-Gothic, and from 1906/1913, in Old Red Sandstone and neo-Gothic but more-or-less replicating earlier dressings. There are extensive remains of late 18th-early 19th century external render, with repointing from 1880 and 1913; the internal plaster is early, with wall-paintings (pre-Reformation?). Roofs are slated gables, the vestry/organ chamber has a slated lean-to roof and the tower roof was not seen..

The 'chancel'

Although there is, and has never been, any structural distinction between nave and chancel it is useful here to divide the internal space for descriptive purposes.

The 'chancel' walls are battered, and feature Roman brick/tile. They appear to have been raised considerably, along with the floor; the sill of the original east window lies very close to the present floor level as does the piscina in the same wall (see below). The present east window is of 3 lights, with cusped semicircular heads and sunk spandrels in a square surround, from the late 15th century but extensively restored in 1913. Internally, the sills and lower splays of the earlier, blocked 2 light window are visible, interrupted by the 15th century window and given segmental heads; the internal framing of the splays caused Caröe to reconstruct the window as a Romanesque type from the 12th century (Caröe, 1917, 26-8) and some internal paint remains. South of the window is the piscina, which has a crude 2-centred head and a plain bowl, of probable 13th century date.

The east bay north wall features a window like the east window but of 2 lights and all in Old Red Sandstone, with heads rebuilt in 1913. The central bay is lit by a single, multi-cusped lancet in a square surround, all (re)built, with infill, in 1913. The west bay is lit by single uncusped lancet in a 2-centred surround, in double cavetto-moulded Old Red Sandstone rebuilt in 1913, with infill, from a ?14th century original; there is a small, simple, lintelled square opening above, which may be a light but equally may be a socket. Internally, the east bay north wall features a tomb recess or Easter sepulchre with a low, rounded 2-centred head with a chamfered surround, probably from the 13th century; it is empty. A second, similar recess lies in the bay to the west, but lacks a surround; it has been interrupted by the insertion of a tall, square recess, of unknown date and function but not, apparently, a

window. Above it, a line of quoins can be seen on the internal face of the wall which appears to represent an internal return into a former transeptal structure, removed prior to the insertion of the tomb-recess(es)

The east bay south wall is pierced by a plain medieval slit-light with a square head which, with the sill, was replaced in 1913; the rear arch is segmental which gives the opening a probable late 13th-14th century date. The south wall of the central bay features a blocked arch that led into a former south chapel (see below); internally, the arch has a chamfered, 2 centred surround with plain, chamfered imposts probably from the 14th century, and externally the arch has a rounded, 2-centred profile with voussoirs that lie beneath the render, demonstrating that the chapel was removed prior to the early 19th century. The blocking is itself pierced by a cusped 2-light window in a square surround and label, in cavetto-moulded Old Red Sandstone, yellow sandstone and oolite, with sunk spandrels featuring moulded shields, all from the late 15th century; the sources suggest that the blocking is rather later and that the window is re-used (see below). In the west bay is a further window with 2 cusped, semicircular-headed lights in a square surround with sunk spandrels, all rebuilt in cavetto-moulded Old Red Sandstone in 1913, with infill. Above it are 2 simple slit-lights; the one to the east is blocked both internally and externally, but the heads and sills were replaced in 1913, while the one to the west has an inserted timber lintel and a square embrasure.

The internal plaster is fundamentally early, and there are the remains of wall-paintings on the east wall, with a text in 16th century characters. The oak, king-post roof is 18th century (1723?) but was given a softwood 'wagon roof' ceiling in 1880, restored in 1913. The red-tiled floor is from 1913.

The 'nave'

The 'nave' north wall features some Roman brick/tile; the west end features very large, medieval quoins. There is a window towards the west end, with 2 independent 2-centred, cusped lights in a segmental arch with infill, from 1880. Internally, a blocked medieval north door is visible beneath the window; it has a cavetto-moulded 2-centred surround, with chamfered stops at the bases of the jambs, from the late 15th century. Further west is a plain, square-headed, earlier(?) medieval light, re-exposed in 1913.

At the east end of the south wall is a 3-light window like the 1880 window in the north wall. A stone projects from the external face beneath its sill, which may relate to the blocked doorway visible internally and truncated by the window; however, in this location the doorway probably relates to a former rood-loft stair in the wall thickness. Immediately east of the south porch is a simple slit light with a semicircular head whose voussoirs incorporate Roman tile, lying in a splayed embrasure with a semicircular head; all 12th century. The south door has a 2-centred surround, probably from the 14th century but restored in 1913, externally, to the east of the door is a plain stoup of probable 14th century date. At the east end of the south wall is a single light, unblocked in 1913, with a cusped, 2-centred head in a square surround with sunk spandrels, with the sill probably from the 15th century but with jambs replaced in 1913; the embrasure, with a roughly segmental head, may be earlier.

The internal plaster is early like that in the chancel and the north wall exhibits faint wall-paintings. The oak king-post roof is continuous with that in the 'chancel' but is here without the 1880 ceiling, and was restored in 1913. Floored as the 'chancel'.

The west tower

The west tower is from the late 15th century and comprised 4 storeys. The facework is in large limestone rubble, and the tower

features the external batter up to a string-course typical of the region. A square spiral stair turret projects from the eastern half of the south wall, entered through a late 15th century doorway with a cavetto-moulded 2-centred surround, with chamfered stops at the bases of the jambs, and lit by simple loops. The ground floor communicates with the nave through a plain, 2-centred arch, late 15th century. The west door lies beneath the string-course which is corbelled over the cut-out in the batter; it has a rounded 2-centred surround in chamfered Old Red Sandstone from the late 15th century, unblocked in 1906. Above it is a 2-light window of cusped lights with semicircular heads in a 2-centred outer arch, the spandrel of which is pierced by a trefoil, all in chamfered Old Red Sandstone from the late 15th century but much restored, after earlier damage, in 1913. The late 15th century barrel-vault has a 2-centred profile. The floor is tiled as the chancel/nave.

The second stage is lit by a window in the south wall like that in the west wall of the ground floor, late 15th century; this stage is now continuous with the third stage, which is lit by 2 cusped single lancets and has a surviving fireplace and flue suggesting that it formerly formed a 'priest's chamber' (Caröe, 1917, 35). The belfry stage has cusped 2-light openings with semicircular heads in all 4 faces, again from the late 15th century. The crenellated parapet lies on a string-course, and features gargoyles, all from the late 15th century but restored in the late 17th century (ibid.).

The south porch

The south porch was entirely rebuilt, in roughly squared and coursed limestone, in the 18th century. The door has a contemporary 2-centred surround in chamfered limestone and Old Red Sandstone, but may re-use part of a 14th century surround, and there is 18th century internal benching. The softwood roof, and floor laid directly on the substrate, are from 1880.

The vestry and organ chamber

The vestry is from the early-mid 19th century and is entered from the 'nave' through a plain, 2-centred doorway, and from the churchyard through a simple, square doorway in the north wall, rebuilt in the later 20th century when the plain, square window was also rebuilt.. A heating chamber was excavated beneath the floor of the eastern half in 1880, and the upper courses of the walls were rebuilt in 1913 when the heating chamber was altered and given a plain square chimney in the east wall. The apparatus was again converted, in the later 20th century, to run on oil from an external tank. The softwood lean-to roof is from 1913.

The organ chamber was added at the east end of the vestry in 1880 and communicates with the 'nave' through a tall, contemporary segmental arch. The external walls have square quoins; there is a single square light in a chamfered Old Red Sandstone surround in the east wall, and a similar 2-light window in the north wall. The softwood lean-to roof is from 1913; floored as the chancel/nave.

There is a pronounced, D-shaped platform beneath the eastern half of the church, primary; it terminates beneath the east wall suggesting that the church may originally have been shorter. Medium-depth, earth-cut drains run along the north and south walls of the eastern half of the church, and a shallow, concrete-lined drain runs around the western half and vestry. There was formerly a south chapel, and a possible transeptal structure north of the 'chancel'. The floor was raised in the eastern half of the church during the medieval period. Floors were formerly suspended over a void in the 'nave' and organ chamber. There is a below-ground heating chamber in the vestry. External memorials lie significantly close to the north-east, east and south walls.

Structural development

St Mary, Llanfair-ar-y-Bryn, stands within the Roman fort site of *Alabum*.

The chancel/nave contains 12th century openings including very small slit lights. A transeptal structure appears to have led off from the north wall but had gone by the time the 13th century tomb recess(es) were inserted; the church was apparently 'restored' in 1290 (Caröe, 1917, 15) which may at least provide a date for the former south chapel and arch. It has been seen above that the east bay, which hitherto must have lain at a considerably lower level than the 'nave' floor (and approached by steps down?), was raised during the same period. The south porch may have been added during the 14th century but was rebuilt in the 18th century (see below). In 1484 Richard III gave 10 marks towards repairing the church, with that at Llandingat (RCAHM, 1917, 97), and this may provide a context for the late 15th century windows including the re-used chancel south wall window (formerly in the south chapel?), the construction of the tower, and the insertion of the rood-screen, for which there are 'distinct traces' (Caröe, 1917, 15) including a possible door. The vestry and organ chamber are 19th-20th century (see below).

The 'steeple and bells' were out of repair in 1672, and the windows were unglazed (Anon., 1919, 212). In 1705 the 'walls, rooffe and windowes' were in good repair, 'excepting a little of ye rooffe, and ye wheel of ye bell' (Evans, 1917, 70).

An account of 1710 describes the floors as of earth and uneven, but the windows were glazed (Evans, 1909, 42). Much of the exterior was ivied, and with saplings. This situation still obtained in 1720 when the church 'and chancel' both 'want repairing very much', and the tower was 'much impair'd... by the great quantity of ivy that has been suffer'd to grow upon it' (Evans, 1921, 11); the greater window at the east end of the chancel' was 'something out of repair', and the window on the 'south side of the chancel... to

want glazing very much'. The present, king-post roof is 18th century, possibly from 1723 according to Caröe, 1917, 35. The tower apparently carried a lead spire during the 17th and 18th centuries (ibid.). The porch has been dated to the first half of the 18th century by Caröe (ibid.), and re-uses part of a 14th century door surround.

Churchwarden's accounts of the 18th century make frequent reference to the former south chapel. The chapel appears to have been transeptal, and the 1710 account describes the 'space, about 25ft in length between the church porch and a side chancel that is projected from the body of the church as far from the body of the church as the church porch' (Evans, 1909, 42); this space was apparently full of 'men's skulls (sic) and bones.. piled up against the church wall about 6 foot high and expos'd to the open air'. In 1781 'a part of Llanfairarybryn church, commonly called... Llwynhowell Chapel' was out of repair, and in 1788 'the chapel called Llwynhowell, adjoining the church' was 'miserably out of repair' (Jones, 1937, 49). By 1790 it was 'out of repair and ruinous' and the 'current of air admitted thro' the said chapel may, for want of a vent, endanger the roof of the church' (ibid.). The chapel appears to have been demolished soon afterwards; it had apparently contained a fine 16th century tomb, fragments from which now lie in the new parish church at Cyngordy (ibid.).

The extent of 18th-early 19th century blocking of medieval openings, or their alteration and refenestration, can be judged from Glynne's description of 1851 (Glynne, 1898, 361). The chancel was described as 'not very well distinguished; the east window square-headed, of 3 lights. On the north side of the chancel is a similar window of 2 lights, and a plain slit... the other windows are modern'. The porch and tower are described as they exist today, and there was 'a modern excrescence on the north side', the present vestry, which was presumably a fairly recent addition.

The church was restored in 1880 when some refenestration took place, the organ chamber was added and the south porch was rebuilt. The work was much criticised by the architect W. D. Caröe, in an account of 1906 written prior to his restoration (Caröe, 1914, 11). The 'chancel' north wall windows had been 'mutilated out of recognition', and 'the modern (Bath stone) windows of the church... of a conventicle kind... and the porch' were 'quite out of character with the fabric', and the east window (still square?) showed signs of movement. The late 15th century west window in the tower had been reset, but upside-down, and capped 'with a piece of modern work'. The 'chancel' received its present ceiling, and the church was refloored, reseated and partly refitted; the timber floors had dry rot in 1913.

The tower was restored by Caröe in 1906 (*ibid.*), but work on the rest of the church was not commenced until 1913 (Yates, 1974, 65). The restoration was very low impact. Blocked medieval openings were re-exposed, including the sills of original eastern window, and many windows were rebuilt/restored. The west door was unblocked. The church was refloored, and the porch, vestry and organ chamber reroofed. The seating was removed and replaced with chairs. The vestry heating chamber was altered.

The altar table and credence are Jacobean (Yates, 1974, 72). The organ is said to be 'pre-1800' (Anon., n.d.) but appears to have been (re)built in 1880 (Caröe, 1917, 35). The pulpit from 1922, by Caröe (Anon., n.d.).

The font has a 15th century octagonal Old Red Sandstone bowl, on a 'modern' limestone stem (Anon., n.d.; Yates, 1974, 72).

There were 4 bells in 1535 (Anon., n.d.). The bells were 'out of repair' in 1672 (Anon., 1919, 212), 1678 (Evans, 1912, 34) and in 1684 (Evans, 1915, 97) when at least one bell was replaced. Another was 'very much out of repair' in 1720 (Evans, 1921, 11)

and all 'want clappers etc'. Two bells were recast in 1902 (Anon., n.d.) but there were only 2 bells in 1913, from 1684 and 1902 (Caröe, 1917, 35).

A post-conquest inscribed ?tombstone, and a moulded head, are set in the internal face of the nave north wall, probably not *in situ*.

The church was Grade I listed in 1998. First Listed in 1966. Last Amended in 2004.

SITE HISTORY

There is some evidence for the pre-conquest religious use of the site:-

Roman fort site.

St Mary, Llanfair-ar-y-Bryn, was a parish church during the post-conquest period (Rees, 1932), of the medieval Deanery of Stradtowy. The church itself was detached, lying within the parish of Llandingat. From c.1126 until 1185 it was a cell of the Benedictine Priory at Great Malvern, but was dissolved by Rhys Grug (Caröe, 1917, 15).

In 1833 the living was a perpetual curacy annexed to the vicarage of Llandingat, endowed with £1000 parliamentary grant (Lewis, 1833). It ceased to be a parish church in 1883, when a new parish church was erected at Cynghordy (Yates, 1974, 52), and became a chapel-of-ease to Llandingat. However, in 1710 it was referred to as 'a Chapell to Llan Dingad' (Evans, 1909, 42).

In 1998 St Mary, Llanfair-ar-y-Bryn, was a vicarage of the benefice of Llandingat (Llandovery) with Myddfai (Benefice no. 530), in the Archdeaconry of Carmarthen, Rural Deanery of Llangadog and Llandeilo (St Davids, 1997-8).

The 'Mary' dedication is probably post-conquest, according to Yates, 1974, 52.

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Updated: August 2021 – Peter K Rowland