

St Mary Magdalene, St Clears, Carmarthenshire



ST MARY MAGDALENE, ST CLEAR, CARMARTHENSHIRE

Dyfed PRN 3880

RB No. 3713

NGR SN 2185 1574

Listed Building No. 9409

Grade II listed (1998)

Listed Grade II*. First Listed in 1966. Last Amended in 2001.

Reason for Listing: Included at grade II* as a restored medieval church with the best surviving Norman carved work in the county.

SUMMARY

Medieval church; 80% pre-19th century core fabric.

A 3 cell church, small-medium sized. Consists of chancel, 3 bays; nave, 4 bays; west tower, 3 (formerly 4) storeys, medieval. Vestry (south), 1883-4. Limestone rubble construction; some 18th – early 19th century external render; internal walls with render/plaster in 80% of church. Chancel with slate gable roofs; nave and vestry gables with synthetic tiles; tower roof not seen. 12th century, Romanesque chancel arch, medieval tower openings and vault; blocked medieval doors. 17th century window. Other openings mainly from 1853-5 and 1883-4, neo-Gothic, with yellow oolite dressings..

Roofs: 1853-5 and 1883-4. Floors: early 19th century and 1883-4. Finishes: 18th – early 20th century.

Condition – good.

Archaeological potential – very good. Narrow, deep concrete drain around 20% of church; floors raised in 40% of church?; known burials beneath 30% of church. floors suspended over heating ducts in 40% of church; below-ground heating chamber in 5% of church; below-ground evidence for medieval buildings beyond 20% of church; few external memorials significantly close to 10% of church.

Structural value (pre 19th century) – very good. 80% pre-19th century core fabric; unique Romanesque chancel arch, medieval tower openings and vault; blocked medieval doors. 17th century window.

Group value – high. Medieval landmark church with tower in central town location; very large churchyard, site of medieval priory; lych-gate, 1911.

Phasing:

Phase 1 – Nave, C12.

Phase 2 – Chancel, c.1300?.

Phase 3 – West tower, later C15.

Phase 4 – Restored 1853-5, high impact; vestry built.

Phase 5 – Restored 1884-5, high impact; vestry rebuilt.

DESCRIPTION

The present church

St Mary Magdalene, St Clears, is a 3-celled church, of small-medium size. It retains approximately 80% pre-19th century core fabric.

The present church consists of a 3-bayed chancel, a 4-bay nave, a 3-storeyed west tower (formerly 4-storeyed), and a vestry south of the chancel west bay. The Romanesque chancel arch is unique within the district and one of its earliest securely dateable pieces of ecclesiastical masonry. There are some further medieval openings, mostly blocked or altered, and a 17th century window,

but dressings are mainly from 1853-5 and 1883-4, neo-Gothic and in yellow oolite; one may replicate a medieval original. There are some remains of external render from the 18th – early 19th century; repointing is from 1883-4 and the early 20th century, and the interior is plastered except within the tower. Roofs are gables with slates in the chancel, and synthetic tile coverings from the 1960s in the nave and vestry; the tower roof was not seen.

The upper sections of the chancel east wall and the adjacent corners were rebuilt in 1883-4. There is a medieval basal offset the south and east walls; the south wall displays, just east vestry east wall, a cut-out in this plinth which may be the only surviving structural evidence for the conventual buildings of the former Cluniac Priory (see below), possibly marking the scar of the east wall of an east range. The east wall has plain, set-back raking buttresses with string-courses, 19th century, before 1883. The 3-light east window has geometric tracery and a drip-mould, in yellow oolite, and is entirely from 1883-4, with infill. The north wall is pierced by 3 windows; the easternmost is an 1883-4 rebuild of an existing 2-light window and has a large, segmental-headed embrasure that may be original, otherwise it is like the east window including the drip-mould, but 2-light, and from 1883-4. The central window is similar, but all from 1883-4 including infill; a similar window was inserted in the south wall at the same time. The westernmost window displays a square-headed surround, in chamfered limestone, of early 17th century date, and lies within a low, narrow segmental-headed embrasure. Internally, the south wall exhibits a piscina from 1883-4. To the west is the vestry door, which has a surround from 1883-4 in a medieval opening which may represent either access to the east range of the former priory, or a 'priest's door'; however, the outline of an arched recess (stoup?) in the exterior face is perpetuated in the present plaster finish next to the doorway. A slight offset halfway up the interior face of the western half of the same wall stops vertically on a line respecting the plinth cut-out. Its exact origins can only be

conjectural, but it is suggested here that the offset supported a timber gallery leading from the east range first floor (ie. the dormitory) to a stairway down into the chancel, and therefore respects the east range first floor level. The recess above the offset may have been infilled flush at the dissolution. The Romanesque chancel arch is in sumptuously dressed and moulded limestone ashlar; it has a very depressed semicircular head (*not* segmental) of 5 orders, 2 cylindrical, attached shafts recessed within in each stop with Romanesque capitals displaying cable-moulded and animal motifs, but without bases – beneath present floor level?. A slot between the two eastern orders in both arch stops may have received the ends of a rood-screen (but is remarkably early evidence for such a fitting), and a window formerly present in the nave north wall (see below) may have lit a former rood-stair; a simple, square squint was formerly present south of the arch (see below). The softwood ‘wagon-roof’ has matchboarded panels, all from 1883-4. The passages are tiled, with suspended board floors, also from 1883-4; there are marked burials below.

Internally, the nave side walls can be seen to lean out markedly, and were thickened, at an early date, with outer ‘skins’ that batter inwards proportionately. The nave is lit by 4 windows in each side wall, with rather crude segmental-headed embrasures that may appear to be pre-19th century but are probably from 1853-5 like the surrounds (and infill), all of which comprise 2 ogival lights with sunk cusps and simple curvilinear tracery, in yellow oolite, beneath drip-moulds on out-turned stops. There are blocked doorways, with plain, segmental heads visible externally (but truncated by the 19th century windows), towards the west of both side walls; the southern door was open until 1853. A further area of blocking descends to ground level below the westernmost south window; its outline is rather irregular, from the robbing of the dressed surround of a possible second south door associated with a conventual west range? However, there is no further evidence in the form of scars etc, for the presence of such a west range and

the opening may represent the medieval main south door, the segmental heads of the north and south doors discussed above possibly being post-medieval. The softwood roof is from 1853-5 and lacks trusses, all rafters having queen-posts, matchboarded above. The passages are flagged, earlier 19th century, with a heating chamber and ducts inserted in 1898; the suspended board floors are from 1853-5.

The west tower is from the later 15th century, now comprises 3 storeys and is broadly typical of the region, but the basal batter and string-course is confined to the square spiral stair turret which projects from the eastern half of the south wall, and is lit by simple square slit-lights. The stair is no longer accessible from ground floor level, but there is evidence of a blocked, simple square doorway with a landing a higher level; at the same level in the east wall is an recess with a 2-centred head in yellow oolite and, lower down, a corbel, suggesting that a 'mezzanine' floor may have been present. There is, however, no evidence of a light into such a chamber. The ground floor communicates with the nave through a doorway with a 2-centred surround, in chamfered yellow oolite from the later 15th century. The west door has a simple, segmental head without a surround, from the later 14th century? or inserted during the 17th – 18th century?. There is a 2-centred barrel-vault, and the floor is like that in the nave. The flue from the 1898 heating apparatus ascends the north-east internal corner. The second stage formerly comprised 2 stages, each entered from the stair through a 2-centred doorway from the later 15th century; the intervening floor has gone. It is lit by a simple square light, with a chamfered limestone surround, in the north wall, from the later 15th century; in the west wall is a cusped, 2-light window with a square surround and label, in yellow oolite probably from 1883-4. The belfry stage has a simple, square opening with a chamfered limestone surround in all 4 faces, from the later 15th century. The crenellated parapet lies on an external corbel table which stops at

the stair turret; the crenellations are from 1786 (Carms. R. O., CPR/56/13).

The present vestry was added in 1883-4. It is entered from the churchyard through a simple, square-headed doorway in its west wall, from 1883-4, and lit by contemporary windows in the east and south walls. The former has 3 square-headed lights in a square, oolite surround, the latter is similar, but 2-light and with a segmental outer arch. There is a blocked fireplace with a marble surround in the north-west corner, also from 1883-4, with a contemporary octagonal chimney. The gabled roof-timbers are concealed by matchboarding, while the floor is fully carpeted.

External cuttings are limited to a narrow, deep concrete drain along the chancel south wall. The nave floor may have been raised. There are known burials beneath the chancel. The nave floor is suspended over heating ducts. There is a below-ground heating chamber in the nave. Below-ground evidence for (conventual?) buildings lies south of the chancel. Few external memorials lie significantly close to the east wall.

Structural development

The church was both parochial, and a monastic house of the Cluniac order during the medieval period, and below-ground evidence of (conventual?) buildings to the south of the chancel has been demonstrated through geophysical survey (Gater *et al.*, 1991). There is no structural evidence, however, that the church itself was ever any larger than at present.

The Romanesque chancel arch with its very depressed semicircular head (*not* segmental) accords with a 12th century date. The primary (inner) walls of the nave may be broadly contemporary with the chancel arch but all detail has been lost, and none of the original openings survive unaltered. It has been

noted that a common feature of Cluniac churches is an apsidal east end (RCAHM, 1917, 238-39, *et al.*); but whether this (fundamentally Romanesque) feature was emulated in South-west Wales cannot be proven from St Clears; however, the present chancel is structurally different from the nave, being more regular and with walls that do not lean, and may be a replacement from c.1300 if the geometric tracery of the rebuilt north window is a copy of the original. The outer thickening of the nave walls may be contemporary; the blocked north and south doors have segmental heads, 14th century?, or rebuilt/inserted in the 17th – 18th century? (see above). The west tower is late 15th century and may not originally have featured an entry; there is a doorway rather than an arch into the nave, and the present west door is rather plain, 17th – 18th century?. The vestry is 19th century.

The church was 'not altogether in reparaire' in 1684 (Evans, 1919 (ii), 43) and the bellframe was 'out of repair' in 1678 (*ibid.*). The roof apparently fell in 1680-81 (RCAHM, 1917), but in 1705 was merely 'decayed by reason of ye late storm' (Evans, 1918, 32). It was still 'out of repair' in 1717 (Evans, 1919 (ii), 43) when, in addition, the windows were 'not well "glassed" (and) the floors not well paved'; the walls were ivied.

The 'top' of the west tower was 'taken down' in 1759 (Evans, 1917 (ii), 58) and 'mended' (Carms. R. O., CPR/56/13). It was agreed in 1786 to point 'the tower or steeple and to erect battlements thereupon' (*ibid.*); whether the crenallations were an entirely novel introduction, or whether they were a replacement of a pre-1759 feature, is unknown. Two windows were inserted, or rebuilt in 1787 (*ibid.*), one of them by the pulpit which at this period was probably situated in the middle of the nave south wall. The north wall was repointed in 1799 (*ibid.*).

The church was visited by Glynne in 1845 (Glynne, 1898, 364-5). The 'obtuse arched' main south door (to the east) was still open,

but the north door opposite had been blocked. The nave roof was 'open, with plain ribs', date?. The chancel arch was noted, and a squint was present, to the south of the chancel arch, which was blocked in 1853-5 and is no longer traceable. The chancel north wall east window was described as 'Decorated', and the 'priest's door' was also noted. The windows generally had 'been mostly mutilated' but a small, blocked 'obtuse' window was set low down at the east end of the nave north wall, which was presumably associated with the former rood-screen/stair (Crossley and Ridgway, 1947, 229). The west tower lights were all simple slits.

The church was restored in 1853-55, to the designs of the architect R. Kyrke Penson (Benson, forthcoming, 4). The restoration concentrated mainly upon the nave, which was refenestrated, reroofed and reseated, but the earlier flag flooring was retained. The squint was blocked. The east window of the chancel north wall was blocked. A vestry was built (NLW, SD/F/589), on the site of the present vestry but to a smaller plan; a building, of unknown function, was present between the chancel north wall and the nave in 1883. The chancel east wall may have received its buttressing.

The chancel, which hitherto had been lit solely by a 3-light east window, was restored in 1883-4 to the designs of the architects Middleton & Son of Westminster and Cheltenham (NLW, SD/F/589). The vestry was rebuilt to a slightly larger plan, and the building between the chancel north wall and the nave was removed. A new east window was inserted and the north wall windows were unblocked and restored/rebuilt; the present window between the two, and the south wall window, were inserted. The chancel was reroofed, refloored and replastered. The nave and tower dressings were repaired, and the tower second stage window was probably inserted; the external walls were repointed throughout.

The heating apparatus and chamber were installed in 1898 (Carms. R. O., CPR/56/9) and converted to gas; however, 2 new stoves were purchased in 1911 (Owen, 1914). The chamber was widened in 1949 (Carms. R. O., CPR/56/10) and the apparatus was still operational in 1998.

The plaster was stripped from above the chancel arch and replaced, with painted and zinc plate texts, in 1904 (Owen, 1914), since removed. The synthetic roof coverings are from the 1960s (Rev. R. Thomas, St Clears, *pers. comm.*)

The pews are from 1853-5 and the stalls are from 1883-4 (NLW, SD/F/589), but many fixtures and fittings are from 1895-1914 (Benson, forthcoming, 5). An organ was present from at least 1889 (Carms. R. O., CPR/56/9) but the present organ, with its softwood panelled gallery supported on 4 cast-iron columns at the west end of the nave, was erected in 1908-9 (NLW, SD/F/590; Owen, 1914); a vestry had been established beneath the gallery by 1914 (Owen, 1914). The reredos is from 1898 and the pulpit from 1900 (*ibid.*).

There were 3 bells in 1552 (Wallcott, 1871, ii), in 1672 (Anon., 1919, 214) and in 1684 when one pre-Reformation bell bearing the inscription 'SANCTA CATERINA ORA PRO NOBIS' (Evans, 1917 (i), 17) and possibly from another church; a second, post-Reformation bell, which was inscribed 'MARGARET SILVIES' had cracked in 1680 (*ibid.*). They were recast into 4 new bells in 1853-55 (Benson, forthcoming, 6).

The plain limestone font has a circular bowl and cylindrical stem; it may be 12th century (Yates, 1974, 74) but its date is 'quite uncertain' (RCAHM, 1917, 239).

The church was Grade II listed in 1998. Listed Grade II*. First Listed in 1966. Last Amended in 2001.

SITE HISTORY

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

Former Celtic dedication?.

St Mary Magdalene, St Clears, was a parish church during the medieval period, of the medieval Deanery of Carmarthen. Between 1147 and 1184 (Soulsby, 1983, 237) the church was granted as a cell to the Cluniac Priory of St Martin-des-Champs, Paris, to become an alien priory in addition to a parish church (ibid.). It was always small, normally served by a prior and 2 monks; the prior in 1386 was a certain 'Pontius' (Banks, 1873, 175). As an alien priory it was dissolved in 1414 and was granted to All Souls College, Oxford, in 1446 (Lewis, 1833).

The tithes and patronage belonged to All Souls in 1833 when the living, a discharged vicarage, was rated in the king's books at £4 17s 1d, endowed with £200 private benefaction, £200 royal bounty and £600 parliamentary grant (ibid.).

In 1998 St Mary Magdalene, St Clears, was a parish church. The living was a rectory, held with Llanddowror, Llangynin and Llanfihangel Abercywyn (Benefice no. 804) in the Archdeaconry of Carmarthen, Rural Deanery of St Clears (St Davids, 1997-8).

It has been suggested (Benson, forthcoming, *et al.*) that a pre-conquest church here may have been dedicated to 'St Clarus'.

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CPR/56 – St Clears:-

CPR/56/9 – Churchwardens' Account Book, 1876-1910.

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Updated: August 2021 – Peter K Rowland