

# St Cybi's Church, Holyhead

## Internal west wall of nave

Archaeological Watching Brief and Survey



Ymddiriedolaeth Archaeolegol Gwynedd  
Gwynedd Archaeological Trust



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### Archaeological Watching Brief and Survey

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## Introduction

In July 2013 repair works were carried out to the exterior of the west tower and the interior of the west nave wall at St Cybi's church, Holyhead. The church is located at SH24728262 in the parish of Holyhead, and is a Grade 1 Listed Building (ref. 5413; HER PRN 6915). It lies within the walls of a late Roman fort (PRN 1762; Scheduled Ancient Monument An 031). The fort is located on the west side of Holyhead harbour, to the west of and above Victoria Road.

The repair works included the removal of plaster from the upper part of the west nave wall. This report describes the features visible within the masonry following removal of the plaster. The survey was undertaken in July 2013, immediately following plaster removal.

## Acknowledgements

The Trust is very grateful to Dr Ken Roberts and Mr Chris Medley for all their help during the survey. The on-site survey work was undertaken by Jessica Davidson. The work was funded by the Parochial Church Council.



*North side of church showing relationship between nave, tower and Roman wall with north aisle in foreground*



## Historical and architectural background

The Life of St Cybi, written down c. 1200, records that the Roman fortress of Caer Gybi was conveyed to 'God and St Cybi' by King Maelgwn, who is said to have died of the plague in AD 547 (Wade-Evans 1944, 234-51). The site is strategically located on the Irish seaboard, alongside sheltered harbourage, and is the closest harbour to Dublin. The fort is thought to date from the 4th century AD, and to have been built (together with the watch tower on Holyhead Mountain) to aid defence against Irish raiders. Within the fort lie two churches, the smaller one to the south interpreted as a 'Capel y Bedd' marking the burial place of the saint, and where relics were often housed.

In the year 961 Holyhead is recorded as being 'ravaged by the sons of Amlaibh' during a period of Viking raids. A silver penny of King Edward the Martyr dated 975-8 was found inside the fort in 1952, though it is difficult to interpret the significance of a single coin (Davidson 2009, 53-4).

One source claims that during the revolt of Owain Glyndwr, Stephen Scrope, deputy-lieutenant of Ireland, raised an army in Dublin on behalf of the King, defeated the Welsh at Rhosmeirch, recaptured the castle at Beaumaris, and proceeded to ravage the island, including carrying off the shrine of St Cybi, the pride of the church of Holyhead (Lloyd 1931, 99). The date of the shrine is unknown, though other examples in Wales are typically of 12th century date. During repairs to the chancel undertaken in 1711, a 'curiously wrought bell' was found – this might be a hand bell associated with Cybi, of the type found elsewhere within Wales (Williams 1947, 48).

The smaller church, of which only the nave now remains, is called Capel y Bedd or Eglwys y Bedd, a name used at least since the 16th century (Owen 1890, 330). It was rebuilt in the 14th century, but earlier footings are visible below the west wall (Gruffydd 1992, 76-7). The chapel was built on an alignment that closely parallels the fort walls, whereas the larger church lies with the east end just south of an east-west alignment, at variance with the fort. The chapel was also known as Capel Llan y Gwyddel, emphasising an Irish connection, and in 18th century sources it is often associated, not with Cybi, but with the grave of Sirigi, the Irish leader slain by Maelgwn's father, Cadwallon (Price 1782, 8). A stone coffin was discovered when the chancel was demolished and other stone-lined graves were found just outside the walls of the fort (Llwyd 1833, 205). The role of this chapel is best defined, however, as that commemorating the burial place of



*East end of Eglwys y Bedd showing former chancel arch*

Cybi, in the manner of similar chapels found at Llanelian and Clynnog.

There is evidence that the larger stone church of St Cybi's was first built in the 12th century, as indicated by the presence of three poorly preserved chevron marked stones in the external wall of the south transept. By the 13th century Holyhead had become collegiate with a provost and 12 canons forming the chapter. The chancel contains remains of 13th century work, and it is likely to have been rebuilt on a larger scale to accommodate the newly formed chapter. The nave and crossing were rebuilt in the late 15th century, though the south aisle and south porch are (from their architectural style) of early 16th century date (c. 1520). The west tower is thought to date from the 17th century, when the west door was probably knocked through. The church, or at least the nave, was used during the Civil War to garrison soldiers, and though it is difficult to date any of the alterations to this period, the tower is thought to have been used as a lookout.

The tithes were granted to Jesus College, Oxford, in the mid-17th century, and the college subsequently took responsibility for repairing the chancel, carrying out numerous repairs in the 17th and 18th centuries. The church was heavily restored in the late 19th century by George Gilbert Scott (1877-9), and the Stanley chapel was subsequently built onto the south side of the chancel in 1896-7.



*South side of Holyhead church*

### **Previous records relating to an earlier nave roof**

In 1930 Harold Hughes wrote that 'Some 25 years ago, when repairs were being carried out to the western tower, the walls of which were seriously cracked, indications were found of the upper part of a steeply pitched gable in the external face of the western wall of the nave. The upper part of the tower appeared to have been set on the raking walling, with little attempt at bonding. I have been unable to satisfy myself with any certainty as to the architectural history of this gabled end. The rake of the pitch is what we might expect for an early roof of an aisleless nave. On the other hand the character of the masonry of the western face of the wall would seem to indicate that it was never intended for an external face, but that it was built at the same time as the rest of the tower. Moreover, there were signs of a former collar tie on the western face, which had been partially embedded in the wattling. In any case I would suggest that the church, at one time, was a cruciform building, without aisles, the transepts and nave with gabled roofs, similar in outline to that of the chancel, but at a slightly higher level.' (Hughes 1930, 360).

Lucy Williams says in 1947 that 'A workman informs me that when working on a job in the inside plaster of the west wall of the nave, he saw 'coloured paintings of angels' under the present surface'. (Williams 1947, 39).

## Repairs in 2013

In June and July 2013 repairs to cure damp on the west wall of the nave were undertaken, which involved stripping off the internal plaster from the upper face of the east elevation. Gwynedd Archaeological Trust carried out a watching brief during the works, and were notified by Dr Ken Roberts of the presence of masonry changes which indicated a former roof line visible in the upper part of the wall. Other blocked openings were also visible. Two members of Trust staff attended the site, and recorded the visible features by undertaking a measured survey and photographic record. The photographs were subsequently 'stitched' together to create a compound image of the wall. No evidence for medieval or later wall paintings was noted.

### Description of findings

An area of plaster just below the present ceiling was removed, approximating to an area 5m wide by 3m high. The stone work is of largely local Precambrian schist, and is roughly coursed, bonded with lime mortar.

Changes visible within the masonry included evidence of three former openings, and two diagonal lines thought to represent an earlier roof-line. The three openings consist of (i) a small rectangular loop on the north side, which cuts the northern diagonal roofline; (ii) an upper square central opening with lintel; and (iii) immediately below (ii) a larger opening with lintel. Each of these would have opened into the present tower.

#### (i) North opening

The dimensions of this opening are approximately 0.28m wide by 0.56m high. There is no obvious lintel or sill, though the jambs are recessed at the base where a timber lintel may have fitted. There is a straight joint on the south side, and another, slightly less clear one, on the north. The blocking contains an angled stone in the centre, with fairly loose creamy pale mortar around. The mortar appears weaker in the blocking



*The north opening appears to lie on the former north roof-line.*



than in the wall either side. The jambs on the north are of relatively large slabs laid horizontally. Their positioning would suggest the opening was made at the time the roof line was extended.

(ii) Upper central opening

This blocked opening is 0.58m wide. There is a stone lintel across the top, with loose blocking stones and a slightly harder, whiter mortar poorly plastered over some of the stones. The lower part of the opening is difficult to interpret because of the second opening below, however it would appear to be marked by a line of three blocking stones 0.58m below the lintel. There is no obvious sill.



*Upper central opening*

(iii) Lower central opening

The lower central opening has two timber lintels in place, with a brick laid at an angle on the north side. The opening measures approximately 0.8m high by 1.2m wide. There is no obvious sill. A slightly darker mortar obscures the jambs, though a straight joint is indicated within the mortar.

(iv) former gabled roof line

These are visible on the north and south sides. They are not easy to follow accurately and are best appreciated from the illustration. The apex was above the level of the ceiling, and is not visible. The roofline starts approximately 1.4m below the present ceiling.

## Interpretation

The two diagonal lines are best interpreted as marking a former pitched roof-line, and quite possibly the same as those visible on the west side from within the tower, as recorded by Hughes, and still visible (though additional survey work is required to confirm this). These must pre-date the 16th century roof, and quite possibly belong to the earlier 12th century church. This masonry, as Hughes suggests, is likely to

have belonged to a simple nave without aisles (though it does not preclude simple 12th century aisles as seen at Tywyn Church, Merionethshire). The typical plan of a 12th century *clas* church would include a central crossing tower and transepts. The evidence would suggest, therefore, that the west wall was not re-built in its entirety during the reconstruction of 1480-1520, but was left in-situ, and the upper walls added. Any lower changes in masonry to confirm this would be hidden externally by the tower and internally by the aisle responds.

The small north opening is likely, from the positioning of the jambs, to date from this late-medieval rebuilding. Its purpose is unknown, though if there was no west tower at this time, it must have opened out. It is similar to small rectangular loops which typically light stairs, and it may suggest the presence of a former stair either inside or outside the west wall.

The two larger openings appear, from the style of construction, to be later in date, and to post-date the construction of the tower. The upper opening appears to be the earlier, and may date from the occupation of the church by the military during the civil war. Either might be associated with a west gallery, a feature of many Anglesey churches in the 18th century.

## Conclusions

The plaster removal revealed a number of features, including three former openings, and a possible former roof-line. The latter may represent the roof of the 12th century church. One or both of the former central openings may suggest the presence of an earlier west gallery. Though only a small portion of plaster has been removed, it has revealed considerable evidence for earlier structural modifications, and any further removal of plaster should be carefully monitored to add to this evidence. Further survey work within the tower, on the east wall, would also be of benefit in helping understand the features revealed in the nave.

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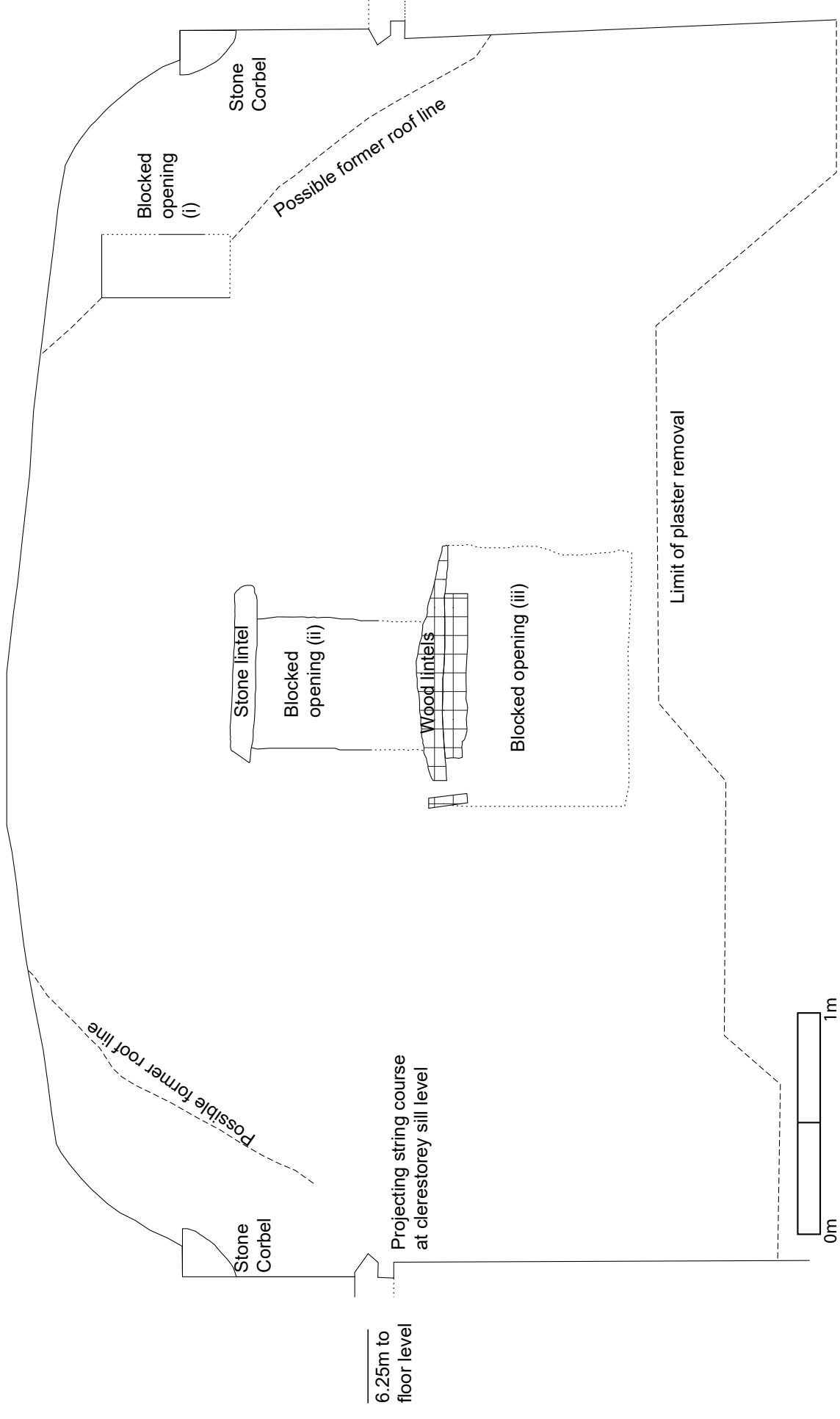




*Lower central opening*



*Possible former roof line on south side*



*Location of principal features on east facing wall of nave following plaster removal*





*West wall of nave during repair work*



*West wall of nave showing changes in masonry*



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