

THE MONASTIC WALES PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

The religious houses of medieval Wales, along with the Norman and native Welsh castles, form an important part of the country's medieval heritage. The *Monastic Wales Project*, launched in 2009, aims to explore how medieval monasteries have helped shape modern society, provide a platform for research on Wales's medieval monastic sites, as well as facilitate informed visits to the medieval monastic sites of Wales. This article presents the *Monastic Wales Project* in its context within the heritage industry, heritage management projects and historical societies in Wales from the 18th century to the present day. It introduces the project's aims, its website and publications, the activities of its members, and its contribution to conscientious tourism in Wales.¹

KEYWORDS

Wales, Monasticism, Conquest, Digital humanities, Heritage.

CAPITALIA VERBA

Walliae, Monachismus, Conquista, Digitales humanitates, Patrimonium.

The medieval heritage of Wales is —along with its spectacular mountains and its rugged coastline— one of its greatest attractions. The dramatic ruins of the Edwardian castles and the romantic remains of the religious houses have stirred the imagination of locals, travellers and artists for centuries.² They are testimony to a turbulent past. Wales is a distinctive place, in many ways very different from its neighbour to the east, England, though the histories of both entities have been intimately linked for many centuries. Medieval Wales was a fragmented country. Though some of its elite leaders might aspire to the title of ‘King of Wales’ or ‘Prince of Wales’, there was no concept of a country united by anything more than transient personal power and political aspirations.³ In reality medieval Wales, both before and after the first arrival, in the late 11th century, of the Normans, who moved westwards from their power bases in England, was a land of territorial powers under local leaders. The boundaries of principalities such as Gwynedd, Powys, Ceredigion, and Deheubarth, shifted and re-formed with the changing fortunes of their leaders. Under Rhys ap Gruffudd (the Lord Rhys), for instance, the lordship of Deheubarth in south west Wales was a powerful political force in the late 12th century, but by the 13th century this dominance had passed to Gwynedd in north-west Wales. For two centuries, from the late 11th to the late 13th century, the Norman and English kings were suspicious of their neighbours to the west. What the followers of King William I of England began in 1069 —the infiltration of Welsh territories and the establishment of their own political dominance— the armies of Edward I completed by 1284. From that date Wales came fully under English rule, its native rulers removed from power and its elite destroyed. It was not, however, until a series of acts of the English Parliament in the 1530s, known collectively as the Act of Union, that Wales was brought fully into the legal and administrative system of England. Despite this, and despite regional differences within the country, Wales has remained conscious of its distinctive heritage, its language, and its cultural traditions. This has been expressed by political movements striving in some cases for independence from England, or for a greater degree of self-determination, the latter achieved in some measure by political devolution in the 1990s and still a matter for debate. The history of interest in Wales’s medieval heritage is discussed below, but first a few words should be said about the way in which the landscape of Wales still reflects its turbulent medieval past.

1. The authors would like to acknowledge the support of the research project *Auctoritas. Iglesia, cultura y poder, siglos XII-XV* (HAR2012-31484), funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of the Government of Spain.

2. The ruins of the Cistercian abbey of Tintern, for instance, inspired the poet William Wordsworth and the artist William Turner. See: Robinson, David. *The Cistercians in Wales: Architecture and Archaeology 1130-1540*. (*Society of Antiquaries of London, Research Committee Report*). London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 2006: 286.

3. Davies, John. *A History of Wales*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993; Carr, Anthony D. *Medieval Wales*. New York: St Martin’s Press, 1995; Davies, Rees R. *The Age of Conquest. Wales 1063-1415*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. It is worth mentioning that John Davies’s monumental *History of Wales* was originally published in 1990 in the Welsh language as *Hanes Cymru*, the first book ever to be published in Welsh by Penguin Books. The English translation was published three years later.



1. A land of castles and monasteries

The stone castle was an obvious marker of political infiltration and dominance. The coming of the Normans was accompanied by the building of castles, one of the earliest being Chepstow on the banks of the River Wye, constructed by William fitz Osbern, who had been sent by William I to conquer what he could of Wales and to keep its borders. As the Normans marched westwards, so they constructed more castles to demonstrate their presence and their power. From a base on the English side of the River Severn at Shrewsbury the Montgomerys marched west across mid Wales and then south, establishing fortifications as they went. The Welsh, too, constructed their strongholds, and the final destruction of Welsh independence is marked by a series of showpieces, the Edwardian castles of north Wales, which are now a magnet for tourists. Perhaps less obviously the transformation of the ecclesiastical institutions of Wales was also a tool of the imposition of alien power. The medieval Welsh church has sometimes been described as an old-fashioned institution that ‘cannot be described as a power-house of spiritual activity’.⁴ While this may be arguable, what seems certain is that when the Normans began their invasion and settlement of Wales in the late 11th century, they found the native church, and native monasticism, in many ways unfamiliar to continental, and English, practice. Along with the castles they built on their newly-conquered Welsh lands, the Norman settlers began establishing monasteries that were directly affiliated to their existing Benedictine foundations in England and France, and thereby brought Wales into line with monastic practice in continental Europe.⁵ So it was that William fitz Osbern drew monks from his family monastery of Corneilles in Normandy to staff a Benedictine priory at Chepstow, which faces the castle that he constructed across a wide market place.⁶ When Arnulf of Montgomery marched from Shrewsbury across mid Wales and south into Pembrokeshire he settled at Pembroke, building a castle that still dominates the town, and a Benedictine priory. He is recorded as standing in the chapter house of his family monastery at Séez in the year 1098 affirming his grant to the abbey of the church of St Nicholas of Pembroke, which he made in memory of his father Roger and of his brother, Hugh, who had been killed that year.⁷ The new stone priories of south Wales were thus a symbol of a new ruling elite in the same way as its castles. Along with Benedictine monasticism the Normans also introduced new ecclesiastical structures, new liturgical practices and new architectural styles into Wales.

4. Carr, Anthony D. *Medieval Wales...*: 49.

5. For the foundation of the Benedictine houses of south Wales and their link with conquest see: Burton, Janet. “Transition and transformation: the Benedictine houses”, *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, Janet Burton, Karen Stöber, eds. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013: 21-37.

6. Shoesmith, Ron. “Chepstow Town, Priory and Port Wall”, *Chepstow Castle: its History and Buildings*, Rick Turner, Andy Johnson, eds. Logaston: Logaston Press, 2006: 199-212.

7. *Calendar of Documents Preserved in France, Illustrative of the History of Great Britain and Ireland. Vol. I. AD 918-1206*, ed. John Horace Round. London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1899: 237-238.



The incomers also brought in the reformed orders of the 12th century, and were responsible for the introduction of the Tironensians to St Dogmaels on the west coast of Wales at the estuary of the River Teifi, the Savigniacs to Basingwerk in the north-east and Neath in the south, and the Cistercians, first to Tintern, which was located on the River Wye not many miles from Chepstow. The Anglo-Norman elite did not, however, have a monopoly on the patronage of the new orders. From the mid-1160s native rulers discovered, first in the Cistercians and then in the Augustinian canons, worthy recipients for their benefactions. Beginning with the Lord Rhys's adoption of the nascent Cistercian community at Strata Florida in mid Wales (1165), founded only the year before by the Norman lord of Cardigan Castle, Welsh rulers established, endowed, and patronized Cistercian houses, attracted by a combination of factors: the reputation of the White Monks for austerity, their lack of dependence on English and Norman or French mother houses (which so distinguished the Welsh Benedictine priories), and the pan-European nature of the order. The Cistercian houses under Welsh patronage, however, were more than places of prayer and worship: they became inextricably linked to the cultural and political ambitions of the native rulers.

The medieval monasteries of Wales are part of the heritage of Wales today. The choice of location for these houses also seems to have been linked to heritage in a different way. In several cases new monastic foundations were made on the sites of earlier or existing religious communities. Incised stones found near the site of the Benedictine priory of Ewenny and the Cistercian abbey of Margam suggest that the Norman founders may have sought to transform sites of cultural or religious significance in a form of cultural appropriation.⁸ Archaeological investigation at Strata Florida is suggesting more and more that there were ecclesiastical antecedents at the site, while the placement of Valle Crucis near the ninth-century Pillar of Eliseg, commemorating local political Welsh dominance, must also have been significant. Are we here seeing native rulers using the Cistercians as custodians of their Welsh past? Valle Crucis was the last Cistercian foundation by a native Welsh ruler (1201).⁹ In the 13th century the rulers of Gwynedd in particular diverted their patronage in the direction of the Augustinian canons. Llywelyn ab Iorwerth (died in 1240) and his successors used the canons to colonize existing houses of Culdees (eremitical groups) and *clas* churches (mother churches serving a wide area). Here we may see the transformation of a Welsh traditional church and monastic structure along with continuity of the religious significance of these sites, as part of the political strategies of an aspirant ruler.¹⁰

8. For Ewenny see, for instance: Burton, Janet. "Transition and Transformation...": 21-37. On Margam: Robinson, David. *Cistercians in Wales...*: 253-261.

9. On Valle Crucis, see: Burton, Janet; Stöber, Karen. *Abbeys and Priories of Medieval Wales*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2015: 213-217.

10. Stöber, Karen; Austin, David. "Culdees to Canons: the Augustinian Houses of North Wales", *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, Janet Burton, Karen Stöber, eds. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013: 39-54.



2. Wales and its heritage

How, then, has Wales seen its medieval past, in particular its monastic houses? Ever since, from the 18th century onwards, the nationalist impulse reawakened an interest in the remains of a great, heroic Middle Age, when Wales was a land of myths and heroes, the medieval heritage has been the focus of historians, archaeologists, and antiquarians. Great demographic, economic and cultural changes affected Wales between the mid-19th century and the First World War,¹¹ a period that was in many ways a peak time for scholarly activity of nationalist slant.

The 18th century saw the emergence of interest in all things Welsh, an interest that extended beyond Offa's Dyke (the earthwork that marked the boundary between the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia and the Welsh)¹² and gathered speed during the following century. Among the most notable by-products of this newly-roused Welsh nationalism were the promotion of the Welsh language, and the appearance of scholarly societies devoted to Welsh history and culture. One of the first of these, the *Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion*, was founded in London in 1751 with the purpose of 'defending the purity of the Welsh language, stimulating interest in the history and literature of Wales, and promoting economic and scientific ventures beneficial to Wales'.¹³ It was refounded on two occasions, in the first and second half of the 19th century respectively, and it continues to this day. An important aspect of this, and later, societies was the publication of a journal. The *Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* was, moreover, instrumental in promoting Welsh culture in a number of other ways, including its support of the creation of what was to become the University of Aberystwyth, in 1872, and by helping to establish the modern *eisteddfodau*, annual cultural gatherings that celebrate Welsh literature, music and poetry and that have their remote (and perhaps imagined) origins in the 12th century, and that have been celebrated annually in different parts of Wales ever since the mid-19th century.¹⁴ The new-found Welsh consciousness also expressed itself in the adoption of the song *Hen Wlad fy Nhadau* ("Ancient Land of my Fathers"), composed in 1856, as national anthem of the Welsh people.¹⁵

The *Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* aside, throughout the 19th century local history societies were springing up across the different parts of Wales. They had the aim of raising people's awareness of their local history and heritage and contribute to their 'cultural awakening' by means of more or less regular meetings of varying

11. Davies, John. *A History of Wales*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993: 398-400.

12. The word 'Welsh' is of Anglo-Saxon origin and means 'foreigner'; it was used by the Anglo-Saxons of the folk living in what the English call Wales. The Welsh words are *Cymru* ("Wales") and *Cymraeg* ("Welsh").

13. Davies, John. *A History of Wales...*: 305.

14. The first post-medieval *National Eisteddfod* was held in 1861 in the southern Welsh town of Aberdare. Davies, John. *A History of Wales...*: 416. On the Welsh *eisteddfodau* see also: Morgan, Prys. "From a Death to a View: The Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period", *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, eds. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 1983: 43-100.

15. Davies, John. *A History of Wales...*: 417.



frequency.¹⁶ Many local history societies —some with greater scholarly credentials than others— founded in the 19th century have continued to this day; in most cases they have journals that are published annually, and some hold seminar series. The *Welsh Manuscripts Society*, for example, was established in Abergavenny in 1837; the *Powysland Club* was founded in 1867 in Montgomeryshire in mid Wales; and the *Cymdeithas Hanes Ceredigion* (“Ceredigion Historical Society”) was founded in 1909 (as the *Cardiganshire Antiquarian Society*). The directors of the *Monastic Wales Project* have frequently been invited to give lectures to local history societies over the past few years, including the *Powysland Club*, and the *Ceredigion Historical Society*, as well as at the different academic institutions of Wales, among them the University of Bangor and Cardiff University.

The growing interest in the language, literature, and culture of Wales, promoted and popularised by the history societies, was mirrored by increasing attention paid to its architectural heritage. The dramatic ruins of the Edwardian castles of north Wales, and of the grand Cistercian abbeys of the south, began to excite increasingly professional attention. By the mid-19th century the *Cambrian Archaeological Association* had been established and held its first meeting in Aberystwyth in September 1847. One of the first projects of the association had a monastic target: as early as 1848 the ruins of Strata Florida Abbey caught the imagination of Stephen Williams, member of the *Cambrian Archaeological Association* and railway engineer, involved in surveying Ceredigion for the construction of a railway line in west Wales (which was to be realised later in the century). It was Williams who was responsible for the first large-scale excavation at Strata Florida Abbey in 1887-1890, in some ways initiating a new phase of what we might now refer to as ‘heritage management’ in Wales.¹⁷ Williams was also in charge of the excavations at two further Cistercian monasteries in Wales, Abbey Cwmhir (in 1890) and Strata Marcella (also in 1890). Excavations at the Premonstratensian abbey of Talley were carried out between 1892 and 1894 at the behest of Sir James William Drummond. More recently, excavations at different monastic sites across Wales have been led by archaeologists from different institutions, such as the Cistercian abbey of Whitland,¹⁸ and the Franciscan friary at Carmarthen.¹⁹ Perhaps the most significant of these is the ongoing work at Strata Florida Abbey in Ceredigion, led by Professor David Austin from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and his team, who are behind the *Strata Florida Project*. The findings of this important project are not only throwing new light on the creation of Cistercian precincts and the impact of the Cistercian order on medieval landscape,

16. Davies, John. *A History of Wales...*: 416.

17. Williams, Stephen. *The Cistercian Abbey of Strata Florida: its History and an Account of Recent Excavations made on the Site*. London: Whiting and Co., 1889.

18. For Whitland see: Ludlow, Neil. “Whitland Abbey, Carmarthenshire: a Cistercian site re-examined, 1994-99”. *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 151 (2002): 41-108. For a summary of recent archaeological work on monastic sites in Wales, see: Austin, David. “The Archaeology of Monasteries in Wales and the Strata Florida Project”, *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, Janet Burton, Karen Stöber, eds. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013: 3-20.

19. James, Terrence. “Carmarthenshire’s religious houses: a review of recent archaeological work”. *Carmarthenshire Antiquary*, 36 (2000): 58-70.



but it moreover represents a major excavation and training site for archaeologists in Wales.²⁰

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the further professionalization and formalisation of the custody of Welsh patrimony, both architectural and documentary, with the establishment of the National Library of Wales (founded in Aberystwyth in March 1907 by royal charter) and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (established in 1908).

Inevitably, time has left its mark upon the ancient stones. Recent years have seen an increasing awareness of the need to preserve Wales's medieval heritage. With the creation of *Cadw* (a Welsh term meaning "to keep / to protect") in 1984, the Welsh government established a counterpart to the equivalent organisation in England, *English Heritage* (established in 1983 as the successor of the Ministry of Works). The year 1991 saw the foundation of Historic Scotland.²¹ *Cadw*, which describes itself as the 'official guardian of the built heritage of Wales', is custodian of a number of the Welsh medieval monastic sites that are part of the *Monastic Wales Project*.²² The project directors maintain contact with both *Cadw* and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, and are grateful to both these bodies for their support.

3. The Monastic Wales Project

The *Monastic Wales Project*—a non-profit endeavour—grew out of the desire of its founders to create a platform for the study of the monastic history of medieval Wales, to explain its historical context, to encourage further investigation of Wales's medieval monastic sites, and, finally, to explore how medieval monasteries have helped shape modern society. The *Monastic Wales Project* seeks to facilitate informed visits to the medieval monastic sites of Wales.

The monasteries of Wales have, of course, had their fair share of historians, both historians of the Welsh church in general and those, notably David Williams, who have made monasteries the focus of their research.²³ However, the *Monastic Wales Project* is the only attempt to date to work towards a comprehensive history of the monastic houses of medieval Wales, and to make its findings accessible in a variety of ways. It seeks, as its home page outlines, to raise the profile of the Welsh monasteries

20. See: Austin, David. "The Archaeology of Monasteries in Wales...": 3-20, especially, 10-16; see also: University of Wales Trinity Saint David. "Strata Florida: Place of History and Landscape". *The Strata Florida Project*. 9 June 2015 <<http://www.strataflorida.org.uk/>>.

21. See: Government of England. "English Heritage". *English Heritage*. 9 June 2015 <<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/>>; The Scottish Government. "Historic Scotland". *Historic Scotland*. 9 June 2015 <<http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/>>.

22. Welsh Government. "Cadw". *Historic Wales*. 9 June 2015 <<http://www.cadw.wales.gov.uk/>>.

23. See, for instance: Williams, David. *The Welsh Cistercians*. Leominster: Gracewing, 2001, which is an updated version of his earlier two volume work (Williams, David. *The Welsh Cistercians*. Caldey Island: Cistercian Publications, 1984) and many articles.



and to give them their rightful place in the history of the medieval church in western Christendom. It also charts how monasticism within Wales developed over time. Monasteries were important to medieval society in all sorts of ways. To be sure, in the four and a half centuries of their existence, they changed. For individual monks, canons, and nuns, life inside the cloister might have remained constant as they lived out their existence according to rules which were laid down centuries before, but as institutions monastic houses were subject to forces and pressures like any other. This was even more apparent in a society such as medieval Wales, which saw such dramatic and fundamental changes during the lifetime of its medieval monasteries.

Our story begins with the coming of the Normans to Wales, which, as outlined above, brought such radical changes to Welsh politics, church, and society. Monasticism itself was no new phenomenon in the Wales of the late 11th century, however, and the chronological parameters of the project require some explanation. At an early stage of our planning we were fortunate to gain two modest tranches of funding, the first was from University of Wales, Lampeter (now University of Wales Trinity Saint David) and the second from the Marc Fitch foundation.²⁴ This allowed us to secure the services of Nigel Callaghan of Technoleg Taliesin and Martin Crampin of the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies (*Canolfan Uwchefrydiau Cymreig a Cheltaidd*) in Aberystwyth, who designed the database and the webpages, and to employ Dr Julie Kerr as a research assistant, but it meant that we had also to be fairly modest in our ambitions and make sure that we could be reasonably certain to complete what we had planned. Although we were fully aware that what lay behind the monasteries of what we might call the ‘High Middle Ages’ was a rich and vibrant tradition that went back as far as the post-Roman period, we designated *Monastic Wales* as a project designed to cover the period from the coming of the Normans to the dissolution of the 16th century. However, the project does not neglect early medieval monasticism in Wales, and one aspect of the research of scholars on the *Monastic Wales* team is the issue of transition and transformation: how much the later tradition owed to the earlier in terms of the sites of monastic houses as well as their impact. But for practical reasons—and until we obtain more funding—*Monastic Wales* begins in the late 11th century with the imposition on parts of Wales of an alien aristocracy, and ends in the 1530s when King Henry VIII of England and his commissioners decided on the wholesale closure of the monastic houses of both England and Wales.

4. The *Monastic Wales* website (www.monasticwales.org): the project and its academic and non-academic audience

Determined by the funding awarded to the *Monastic Wales Project*, the first phase involved the creation of an interactive website, which was to serve a range of

24. We are grateful to the University and to the Marc Fitch fund for their support.



functions. The first of these was to bring together and make accessible the research carried out by scholars across the disciplines, most prominently among them history, archaeology, architectural and art history, and literary studies. The second was to identify primary documentary sources relevant to the religious communities of medieval Wales, in addition to a full bibliography of secondary works in the disciplines of history, archaeology, art and architecture, manuscript studies, visual culture, and literature, and thereby provide a useful tool for researchers. The third was to document (in a photographic database) the standing remains, site details, and any surviving artefacts of the Welsh monasteries, including items that are no longer *in situ*, or even in Wales (such as rood screens, fonts, tiles). At the time of writing this first phase of the project is complete—with the proviso that it is in the nature of such compilations of data that they are constantly being augmented and updated. One of the strengths of the project has been the interaction between the project team and volunteers, whether they be members of the public who have heard the directors speak at one of their numerous local lectures, or undergraduate and postgraduate students, who have added bibliographical references or contributed photographs to our ever expanding data bank of images.²⁵

In terms of the website the directors are now ready (once appropriate funding has been secured) to enhance the website further with digital innovation. The next step will be to create a teaching tool, with sections appropriate for use by school students at different educational stages / levels, raising their awareness of their local medieval and monastic heritage. A priority for this—and indeed for other sections of the website—will be translation into Welsh to make the site fully bilingual. Translation of some of the principal pages of the website is already underway.

The *Monastic Wales* website went live in 2009 and was launched at a joint event in Aberystwyth and Lampeter in October of that year to coincide with an international workshop on 'Monastic Wales'. At the time of its launch the website was still in its infancy, but it was the deliberate decision of the directors to raise the profile of the project at that early stage, in order to increase public awareness and participation. At that early stage the website comprised pages for some fifty monastic sites across Wales, including houses of Benedictine monks and nuns, Cistercian monks and nuns, Cluniac monks, Tironensian monks, Bonhommes, and Augustinian and Premonstratensian canons. In a second stage, further religious orders were added to the list: the houses of mendicant friars (the Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites, and Austin friars) and the only foundation in Wales associated with the military orders, increasing the total number of monastic sites on the website to sixty. Each of the monasteries included on the website has an individual page which contains a schematic history of the house from its foundation to its dissolution; descriptions and photographs of the standing remains and any related artefacts; some practical information, such as access and ownership; a searchable list of people associated

25. We are grateful to a range of people who have contributed to the database of photographs, most especially Martin Crampin. Mention should also be made of postgraduate students at University of Wales: Trinity Saint David (Lampeter), notably Therron Welstead, Paul Watkins, Christopher Pearce, and Ian Bass.



with the site, be that in their capacity of founders or patrons, heads of the house, or secular as well as ecclesiastical authorities involved with the community in question; a list of archival sources with details of content and, where available, digital images; and a list of relevant bibliographical sources.

As well as information about sixty religious communities, the *Monastic Wales* website has a section on the different religious orders that were present in medieval Wales, a searchable database of people, an extensive glossary of terms, a comprehensive bibliography and list of archival material, and a section which contains scholarly articles written by members and collaborators of the *Monastic Wales Project* and which is being updated and expanded at regular intervals. At present the articles included in this section treat different religious orders (the Benedictines, Cistercians, Cluniacs, regular canons), an article on 'transient' religious houses in Wales, and a series of articles on the architectural remains of individual sites. The *Monastic Wales* website, moreover, has an interactive map marking all the monastic sites included, facilitating their localization. Finally, one very important element of the *Monastic Wales* website is its interactive function, facilitating direct contact with the project team and thereby enabling the participation of the public in the project.

The *Monastic Wales* website is regularly updated and expanded, making this very much a 'living' project that accumulates and incorporates new information as it becomes available, and raising awareness of our links with cognate projects and research elsewhere. Monthly statistics allow us to measure the number and provenance of visitors to the *Monastic Wales* website, which has registered users from across Europe (mostly from within the United Kingdom, but also from Ireland, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Scandinavia, and eastern Europe), as well as the United States and Australia. It is noticeable that significant visits to the website have been registered after the delivery of a lecture or conference paper.

5. *Monastic Wales*: scholarly research and publications

To date, the *Monastic Wales Project* has resulted in two major publications: first, the collection of scholarly essays entitled *Monastic Wales: New Approaches* was published by the University of Wales Press in March 2013.²⁶ This book brings together recent work of some of the most important scholars from different disciplines and different backgrounds currently working on aspects of monastic Wales. They include archaeologists, historians, literary scholars, and art historians, from Wales, England, and Ireland, and their aim is to 'consider the history, archaeology, architecture and wider cultural, social, political and economic context of the religious houses of Wales between the Norman conquest in the 11th century and dissolution of the monasteries in the 16th century. This is our first step towards a comprehensive

26. Information from the back cover of: Burton, Janet; Stöber, Karen, eds. *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013.



history of monastic Wales. Professor Huw Pryce has called the book an “impressive collection of essays [that] makes an extremely valuable contribution to the study both of medieval Wales and medieval monasticism”. He continues:

No other volume provides such a wide-ranging picture of Welsh monastic history over the centuries from the coming of the Normans to the Reformation. Informed by the latest research, it demonstrates the impact of the monastic orders on all facets of Welsh society: from the economy to literature and book production, from politics to popular religion, in towns as well as in the countryside. Sensitive to both local contexts and European connections, the contributors add significantly to our understanding of the place of Wales in medieval Christendom.²⁷

The second publication, *Abbeys and Priors of Medieval Wales*, published in hardback and in paperback in February 2015, also by the University of Wales Press, is a guide to the religious houses of medieval Wales, providing a thorough introduction to monasticism, with special focus on Wales, followed by individual histories of each of Wales’s almost sixty houses of monks, canons, friars, and nuns.²⁸ This book, which includes maps and other practical information, is both a scholarly history of Wales’s medieval monastic heritage, and a practical visitor’s guide for the general public. In addition to the usual outlets of bookshops it is marketed at heritage sites throughout Wales. The impact (both scholarly and non-academic) of these publications will continue to be demonstrated through book sales and citations in academic works.

6. Monastic Wales in its wider context

Monasticism was a universal, European wide, medieval experience and one that has always attracted, and continues to attract, widespread scholarly attention. The *Monastic Wales Project* has the support of a prestigious international advisory board, whose members are Dr Maureen Jurkowski (University College London), Dr Edel Bhreathnach (The Discovery Programme, Dublin), Professor Andrew Prescott (Glasgow University), Dr Anne Müller (University of Wales Trinity Saint David and project manager at the Monastery of Heidenheim), Professor Blanca Garí (University of Barcelona), Professor Dr Hedwig Röckelein (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen), and Professor Petr Sommer (Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Prague).

The *Monastic Wales Project* does not exist in isolation. On the contrary, it is a collaborative venture that benefits from, as well as inspires, other projects of similar nature. In the first instance, contacts were established with colleagues across the Irish Sea. This was in many ways a natural collaboration. Close links existed between Wales and Ireland during the medieval period, when two Welsh monasteries (Tintern

27. Pryce, Huw. *Monastic Wales: New Approaches*, Janet Burton, Karen Stöber, eds. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013: back cover.

28. Burton, Janet; Stöber, Karen. *Abbeys and Priors of Medieval Wales...* (Reprinted in paperback in November 2015).



Abbey, and Llanthony Priory) established daughter houses in Ireland. Moreover, monasticism in Ireland, as in Wales, exhibited some of the characteristics that arose from tensions between native and immigrant lordships. In 2011, therefore, the *Monastic Wales Project* team organised a workshop, held at the University of Wales: Trinity Saint David in Lampeter, which had its focus on establishing collaborative links between Monastic Wales and Ireland, and which was attended by colleagues from Dublin, Belfast, Cork, and Limerick. In the event, out of this initial meeting grew an independent research project, inspired by the *Monastic Wales Project* and closely related to it: the *Monastic Ireland Project*.²⁹ This new project, which is based at the Discovery Programme Ireland and Trinity College in Dublin, was launched in Dublin in December 2014 in the presence of the directors of the *Monastic Wales Project*. A further, similar, research project is presently at planning stage in Scotland. The *Monastic Scotland Project*, currently under discussion involving scholars from the universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Stirling and St Andrews. Like its counterparts in Wales and Ireland, this project will emphasise interdisciplinarity and close collaboration with existing local heritage organisations, such as Historic Scotland. The *Monastic Wales Project* is maintaining close contact with the Scottish team.

The *Monastic Wales* directors are moreover closely involved as collaborators in a range of other monastic projects, most notably the *Strata Florida Project*, based at the University of Wales: Trinity Saint David and directed by Professor David Austin and Dr. Jemma Bezan, and the research project *Claustra. Atlas de Espiritualidad Femenina en los Reinos Peninsulares* (HAR2011-25127), directed by Professor Blanca Garí at the University of Barcelona, as well as the research project *Auctoritas. Iglesia, cultura y poder, siglos XII-XV* (HAR2012-31484), directed by Dr. Karen Stöber at the University of Lleida (both funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of the Government of Spain).

Finally, the *Monastic Wales* and *Strata Florida* projects were the joint instigators and organisers of the exploratory workshop *Monasteries in the Shadow of Empire*, held at the Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt in Germany in October 2013, which was awarded €12,000 by the European Science Foundation (EW12-069). This meeting brought together participants from Wales, Ireland, England, Spain, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Romania, Hungary, and Denmark, to explore the possibilities for an international, inter-disciplinary collaborative project on regional aspects of monasticism and state building, cultural communication and narrative, and the spatial impact of religious houses in the landscape.

7. Monastic Wales and conscientious tourism

Fostering ‘conscientious tourism’ is one of the key aims of the *Monastic Wales Project*. It seems clear that people treat historical patrimony differently when they

29. Monastic Ireland. “Welcome to Monastic Ireland”. *Monastic Ireland*. 9 June 2015 < <http://www.monastic.ie/>>.



have established a relation with it. In this sense, *Monastic Wales* not only targets tourism from further afield, but is simultaneously aimed at ‘internal tourism’, raising people’s consciousness of their local heritage. Putting the medieval Welsh heritage into its historical, but also its cultural, social and political context, helps people understand the wider significance of what might in some cases at first glance appear to the uninformed visitor simply as piles of old stone. It is therefore crucial for the preservation of the monastic heritage of Wales to initiate, through the provision of information, the process of understanding — appreciating — caring — maintaining — of the material remains of the abbeys and priories of medieval Wales. Furthermore, the *Monastic Wales* website provides the visitor with practical information beyond the immediate site of individual religious houses, by drawing their attention to the documentary sources kept in archives in Wales and beyond, and the seals that survive in some cases and are now at the National Library of Wales or the National Museum of Wales, or in archives outside Wales. And then there are those items of monastic provenance that are no longer *in situ*, such as the floor tiles from Neath Abbey and Basingwerk Abbey, now kept at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff; or the fine stone effigy of Siwan (Joan), the wife of Llywelyn ab Iorwerth (died in 1240), ruler of Gwynedd and patron of the Franciscan friary of Llanfaes in Gwynedd, now at Beaumaris parish church; or the capitals from Cwmhir Abbey, now at St Idloes church in Llanidloes; or the capital from a pier from Strata Marcella Abbey, which now functions as a baptismal font at Buttington parish church.³⁰

8. Case Studies

The following three case studies are examples of some aspects of the *Monastic Wales Project’s* role in raising the awareness of, and by extension promoting the maintenance and care of, Wales’s medieval heritage.

8.1 Strata Florida Abbey (Cistercian, Cardiganshire)³¹

The important Cistercian monastery of Strata Florida was a daughter house of Whitland Abbey, which in turn had been founded directly from France.³² Over

30. See: Burton, Janet; Stöber, Karen. *Abbeys and Priories of Medieval Wales...*: 115 (for Llanfaes), 196 (for Strata Marcella). See also: “Monastic Wales”. *Monastic Wales*. 9 June 2015 <<http://www.monasticwales.org/browsedb.php?func=showsite&siteID=26>> (for Abbey Cwmhir).

31. “Strata Florida (Abbey)”. *Monastic Wales*. 9 June 2015 <<http://www.monasticwales.org/site/32>>.

32. Traditionally Whitland Abbey has been counted as a daughter house of the abbey of Clairvaux. However, Benoit Tock has shown that the foundation history of Vaucelles Abbey in northern France claims to be the house from which Whitland was founded. See: Tock, Benoit. “Les fondations anglaise et galloise de l’abbaye de Vaucelles”. *Revue du Nord*, 391-392 (2011): 795-814.



time Strata Florida acquired great importance. Not only did it become the family monastery and dynastic mausoleum of the southern Welsh princes of Deheubarth; it moreover represents one of the most significant centres of cultural production of all the medieval Welsh monasteries. Its history is closely linked to the native Welsh princes, who on at least one occasion in the 13th century used the abbey for a political gathering, and in consequence also to the latter's hostile relationship with the English crown. Over the centuries, the Strata Florida monks repeatedly felt the repercussions of these hostilities, when their abbey was attacked by royal English troops or sympathisers of the English king, who went as far as abusing the monastic buildings for military purposes, as in the 15th century, when English soldiers stabled their horses in the abbey church. Despite its turbulent history, Strata Florida played a key role in the cultural life of medieval Wales and was instrumental in the production and preservation of native literature, both in Latin and in Welsh. Many of the most important Welsh literary manuscripts are attributed to its scriptorium, and it is also known that later heads of the abbey played a central role as patrons to some of the Welsh bards. Architecturally the monastery represents a fine example of the regional building style that has parallels in the West Country (England), but the spectacular west front of the abbey church represents a unique example in a Cistercian context. Strata Florida Abbey survived the first wave of monastic suppressions under King Henry VIII, but was eventually dissolved by royal order in February 1539. The remains of the abbey church and conventual buildings are now in the guardianship of *Cadw*, while the rest of the former monastic precinct is in private hands.

Strata Florida has always attracted the attention of scholars and local historians. It is among the most-discussed monasteries in Wales, but the resulting documentation about the abbey was dispersed, making the comprehensive treatment of the house difficult. The *Monastic Wales Project* has gathered together in one place all available information about Strata Florida Abbey, thereby allowing visitors to the website, easy access to the wide range of bibliographical material and facilitating further research, as well as offering a detailed outline of the abbey's history from its foundation to its suppression. The information presented schematically on the website has moreover been elaborated in the *Monastic Wales Project* publication *Abbeys and Priors of Medieval Wales*.³³ In the case of Strata Florida Abbey, the *Monastic Wales Project* has, as stated above, established close collaborative connections with colleagues from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David's archaeological team and their *Strata Florida Project*.³⁴ The government organization, *Cadw*, is in charge of the ruins of the abbey church and the remaining part of the cloisters. *Cadw* has established a small museum and visitor centre on the site, where informative material, including a brief guidebook published by *Cadw* is available, as well as postcards and souvenirs. The display boards on the site and in the museum / reception area have recently been updated with information about the economic activities of the abbey in its

33. Burton, Janet; Stöber, Karen. *Abbeys and Priors of Medieval Wales...*: 187-193.

34. "Strata Florida". *Monastic Wales*. 9 June 2015 <http://www.strataflorida.org.uk>>.



landscape and environment which has emerged from recent investigation of the site by the *Strata Florida project*.

8.2 Llanthony Priory (Augustinian, Monmouthshire)

Llanthony Priory was the first house of Augustinian canons to be established in Wales. Its foundation dates back to the beginning of the 12th century and has its origins in a hermitage set deep in the Black Mountains on the borders of Wales and England.

The priory, which had a turbulent history, being drawn into the social unrest that affected the border region during different time throughout its history, was an important religious centre until its suppression in 1538 at the hands of the English crown during the dissolution of the monasteries. At its closure, its lands and possessions came into the hand of a member of the royal (English) household, and it has remained in private hands ever since. Today the dramatic ruins of Llanthony Priory are among the most picturesque in Wales. Set in farmland among the bare hills of the Black Mountain range, the former monastic complex now forms part of a working farm, which offers pony trekking excursions. Parts of the medieval buildings now house a privately-owned hotel and restaurant. The present owners of the site draw heavily on its medieval heritage, as a look at their website suggests, which states that:

the Hotel dates back to the 12th century and was originally part of Llanthony Priory which was built by Augustinian monks [sic]. A visit to the Hotel is like stepping back in time, as the building is very much the same today as it was when it was built, with its narrow spiral stair way leading to each of the four bedrooms situated in the tower, its magnificent dining room, which originally served as the prior's outer parlour and conference room and the bar, possibly once the prior's quarters.³⁵

Also on the Llanthony Priory Hotel website are a brief summary of the priory's history, and a photographic tour of the site. Visitors to Llanthony are granted free and unrestricted access to the monastic ruins, which now offer a splendid location for the many car-tourists, walkers, cyclists and horse-riders that pass through the valley. At the site, explanatory panels provide basic information about Llanthony's history and about the appearance of some of its buildings during the medieval period.

Beyond this basic provision of information, the visitor can turn to the *Monastic Wales Project* website, or to the published monastery guide.³⁶ Here, all the available information on the priory, gathered together from a wide range of archival sources

35. Llanthony Priory Hotel. 9 June 2015 <<http://www.llanthonyprioryhotel.co.uk/>>.

36. "Llanthony Prima (Priory)". *Monastic Wales*. 9 June 2015 <<http://www.monasticwales.org/browsedb.php?func=showsite&siteID=45>>; Burton, Janet; Stöber, Karen. *Abbeys and Priories of Medieval Wales...*: 128-134.



and published literature, is presented, chronologically and fully referenced, in a clear, accessible way, with suggestions for further reading.

8.3 Cwmhir Abbey (Cistercian, Radnorshire)

A striking example of a site whose material remains do not reflect its role in the monastic landscape of medieval Wales, the Cistercian abbey of Cwmhir has now all but disappeared.³⁷ Founded in the 12th century by a local Welsh lord as a daughter house of Whitland (like its sister abbey Strata Florida), Cwmhir's history was eventful and closely related to the volatile political situation of medieval Wales. Throughout most of its existence, the monastery was in the crossfire of English and Welsh hostilities, an uncomfortable situation echoed by the abbey's changing patronage history: Cwmhir passed from the hands of its Welsh founders in the 12th century briefly into those of English patrons and the protection of the English king in the early 13th century, and back into the hands of native Welsh patrons in the mid-13th century. Its cross-cultural existence was also reflected in its recruitment: in the 14th century the abbey was home to four monks, two of whom were Welsh, two English. Today next to nothing remains of the former Cistercian monastery, and yet the house has a very central place in Welsh sentiment: it was here that the last of the native Welsh princes, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, was laid to rest after he was killed near the site during the final campaign of King Edward I of England in December 1282. A plain tombstone was laid in the remains of the abbey church in 1977, on the seven hundredth anniversary of Llywelyn's death. Abbey Cwmhir remains an iconic site in Welsh sentiment. *Cyfeillion Abaty Cwmhir* ("The Friends of Cwmhir Abbey") exists to foster appreciation of the historical importance of the site, and organizes a series of lectures. The main annual lecture (delivered some years ago by one of the project directors) is held in early December, on the Sunday closest in date to the death of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, and is preceded in the abbey ruins by an ecumenical service of commemoration and reconciliation.

In the case of a monastic site with only fragmentary remains, the *Monastic Wales Project* plays a particularly central role in the appreciation of its heritage. The website brings to life a place of great historical significance that might otherwise be easily overlooked, having no eye-catching ruins to attract visitors.

As the three case studies demonstrate, the *Monastic Wales Project* is an active participant in the wider heritage management in Wales, be it by collating and expanding information about individual monastic sites in one easily accessible location (as in the case of Strata Florida), by providing thoroughly researched histories to complement the standing remains of an abbey or priory (as in the case of Llanthony Priory), and by making available and bringing to life monastic sites where little or no material remains now survive (as at Abbey Cwmhir).

37. "Cwmhir (Abbey)". *Monastic Wales*. 9 June 2015 <<http://www.monasticwales.org/browsedb.php?func=showsite&siteID=26>>; Burton, Janet; Stöber, Karen. *Abbeys and Priories of Medieval Wales...*: 80-83.



9. Conclusions

The *Monastic Wales Project* seeks to play a part in the preservation of Wales's medieval heritage on several levels by bringing the history and heritage of one small region to the attention of a wider, international audience. It is both a research tool and an educational platform, as well as offering practical information for the casual visitor.

By raising awareness of the monastic remains, the *Monastic Wales Project* promotes conscientious tourism, nurturing users' appreciation and understanding of the monastic ruins in their wider social, cultural, spiritual, political, and economic context, and in the landscape, and thereby encouraging adequate treatment of the material remains of the medieval Welsh monasteries.

The Monastic Wales Project is a working example of how much can be achieved with limited funding (to date £22,000) and in a short time.

