

Llantarnam Abbey - An Oasis of Tranquillity and Prayer

The village of Llantarnam, situated a few miles outside Newport in south-east Wales is in an area steeped in history.

Eight centuries ago, because of its tranquil location, it was the chosen site for one of the few Cistercian monasteries established in the country. The abbey was founded by a member of the Welsh nobility, Hywel ap Iorweth, Lord of Caerleon. In 1179, he declared: "Be it known to all the faithful of the Church of God that I, Hywel ap Iorweth, son of Owen, for the salvation of my soul and that of my parents and predecessors, I have settled the White Monks at Llantarnam and given the lands to the White Monks";

The origin of the name Llantarnam is shrouded in the mists of time. One suggestion that it may have originally been from the Welsh "Llan-tor-non" - "the church on hill of St. Non" seems implausible. More likely is that the origin is "Nant Teyrnnon" - valley of Teyrnnon, after a Celtic hero, or "Lanterna" as in "Abbey of Light".

Down the centuries there has also been speculation that the original abbey was situated at Caerleon and relocated to Llantarnam, some five miles away. However it seems clear that Caerleon Abbey and Llantarnam Abbey were one and the same. A mandate addressed to "The Abbot of St. Mary's Llantarnam" and other later documents refer to: "the monastery of the Blessed Virgin of Karelyn alias Llantarnam". The monks who settled at Llantarnam came from another Welsh establishment at Strata Florida, which had been founded in 1164 and was situated some 15 miles south-east of Aberystwyth in West Wales. At the outset, the Llantarnam community numbered around sixty including lay brothers.

After its establishment, the abbey prospered but was soon in dispute with other Welsh abbeys at Tintern and Margam. More seriously, Llantarnam came into conflict with the Earl of Gloucester, Gilbert de Clare. Around 1272, the abbey found itself at the mercy of de Clare and one report tells that its possessions had reduced considerably because "wild animals had devoured the land" - thought to be a reference to actions of the earl.

By 1291, Llantarnam had acquired fourteen properties or granges located in Gwent and Glamorgan. Perhaps the most well known was at Penrhys in the Rhondda Valley, some 25 miles away. At a mountain top location around 1,000 feet above sea level, a grange complete with small chapel was built there to house a small community of monks. It is believed that the monks at Penrhys utilised land there to grow medicinal herbs for use in the infirmary at Llantarnam. At Penrhys too, was a well dedicated to the Virgin Mary and which came to be known locally as "Fynnon Fair" or "Mary's Well". Today, the area at Penrhys continues to be known as "Craig Rhiw Mynach" or "Monks' Ridge Rock" and a seventeen foot high Portland stone statue of the Virgin Mary and the Holy well is today still the focus of pilgrims.

David Jones

The full version of this article appears in the September-October issue of Cambria