



Thin Places, Sacred Spaces, Historical Traces

St Helen's Tour of Mystic Britain A Visitors' Guide

Chapter 3 – Wales: July 2023

This week we travel north across the Bristol Channel into Wales, a country where many places, much history, the language and its spelling (especially the last) are all very mysterious to the visitor. We drop in on a three places, taking a tour around the south and west of Wales in the process. Helen will tell us about St Govan's chapel in Pembrokeshire as well as the village/city (see below what that's about) and cathedral at St Davids. Traveling 200 km northeast along the Welsh coast to Llangolan, we hear from Val about the Saint who built a hermitage and chapel here, giving it the name meaning in Welsh "religious settlement of Collen", St Collen being the focus of her story. And so we move on to ...

St Govan's Pembrokeshire South Wales. A scenic walk along the cliff top through a military firing range brings us to the tiny chapel of St Govan. 52 stone steps lead to the chapel, built in the 13th century halfway down the cliff. St Govan (Gawain Dafod Aur in Gaelic, (Gwalchmai in Welsh, Walganus in Latin, Gavin in English – it's no wonder British history is so hard to follow) lived here in the 6th century as a reclusive hermit, but not before many adventures as Sir Gawain and the largely absent King of Gododdin. He is said to have abdicated in favour of a saintly life on the coast near here, been chased by Irish pirates, and found sanctuary in a cleft in the rock where the chapel now stands. Some felt his presence protected the area from the Viking raiders who plagued the coastline. The tourist guide says: "ancient mystery clings to the chapel and there is a feeling of 'something' in the air". What better place to commune with God and nature than on the edge of the ocean with the sounds of the waves below and the cries of seabirds circling above.



St Govan's Chapel, photo credit:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Govan%27s_Chapel

(www.earlybritishkingdoms, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Govan%27s_Chapel)

St Davids, at the most westerly point of Wales, is the smallest city in Britain with a population of about 1700. Though its cathedral qualifies it as a city, it lost this status in 1888, but it was reinstated by Queen Elizabeth in 1992.

Who was St David? Much is recorded about his life, though how much of it is legend is uncertain. One story that clearly is legend is that of his difficult birth in a violent storm where a boulder was rent in two, one half becoming the foundation stone of the cathedral and the other the well head of St Nons' Well. We do know that he was born in the early 500's and died in 589, living for a time as a hermit before making the Great Pilgrimage to Jerusalem. When he returned to his birthplace, he established a monastery on the shores of the River Alun, converted many to Christianity and was known for his great kindness and holiness. When he died, his grave became a shrine attracting the faithful from far and wide. The Vikings

raided the area in the 10th and 11th centuries and the shrine was desecrated but was rebuilt and David's relics along with those of St Justinian another local hermit were moved into a portable casket. In the 12th



*St David's Cathedral, photo credit:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_David%27s_Cathedral*

century St Davids was an important pilgrimage site equal to that of Santiago de Compostela, visited by kings and queens and Pope Calixtus II decreed that two pilgrimages in search of St David were equal to one to Rome.

The relics were lost during the reformation when the Bishop of the time embraced Protestantism, stripping the shrine and cathedral of all its treasures and decorations. The shrine was restored with paintings of St David, St Patrick and St Andrew and rededicated on St David's Day in 2012.

Today the cathedral is part of the Anglican communion with services in both Welsh and English. Pilgrims come as walkers seeking peace as they walk the Pembrokeshire Coastal

Trail or as tourists visiting the artisan studios and restaurants in the small village that is the city of St David's. www.stdavids cathedral.org.uk, *Sacred Britain* by Martin Symington

St. Collen of Llangollen was a 6th century warrior and religious figure who also lived for a time as a hermit on Glastonbury Tor, Somerset. He was educated in Orleans (France) before returning to Britain where he was invited by the Pope's emissaries to accept a challenge of single combat from a Greek pagan leader (Bras). Watched by the Pope and a host of onlookers, Collen was wounded, given medical aid by his enemy and managed to bring Bras to his knees. Begging for mercy, Bras agreed to the conversion of his people to Christianity. The Pope rewarded Collen with the gift of a miraculous lily which, although it had been withered, had bloomed before a crowd of pagans when they doubted the truth of the Virgin Birth (in later years it was revered at Worcester Cathedral).

When Collen returned to Britain, he joined the community at Glastonbury Abbey (which we visited last week) and was soon chosen as their abbot. He became a travelling preacher before withdrawing to a small hermitage near a spring at the foot of Glastonbury Tor. While he was there, Collen heard two men talking of 'Gwyn ap Nudd, the King of Annwn (the Otherworld) and of the Fairies'. He chastised the two locals for believing in such demons and was warned by them that he would regret his disrespect. Shortly afterwards, a Royal messenger invited Collen to visit 'Gwyn' and after three refusals, he bottled up some holy water and began to climb the great hill. He found the King seated on a



St Collen's parish church (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Llangollen#>)

(c) 2016 St. Helen's Church The contents of this publication are protected by applicable copyright laws. All rights are reserved by the authors.



St Collen Photo credit:
www.earlybritishkingdoms.com

golden throne in a magnificent castle, but despite offers of gifts, Collen was not impressed. He brought out his sprinkler and sprayed holy water over the whole company. They disappeared and Collen was left standing alone on the hillside. If you hadn't gathered by now that much of his story is legend, this part seals it. The Lord guided him to Llangollen in North-East Wales, where Collen built a hermitage and chapel, the perfect place for prayer and contemplation until he discovered that a giantess living in a nearby mountain pass was eating the local population (the world operated differently back then). Collen went to the pass, killed the giantess, and washed his sword in St. Collen's Well on the mountainside and at last was able to live a life of peaceful contemplation in his Welsh valley home.

St. Collen died sometime in the early 7th century and was buried in his chapel. A tomb-shrine to Collen stood in the churchyard until the 19th century when it was demolished to create space for the current west tower. An image of Collen can be seen in one of the stained glass windows.

Credits: <http://www.earlybritishkingdoms.com/bios/collen.html>; Wikipedia

We can't visit mysterious Wales without talking about the Celts. Arriving from northern Europe between 600 and 500 BC at the start of the Iron Age, Celts soon dominated the culture of the earlier inhabitants here by force of warrior skill and artistic prowess rather than numbers. Living in clans and farming when they

weren't fighting, they held many of their pre-Christian religious ceremonies in woodland groves and near sacred water, such as wells and springs. They are also known for training Druids, a sort of super-class of priests, political advisors, teachers, healers, and arbitrators. Druids had their own universities, where traditional knowledge was passed on by rote. They had the right to speak ahead of the king in council, and may have held more authority than the king. They acted as ambassadors in time of war, they composed verse and upheld the law. They were a sort of glue holding together Celtic culture.

(<http://www.britainexpress.com/wales/history/iron-age.htm>).

Christianity entered Wales during and after the Roman presence, taking hold over centuries. The term "Celtic Christianity", however, appears to be more an ephemeral concept than any substantive difference with the Roman church. It has come to mean anything more spiritual and less political, with more ties to the ancients than the latter. In truth, the early Celtic Christians, in Wales and elsewhere, did place more emphasis on the abbey than the cathedral, but without really separating themselves from episcopal authority. It could be said that mysticism came with monasticism, separation as a virtue entered Christian Zeitgeist with the Celts; much of what we understand as Celtic influence comes from that thinking. Another influence on Wales and Welsh Christianity was the Norsemen presence. The Vikings (in the Norse language, to "go Viking" meant raiding to gather plunder) often raided Wales during the 7th and 8th centuries, usually from the settlements they had established in Ireland and north Atlantic islands. They didn't set up colonies there, as eventually the Welsh interrupted their normal internecine warfare enough to repel sustained intrusions. In fact, the Welsh joined in various alliances with the Norsemen (North men) to counter their hated Saxon foes.

As Christianity became more widespread in Northern Europe, Norsemen were converted, and some came to Wales on pilgrimage, for religious instruction or to enter holy orders, contributing, in the process, much to Welsh art, music and literature.

Wales' history is replete with ancient influences on transitioning cultures. Absent a solid historical record, legends abound, and the Ancients were, and are still, often seen to have contributed that which we wish they had contributed, to have been things that we wish we were. It is not surprising then that we assume that they somehow understood spiritual mysteries that we can only glimpse fleetingly. Did they? That remains part of the mystery!

Your Mystic Britain travel guides