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**The *Hortus Conclusus*: A Herbalist ‘Herstory’ -
How the Enclosed Castle Garden in Wales may Illuminate the Lived
Experience of the Medieval Noblewoman**

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BA (Hons)

Supervised by Jane Cartwright

Undertaken in fulfilment of an MA Celtic Studies at

The University of Wales Trinity Saint David

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore how the high and late medieval noblewoman spent her time in the castle garden. I will investigate whether relict plants (surviving medieval species) can illuminate female health concerns, by examining their possible uses as illustrated in medieval Welsh medical manuscripts. Can the idea of women using gardens to display agency over their own bodies be substantiated by an interdisciplinary approach; including historical records, archaeology, art and archaeobotany?

The medieval garden will be considered as a place of devotion, one which came with many recognisable Mariological motifs. For example, while the re-growth of plants demonstrated fertility, the walls surrounding the garden represented an embodiment of chastity, both ideals which medieval women sought to embody as part of their social identity. I am choosing to focus on women because there is less historical narrative about their lives, and I believe this *green history* from archaeobotany is an underdeveloped and potentially illuminating way of understanding their lived experience.

Until forty or so years ago when a flow of feminist study began, the history of women was little researched. Previously, the study of castles had been measured mostly by their military associations, elite male occupants, and male-centred archaeology thereafter. I aim to explore the castle as a domestic location – a place also occupied by families, by examining historical records of gardens built for queens, the architectural placement of the gardens and the spatial route to them, and the folklore surrounding Welsh women as healers.

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Introduction

The *hortus conclusus*, which is the Latin for ‘enclosed garden’, was represented in Christian art from the Middle Ages onwards, as a symbol of purity; ‘the garden is frequently shown walled, so implying impenetrability.’¹ From the twelfth century, the biblical Song of Solomon² gained popularity, and gave the *hortus conclusus* a recognisable association with the Virgin Mary and the chaste wife. So much so that, ‘the *hortus conclusus* came to symbolize Mary’s complex status as a virginal mother, whose fruitful body nevertheless remained spiritually and physically enclosed’.³ By the fourteenth century ‘depictions of the Virgin Mary in the *hortus conclusus* proliferated, filling literary texts, prayerbooks, textiles, altar pieces, and other devotional objects.’⁴ Rachel Delman has argued that these symbols meant high-status women became ‘fluently conversant with the walled garden’s associations with female kinship and idealised womanhood’,⁵ and I aim to explore how this was the case.

If then, women (specifically virgins) inhabited artistic depictions of the *hortus conclusus*, I will investigate how real women were occupying the true outdoor space. To do this, I aim to

¹ The National Gallery, ‘Glossary – Hortus Conclusus’, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/glossary/hortusconclusus#:~:text=Hortus%20Conclusus%20is%20the%20Latin%20for%20an,is%20frequently%20shown%20walled%2C%20so%20implying%20impenetrability>. (accessed 27/4/26).

² Bible Hub, ‘Song of Solomon 4:12’ also known as Song of Songs, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/songs/4-12.htm> (accessed 04/08/2026).

³ Rachel Delman, ‘Enclosed gardens, female networks, and spiritual kinship, in late medieval northern Europe’ (*Viator - Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 51(1), 437–464. 2021), p. 440.

⁴ Ibid. p. 441.

⁵ Ibid. P. 439.

deepen our understanding of medieval women's lives by utilising a relatively new approach - green history,⁶ and by pulling together threads of women's narratives, using a multidisciplinary method. This approach will lead me to analyse castle sites in Wales through the lens of archaeology, written historical sources, art, and archaeobotany; drawing thoughtful conclusions about how these women were living and potentially caring for their own bodies and each other's.

This exploration will encompass the medieval concept of herbalism; comprising of an oral tradition of botanical knowledge and extant medical texts. I believe that by considering the plants found in situ, and the evidence we have of women being the prominent owners of the castles' gardens, we can illuminate specific treatments aimed at women's afflictions.

Information can be pieced together about specific noblewomen more readily than their lower counterparts, as there are simply more records relating to them, due to their high status. At the same time, we must acknowledge that first-hand information about even noblewomen is scarce. The medieval written word was *almost* always penned by male hand,⁷ and by consequence, the extent sources we have, even if *about* women, are filtered through a patriarchal lens. However, we do know that there were women living at these castles, and that the pursuit of health *was* universal; we can therefore make some sensible suggestions about women's wellness and their attitudes towards it.

⁶ Karen Dempsey, 'Tending the 'Contested' Castle Garden: Sowing Seeds of Feminist Thought' (*Cambridge Archaeological Journal*. 2021;31(2):265-279.)

⁷ For notable exceptions see; Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Penguin Classics, London, 2000), Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Divine Love* (Penguin Classics, London, 1998). Christine De Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (Penguin Classics, London, 2000) and Marie De France, *The Lais of Marie de France* (Penguin Classics, London, 1999).



At first glance the primary source material available to us may seem limited, as organic matter naturally decays; so, how am I approaching this difficulty? Firstly, the basis and inspiration for this thesis, came from Ann Connolly's report⁸ on plants which are still found at Welsh castle sites, but that are crucially missing from the wider environment – see Appendix 1. Connolly surveyed the walls and nearby grounds of fifty castles and twenty abbeys in Wales and the marshes, compiling evidence of archaeophytes,⁹ and concluded that 'medieval importation seems justified.'¹⁰ I will be using this research to inquire into the potential uses of these relict¹¹ archaeophytes, and the suggestion put forward by Connolly, and subsequently by academic Karen Dempsey,¹² that these relict species were likely to have been meaningfully planted by the original users of the garden; and it is likely that these *users* were often the ladies whose chambers

⁸ Ann Connolly, 'Castle's and Abbeys in Wales: Refugia for 'Mediaeval' Medicinal Plants' (*Botanical Journal of Scotland*, 46(4), 628-636, 1994).

⁹ Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland, 'Archaeophytes' which are non-native relict plants <https://bsbi.org/learn/getting-started/terms/general-terms/archaeophytes> accessed 28/07/2026.

¹⁰ Connolly, 'Castle's and Abbeys', p. 634.

¹¹ Relict plants can be identified as 'the descendants of plants grown, cared for and used by (medieval) people.' Karen Dempsey, 'Sowing Seeds and Reaping Rewards: Relict Plant Studies at Medieval Castles' (Castle Studies Website <https://castlestudiestrust.org/blog/author/karen-dempsey/> 2020).

¹² Karen Dempsey, 'Planting new ideas: a feminist gaze on medieval castles' (*Château Gaillard: Études de Castellologie Médiévale*, 29 : Vivre au château, 85-98., 2021), 'Gender and medieval archaeology: storming the castle' (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 'Beyond the martial façade: gender, heritage and medieval castles' (*International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 26(4), 352–369, 2020) and 'Tending the 'Contested' castle garden.'

overlooked them. This suggests that the enclosed garden may have given high status women a means to cure themselves, agency that might not have been afforded to them elsewhere in their lives. For comparison, similar ecological studies have been undertaken in Ireland,¹³ including Lea Castle in County Laois.¹⁴

Whilst there has been some exploration from horticulturalists into historic garden design, there has been little academic study around the cultural history of the garden in Britain. Archaeology has tended to explore outside space in terms of boundaries. However, some discourse around health and wellbeing in the medieval garden has been discussed, notably in Patricia Skinner and Teresa Tyres book¹⁵ and John Harvey's¹⁶ work on medieval gardens; the latter was researched by analysing building accounts and household records.

To support these enquiries, I will consider the contemporary medical texts in circulation at the time, and what these are able to tell us about the known properties of the plants. This will importantly include the medieval Welsh medical manuscripts, as translated by Diana Luft.¹⁷ Alongside Luft, I will also reference another expert in the field of medieval medicine and health, the historian and academic Monica Green. Green has written extensive feminist scholarship on

¹³ Lorraine Foley, 'The Botanical Legacy of Bective Abbey from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century' (The Bective Abbey project <https://bective.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/bectivefoleyappendix.pdf>).

¹⁴ Fiona MacGowan, 'Ecological Report for the area around Lea Castle' (<http://www.leacastle.ie/wildlife/>, 2014).

¹⁵ *The Medieval and Early Modern Garden* ed. by Patricia Skinner and Teresa Tyres (Routledge Studies in Cultural History, London, 2021).

¹⁶ John Harvey, 'Medieval Gardens' (Batsford, London, 1981). This book was researched via building accounts and records.

¹⁷ Diana Luft, *Medieval Welsh Medical Texts* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2020).

women and medicine in medieval Europe¹⁸ and is well known for her cross-disciplinary approach between history and science; her translation of *The Trotula* is the version I refer to throughout this dissertation.

I will argue that there is evidence for certain remedies in the Welsh manuscripts, that use the relict plants Connolly identified in situ.¹⁹ This could suggest that the garden was a safe space for women to grow these chosen plants, aiding their specific health concerns – typically: menstruation, fertility, childbearing, lactation and menopause; and I will discuss why I believe it is possible it was women who were growing them. A feasible hypothesis being that there are, in many cases, specific references to the garden having been built for a queen's sole use.²⁰ Of course, we can only speculate as to whether the original inhabitants at the sites would have been aware of any plant's potential uses. Though it is my belief that due to this compelling parallel evidence gathered from multiple occupied locations, there is a strong implication that these plants would have been specifically chosen. We can therefore reasonably suggest that due to the multiplicity of the plants found, the location of the gardens under the women's chambers and the wide distribution of written remedies (medical texts, treatises, herbals and regimens) mentioning

¹⁸ For examples see – Monica Green, *Women's Healthcare in the Medieval West* (Routledge, 2000), *Making Women's Medicine Masculine* (OUP Oxford, 2008), 'Gendering the History of Women's Healthcare' (Gender & History. 20. 487 - 518. 2008), 'Midwives and obstetric catastrophe: retrieving the past' (The Lancet, 372, 1142-1143, 2008), 'The trial of Floreta d'Ays (1403): Jews, Christians, and obstetrics in later medieval Marseille' (Journal of Medieval History. 34. 185-211. 2008), 'The Court Midwife' (Early Science and Medicine. 13. 215-216. 2008), 'Printed Gynaecological and Obstetrical Texts 1474–1600' (2008) and *The Trotula: An English Translation of the Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

¹⁹ See appendix for examples for female specific cures from Luft.

²⁰ Sylvia Landsberg, *The Medieval Garden* (British Museum Press, London, 1996), p. 5.

these plants, that it is likely some of their uses would have been understood and applied, by the women living there – though much herbal knowledge is likely to have been gained via oral tradition, and not referenceable.



Data about green space within the castle compound has mostly been all but a footnote in any architectural explanation of a site. Historical research into castles tended to be predominantly from a military viewpoint until the 1970s and 80s, when feminist pedagogy and theory gathered momentum and began to more broadly illuminate female lives of the past.²¹ Moving forward, historians have begun to unpick female experiences from the sidelines of men's narratives. Rare and forgotten manuscripts by and about women (and those who identify as such; see the unusual case of medieval transgender sex worker Eleanor Rykener²²) are reshaping how we interpret their lived experiences. Hearing female voices and understanding what mattered to them is immensely valuable, considering the largely male-dominated authorship of historical documentation on the

²¹ For examples see Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*. (Cambridge University Press, 1975), Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford University Press, 1986), Marcelle Theibaux, *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology* (Oxford University Press, 1994), *Medieval Queenship*, ed. by John Carmi Parsons (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1994), Henrietta Leyser, *Medieval Women: Social History Of Women In England 450-1500* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, United Kingdom, 1995), Lisa M. Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe 400-1100* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

²² *Medieval Women Voices and Visions*, ed. by Eleanor Jackson & Julian Harrison (British Library, London, 2024) p. 176.

subject. Recent scholarly publications include topics on consent and sexual brutality in medieval literature, representations of gender, female emotions in medieval Irish literature, and Christianity as experienced through the enclosure of female devotees.²³ Popular culture is also enthusiastically embracing medieval femininity and celebrating our female ancestors' contributions to society, art, literature and science. Bookshops are full of displays with titles such as *The Secret Lives of Single Medieval Women*,²⁴ *Poet Mystic Widow Wife*²⁵ and *Femina - A New History of the Middle Ages, Through the Women Written Out of It*.²⁶ In 2025 the British Library held a sold-out exhibition titled 'Medieval Women: In Their Own Words', which ran for five months, and the same year, *castle-core*, or medieval and gothic inspired dress, was a key inspiration in the Autumn catwalk.²⁷ In March 2025, Oxford University held an open zoom seminar titled 'Why Medieval Women's Lives Are Still Relevant', with Professor Pragya Agarwal and Professor Diane Watt,²⁸ where they

²³ Examples of publications covering these subjects are: *Reconsidering Consent and Coercion: Power, Vulnerability, and Sexual Violence in Medieval Literature*, ed. Jane Bonsall & Hannah Piercy (Brepols, Belgium, 2025), Joanne Findon, *Bound and Free: Voices of Mortal and Otherworld Women in Medieval Irish Literature* (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Canada, 2024), *Within Walls: Experience of Enclosure in Christian Female Spiritualities From Late Antiquity to Early Modern Period*, ed. by Julia Lewandowska & Araceli Rosillo-Luque (Brepols, Belgium, 2025).

²⁴ Rosalie Gilbert, *The Secret Lives of Single Medieval Women: True Stories of Nuns, Maidens and Not-So-Merry Widows Who Made Their Own Way in the Medieval World* (Mango, Miami, 2025).

²⁵ Hetta Howes, *Poet Mystic Widow Wife* (Bloomsbury, London, 2024).

²⁶ Jamina Ramirez, *Femina, A New History of the Middle Ages, Through the Women Written Out of It* (Penguin, London, 2023).

²⁷ Laird Borrelli-Persson, 'How Often Do You Think About the Medieval Ages? Designers Did a Lot for Fall 2025', Vogue, 08/04/2025 <https://www.vogue.com/article/how-often-do-you-think-about-the-medieval-ages-designers-did-a-lot-for-fall-2025> (Accessed 02/01/2026).

²⁸ Pragya Agarwal and Diane Watt, 'Why Medieval Women's Lives Are Still Relevant' (University of Oxford, 2025), <https://oclw.web.ox.ac.uk/event/why-medieval-womens-lives-are-still-relevant> (accessed 07/09/2026).

discussed the 'disconnect between the misogyny of the wider culture and society and women's everyday experience.'²⁹ The trend continued into 2026, where the Sunday Times ran a segment titled 'Chain Mail, but Make it Chic'.³⁰ There seems to be no stopping the popularity surrounding medieval women - I believe this interest in the lives of our female ancestors can be partly attributed to seeking meaning in an increasingly digital and fragmented world, alongside a modern society where women are still being failed by the healthcare service. A recent example of this being that in September 2025 a new legislation was passed in Westminster, 'Jess's Rule: Three Strikes and we Rethink';³¹ where if a patient returns three times with the same concern, the doctor must re-consider the diagnosis and treatment.³²

The National Health Service available to us today in the UK is a far cry from the treatment available in the medieval period, where a visit to a learned physician was out of the remit of all but the elite. The garden became the space where most people would have grown their own pharmaceuticals, but we have little background study at hand to explore the castle garden specifically through the domestic or feminine lens. To begin to remedy this, I will analyse the location of castle gardens, alongside spatial study of medieval uses of space,³³ and discuss the

²⁹ Ibid. <https://oclw.web.ox.ac.uk/event/why-medieval-womens-lives-are-still-relevant>

³⁰ 'Chain mail, but make it chic', *The Sunday Times Style Magazine*, 19 July 2026, p. 5, references a London medieval restaurant, chain mail inspired jewellery and perfume advertised with a medieval banquet.

³¹ Baroness Merron, 'Primary Care Clinicians: Jess's Rule', (UK Parliament, Written Questions, Answers and Statements, 14/10/2025) (<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-10-14/hlws959>) accessed 07/009/2026.

³² This ruling was triggered by the death of Jess Brady, whose cancer was dismissed after frequent visits to the G.P.

³³ Examples; Daphne Spain, 'Gendered Spaces and Women's Status' (Sociological Theory, Vol. 11, No. 2, Jul., 1993, pp. 137-151, American Sociological Association), 'Gender in Medieval Places, Spaces and Thresholds', ed.

likelihood of these small outdoor areas being specifically designed for the lady of the house and what this could mean. A similar, but more in-depth study, has been undertaken by Leonie Hicks, who has looked at castles in Normandy and their spatial symbolism regarding gender.³⁴ I will expand in a small way to argue that to the medieval mind, gardens held feminine associations,³⁵ similar to decorative ladies' chambers:³⁶

the Marian *hortus conclusus* (held) multivalent associations with
feminine piety, chastity, motherhood, labour, curative medicine, and
kinship.³⁷

by Victoria Blud, Diane Heath and Einat Klafter (London Institute of Historical Research, 2019), Amanda Richardson, 'Beyond the Castle Gate: The Role of Royal Landscapes in Constructions of English Medieval Kingship and Queenship' (Concilium Medii Aevi, 14. pp. 35-53, 2011), Roberta Gilchirst, *Gender and Archaeology: Contesting the Past* (Routledge, London, 1999), *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps*, ed. Shirley Gardener (Routledge, London, 1993) and Sian Rees Jones, *Oxford Handbook women and Gender in Med Europe*, specifically chapter - "Public and Private Space and Gender in Medieval Europe" (Oxford Academic, 2013).

³⁴ Leonie Hicks, 'Magnificent Entrances and Undignified Exits: Chronicling the Symbolism of Castle Space Normandy' (*Journal of Medieval History*, Vol. 35:1, 2009).

³⁵ Delman, R., 'Enclosed Gardens, Female Networks, and Spiritual Kinship in Late Medieval Northern Europe.' (Brepolis, Viator 51, No. 1, 2021), see Delman's article in full, where she considers that 'elite women were fluently conversant with the walled garden's multifaceted associations with female kinship and exemplary femininity, which they deployed for both their individual and collective self-fashioning as devout wives, mothers, and widows. Through their literal and mental inhabitation of both real and imaginary walled gardens, laywomen expressed their belonging to dense and far-reaching female networks, which transcended figurative and literal boundaries.' p 438.

³⁶ See chapter 3 'Castle, Palace and Manor House,' in Skinner, P., and Tyres, T., eds., *The Medieval and Early Modern Garden* (Routledge Studies in Cultural History, London, 2021). Medieval castles and palaces, like medieval monasteries and all big medieval houses, were made up of a lot of buildings, some joined to each other by covered walks, some separate, so that their gardens were naturally enclosed between them, and were designed as extensions of the most decorative of them, usually the lady's chamber and the chapel.' p 102.

³⁷ Delman, 'Enclosed Gardens', p. 439.

Correspondingly, both the chamber and enclosed garden were part of the private rather than the public sphere;³⁸ places where women normally belonged. The popular biblical poem Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon) compares a woman's purity to a garden enclosed.³⁹ To understand what this could mean, I will explore what else women were doing in their gardens - namely, the garden as a pious space for reflection and devotion. Composed around CE 530 the Rule of Saint Benedict highlighted the idea of gardening as a form of prayer and work,⁴⁰ in fact, horticulture was prescribed in the medical treatises as a worthy occupation to alleviate stress, as it is understood to be today.⁴¹

The religious life of these women was closely interwoven with their sense of identity and gender. By trying to understand women's beliefs and religious practices, we get a more rounded picture of who they were, their aspirations, and how nature brought them closer to these ideals. The feminine and the divine were similarly entwined, namely in the form of the faultless and chaste Virgin Mary. I will contemplate how this manifested within the garden; how religious imagery was understood and represented by certain plants.

³⁸ Hicks, 'Magnificent Entrances', pp. 62-3.

³⁹ 'Song of Songs' from The Hebrew Bible, full poem can be read here: Bible Gateway, 'Song of Solomon 4:12-14' <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Song%20of%20Solomon%204%3A12-14&version=NKJV> (accessed 24/07/2026).

⁴⁰ Jenny Uglow, *Little History of British Gardening* (Random House, London, 2004) p. 25.

⁴¹ Carole Rawcliffe, 'How to Keep fit in the Middle Ages', *Gone Medieval* podcast, ep. 278, 1/1/24, <https://shows.acast.com/gone-medieval/episodes/keeping-fit-in-the-middle-ages>

These thoughts lead us on to the folklore surrounding plants, with specific acknowledgement to Celtic folklore, which held women at the heart of healing.⁴² Can the literature and lore around the medicinal application of herbs be seen in the stories which were commonly shared at the time? I will expand on this by discussing the Welsh folklore attached to some common plants and what this can tell us about their intended uses, and potentially who was likely growing them.

It has been said that the early twelfth-century, ‘was the last moment in western history when there were no legal restrictions whatsoever in medical practice’⁴³ – alongside normal women treating family, I will look at the idea that the cunning women of Wales, serving the community, initially faced less challenges to their practice and why this may have been.

Hopefully, by reflecting on the *Hortus Conclusus* in this rounded way, I can make sensible suggestions about real medieval women’s health concerns; what ailments and problems they were able to alleviate through herbal cultivation and application, and what this could tell us about their lived experience.

⁴² Nancy Nenno ‘Between Magic and Medicine – Medieval Images of the Woman healer’, in *Women Healers and Physicians: Climbing a Long Hill*, ed. Lilian Furst (Uni Kentucky Press 1997).

⁴³ Monica Green, *Making Women’s Medicine Masculine* (Oxford Press, 2008) p. 3.

Chapter 1:

The *Hortus Conclusus* – what made a medieval garden?

‘Dod yn ôl at Fy Nghoed’⁴⁴ - this Welsh proverb translates as ‘to come back to my trees’, but the words have a deeper meaning, suggesting peace can be found only with a balanced mind. It is no coincidence then, that trees are used as an allegory for positive mental health, the benefits of being outside in nature long understood.

The medieval garden came in a variety of guises. Garden historian Sylvia Landsberg divides them into three main types: the *herber*; small, walled and according to Bartholmew of Glanville’s 1240 encyclopaedia on plants, containing a lawn, flowers and medicinal herbs.⁴⁵ The *orchard*; for the growing of fruit, and the *park*; used for the pleasure of hunting animals and birds.⁴⁶ This thesis will focus on the *herber* and *hortus conclusus*; similar in that both were small and walled, though the *hortus conclusus* usually refers to Christian art from the Middle Ages and monastic gardens. The garden below the ladies’ chamber in castles and manor houses, can be classed as a *herber*, though there would have been some cross-pollination, as laywomen would have used it as a devotional setting alongside growing herbs.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Wrexham University, “Dod yn ôl at fy nghoed”: To return to my trees’,

<https://wrexham.ac.uk/blog/posts/dod-yn-ol-at-fy-nghoed-to-return-to-my-trees/> (accessed 02/05/2026).

⁴⁵ Harvey, *Medieval Gardens*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Landsberg, *The Medieval*, p. 13.

⁴⁷ The National Trust, ‘Gardens with Medieval Features’, <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/gardens-parks/gardens-with-medieval-features> (accessed 31/07/2026).



Of course, our neolithic ancestors began crop farming around twelve-thousand years ago, but where does the idea of gardening for health and wellbeing arise from? Early botanical knowledge arrived with the Romans, importers of plants; we know this because Anglo-Saxon plant names are derived from Latin, including ‘lily’ and ‘rose’. Later in the British Isles, the monastic orders created gardens and nurseries, such as Kilmainhaim in early fourteenth-century Ireland.⁴⁸ Due to monks' superior knowledge, gained from the copying of manuscripts,⁴⁹ they were at the forefront of plant cultivation. Was this awareness of garden design and herbalism also utilised by their female counterparts? The uniqueness of women's segregation makes nunneries interesting places, as nuns had ‘less gender constraints, as they were only around other women.’⁵⁰ Unfortunately, we have hardly any direct source material written by nuns, and - as is frustratingly common of the era - ‘women’s agency in the foundation of nunneries has been masked in the records by those of their male relations.’⁵¹ What we do know is that the nuns’ closed environment meant that they would have had to garden for both their sustenance and medical requirements, and as scientific learning was not available, to alleviate rather than cure

⁴⁸ MacGowan, ‘Ecological Report’.

⁴⁹ Harvey, *Medieval Gardens*, p. 34.

⁵⁰ Liz Herbert McAvoy, ‘Gendered Spaces of Flourishing and the Medieval Hortus Conclusus’, in *The Medieval and Early Modern Garden*, ed. by Patricia Skinner and Teresa Tyres (Routledge, London, 2018) p. 35.

⁵¹ *Gender in Medieval places*, Blud, ed. p. 28.

was the general aim. In fact, during the Middle Ages, ‘spiritual welfare was as important as medical needs.’⁵²

A wonderful anecdote that Uglow gives us from her book on medieval gardens is that ‘the twelfth century garden at the infirmary of the Augustine priory of St Eadbury at Bicester was called *The Trimbles*, from ‘trimble,’ (lovely word), meaning to walk unsteadily’;⁵³ which paints a real and tangible picture of a medieval garden in use for patient rehabilitation. Below is a rare picture of a hospital (fig.54), and even though this is in Paris and would have been well funded, we can get a good idea of what an ‘ideal’ hospital would have looked like. The second picture is a map of Welsh hospital locations (fig. 55), many of which are near castles; I surmise this was a practical consideration from a military standpoint.



The Hôtel-Dieu de Paris hospital. This is one of the few pictures of the inside of a medieval hospital

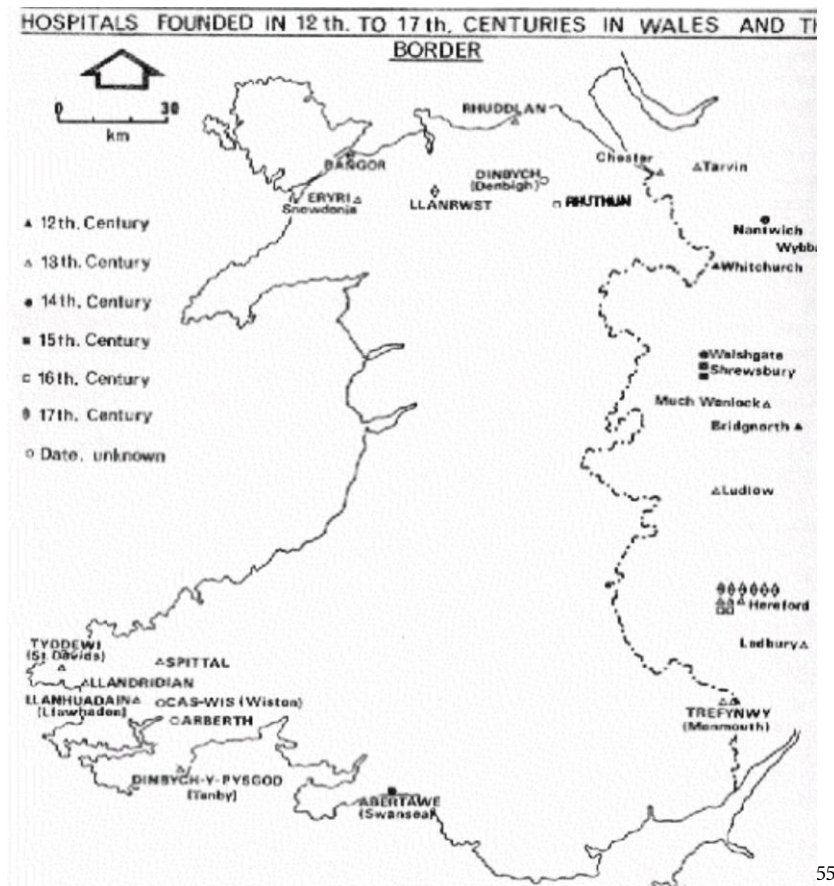
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⁵² Uglow, *A Little History*, p. 30.

⁵³ Uglow, *A Little History*, p. 30.

⁵⁴ BBC History, ‘Medicine in Medieval England, c. 1250 - c. 1500’

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zfkt6g8/revision/5> (accessed 04/03/2026).



We have no evidence of nuns working in any hospitals in Wales, but three medieval nunneries have been identified.⁵⁶ These are believed to have been the ‘two Cistercian convents at Llanllŷr and Llanllugan and a Benedictine priory at Usk’⁵⁷ – all founded in the twelfth century.

⁵⁵ Medievalists.net, ‘Some Early Hospitals in Wales and the Border’,

<https://www.medievalists.net/2011/09/some-early-hospitals-in-wales-and-the-border/> (accessed 04/03/2026).

⁵⁶ Jane Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2008) p. 177.

⁵⁷ *Monastic Wales: new approaches* (1st ed.), ed. Janet Burton & Karen Stober (University of Wales Press, 2013) p. 191.

However, due to the lack of funding they received, these would have been humble houses, and the occupants would have lived quite frugally.



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Usk Priory founded 1135, behind St Mary's Church.

At the Welsh Cistercian house at Llanllŷr, we know that the Abbess was called Annes. The convent was founded by Rhys ap Gruffudd and originally there were about sixteen nuns there.⁵⁹ An archaeological survey was carried out at the location in 2016, identifying 'earthworks of possible ponds and other features conceivably associated with the nunnery.'⁶⁰ At this time, a pond would likely have contained fish for consumption, but equally; we can expect that the garden brought not only purpose in work for the nuns, but contemplation and spiritual peace:

⁵⁸ For more information see History of Usk priory: <https://uskma.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/History-Information-Sheets.pdf>

⁵⁹ Monastic Wales, Llanllŷr (Abbey), <https://monasticwales.org/browsedb.php?func=showsites&siteID=38> (accessed 10/02/2026).

⁶⁰ Dyfed Archaeological Trust, 'Llanllŷr, Ceredigion, Archaeological Fieldwork 2015: Interim Report', [dat24_05.pdf](#) (accessed 10/02/2026).

So Heaven – the return to Eden – was imagined as an enclosed garden in late spring. The enclosure is a symbol of Mary’s sealed womb; you might see a dove as the Holy Spirit entering from above, but the gates always stay shut.⁶¹

Apart from rare earthworks, the challenge we are presented with is that unlike stone remains, the organic nature of a garden means we are left with almost no lasting physical evidence of its design. However, discoveries of long buried seeds reveal tantalising glimpses of ancient plants. Seed remains have been well documented at Danish sites,⁶² and closer to home, at Bective Abbey in County Meath:

excavated soil along the boundary wall germinated many species typical of disturbed soil, for instance noxious weeds and grasses. However, poppies (Pl. 4), six row barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) and forget-me-nots (*Myoprisarvensis*) (each a byproduct of farming) sprouted alongside a species of *brassica ssp* (subspecies). It is suggested that this unknown plant is a variety of kale (Curtis, perscomm.). Such soil disturbance promoted the correct conditions for dormant seeds to germinate during the summer.⁶³



⁶¹ The Art Society website, ‘Medieval Natural Symbols’ <https://theartsociety.org/arts-news-features/medieval-natural-symbols-0> (accessed 10/02/26).

⁶² Pernille Rohde Sloth, Ulla Lund Hansen and Sabine Karg, ‘Viking Age Garden Plants from Southern Scandinavia – diversity, taphonomy and cultural aspects’ (*Danish Journal of Archaeology*, 1(1), 27–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21662282.2012.750445>).

⁶³ Lorraine Foley, ‘Botanical Legacy’ pp. 9-10. Although, it must be acknowledged that ‘seed dormancy is a contentious subject’, due to there being no way of knowing the chronology of the germinating seeds.

The earliest *surviving* example of a garden in Wales is believed to be Aberglasney in Carmarthenshire, where parts of the current grounds can be dated to around 1600. Some evidence for this claim comes via the fifteenth-century bard Lewys Glyn Cothi (1420-90), who wrote about Rhydderch ap Rhys and his home.⁶⁴ It is thought that the gardens Cothi described are preceding ones at Aberglasney; as Rhydderch's family were living in the area, it is very likely to be them. The poet's *cywydd* (or ode) is 'one of the earliest accounts of Welsh gardens to survive';⁶⁵ whilst the ode's praise concerns the horticultural skill of a man, it is still interesting for its unusual and 'specific mention of gardens':⁶⁶

He has a proud hall, a fortress made bright by whitewash, and... encompassing it all around nine green gardens. Orchard trees and crooked vines, young oaks reaching up to the sky.⁶⁷

There are, however, some examples of Welsh praise poetry celebrating women's healing skills; such as Guto'r Glyn (c. 1412 – c. 1493) who wrote a poem for noblewoman Joan Burgh, in which he commends the food at her feast for causing 'illness to retreat'.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Info on Cothi, whose poems are contained in Peniarth MS 109 can be found at The National Library of Wales, 'Poetry by Lewys Glyn Cothi, <https://www.library.wales/discover-learn/digital-exhibitions/manuscripts/the-middle-ages/poetry-by-lewys-glyn-cothi> (accessed 6/1/25). As quoted in Penny David, *A Garden Lost in Time* (Weidenfeld Nicolson Illustrated, 1999), p. 30.

⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 11.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 30.

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 11.

⁶⁸ Guto's Wales, 'The Nobleman's Wife,' Guto Glyn, poem 81 <https://www.gutorglyn.net/gutoswales/gwledd-domestig-gwraig.php> (accessed 27/4/26).

Penny David, who has researched Aberglasney, acknowledges that generally gardens that were ‘attached to a number of fashionable gentry houses of Wales, favoured long walks – so called ‘streets’ in Welsh – lined with shaped trees or shrubs.’⁶⁹ As example of this is an archway of yews at Aberglasney (fig.72), where the trees have been purposefully bent into position to create a covered thoroughfare. There is debate about the age of these trees, as the forced bending of the branches makes them difficult to date. One expert has suggested that they are 1000 years old,⁷⁰ whilst others believe they were planted in the early eighteenth century when the estate was purchased by Robert Dyer.⁷¹



The yew walk. Aberglasney gardens Instagram.

Whilst this rare example of a living garden gives us a small glimpse into our *green history*, complementary evidence is available from which we can piece together a bigger picture.

⁶⁹ Penny David, *A Garden*, p. 12.

⁷⁰ Ibid. pp. 16-17.

⁷¹ Aberglasney – Heritage Garden of Excellence, ‘About’, <https://aberglasney.org/about-aberglasney/> (accessed 24/4/26).

⁷² Aberglasney Gardens, ‘Yew Tunnel’, (Instagram, 28/03/2022) <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cbp5RMgtSjX/?stkn=MTAzbWc5eXJlN3UwMA%3D%3D> (accessed 04/03/2026).

The ninth-century Gall Plan is a detailed blueprint of a Swiss Benedictine monastery (fig.74).

There is no proof that the monastery was ever built, but the architectural drawings clearly show the intended layout. This draft was distributed throughout Europe as the gold standard of monastery design, albeit academic in that it would undoubtedly have been adapted to suit different locations and terrain. Amongst the buildings listed, the plan includes the beneficial arrangement of the physic garden next to the doctor's house and a vegetable garden near the refectory, ideas which may have been adapted at manor houses and castles:

The physician's house was located so that the very sick could be brought there and during their convalescence look out over his garden of medicinal herbs.

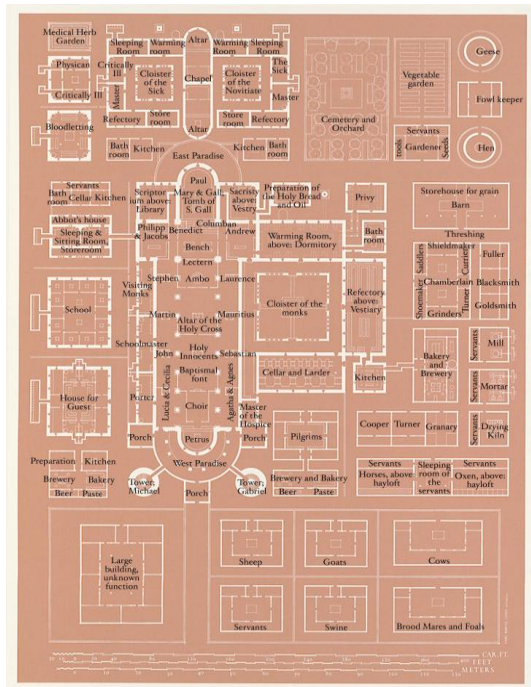
These included roses, lilies, sage, rosemary, violets, iris and many others grown for their pleasant aroma and the brews that could be concocted from their pods, bulbs, leaves and blossoms.⁷³



⁷⁴ Original Gall Plan

⁷³ Ramona Jablonski, *The Medieval Garden Design Book* (Stemmer House, Maryland, 1982), p. 2.

⁷⁴ UCLA Library, 'The Gall Plan', <https://digital.library.ucla.edu/catalog/ark:/21198/zz002kp2b7> (accessed 31/10/25).



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Modern re-draft. (c)Walter Horn and Earnest Born.

Monks themselves were part of communities that crossed borders, sharing gardening expertise along networks; thus ‘monks were natural importers and exporters, constantly improving their knowledge and resources by exchanging plants, personal and horticultural gossip with members of other monastic families.’⁷⁶ On a smaller scale, it is possible the Welsh nuns were also networking, as laywomen would, by attending markets and fairs, buying new plants and seeds, which were available via trade networks, or brought back from the crusades.⁷⁷ Of course, it is true that nuns were supposed to live under strict active enclosure, not leaving the

⁷⁵ Walter Horn and Earnest Born, ‘The Plan of St. Gall: A Study of the Architecture & Economy of & Life in a Paradigmatic Carolingian Monastery’ (accessed via The Garden History Blog, ‘The Perfect Monastic Garden’ <https://thegardenhistory.blog/2019/08/31/the-perfect-monastic-garden/> 31/10/25).

⁷⁶ Teresa McLean, *Medieval English Gardens* (Third Millenium Press, Wiltshire, 2020) p. 25.

⁷⁷ *The Medieval and Early Modern Garden* ed. by Patricia Skinner & Teresa Tyres (Routledge Studies in Cultural History, London, 2021), p. 46.

convent boundary; however, there were often lapses to this rule, as ‘there are instances of nuns being admonished for changing their habits to resemble dresses worn by laywomen; keeping pet dogs and rabbits; gossiping and forming cliques; absconding and abandoning their monastic vows; and worst of all, having illicit sexual relationships and becoming pregnant.’⁷⁸ Indeed, in the fifteenth century, aforementioned Annes, abbess of Llanllyr, was immortalised in a poem by Huw Cae Llwyd, in which she requests an ape for a pet.⁷⁹

At other monastic sites, stone cloisters which survived the reformation, give us undisturbed evidence of where outside spaces would have been located amongst the buildings. The early twelfth century brings proof of gardening monks in Ireland, when the Cistercian’s arrived from the continent. Irish scholar Manchán (d. 665) of Liath was recorded as celebrating the godliness of plants - demonstrating a love of nature within Celtic Christianity:

God was experienced through nature, which was the garden he had given man
For that purpose, and which the Celtic anchorites lived off and celebrated in
rhapsodically sensual poetry.⁸⁰

This background of horticultural origins is relevant as it explains the beginnings of both men and women’s love of the garden and gardening, and the accompanying acceptance of it as a

⁷⁸ English Heritage Website - ‘Nuns in Medieval England.’ <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/abbeys-and-priories/medieval-nuns/> (accessed 27/4/26).

⁷⁹ Jane Cartwright, ‘Abbess Annes and the Ape,’ pp. 191-207, in *Monastic Wales : new approaches* (1st ed.) ed. by Janet Burton & Kren Stoßer (University of Wales Press, 2013).

⁸⁰ Skinner & Tyres, *The Medieval*, p.19.

'spiritual endeavour'.⁸¹ Gardening as sanctified recreation for both sexes filtered down from the most dedicated, to the layperson; given its religious credence, health benefits, and enclosed private position, husbandry became an acceptable pursuit for the noble lady. Understanding how women came to 'be' in the garden is interesting, as the walls which held them arguably became a space of which they could take ownership.



It came to be then, that medieval wellness was governed by the notion that a healthy mind gave rise to a healthy body, and open spaces were seen as providing essential health-giving air. Avoidance of stress and anxiety was advised and while confession went some way in alleviating any troublesome burdens, exercise outside in nature, was recommended for keeping one's soul healthy. Religion and medicine were therefore deeply intertwined, in that, illness was thought to be an imbalance of the four humours,⁸² abated by prayer as well as remedy. Due to its credence from the monks, gardening was one of the pastimes prescribed to keep these supposed humours in balance. We know this, because it was recommended in medieval

⁸¹ Rachel Delman, 'Enclosed Gardens, Female Networks, and Spiritual Kinship, in Late Medieval Northern Europe' (Viator - Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2021), p. 440.

⁸² Yellow bile, black bile, phlegm and blood. Medical theory from ancient Greece. For info see Wellcome Collection, 'Shakespeare and the Four Humours', <https://wellcomecollection.org/stories/the-humours-in-shakespeare> (accessed 22/09/2026).

‘regimens’ - lifestyle guides for mental and physical health.⁸³ These manuals, from the thirtieth century onwards, were very popular; French physician Aldobrandino of Siena composed one for the Countess of Provence, Beatrice of Savoy (d.1266), called *Régime du corps* (Regimen for the Body). It contains a range of advice, including what to do in labour and pregnancy:

pregnant women should avoid foods that provoke menstruation and urination, such as parsley and rue, and should pay careful attention to their emotional state, seeking joy and comfort and avoiding fear and anger.⁸⁴

The book also contained beautiful illustrations to demonstrate Aldorbandino’s advice. Such as below (fig. 85), depicting a wet nurse being selected.



⁸⁵ Choosing a wet nurse. France 1265-70

⁸³ Carol Rawcliffe, ‘How to Keep fit in the Middle Ages’, *Gone Medieval* podcast, Ep. 278, 1/1/24, <https://shows.acast.com/gone-medieval/episodes/keeping-fit-in-the-middle-ages>

⁸⁴ *Régime du corps*, British Library MS Sloane 2435 fol. 28v. (<https://searcharchives.bl.uk/catalog/040-002114802>), accessed 02/03/2025.

⁸⁵ Jackson & Harrison, *Medieval Women*, pp. 56-57.



From the monks and nuns' gardens - and the idea of the absolution that was to be found in them - outside spaces began to be made for upper class medieval women. The highly stylised illustration overleaf (fig.87) depicts a royal herber. Accepting a degree of artistic license, the corpus of similar drawings (often found in ladies' books of hours), give us a hint at reality - evidence of the plants that could have been growing there. The picture reveals turf benches accented with trellis and roses, creating seats and shade. There is also a tunnel or *arbour*, bordered with flowers and herbs for both use and scent. Dovecots were common, a 'popular medieval delight,'⁸⁶ as the birds' gentle cooing was considered calming.



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⁸⁶ Skinner & Tyres, *The Medieval*, p. 103.

⁸⁷ Emilia in her garden from *La Teseida* by Giovanni Boccaccio. 1460 © Österreichische Nationalbibliothek

A fifteenth-century Italian woman in her garden. The blue gown is suggestive that the subject may depict the Virgin Mary.

John Harvey refers to this emergence of eleventh-century gardens as places of pleasure and respite, as demonstrating the peoples 'keen delight in the appearance of plants and their perfumes.'⁸⁸ However, these gardens had a parallel function, that of demonstrating the lord's wealth, learning, and modern tastes. Indeed, the lady in the picture above wears blue one of the most expensive dyes⁸⁹ - which was a colour in which the Virgin Mary was often painted.

The contents of these gardens display the medieval culture for duality of uses; nothing was to be wasted when life was hard. Flowers grown for their beauty would also have been chosen for their potential herbal applications; likewise, fountains with their meditative cascades housed fish stock and aquatic medicinal plants. If there could be, there was always a multi-purpose for everything; within the enclosed garden a blurring between pleasure and medicine arose.⁹⁰

It follows then, that noble ladies became horticultural pioneers and trendsetters; often from abroad, seventeen out of twenty-two medieval English queens were born overseas,⁹¹ they brought with them new ideas. One such lady was Spanish born Eleanor of Castille (b. 1241 – d.1290), the first wife of Edward I, who had rooms and gardens built for her at Conwy, though

⁸⁸ Harvey, *Medieval Gardens*, p. 14.

⁸⁹ Hetta Howes, *Poet Mystic Widow Wife – The Extraordinary Lives of Medieval Women* (Bloomsbury, London 2024), p. 114.

⁹⁰ Landsberg, *The Medieval*, p. 27.

⁹¹ Ibid. p. 5.

it is unlikely she ever stayed there.⁹² Influences for these new private gardens in the West, were taken from the Near and Middle East, which had enjoyed walled gardens as far back as 3000 years ago. In the East, these early examples of garden design were often found in monasteries; an original meaning of *paradise* being a garden where one could meditate.⁹³



Rhuddlan (completed 1282) is the earliest Edwardian castle in Wales with evidence of royal gardens; in fact, there were two⁹⁴ - wild sage and black henbane (considered a sedative and in folklore a painkiller for childbirth and cancer) have been found there.⁹⁵ At Chepstow, wild cabbage has been identified as a relict species; similarly at Kidwelly, Danish scurvygrass – a native plant that remains unusual this far inland.⁹⁶ The garden at Welsh native castle Dolbadarn was built by Llywelyn the Great for his wife Joan (d. 1237, the illegitimate daughter of King John and sister of King Edward III of England) in the early thirteenth century. Whilst it is undisputed that castles had orchards and parks outside, it was the small gardens inside the walls that ‘came into their own from the twelfth century onwards in confined castle sites’⁹⁷ and are spaces where we can explore the lives of the female inhabitants.

⁹² Ibid. p. 5.

⁹³ Ibid. p. 18.

⁹⁴ Dempsey, 'Tending the 'Contested' Castle Garden' p. 271.

⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 271.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 271.

⁹⁷ Landsberg, *The Medieval*, p. 16.

Chapter 2:

Green History - The relict plants found in situ

Botanist Ann Connolly's plan was to search for relict plants growing around castles in Wales that were notably absent from the surrounding topography. Her hypothesis was that an absence of these specific taxa within the wider landscape demonstrated a plausible theory that the ancient vegetation had been meaningfully and decidedly grown by humans at the sites; she called this - 'relict status from former cultivation'.⁹⁸

Common species discovered at multiple sites:

- White deadnettle / *Lamium album*
- Common vervain / *Verbena officinalis*
- Dwarf elder / *Sambucus ebulus*
- Black henbane / *Hyoscyamus niger*

Other notable examples across the sites include:

- Perennial wall rocket / *Diplotaxis tenuifolia*
- Tansy mustard / *Descurainia sophia*
- Indian hedge mustard or Eastern rocket / *Sisymbrium orientale*.

⁹⁸ Connolly, 'Castles and Abbeys in Wales', p. 628.

Others occurring near remote settlements:

- Greater celandine / Black horehound / Common mallow.⁹⁹

The specimens identified are authenticated by The Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland,¹⁰⁰ which lists them as archaeophytes, confirming their relict status. They are further categorised as *denizens*, which means they ‘have the appearance of being native (i.e. fully naturalised) but with some suspicion of having been originally introduced.’¹⁰¹ I visited some of the sites and recorded corroborative data (see Appendix 3); though some taxa at Castell Raglan, a ‘well kept’ site, were found just outside the walls, as the castle itself seems to be often ‘weeded’ by enthusiastic custodians; a potential problem when trying to identify relict species.

A similar study to Connolly’s was undertaken by Lorraine Foley at Bective Abbey in County Meath; here most of the archaeophytes (including white deadnettle) were found within the abbey grounds. Although Foley notes an important aside, that ‘the role of herbs in medieval daily life is not restricted to archaeophytes as many native species provided essential nutrients and healing as well as adding taste to food.’¹⁰² Nevertheless, by analysing these plant lists alongside the earliest collection of medieval Welsh medical texts, we can contextualise the uses of which medieval people were aware. These manuscripts, dating from the fourteenth-century to the

⁹⁹ Connolly, ‘Castle’s and Abbeys in Wales’, p. 628.

¹⁰⁰ Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland, ‘Archaeophytes’, [Archaeophytes - Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland](#) (accessed 4/4/2026).

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Foley, ‘The Botanical Legacy of Bective’, p. 11.

beginning of the fifteenth,¹⁰³ showcase advanced medical practice in Wales. The texts have often been presented as a whole, attributed to the *Physicians of Myddfai*, who were a real dynasty of physicians from Carmarthenshire. Much later the family became immortalised in folk tales as having mystical origins.¹⁰⁴ In reality, within the compendium of the Welsh Medical Texts, only a small section of the recipes are referenced to the *Physician's*, but the Welsh antiquarian and document forger Iolo Morganwg (b. 1747 – d. 1826) pushed their story, as part of his contribution to the eighteenth-century ‘Celtic Revival’.¹⁰⁵ In doing so, Iolo rearranged the manuscripts to make the whole corpus seem cohesive and traditionally ‘Welsh’, using Welsh vocabulary and taking out more modern remedies, creating an aged mysticism that fed into the cultural renaissance. In turn this fuelled an enduring narrative that the entire work was that of a fairy-born Welsh family.¹⁰⁶ The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought a new breed of enthusiastic male antiquarians and historians, who continued to write everyday women out of history, just as their medieval forefathers had neglected to record all but scarce mention of women in court records and accounts.

It seems probable that the *Physicians of Myddfai* omitted female-specific remedies, potentially because they were unaware of certain botanical properties, or just as likely, because

¹⁰³ Found in British Library Additional 14912 (BLAdd), Cardiff 3.242 (Hafod 16, Card), Oxford Bodleian Rawlinson B467 (Rawl), and Oxford Jesus College 111 (the Red Book of Hergest, RBH), see Luft, *Medieval Welsh*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ David Hoffmann, *Welsh Herbal Medicine* (Abercastle Publications, 1978), p 17.

¹⁰⁵ Trevor Herbert, Martin Clarke and Helen Barlow, eds. *A History of Welsh Music* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2022) pp. 171–194.

¹⁰⁶ Luft, *Medieval Welsh*, p. 3.

the symptoms with which these remedies were associated with, did not concern them. We may imagine then that the medieval Welsh Medical Texts will be dismissive of women's 'troubles' and that Luft's translation may not contain many remedies for female specific complaints - but interestingly there are a few. These recipes within the Welsh compendium, contain advice and solutions for heavy menstruation (including heather, burdock, and the ashes of a stag – killed with its horns intact¹⁰⁷), St John's wort (during my field trips I observed St John's wort growing by Castell Raglan - see Appendix 3), among others, for a woman who cannot get pregnant,¹⁰⁸ and for those who conceived but are having complications, a drink made from salad burnet.¹⁰⁹ In general, remedies for pregnancy complications in which a husband would have an invested interest.

However, these remedies remain in the minority, suggesting female healers growing herbs in Welsh gardens would have had to be content with inherited knowledge; in this regard, lack of literacy was no barrier.



In Wales, we do not have undisputed evidence of women preparing herbal tinctures during this period, but the clues we can find offer a plausible rationale. Researching our female ancestors' lives can take some detective work, as women's stories are often what is left out of a

¹⁰⁷ Luft, *Medieval Welsh*, 4/14 p. 102. Full examples of the recipes can be found in appendix 2.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 4/13 p. 102. See also appendix 3, evidence of St. John's wort at Raglan from my own fieldtrip.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* 2/31 p. 76.

text.¹¹⁰ There is, however, one contemporary medical compendium from the Continent - *The Trotula*, of which at least one part, 'The Treatments for Women', is widely considered by academics to have female authorship. The so-called 'School of Salerno' was formed in southern Italy, before formal universities were established. This was not a physical place, but a group of kindred minds who collated and dissected the established Arabic medical works. Thought to be a historical figure, Trotua is attributed as author of *Treatments for Women (De Curis Malirum)*, which, as Monica Green argues, was the source of the most distinctive and novel 'hands-on' text of women's medicine composed in the medieval period - which would later form the centrepiece of the Trotula ensemble.¹¹¹ In her discussions around *The Trotula*, but also potentially relevant to the Welsh texts, Green surmises that:

Male physicians clearly diagnosed and prescribed for gynaecological conditions, and they recommended a wide variety of potions and herbs for difficult birth. But it is doubtful that they ever directly touched the genitalia of their female patients. The limitation of male gynaecological and obstetrical practice left room for the existence of female practitioners whose access to the female body was less restricted.¹¹²



¹¹⁰ Philippa Gregory, *Normal Women: 900 Years of Making History* (William Collins, London, 2023), p. 2.

¹¹¹ Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine*, p. 22.

¹¹² Green, *The Trotula*, pp. 13-14.

By further exploring the common plants at the sites, we can see if there are any links to women's issues. White Deadnettle, a perennial herb, is rare in Britain, but curiously common near former habitation in Wales. It is a genus of the mint family and in the Welsh medical texts also referred to as marrubium and madder.¹¹³ Within the Welsh texts, its uses range from treatments for boils and fevers, to dog bites, and often the cleansing of wounds.¹¹⁴ Looking further afield points us to an alternative spiritual uses for white deadnettle, such as an ancient application as a mood enhancer 'to drive away melancholy',¹¹⁵ its mention in *The Trotula* for restraining the menses,¹¹⁶ and Pliny the Elder noted it had common gynaecological uses.¹¹⁷ This assessment seems to have stuck, as the plant is used to this day:

(in) traditional and folk medicine white deadnettle is also known with its anti-inflammatory astringent and anti-septic activity and is especially utilised in menorrhagia, uterine haemorrhage, vaginal and cervical inflammation and leucorrhoea treatment. It is often called the medicine of women's afflictions.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Luft, *Medieval Welsh*, p. 498.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 5/43 'Here are the appropriate herbs from which water is made from wine to wash corrupt flesh and everything that stems from such a condition: rue, sage, mouse-ear-hawkweed, poppy, white dead-nettle,159 seaweed,160 agrimony, greater plantain,161 and ribwort plantain.' p. 138.

¹¹⁵ Authors: Milena Dimitrova, Elena Iakimova, Z.P. Yordanova, Z., Miroslava Zhiponova 'Revealing the reviving secret of the white dead nettle (*Lamium album* L.)' (The Phytochemical Society of Europe, Cambridge, 2014) p. 376.

¹¹⁶ Green, *The Trotula*, p. 90.

¹¹⁷ Pliny, see book 24 'Natural History' (Harvard University Press, 1956).

¹¹⁸ Dimitrova et al, 'Revealing the Reviving' p. 119. Further information on white deadnettle can be found at the National Library of Medicine, '*Lamium* Plants—A Comprehensive Review on Health Benefits and Biological Activities', <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6571824/> accessed 04/04/2026 and Totally Wild UK, 'Dead Nettle (*Lamium album* & Spp) Identification', 29/04/2020 <https://totallywilduk.co.uk/2020/04/29/identify-dead-nettle/> (accessed 04/04/2026), where it is stated that 'white dead nettle is an astringent and demulcent herb that is chiefly used as a uterine tonic, to arrest inter -

The fact that the Welsh texts do not explicitly mention white deadnettle as a gynaecological phytomedicine does not mean it was not being used as such, as information from sources like *The Trotula* was being circulated outside of Italy and were based on older empirical wisdom. There is evidence of a contemporary copy of *The Trotula* in Ireland - was this knowledge shared amongst likeminded women there, or was it already known? At the very least, from Luft's translation, we are assured that there was understanding in Wales of white deadnettle being useful as a general antiseptic. It is not an unreasonable leap, then, to consider the possibility that the women treating themselves or other women were applying this remedy topically for gynaecological prescription, but we cannot say with certainty.

Regarding vervain, Luft has found recipes for salves, ointments, and perhaps more interestingly, the staunching of blood; whereas *The Trotula* suggests the plant could have the opposite effect:

For provoking the menses, take vervain and rue.¹¹⁹

Contrary to *The Trotula's* advice, the English herbalist Nicholas Culpeper (b.1616 - d.1654) believed vervain to be 'excellent for the womb.'¹²⁰ Perhaps Culpeper had heard about *The Trotula's* association with the plant and simply deemed it 'women's business'; we cannot know, but it certainly has suggestive links to gynaecology. Likewise, Culpeper referred to dwarf elder as

menstrual bleeding and to reduce excessive menstrual flow. It is a traditional treatment for abnormal vaginal discharge and is sometimes taken to relieve painful periods.'

¹¹⁹ Green, *The Trotula: A Medieval*, p. 106.

¹²⁰ *Culpeper's Colour Herbal*, ed. by David Potterton (Foulsham, London, 1983) p. 195.

a plant which could treat ‘women’s diseases’;¹²¹ being suitable for turning into a liquor ‘to smell and to rub the temples with fainting of women in labour and after delivery.’¹²² It too can be found in the Welsh texts, as having healing properties for a variety of ailments, including pneumonia, fevers, and headaches. However, Luft also identified remedies using dwarf elder centred around breast pain and swelling of the breasts.

5/18. For a disease in the breastbone, take dwarf elder and boil them in beer or in the watered-down milk and drink that and you will be healed.¹²³

And:

6/17. For pain in the breasts, pound dwarf elder and old fat in a mortar and put it on it.¹²⁴

Hemlock, found at Welsh built castle Dryslwyn, was, like vervain, recorded as having properties which induced bleeding. While extremely unusual for abortion to be stated outright, there are numerous remedies in print for bringing on bleeding; perhaps when there was risk to the mother’s life or due to the classical belief that a regular cycle was the answer to a vast number of ills.¹²⁵ There is, however, a singular reference to abortion from the tenth and eleventh-century manuscripts contained in the *Old English Herbarium*, which forms part of The Lacnunga Collection:

To stimulate menstruation, take ten pennies’ weight of the seeds of this

¹²¹ Ibid. p. 66.

¹²² Ibid. p. 66.

¹²³ Luft, *Medieval Welsh*, p. 128 and p. 172: 5/18:

¹²⁴ Ibid. p. 172.

¹²⁵ Ibid. p. 19.

plant [Viola/Wallflower], either pounded and drunk in wine, or mixed with honey and put on the sexual organ. It brings about menstruation and takes the fetus from the womb.¹²⁶

Christine Voth has examined The Lacnunga Collection, which ‘is thematically important as it appears to have been made with a focus on writing down remedies that had previously been part of oral traditions.’¹²⁷ The corpus also includes *Bald’s Leechbook* and the manuscript Harley 585.



The significance of Connolly’s identification of these plants in situ, alongside both their commonality and frequent mentions in extant texts, and the evidence we have of the gardens being designed for ladies, gives a high likelihood that they were being grown for medicinal uses, by women, as well as men. Indeed, Dr Christopher Preston’s article *Archaeophytes in Britain*,¹²⁸ supports Connolly’s theory. He states:

Species which are confined to man-made habitats are much less likely to be native than those which occur in semi-natural habitats, and the restriction to artificial habitats is therefore circumstantial evidence that the plant is introduced.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Christine Voth, *Women and “Women’s Medicine” in Early Medieval England, from Text to Practice* (Routledge, Oxford, 2023) p. 290.

¹²⁷ Ibid. p. 285.

¹²⁸ Christopher Preston, ‘Archaeophytes in Britain’ (*Botanical Journal of the Linnean Society*, Vol 145, Issue 3, 2004, pages 257 – 294).

¹²⁹ Ibid. p. 262.

Cross-referencing Preston's work on seed fossils¹³⁰ with Connolly's on relict plant remains confirms the introduction of our common taxa and adds further substantiation that the plants were unlikely to have been coincidentally growing.

Further evidence can be sought from medieval garden inventories. These household records began around the sixteenth century and list *Hyoscyamus niger*, *Lamium album*, *Sambucus ebulus* and *Verbena*.¹³¹ Preston caveats his suggestion, with the inference that if fossil seeds are found with grain or scattered near settlements, they are likely to be weeds associated with crops, but 'a greater difficulty is attached to the remains of edible fruit of medicinal plants, which are more likely to have been cultivated or imported.'¹³²

In Wales, evidence of seed remains were found at Castell Dryslwyn excavations, which revealed abundant cereal grain (oats).¹³³ The archaeologists at the dig concentrated their inquiries on edible plant remains, as differences in regional production defined periods of peace (where more growing and building happened), whereas less cultivation suggests a period of warfare or siege. Regarding medicinal plants as fossil remains at Dryslwyn, either these were not present, or they were not counted as important and discarded. The singular mention of herbs at the site, is when comment is made of the different ways seeds are preserved. Regarding this, it is briefly noted that the waterlogged taxa tend to be 'food plants or possible medicinal plants, such as

¹³⁰ Ibid. pp. 264-271.

¹³¹ Ibid. table 4, pp. 272-275.

¹³² Ibid. p. 277.

¹³³ Chris Caple, *Excavations at Dryslwyn Castle 1980-95* (The Society for Medieval Archaeology, Leeds, 2007).

hemlock (*Conium maculatum*). However, the latter also is a ruderal, and the low numbers may simply reflect naturally occurring plants in the area.¹³⁴ As such, the dig at Dryslwyn shows how even as little as forty or so years ago, the castle as domestic sphere was not readily considered by archaeologists. Neither did they study, as Connolly went on to do a decade later, evidence from nearby sites for patterns of taxa – at Dryslwyn the priority was the castle as a military stronghold.¹³⁵ Correspondingly, at Dryslwyn, there is little mention of the fantastic find of a rose (the head piece from a watering can), which is simply noted as ‘for maintaining the grounds.’¹³⁶ Likewise, the discovery of delicate shears, gained only the passing explanation, ‘reflecting sewing.’¹³⁷ There is no further discussion around these ‘feminine’ objects in a domestic sense, nor the possibility they bring that women lived at the castle; demonstrating the then male-centred discipline of archaeology. These fantastic finds were simply not deemed worthy of further examination.

Someone who has considered this medicinal link is botanist Fiona MacGowan, who has studied taxa found around Irish castles; notably 13th century Lea Castle in County Laois. Yellow wallflower, greater celandine and navelwort, stood out at Lea:

(greater celandine) scarcity in the region together with its known medicinal uses points towards the plants at Lea being relicts of the medieval community who lived in and around the castle – a very pretty, tangible link to the past.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Preston, ‘Archaeophytes in Britain’, p. 262. p 325.

¹³⁵ Dempsey et al, ‘Beyond the Marital’, p. 355. Here it is questioned whether ‘heritage professional bodies have an inherent gendered bias’? The suggestion being a male militarised past.

¹³⁶ Caple, *Excavations at Dryslwyn*, p. 247.

¹³⁷ Ibid. p. 247.

¹³⁸ Fiona MacGowan, ‘Ecological Report for the area around Lea Castle’, (available at Lea Castle Conservation project - <http://www.leacastle.ie/wildlife/> 2014), p. 7.

Yellow wallflower was often planted under windows, so that the sweet aroma wafted in to counteract any unpleasant smells. Interestingly, this plant was the most common example of relict growth at the Welsh castle sites, and it is notable that wallflower's scent and purposeful uses, align with some of the basic principles of medieval wellness; foul smells were thought to spread disease, so the wallflower was actively combatting ill health just by growing.



Pellitory-of-the-wall at Raglan.



Wallflower at Conwy in bloom (photos author's own)

In 1260 Albertus Magnus wrote about the importance of restoring the senses through smell in his treatise *Vegetabilibus et Plantis*.¹³⁹ Teresa Tyres argues that:

as gardens developed and cultivated, they, and their aesthetic plants were readily considered and exploited for their fundamental role in the battle against disease and ill health. Moreover, their 'pleasurable' aspects – scent and colour – were also valued for their healing properties as much as for their more traditional, well-known use in topical or internal medicine.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Skinner and Tyres, *The Medieval and Early Modern*, p. 58.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 58.

The Welsh medical texts give us plenty of these internal remedies; it is suggested that saffron be consumed to make you happy, but beware, the overeating of it could cause you to ‘die of happiness.’¹⁴¹ It seems likely that saffron being a spice from Persia, would have been only available to the elite. A more accessible solution was to be found in wild clary, which when pummelled into a juice, could prevent a bad-tempered disposition.¹⁴² Similarly common mallow which Connolly found at multiple Welsh sites, seems to have been regarded as a general all-purpose cure-all:

If you want to be healthy always, drink a spoonful of
common mallow juice every day, and you will always be
healthy.¹⁴³

And as the overseers of the household’s wellness, it fell to women to take the lead when it came to ‘the prevention of illness and remedial treatments’¹⁴⁴ for their families. The nobility may have had an employed male physician within the household, though the women would still have overseen cases regarding intimate feminine issues.¹⁴⁵ Home healthcare for women and children, therefore remained the responsibility of the networks of women who passed their

¹⁴¹ Luft, *Medieval Welsh*, 4/13 p. 106.

¹⁴² Ibid. 4/32 p. 106.

¹⁴³ Ibid. 4/33. p. 106.

¹⁴⁴ *Medieval Women Voices and Visions*, ed. by Eleanor Jackson and Julien Harrison (British Library, London, 2024), p. 56.

¹⁴⁵ See; Green, *The Trotula*, pp. 13-14. Green, *Making Women’s Medicine*, pp. 1-2 where she talks about the case of a female French surgeon Perretta Petone, who was charged for ‘unlicensed practice’ and Jackson and Harrison, *Medieval Women*, discussion around women’s role in household healthcare p. 56.

inherited knowledge onto the next generation; their primary option for obtaining the necessary herbs for remedies, was, invariably, their own domestic garden.

Chapter 3:

Entering the Herber - spatial studies and the route to the garden

The medieval use of space, and what this tells us about the contemporary philosophies, can expand our understanding of the medieval woman's lived experience, as space was both 'political and highly gendered.'¹⁴⁶ To this day, who is allowed into certain spaces, and who is restricted, illuminates cultural values:

Rather spatial constructs are the historical and cultural products of an age. As metaphors and symbolic systems, they embody the most basic rules and meaning of a culture... furthermore, it can be argued that space is an ordering principle through which human hierarchies are created and maintained.¹⁴⁷

What, then, can we learn about women through the places they chose or were allowed to inhabit at the castle?¹⁴⁸ Castle architecture gives a robust example of hierarchy, 'which delineated social status through the location of an individual's living space or through routes of access in order to reach key areas, for example, the hall.'¹⁴⁹ The hall being the largest common space within the castle, where political and social dramas were played out; with large windows, grand

¹⁴⁶ Sarah Rees Jones, 'Public and Private Space and Gender in Medieval Europe', p. 247, in *Oxford Handbook Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, eds. Judith Bennett and Ruth Karras, (Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹⁴⁷ Blud, *Gender in Medieval places*, p. 28.

¹⁴⁸ See Leonie Hicks' research on women and children at castles in Normandy, and how authority was enforced through use of space there. Leonie Hicks, 'Magnificent entrances and undignified exits: chronicling the symbolism of castle space in Normandy', (*Journal of Medieval History*, 35(1), 52–69. 2009)

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmedhist.2009.01.001>

¹⁴⁹ Blud, *Gender in Medieval places*, p. 53.

fireplace and the lord's seat, the space displayed the owner's power through its architecture and furniture.¹⁵⁰ Elite women were allowed in the hall because their place beside their husband overruled their gender. In fact, it is well documented that in times of war many women ran castles and estates in their husband's absence.¹⁵¹ To be ready and capable for such eventualities, the wives would already have had to be competent and trusted by their staff.¹⁵²

An example of a woman breaking out of her expected 'space' is Senana Ferch Caradog (b. 1198 –d. 1263). She appealed in person to King Henry III of England to release her captive husband, Gruffudd ap Llywelyn Fawr. Senana was able to journey many miles away from the marital home and speak directly to the King on her husband's behalf due to her genealogical and noble connection to Owain Gwynedd; essentially, she was Welsh nobility, and this overruled her gender.¹⁵³ Of course, this freedom would not have been afforded to most medieval women, as 'greater gender segregation is associated with lower status of women';¹⁵⁴ but at the *castle*, a noblewoman like Senana was able to expect a greater degree of agency, via her husband, her family ancestry, and if she was a widow, her potential to own property:

Place is where we are allowed to be, and not allowed to be, who we are. Knowing your place – reading the boundaries imposed by class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, religion – does not necessarily mean accepting your place, nor staying in it.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 59.

¹⁵¹ Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Life in a Medieval Castle* (Harper Perennial, London, 2015), p. 81.

¹⁵² Ibid. p. 59.

¹⁵³ Danner Messer, 'The Uxorial Lifecycle and Female Agency in Wales in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries' (Unpublished thesis, Bangor University, Wales, 2014), p. 219.

¹⁵⁴ Spain, 'Gendered Spaces', p. 142.

¹⁵⁵ Blud, *Gender in Medieval places*, p. 6.

Another room in which a woman could be afforded ‘a degree of equality and status’,¹⁵⁶ was the chamber. This room was important as it was the location where private and political matters could be discussed and decided. Often located off the main hall, it was further back from public view, with restricted accessibility. The marriage bed was often the backdrop for the signing of charters; moreover, by the latter thirteenth century, the wealthiest ladies were often allocated their own set of rooms, which made up part of the solar, or private apartments. These rooms may have been shared with attendants,¹⁵⁷ and were usually even further back from the hall, becoming the least accessible and most keenly guarded space.¹⁵⁸

So, if a lady’s chamber was the one of the most secure rooms in the castle, did anything lay beyond it? Quite often something did. The *herber*, inaccessible to most, and often accessed via a further locked door.¹⁵⁹ Accessing the garden from such a restricted entry point provides evidence of the limited persons allowed in. Rachel Delman argues this location ‘informed the gendered spatial arrangements of castles and great residences ... signalling the piety and chastity of their female occupants.’¹⁶⁰ Delman bolsters this theory with her discussions around images of *Virgo inter Virgines* in medieval art. These images are of Mary, the infant Christ and virgin martyrs, and they are depicted with a background of the enclosed garden, ‘as a site of gendered

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 64.

¹⁵⁷ Gies, *Life in Medieval Castle*, p. 67.

¹⁵⁸ For example, see Richardson, A., ‘Gender and Space in English Royal Palaces c. 1160-c. 1547: A Study in Access Analysis and Imagery,’ (June 2003 *Medieval Archaeology* 47(1):131-165) p 131-132.

¹⁵⁹ Skinner and Tyres, *The Medieval and Early Modern*, p. 101.

¹⁶⁰ Rachel Delman, ‘Enclosed Gardens, Female Networks, and Spiritual Kinship in Late Medieval Northern Europe’, p. 441 (*Brepolis, Viator* 51, No. 1, 2021).

kinship.’¹⁶¹ Roberta Gilchrist suggests that these artistic gardens had counterparts - real gardens, which were not only solely accessible via a locked door from the lady’s chamber, but were only *viewable* from these apartments too; creating what she calls ‘the female gaze’.¹⁶² An example of this can be found at Clarendon, where ‘in 1250 a window was especially ordered to provide Eleanor with a view over the gardens.’¹⁶³ Household accounts too, add weight to the idea of these spaces being predominantly for women:

many women sought to regulate access to their garden spaces, as signalled by the frequent mention of locks and keys in accounts.¹⁶⁴

Among the castles in Wales, we have much evidence of these enclosed gardens being beneath the ladies’ chamber – indeed Edward I repeatedly had gardens built in this convenient position for Eleanor of Castile.¹⁶⁵ At Guildford Palace Edward agreed when Eleanor ‘asked her Italian gardener, Willam Florentyn, to make a herb garden with a marble-columned cloister, and had a special staircase designed so that she could step straight from her apartments into the private garden.’¹⁶⁶ During Edward’s prolific castle construction in Wales, it is possible Queen Eleanor asked the same of royal architect James of Saint George; Eleanor’s ideas on garden

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p. 441.

¹⁶² Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Archaeology: Contesting the Past*, (Routledge, Oxford, 2012) p. 137.

¹⁶³ Amanda Richardson, ‘Gender and Space in English Royal Palaces c. 1160-c. 1547: A Study in Access Analysis and Imagery’, (June 2003 *Medieval Archaeology* 47(1):131-165) p. 140.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 449.

¹⁶⁵ Skinner and Tyres, eds., *The Medieval and Early Modern*, p. 46. See also p. 93 where similar locations for gardens are identified, in use by Henry III and Eleanor of Provence and Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine.

¹⁶⁶ Uglow, *Little History*, p. 41.

design demonstrate that these outdoor spaces were distinct from kitchen gardens, orchards, or parkland; they were intimate and, above all, due to the nature of their location, exclusive.



The route to these enclosed castle gardens was therefore restricted to certain high-status residents. In general, the reason for keeping someone out of a space, is so that the knowledge therein is limited to a certain group. In medieval society, it was often gender that dictated entrance, with women being excluded. However, as we have seen, particularly high class individuals - such as queens - can trump this rule.¹⁶⁷ Interestingly, we can argue that, because of this segregation, certain spaces - such as the queen's garden, where she would rest with her attendants (though some men of course, like the king, could enter) - may have become quarantined in a positive sense; fostering kinship between women and allowing their own rituals to develop.¹⁶⁸

At Rhuddlan, the first garden lay 'within the inner ward of the castle, and the second located by the north (or town) gate of the outer ward.'¹⁶⁹ The inner garden where the family were located, had a fishpond at its centre, a lawn and seats, and the north garden was described

¹⁶⁷ Spain, 'Gendered Spaces', p. 137.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 140.

¹⁶⁹ Skinner and Tyres, eds. *The Medieval and Early Modern*, p. 41.

as a pleasure garden or herber.¹⁷⁰ In 1277 Edward I, and probably Eleanor, spent the autumn at Rhuddlan, and their son Edward was born in Wales in 1284:

The royal couple seem to have insisted that gardens be laid out at any new castle they chose to inhabit. At Rhuddlan, under the heading of ‘the Queen’s work,’ the well was prettified and provided with a wooden roof, and encircled by a fishpond, lined with four cartloads of clay from the nearby marshes, and equipped with seats on its circumference; the nearby courtyard was laid with 6000 grass turves and fenced with the staves of old casks.¹⁷¹

Somewhat confusingly, both gardens have been described with elements of what we would attribute to a *herber*, it seems likely though, that the inner garden was where guests were entertained, and possibly the second garden at the north end, a more private one. Regarding botanical evidence, one of the plants found at Rhuddlan was black henbane, which has folk uses including a painkiller for childbirth.¹⁷²

At Conway, located seventeen or so miles west, Edward constructed a similar design; here remains the most complete set of medieval royal residential rooms, ‘not even the Tower of London comes close.’¹⁷³ Similarly, at Conway, Edward had a garden made for his wife; during the building of the castle, ‘a *camera* or private chamber and a garden were constructed for the Queen Eleanor in June 1283.’¹⁷⁴ It is thought that the garden was below the chambers at the east barbican, a raised area above the river. Although the castle was not finished until 1287, meaning

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 41-45.

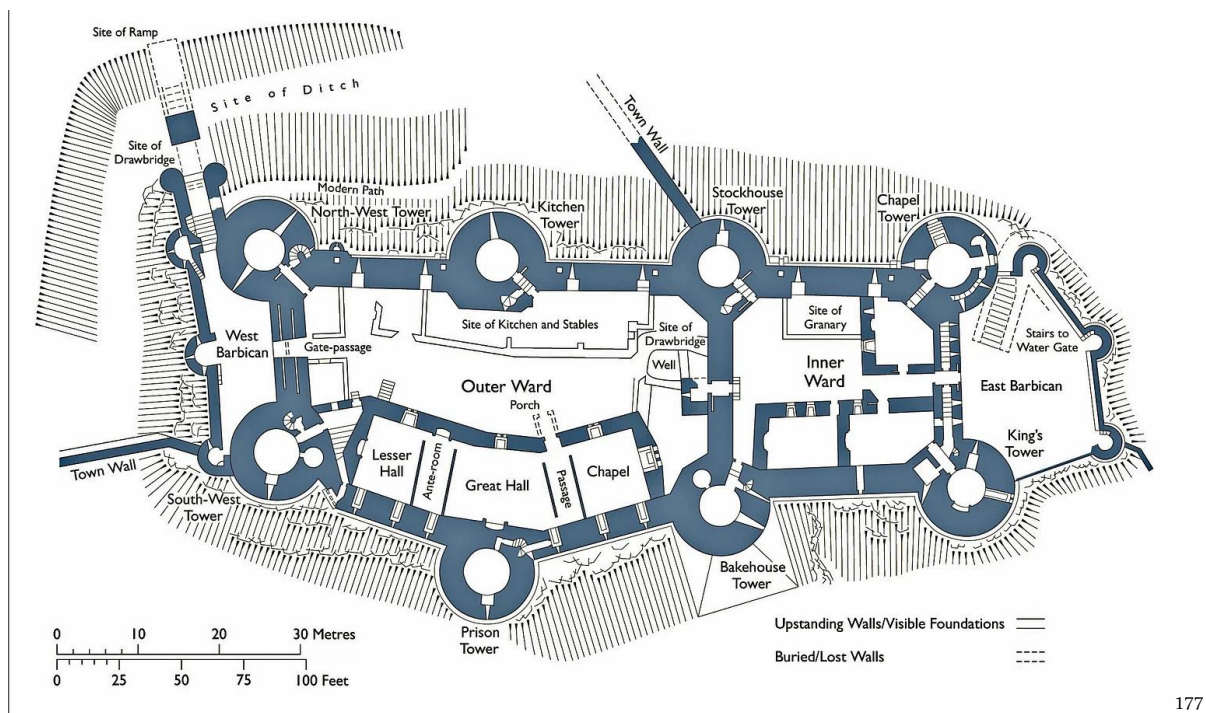
¹⁷¹ Paul Johnson, *National Trust book of British Castles* (Book Club Associates, London, 1979) p. 120.

¹⁷² Dempsey, ‘Tending the ‘Contested’ Castle Garden’, p. 271.

¹⁷³ Cadw, ‘Secrets of the Royal Chamber’ <https://cadw.gov.wales/more-about-castell-conwy> (accessed 17/4/26).

¹⁷⁴ Spain, ‘Gendered Spaces’, p. 46.

Eleanor may never have seen it, as she died in 1290 after some years abroad. However, the couple's son Edward II stayed for a few months in 1301, and this would have been the only times the royal apartments were used for their intended purpose¹⁷⁵ by the family. Subsequently the castle was occupied as a refuge for Richard II and Owain Glwyndwr, and evidence of the garden in bloom can be found in a drawing from around 1600, in which there are 'geometrically planted parterres or flowerbeds.'¹⁷⁶ Somebody was taking care of this space.



Plan of Conwy castle (c) Cadw

¹⁷⁵ Gies, *Life in Medieval Castle*, p. 29.

¹⁷⁶ Skinner and Tyres, eds., *The Medieval and Early* p. 46.

¹⁷⁷ Copyright: Cadw, published 13 December 2019. Found on World History

<https://www.worldhistory.org/image/11614/plan-of-conwy-castle/> (accessed 17/4/26).



During his regime to subjugate the Welsh, Edward I was building castles at an alarming rate. The small gardens contained within the castle walls were certainly not large enough to grow the provisions required for the builders or occupants.¹⁷⁸ This gives credence to the suggestion that the gardens below the chamber were there for pleasure and personal use; the medicinal plants found in situ have potential to have been selected and nurtured by the women of the household. Contextualising this evidence further, we can look back three generations to Eleanor's great-great-grandfather, Henry II of England. Henry built a garden for Eleanor of Aquitaine at Winchester, and from building accounts we know there was an enclosed lawn visible from the living apartments.¹⁷⁹ The idea of a garden at the castle intended for the lady's use, had precedent.

However, both Henry and Edward would have certainly had medical professionals at their disposal, likewise would Welsh nobility. The Welsh Laws of Hywel Dda¹⁸⁰ (died c. 950), recorded in thirteenth century manuscripts, comprise the rights, not only the king, but the common people, incorporating the Welsh Laws of Women.¹⁸¹ In them, everything and everyone is given a price, and compensation is calculated accordingly. The laws are known for being

¹⁷⁸ Skinner and Tyres, eds, *The Medieval and Early Modern*, p. 89.

¹⁷⁹ Skinner and Tyres, eds, *The Medieval and Early Modern*, pp. 93-94.

¹⁸⁰ Dafydd Jenkins, trans., *Hywel Dda – The Law (Y Lofa)*, Aberystwyth, 2025)

¹⁸¹ Owen, & Jenkins, eds. *The Welsh Laws*.

progressive in nature, for example, women are allowed to leave their husbands after a trial period and take away a share of the moveable goods:

If an event occurs of a kind that the law contemplates, which ends the union in fact or entitles her to treat it as ended, she becomes entitled to a share in the pool or moveables common to herself and her husband.¹⁸²

We must consider then that the Laws mention a ‘doctor’, or *meddgy*, who made up one of the principal officers at the court:¹⁸³

The mediciner was to administer medicine gratuitously to all within the palace, and also particularly to the chief of the household, in whose house he lived.¹⁸⁴

However, these manuscripts are academic, and we do not know how closely they were followed in real life. Whilst we can assume the *meddgy* were real, we cannot expect that every castle or manor had a one. In fact, even if they did, it is likely that the women there were still caring for the family and other women; at least when it came to childbirth and intimate healthcare. Women then, could be patients of men, though exceptions could be made when it came to their genitals; ‘women’s naked bodies and anatomy were frequently obscured from men’s eyes.’¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² Owen, & Jenkins, eds. *The Welsh Laws*, p. 134.

¹⁸³ John Cule, ‘The Court Mediciner and Medicine in the Laws of Wales’ (*Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 21(3), 213–236, 1966) p. 219.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 219.

¹⁸⁵ Pragya Agarwal, The Conversation, ‘Medieval Women Used Informal Social to Share Health Problems and Medical Advice – Just as we do Today’, <https://theconversation.com/medieval-women-used-informal-social->

Pragya Agarwal discusses further evidence for these ‘networks’ of women who would have taken on this caring role. Agarwal cites evidence from fifteenth-century publications, *The Distaff Gospels*,¹⁸⁶ a collection of folk wisdom on reproductive health, and *The Wellcome Apocalypse manuscript*,¹⁸⁷ which has an illustration of an elder woman consulting a younger female regarding gynaecological problems.¹⁸⁸ Likewise, Monica Green insists that we have significant evidence seen in ‘artwork, inscriptions, documents, and other writings (which) amply show that women practiced both as midwives (maiai / obstertices) and as general practitioners (iattrinai/ medical).’¹⁸⁹

These ideas support the documentation we have of both the location of the locked garden, its design specifically for the lady, and accounts detailing keys made for them, which all strongly point to the medicinal plants found there being utilised by women. Whilst the laws of Wales suggest ‘the court mediciner emerged as rather a solitary figure, pre-occupied with casualty surgery’;¹⁹⁰ women would have been caring daily, soothing the bumps and scrapes of tumbling

[networks-to-share-health-problems-and-medical-advice-just-as-we-do-today-224537](#) 07/03/2024 (accessed 07/09/2026).

¹⁸⁶ Loughborough University, ‘Medieval women used informal social networks to share health problems and medical advice – just as we do today’, March 2024, <https://www.lboro.ac.uk/schools/social-sciences-humanities/news/2024/medieval-women-used-social-networks/> (accessed 15/08/2026).

¹⁸⁷ Wellcome Collection, ‘Wellcome Apocalypse’, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/du9ua6nd> (accessed 15/08/2026).

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. Agarwal, ‘Medieval Women’.

¹⁸⁹ Monica Green, *Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013) p. 348.

¹⁹⁰ Cule, ‘The Court Mediciner’, p. 228.

children with homemade herbal balms, assisting with the monthly pains they and their ladies experienced, and delivering the next generation of kings or caregivers.

Chapter 4:

Female Devotion *en Plein Air*

We have gathered evidence of a hidden garden below the castle chamber, accessed via a locked door from ‘the lady’s bower’,¹⁹¹ and as such, this *herber* was also an ideal place for the noblewoman to practice her religious devotion. Monks and nuns had set precedent enjoying their gardens, as they gave one ‘notions of Eden, of the Virgin’s bower and the heaven to come’¹⁹² and this religious appreciation bestowed an acceptance for noblewomen to spend time out of doors. For what else could improve a person more than prayer? And it was a woman’s role to pray for the family’s wellbeing.¹⁹³ After all, the nurture and care that a woman displayed tending her garden, mirrored the hope she had for her family’s growth.¹⁹⁴ Indeed, the very act of kneeling at the soil encouraging re-growth of plants, became a prayer to God’s creations, whilst physically replicating the act in church. The regimens too, suggested that those sensitive humours which could so easily, especially in women become unstable, could be repaired in part at least, by gardening. The *herber* or *hortus conclusus* became the place where both physical exertion and faith could co-exist as one respectable pastime.

¹⁹¹ Skinner and Tyres, eds, *The Medieval and Early Modern*, pp. 96-97.

¹⁹² Uglow, *Little History*, p. 33.

¹⁹³ See Diane Watt, ‘Mary the Physician: Women, Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages’ p 39. In *Medicine, Religion and Gender in Medieval Culture* (pp. 44–27) ed., Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, (D.S. Brewer, Cambridge, 2015) for discussion. Here Watt suggests that medieval housewives kept store of medical remedies and that the Paston letters give evidence of female networks (relatives and friends) exchanging recipes and medicine p. 40.

¹⁹⁴ Dempsey, ‘Tending the ‘Contested’ Castle Garden’, p. 267.



Gardening itself brings with it a long history of iconography associated with fertility and regeneration:

the garden has also been recognisably associated with the female body, from the biblical Song of Songs 'spouse' being a 'garden enclosed,' to images of the rose as an allegory for the Virgin Mary.¹⁹⁵

The idea of fertility and progeniture was of course juxtaposed with the equally valued idea of chastity. Mary embodied this unattainable ideal - a virgin before and after birth. By the thirteenth century, the cult of the Virgin Mary was growing exponentially and there were more churches and holy wells dedicated to her in Wales than any other saint.¹⁹⁶ Diane Watt explores the idea of 'Mary as Physician', as seen through medieval women's own words. A belief of Mary as doctor, 'closely linked to, and indeed validated, the role of women as healer.'¹⁹⁷ While Mary was revered by both sexes, for women she was especially relevant, as they would pray to her for a painless birth¹⁹⁸ and 'prayers to motherhood and healthcare more broadly.'¹⁹⁹ Alongside this,

¹⁹⁵ Skinner and Tyres, eds., *The Medieval and Early Modern*, p. 6.

¹⁹⁶ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 9.

¹⁹⁷ Watt, 'Mary the Physician', p. 27. Watt looks at the Paston letters, Margery Kempe and Hildegard of Bingen.

¹⁹⁸ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 21.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. p 27.

Mary became closely associated with the natural world, with its cycle of renewal, she became the go-to saint when it came to prayers regarding pregnancy and childbirth.²⁰⁰

The connection between the Virgin and nature was often understood through floral iconography, and she is repeatedly depicted in illustrations surrounded by the sun; her divine light making the flowers grow.²⁰¹ Further evidence of gardens as places of feminine spirituality can be seen in sixteenth century Belgium, at Mechelen. Here, a group of Augustinian nuns began creating devotional art. They made miniature enclosed gardens, small mixed media shrines which were used as ‘focal points for intense meditative devotion.’²⁰² Barabra Baert believes that the pieces acted as ‘metaphor for immaculacy, purity, and virginity’²⁰³ and served as a focus for the nuns to locate and enter ‘the immaculate place in one’s soul.’²⁰⁴ Could it be that for the laywoman, the real enclosed garden similarly acted so? Baert goes on to discuss the parallels between woman and flower; fertility, seeds, cycles, fragility – and scent.²⁰⁵ Fragrance and the divine were linked (incense, herbs and oils), and scent could help a soul reach paradise.

Two plants that came to be strongly associated with Mary, were the lily and the rose. The Madonna lily was described by Bede as the ‘emblem of the virgin Mary, the white petals

²⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 32.

²⁰¹ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 43.

²⁰² Delman, ‘Enclosed Gardens’, p. 439.

²⁰³ Barbara Baert, ‘Art and Mysticism as Horticulture: Late Medieval Enclose Gardens of the Low Countries in an Interdisciplinary Perspective,’ p 107, in *Art and Mysticism Interfaces in the Medieval and Modern Periods*, eds., Louise Nelstrop, L and Helen Appleton (Routledge, London, 2018).

²⁰⁴ Ibid. p 107.

²⁰⁵ Ibid. p 111.

signifying her bodily purity, and the golden antlers the glowing light of her soul.’²⁰⁶ The use of lilies in medicine was ‘also closely associated with the symbolic ideal of purity and whiteness.’²⁰⁷ Likewise, ‘the oldest meaning of rosary is that of a rose garden, and the enclosed rosery was the perfect garden of Marian devotion.’²⁰⁸ Indeed, what better location than the *hortus conclusus* to safely display one’s piety:

The symbolism of plants and flowers, in particular, the lily and the rose, are constant reminders of chastity and Marian devotion throughout the later medieval writings and imagery.²⁰⁹

The idea of flora being a recognisable emblem of Mary, couples succinctly with ideas of gender and space. Roses were the foremost bouquet for the noble lady to cultivate, further testimony to the enclosed garden beneath her chamber as space nurtured by the liege lady. Of course, there was not any bar on men entering, the castle was not a nunnery, but alongside the evidence of gardens being designed and included in castle plans for the queens, it is another suggestion of them being places where women were both accepted and expected to be. Like the nuns at Mechelen producing art, the physical labour of gardening created a repetitive meditative flow.²¹⁰

The rose as an allegory for a chaste woman also crops up in secular literature. In a story recounted by fourteenth-century travel writer John Mandeville, roses were said to have bloomed

²⁰⁶ Harvey, *Medieval Gardens*, p. 27.

²⁰⁷ Skinner and Tyres, *The Medieval and Early Modern*, p. 62.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 31.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. p. 8.

²¹⁰ Ibid. p. 114.

where a virgin was wrongly accused²¹¹ - linking morals, divine intervention and the botanical landscape. The castle garden, where flowers grew over the arbour, sheltered the lady not only from the sun, but also potential prying eyes and wandering hands. Parallel to this idea, we often see ‘bushes or trellises of roses in the background of holy imagery’,²¹² representing Christ and Mary:

the smell of roses was specifically linked to Mary’s Assumption, being a sensory marker of her intercessory status between heaven and earth.²¹³

Rose water too, was something that laywomen were known to produce and gift to friends, distilling the plants into a tincture. Delman suggests this shared experience ‘brought women together, through bonds of labour, healing, and affective piety.’²¹⁴

Plant names also, have been given due to their associations with Mary.²¹⁵ In Wales this includes lady’s mantle – mantell fair, and dwarf elder – ysgallen fair. Dwarf elder being one of Connolly’s identified plants. Marian links to plants, as well as gardens as metaphors for the female body and as emblems of re-birth,²¹⁶ all connect them to women in different ways. Interestingly, an effigy of a thirteenth-century noblewoman at Beaumaris (fig. 218), is carved surrounded by flowers. If we look at the effigy, in light of the associations above, it could be read as a feminine display, demonstrating that ‘medieval people were alert to the embodied nature of

²¹¹ Blud, Heath and Klafter, ‘Gender in Medieval Places’, p. xviii.

²¹² Ibid. p. xvi.

²¹³ Delman, ‘Enclosed Gardens,’ p. 457.

²¹⁴ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p. 458.

²¹⁵ Ibid. p. 25.

²¹⁶ Skinner and Tyres, *The Medieval and Early Modern*, p 6.

the garden and its gendered implications for women.²¹⁷ It is not certain who the carving was made for, but the two most probable candidates are Siwan, wife of Llywelyn ab Iorwerth and Senana ferch Caradog.²¹⁸ Whilst we cannot know if carvings represent a pertinent connection to the lady (was she a keen horticulturist?), in broad terms, the choice of decoration corroborates the medieval understanding and synergy of flowers, chastity, femininity and the divine.²¹⁹



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Effigy of a noblewoman at Beaumaris church. (Photograph: courtesy of Church Monuments Society, (c) Dr Madeline Gray).

²¹⁷ Dempsey, 'Tending the Contested', p. 267.

²¹⁸ For discussion over possible candidates for the effigy see Madeline Gray, *Four Weddings, Three Funerals and a Historic Detective Puzzle: A Cautionary Tale*, 2014 Transactions of the Anglesey Antiquarian Society <https://www.hanesmon.org.uk/aaswp/wp-content/uploads/Files/BeaumarisEffigy-CorrectedText-Photos.pdf>

²¹⁹ Dempsey, 'Tending the Contested', p. 267.

²²⁰ Church Monuments Society, 'A Effigy in the Porch of Beaumaris Church', <https://churchmonumentsociety.org/monument-of-the-month/an-effigy-in-the-porch-of-beaumaris-church> (accessed 11/05/26).

Chapter 5:

Welsh Folklore – tales of botany

Women were healers. Even if they were not officially recorded as such, they existed because they had to. There was no easy access to medical care in the Middle Ages. In Wales, outside of the domestic environment were the unregulated but trusted *gwragedd doeth's*, Welsh for 'wise women'. These amateur healers remain undocumented, though professional medical women are equally difficult to identify; in Britain, over eight centuries, from the Anglo Saxons to the sixteenth, only eleven women were officially recorded by name as surgeons, midwives or physicians.²²¹ However, to varying degrees, wise women would have been operating daily, in villages and towns across Wales; it was 'women's marginality vis-à-vis literate medical culture that would make them marginal in the process of creating written knowledge about their own bodies and diseases.'²²²

The *gwragedd doeth's* continued survival meant that their empiric cures held some degree of success. These healers were linked to folkloric counterparts, the *Gwragedd Annwn*, who were female faeries that dwelt beneath lakes and rivers and who had great healing abilities and

²²¹ Monica Green, 'Women's Medicine Practice and Health Care in Medieval Europe' (*Signs*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1989, pp. 434–73), p. 440.

²²² Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine*, p. 2. See also the case of Jacqueline Felice de Almania (c. 1322) who was prosecuted due to unlawfully practicing as a female physician in Paris, even though there were multiple testimonies in support of her abilities and knowledge – Order of Medieval Women, 'Jacqueline Felice de Almania', <https://www.medievalwomen.org/jacqueline-felice-de-almania.html> (accessed 11/5/26).

knowledge. These female faeries were often associated with mystical white cattle and had a human likeness²²³ and, of course, one of the most famous of them became the Lady of Llyn y Fan Fach – the origin story of the *Physicians of Myddfai*.

The Physician's story is a late nineteenth-century folk tale, 'first recorded in print as recently as 1821 by Siencyn ap Tydvil, in the *Cambro-Briton*'²²⁴ and affirms the narrative that this group of male physicians descended from a union between a fairy woman and a human. This otherworldly creature initially shared her mystical knowledge with the couple's eldest son Rhiwallon, whose decedents are said to have practised medicine in an unbroken line until 1739. This relatively modern link created between the physicians and the fairy realm, adapted from a much earlier lake legend,²²⁵ as oral tales from the Middle Ages, often centred around a fairy-mortal union, with magical powers bestowed on a half-mortal son.²²⁶ In a patriarchal society, it is interesting that these original stories portrayed a woman, albeit a supernatural one, as the origin of knowledge. Could this somewhat sceptical validation of women's role in medicine mirror the real world, where the Welsh wise woman or *gwragedd doeth* held a long association with healing? Pragma Agarwal argues that medieval women 'were increasingly being taken seriously as

²²³ John Pughe, 'Gwragedd Annwn – The Dames of Elfin Land' (*Archaeologia Cambrensis*, 4(15), 1853, 201–205).

²²⁴ Robin Gwyndaf, 'Magic, Reality, and Relevance: Why some narratives never die. The fairy wife from a Welsh mountain lake and a renowned family of physicians' (The International Society for Folk Narrative Research <https://isfnr.org/files/Printed.pdf>), p. 6.

²²⁵ Regarding Middle Ages tales such as the Gwragedd Annwn, 'lake maidens,' from Annwn (the otherworld). Lakes and hills were liminal places. See: Gwyndaf, 'Magic, Reality, and Relevance', p 8, Hoffmann, *Welsh Herbal Medicine*, p 9, and Folklore Thursday, 'Welsh Lakes', <https://folklorethursday.com/legends/folklore-legends-welsh-lakes-llyn-barfog/> (accessed 10/06/2026).

²²⁶ Hoffman, *Welsh Herbal Medicine*, p. 9.

healers and as bearers of wisdom about women's bodies and health. But despite this, men were preferred while women faced restrictions.'²²⁷ More research needs to be conducted to look for evidence of recorded women healers in Wales, though it is unlikely any will be found, due to both their own lack of literacy and their unregulated practice – there simply are no official records of them. However, these ideas could be the starting point for further investigation into the history of women's empirical expertise within the Welsh borders. Continued study could also consider whether an acceptance and familiarity of women healers, contributed to the lack of witch trials in Wales, where only five women were executed,²²⁸ as opposed to huge numbers in Scotland, and to a lesser extent England. Other explanations for this could be the traditional Welsh laws²²⁹ and lack of English judges fluent in Welsh when it came to English-led trials and the Welsh's 'preference for unreformed religion. And the people's reliance on wise women.'²³⁰

The *gwragedd doeth's* expertise was not however, supernatural, it was honed through experience, and collective over generations. Men may have had a learned advantage through literature, but just as women were barred from the new universities,²³¹ some scholars argue that

²²⁷ Agarwal, 'Medieval Women'.

²²⁸ Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales, 'Welsh Witches', <https://rcahmw.gov.uk/welsh-witches/> (accessed 20/1/26).

²²⁹ See Eds., Morfydd Owen and Dafydd Jenkins, *The Welsh Laws of Women* (University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2017) and Dafydd Jenkins, *The Law of Hywel Dda: Law Texts from Medieval Wales* (Gomer Press, 1986).

²³⁰ Aberystwyth University, 'Why so few women were executed in Wales in the Middle Ages', <https://www.aber.ac.uk/en/news/archive/2024/04/title-270199-en.html> (accessed 20/1/26).

²³¹ Philippa Gregory, *Normal Women: 900 Years of Making History* (William Collins, London, 2023), pp. 171-173, where Gregory discusses the English law passed in 1512 regulating doctors and barring women. However, she also details many examples of named women still practicing, and being well respected, though this was not always the case and women were prosecuted.

men, due to propriety around women's bodies, were to some degree excluded from studying symptoms and ailments which affected women.²³²

Prior to medical expertise becoming standardised in Britain from the sixteenth-century, 'all gynaecological and obstetric examinations and treatments were exclusively performed by women';²³³ though in rural and poor areas women healers continued to practise after this date. It followed that women who had historically been care-givers were distrustful of these new doctors. The Paston letters are a collection of fifteen-century correspondence from a Norfolk family, and a primary source of information on familial healthcare. The letters show that Margaret Paston kept her own supply of medical remedies, and Diana Watt argues that the letters indicate:

women within the late medieval household continued to play important roles when it came to healing as well as caring for the sick. The Paston women's responsibilities in health care extended from nursing to treating ailments and to prescribing and dispensing medicines.²³⁴

Women continued to employ women for matters of gynaecology and childbirth, leading to the Middle Ages being branded a 'golden age' for women's control over their own

²³² Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine*, p. 19. Here Green discusses whether medieval culture insists private feminine matters are not shared with men. If so, this knowledge remains solely with women and not shared. See also, Pragya Agarwal's article 'Medieval Women Used Informal Social Networks to Share Health Problems and Medical Advice – Just as we do Today' in *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/medieval-women-used-informal-social-networks-to-share-health-problems-and-medical-advice-just-as-we-do-today-224537> (accessed 12/09/2206).

²³³ Ibid. p. 170.

²³⁴ Watt, 'Mary the Physician', p 39.

healthcare.’²³⁵ As such, the folk tales often spoke of women healing, creating further blurred lines between magic, medicine and women. Such a myth surrounded the faerie shapeshifter Ceridwen, who was the keeper of the cauldron of wisdom, which lay at the bottom of a lake.²³⁶ Ceridwen used this magic cauldron to brew potions which gave the recipient wisdom and beauty; but her dark wrath was incurred when a servant tasked with stirring the cauldron spilt a drop on his finger and was gifted her power. Ceridwen pursued the man until she consumed him, though he became a baby inside her which she went on to keep.²³⁷

And so it was, that the faery women of Welsh literature were ‘believed capable of malicious intent and evil; and perhaps the most famous example of this dual personality is the Welsh water deity who appears as both the beautiful and benevolent Morgain and the evil, ugly hag, Morrigan.’²³⁸ This character is found across Celtic folklore in different guises, from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, with the ruler of Avalon called Morgen (c. 1150, also linked to Breton ‘Mari-Morgan,’ ‘Mary-Morgan,’ who were sirens hypnotising sailors), to the Irish *Muirgen* (sixth-century origin, recorded in seventeenth-century Irish annals), a princess transformed into a mermaid, and the Cornish *Morvoren* or the Mermaid of Zennor (first recorded in writing 1873, but believed to have come from older oral tales).²³⁹ What these variations have in common, is the

²³⁵ Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine: The Rise of Male Authority in Pre-Modern Gynaecology* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008) p. 19.

²³⁶ James MacKillop, ‘Cerridwen’, in *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (1st ed.) (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004).

²³⁷ Eryri National Park, ‘Ceridwen’, <https://eryri.gov.wales/discover/history-and-heritage/mythology-and-folklore/ceridwen/> (accessed 05/03/2026).

²³⁸ Nenno, ‘Between Magic and Medicine’, p. 46.

²³⁹ Ibid. p. 46.

contradiction that women and medicine were both needed but distrusted; so-called *magic* then, was a testament to oral traditions, but became linked with otherworldly connotations, bringing anxieties around wise women.²⁴⁰ Interestingly, as noted, there seems to have been somewhat less of this suspicion in Wales, which can perhaps be further attributed to the strong heritage of folktales and lack of large cities with richer folk able to afford trained doctors; due to its geographical isolation there simply were not enough 'learned' doctors to go around.²⁴¹

What this could have meant, is that women, as the domestic caregivers, had no other choice but to pass on homespun life-saving skills to the next generation. Evidence of a mother teaching her daughter the properties of rosemary can be found in a note left in a prayer book,²⁴² and account records document higher class women seeking medical plant knowledge from lower class women in the community.²⁴³

Elsewhere in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, demonisation of Celtic deities was in abundance, as the Church sought to erase, absorb or sanitise any such thing. Elves became devils,²⁴⁴ manuscripts banned worship in the woods,²⁴⁵ and there was a strong distrust of pagan

²⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 46, here Nenno discusses the statute of medical practice: 'Church authorities sought to eliminate, absorb, or demonise pre-Christian traditions, and states began to regulate medical practices, the woman healer became a target for anxieties about autonomous medical practice, pagan traditions and demonic magic.'

²⁴¹ Gregory, *Normal Women*, p. 173.

²⁴² Delman, 'Enclosed Gardens', p. 453.

²⁴³ Ibid. p. 453.

²⁴⁴ Wilfred Bonser, 'The Medical Background of Anglo-Saxon England: A Study in History, Psychology and Folklore' (Wellcome Historical Medical Library, 1963), p. 164.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 136.

herbs which could cause sterility.²⁴⁶ Natural places, such as the liminal lakes where otherworldly creatures could emerge, and the forest glades of the much earlier druids, became the gardens of the medieval period. Here, nature still held power – albeit sanitised.

In Welsh mythology, we can observe a tension between Paganism and Christianity. For example, when faerie king Gwynn ap Nudd is defeated by holy water.²⁴⁷ Similarly, in the Mabinogion,²⁴⁸ the pagan or otherworld is treated with suspicion, especially the women. The character Blodeuwedd's name translates as *flower faced*, as she was created from flora by magicians Math and Gwydion. Later her punishment for adultery is to be transformed into an owl, demonstrating that women are associated with the natural world and fertility, but deemed outsiders. Female characters frequently ended up in ambivalent and often dangerous positions, such as Rhiannon, with her magical links to the natural world (her 'birds' bringing portents of death²⁴⁹), and who is wrongly accused of infanticide.²⁵⁰

In 'How Culhwch won Olwen', Olwen is described florally and with much meaningful colour symbolism:

Yellower was her hair than the flowers of the broom.
Whiter were her palms and her fingers
than moist cotton grass amidst the fine gravel of a bubbling spring.

²⁴⁶ Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (Polity Press France, 1985), p. 87.

²⁴⁷ BBC Wales History, 'St Collen and the King of the Fairies', https://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/themes/society/myths_collen.shtml (accessed 23/2/26).

²⁴⁸ *The Mabinogion*, ed. and trans. by Sioned Davies (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018).

²⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 196. 'I want the birds of Rhiannon, they that wake the dead and lull the living to sleep'.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. pp. 16-17.

... Whiter were her breasts than the breast of a white swan.
Redder were her cheeks than the reddest foxglove.
Whoever saw her would be filled with love for her.
Four white clovers would spring up behind her wherever she went.
And for that reason she And for that reason she was called Olwen.²⁵¹

Olwen translates as 'white track' and is chosen because of the path of white flowers she leaves in her wake. White symbolises beauty, chastity, and purity, and is one of the colours associated with the Virgin. Olwen's cheeks are red, for love, but significantly white and red is associated with the supernatural.²⁵² Her hair is likened to broom, a hardy shrub with yellow flowers, which was a common metaphor for a maiden's hair.²⁵³ Colour had meaning²⁵⁴ and poultices would be made in certain colours believed to aid recovery; red to help with haemorrhage, yellow for the liver and white for anaemia.²⁵⁵ This complemented 'sympathy' - plant uses equalling their appearance (e.g. the walnut for head ailments²⁵⁶) and often words which obviously described a use (fleabane killing fleas²⁵⁷) came into circulation. Today, herbs can still be identified by the suffix *wort*, which comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *wyrt*, assigned to plants with medicinal properties.²⁵⁸

²⁵¹ Ibid. p. 193.

²⁵² Ibid. p. 288 - see the white hounds with red eyes.

²⁵³ Ibid. p. 243.

²⁵⁴ Bonser, *The Medical Background*, pp. 216 – 219.

²⁵⁵ Ibid. pp. 216 – 219.

²⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 250.

²⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 252.

²⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 306.

This recognised understanding of colour meaning can be seen in the design and planting of *herbers*; suggesting that folk stories both took inspiration from the natural world and its religious associations and in turn influenced the plants which went on to be chosen by gardeners.

Castles had lawns such as the one at Caernarfon²⁵⁹ and the garden at Conwy, where ‘the Queen had another lawn laid ... and we are told that one of her squires, Roger le Fykeys, saw that it was watered.’²⁶⁰ Whereas white reflected purity, the green of the lawn symbolised new life, Eden and paradise. Other shades with significance were blue for the divine, but also due to its scarcity in the natural world, it denoted something dangerous or unusual,²⁶¹ and red which could represent both lovers and Christ's wounds (the stamen of the lily).²⁶²



We will now be considering the folklore associated with the plants that Connolly identified; do they have the potential to further our understanding of medieval ideas and concerns regarding women?

²⁵⁹ Skinner and Tyres, *The Medieval and Early Modern*, p. 47.

²⁶⁰ Paul Johnson, *National Trust book of British Castles* (Book Club Associates, London, 1979), p. 120.

²⁶¹ Fitzwilliam Museum, ‘Colour & Meaning’, <https://colour-illuminated.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/explore/colour-and-meaning> (accessed 15/11/2025).

²⁶² The National Library of Wales, ‘Llanbeblig Book of Hours’, <https://www.library.wales/discover-learn/digital-exhibitions/manuscripts/the-middle-ages/the-llanbeblig-book-of-hours/> (accessed 10/6/2026).

Vervain, often considered the *magician's herb*, was mentioned by Pliny as a holy for Druids and Romans.²⁶³ Known for its protection against evil, unique 'lock opening properties',²⁶⁴ and representations of devoted love, it was also a general cure-all, noted as 'one of the most well-known and widespread magical plants in ancient time.'²⁶⁵ Tudor botanist Nicholas Culpepper references vervain as being 'excellent for the womb.'²⁶⁶ Especially potent if gathered in midsummer,²⁶⁷ vervain was also used in charms, such as a Welsh one to prevent bad dreams.²⁶⁸

The optimum time to harvest henbane had a further specific stipulation; it must be gathered by a virgin at midnight.²⁶⁹ Associated with witches and love charms, henbane is still used in folk medicine for childbirth and travel sickness today.²⁷⁰ A toxic herb, it was also historically mentioned by Pliny as suitable for use in oils, but he noted, deadly if ingested, and Culpepper agrees, referring to it as an 'outwards' medicine.²⁷¹ Correspondingly, Greek myth references henbane, as being wound in a crown worn by the dead, and a later witchcraft connection sees it as a psychotropic, inducing flying hallucinations. As well as being present at the Welsh site, archaeobotanical excavations in Scandinavia have found henbane where it is not

²⁶³ Margaret Baker, *Discovering the Folklore of Plants* (Shire Publications, London, 2008), p. 152.

²⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 152.

²⁶⁵ Magickal, 'Vervain: Folklore, Healing & Magical Properties', <https://magickalspot.com/vervain-magical-properties/> (accessed 03/03/2026).

²⁶⁶ Potterton, *Culpepper's Colour Herbal*, p. 195.

²⁶⁷ Bonser, 'The Medical Background', p. 318.

²⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 165.

²⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 75.

²⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 152.

²⁷¹ Potterton, *Culpepper's Colour*, p. 95.

native,²⁷² suggesting again, human cultivation for use.²⁷³ Henbane was also found at Soutra Friary, a medieval hospital near Edinburgh, where over three hundred plant species have been discovered.²⁷⁴ Henbane use was identified at this site as an anaesthetic used in childbirth, dentistry and amputation;²⁷⁵ Dr. Brian Moffat who was present at the Soutra excavation, linked these finds with stillborn babies unearthed at the site. Henbane's properties were also known to the physicians of Myddfai; the Welsh medical texts contain the following recipe:

5/71. This is a pleasing drink to cause a person to sleep while he is being cut open... take Egyptian opium juice, henbane, poppy (that is, the French poppy), mandrake, ivy, blackberries, hemlock, lettuce, as much of each one as of the others... he will sleep without delay.²⁷⁶

Another potent phytomedicine still used in folk medicine the world over, is dwarf elder, which is part of the *Sambucus* genus. Dwarf elder holds superstitious connotations, partly due to being related to elder trees, which were often planted by homes to ward off evil:

If the eyes are bathed in the green juice of the wood, you might see fairies and witches. If you stand under an elder-tree at Samhain in Scotland, you can see the faery host riding by. Elderberries plucked on Midsummer's Eve confer magic powers. In the Isle of Man, elders are the main dwelling-place for elves..²⁷⁷

²⁷² Pernille Rohde Sloth, Ulla Lund Hansen and Sabine Karg, 'Viking Age Garden Plants from Southern Scandinavia – Diversity, phonology and Culture Aspects', (Danish Journal of Archaeology, 2012, 1:1, 27-38) p. 31.

²⁷³ Uglow, *Little History*, p. 30.

²⁷⁴ Soutra Aisle, 'Site of the "Once Powerful Medieval Hospital"', www.Soutraaisle.org (accessed 04/03/2026).

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Luft, *Medieval Welsh Medical*, p. 154.

²⁷⁷ The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, 'Elder', <https://druidry.org/druid-way/teaching-and-practice/druid-tree-lore/elder> (accessed 20/08/2026).

One of the most mystical plants in British folklore, elder is both known for its protective qualities but also feared, as often used by witches.²⁷⁸ A Welsh talisman was to plant an elder before a cowshed to protect the beasts.²⁷⁹ Like vervain with its associations with the womb, and henbane with its sedative effects for childbirth, elder was connected to 'women's diseases' - in Welsh its name *ysgallen fair* refers to the Virgin Mary.

Finally, white deadnettle, a common relict plant at the castle sites, arrives steeped in folklore. It was, like dwarf elder, considered a medicine for women's problems, a perennial herb, part of the mint family,²⁸⁰ white deadnettle was a cold remedy and used for the healing of wounds. Its flowers, which always grow in twos, became known as 'pixie shoes.'²⁸¹

It is curious then, or perhaps not so, that many healing herbs used by women, later became affiliated with the occult. Indeed, the use of charms was still common in the late medieval period, but an early example can be found in the ninth-century Mercian 'Royal Prayerbook'.²⁸² This book is singular due to the fact it was perhaps 'the only non-medical book to focus on women's medicine.'²⁸³ The prayer book contains a charm against excessive bleeding, and it has been suggested that 'this manuscript may have belonged to a female physician.'²⁸⁴ We

²⁷⁸ Roy Vickery, *Vickery's Folk Flora* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 2019), p. 232.

²⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 235.

²⁸⁰ Luft, *Medieval Welsh Medical Texts*, p. 498.

²⁸¹ Plant Lore – Collecting the Folklore and uses of Plants, 'White Deadnettle', <https://www.plant-lore.com/white-deadnettle/> (accessed 03/03/2026).

²⁸² Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts in Microfiche Facsimile '283. London, British Library, Royal 2. A. xxPrivate prayer book', <https://journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/asmmf/article/view/5435> (accessed 15/09/2026).

²⁸³ Voth, *Women and "Women's Medicine"*, p. 286.

²⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 286.

can wonder then whether this woman suffered from an abnormal menstrual flow, perhaps exhausted of all possible medical ‘cures’, she turned in desperation to charms - we will never know, but the idea is intriguing.

Menstruation itself was seen as unclean, and people were not allowed to enter church during their menses - how then, would a woman or person with abnormal menstruation (excess or random) have dealt with this condition and the alienation from society that it could bring? Undoubtedly, they would have sought any cure, and perhaps then, charms were a worthwhile gambit. The dilemma being that charms were not religious, but folk, and the Old English Herbarium records their uses as solely by women, in a move by its authors to discredit the female sex and their place in society as healers.²⁸⁵



Whilst herbal, oral and sympathetic medicine, seemingly produced some positive results, they posed potential problems for women as much went against the Church’s authority - but was this as much the case in Wales? The Welsh medical texts contain evidence of charms well into the fifteenth century, and some were likely produced by monastic scribes.²⁸⁶ These scribes were echoing earlier Christianised pagan charms, containing holy water and a priest blessing,²⁸⁷ but later notes added into the manuscripts by users show these charms becoming more accepted and

²⁸⁵ Voth, *Women and “Women’s Medicine”*, p. 305.

²⁸⁶ Luft, *Medieval Welsh Medical*, p. 12.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 12.

available to the lay person, by, for example, carving biblical phrases into an apple to treat fever.²⁸⁸

Many other Welsh folk customs, surrounding courtship, marriage, birth and death, lasted well into the nineteenth century, but had been ‘dampened by the Methodist revival’ beginning a century earlier.²⁸⁹ Welsh keening, indeed *Celtic* keening (as the practice was also common in Scotland and Ireland too) was a funeral ritual that was usually undertaken by elder women of the community, and prevailed until around the end of the nineteenth century. Like the *gwragedd doeth*’s, these women (who may well have been the local wise women / midwives anyway), performed strange sounds and wails which were said to help the spirit to leave the body:

there would usually be three or more women that were cultural professionals. It was only towards the end of the tradition that you would find a singular woman performing a keen.²⁹⁰

Similarly, many customs associated with the seasons continued to be recognised, such as the throwing of ale over a plough in Pembrokeshire around Christmastime, to show that it had not been forgotten and would be used again.²⁹¹ Folk remedies and traditions, some from the Middle Ages and others revived by Iolo and his followers, seem to have persisted alongside new

²⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 356.

²⁸⁹ J. Geraint Jenkins, *Life And Traditions In Rural Wales* (Amberley, Stroud, 2008), p. 175.

²⁹⁰ The Keening Wake, ‘The Keening Tradition’, <http://www.keeningwake.com/keening-tradition/>, (accessed 24/07/2026).

²⁹¹ Jenkins, *Life And Traditions*, p. 179.

science in Wales. These remained strong within the borders, due to 'the heart of an oral culture (which) lives in the people and places, the stories shared and the songs sung.'²⁹²

²⁹² Ibid. 'The Keening Tradition'.

Conclusion

Figuring out how these women survived in times which afforded them little ownership, of both property and themselves,²⁹³ gives us a real insight into their challenging lives. This includes the role of women in history, their achievements through adversity and growth of rights. In a more familial sense too, what they laughed at, how they potted about on a quiet day, and what their friendships looked like – all have meaning. These seemingly small thoughts are resistance to a male dominated narrative. So, when I read Connolly's report on relict plants, it struck a chord. How, I wonder, were ladies at these castles, spending their time in the gardens? What can we learn about them by looking at plants? It turns out these thoughts are a springboard for many fascinating explorations into the lives of medieval women. Not all of which could be covered here.

Despite their inferior legal status, medieval women were not mere observers; there were ways for them to assert agency in their own lives. There are notable examples of noblewomen who stepped out of their expected space, such as Senana Ferch Caradog,²⁹⁴ but this independence was not the 'norm' for most women. Decisions were mostly made for them, but it is possible that during the Middle Ages, before medical regulation, women held more autonomy concerning decisions regarding their personal health and bodies.

²⁹³ Owen & Jenkins, eds. *The Welsh Laws*.

²⁹⁴ See chapter 1, pp. 24-4, Gwennyth Richards, 'From Footnotes to Narrative: Welsh Noblewomen in the Thirteenth Century' (*PhD Thesis, University of Sydney, 2005*).

Before physicians required a university education under English law in 1512²⁹⁵ (though it was not until the 1800s that medicine became a reliable discipline) and began to become available to those that could afford their services, women were the sole familial caregivers. These women had intimate knowledge of their own bodies and experiences such as menstruation, childbirth and menopause, and how to care for themselves. This knowledge can only have come through oral transmission along generations; women had no choice but to be hands-on in these matters and their family's treatment, including propagation of the required herbs used for remedies, as seen in the Paston letters.²⁹⁶

These herbs were likely home-grown, and gardens at the castle sites have been identified with certainty. Their locations below the ladies' chamber giving us a credible supposition that these spaces were intended for the occupants' use:

By making sure that their gardens were enclosed and that access to them was tightly controlled, elite female heads of households ensured that they and their female servants (who acted as representatives of their mistress's reputation) were considered chaste, virtuous, and pious in the world outside the garden's walls.²⁹⁷

Due to the high percentage of women who were illiterate, knowledge of the properties of plants is most likely to have been the result of a network of information sharing between women.²⁹⁸ However, we must consider that due to the high status of noblewomen at the castles,

²⁹⁵ Gregory, *Normal Women*, pp. 171-173.

²⁹⁶ Watt, 'Mary the Physician'.

²⁹⁷ Delman, 'Enclosed Gardens'.

²⁹⁸ Ibid. p 453.

it is possible that they could have read medical manuscripts. Regardless, of the origin of their knowledge, the repeated discovery of common relict plants, identified in gardens we know were designed for the female heads of the household, brings the possibility that women were topically healing themselves when it came to heavy or irregular periods, fertility issues, pain during childbirth and menopause symptoms.

Historical herbal lore may often be dismissed, but in fact more than one hundred and thirty of the medicinal plants in the *Old English Herbarium* are still used today.²⁹⁹ A 2013 thesis,³⁰⁰ considered Anglo-Saxon antimicrobials, and whether we can look to remedies from the past to rediscover valuable knowledge. Plants such as poppy and willow, archaeophytes found in the Lacnunga³⁰¹ collection, provided the chemical architecture for the synthetic production of aspirin and morphine.³⁰² Willow can be found in the Welsh texts as a cure for paralysis³⁰³ and poppy to put a patient to sleep.³⁰⁴ Even toxic hemlock, found at the Welsh sites, is being understood today as useful being a non-addictive painkiller.³⁰⁵ Whilst there is no suggestion it was only women using these plants, their cures for feminine ailments are conclusive.

²⁹⁹ Harvey, *Medieval Gardens*, p. 114.

³⁰⁰ Frances Watkins, 'Investigation of Antimicrobials from Native British Plants used in 10th Century Anglo-Saxon wound healing formulations' (Published thesis, University of East London, 2013).

³⁰¹ Emily Kesling, 'The Lacnunga and Insular Grammatica.' In: *Medical Texts in Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture*. Anglo-Saxon Studies. (Boydell & Brewer; 2020, pp. 95-129).

³⁰² Ibid. p. 16.

³⁰³ Luft, *Medieval Welsh Medical*, p. 208.

³⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 74.

³⁰⁵ Dempsey, 'Sowing Seeds of Interdisciplinary Work', p. 16.

As we have seen, plants such as vervain, mallow, pellitory-of-the-wall, and hemlock, discovered still growing in-situ, give us, alongside the Welsh medical texts, rich context for their possible uses (see Appendix 2 for further remedies from the Welsh texts). This data supports evidence from archaeological digs in Scotland, Ireland and Scandinavia, where ancient seed remains have been unearthed. The plants discovered were used in recipes that align with medieval ideas of wellness. Recipes using plants that have abortive properties or that aid mensuration, suggest that women knew of these remedies and were growing what they needed.

Evidence from Welsh sites complements the significant oral tradition of storytelling, song and healing in Wales; ideals and wisdom were transmitted not only by way of manuscripts, but also presumably via word of mouth. Medieval Welsh literature and poetry, gives us evidence too about social beliefs, and we can see how women took the lead in domestic healthcare, whilst facing distrust in doing so. Suspicion arose from the ‘magic’ quality of empirical cures, where there was no understanding of the chemical compounds, there was danger for the healer if a patient was to get sicker.³⁰⁶ Correspondingly, a waning trust in women healers intensified when their remedies failed to prevent the plague.³⁰⁷ Even so, the approval of women as healers in Wales, seems to have outlived those across the border. Reasons for this could incorporate these longstanding oral traditions, which granted some acceptance, alongside the fact that Welsh flourished as a Celtic language. The language issue is interesting. Localised beliefs and ideas

³⁰⁶ Furst, *Between Magic and Medicine*, (Uni Kentucky Press 1997) - specifically, Nancy Nenno, ‘Women Healers and Physicians: Climbing a Long Hill’, p. 45.

³⁰⁷ Gregory, *Normal Women*, p. 173.

would not have been dismissed so easily by an incoming culture, where native language remained; new laws were harder to implement, due to this language barrier.³⁰⁸

It seems plausible then, that we can suggest medieval women at the castle sites had inherited knowledge about plants and how they could aid their personal wellness. The *hortus conclusus*, as an enclosed and private space, was the ideal place for women to take ownership over their bodies, though this does not mean that men never entered. Not only was the garden a spiritual setting of God's design, for women to practise devotion, He had also given them, with plants, the tools to help themselves. The very nature of the garden's seclusion marked it as acceptable and safe for women to be there alone, or with other female family members or staff. However, and crucially, this forced confinement could also have bred empowerment, providing an unusually secular female-only space. We cannot know for sure, but the evidence suggests that these noblewomen and the women who worked for them, had an empirical knowledge of healing plants, and with the garden, came the space to put this expertise into practice.

³⁰⁸ Joe Goodden, 'The Law and the Welsh Language', BBC Wales, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/webarchive/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bbc.co.uk%2Fblogs%2Fwales%2Fentries%2F020f5be9-73a7-3491-a4dd-57fc6875eade#:~:text=Despite%20its%20Welsh%20roots%2C%20the.allow%20Welsh%20to%20be%20heard> (accessed 30/3/26).

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Table 3. Species found on castle/abbey walls

a) of limited occurrence

Diplotaxis tenuifolia (Harlech, Carew, Haverfordwest)

Descurainia sophia (Denbigh 1898, St Davids 1869)

Sisymbrium orientale (Raglan, Haverfordwest)

Brassica oleracea (Tenby 1775 on, Chepstow)

Antirrhinum majus (Cardiff, Monmouth, Valle Crucis)

Salvia verbenaca (Rhuddlan, Tenby, Penmon Priory)

Verbena officinalis (Skenfrith)

Reseda luteola (Montgomery, Raglan, Neath)

native:

Cochlearia danica (Newcastle Emlyn, Kidwelly)

recent introductions:

Senecio squalidus (Abergavenny, Neath, Cardiff 1898)

Buddleja davidii (Bridgend, Neath)

b) of wider occurrence

Centranthus ruber

Erysimum cheiri

Cymbalaria muralis

Parietaria judaica

native:

Arabidopsis thaliana

Erophila verna

Polypodium cambricum

Geranium lucidum

Saxifraga tridactylites

Appendix 2:

Examples of remedies for women from the Welsh Medical Texts Ed. Diana Luft

2/31. For an obstruction in giving birth: take salad burnet and mix it with water and drink it. P.76

4/13. A woman who is prevented from getting pregnant, a medicinal drink should be made for her with these herbs: common St John's wort, and *iawn*, and agrimony, and red mugwort, and tansy, and buck's-horn plantain, and orpine and scarlet pimpernel. And during that, give her a purge.

4/14. A woman to whom the women's disease comes very strongly, take small melilot and lesser burdock and orpine and heather and scarlet pimpernel and wood avens and the ashes of the horn of a stag that has been killed with its horns on its head, and boil them in red wine as well as possible, and strain that liquid well and drink it every day until it is finished. And avoid the warm foods that have been prohibited above, and let blood from the ankles and the thighs.*

P.102

4/35. For the womb escaping, that is, going out, the most important advice is, take wheat flour and bake it with the yolks of nine eggs and honey, and pound the fur from the chest of a hare into it and toast it under the ashes. And the second is, drink the first milk of a cow after calving.

P. 108

/34. If a woman is unable to deliver her child, let mugwort²⁰⁸ leaves be bound to her left thigh, and let them be removed immediately after she has given birth in case her organs should drop. P.

178

7/17 To cause a woman to have children, let her eat lettuce often with warm fat and pepper. P200

9/62. For swelling of the breasts, take vinegar sediment and new wax and make a plaster and put it onto it. P. 262

c/1. For streaming flow of blood, take vervain³⁴⁰ and add it to water and drink it, and the flow of blood will break.* P. 300 – could this be menstrual as vervain for women and if was streaming from a wound, you would want to act quick not make a drink?

Appendix 3: Author's own observations from field research

Below are plants I identified during field trips over the summer of 2025 and Easter time of 2026. Many of these plants had known medicinal properties in the Middle Ages, and some mirror Connolly's findings. Out of the twenty-two plants I identified at the four sites, nine are mentioned in the Welsh Medical Texts (in bold), whilst others such as wallflower, are found in texts like those comprising the The Lacnunga Collection. This is further evidence towards the theory that these plants were intentionally planted.

Castell Caernarfon	Red valerian (<i>Centranthus ruber</i>) Sowthistle (<i>Sonchus oleraceus</i>) Lesser celandine (<i>Ficaria verna</i>) Foxglove (<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>) Dandelion (<i>Taraxacum officinale</i>) Hairy bittercress (<i>Cardamine hirsuta</i>) Ivy leafed toadflax (<i>Cymbalaria muralis</i>) Pellitory-of-the-wall (<i>Parietaria judaica</i>)
Castell Conwy	Wall rocket (<i>Diplotaxis tenuifolia</i>) Oregano (<i>Origanum</i>) Bird's foot trefoil (<i>Lotus corniculatus</i>) Common whitlowgrass (<i>Draba verna</i>) Wallflower (<i>Erysimum</i>) Irish Heath (<i>Daboecia x scotia</i> 'William Buchanan') Oxford Ragwort (<i>Senecio squalidus</i>) Thick leaved Stonecrop (<i>Sedum dasyphyllum</i>) Common groundsel (<i>Senecio vulgaris</i>) Spring Whitlowgrass (<i>Draba verna</i>) Gorse (<i>Ulex europaeus</i>) Red Valerian (<i>Centranthus ruber</i>)

Castell Raglan	Pellitory-of-the-wall (<i>Parietaria judacia</i>) Pineapple weed / wild chamomile (<i>Matricaria discoidea</i>) Ivy leafed toadflax (<i>Cymbalaria muralis</i>) Curly dock (<i>Rumex crispus</i>) Meadow vetchling (<i>Lathyrus pratensis</i>) St. John's wort (<i>Hypericum</i>)
Castell Dolbardarn	Foxglove (<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>) Lesser celandine (<i>Ficaria verna</i>) Sowthistle (<i>Sonchus oleraceus</i>)