

THE RICH HISTORY OF ABERGAVENNY PRIORY

Abergavenny Priory is sometimes described as "The Westminster Abbey of Wales" due to its historical importance and the number of notable figures associated with it. A well-known ancient church in London, England called Westminster Abbey has long served as a significant hub for religious, cultural, and political life in the UK. It is the customary location for the coronation and burial of English monarchs and contains a number of monuments and tombs dedicated to significant persons in English history. Similar to this, Abergavenny Priory was a significant religious site in Wales and had a number of monuments and tombs dedicated to significant persons in Welsh history. ¹The moniker "The Westminster Abbey of Wales" probably serves to emphasize Abergavenny Priory's historical and cultural importance in relation to Welsh history.

¹ *St Mary's Priory Abergavenny: St Mary's church, the Tithe Barn & The Priory Centre. WELCOME & NEWS.*

<http://www.stmarys-priory.org/>[accessed 19 December 2022].



Figure 1: Abergavenny Priory (Biebrach, 2015).

Abergavenny Priory, also known as the Priory Church of St. Mary, was a medieval monastery in Abergavenny in Monmouthshire, Wales. It was founded in the 13th century and was one of the area's largest and most important religious institutions. Due to its size and architectural importance, the Priory has been compared to Westminster Abbey in London, one of England's most famous religious buildings. ²Abergavenny Priory, located in Abergavenny in Wales, has been described as "The Westminster Abbey of Wales" due to its long history and historical importance. The Priory was founded in 1087 as part of a Benedictine monastery that was established beside the Norman castle that dominated Abergavenny town. The monastery was founded by Hamelin de Balun, a Norman lord who had been given the lands of Abergavenny by William the Conqueror.

The monastery was initially built to serve as a place of worship for the Normans who had settled in the area, but it quickly became an important center of learning and scholarship. The monastery's library contained many rare and valuable manuscripts, including copies of the Bible,

² Helen Phillips. 'Langland and Wales: Place, Identity, Borders.' *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 34 (2020), p.59.

the works of classical authors, and the writings of the church fathers. Over the centuries, the monastery at Abergavenny went through many changes. In the 12th century, the monastery was expanded and renovated, and a new church was built to replace the original Norman church. In the 13th century, the monastery was converted into a convent, and Augustinian canons replaced the Benedictine monks who lived there.³ Despite these changes, the Priory remained an important center of religious life and learning in Wales. Many important figures in Welsh history were associated with the Priory, including the princely family of Abergavenny and the poet and chronicler Giraldus Cambrensis. In the 16th century, the Priory was dissolved by King Henry VIII during the English Reformation, and the buildings were sold to private individuals. ⁴Today, the remains of Abergavenny Priory are a popular tourist attraction, a testament to the Priory's long and storied history. Despite its many changes over the centuries, the Priory remains an important part of Wales's cultural and historical heritage with different historical monuments.

Monuments

Different monuments were constructed in the Abergavenny Priory, and they still exist. These include:

Jesse Monument

The Jesse monument is the oldest surviving medieval sculpture in Wales. It is carved from Welsh slate and well-polished, dating to circa 1180. Jesus Christ is written on the base of the statue (Jesus Christ). Jesse was a Welsh saint who lived during the fifth century and became

³ Rhianydd Biebrach, *Church Monuments in South Wales, c. 1200–1547* (Boydell Press, 2017).

⁴ Michael Eastham, 'St Mary's Priory Church, Abergavenny—Monument Conservation.' *An Anatomy of a Priory Church: The Archaeology, History, and Conservation of St Mary's Priory Church, Abergavenny* (2015), p.41.

famous for his righteousness and holiness.⁵ He spent most of his life as a hermit at Glastonbury Abbey in Somerset, where he died in AD 439 or 440 (some sources say AD 448). His body was buried there but later moved to Hereford Cathedral. This fantastic life-size sculpture was formerly the cornerstone of an intricate and ornate construction that traced Jesus Christ's lineage to Jesse, King David's father. It is common to see Jesse trees and Jesse figures in stained glass and stone, but this is the only one of its kind in the UK—and possibly the entire world—built entirely of wood. It was featured in the BBC program *A History of British Art*. Andrew Graham Dixon described it as "the only magnificent wooden figure to survive the debris of the British Cultural Revolution." Jesse also appeared in the most recent BBC television program, *The History of Welsh Art*.⁶ It was carved out of a single piece of oak in the fifteenth century, and at one time, it featured vivid colors and images of all the kings and David's ancestors, with Mary, Jesus, and Christ seated above them.



Figure 2: Jesse Monument (Eastham, 2015).

⁵ Britain Express, *Abergavenny, St Mary's priory church: History, Photos & Visiting Information*, <https://www.britainexpress.com/attractions.htm?attraction=354> [accessed 18 December 2022]

⁶ Helen Phillips, 'Langland and Wales: Place, Identity, Borders.' *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 34 (2020), p.77.

Sir William de Hastings

Sir William de Hastings, brother of Sir Lawrence de Hastings, is assumed to be buried in the stone monument that rests in the window recess to the south of the chapel. In 1348, he perished in the Black Death Plague.⁷

A Hastings lady

The Abergavenny Lady is a stone carving of a woman, possibly Margaret Plantagenet, John de Hastings's wife, in the Priory Church's north wall. It was placed there in about 1220. The figure is carved on one side only, and it has been suggested that this could be because she was initially intended to be viewed from behind or because the chisel would have damaged her face.⁸ There are no inscriptions on either side, but it is possible that they were once present as part of an inscription that has now worn away.



Figure 3: A Hastings Lady (Lindley, 2020).

The Choir and Sanctuary

It is believed that the Priory had a choir and sanctuary, which the monastery's monks used for daily prayers and other religious services. The choir was located near the altar, and the

⁷ Phillip Lindley, 'Two fourteenth-century tomb monuments at Abergavenny and the mournful end of the Hastings earls of Pembroke.' in *Cardiff* ed. by John R. Kenyon, Diane M. Williams (Routledge, 2020), p.139.

⁸ Jeremy Winston, and Trefor Morris, *St Mary's Priory Church: Abergavenny* (Much Wenlock: RJL Smith & Associates, 2018).

sanctuary had a separate area reserved for the exclusive use of the clergy. The choir and sanctuary at Abergavenny Priory were decorated with religious imagery and art and were an essential part of the daily life of the monastery. The monument for the choir and sanctuary consists of monastic choir stalls with writings, "The Wybchester," which indicates their dating.⁹ The monument also consists of finely curved stalls, which the Herbert family introduced to the church.

The Herbert Chapel

The Herbert Chapel at Abergavenny Priory was named after a prominent medieval Welsh family, the Herbert family, who had connections to the town of Abergavenny. The Herbert families were influential landowners and patrons of the arts, and they likely donated funds or supported the construction of the chapel at the monastery.¹⁰ The Herbert Chapel was used for private worship or as a burial place for the Herbert family members. It is also possible that the chapel was dedicated to a particular saint or had a specific religious purpose. The chapel was decorated with frescoes, paintings, stained glass windows, and other religious art forms.¹¹ These decorations were often used to depict biblical scenes or to honor particular saints. Moreover, the Herbert Chapel at Abergavenny Priory had some form of decoration, whether it be frescoed on the walls, stained glass windows, or other art forms.

⁹ Charles Tracy, Hugh Harrison, and Daniel Miles, 'The Choir-stalls at the Priory Church of St Mary, Abergavenny.' *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 155.1 (2002), p.223.

¹⁰ George Nash, 'An anatomy of a priory church: the archaeology, history, and conservation of St Mary's Priory Church, Abergavenny.' *An Anatomy of a Priory Church* (2015),p.206.

¹¹ Phillip Lindley, pp.136-160.

Monument to William and Joan Baker

The monument to William and Joan Baker at Abergavenny Priory is a memorial of two individuals associated with the monastery. The monument was located inside the sanctuary. William and Joan Baker were essential figures in the town of Abergavenny and the surrounding area, and their monument honored their contributions to the community. The monument was a 17th-century artwork. In this monument, the image of William and Joan is depicted as they were praying while kneeling. The painting is carefully and artistically carved in local stone, and it is thought that the craftsman finished it "in situ."

William ap Thomas and Gwladys

The monument is a reverence to Sir William. This was a successful Welsh squire who participated in fighting at Agincourt with Henry V. After the victory, William was made a knight, which obviously elevated his status in the society; he became rich and powerful. Using his wealth, he constructed the Yellow Tower at Raglan Castle.

Sir Richard Herbert of Coldbrook Monument

Sir Richard Herbert of Coldbrook was a prominent member of the Herbert family, a medieval Welsh noble family with connections to Abergavenny and the surrounding area. Sir Richard Herbert was associated with Abergavenny Priory in some way, perhaps as a patron or benefactor.¹² In addition, Sir Richard Herbert was buried at the Priory as a form of reverence for his contribution to the community.

¹² Rhianydd Biebrach,. 'Commemoration and Culture: the monuments of Abergavenny Priory in context.' *An*

Anatomy of a Priory Church: The Archaeology, History and Conservation of St Mary's Priory Church, Abergavenny (2015), p.143.

Judge Andrew Powell and his wife, Margaret Monument

Judge Andrew Powell and his wife Margaret were buried at Abergavenny Priory. They were important figures in the town of Abergavenny and the surrounding area, and their monument was a way of honoring their contributions to the community.

Effigy of Sir John De Hastings

An effigy is a sculpted or carved representation of a person, usually depicted in a reclining position and placed on top of a tomb or monument. The effigy of Sir John De Hastings at Abergavenny Priory is a sculpture or carving of Sir John De Hastings located at the Priory. Sir John De Hastings was a medieval English nobleman who lived in the 13th and 14th centuries.¹³ The effigy of Sir John De Hastings at Abergavenny Priory is a tomb or monument that commemorates his life and achievements.



Figure 4: Effigy of Sir John De Hastings (Biebrach, 2015).

¹³ Rhianydd Biebrach, p.226.

Eva de Braose Monument

Eva de Braose is buried at Abergavenny Priory. Eva de Braose was a medieval English noblewoman who lived in the 13th and 14th centuries. She was the daughter of William de Braose, a powerful Welsh Marcher Lord, and was married to Sir John De Hastings, a prominent English nobleman.¹⁴ Eva de Braose was an important figure in the town of Abergavenny and the surrounding area, and her monument honored her contributions to the community.

Sir Lawrence de Hastings Monument

Sir Lawrence de Hastings was a medieval English nobleman who lived in the 13th and 14th centuries. He was the son of Sir John De Hastings and Eva de Braose and was likely associated with the monastery in some way. Sir Lawrence de Hastings inherited his father's title and estate and was likely an important figure in the local community. Moreover, Sir Lawrence de Hastings served in the military or held other positions of responsibility.¹⁵ Sir Lawrence de Hastings was buried at Abergavenny Priory since he was an important figure in the town of Abergavenny and the surrounding area. His monument is a way of honoring his contributions to the community.

Dr. David Lewis Monument

Dr. David Lewis was the advisor to Queen Elizabeth I, which helped him achieve fame despite being a commoner. He was later appointed as the 1st principal of Jesus College, which

¹⁴ Blackwell, Kay, and Trefor Morris. 'Establishing Strong Roots: The Medieval History of St Mary's Priory

Church, Abergavenny.' *An Anatomy of a Priory Church: The Archaeology, History, and Conservation of St Mary's Priory Church, Abergavenny* (2015), p.29.

¹⁵ Tracy, Charles, Hugh Harrison, and Daniel Miles. 'The Choir-stalls at the Priory Church of St Mary, Abergavenny.' *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 155.1 (2002), p. 213.

was located in Oxford. ¹⁶From his name that the Lewis chapel was constructed and named after him.

Conclusion

Abergavenny Priory is an important site of cultural and historical significance in Wales. It was founded as a Benedictine monastery in the 11th century and continued to function until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16th century. The Priory played a significant role in the surrounding community's religious, cultural, and political life. It is believed to have been a center of learning and scholarship and may have been visited by notable figures such as William the Conqueror and King Henry II. The Priory also has several tombs and monuments honoring notable figures from Welsh history, including members of the Herbert family and other prominent medieval Welsh nobles. In addition, the monastery had an important place of worship for the local community and was used for daily prayers and other religious ceremonies. The monastery was an important center of religious education and scholarship and played a role in the community's spiritual life. Today, the Priory remains an important cultural and historic site and is open to the public for tours and events. It is also an active place of worship and continues to be used for religious services and ceremonies.

¹⁶ Bartosch, P. M. 'The History of the Conservation of the Priory Fabric.' *An Anatomy of a Priory Church: The Archaeology, History, and Conservation of St Mary's Priory Church, Abergavenny* (2015) p. 35.

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