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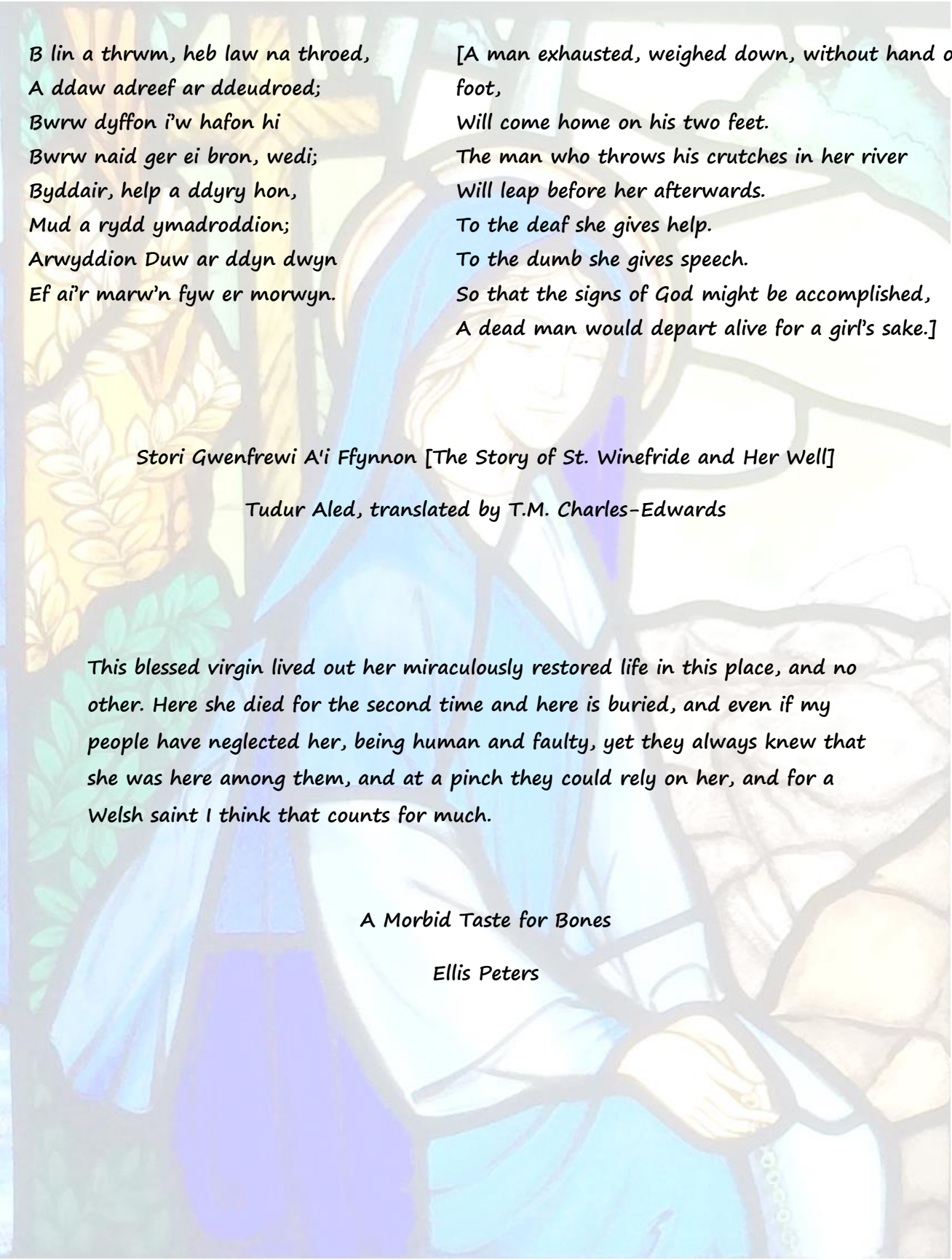
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**Gwenfrewy the guiding star of Gwytherin:
From maiden and martyr to abbess and saint
The cult of Gwenfrewy at Gwytherin
CYCS7010**

**Sally Hallmark
2015**

**MA Celtic Studies Dissertation/Thesis
Department of Welsh
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David
Supervisor: Professor Jane Cartwright**



B lin a thrwm, heb law na throed,
A ddaw adreef ar ddeudroed;
Bwrw dyffon i'w hafon hi
Bwrw naid ger ei bron, wedi;
Byddair, help a ddyry hon,
Mud a rydd ymadroddion;
Arwyddion Duw ar ddyn dwyn
Ef ai'r marw'n fyw er morwyn.

[A man exhausted, weighed down, without hand or
foot,
Will come home on his two feet.
The man who throws his crutches in her river
Will leap before her afterwards.
To the deaf she gives help.
To the dumb she gives speech.
So that the signs of God might be accomplished,
A dead man would depart alive for a girl's sake.]

Stori Gwenfrewi A'i Ffynnon [The Story of St. Winefride and Her Well]

Tudur Aled, translated by T.M. Charles-Edwards

This blessed virgin lived out her miraculously restored life in this place, and no other. Here she died for the second time and here is buried, and even if my people have neglected her, being human and faulty, yet they always knew that she was here among them, and at a pinch they could rely on her, and for a Welsh saint I think that counts for much.

A Morbid Taste for Bones

Ellis Peters

Abstract

As the foremost female saint of Wales, Gwenfrewy has inspired much devotion and many paeans to her martyrdom, and the gift of healing she was subsequently able to bestow. The miracle of her resurrection after her ‘first death’ was followed by many more miracles, both during her lifetime and posthumously. Of the three cultic centres associated with her, much has been written about Ffynnon Wenfrewi, St Winefride's Well, Holywell, the primary cultic centre. Discovering details of Gwenfrewy's cult at Shrewsbury Abbey is relatively straightforward as she is woven into the tumultuous history of that place, where her bones were taken 500 years after her death to provide enticement for pilgrims that would bring glory and wealth to the abbey. Seven years after the martyrdom event at Holywell, she travelled to Gwytherin, in a remote part of North Wales, and became abbess of a convent there. It is in Gwytherin that she was buried after her ‘second death’. Little has been written about her life at Gwytherin and her cult there. This thesis aims to add to the understanding of Gwytherin as a cultic centre in the context of Holywell and Shrewsbury Abbey, and asks why the site was significant, how Gwenfrewy's cult developed there, and why it endured beyond her death.

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Contents

Postgraduate Dissertation coversheet & feedback form:	1
Abstract	6
Acknowledgements	7
List of Figures	9
Notes	11
Chapter 1	12
The power of three: Gwenfrewy's cultic centres	12
Chapter 2	14
The life of Gwenfrewy: the legend and the sources.....	14
Chapter 3	21
Holywell: Winning ways, airs innocent, maiden manners, sweet looks.....	21
Introduction.....	21
The first cultic centre	22
Chapter 4	32
Gwenfrewy, the guiding star of Gwytherin.....	32
Introduction.....	32
The place called Gwytherin	33
Gwytherin before Gwenfrewy	35
A pre-Christian site	35
The four standing stones	38
Penbryn Capel.....	42
The yew trees and the church.....	44
An early monastic site.....	48
The cult of Gwenfrewy at Gwytherin	50
The transition from Holywell to Gwytherin.....	50
The development of Gwenfrewy's cult at Gwytherin.....	54
Capel Gwenfrewy	55
Gwenfrewy's gravestone.....	60
The Arch Gwenfrewy.....	70
The legacy of Gwenfrewy's cult at Gwytherin	80
Chapter 5	83
Shrewsbury Abbey: Often they complained to one another that they very much lacked relics of the saints	83
Introduction.....	83

The third cultic centre	84
Conclusion	91
Bibliography.....	93
Appendices.....	99
Appendix A: Examples of Bronze Age axes and palstaves found in Wales.....	99

List of Figures

Figure 1. Map showing the three cultic centres: Holywell, Gwytherin and Shrewsbury.....	12
Figure 2. Gwenfrewy and Beuno depicted in a stained glass window in the Well Chapel at Holywell	15
Figure 3. The exterior of St Winefride's Well shrine and the Well gardens.....	23
Figure 4. Interior of the Well crypt, showing the star-shaped spring basin	24
Figure 5. Crutches displayed in the Exhibition Centre, Holywell	25
Figure 6. Stone corbel overlooking the holy well, showing a sick pilgrim being carried through the well waters.....	26
Figure 7. Shrine of Gwenfrewy at Holywell (Welsh: Treffynnon), Flintshire, Wales.....	30
Figure 8. Nineteenth century map of Denbighshire showing Gwytherin circled.....	34
Figure 9. Aerial photograph of St Winifred's Church, Gwytherin, taken by C.R. Musson, 33/04/94 in Associated Collection Records, courtesy of Alison Goulbourne	36
Figure 10. The llan at Gwytherin.....	37
Figure 11. The standing stones on the north side of the llan at St Winifred's Church Gwytherin showing their alignment	38
Figure 12. Inscribed standing stone at St Winifred's Church Gwytherin	39
Figure 13. Penbryn Capel, Gwytherin	43
Figure 14. One of the female yew trees in the churchyard at Gwytherin	45
Figure 15. The old church of St James at Gwytherin.....	46
Figure 16. Supposed site of Capel Gwenfrewy, 'after Pritchard'	57
Figure 17. A Tombstone at Kappel Gwenfrewi in ye South part of Gwetherin Church Yard	63
Figure 18. The vertical slab at St Winifred's Church, Gwytherin, showing the wheel cross	64

Figure 19. The vertical slab at St Winifred's Church, Gwytherin, showing the adze or double-headed hammer.....	65
Figure 20. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: from Late 14th century original manuscript, artist unknown	67
Figure 21. A sepulchral slab now forming part of the altar pace	68
Figure 22. The horizontal sepulchral slab at St Winifred's Church, Gwytherin, from above	69
Figure 23. Arch Gwenfrewi yn eglwys Gwytheryn yn swydd Ddimbech	72
Figure 24. Gwytherin Chest 12th century.....	74
Figure 25. Fragment of the shrine of Gwenfrewy showing reconstructed section	75
Figure 26. Shrine of St Manchán	78
Figure 27. Shrewsbury Abbey today, showing remaining sections of the original Norman 11th century building.....	83
Figure 28. The shrine of St Winefride at Shrewsbury Abbey.....	86
Figure 29. Details of the foundation of The Guild of St Winefride.....	87
Figure 30. Fifteenth-century seal of the Guild of St Winefride, Shrewsbury Abbey	88
Figure 31. The St Winefride Window, Shrewsbury Abbey	89

Notes

1. Gwenfrewy is the spelling adopted throughout the text, unless a document is referenced where the spelling differs, in which case the spelling of the reference is used. Gwenfrewy may, therefore, appear as Gwenfrewi, Winefride Winifrede, or Winifred.
2. Unless a different attribution is given, all photographs in this thesis were taken by Joe Hallmark and remain the property of Sally and Joe Hallmark.

Chapter 1

The power of three: Gwenfrewy's cultic centres

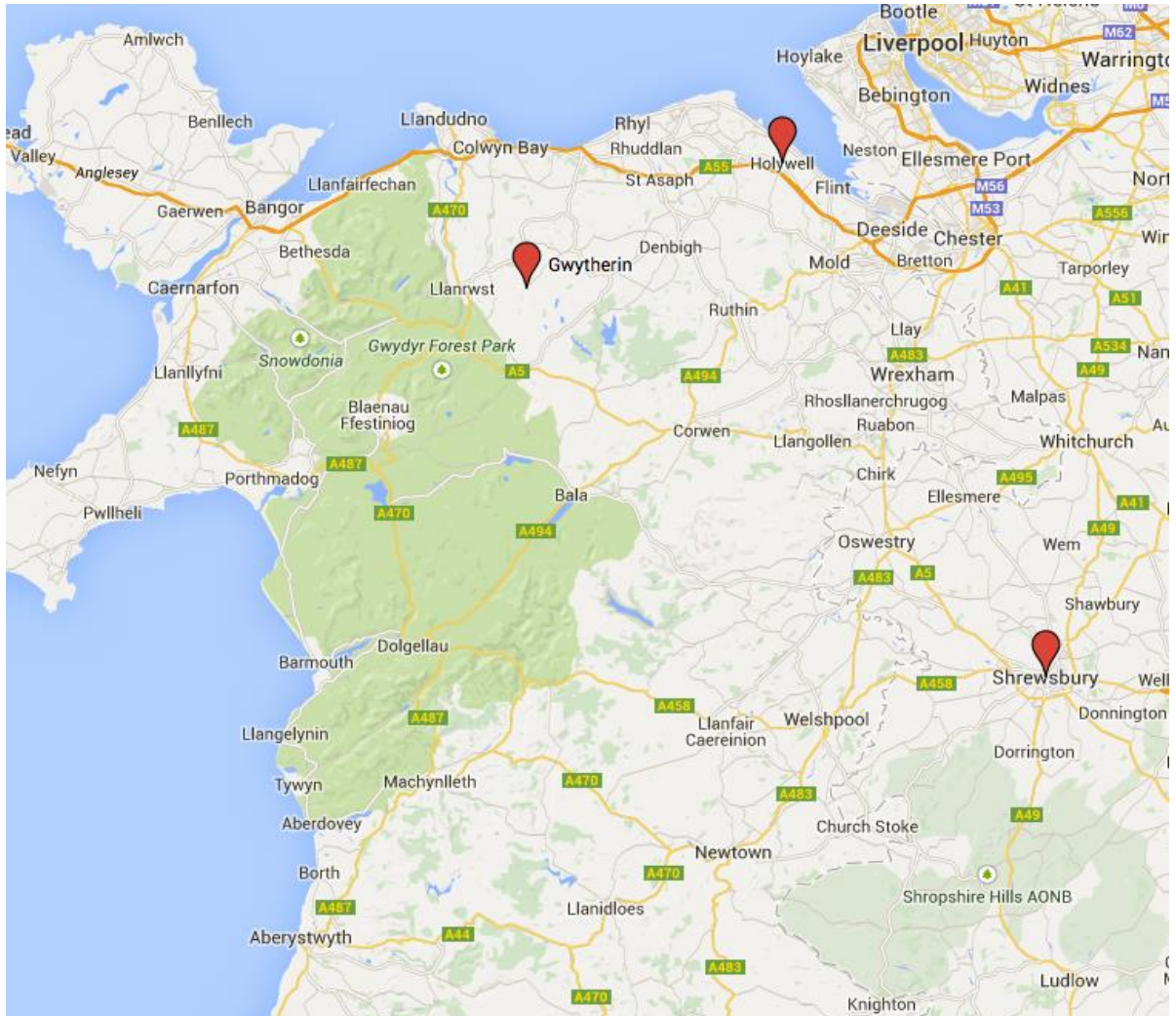


Figure 1. Map showing the three cultic centres: Holywell, Gwytherin and Shrewsbury

The three cultic centres associated with Gwenfrewy are at Holywell in Flintshire, Gwytherin in Conwy, and Shrewsbury in Shropshire, England (see Figure 1). T. W. Pritchard believes that Prior Robert Pennant, in his *Vita et translatio S. Wenefredae*, sees the collective purpose of these three sacred places as being ‘to extend the influence and enhance the worthiness of the maiden, martyr and abbess, Winefride.’¹ Whilst each of the three centres can be said to have its own distinctive aspect of Gwenfrewy’s cult, characterised by the part they played in the broad narrative of

¹ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission c 650 – 1930* (Wrexham: Bridge Books, 2009), p. 29.

Gwenfrewy's supposed life, they are also linked by the event of her martyrdom, the accounts of miracles, and by relics.

Two of the centres, Shrewsbury and Gwytherin, were involved in a power struggle over Gwenfrewy's remains, fictionalised in the Ellis Peters' novel, 'First Chronicle of Brother Cadfael, A Morbid Taste For Bones'. These relics, which actually were the saint herself, were the focus for pilgrimages, conferring protection, intercession and healing on those who visited or came into contact with them, and bringing power to the church or abbey that housed them. The monks of Shrewsbury saw a potent advantage to housing Gwenfrewy's remains at their abbey, and removed them from Gwytherin despite an outcry from the Welsh people who lived in the village.

Gwenfrewy's cult at Holywell, the primary cultic centre, developed at key points from its medieval inception to modern times. An initial burgeoning period lasted centuries until the religious reformation that began with Henry VIII in 1536. The struggle by the Roman Catholic Church to retain its footing as a religion, albeit minor, during this period, was mirrored by a parallel struggle of the cult to survive. Uncertain times continued through the reign of the Tudors and Stuarts, the Commonwealth, and beyond. It was not until the nineteenth century that the cult experienced a period of rejuvenation in a more tolerant religious environment, where penal legislation against Catholics in Britain was repealed, culminating in the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829.

The cult at Gwytherin, the prime focus of this dissertation, developed from the time of Gwenfrewy's arrival there² and is traceable till the late sixteenth century. Despite its relatively remote location, the cult at Gwytherin persisted until the majority of relics that had provided its focus had disappeared.

The cult at Shrewsbury Abbey flourished from the time of the *translatio* in 1138, and enjoyed a period of marked success till the Dissolution of the Monasteries began in 1536.

² Recorded in Prior Robert of Shrewsbury's *Vita et translatio S. Wenefredae* as seven years after the departure of Beuno from Holywell.

Chapter 2

The life of Gwenfrewy: the legend and the sources

According to Gwenfrewy's legend³ she was a devout maiden, living in seventh-century Wales, daughter of Teuyth, the son of a Welsh chieftain. She was being instructed in religious matters by her uncle Beuno, and wished to renounce worldly things to become a nun. Left alone one day, when her parents were at the nearby church Beuno had built, she was approached by a young prince, Caradog, who professed a great desire for her. She refused his sexual advances, pretending she wished to change her clothes, and fled from him towards the church. He thereby pursued her and beheaded her on the steps of the church. A healing spring miraculously flowed from where her blood had been spilled, and a second miracle took place when her uncle, placing her head back on her shoulders, restored her to life. Caradog died and melted away, and Gwenfrewy, a resurrected martyr, thereafter bore a white scar around her neck.

She took her vows as a nun and remained in Holywell, even after the departure of Beuno, gathering around her a community of daughters of noblemen, for whom she became an example of sanctity and their teacher. Each year she would send Beuno a chasuble which remained dry, despite the fact that it was miraculously transported to him by the flow of the river. For this reason he was known as Beuno 'Cassul sych' (Beuno of the dry chasuble⁴).

Beuno had predicted that Gwenfrewy would remain in Holywell for seven years and then receive divine instruction to journey to a place where she would live out the rest

³ Robert, Prior of Shrewsbury, 'Vita et translatio S. Wenefredae', *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, (Eugene Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), and W. J. Rees, *Lives of the Cambro British Saints* (Llandoverly: W. Rees, 1853), pp. 20-21.

⁴ 'casula' is translated as 'chasuble' in Prior Robert of Shrewsbury's 'Vita et translatio S. Wenefredae', where it is clearly a liturgical vestment, and as 'cloak' in the anonymous Life where it seems to have been a secular garment. *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 20.

of her life.⁵ At the end of the seven years, she is directed to the double monastery⁶ at Gwytherin, and is received by Abbot Eleri, who commends her to the community of nuns. She eventually succeeds Eleri's mother Theon, as abbess, and remains at Gwytherin until she dies and is buried there. Miracles and healing characterised Gwenfrewy's life in Holywell and Gwytherin, and these continued after her death.

Some five hundred years after her death, monks from Shrewsbury Abbey dug up her bones and took them from Gwytherin to Shrewsbury Abbey. Her reputation grew, so that from being initially regarded as a local saint, she became nationally and then internationally recognised.



Figure 2. Gwenfrewy and Beuno depicted in a stained glass window in the Well Chapel at Holywell

⁵ The 'Vita S. Wenefrede', *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, (Eugene Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011) adds a pilgrimage to Rome and attendance at a synod and so has a different version of how Gwenfrewy came to be abbess at Gwytherin.

⁶ It is believed that there may have been a double monastery at Gwytherin i.e. a monastery combining a separate community of monks and one of nuns, joined in one institution.

The outline of Gwenfrewy's legend was preserved through the Celtic oral tradition of communicating popular and exemplary stories from one generation to the next, both informally and through public sermons, which served as a basis for later written accounts.

Gwenfrewy is one of only two Welsh female saints with official extant prose *Lives*, the other being Melangell.⁷ Details of Gwenfrewy's legend come mainly from hagiographical sources, in particular the twelfth-century Prior Robert of Shrewsbury's 'Vita et translatio S. Wenefredae'⁸ and the 'Vita S. Wenefrede',⁹ together with a fifteenth-century Welsh *buchedd*. Jane Cartwright points out that Gwenfrewy's legend 'is well attested in medieval sources', and was:

translated into Middle English and included in a number of extremely popular hagiographical collections such as certain versions of the South English Legendary (which was in wide circulation between c. 1270-85 and the fifteenth century), the Gilte Legende (1438), and William Caxton's printed edition of the Golden Legend (1483).¹⁰

Prior Robert's *vita* follows Gwenfrewy's life through the stages of maiden, martyr, abbess and saint at Holywell, Gwytherin and Shrewsbury. He places great emphasis on the process that leads up to Gwenfrewy's becoming an abbess, with miracles occurring at Gwytherin as they had at her time at Holywell, doubtless because he wished to portray her as a Welsh saint. A saint thus chosen by God would suit his purposes to guarantee an increase in the number of pilgrims to Shrewsbury Abbey, the place that eventually housed her corporeal remains. The *vita* also provides an account of the *translatio* of her relics from Gwytherin to Shrewsbury. William Caxton's 1484 translation of Prior Robert's *vita* into English provides the names of

⁷ J. Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), p. 72; J. Cartwright, 'The Legends of the Saints', *Cymynrodd y Seintiau Celtaidd Interpretation Plan* (Perth, Scotland: Touchstone Heritage Management Consultants, 2011), p. 16.

⁸ Hereafter referred to as the *vita*. 'There are three manuscripts extant of Robert's *vita*, dating from the twelfth, thirteenth and seventeenth centuries.' *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 12.

⁹ Hereafter referred to as the anonymous Life. There is only one extant copy of the anonymous Life, in a collection of four saints lives' written in the early thirteenth century, perhaps at Worcester.' *Ibid.*

¹⁰ J. Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 73.

the prior (Wulmere) and priest (Idon) who travelled with him to Gwytherin. The *vita* only mentions that there was a group of seven.¹¹

Both Prior Robert's *vita* and the anonymous Life give accounts of miracles associated with her relics. Prior Robert's *vita* relates miracles that took place around Gwenfrewy's time at Holywell and Gwytherin and around the *translatio* of her corporeal remains from Gwytherin to Shrewsbury. The anonymous Life, on the other hand, centres on posthumous miracles that Gwenfrewy worked at Holywell. The two Latin versions, edited in the *Acta Sanctorum* by the Bollandists, have quite different styles, with the anonymous Life seeming terse alongside the more expressive *vita*.

There are few references to Gwytherin in the anonymous Life other than the choice of Gwenfrewy as an abbess at the synod she attends, and her taking up the appointed position at Gwytherin, where she presided over eleven virgins. The anonymous Life is the only version of Gwenfrewy's life that interpolates her attendance at a synod, and a pilgrimage that she supposedly makes to Rome.

The Welsh version of the Life of Gwenfrewy found in Llanstephan 34 bears close resemblance to the *vita*, whereas the version found in Peniarth 27 differs in a number of details, with no mention of the *translatio*, and instead an emphasis on the importance of *Penbryn Capel*,¹² the 'The Saints' Graveyard' burial site at Gwytherin. Jane Cartwright suggests that the version in Llanstephan 34:

may have been linked to the Cistercian monastery at Basingwerk which profited from Gwenfrewy's well throughout most of the Middle Ages.¹³

Yet another prose source of Gwenfrewy's martyrdom at Sychnant (from then on known as Holywell)¹⁴ can be found in The Welsh Life of Beuno, *Hystoria o Uuched Beuno*¹⁵ (c. 1346).

¹¹ J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England: Translation, Orality, and National Identity in the Cult of St Gwenfrewy, 1138-1512*. (University of Georgia, 2012), p. 79.

¹² See p. 39.

¹³ J. Cartwright, 'The Legends of the Saints', *Cymynrodd y Seintiau Celtaidd Interpretation Plan*, p. 16.

¹⁴ J. Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 72.

¹⁵ Hereafter the *Hystoria*.

Fiona Winward has suggested that, despite differences in their accounts, the *vita* and the anonymous Life share a common Welsh source written in Latin. This source could be the *Hystoria o Uuched Beuno* which ‘may be a Welsh version of a lost Latin life of St Beuno’.¹⁶ The anonymous Life has some resonances with the *Hystoria* that the *vita* does not, for example the mention of Beuno going to Teuyth when the sons of Selym forced him to move, and that all these events occurred in the reign of King Cadfan. However, the *vita* and the anonymous Life have some shared features that are not in the *Hystoria* such as the royal status of Caradog (though he is not a king), Winefride’s request to change her clothes before she flees Caradog, and the blood-stained stones and the sweet-smelling moss at the well. These could suggest that the story of Gwenfrewy, while being based on a lost Latin original of the *Hystoria*, was enhanced by additional details from the oral version of her legend,¹⁷ creating a *mélange* of folklore and Christianity.

There is also a body of medieval Welsh poetry that recounts Gwenfrewy's legend and miraculous healings at her well in ‘two medieval *cywyddau* of uncertain authorship’¹⁸ and in the work of Ieuan Brydydd Hir (fl. 1450-85), Tudur Aled (c.1465-c.1525), and Sion ap Hywel ap Llywelyn Fychan (fl. c.1490-1532).¹⁹

The legend of Gwenfrewy sits within a medieval tradition where female sanctity is closely linked with the saint’s virginity. As Jane Cartwright explains, the female saint is depicted as a paradox, both a hapless victim and a victor, existing ‘in an ecstasy of self-denial’ until she is united with her heavenly husband.²⁰ The threat of rape is real, as in the Middle Welsh Life of Gwenfrewy, when Caradog tells Gwenfrewy:

Oni byddi di vn a mi *oth vodd*, y lledir dy benn a’r cleddyf hwnn.
(If you will not become one with me *willingly* [i.e. have intercourse with me]
I’ll cut off your head with this sword).²¹

¹⁶ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 18.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ J. Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, *Ibid*, p. 73.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid*, p. 93.

²¹ *ibid*, p. 96.

While Gwenfrewy would hardly have been willing to have intercourse with Caradog, it was also essential that she preserve her physical purity since she has decided to take the veil and be the bride of Christ. As Jane Cartwright says, ‘virginity is almost a prerequisite for feminine sanctity’.²²

The importance of this tradition is considered by Mary-Ann Stouck, in her discussion of hagiography in the late fourteenth-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where she states that the poet’s references to saints are very probably intended:

to evoke the audience’s knowledge of a broad hagiographical context that included popular traditions of beheaded saints and themes of sexual temptation present in both vernacular and Latin saints’ lives.²³

She believes that Gwenfrewy’s story is archetypal with respect to the traditions that link beheaded saints and sexual temptation, and notes that David Farmer,²⁴ lists the axe as one of the icons of Gwenfrewy.²⁵

Michael Bennett notes that Gwenfrewy’s cult was being promoted from provincial to national about the time *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was being composed.²⁶ He therefore extrapolates that many people would have understood the context for the poem through the link made to the story of Gwenfrewy, whose well is crossed by Sir Gawain on his way to the Green Chapel.

The official recording of her life in the Middle Welsh *buchedd* and the twelfth-century Latin lives indicates that Gwenfrewy was of considerable political importance. This importance is confirmed by a representation of her on the ecclesiastical seal of the Dean and Chapter of St Asaph Cathedral, used from the mid fifteenth century onwards. She is represented as a holy abbess, holding her crook and

²² *ibid.*

²³ M. A. Stouck, *Of Talking Heads and Other Marvels: Hagiography and Lay Piety in ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’*, *Florilegium*, vol. 17 (2000), p. 60.

²⁴ D. H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 4th edition (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), p. 530.

²⁵ M. A. Stouck, *Of Talking Heads and Other Marvels*, p. 70.

²⁶ M. J. Bennett, ‘The Historical Background’ *A companion to the Gawain Poet*, edited by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1977), p.87.

a reliquary, standing to the left of St Asaph, in a group of three, completed by the diocesan bishop kneeling in veneration.²⁷ The seal was attached to important documents and signified the decision of the governing body responsible for administering the cathedral. Gwenfrewy is clearly singled out as ‘a special saint of the diocese venerated for her martyrdom and miraculous works’.²⁸

However, not every scholar is convinced that the importance with which Gwenfrewy has been invested is merited. Rice Rees states that:

Gwenfrewi, or St Winefred, owes her celebrity more to the well that is called after her name than to anything that is said of her in *Bonedd y Saint*²⁹; for even her parentage is not mentioned in the Welsh accounts, and the time in which she lived is ascertained only from the names of her contemporaries which occur in her legendary Life.³⁰

Baring-Gould and Fisher also question Gwenfrewy’s existence, referring to the fact that her name ‘does not occur in any early Welsh pedigree of saints’,³¹ the silence of the early English historians about her existence, and the fact that ‘she is not entered in the Calendar of Welsh Saints in *Cotton MS. Vesp. A. xiv*, of the early thirteenth century.’³²

Whether or not Gwenfrewy existed historically has little bearing on the strong cult that undoubtedly developed, and has persisted, around her persona and her legend. Her cult is explored in the next three chapters, with a more detailed examination and discussion of the cult at Gwytherin.

²⁷ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission c 650 – 1930*, p. 67.

²⁸ *ibid*, pp. 67-68.

²⁹ *Bonedd y Saint* [Descent of the Saints] is a Welsh genealogical tract detailing the lineages of the early British saints. There are a number of different manuscripts in existence dating from the early 13th to the late 17th century, although the material is believed to be much older in origin.

³⁰ R. Rees, *An Essay on the Welsh Saints of the Primitive Christians* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1836), p. 295.

³¹ S. Baring-Gould, and J. Fisher, *The Lives of the British Saints* vol.3 (London: Charles J. Clarke, 1911), p. 188.

³² *ibid*, p. 187.

Chapter 3

Holywell: Winning ways, airs innocent, maiden manners, sweet looks

Introduction

Holywell (Welsh: Treffynnon) is the place where the cult of Gwenfrewy began and so it is fitting that we look briefly at how the cult developed here. The historical context and political background for the development of Gwenfrewy's cult in Holywell during the medieval period was one of unrest and jostling for power by the Welsh princes and the English kings and earls of Chester.³³ During the successive reigns of Henry I (1100-1135), Stephen (1135-1154) and Henry II (1154-1189), control of St Winefride's well and Holywell by the Welsh or the English reflected the strength of each Norman king. In 1240 Holywell was returned to the Welsh to enjoy a period of stability for the next three centuries. Whereas Henry I and Henry II were strong rulers, under Stephen, Owain Gwynedd was able to wrest power from the English in the cantref³⁴ of Tegeingl in north-east Wales.

To the east of Holywell, across the English border, was St Werburgh's, a Benedictine Abbey in Chester, England. Earl Richard of Chester, in 1119, recorded the gifts he and his father had bestowed upon the abbey, including what appears to be Holywell, referred to as 'Halliwella'. A mere twelve years later, Basingwerk a few miles from St Winefride's Well, was settled by monks from the Order of Savigny. Between 1147 and 1148, Basingwerk, its founding abbey at Buildwas, and the Order of Savigny, were all incorporated into the Cistercian Order. This resulted in a power play between the Benedictine and Cistercian abbeys for control of St Winefride's Well at Holywell.³⁵

This power play continued, with the control of the well passing backwards and forwards, firstly to Basingwerk some time between 1129 and 1153, then back to St Werburgh for a period between 1153 and 1181. It is reasonable to suppose that help was obtained from the Benedictines at Chester for the *translatio* of Gwenfrewy's

³³ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission c 650 – 1930*, p. 48.

³⁴ A medieval Welsh land division important in the administration of Welsh law.

³⁵ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 8.

remains to the recently founded Benedictine site at Shrewsbury in 1138.³⁶ Henry II granted Holywell Church and St Winefride's Well to St Werburgh's Abbey in 1157. In the same year he is said to have refounded the 1131 monastery at Basingwerk on a new site,³⁷ established a house of Templar knights there to protect pilgrims wishing to visit the well, and rebuilt a castle at Basingwerk that had been destroyed during the reign of King Stephen.³⁸

Owain Gwynedd razed this castle to the ground in 1167, and by 1240 Dafydd ap Llewellyn, Prince of Wales, confirmed that he had granted Holywell to Basingwerk Abbey. A period of stability followed, with a strong relationship maintained between Holywell and Basingwerk Abbey until the Dissolution of the Monasteries c. 1536.³⁹

Holywell has remained the most popular cultic centre for Gwenfrewy because of a combination of three major factors – it is the place of Gwenfrewy's reputed martyrdom and her miraculous restoration to life; it has enjoyed a continuous history of public pilgrimage for over thirteen centuries, with strong support from the Catholic Church; and, perhaps most importantly, it has a healing well whose renown is as old as the story of Gwenfrewy herself.

The first cultic centre

The cult of Gwenfrewy grew up around the well, Ffynnon Wenfrewi, and the pilgrims it drew, and continues to draw, from all over the world. In the Middle Ages, pilgrimages were immensely popular, with Jerusalem being the most important place for pilgrims to visit. Pilgrimages to Rome to visit the tombs of martyrs⁴⁰ and to view relics were also popular, as were pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela in Spain (after the ninth century) where the body of the martyred apostle St James the Greater lay.⁴¹ T. W. Pritchard comments:

Christian Europe was then a cultural unity, with its peoples sharing common values of charity, belief in miracles, veneration of saints and their power to

³⁶ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission c 650 – 1930*, p. 46.

³⁷ *ibid*, p. 47.

³⁸ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 9.

³⁹ *ibid*.

⁴⁰ In particular the foremost apostles Peter and Paul.

⁴¹ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 54.

aid the penitent sinner and those afflicted by sickness with no other remedy but a visit to a shrine or healing well.⁴²



Figure 3. The exterior of St Winefride's Well shrine and the Well gardens

Known as the Lourdes of Wales,⁴³ St Winefride's Well at Holywell brought healing to the sick and afflicted, and guaranteed wealth through monetary offerings to whoever had control of the well and shrine. The popularity of Gwenfrewy's shrine was enhanced by the patronage of royalty. Jane Cartwright points out that:

From 1240 to the Dissolution the holy well was a source of considerable income for the Cistercian monks of Basingwerk to whom it was appropriated and, throughout the Middle Ages, it attracted eminent visitors such as Henry V, Edward IV, and Richard III.⁴⁴

It is said that when Henry V made his first pilgrimage to the well, it was to ask for Gwenfrewy's blessing on his military campaign in France. On his return from

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Lourdes Cymru in Welsh. Lourdes in southern France is the site where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared to Marie-Bernadette Soubirous on a total of eighteen occasions. Lourdes has a healing spring and is a major place of Roman Catholic pilgrimage and of miraculous healings.

⁴⁴ J. Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 73.

France, he made a second pilgrimage, to express gratitude for his victory at Agincourt, and to acknowledge the crucial role the Welsh archers had played in his success. He travelled on foot from Shrewsbury to Holywell to show his humility and sincerity. His pilgrimages have been seen as politically motivated, aimed at ‘wooing Celtic sensibilities’.⁴⁵



Figure 4. Interior of the Well crypt, showing the star-shaped spring basin

The well is said to have cured a range of maladies, many relating to physical disability. Lolitta L’Aiguille, the current co-custodian at Holywell, gives personal testimony to the healing power of its bubbling spring water. She recounts how she first visited the well as a pilgrim, suffering from several illnesses, and how she immersed herself in the water, thinking of St Winefride: ‘what came to my mind was that if she had died and lived again then she could help me’.⁴⁶ The healing that Lolitta L’Aiguille says she received changed her life drastically and led to her

⁴⁵ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, pp. 62-63.

⁴⁶ Lolitta L’Aiguille, pers. comm.

becoming co-custodian at the well with her husband.⁴⁷ She sees her purpose as being:

to help others find God, the same way I found God. I want to help others basically. There's your faith in the water, that's all it takes.⁴⁸

The Exhibition Centre at the well houses abandoned crutches, testament to those who found healing in the well waters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Figure 5. Crutches displayed in the Exhibition Centre, Holywell

A whole economy was built upon Gwenfrewy's cult at Holywell as it developed in the Middle Ages. In return for a payment towards the repair of buildings, pilgrims received healing in the holy water, and indulgences, 'which promised precious days of remission from Purgatory'.⁴⁹ Those who could not walk were carried by friends or family to be immersed in the cool waters of the well. T. W. Pritchard envisages a

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 61.

bazaar-like atmosphere in the town of Holywell during this period ‘with booths of vendors of religious souvenirs.’⁵⁰



Figure 6. Stone corbel overlooking the holy well, showing a sick pilgrim being carried through the well waters

Today’s pilgrims still come to bathe in the waters, seeking healing, and take comfort in being blessed by St Winefride’s relic⁵¹ and purchasing religious souvenirs from the St Winefride’s Well shop.

The remarkable qualities of the well waters have been extolled in literature since the fifteenth century. A poem of uncertain authorship⁵² refers to the well waters as

⁵⁰ *ibid*, p. 62.

⁵¹ ‘A fragment of finger bone, presumed to be Gwenfrewy’s, is encased in a silver monstrance: the relic which had been sent to Rome was returned to Holywell in 1855’, J. Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales* p. 73.

⁵² ‘Ffynnon Wenfrewi’, [‘St Winefride’s Well’], has been attributed to the fourteenth-century poet, Iolo Goch, but T.M. Charles-Edwards thinks this is unlikely, and that the poem is likely to have been written after the Papal Bull of 1427, by which time Iolo Goch was already dead (died circa 1398). The Papal Bull provided for the relaxation of penance for those who visited and gave alms for the repair and maintenance of the chapel at Holywell.

‘Ffons fendigedig o’r ffydd [A blessed fountain of the faith]’,⁵³ and focuses on the fast bubbling current of water, with bright images and a musicality that is created by *cynghanedd*, an internal system of alliteration and rhyme.⁵⁴

Budd a wna’r ffynnon i’r byd,
Berwi o’r llawr, heb awr baid,
O’i chanol, eirw uchenaïd,
Bob un fel arian byw bydd,
Bob dau boglynnau glenydd,
Bob dri, uchel y gwelais,
Bob bedwar, llafr yw’r llais,

[A strength which the well gives to the world,
Bubbling from the ground, without a moment’s pause,
From its midst, foaming, sighing,
Every bubble is like quick-silver,
Every two bubbles by the banks,
Every three I saw flung high,
Every four were chattering voices,]⁵⁵

The Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, writing in the nineteenth century, rapturously describes his experience of water flowing at St. Winefride’s Well in a journal entry:

The sight of the water in the well, as clear as glass, greenish like beryl or aquamarine, trembling at the surface with the force of the springs, and shaping out the five foils of the well quite drew and held my eyes to it ... The strong unfailing flow of the water ... took hold of my mind with wonder at the bounty of God in one of His saints.⁵⁶

In the *vita*, Beuno tells Gwenfrewy that stones in the holy spring spattered by drops of her blood will retain those marks of her martyrdom forever and can never be washed clean. He describes this as a gift, a relic of her suffering to remind all who see it of the triumph of her chastity. Michael Drayton, a sixteenth-century poet,

⁵³ Anonymous, ‘Ffynnon Wenfrewi, [St Winefride’s Well]’, in T.M. Charles-Edwards, ed., *Two Mediaeval Welsh Poems Stori Gwenfrewi A’l Ffynnon The Story of St. Winefride and Her Well and Ffynnon Wenfrewi St Winefride’s Well* (Wales: Gwasg Gomer, 1971), line 28.

⁵⁴ *ibid*, Introduction.

⁵⁵ *ibid*, lines 40-46.

⁵⁶ R. B. Martin, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Very Private Life* (London UK: Faber and Faber Ltd, 2011), Journal entry October 12 1874.

wrote about the stones and how they were still stained with Gwenfrewy's blood, contrasting the white of the stones (pearly) and the red of her blood (vermilion):

And, that for her alone the water should not mourne
The pure vermilion bloud, that issu'd from her vaines,
Unto this very day the pearly Gravell staines:
As erst the white and red were mixed in her cheeke.⁵⁷

Writing in 1512, Sion ap Hywel ap Llywelyn Fychan (fl. c.1490-1532) produced an awdl to Gwenfrewy and her well, in veneration of her martyrdom. He compares her wound to the wounds of Christ, and, in so doing, he too writes about the bloodied stones, in lines 1-4:

Gwenfrewy, Duw fry, gwaed y fron, – mor debyg
'Dyw'r aber i'r ffynnon;
A gwaed rhudd yw godre hon,
Gweryd ar y main geirwon.

[Gwenfrewy, God above, the breast's blood how similar/is its flow to this well; / with its red blood bottom / and moss on rough stones.]⁵⁸

Two of the major factors that have made Holywell such a popular cultic centre, the site of Gwenfrewy's martyrdom and her healing well, are inextricably bound together. Beheaded by the enraged Caradog, the maiden with 'winning ways, airs innocent, maiden manners, sweet looks'⁵⁹ becomes a martyr, and this results in an instantaneous miracle when a spring of healing water appears where her head fell:

As soon as the head of the maiden fell to the ground, a most clear spring burst forth in that very spot and spread itself copiously, offering health to many sick people through the merits of the holy maiden, which even today has not ceased to flow.⁶⁰

Tudur Aled, from Llansannon, near Gwytherin, writes a metaphorical commentary on Gwenfrewy's martyrdom in his early sixteenth-century cywydd, 'Stori Gwenfrewi

⁵⁷ M. Drayton, *Polyolbion Song X*, 1612, ed. J.W. Hebel (Oxford: Blackwell, 1933), pp. 204-205.

⁵⁸ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 74.

⁵⁹ G.M. Hopkins, 'Maidens' song from St Winefred's Well' *The Leaden Echo and The Golden Echo* line 31, originally intended as a chorus for the unfinished tragedy *St Winefred's Well*, *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins Now First Published* (London UK: Humphrey Milford, 2007).

⁶⁰ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 35.

A'i Ffynnon' ['The Story of St. Winefride and Her Well']. He takes the powerful blessing of her martyrdom as a sign and memorial of the Resurrection that brings healing to pilgrims who trust her. He speaks of 'two cures' Gwenfrewy can bestow:

Iechyd corff, uchod y caid
A chadw i'n iechyd enaid

The cure of the body (it is obtained above)
And the assuring for us of our souls' cure.⁶¹

The cult of Gwenfrewy at Holywell was established by this first miracle of a spring appearing, followed closely by a second miracle of her restoration to life by Beuno. Thereafter her cult at Holywell flourished, based on a plethora of further miracles. These are recorded in Prior Robert's *vita*, and in great detail in the anonymous *Life*, both of which did much to disseminate Gwenfrewy's legend. Echoing the Gospels, Ieuan Brydydd Hir Hynaf (fl. 1450-85) writes at the end of the fifteenth century about the healing miracles attributed to Gwenfrewy, in his 'Cywydd i Wenfrewi a'r ffynnon' [A *cywydd* to Gwenfrewy and the well], lines 27-32:

Os un a ddaw heb synnwyr,
A'i caiff ond enynnu cwyr,
A d'wedyd os mud ydyw,
Os byddar, clae'r y clyw;
Un heb gerdded i'r redeg,
Dyn dall i weled yn deg.

[If one arrives insane/he will receive it [sanity] on lighting a candle / and can speak if mute / If deaf clear will be his hearing / if crippled to run / a blind man to see well.]⁶²

The third major factor in the ongoing popularity of Holywell as a cultic centre is the way in which it has survived the vicissitudes of changing politics over the centuries. A two-storey late perpendicular Gothic stone shrine was built in the early sixteenth century to cover the well crypt, with the Chapel of St Winefride on the upper

⁶¹ Tudur Aled, *Stori Gwenfrewi A'i Ffynnon [The Story of St. Winefride and Her Well]*, in Tudur Aled, T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Two Mediaeval Welsh Poems*, lines 93-94.

⁶² T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 73.

storey.⁶³ The shrine is generally attributed to the patronage of Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, though there is evidence, in Tudur Aled's poem, 'Stori Gwenfrewi A'i Ffynnon' ['The Story of St. Winefride and Her Well'], that Thomas Pennant, Abbot of Basingwerk at that time, is responsible for the construction of the building. Siôn ap Hywel's *awdl* to Gwenfrewy, suggests that Thomas Pennant may even have borne the cost of the building:

O law Tomas urddaswin
Yr aeth y gost ar waith Gwen:
Diwan adeilad, da iawn y dylud,
Da y darparwyd, iti darperir.

[From the hand of Thomas [provider of] noble wine
came the cost of Gwen's work:
A sturdy building, full well do you deserve it,
well was it prepared, prepared for you.]⁶⁴



Figure 7. Shrine of Gwenfrewy at Holywell (Welsh: Treffynnon), Flintshire, Wales

⁶³ St Winefride's Well [online]. Available: <http://www.saintwinefrideswell.com/home/4569900182> <accessed 29 December 2014>

⁶⁴ J. Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 74.

This magnificent shrine still exists today, and is part of the attraction of the well and the perpetuation of Gwenfrewy's cult at Holywell. A Jesuit Mission supported and protected the well from when it originated, c. 650, to 1930. At this time, Bishop Vaughan requested the Society of Jesus to hand over a number of Missions, including the one at Holywell, to the diocesan authorities. Father John Luck, the priest at Holywell in 1930, recalled:

... that the history of the Mission at Holywell differed from thousands of other missions and chapels in England, and in some ways this mission has been quite unique. It was the only parish where a parish priest had been appointed without a gap for 360 years.⁶⁵

Members of the Catholic community thanked the Society of Jesus, with deep appreciation and acknowledgement of their role:

That through their services and never tiring zeal the Faith has been kept alive through penal⁶⁶ times up to the present.⁶⁷

Gwenfrewy's cult at Holywell, still flourishing today, was well established by the end of the fourteenth century. By this time Holywell was one of the foremost centres for pilgrims in medieval Britain, and her feast day on the third of November was observed throughout the province of Canterbury.⁶⁸ Her legend was already part of the national identity of Wales, an identity besieged by Norman influences. We see evidence of the promotion of her cult and the establishing 'of a locus of pilgrimage with a view to both financial and spiritual gain'.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 400. T. W. Pritchard notes it was, in fact, 340, not 360 years.

⁶⁶ The Jesuits had to adopt disguises and false names and adopted the role of publicans, offering Mass secretly at night. *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 399.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶⁹ J. Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 75.

Chapter 4

Gwenfrewy, the guiding star of Gwytherin

Introduction

This chapter discusses the significance of Gwenfrewy's cult at Gwytherin, where she purportedly spent the second part of her life. A number of varied sources provide us with valuable information about the significance of Gwytherin - the Welsh *buchedd*, together with some medieval Welsh poetry, archaeological evidence, information from St Asaph diocesan archival material, and primarily Prior Robert's *vita*.

Prior Robert aims to give his *vita* credibility by stating that it is a melding of documents 'preserved in the churches of the district where she lived and the reports of worthy priests'.⁷⁰ In addition there is evidence that Gwytherin was an important pre-Christian site, and that, by the time Prior Robert travelled there in search of 'the blessed maiden's bones',⁷¹ it had become a Christian site with important ecclesiastical status.

The *vita* tells of how Gwenfrewy was directed to Gwytherin by St Saturnus, thus bringing about a prophecy from St Beuno, made seven years earlier, that she would leave Holywell and travel, through divine guidance, to a new place. This journey provides an important link between the two cults, and can be seen as a device that graces the development of the cult at Gwytherin with the power of being founded in a predicted and holy place. The cult of Gwenfrewy at Gwytherin is considered during her supposed lifetime, after her death, and once her bones had been translated to Shrewsbury Abbey. Finally there is a discussion of Gwytherin in the twenty-first century and its place in the enduring cult of Gwenfrewy.

⁷⁰ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 37.

⁷¹ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 82.

The place called Gwytherin

There is a certain place called Witheriac [Gwytherin], a place filled with the relics of many saints; it was chosen by God on account of their venerable manner of living, and it is held in very great awe by all the people.⁷²

This is the first mention of Gwytherin in Prior Robert's Life, and this is the place that 'the Blessed Saturnus' (Welsh, *Sadwrn*) speaks of when he tells Gwenfrewy:

God commands you to visit this place, and while you are alive to dwell there in person and to instruct the souls of others by your example.⁷³

Thus, according to Prior Robert, begins the final period of Gwenfrewy's life, following her seven years spent in Holywell 'presiding over a community of nuns'.⁷⁴ The anonymous Life makes only passing reference to Gwytherin as 'the place where she lived with her virgins'⁷⁵ and the place where she was buried 'on the 8th day of the calends of July'.⁷⁶ It does, however, even in its brevity, agree with Prior Robert's account of Gwenfrewy's time there. The extant Welsh *buchedd*, preserved in Peniarth 27, echoes Prior Robert on the importance of the burial site at Gwytherin, emphasising that countless other saints were also buried there, including local saints such as Cybi, Sanan and Theon.⁷⁷ Whereas Gwenfrewy's cult at Holywell builds credibility around the well and the healing powers resulting from her martyrdom, the cult at Gwytherin has a credible basis in a pre-existing tradition as a renowned place associated with saints.

In the nineteenth century, Samuel Lewis, the editor and publisher of an early topographical dictionary of Wales, described Gwytherin as:

A parish in the Union of Llanrwst, hundred of Isaled, county of Denbigh, 6 miles (ESE) from Llanrwst. Within this parish, which is situated in the mountainous district of the county, are the sources of the rivers Elwy, Aled and Alwen, upon the first of which, about two miles below its source, the

⁷² *ibid*, p. 55.

⁷³ *ibid*.

⁷⁴ J. Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 73.

⁷⁵ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 102.

⁷⁶ *ibid*. Gwenfrewy is commonly believed to have died in 660 AD.

⁷⁷ J. Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 72.

village is pleasantly seated. The surface of the surrounding country is beautifully diversified, and in many parts the scenery is highly picturesque: within the parish are three noble lakes, Llyn Alwen, Llyn Moelvre, and Llyn Aled, the last of which is enclosed on almost every side by mountains covered with dark and barren heath.⁷⁸



Figure 8. Nineteenth century map of Denbighshire showing Gwytherin circled⁷⁹

Today Gwytherin is still a pleasant village of some 27 houses with an inn, which was originally a row of seventeenth-century cottages. It has changed little since the nineteenth-century tithe survey of around 1842, though there is no longer evidence of :

strip fields or quillies that existed in the fields to the south-west of the village, perhaps pointing to medieval cultivation.⁸⁰

The only additions noted are a road to the north-east of the rectory and the addition of some modern houses.⁸¹

⁷⁸ S. Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Wales 1833 & 1849* [online]. Available at: <http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/wal/DEN/Gwytherin/> <accessed 30 October 2014>

⁷⁹ GB Historical GIS / University of Portsmouth, 'History of Gwytherin, in Conwy and Denbighshire Map and description, *A Vision of Britain through Time*'. [online]. Available at: <http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/place/1967>. < accessed 15th November 2014>

⁸⁰ Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust, *Gwytherin* (Eastern Conwy: Historic Settlement Survey, 2014), p. 2.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

Gwytherin before Gwenfrewy

A pre-Christian site

Understanding the cult of Gwenfrewy at Gwytherin is informed to a large extent by understanding the history of the place itself. Gwytherin has been identified as a place of very early archaeological and ecclesiastical significance. Its very name, although it could be simply interpreted as a Welsh place name for ‘berry bushes’,⁸² is seen by some to date back to the sixth century, meaning ‘the place of Gwytherin’, Gwytherin reputedly being the name of a sixth-century saint.⁸³ D. R. Thomas gives another interpretation of the name as the Welsh form of Victorinus, ‘probably a survival of the Roman occupation’.⁸⁴ He sees similarities with the naming of Llanvetherine (Welsh *Llanwytherin*) in Monmouthshire.

A topographic view of the site at Gwytherin shows how the shape of the enclosure is a large curvilinear site, probably dating back to the Bronze or Iron Age as a pre-Christian religious settlement.

⁸² D. R. Thomas, *The History of the Diocese of St Asaph: General, Cathedral, and Parochial*, vol. 2, (Oswestry: Caxton Press, 1911), p. 312, footnote 1: found in Gwytherin church history records, copy kindly given by Alison Goulbourne.

⁸³ Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust, *Gwytherin* (Eastern Conwy: Historic Settlement Survey, 2014) [online]. Available at <http://www.cpat.demon.co.uk/projects/longer/churches/conwy/16790.htm> <accessed 20 October 2014>

⁸⁴ D. R. Thomas, *The History of the Diocese of St Asaph*, p. 312, footnote 1.



Figure 9. Aerial photograph of St Winifred's Church, Gwytherin, taken by C.R. Musson, 33/04/94 in Associated Collection Records, courtesy of Alison Goulbourne⁸⁵

J. Wyn Evans argues a case for the site at Gwytherin originally being an Iron Age enclosure. He links archaeological research that former Iron Age enclosures 'were reused as early Christian cemeteries'⁸⁶ to land form features that indicate the *llan*⁸⁷ (ecclesiastical enclosure) at Gwytherin is sited on an Iron Age promontory fort, now a 'much degraded bank between the churchyard entrance and the west wall of the church'.⁸⁸

T. W. Pritchard, aware, no doubt, of earlier work done by J. Wyn Evans and others in dating the Gwytherin *llan*, reiterates that it was part of an 'ancient compact village settlement' which may have been within an Iron Age promontory fort.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Available: <http://www.coflein.gov.uk/en/catalogue/6145726/details/504>.

⁸⁶ J. Wyn Evans, 'The Early Church in Denbighshire', *Denbighshire Historical Society Transactions*, vol. 35: (1986), p. 67.

⁸⁷ D. S. Davies states that a *llan* originally meant a clearing, a level space where the founder desired to settle and was later consecrated by burial. Before 500 AD it would have been referred to as an *eglwys*, a barrow. Later, when churches were built in these clearings, *llan* took on its most accepted meaning of 'ecclesiastical enclosure'. D. S. Davies, 'How Old is this Church', *The Radnorshire Society Transactions*, vol. 15: (1945), p. 39. In *Welsh Journals Online* [online]. Available: <http://welshjournals.llgc.org.uk/browse/viewpage/llgc-id:1191402/llgc-id:1192569/llgc-id:1192609/get650> <accessed 18 November 2014>.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, pp. 36-37.

On visiting the site it is clear that the church is strategically positioned on a hillock, with the only approach on level ground being the entrance to the northern churchyard and church from the west, facing the Lion Inn (see figure 10).

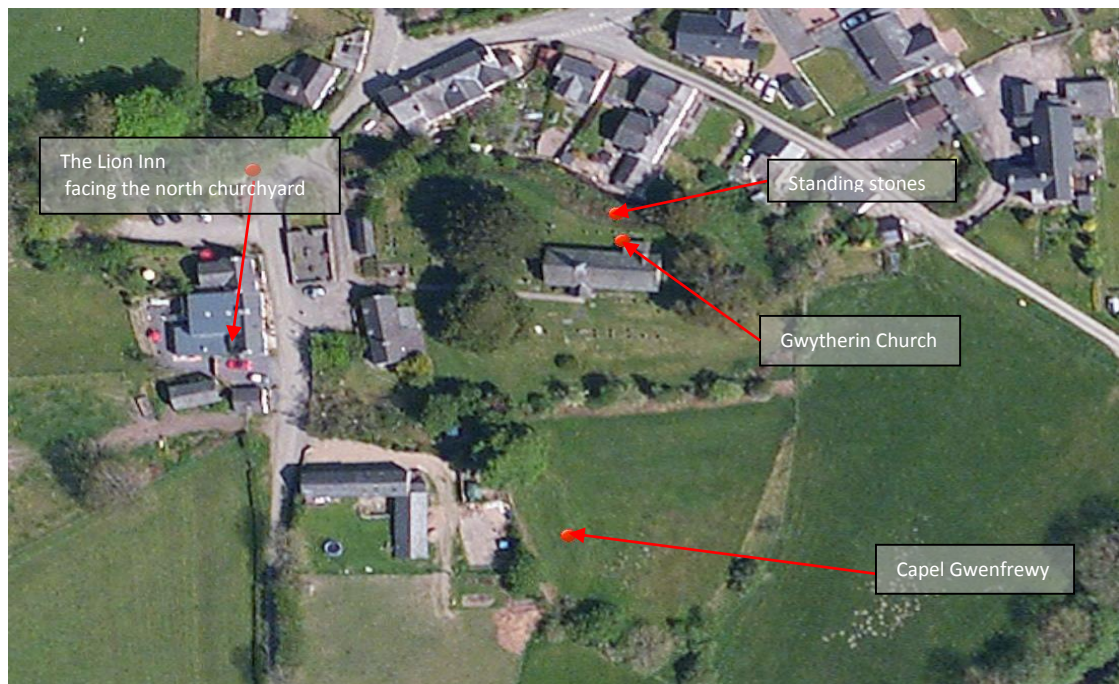


Figure 10. The *llan* at Gwytherin⁹⁰

A detailed description of the *llan* site is offered by James Ryan Gregory, supporting the argument for its having been an ancient hill fort:

The contours of the land on which Gwytherin church sits could plausibly have formed an ancient hill fort, as the ground drops away sharply on the northern, southern, and eastern sides, with only the western side allowing a level approach to the site. The southern boundary of the present churchyard is demarcated by a straight hedge that runs along the course of a dried up stream and that divides the originally egg-shaped, curvilinear *llan* into a northern and southern half. This latter portion consists of another hill with steep sides on its northern, eastern, and southern faces, offering clear views of the surrounding valley.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Aerial photograph [online]. Available: <http://www.cofiadurcahcymru.org.uk/reader/app/index.php?group=CPAT&bounds=287561,361367,287701,361514> <accessed 15 November 2014>; own labels added.

⁹¹ J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 94.

The four standing stones

There are four standing stones on the north boundary of the churchyard, one of which is inscribed vertically *Vinnemagli fili Senemagli* (i.e. the body or tombstone of Vinnemaglus, son of Senemaglus) in debased Roman capitals. On average the stones are about 1m high and set a little over 2m apart.⁹² J. Wynn Evans cites the work of V.E. Nash-Williams in dating the inscribed stone to the fifth or the early sixth century AD.⁹³



Figure 11. The standing stones on the north side of the llan at St Winifred's Church Gwytherin showing their alignment

James Ryan Gregory points out that ‘the first accurate translation of the inscription on record’⁹⁴ was in Professor J.O. Westwood’s report on Gwytherin in 1858, and that the 1858 translation ‘signals the end of the tradition that identified the stone row as a marker of Gwenfrewy’s burial place’.⁹⁵ Prior to Professor Westwood’s

⁹² The Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust, *Historic Environment Record*, Early Ecclesiastical Settlement project [online]. Available: http://www.cofiadurcahcymru.org.uk/arch/cpat/english/cpat_interface.html <accessed 14 November 2014>

⁹³ V.E. Nash-Williams, *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales*, (Cardiff: 1950), p.121, in J. Wynn Evans, *The Early Church in Denbighshire*, p.67.

⁹⁴ J.R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 139.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

translation, there were several attempts to interpret the lettering, including one by Roger Gale, submitted to the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1724, and one by G.N. Wright in his 1833 *Scenes in North Wales*. Roger Gale drew the four stones and provided a textual reference for one that bore the inscription ‘VINNEAAGLI F SENFAAGL’,⁹⁶ whereas G.N. Wright commented that, on one of the four stones, ‘the name of Winifred is graven in ancient characters’.⁹⁷



Figure 12. Inscribed standing stone at St Winifred's Church Gwytherin

Nancy Edwards has dated early inscribed stones in Wales, ‘by their epigraphy and language’, to a period from the fifth to mid-seventh centuries.⁹⁸ She points to recent work on the possible function of inscribed standing stones by Mark Handley that

⁹⁶ *ibid*, p. 138.

⁹⁷ *ibid*.

⁹⁸ N. Edwards, *Early-Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales: Context and Function*, p. 17 [online]. Available: http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-769-1/dissemination/pdf/vol45/45_015_039.pdf <accessed 31 December 2014>

builds on Thomas Charles-Edwards' research on ogham⁹⁹ stones in the Irish legal texts.¹⁰⁰ Mark Handley suggests that inscribed names on standing stones¹⁰¹ in 'the religiously neutral *of X son of Y*',¹⁰² whilst appearing to be purely commemorative, may, in fact, have functioned as boundary markers and have been used as proof of land ownership. He sees that this function is probably an adopted Irish practice that is likely to have been brought to Pembrokeshire and South Wales by Irish settlers in the fifth century, spreading thereafter to the rest of Wales.¹⁰³

It may be that the standing stones are no longer where they were originally placed. In 1710, Thomas Williams, rural dean at that time, makes the first recorded mention of the stones, reporting that there were:

two rude and unpolish'd stones standing on end in the Ground with these words Cutt in them. Vinnemagle. Sennemagle.¹⁰⁴

He takes these names for those of two abbots who lived at Gwytherin, quoting oral tradition as his source for the connection with the abbots.¹⁰⁵ Intriguingly he refers to two inscribed stones, whereas only one with an inscription is apparent today. From his report, ambivalent at best, we cannot tell if there was a total of only two stones on the north boundary of the churchyard in 1710, or whether his observations are simply inaccurate. We do know that later eighteenth-century accounts, such as that of Roger Gale in 1724 and of Thomas Pennant in 1781, mention four stones aligned, and that this was reiterated in the nineteenth-century accounts of George Nicholson and G.N. Wright.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁹ Ogham script is an Early Medieval alphabet used primarily to write the early Irish language (in the so-called 'orthodox' inscriptions, 4th to 6th centuries). There are roughly 400 surviving orthodox inscriptions on stone monuments throughout Ireland and western Britain.

¹⁰⁰ N. Edwards, *Early-Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales: Context and Function*, pp.17-18.

¹⁰¹ such as the one on the 'Vinnemagli' stone.

¹⁰² N. Edwards, *Early-Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales: Context and Function*, p. 17.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁴ T. Gray Hulse, 'Gwytherin: A Welsh Cult Site in the Mid-Twelfth Century' (unpublished paper presented at the 29th International Congress of Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, 7 May 1994), p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 138.

Tristan Gray Hulse has suggested that the standing stones were perhaps originally gravestones from the southern part of the churchyard near the chapel of Gwenfrewy.¹⁰⁷ He has also suggested that, at some point between 1710 and 1784, the four stones were used as a form of fence for the church:

this stone (the 'Vinnemagli' stone) and its companion, now joined by two further stones of unknown provenance, were erected in a straight line on the north side of the church, perhaps as a barrier against the abrupt drop to the boundary stream immediately below them.¹⁰⁸

The stones may, as J. Wyn Evans postulates, be the gravestone markers of successive generations of a high ranking family of princes or chieftains.¹⁰⁹ This possibility would fit with Professor Charles Thomas' suggestion that smaller curvilinear churchyards began with an enclosure 'containing the grave of a founder, who might have been secular rather than saintly'.¹¹⁰ This enclosure, with one gravestone inscribed, could well have been the family home, the basis for a churchyard with a church in situ in later times. The early Welsh practice of adopting a pre-Christian burial ground as a churchyard is noted by David Stedman Davies:

The early Welsh Christianity adopted the circular form of the pagan burial place and many of the churchyards are the actual barrows of the familiar type. In these times a barrow was raised over an important grave, this grave was the 'mynwent', around which the lesser folk were buried, it was to them a sacred place and when a Christian church was built later on it became a Christian graveyard.¹¹¹

Nancy Edwards holds a similar view:

Where they [inscribed stones] have been found on church sites, they signal that these foundations almost certainly have their origins in the 5th to 7th centuries as places of burial which have subsequently developed into local churches.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ The Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust, *Historic Environment Record* [online]. Available: http://www.cofiadurcahcymru.org.uk/arch/cpat/english/cpat_interface.html <accessed 4 November 2014>

¹⁰⁸ T. Gray Hulse, 'Gwytherin: A Welsh Cult Site in the Mid-Twelfth Century', p. 3.

¹⁰⁹ J. Wyn Evans, 'The Early Church in Denbighshire', p. 67.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ D. S. Davies, 'How Old is this Church', p. 39.

¹¹² N. Edwards, *Early-Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales: Context and Function*, p. 29.

It is equally possible that the stones are a similar age to the Iron Age enclosure at Gwytherin, and that the inscription was carved onto the prehistoric stone during the early Christian period, the stones themselves being from pre-Christian times. Perhaps the Romano-British Latin inscription on the 'Vinnemagli' stone, functioning as proof of land ownership, covers an earlier inscription in oghams, similar to those in Pembrokeshire.¹¹³ Perhaps there were other stones here in pre-Christian times, forming a linear alignment that had significance for the pagan people who lived here.¹¹⁴

Whatever the explanation, there is a distinct body of archaeological evidence that the *llan* at Gwytherin was built on a former pre-Christian enclosure, imbuing the land with a long tradition of settlement, secular power, and spiritual importance.

Penbryn Capel

A number of references can be found to a low rounded hill in the meadow in the southern half of the *llan*,¹¹⁵ inventorised for *The Royal Commission on The Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions in Wales and Monmouthshire* in 1914 thus:

To the south of the churchyard and adjacent to it is a meadow called Cae Bryn Capel, on the south side of which is a low rounded elevation sloping gently to the eastward and northward.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ The largest number of ogham inscriptions on stone monuments outside of Ireland is in Pembrokeshire in Wales. Macalister/1945, 376, *Celtic Inscribed Stones* database suggests of the 'Vinnemagli' stone: 'The very irregular outline of the inscribed stone is adapted to the shape of the extant inscription in a way which suggests that the original angle has been trimmed down, destroying the objectionable Ogham but sparing the harmless Roman.' [online]. Available: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/cisp/database/> <accessed 29 November 2014> see also N. Edwards, *Early-Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales: Context and Function*, pp. 17-18.

¹¹⁴ 'The Northern Antiquarian' [online]. Available: <https://megalithix.wordpress.com/2011/07/26/gwytherin-churchyard> <accessed 24 November 2014>

¹¹⁵ See figures 10 and 13.

¹¹⁶ The Royal Commission on The Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions in Wales and Monmouthshire. *An Inventory of The Ancient Monuments in Wales and Monmouthshire. IV.-County of Denbigh* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1914), p. 65.

This elevation is known locally as *Penbryn Capel* (the hilltop chapel). Prior Robert, in his account of Gwenfrewy's burial, describes it as the place where she requested to be buried.¹¹⁷



Figure 13. *Penbryn Capel, Gwytherin*

Known also as *The Saints' Graveyard*, it is a burial ground that was already renowned before Gwenfrewy came to Gwytherin, that 'place filled with the relics of many saints' that St Saturnus refers to in Prior Roberts' *vita*.¹¹⁸ The number of saints who were reputed to be buried here was numinous, according to the local lore Prior Robert drew upon:

God alone knows the names and number of the other saints who repose there. Indeed, that place is held to be venerable due to so great a gathering of saints that no mortal could know their names or even comprehend the number of those gathered.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Robert, Prior of Shrewsbury, *The Life of Saint Winefride*, p. 67.

¹¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 55.

¹¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 67.

The importance of this site in the cult of Gwenfrewy at Gwytherin will be discussed fully in the next chapter in a consideration of Gwenfrewy's reputed place of burial, *Capel Gwenfrewy*. Suffice it to say in the discussion of 'Gwytherin before Gwenfrewy' that the saints' graveyard at *Penbryn Capel* adds to the body of evidence we have that Gwytherin was already a significant Christian site by the time of Gwenfrewy's arrival there, as recorded in the *Latin Lives*.

The yew trees and the church

Yet further evidence of the age of the *llan* at Gwytherin may be provided by the three, large female yew trees at the site.¹²⁰ These are possibly several thousand years old, although there are no known church records to confirm this. Andrew Morton comments that:

The positioning of the two biggest yews, 8 metres either side of the present church, gives the distinct impression that their planting, at whatever period, was related to the earliest structure built at the centre of that mound.¹²¹

Since the standing stones appear to be the earliest structure at the centre of the church mound,¹²² Andrew Morton sees that the yews can be dated, like them, to some time between the fifth and the seventh centuries. He adds the caveat that this date is indicated for the yew trees provided the standing stones were not moved to their present position on the church mound after the ninth century. He also makes mention that Prior Robert, in his twelfth century *vita*, does not refer to the yews, only to a sacred oak tree, adding that textual omission is not necessarily an indication that the yews were not growing at Gwytherin at the time of the *translatio*.¹²³

¹²⁰ There are also an undetermined fourth yew tree and a much younger yew in the churchyard: A. Morton, *Trees of the Celtic Saints: The Ancient Yews of Wales* (Llanrwst, Wales: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2009), p. 39.

¹²¹ A. Morton, *Trees of the Celtic Saints: The Ancient Yews of Wales*, p. 39.

¹²² As opposed to Penbryn Capel which Andrew Morton refers to as the 'chapel field'.

¹²³ A. Morton, *Trees of the Celtic Saints: The Ancient Yews of Wales*, p. 39.



Figure 14. One of the female yew trees in the churchyard at Gwytherin

Alison Goulbourne believes that the yew trees indicate that the site is a pre-Christian site which was then Christianised. She points out similarities with the churchyard at the nearby village of Llangernyw:

At Llangernyw there is an ancient yew that is one of the oldest yews in the country, in fact one of the oldest yews in the world,¹²⁴ and that's been dated at about 4,000 years old. Within that churchyard also are standing stones at the back of the church ...¹²⁵

Attached to the churchyard gate at Llangernyw is a certificate from the Yew Tree Campaign in 2002, signed by David Bellamy, which states that 'according to all the data we have to hand' the tree is dated to between 4,000 and 5,000 years old.

Ancient yew trees remind us, as David Stedman Davies states, of the pre-Christian custom of erecting a mound over a grave.¹²⁶ He goes on to say that when these yews are found in a circular churchyard:

we have a double reminder of a burial within a circular enclosure which was so sacred to the early Celts and a place of meeting for the community, who,

¹²⁴ R. Bevan-Jones, *The Ancient Yew: a History of Taxus baccata*, (Windgather Press, Bollington, 2004), p. 49.

¹²⁵ Alison Goulbourne, pers. comm.

¹²⁶ D. S. Davies, 'Yew trees in the churchyards', *The Radnorshire Society Transactions*, vol. 15: (1945), p. 38. In *Welsh Journals online* [online]. Available: <http://welshjournals.llgc.org.uk/browse/viewpage/llgc-id:1191402/llgc-id:1192569/llgc-id:1192609/get650> <accessed 20 November 2014>.

on becoming Christians, built a church of wattle and mortar within its confines, thus handing it down to us through the centuries.¹²⁷

Frequently an early Christian church built on such a pagan centre of worship is dedicated to that church's founder. Tradition indicates that the original church at Gwytherin was dedicated to St Eleri,¹²⁸ reputed to be the cousin of Gwenfrewy's mother.¹²⁹ Since then it has had a chequered history. It was later re-built and re-dedicated in the name of St James.¹³⁰

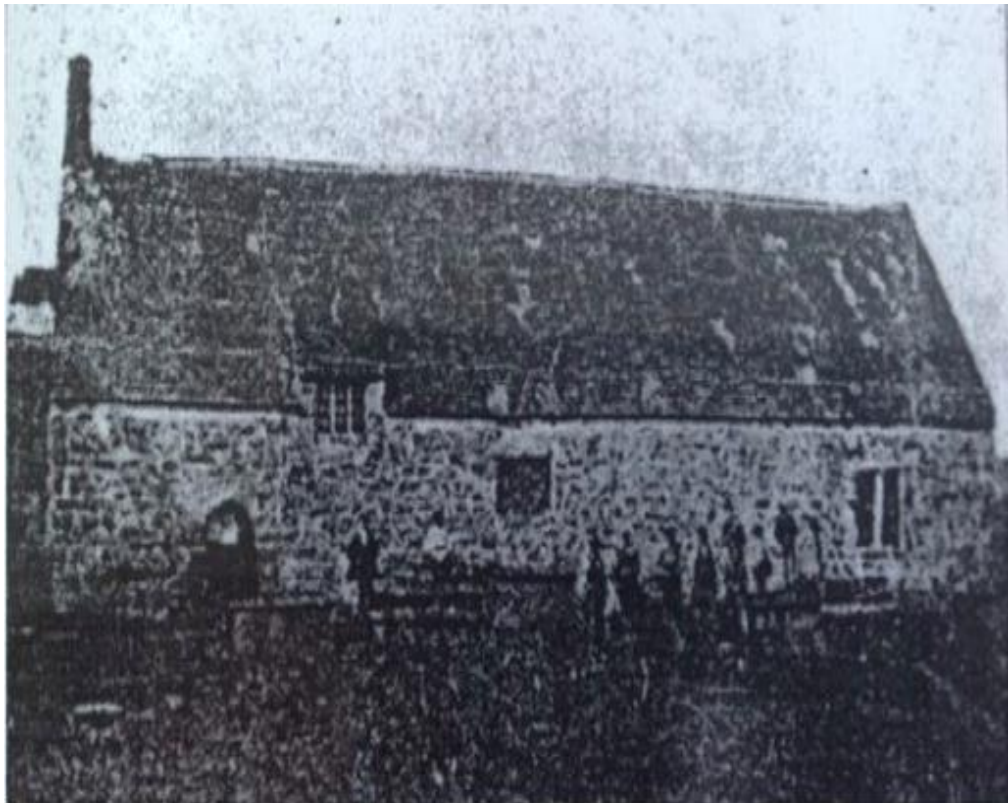


Figure 15. The old church of St James at Gwytherin¹³¹

The actual date of that rededication is unclear. William Cathrall, in his *History of North Wales* (1828),¹³² refers in a footnote to the fact that:

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

¹²⁸ Andrew Breeze argues a case for Eleri being an associate of St Kentigern, having evangelised the Clyde region in Scotland, and never having known Gwenfrewy: A.Breeze, 'St Eleri of Gwytherin', *Denbighshire Historical Society Transactions* 20, (2012), p. 18.

¹²⁹ D. R. Thomas, *The History of the Diocese of St Asaph*, p. 313.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*

¹³¹ D. R. Thomas, *The History of the Diocese of St Asaph*, p. 313: found in Gwytherin church history records.

¹³² W. Cathrall, *The History of North Wales, Comprising A Topographical Description of the Several Counties of Anglesey, Caernarvon, Denbigh, Flint, Merioneth and Montgomery*, vol II: (Manchester: J. Cleave and Sons, 1828) footnote to p. 165.

According to Ecton's *Thesaurus*,¹³³ Gwytherin is dedicated to St James. So here we have three saints for one church, viz, Gwytherin, St James, and St Elerius.¹³⁴

It may well be that the church was rededicated to St James not long after the Norman Conquest. Rice Rees claims that one consequence of Norman settlement was that a number of churches in Wales had their dedications to local saints changed to universal saints:

That the Roman Catholics, or, at least, the various conquerors of Wales, all of whom professed that religion, hardly considered the primitive founders in the light of Saints, will further appear from the circumstances that in many instances they gave their churches a new dedication.¹³⁵

He supports this 'hypothesis' by pointing out that Ecton assigns 'dedications which differ from the Welsh names of the churches, or from the known history of their founders'.¹³⁶ This argument seems feasible, even though it has its detractors.¹³⁷ Equally the rededication could have been much later, nearer to 1742, the publication date of *Ecton's Thesaurus*.

The re-dedication of the church to St James indicates a period of time when Gwytherin's link to the cult of Gwenfrewy was, if not forgotten, at least sufficiently weakened for the church to lose its dedication to St Eleri and the connection to Gwenfrewy's story. This would appear to be the result of a politically motivated post-Conquest strategy, a direct attempt to influence Welsh religious and ecclesiastical culture.

¹³³ Ecton's '*Thesaurus Rerum Ecclesiasticarum*,' London, 1742, was a compilation of Ecclesiastical Benefices in England and Wales.

¹³⁴ The Welsh for Elerius is Eleri.

¹³⁵ R. Rice, *An Essay on the Welsh Saints or the Primitive Christians* (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1836), pp. 69-71.

¹³⁶ *ibid*, p. 71.

¹³⁷ John Reuben Davies believes that Anglo-Norman imperialism in 'the spheres of religious and ecclesiastical culture' has been overestimated, and he calls into question the practice of rededicating Welsh churches from local saints to universal saints. He sees adherence to a belief in rededication as 'the invention of outmoded prejudices', J. R. Davies, *The cult of saints in the early Welsh March: aspects of cultural transmission in a time of political conflict*, p.22 [online]. Available: eprints.gla.ac.uk, 2011 <accessed 14 November 2014>

Wyn Evans notes that the church rededicated to St James in turn became very dilapidated, and was totally rebuilt in 1867.¹³⁸ The replacement Victorian church, which was consecrated on 3 June 1869, was dedicated to St Winifred. Alison Goulbourne points out that the church is built on the footprint of the earlier medieval church, and that you can still see an original door entrance to the north in the footings. Part of the older fabric has been used for the building of the Victorian church, for example medieval roof rafters have been used under the floor, and some of the older stones have been re-used in the east end above the window and in the walls.¹³⁹

The Victorian church was deconsecrated in 1982 after eight years of disuse, then rededicated in 1990.¹⁴⁰ However, in 2005 it was subsequently deconsecrated once more, and began to deteriorate until Alison Goulbourne purchased it and began to restore it.¹⁴¹

An early monastic site

Bob Silvester and Andrew Davidson (2000), in their report for Cadw¹⁴² on Welsh Historic Churches, state that the evidence for Gwytherin being an early monastic site, a *clas* (a community, usually ecclesiastical, common in medieval Wales) or *mam eglwys* (mother church) is ‘reasonably convincing’.¹⁴³ In coming to this conclusion, they use the following criteria:

the curvilinearity of churchyards, dedications to British (i.e. Celtic) saints, specific topographic locations, and more rarely direct historic references of variable integrity... Early medieval inscribed and incised stones also represent potential evidence.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁸J. Wyn Evans, *The Early Church in Denbighshire*, p. 66.

¹³⁹ Alison Goulbourne, pers. comm.

¹⁴⁰ Clwyd Powys Archaeological Trust, *Eastern Conwy Churches Survey: Church of St Winifred, Gwytherin* [online] Available: <http://www.cpat.demon.co.uk/projects/longer/churches/conwy/16790.htm> <accessed 27 November 2014>

¹⁴¹ Alison Goulbourne at Gwytherin, pers. comm.

¹⁴² Cadw is the Welsh Government's historic environment service working for an accessible and well-protected historic environment for Wales.

¹⁴³B. Silvester, A. Davidson, *The Historic Churches of the Conwy Valley, Church Survey*, (CPAT Report No 268, GAT Report No 381, Wales Historic Churches Project, 2000), p. 3.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid*, pp.3-4.

It is evident from the previous section that the *llan* at Gwytherin met many of these criteria, and had its basis in a very early settlement, which possibly began as an Iron Age enclosure and later became ecclesiastical. The *vita* implies that there was a double monastery at Gwytherin, with two communities, one for men, supervised by Abbot Eleri, and one for women, supervised by his mother, Abbess Theon:

On a certain day Blessed Elerius entered the nuns' cloisters to visit the holy maiden, Winefride, and to discuss with her the things of the Lord.¹⁴⁵

Although no other specific evidence of a double monastery at Gwytherin can be found, certainly there is evidence that Gwytherin was an important ecclesiastical site by the fourteenth century. J. Wyn Evans points to the 1334 *Survey of the Honour of Denbigh* which states 'a certain due called *abbadaeth* was paid to the *abbates* of Gwytherin, descendants of one Cynon ap Llywarch'.¹⁴⁶ *Abbates* were initially lords over tenants who were bondmen, but at Gwytherin they may have become 'hereditary successors of the leaders of an ecclesiastical community', making both them and the church at Gwytherin powerful.¹⁴⁷

James Ryan Gregory cites evidence from the Welsh laws, *Brut y Tywysogion* and Gerald's *Itinerarium Cambriae* that indicates that these hereditary successors:

would have been laymen who had come to control what previously had been a *clas* community ruled by an abbot.¹⁴⁸

A *clas* was a self-contained ecclesiastical community, consisting of an abbot and a group of canons, sharing a common income but living as secular clerks, often indeed as married clerks and even transmitting their property and ecclesiastical offices to their children.¹⁴⁹

Links between a *clas* and a mother church are explained by T.M. Charles-Edwards when he points out that the term *clas*, when used in a legal text outlining the

¹⁴⁵ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 61.

¹⁴⁶ J. Wyn Evans, 'The Early Church in Denbighshire', p. 68.

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 95.

¹⁴⁹ R. R. Davies, *Conquest, Coexistence, and Change: Wales, 1063-1415* (Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 174, in J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 95.

compensation to be paid for an offence committed within a church,¹⁵⁰ appears to refer to the community of a mother-church:

Whoever does wrong to a mother-church, let him pay fourteen pounds, one half to the abbot, if he be a devout and literate man, and the other half between the priest and the *clas*. If wrong be done in the cemetery, seven pounds in two halves, like the other [fine]. Whoever does wrong in another church, let him pay seven pounds, one half to the priest and the other to the parson.¹⁵¹

It would appear, then, that Gwytherin, originally governed by a *clas* community, may have been a mother church and of regional importance. The association of a *clas* with an early monastic site at Gwytherin is promulgated by J. Wyn Evans. He makes a link to J.E. Lloyd's *A History of Wales* (1912), where Lloyd suggests that 'churches with which the terms *abad* and *clas* were associated had once been monastic.'¹⁵² This signifies that Gwenfrewy's cult at Gwytherin is likely to have developed around an early monastic settlement and that it endured beyond the twelfth century, centred on a *clas*, or even a mother church, that was powerful regionally.

The cult of Gwenfrewy at Gwytherin

The transition from Holywell to Gwytherin

Therefore, to you she has come, to remain with you and to await the day of her death, she who has already claimed Heaven by her merits, and whose place of retribution among the blessed martyrs is secured.¹⁵³

With these words, so the *vita* tells us, Abbot Eleri both introduces and commends Gwenfrewy to the community of religious women at Gwytherin. St Saturnus, meeting with Gwenfrewy on her journey to Gwytherin, tells her that this community consists of:

¹⁵⁰ 'Llyfr Iorwerth': a critical text of the Venedotian code of medieval Welsh law: mainly from BM. Cotton ms. Titus Dii / Transcribed and edited with introd. and notes by Aled Rhys Wiliam.

¹⁵¹ 'Llyfr Iorwerth', ed. Wiliam, 43/10-12 (version in *MSS A and E* translated by T.M. Charles-Edwards) in T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, pp. 350-1064, (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 602-603.

¹⁵² J. Wyn Evans, 'The Early Church in Denbighshire', p. 72.

¹⁵³ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 57.

Virgins consecrated to God, from the very beginnings of their childhood observing celibacy in the profession of the religious life and exerting themselves in their purpose with diligent devotion.¹⁵⁴

There can be no doubt that Gwytherin has been singled out as a special place. Abbot Eleri explains that Gwenfrewy has been sent there by divine will ‘so that this place might be sprinkled with much fame on account of her while this world endures.’¹⁵⁵ In Prior Robert’s *vita*, Gwenfrewy has come to Gwytherin from Holywell through divine guidance. Her journey is prefigured by St Beuno, who indicates on his departure that, once seven years have elapsed, she should look for another place and live there. At the completion of her seventh year of presiding over a convent of virgins at Holywell, Gwenfrewy keeps vigil and prays for help and direction. A ‘divine utterance’ comes to her, instructing her as follows:

With only one maiden with you as your companion, go to Blessed Deifer, who dwells in the place called Botavarrus,¹⁵⁶ and when he has been consulted, you will know what then you are to do or where you are to go.¹⁵⁷

In this way, the *vita* places an emphasis on Gwenfrewy’s being destined to journey to Gwytherin to join a community of religious women. This focus serves to distinguish Gwenfrewy from other holy women, and is part of Prior Robert’s strategy to elevate her status to that of saint.

The *vita* goes on to tell us that, on her journey to Gwytherin, Gwenfrewy receives guidance from holy men who have received divine messages to guide her. Deifer welcomes Gwenfrewy ‘with great kindness’,¹⁵⁸ and he receives heavenly instruction through prayer that she should journey to the village of Henllan and seek further directions from St Saturnus. Gwenfrewy has an equally warm reception from St Saturnus, who has had foreknowledge of her arrival and her journey’s purpose. As

¹⁵⁴ *ibid*, p. 55.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid*, p. 58.

¹⁵⁶ Bodfari, eight or nine miles from Holywell.

¹⁵⁷ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 51.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid*, p.53.

we have seen, it is from St Saturnus that Gwenfrewy learns her final destination will be Gwytherin and that she will be received there by the 'Blessed Elerius'.¹⁵⁹

Much is made of the entire journey from Holywell to Gwytherin in Prior Robert's *vita*, with details of how Saint Saturnus provides Gwenfrewy with the companionship of his dean for the journey from Henllan, and of how he himself accompanies her for a portion of the way. Prior Robert no doubt drew on a local oral tradition, still strong today, as a source for this. He is reputed to have told his friend Guarin, Prior of Worcester, that his *vita* was based on documents 'preserved in the churches of the district where she lived' and the reports of worthy priests.¹⁶⁰

The probable reason for this lengthy description of Gwenfrewy's journey was Prior Robert's eagerness to advance her cult from local to national status by emphasising how she was chosen by God to travel to Gwytherin and become an abbess. The journey described in the *vita* creates a constructed transition between the two cultic centres, Holywell and Gwytherin, that is deemed to be divinely inspired. T. W. Pritchard sees that this transition marks the elevation of Gwenfrewy to a national saint:

At Holywell in the seventh century she was merely a local saint performing miracles there. At Gwytherin she became a saint of the Welsh church.¹⁶¹

The anonymous Life interpolates an episode into Gwenfrewy's transitional journey from Holywell to Gwytherin by reference to a pilgrimage she makes to Rome 'to offer herself devoutly and completely to God in the presence of the relics of the saints'.¹⁶² This echoes the account in Rhygyfarch's *Life of St David*¹⁶³ of how Dewi Sant travelled to Jerusalem with two companions and was anointed by the patriarch as an archbishop. This recounted story is seen by many historians as an attempt by Rhygyfarch to support the independence of the Welsh church from Canterbury, the

¹⁵⁹ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 55.

¹⁶⁰ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 37.

¹⁶¹ *ibid*, p.35.

¹⁶² *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 102.

¹⁶³ R. Sharpe, and J. R. Davies, 'Rhygyfarch's *Life of St David*' In *St. David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, eds. J. Wyn Evans and Jonathan M. Wooding (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), pp. 138-141.

centre of the Catholic English church, and to give it an equal status to that of Canterbury.¹⁶⁴ Similarly, the reference to Gwenfrewy's pilgrimage in the anonymous *Life* is likely to be parallel in intention, promoting the international ecclesiastical importance of a Welsh martyr and saint.

Gwenfrewy's pilgrimage is followed some unspecified time later by her attendance at the Synod of Whitby in England, where 'all things were arranged devoutly according to the synodal process'.¹⁶⁵ At this synod Gwenfrewy was chosen as an abbess, through a process that appointed 'prefects' or supervisors to preside over groups of holy men and women:

namely that the saints who had previously lived alone having no rule but their will, would henceforth come together in suitable places and amend their way of life under prefects appointed for them.¹⁶⁶

Gwenfrewy is chosen to preside over a group of eleven virgins 'so that they would receive from her a model of a holy way of life'.¹⁶⁷ The place where she was to live with them was Gwytherin.

Once again there are parallels with Rhygyfarch's *Life of St David*, where Dewi Sant, upon his return to Wales in AD 545, attends the Synod of Llandewi Brefi, convened to end the Pelagian¹⁶⁸ heresy in Britain, and to discuss a set of rules to create discipline within the church.¹⁶⁹ It seems feasible that the authors of the *Life of St David* and the anonymous *Life* include the attendance of Dewi Sant and Gwenfrewy respectively at important synods to invest them with sanctity and ecclesiastical authority.

According to both the *vita* and the anonymous *Life*, Gwenfrewy arrives in Gwytherin already the maiden made martyr. She comes with the stated intent of

¹⁶⁴ D.H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁶⁵ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p.102.

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ Pelagianism, named after Pelagius (354 - 420 or 440), is the belief that original sin did not taint human nature and that mortal will is still capable of choosing good or evil without special Divine aid. Pelagianism has come to be identified with the view that human beings can earn salvation by their own efforts.

¹⁶⁹ R. Sharpe, and J. R. Davies, 'Rhygyfarch's *Life of St David*', pp. 142-147.

living out her life in Gwytherin, exemplifying goodness, and exhorting others to follow her example. It is here in Gwytherin that we are told she becomes an abbess and a saint.

The development of Gwenfrewy's cult at Gwytherin

The importance of the cult of Gwenfrewy at Gwytherin is attested to by Prior Robert, who, in his *vita*, outlines the influence she had while she supposedly lived there. He speaks of how she was honoured and sought out by people of all ranks, from 'powerful men and nobles of the country' to 'robbers and usurpers of others' property'.¹⁷⁰

And (that I might include everything precisely), no age, no sex, likewise no man of any business within that country seemed left who did not have some benefit from the good deeds of this maiden.¹⁷¹

As well as being a role model for living an exemplary life and bringing enlightenment to many, Gwenfrewy was known in Gwytherin as having the power of divinity because of the 'countless miracles and cures of the sick granted through her'.¹⁷²

It is interesting to note that this ability to heal during her time at Gwytherin, as related in the *vita*, is comparable to the miracles and cures carried out by her at Holywell, and that she healed holistically - not only the body, but also the mind:

The one who came sad went away rejoicing; one who came oppressed at heart by any trouble or burdened by some outward cause befalling him returned to his own place cheerful, immediately freed from the cares weighing him down, and having gained his wish. ... Indeed, whoever dwelt in the area of that estate and was beset by misfortunes of body or soul quickly obtained his desired remedy through her¹⁷³.

Gwenfrewy tells Abbot Eleri that her time at Gwytherin is preordained by God and that he will bury both his mother, Abbess Theon, and her during his lifetime. Not

¹⁷⁰ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 62.

¹⁷¹ *ibid.*

¹⁷² *ibid.*

¹⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 63.

long after Gwenfrewy has made this prediction, Abbess Theon becomes mortally ill, and commends Gwenfrewy to the nuns who were under her discipline, urging them to:

Reverence her, imitate her, follow her as a guiding star, cast upon her all your cares, not doubting that she will be in all things your helper with God.¹⁷⁴

After Theon's death and burial, Eleri asks Gwenfrewy to succeed his mother as abbess at Gwytherin. She expresses reluctance, but eventually agrees, and she retains that position for the rest of her life, increasing her fame and leading 'a life acceptable to the King on high in its devoted service'.¹⁷⁵

It is interesting to note the differing accounts given in the *vita* and the anonymous Life of how Gwenfrewy became abbess at Gwytherin. The anonymous Life makes but a passing reference to her being 'chosen for eleven virgins',¹⁷⁶ placing more emphasis on Gwenfrewy's time in Holywell, and indeed has a whole section devoted to the miracles she performs there. Prior Robert's *vita*, on the other hand, is a piece of twelfth-century hagiographic writing designed to show that Gwenfrewy is chosen by God, that Gwytherin has an historical tradition going back at least five hundred years, and 'to give a credible provenance to her relics'.¹⁷⁷

Capel Gwenfrewy

When Gwenfrewy dies, the *vita* tells us that Eleri buries her in the place she had requested, in *Penbryn Capel*, the low rounded knoll in the southern half of the *llan* at Gwytherin that remains as part of the Gwytherin landscape today, and appears to have been kept aside for the burial of saints.

Furthermore, the place in which so great a treasure is kept is separate from another cemetery where the bodies of those who die now are buried, and it is filled with the bodies of many other saints.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ T. Swift, English translation of *The Life of St Winefride, Virgin and Martyr*, SJ. (Holywell, 1888), pp. 44-45, in T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p.36. Father Swift based his *Life* upon Carolus de Smedt, SJ, *Acta Sanctorum Novembris I*, (Parisiis), 1887.

¹⁷⁵ Robert, Prior of Shrewsbury, *The Life of Saint Winefride*, p. 63.

¹⁷⁶ *ibid*, p.102.

¹⁷⁷ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p.36.

¹⁷⁸ Robert, Prior of Shrewsbury, *The Life of Saint Winefride*, p. 86.

Prior Robert comments on the way in which *Penbryn Capel* is said to have drawn many saints:

Certainly they [the saints] are remembered among the native people there to have been men of great virtues, and to have come to the same place on account of the multitude of saints whom they heard had gathered there to complete the struggle of the present life.¹⁷⁹

The Welsh *buchedd* follows Prior Robert's *vita* in the emphasis it places on the power of the graveyard at Gwytherin. The *buchedd* also echoes the *vita* in its account of the burial of Eleri and the posthumous miracles he performs. When Eleri dies, he is buried at Gwytherin 'in his own church', and

y mae yn guneüthyr guyrthiaü er hynny hyd heddiu ac o'i uyrthiaü yn
goleühaü y lle hunnu yn faur gan anrhydedd a theilyngdaud

[and he still performs miracles today despite this and his miracles light up
that place greatly [because of his] honour and worthiness.]¹⁸⁰

James Ryan Gregory points out that the name *Penbryn Capel* probably commemorates a saint's *capel-y-bedd* (grave chapel) that once stood on the site. He sees 'a wide section of flat ground about half-way up the rise facing east'¹⁸¹ as the most likely site of this, since a geophysical survey of 1995 found this section of land:

to be the most disturbed of all the ground in the southern half of the *llan*, suggesting that this was the spot on which the *capel-y-bedd* stood and in which Gwenfrewy and the other saints were buried.¹⁸²

The *vita* gives us a description of where Gwenfrewy's body was placed in the burial ground: Cybi is reportedly buried at her head and Sannan in the same row as her, while Theon is to her left. Prior Robert appears to be relying heavily on oral tradition

¹⁷⁹ *ibid*, p. 67.

¹⁸⁰ 'Buchedd Gwenfrewy', ed. and trans. Jane Cartwright (forthcoming) *Seintiau, Saints in Wales*, AHRC-funded project [online]. Available: <http://www.welshsaints.ac.uk/> <accessed 12 January 2015>.

¹⁸¹ J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 107.

¹⁸² *ibid*, pp. 107-108.

for the details of saints buried in the churchyard, though he does have an awareness of local churches dedicated to these saints:

In the same district there still exist some churches in their memory, in which their great merit before God is shown clearly to men through numerous miracles.¹⁸³

In his description of Gwenfrewy's burial place, Prior Robert also makes mention that 'there stands a little wooden church which is frequented by great crowds of people' with 'an easy access open to it for all wishing to pray there'.¹⁸⁴ It is this church, and its later stone replacement, *Capel Gwenfrewy*,¹⁸⁵ that was the centre of Gwenfrewy's cult at Gwytherin until it fell into disrepair in the seventeenth century.

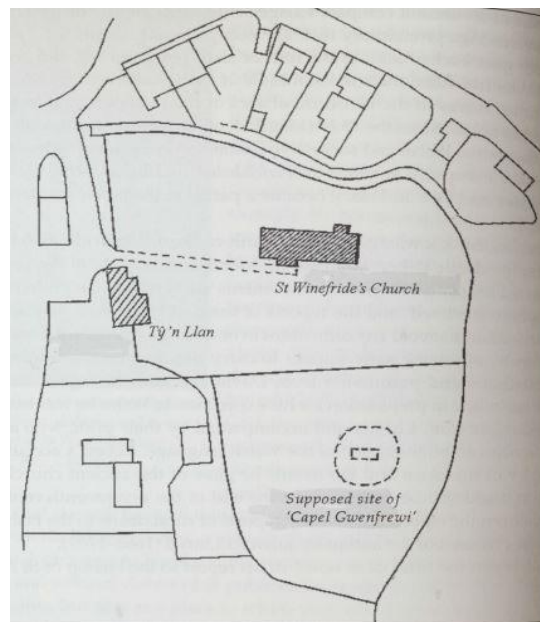


Figure 16. Supposed site of Capel Gwenfrewy, 'after Pritchard'¹⁸⁶

Prior Robert gives account of healing and miracles that occur at this place, praising the posthumous power of Gwenfrewy:

Many invalids, many troubled by the afflictions of various diseases enter it to ask for cures for themselves. They do not lament that the cures which they

¹⁸³ Robert, Prior of Shrewsbury, *The Life of Saint Winefride*, p. 67.

¹⁸⁴ *ibid*, pp. 86-87.

¹⁸⁵ The original wooden church was at some point replaced with a stone church known as *Capel Gwenfrewy*.

¹⁸⁶ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 38.

ask for are long delayed, for with health granted to them straightway through the merits of the saints, they return to their homes safe and sound.¹⁸⁷

He also comments on the sacred nature of the cemetery, reserved for prayer and healing, a place where no animals may graze and where punishment miracles occur. He recounts the story of a man who tries to make shoe laces from the bark of ‘an oak of wondrous height, untouched from ancient times’ growing among the saints’ tombs.¹⁸⁸ The man can neither pull his axe free from the tree nor himself free from his axe. His arm withers and becomes useless, and he remains in that parlous state until a crowd that had gathered called upon Gwenfrewy for mercy and forgiveness. The oak tree, so we are told, stands there ‘as if it were struck recently’,¹⁸⁹ bearing witness to the true nature of the miracle. The story serves to underline the ongoing veneration for Gwenfrewy, and that Gwytherin remained a place of pilgrimage after her death.

The oak is no longer at *Penbryn Capel*, nor are there any discernible traces of *Capel Gwenfrewy* to verify Prior Robert’s account, yet the positioning of the wooden church and the pattern of burial of saints at *Penbryn Capel*, as described in the *vita*, fit with the practice of *burial ad sanctos*:

wherein the inhumation of a particularly revered individual would attract the burials of those wishing to partake of that person’s holiness and protection; while Gwenfrewy asks to be buried beside Theonia, Chebius and Senanus appear to have been buried specifically in relation to Gwenfrewy.¹⁹⁰

There are a number of sources for documented references to the existence of *Capel Gwenfrewy*, some noting a gravestone. One of the earliest references is made by John Leland in the sixteenth century:

There is a hill with pasture in Guitheryn parochie in Denbigh lande caullid ‘Penbere’ i.e. Caput Sepulchri wher a ston like a flat stone of a grave lyith, and one, as it is sayde, lyith under it byried.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 87.

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*, p. 88.

¹⁹⁰ J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 103.

¹⁹¹ J. Leland, ‘Itinerary v, on or about the years 1535-1543’ (Ed. By Lucy Toulmin Smith, G. Bell and Sons Ltd, London, 1906, p.63, in D. R. Thomas, *The History of the Diocese of St Asaph: General*,

Two eighteenth-century documents also record the existence of *Capel Gwenfrewy* and a gravestone. In 1729, Thomas Wynn, the rural dean, notes in his report to the Bishop of St Asaph that:

There are within this Churchyard the Ruins of Winifred's Chapel. The supposed Gravestone of Winefride's lies flat upon the Ground within the Ruins of the Chapel which has been supported by decent Pillars in the memory of Man.¹⁹²

Twenty years later, *The Glebe Terrier* for 1749 records the following about a chapel site:

there was a piece of ground on the south side of the churchyard, about a quarter of an acre in extent, which was, according to tradition, the site of a chapel dedicated to Gwenfrewi.¹⁹³

The Glebe Terrier further notes the somewhat scandalous nature of the chapel's demise, that it:

was some years agoe demolish'd by one Edwards lately Rector of the Parish, who converted all the materials to build a house upon a tenement purchased by him in this neighbourhood.¹⁹⁴

This ignominious end for the chapel is echoed by T. W. Pritchard, who notes that *Kappel Gwenfrewi*¹⁹⁵ was 'scandalously used as a quarry by the rector Richard Evans to build a house for himself well after the Reformation'.¹⁹⁶ The story is the same as that recounted in *The Glebe Terrier*, but the name of the unscrupulous rector differs.

Cathedral, and Parochial, vol. 2, (Oswestry: Caxton Press, 1911), p. 313: found in Gwytherin church history records, copy kindly given by Alison Goulbourne, p.312.

¹⁹² 'NLW, St Asaph Rural Deans Reports 1729, NLW MS SA/RD/18', in T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p.37.

¹⁹³ J. Wyn Evans, 'The Early Church in Denbighshire', p. 66.

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Another spelling of *Capel Gwenfrewy*.

¹⁹⁶ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p .37.

Gwenfrewy's gravestone

In the nineteenth century, with *Capel Gwenfrewy* destroyed,¹⁹⁷ there was a brief period when the standing stones in the Gwytherin *llan* were considered to be gravestones marking Gwenfrewy's tomb. Both George Nicholson's 1813 edition of *The Cambrian Traveller's Guide*, and G.N. Wright's 1833 *Scenes in North Wales*,¹⁹⁸ promulgated this view. It was a view that did not hold for long, however, as Father Wynne, a Jesuit priest visiting Gwytherin in 1844, was unable to find the location of a tomb that could have been Gwenfrewy's, although he was able to acquire a fragment of a wooden reliquary attributed to her.¹⁹⁹

The earlier accounts by John Leland and Thomas Wynn (see pp. 58-59) make intriguing mention of what could have been Gwenfrewy's gravestone lying flat upon the ground within the confines of *Capel Gwenfrewy*. They echo a specific reference to Gwenfrewy's gravestone in Prior Robert's *vita*, in the *translatio* section, where he mentions a 'layer of marble which was placed over her holy body'. The context for the reference is the vision the Gwytherin priest has of 'the tomb of the blessed maiden, Winefride'.²⁰⁰

Inside St Winifred's church at Gwytherin are two sepulchral slabs that have attracted considerable interest in the debate about Gwenfrewy's gravestone. They were first illustrated by Edward Lhuyd, or his assistant, in three annotated drawings in the seventeenth century, but were not published until 1909 in his *Parochialia*.²⁰¹ The worn gravestones were also illustrated more recently in *Gresham's Medieval Stonecarving in North Wales*.²⁰² The Lhuyd drawing of one of the sepulchral slabs is labelled 'A tombstone at Kappel Gwenfrewi in ye South part of the Gwetherin

¹⁹⁷ The chapel is mentioned on three occasions during the 18th century as ruinous (1710 and 1729), and in 1749 as destroyed. Archwilio, 'The Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust Historic Environment Record' [online]. Available: http://cofiadurcahycymru.org.uk/arch/cpat/english/cpat_interface.html <accessed 29 November 2014>

¹⁹⁸ See section on 'The four standing stones', p. 37.

¹⁹⁹ J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, pp. 138 -139, and T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 39. There is a discrepancy in the date of Father Wynne's visit to Gwytherin with T. W. Pritchard claiming it was in 1844, and James Ryan Gregory claiming it took place in 1849. T. W. Pritchard's date of 1844 is accepted here.

²⁰⁰ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 85.

²⁰¹ J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, pp. 108-109.

²⁰² C.A. Gresham, *Medieval Stone Carvings in North Wales: Sepulchral Slabs and Effigies of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1968), p. 102.

Church yard’,²⁰³ and J. Wyn Evans states that this tombstone dates from the early fourteenth century.²⁰⁴

These sepulchral slabs have been incorporated into the building fabric – one set vertically into the north wall of the nave, at the end nearest the sanctuary, and one set horizontally against the step up to the sanctuary. Nancy Edwards notes that the mid-nineteenth century saw the demolition of many medieval churches in Wales, and their replacement with Victorian buildings, as in the case of the church at Gwytherin, ‘sometimes constructed on the old foundations’.²⁰⁵ During the deconstruction and rebuilding of these medieval Welsh churches, discoveries were made:

of large numbers of early-medieval monuments, often fragmentary, which had until then been built into earlier masonry, or were sometimes found beneath the church, or dug up within the graveyard, or discovered incorporated into the enclosure wall.²⁰⁶

The two slabs, possibly both dated to the fourteenth century, abut at the bottom of the vertical sepulchral stone. The following description of them tallies with the drawings in Lhuyd’s *Parochialia*:

A sepulchral slab built into the north wall bears a wheel cross, and an adze or claw-hammer; and another slab, now forming part of the altar pace, has a chalice and a missal below a wheel cross: this slab has an inscription of which only HIC. IACET. LLEW[ELY]N can now be deciphered.²⁰⁷

The late seventeenth-century Lhuyd drawing²⁰⁸ of the vertical sepulchral stone is simple and readily discernible in its depiction of a wheel cross and double-headed hammer or adze, with the wheel cross attached to a stepped base by a long shaft, surmounted by a round protuberance at its top. The representation of a double-

²⁰³ The area known as *Penbryn Capel*.

²⁰⁴ J. Wyn Evans, ‘The Early Church in Denbighshire’, p. 66.

²⁰⁵ N. Edwards, *Early-Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales: Context and Function*, p. 16.

²⁰⁶ *ibid.*

²⁰⁷ The Royal Commission on The Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions in Wales and Monmouthshire. *An Inventory of The Ancient Monuments in Wales and Monmouthshire*. IV, p. 65.

²⁰⁸ As a supplement to *Archaeologia Cambrensis* edited by Rupert H. Morris: Edward Lhuyd, ‘Parochialia: Being a Summary of Answers to Parochial Queries in Order to a Geographical Dictionary, etc., of Wales; Part 1-North Wales’ (London: Charles J. Clark, April 1909), p. 27.

headed hammer, widely accepted as being an accurate interpretation, was described by Thomas Pennant, writing in the late eighteenth century, as ‘an antient battle-axe’, which he surmised was ‘the usual weapon of the deceased’.²⁰⁹ D. R. Thomas, writing in the early twentieth century, describes the Lhuyd drawing as follows:

This sketch represents at the head of the stone a Greek cross, from the angle of which radiate floriations saltire wise, within a circle; at the foot Calvary steps, and on the right side a curious implement like a mutilated hammer or axe.²¹⁰

However, Lhuyd’s interpretation of the carving has been challenged by Tristan Gray Hulse and by James Ryan Gregory, both of whom believe the representation of a double-headed hammer is actually a badly worn representation of a sword. James Ryan Gregory suggests that the sepulchral slab was, in all likelihood, a grave marker for ‘an armiger or knight’.²¹¹ He postulates that the carvings represent an expanded-arm cross, with a small equal-arm cross centred and a sword rather than a hammer or axe ‘to the dexter side of the cross’.²¹²

The argument he provides for the carving representing a sword is not entirely convincing. He states that the supposed hilt was eroded and that the tip of the sword was lost when the slab was trimmed to fit into its present position in the Victorian church wall. He cites his own observations together with Gresham’s²¹³ drawings and opinions, and sees parallels with cross slabs in northern England, dated from as early as the twelfth century through to the fourteenth century.²¹⁴

From my own observations, the carving appears to be a wheel cross with a double-headed axe or adze that fits with the interpretations of Lhuyd, Pennant and D. R. Thomas. While the Lhuyd drawing of the axe or sword appears to have a sharp tip (see Figure 17), there does not appear to be sufficient room for a full sword hilt with a pommel under the short horizontal shaft above it. Additionally, if the carving were

²⁰⁹ T. Pennant, *A Tour in Wales*, vol.2, 18=783; repr. (Wrexham: Bridge Books, 1991), p. 55.

²¹⁰ D. R. Thomas, *The History of the Diocese of St Asaph*, p. 312.

²¹¹ J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 108.

²¹² *ibid*, p. 109.

²¹³ C.A. Gresham, *Medieval Stone Carvings in North Wales*, pp.101-102 and 107-109.

²¹⁴ J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, pp. 108 – 109.

a representation of a sword, then the guard would have been even on both sides of the blade, and this is not the case (see Figures 17 and 19).

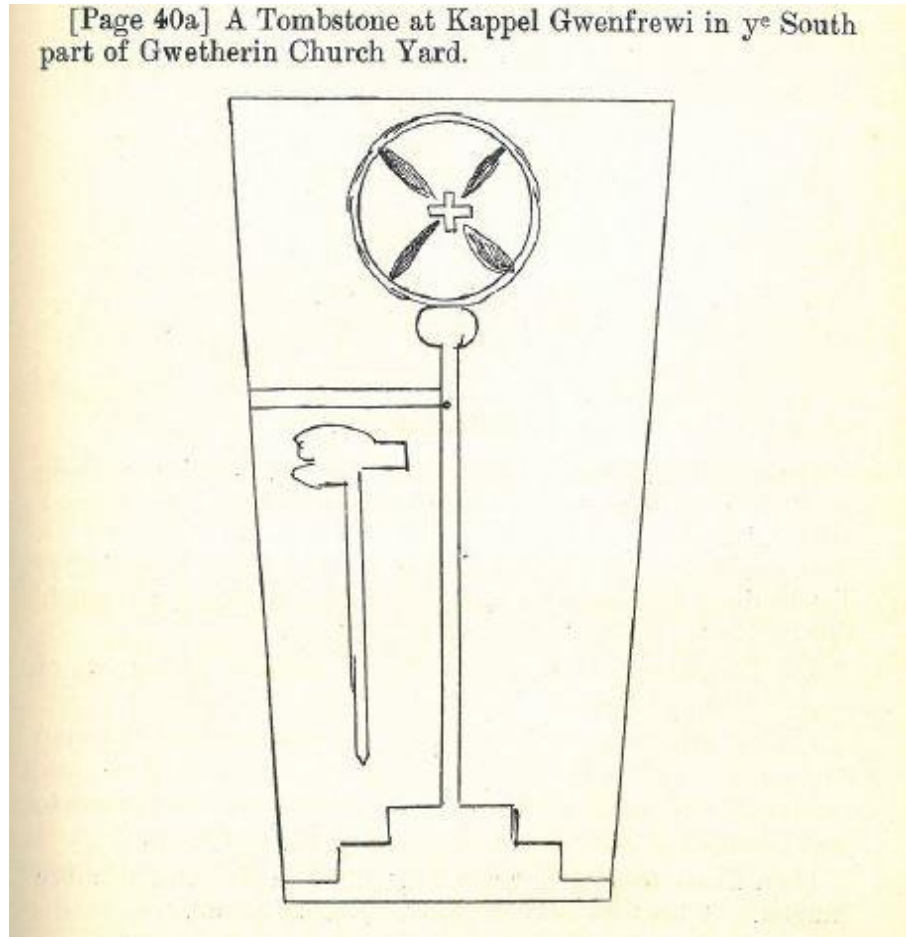


Figure 17. A Tombstone at Kappel Gwenfrewi in ye South part of Gwetherin Church Yard²¹⁵

²¹⁵ E. Lhuyd, 'Parochialia', p.27.



Figure 18. The vertical slab at St Winifred's Church, Gwytherin, showing the wheel cross

The wheel cross carving fits with a representation of a pre-Christian form of worship, dating back to the Iron or Bronze Age origins of the llan. The wheel cross, a cross inside a circle, is frequently found in the symbolism of early cultures and is a design used by the Celts in the Bronze Age to represent the sun, with the four quadrants being the four seasonal cycles of the year.²¹⁶ Subsequently the wheel cross was incorporated into early Christian symbolism.

²¹⁶ John Denham Parsons states that 'the Solar Wheel became a recognized symbol of the Sun-God, and that additional veneration was paid to it because the figure of the symbol of Life was more or less discoverable in the spokes allotted to the Solar Wheel' J. D. Parsons, *The Non-Christian Cross: An Enquiry Into The Origin And History Of The Symbol Eventually Adopted As That OF Our Religion*, (Project Gutenberg [EBook #9071], 2005), available at www.gutenberg.org, <Accessed:12 December 2014>



Figure 19. The vertical slab at St Winifred's Church, Gwytherin, showing the adze or double-headed hammer

Peter Berresford Ellis offers an interesting interpretation of the wheel-headed Celtic high cross from pagan to Christian times:

In its fully developed form, the wheel-headed Celtic high cross is a version of the world's axis. It stands on a foursquare pyramidal base representing the world-mountain whose roots are buried in the earth. From the center of this arises the shaft, the axis proper. Close to the top is the Celtic cross itself. It is a sunwheel, reproducing a natural phenomenon observed occasionally in the skies when the sun's light, shining through ice crystals, is diffracted into a cross-and circle pattern. At the center of the wheel is Christ, the cosmic man. The cross is topped by a house-like form, the hall of heaven, the abode of God, resembling a Celtic reliquary.²¹⁷

²¹⁷ Ellis, P. B., *Celtic Inheritance*, (New York: Dorset Press, 1985), p. 49.

Nancy Edwards observes that the majority of Nash-Williams' Group III sculptured crosses and cross-slabs in Wales are to be found on important monastic sites or the sites of major churches.²¹⁸ This would correlate with the argument that Gwytherin was the site of a *clas*, and possibly even a mother church. She notes that Nash-Williams dated cross-decorated stones typically to the seventh to ninth centuries, but does add that:

their continuation beyond the 9th century, and probably up until the advent of the Romanesque, is, however, more extensive than Nash-Williams realised.²¹⁹

The function of the vertical sepulchral slab as a grave marker is borne out by Nancy Edwards' view that:

in Wales the contexts and forms of the majority of cross-decorated stones strongly suggest that they functioned as upright grave-markers.²²⁰

As for the adze or double-headed axe carved into the vertical sepulchral slab, it could indeed be a weapon, as in Thomas Pennant's interpretation of 'an antient battle-axe'. Bronze Age archaeological discoveries in the UK show that axes and palstaves²²¹ are to be found all over Wales and England, including a number discovered in Powys, Ceredigion, and Wrexham, Wales.²²² If the adze or double-headed axe carving represents a Bronze Age axe or palstave, perhaps the Gwytherin vertical sepulchral slab is older than has hitherto been thought, and is of a similar age to the standing stones in the churchyard. Axes were commonly used in medieval times for ritualistic beheading, as in the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (see Figure 20). The similarities between the poem and the legend of Gwenfrewy have been explored in

²¹⁸ N. Edwards, *Early-Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales: Context and Function*, p. 33.

²¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 30.

²²⁰ *ibid*.

²²¹ A palstave is a type of early bronze axe. It was common in the mid-Bronze Age in northern, western and south-western Europe. In the technical sense, although precise definitions differ, an axe is generally deemed to be a palstave if it is hafted by means of a forked wooden handle kept in place with high, cast flanges and stop bar. The axe should be much thicker on the blade side of the stop bar than the hafting side (Schmidt and Burgess 1981, p.115). In these respects, it is very close, but distinct from, earlier 'flanged axes'.

²²² See Appendix A.

Chapter 2, and the fact that the axe is listed as one of Gwenfrewy's icons has been noted there.²²³



Figure 20. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: from Late 14th century original manuscript, artist unknown²²⁴

By dint of contrast, there are only slight variations in the interpretation of the carvings and inscription on the horizontal sepulchral slab that Lhuyd, or his assistant, captured in the drawing in the *Parochialia*.

D. R. Thomas describes the carving as ‘A foliated cross within a circle at the head, a chalice at the side, and an inscription on the stem of the cross: HIC IACET:

LLEWARCH: CAPELL’,²²⁵ whereas James Ryan Gregory describes the same slab

²²³ D. H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 4th edition (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), p. 530.

²²⁴ British Library, ‘Learning English Timeline’ [online]. Available: <http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/large126560.html> <accessed 30 December 2014>

²²⁵ D. R. Thomas, *The History of the Diocese of St Asaph*, p.314.

as having ‘an encircled, floriated cross atop a long shaft that ends in a two-stepped base’, adding further detail which is very similar to that provided by D. R. Thomas:

To the dexter side of the shaft, near its top, is clearly incised a simple chalice, below which might be a depiction of a small altar or paten. The shaft bears a one-line inscription in false-relief Lombardic Capitals once reading †H(I)C IACET LLEWARCH CAPELL.²²⁶

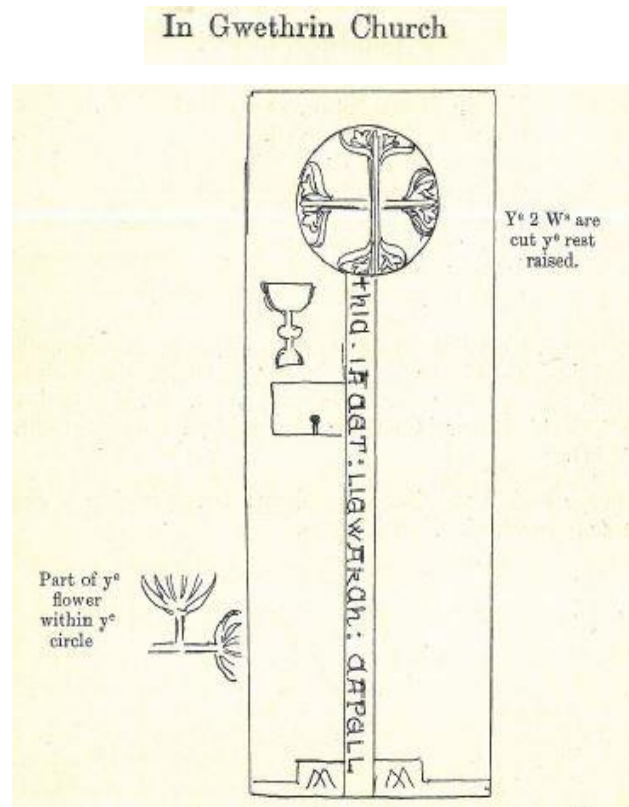


Figure 21. A sepulchral slab now forming part of the altar pace²²⁷

This horizontal slab appears to be in commemoration of Llewarch (Welsh Llywarch), a chaplain. It has been shortened to fit into the step up to the sanctuary, thereby obliterating the bottom part of the shaft and its stepped base.

²²⁶ J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, pp. 109-110.

²²⁷ E. Lhuyd, 'Parochialia', p. 28.



Figure 22. The horizontal sepulchral slab at St Winifred's Church, Gwytherin, from above

The significance of the sepulchral slabs is that we know where they were positioned when they were drawn by Lhuyd or his assistant in 1698. The horizontal sepulchral slab was found 'In Gwethrin Church' (see Figure 21). The vertical stone, however, was found in 'Kappel Gwenfrewi in ye South part of Gwetherin Church Yard' and is described as a tombstone. This provides evidence that, in the seventeenth century, Capel Gwenfrewy still existed, was in the southern part of the *llan*, and contained a tombstone with a wheel cross, and a double-headed hammer. While this is unlikely to have been the tombstone of Gwenfrewy herself,²²⁸ if the dating of the tombstone is fourteenth century, it could have been a tombstone that was used over her empty grave after her *translatio*.²²⁹ We know from Thomas Wynn's report to the Bishop of St Asaph in 1729 that:

There are within this Churchyard the Ruins of Winifred's Chapel. The supposed Gravestone of Winefride's lies flat upon the Ground within the Ruins of the Chapel which has been supported by decent Pillars in the Memory of Man: At which time, as an unwarrantable tradition relates,

²²⁸ Thomas Wynn's report states, 'the supposed Gravestone of Winefride's has upon it 'the Figures of a Hand, a Sword and a Head. There are no letters upon it'. T. Wynn, NLW, *St Asaph Rural Deans Reports 1729*, NLKW MS SA/RD/18.

²²⁹ J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 113.

several sick persons were cured of their maladies by being put to lie under this stone.²³⁰

The description of this practice, known as sacred incubation, highlights an important feature of Gwenfrewy's cult at Gwytherin, 'through which, by lying on the tomb of the saint, the sick hoped to facilitate a cure'.²³¹ The practice indicates the ongoing power of Gwenfrewy's cult at Gwytherin after her death, and also strongly suggests that Gwytherin remained a focus of healing and miracles until the sixteenth century.

The Arch Gwenfrewy

There appears to have been a similar tradition of healing and pilgrimage centred around what was reputedly Gwenfrewy's original coffin. A Welsh carol on the Life of Gwenfrewy, *Carol Buchedd Gwenfrewi*, written by Gwilym Pugh in the seventeenth century, refers to Gwenfrewy's coffin having been left at the church in Gwytherin, after her *translatio*, for pilgrims to visit:

Gadawan' yr hen ysgrin yn eglwys Gwytherin
Fal y gallo'r pererin ei pharchu. (Lines 91-92)
[They leave the old coffin in the church of Gwytherin
So that the pilgrim may respect it.]²³²

T. W. Pritchard notes that Gwilym Pugh came from a strong Catholic family at Penrhyn Creuddyn,²³³ and knew Gwytherin well. His 'Carol Buchedd Gwenfrewy' recounts Gwenfrewy's burial and *translatio*, with details that reflect those in Prior Robert's *vita*:

Mewn ysgrin hi a roddwyd, mewn gweryd gosodwyd
Yn barchus llei claddwyd Gwenfrewi;
Yn y ddaearen bu yn gorfedd y seren

²³⁰ NLW, St Asaph Rural Deans Reports 1729, NLKW MS SA/RD/18 in T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 37.

²³¹ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 37.

²³² T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 40.

²³³ Plas Penrhyn, now known as Penrhyn Old Hall, is today included in the suburbs of Llandudno but in Elizabethan times it stood in a lonely rural district and housed a powerful Roman Catholic family named Pugh (their coat of arms appears over the front doorway) and Robert Pugh of Penrhyn was High Sheriff of Caernarvonshire in 1561. They kept a priest who officiated in the domestic chapel in the grounds of the house, which is now derelict. [online]. Available: http://www.penrhynoldhall.wales4you.co.uk/item/the_history_of_penrhyn_old_hall.html <accessed 14 December 2014>

Wrth feddau Saint Sennen a Chybi.

Pedwarcant blwyddyn y cadwodd Gwytherin
Esgyrn ac ysgrin Gwenfrewi,
Nes i Rupert yn unig, oedd brior Beneddig,
Gan ei symud i'r 'Mwythig ei chyrchu.

Mewn ysgrin o arian rhoed creiriau y lleian
I'r 'Mwythig pan symudan' Gwenfrewi;
Gadawan' yr hen ysgrin yn eglwys Gwytherin
Fal y gallo'r pererin ei pharchu. (Lines 181-92)

[She was placed in a coffin, she was placed/ respectfully in the earth where Gwenfrewi was buried/ in the soil lay the star/ by the graves of saints Sennen and Cybi./ For four hundred years did Gwytherin keep/ the bones and coffin of Gwenfrewi/ and Rupert (i.e. Robert) on his own/ who was a Benedictine prior/ fetched it, moving it to Shrewsbury./ In a coffin of silver were the relics of the nun placed when they move Gwenfrewi to Shrewsbury/ they leave the old coffin in the church of Gwytherin/ so that the pilgrim may respect it.]²³⁴

The reinforcement of Prior Robert's account of Gwenfrewy's burial and *translatio* in the *Carol* could either signify the accuracy of this section of the *vita* or could merely be an indication of the devout Gwilym Pugh's desire to uphold Catholic belief.

As Jane Cartwright points out, Gwytherin appears to have attracted pilgrims even after the removal of Gwenfrewy's relics.²³⁵ There is evidence that these pilgrims visited *Capel Gwenfrewy*, and her supposed gravestone and coffin. However, an additional important focus for Gwenfrewy's cult at Gwytherin was undoubtedly the *Arch Gwenfrewi yn eglwys Gwytheryn yn swydh Ddimbech* (Shrine of Gwenfrewy in Gwytherin Church in Denbighshire). The shrine was a box-like container designed to be portable and to house and preserve relics associated with Gwenfrewy, possibly corporeal such as hair, teeth and nails, or other non-corporeal objects 'that remained after her burial and were treasured and venerated as relics'.²³⁶

²³⁴ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 40.

²³⁵ J. Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 73.

²³⁶ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 38.

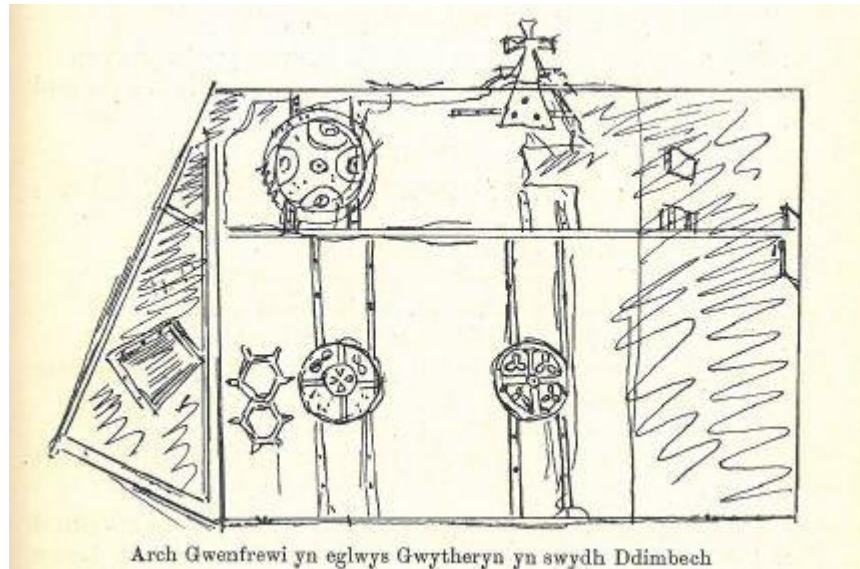


Figure 23. Arch Gwenfrewi yn eglwys Gwytheryn yn swydh Ddimbech²³⁷

The Arch was sketched by or for Edward Lhuyd²³⁸ c. 1696, showing the shrine:

to have been coped in form with bands of metal, probably of silver, ornamented with crosses of various designs, and also surmounted by one. The material of the shrine itself was probably of wood.²³⁹

The sketch, and its later copy, both show that the shrine was triangular in shape, and stood on short legs. It has been described severally as being ‘like a tent’,²⁴⁰ or ‘like a house or temple’.²⁴¹ In addition to the crosses, the ornamentation design incorporates three roundels and two linked hexagons. Nancy Edwards and Tristan Gray Hulse speculate that ‘a lozenge-shaped frame’, on the gable end that can be seen, is perhaps the remnant of a strap attachment for carrying the Arch:

the original frame could have contained a mount with a hinge for the attachment of a carrying hinge and chain in the manner of Insular house-shrines.²⁴²

²³⁷ E. Lhuyd, ‘Parochialia’, p. 29.

²³⁸ James Ryan Gregory points out that there were two versions of the sketch – the original, bound into one of Lhuyd’s notebooks now kept at the Bodleian Library, Oxford (Rawlinson B464, fol.29^r) and a simplified copy included in his ‘Parochialia’. J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 107.

²³⁹ D. R. Thomas, *The History of the Diocese of St Asaph*, p. 314.

²⁴⁰ J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 107.

²⁴¹ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 39.

²⁴² N. Edwards and T. Gray Hulse, ‘A Fragment of a Reliquary Casket from Gwytherin, North Wales’, *The Antiquaries Journal*, vol. LXXII: (1992), p. 97.

The existence of the *Arch* is verifiable through a number of recorded sightings of it through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. J. Wyn Evans points out that the Lhuyd sketch does not give any dimensions, but that the *Arch* appeared to have survived ‘until Pennant’s day’.²⁴³ While visiting Gwytherin in 1776, Thomas Pennant commented that:

In the church is shewn the box in which her reliques were kept, before their removal to Shrewsbury.²⁴⁴

By 1844, it would appear that little was left of the shrine when a Jesuit priest, Father Wynne, visited Gwytherin. The parish clerk at Gwytherin told Wynne that:

the greater part had been carried off by people who occasionally came there and often gave him a shilling to let them cut off a piece of the chest by way of remembrance of their visit.²⁴⁵

During his visit, Father Wynne acquired a fragment of the *Arch* which he later presented to St Winefrde’s Church, Holywell.²⁴⁶

From the fourth edition of Lewis’s *Topographical Dictionary* we know that the *Arch* was still in Gwytherin church in 1850,²⁴⁷ and, in 1858, J.O. Westwood made the last definite reference to the shrine when he wrote:

Within the church are preserved two old rude, wooden chests, in one of which a piece of wood is shown as being a portion of the coffin²⁴⁸ of St Winefride.²⁴⁹

J. Wyn Evans points out that by 1874:

²⁴³ J. Wyn Evans, ‘The Early Church in Denbighshire’, p. 66.

²⁴⁴ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 38.

²⁴⁵ *ibid*, p. 39.

²⁴⁶ Nancy Edwards and Tristan Gray Hulse speculate that Father Wynne may have presented the fragment between 1858 and 1866 when he studied and worked at St Beuno’s College, Tremeirchion, six and a half miles from Holywell. N. Edwards and T. Gray Hulse, ‘A Fragment of a Reliquary Casket from Gwytherin, North Wales’, p. 92.

²⁴⁷ S. Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Wales* (London, 1850), p. 395.

²⁴⁸ Notes on the history of Gwytherin Church, found by Alison Goulbourne when she bought the church, indicate that J. O. Westwood may have been shown a portion of Gwenfrewy’s shrine, mistakenly referred to as a portion of her coffin.

²⁴⁹ J. O. Westwood, ‘Further notices of the early inscribed stones of Wales’, *Archaeol. Cambrensis*, 3 ser., 4: (1858). p. 313.

the first edition of Thomas's *History of the Diocese of St. Asaph* (1874) makes no mention of it. Presumably it had by then disappeared.²⁵⁰

Although the *Arch* has been broken up, the other wooden chest has survived. It was removed from Gwytherin church around the time the church was deconsecrated in 2005, and was placed in the Well Museum, Holywell.²⁵¹



Figure 24. Gwytherin Chest 12th century²⁵²

In 1991, Tristan Gray Hulse discovered a piece of wood, wrapped in brown paper, in the presbytery attached to St Winefride's Catholic Church at Holywell. Faded black ink labelling proclaimed that the wood fragment was 'From the wooden chest at Gwytherin supposed to have contained body of St Winifrede'. Nancy Edwards and Tristan Gray Hulse state that:

²⁵⁰ J. Wyn Evans, 'The Early Church in Denbighshire', p.67.

²⁵¹ Alison Goulbourne pers. comm. I am grateful to Alison for her observations on the church at Gwytherin. Also T. Gray Hulse, 'Gwytherin: A Welsh Cult Site in the Mid-Twelfth Century', p. 1, note 1.

²⁵² Photograph from postcard from St Winefride's Well Library and Museum, 2010. Photography was not permitted at the time of my visit in 2014.

Enough survives for the piece to be identified securely as a fragment of one of the gable ends from the shrine of Gwenfrewi as illustrated in the Bodleian manuscript.²⁵³

They also state that:

There are records of the fragment being preserved in the sacristy of St Winefride's Catholic Church up until 1887 but afterwards it disappeared from view. This seems to have been because there was some doubt as to whether it was a genuine relic of Gwenfrewi and therefore it was not exhibited for devotion.²⁵⁴

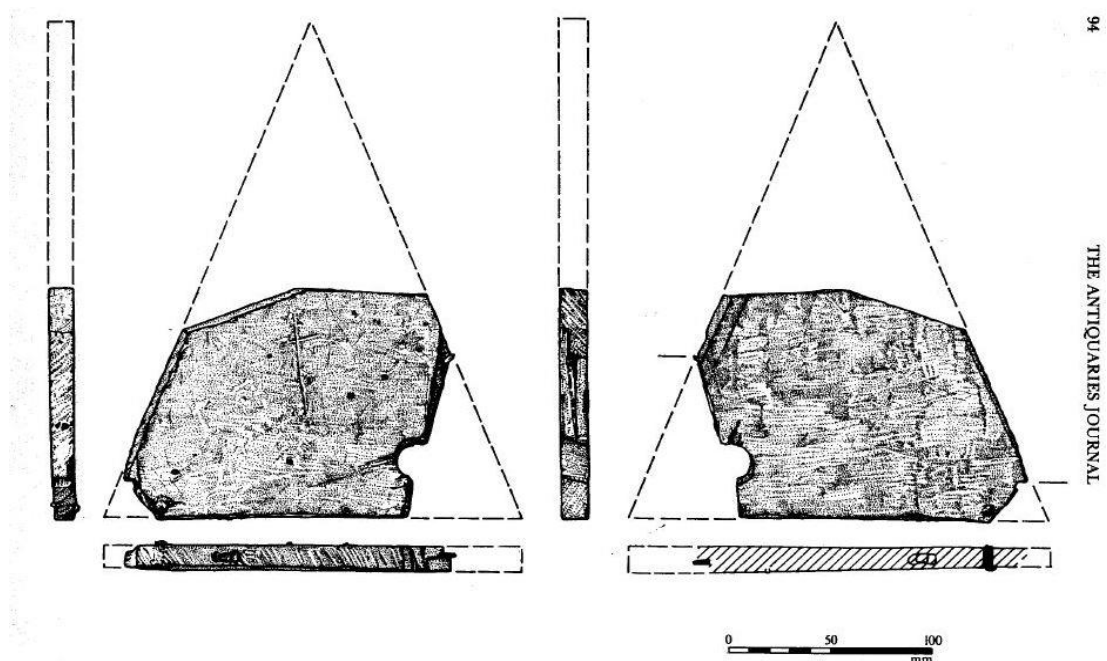


Figure 25. Fragment of the shrine of Gwenfrewy showing reconstructed section²⁵⁵

The evidential base for establishing that the fragment was able 'to be identified securely as a fragment of one of the gable ends from the shrine of Gwenfrewi' on its re-emergence in 1991 is not made clear.²⁵⁶

²⁵³ N. Edwards and T. Gray Hulse, 'A Fragment of a Reliquary Casket from Gwytherin, North Wales', pp. 91-92.

²⁵⁴ *ibid*, p. 93.

²⁵⁵ *ibid*, p. 94.

²⁵⁶ Nancy Edwards and Tristan Gray Hulse note that a second fragment was obtained by Thomas Meyrick on a visit to Gwytherin c. 1851 while he was a student at St Beuno's. They further note that the fragment 'cannot be traced and is almost certainly lost since Meyrick died in Brescia in 1903'. N.

Using this fragment, which they believe is the part of the *Arch* Father Wynne acquired in 1844, Nancy Edwards and Tristan Gray Hulse identify its original position on the *Arch* as having been ‘the greater part of the lower half of one of the gable ends of the triangular-section shrine’.²⁵⁷

They note that the fragment indicates that the shrine was made from oak wood, overlaid with copper-alloy sheeting. A reconstruction of the dimensions of the shrine leads them to consider it to have been larger than the known seventh to ninth centuries Insular house-shaped shrines, but:

considerably smaller than the only other wooden reliquary of triangular shape, St Mancan’s²⁵⁸ shrine from Lemanaghan, County Offaly, which is datable to the early twelfth century.²⁵⁹

They also note another difference between the St. Manchán shrine and that of Gwenfrewy: while the *Arch* was made of oak, the St Manchán shrine was made of yew.

Nancy Edwards and Tristan Gray Hulse acknowledge that local tradition implies the *Arch* ‘contained the saint’s bodily remains’,²⁶⁰ but they believe there are a number of reasons that make this an unlikely scenario. Firstly there is some cultural evidence that the Welsh, prior to Norman influence, did not believe in disturbing the bodies of their saints after burial.²⁶¹ There is also the evidence from Prior Robert, who, in his *vita*, states that Gwenfrewy’s bones were ‘extracted from the dust’, were ‘properly bound, in mantles’ and then borne away to Shrewsbury,²⁶² not left in a shrine in Gwytherin. In their paper, Nancy Edwards and Tristan Gray Hulse argue that the dating of the *Arch* to the eighth or ninth century by Lawrence Butler and James

Edwards and T. Gray Hulse, ‘A Fragment of a Reliquary Casket from Gwytherin, North Wales’, p. 93.

²⁵⁷ *ibid.*

²⁵⁸ Also known as St Manchán’s.

²⁵⁹ N. Edwards and T. Gray Hulse, ‘A Fragment of a Reliquary Casket from Gwytherin, North Wales’, p. 95.

²⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 97.

²⁶¹ *ibid.*

²⁶² *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 89.

Graham-Campbell²⁶³ means it pre-dates the *translatio* to Shrewsbury and therefore the reliquary shrine could not contain Gwenfrewy's corporeal remains. They also argue that the reconstruction of the *Arch* undertaken from the fragment indicates:

the reliquary would have been too small to have held Gwenfrewi's bones unless they were in a very fragmentary state.²⁶⁴

The provenance, and therefore the purpose, of the *Arch* is, however, problematic and disputed. As T.E. Pritchard points out:

because of its location near both the Irish seaboard and the Saxon invasion route it incorporates features of both Irish and Anglo-Saxon design.²⁶⁵

Lawrence Butler and James Graham-Campbell base their dating of the shrine largely on the design of the roundels, seen so clearly in the Lhuyd drawings. The melding of Irish and Anglo-Saxon ornamentation depicted leads them to set out two possibilities for the origin of the shrine: it could have been made in Wales and reflect Irish influence, or it was made in England and reflects Anglo-Saxon influence.²⁶⁶ T.E. Pritchard favours a Welsh provenance:

It [the *Arch*] could have been made in Wales in the eighth or ninth centuries. Other portable shrines are known to have existed in Wales. The shrine of St David was pillaged in 1088 and that of St Cybi disappeared much later.²⁶⁷

An alternative view has been advanced more recently by Cormac Bourke.²⁶⁸ He argues for an Irish provenance, dating to the early twelfth century. He sees the closest parallel for the *Arch* to be St Manchán's shrine from Lemanaghan, Co. Offaly. This Irish shrine, commissioned by High King of Ireland, Turlough O' Connor, and created in 1130 at Clonmacnoise, was reputed to house the bones of St

²⁶³ L. Butler and J. Graham-Campbell, 'A lost reliquary casket from Gwytherin, North Wales, *The Antiquaries Journal*, vol 70: (1990), pp. 45-46.

²⁶⁴ N. Edwards and T. Gray Hulse, 'A Fragment of a Reliquary Casket from Gwytherin, North Wales', p. 97.

²⁶⁵ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 39.

²⁶⁶ L. Butler and J. Graham-Campbell, 'A lost reliquary casket from Gwytherin, North Wales', p. 46.

²⁶⁷ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 39.

²⁶⁸ C. Bourke, 'The Shrine of St Gwenfrewi from Gwytherin, Denbighshire: An Alternative Interpretation', In *The Archaeology of Early Medieval Celtic Churches*, edited by Nancy Edwards (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2009), pp. 375-388.

Manchán.²⁶⁹ It is also tent or house-shaped and portable, and Cormac Bourke postulates ‘that the piece of oak surviving at Holywell is the remnant, not of a gable, but of the *upper part* of a gable,²⁷⁰ making the shrine much larger than previously thought.

This differing view of the *Arch* suggests that its dimensions were much larger than those suggested by Nancy Edwards and Tristan Gray Hulse and that it would be carried with poles through rings attached to metal feet (cf Figure 19).

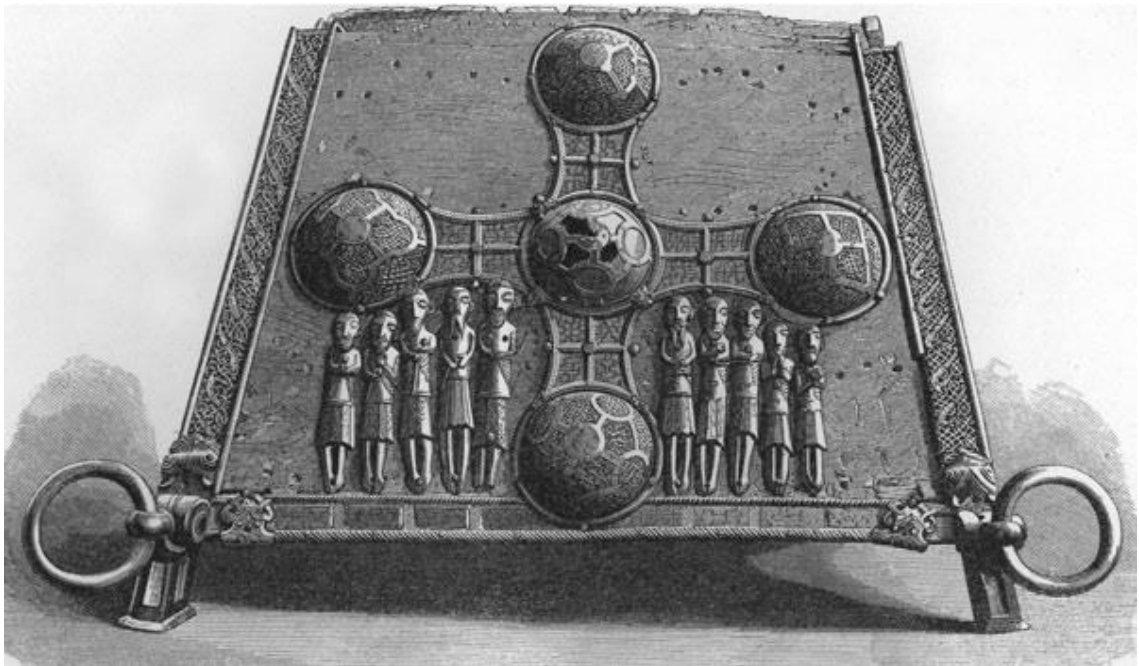


Figure 26. Shrine of St Manchán²⁷¹

Cormac Bourke’s argument highlights similarities in how the Shrine of St Manchán was designed to be carried, and he explains how this ‘finds its ultimate antecedent’²⁷² in the tradition of how the Ark of the Covenant was conveyed, thus placing the *Arch Gwenfrewy* in this tradition:

Such shrines, if that of St Manchán is representative, were intended to approximate the Ark of the Covenant, not only in their size and materials, but

²⁶⁹ Pilgrimage in Medieval Ireland: Medieval Pilgrimage at Lemanaghan, Co Offaly [online]. Available: <http://pilgrimagemedievalireland.com/tag/st-manchans-shrine/> <accessed 31 December 2014>

²⁷⁰ C. Bourke, ‘The Shrine of St Gwenfrewi from Gwytherin: Denbighshire An Alternative Interpretation’, p. 378.

²⁷¹ J. Graves, ‘The Church and Shrine of St. Manchán’. *The Journal of the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland* 3: (1874), pp. 134–50.

²⁷² C. Bourke, ‘The Shrine of St Gwytherin, Denbighshire: An Alternative Interpretation’, p. 379.

also in their suitability for exhibition in both static and processional contexts.²⁷³

Furthermore, he raises the significance of the naming of Gwenfrewy's shrine as the *Arch Gwenfrewy*, referring to Tristan Gray Hulse's comment that the Welsh term for Gwenfrewy's shrine, *Arch Gwenfrewi*, 'recognises the allusion' to the Ark of the Covenant.²⁷⁴ Cormac Bourke considers that, given the range of meaning for *arch* in Welsh is 'ark, chest, coffer, coffin, box, shrine', it is reasonable to conclude that the Welsh word *arch* usually refers to 'a substantial container'.²⁷⁵ Cormac Bourke sees this deliberate choice of nomenclature as an indication that local tradition may well have been correct, and that the *Arch*, large enough to hold Gwenfrewy's skull and her disarticulated bones, actually did contain her corporeal remains - during the formal procession through Shrewsbury to the Abbey. Prior Robert's *vita* recounts that Gwenfrewy's relics were placed at St Giles' Church at Shrewsbury's city gate until the bishop bestowed the blessing of God upon the *translatio*, and then:

A day was designated and announced throughout the assemblies of the neighbouring parishes; all were urged to come on this day who wanted to be present at the translation of the venerable saint.²⁷⁶

According to the *vita*, the formal procession was a great and spectacular event:

Thus, on the appointed day, while the brothers were processing along the way with crosses and candles and a numerous throng of people, the most holy body of the blessed maiden, Winefride, was brought, with all the people genuflecting, and many were unable to refrain from weeping for great joy.²⁷⁷

There would doubtless have been an expectation that Gwenfrewy's remains were carried in a fitting shrine, and this expectation supports Cormac Bourke's suggestion that just such a richly ornamented shrine was commissioned from Ireland, perhaps at Benedictine request.²⁷⁸ The web of connections that existed between Welsh and Irish elites at this time, both ecclesiastical and secular, could have facilitated the

²⁷³ *ibid.*

²⁷⁴ *ibid.*, Tristan Gray Hulse, pers. comm.

²⁷⁵ *ibid.*

²⁷⁶ Robert, Prior of Shrewsbury, *The Life of Saint Winefride*, pp. 91-92.

²⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 92.

²⁷⁸ C. Bourke, 'The Shrine of St Gwytherin, Denbighshire: An Alternative Interpretation', p. 386.

acquisition of the shrine. The *Arch*, or shrine, could then have been returned to the church in Gwytherin, after Gwenfrewy's *translatio*, for pilgrims to visit. This possibility is reflected in Father Wynne's 1859 report where he records a comment by the Gwytherin sexton that the *Arch*, 'a very rude box of oak-wood', had held 'the body of St. Winefride when brought back from Shrewsbury'.²⁷⁹

That the *Arch Gwenfrewi yn eglwys Gwytheryn yn swydh Ddimbech* existed, whatever its provenance, seems beyond any doubt. It provides an important piece of evidence that the cult of Gwenfrewy at Gwytherin continued after her death, focussed on relics kept at Gwytherin for hundreds of years. Its fate at the hands of unscrupulous clergy, over time cut up and given to pilgrims for a shilling a piece,²⁸⁰ brings to mind the fate of Capel Gwenfrewy, 'scandalously used as a quarry' by the then rector.²⁸¹

The legacy of Gwenfrewy's cult at Gwytherin

The cult of Gwenfrewy at Gwytherin built on her martyrdom and the miracles and healing that occurred during her time at Holywell. At Gwytherin her cult grew around the tradition of how her life exemplified goodness and sanctity, the enlightenment she gave to others, and the further healing miracles she is reputed to have wrought. The idea of her being specially chosen and the element of prophecy are tightly woven into her story.

After her death, pilgrims continued to visit Gwytherin, focussed for centuries around objects associated with her, and the healing and miracles she is said to have posthumously performed. These objects, as we have seen, were commemorated to her and connected to her through death - *Capel Gwenfrewy*, her coffin and gravestone, and the *Arch Gwenfrewy*. The power of these objects sits within a tradition of Welsh saints and the protection they give to their people.

²⁷⁹ N. Edwards and T. Gray Hulse, 'A Fragment of a Reliquary Casket from Gwytherin, North Wales', p. 92.

²⁸⁰ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 39.

²⁸¹ *ibid*, p. 37.

It is important to note that, despite the *translatio* of her corporeal remains to Shrewsbury Abbey in 1138, her cult still flourished at Gwytherin for several more centuries. This was helped, no doubt, by the presence of her reputed gravestone and original coffin in the church, and by the *Arch*, which may have been returned from Shrewsbury after the formal procession associated with her *translatio*, as already discussed.

The notes on the history of Gwytherin Church, found by Alison Goulbourne inside the church when she purchased it, indicate that it housed a number of these venerated objects that were physical focal points for Gwenfrewy's cult. Some of those objects remained in the church until it was deconsecrated in 2005. They included the wooden chest now in the Well Museum at Holywell (see p.72 and figure 24), a Sanctus Bell called *Cloch yr Ail Wasanaeth* (Bell of the Second Service), and a chalice, now believed to be in the church at Llansannan.²⁸² The sepulchral slabs remain as part of the fabric of the church.

The date of Gwenfrewy's death is generally accepted as 3rd November 660 AD. It is important to note that a saint was seen, during the medieval period, as 'a person regarded as set apart for a sacred purpose, dedicated to God's service'.²⁸³ Jane Cartwright points out that:

In Wales sanctity was locally conferred and none of the Welsh saints appear to have been canonised by the Roman Catholic Church.²⁸⁴

She goes on to discuss the importance of oral tradition in perpetuating legends and the details of miracles performed. Oral tradition had an important function too in establishing a physical locale for a saint's cult, often near to the saint's church or the church itself.²⁸⁵ T. W. Pritchard explains how the title of saint was eventually reserved for martyrs, who had given their lives for their faith. They were remembered on the anniversaries of their deaths which became feast days, and 'their

²⁸² Alison Goulbourne, pers. comm. I am very grateful to Alison for the time she spent discussing this and many other aspects of the church and Penbryn, and for her generosity in allowing me unlimited access to the site during my visit.

²⁸³ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission c 650 – 1930*, p. 9.

²⁸⁴ J. Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, p. 4.

²⁸⁵ *ibid.*

burial places and bodily remains [were] carefully preserved'.²⁸⁶ D. R. Thomas sees that:

the annual wake or vigil on the 3rd of November commemorates the day of St. Winifred's translation to Shrewsbury and shows that she, a British saint, still retained her hold on the reverence of people.²⁸⁷

He goes on to speak with obvious pride about how the rededication of the 1869 rebuilt church in Gwytherin brought honour back to Gwenfrewy, despite the fact that 'her body had been carried away to promote the interests of a distant Abbey'.²⁸⁸

Today Gwytherin is on the route of *Taith Pererin Gogledd Cymru*, the North Wales Pilgrim's Way, officially launched on 10 July, 2014. The church is now the centre of Alison Goulbourne's *Gwenfrewi Project*. Alison's stated aim is to 'preserve the ancient historical site and provide a platform for the Arts'.²⁸⁹ She first came to Gwytherin on a journey in search of the place where Gwenfrewy was buried. She recalls that:

The whole intention of my buying the church and chapel site was initially one of preservation, preserving the history of the site out of passion for a place I felt was truly amazing. I bought the church in 2009 and I bought the Penbryn chapel site about a month later. I took on a church that had been closed for a good four years and was falling into ruin, so there were holes in the roof, there was plaster everywhere, the actual graveyard in the south side of the churchyard was being used to graze cattle, and you couldn't access it at all, so it certainly wasn't revered in any way. The history was starting to be lost, and what I've tried to do here is keep the church together and the south side of the churchyard so that the history will remain intact, and what I've done is open up the site so that people can visit it. Although Gwytherin became a bit disconnected from its history at one point, and there appeared to be a loss of reverence for the site, there are people in the village who are very, very proud that this is where Gwenfrewy was buried. What I have come to determine is that there is still a focus on Gwenfrewy here, but it is very much in a spiritual way – it's not about objects – it's about the place where I believe she lived and died.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁶ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission c 650 – 1930*, pp. 9-10.

²⁸⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸⁸ D. R. Thomas, *The History of the Diocese of St Asaph*, p. 314.

²⁸⁹ A. Goulbourne, 'The Gwenfrewi Project' [online]. Available: <http://www.thegwenfrewiproject.co.uk/> <accessed 29 December 2014>

²⁹⁰ Alison Goulbourne, pers. comm. I am very grateful to Alison for sharing her story about Gwenfrewy and what she means to her.

Chapter 5

Shrewsbury Abbey: Often they complained to one another that they very much lacked relics of the saints

Introduction

The cult of Gwenfrewy at Shrewsbury Abbey was based upon her relics that were secured by the monks there. The section of the *vita* dedicated to the *translatio* primarily focuses on justifying their acquisition of Gwenfrewy's remains.

Shrewsbury Abbey was a post-Conquest Benedictine foundation, dedicated to Ss Peter and Paul. Prior to the Norman Conquest, a small Saxon chapel dedicated to St Peter existed outside the east gate of Shrewsbury. In 1083 the priest of St Peter's returned from a pilgrimage to Rome, and persuaded Roger de Montgomery, the newly appointed Earl of Shrewsbury, to raise the existing church into a grand abbey.



Figure 27. Shrewsbury Abbey today, showing remaining sections of the original Norman 11th century building

The third cultic centre

The *vita* sets out the reasons for bringing Gwenfrewy's remains to Shrewsbury.

There is a clear admission that the monks in the newly built Shrewsbury monastery were seeking relics:

knowing that they could be protected more by God through the patronage of that one whose honour they might foster on earth by their daily devotion, they tried diligently to be provided with one who might be a patron to them.²⁹¹

The monks had heard that there were many bodies of saints in nearby Wales, and we are told that they tried in every way to find out how they could acquire one of them.

Prior Robert relates a narrative where he uses the device of divine instructions being given to a priest through the medium of a vision. It is a justification device he uses several times in the *translatio* section of the *vita*. The narrative is about the discovery of Gwenfrewy's spring at Holywell by the Shrewsbury monks, when one of them was 'seized by a serious sickness'.²⁹² According to the *vita*, Radulph, the subprior at Chester,²⁹³ fell asleep while praying for the sick monk, and Gwenfrewy appeared to him in a dream. She promised that the sick monk would be restored to health if one of their number were to travel to her spring at Holywell and celebrate Mass in her church there. Her wishes were followed, and the sick monk recovered. So impressed were the monks, the narrative tells us, that they determined to 'acquire even a small part of her most holy body'.²⁹⁴

The *vita* subsequently recounts that a small group of monks, including Prior Robert, travelled to Gwytherin in search of Gwenfrewy's remains, and were told they would meet with resistance from the people there. The Welsh considered that the bodies of

²⁹¹ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 77.

²⁹² *ibid*, p. 78.

²⁹³ The *vita* indicates that the Chester community of St Werburgh's was the primary source of information on how to find the spring at Holywell. They may also have provided information about Gwenfrewy's burial place.

²⁹⁴ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 79.

their saints offered healing and protection to the local people and their indignation would reflect this²⁹⁵:

You are trying to carry off the bodies of saints kept in their possession, to which they and all their own are entrusted.²⁹⁶

However, all resistance is apparently overcome with the help of further justification visions. Prior Robert has several such visions that encourage him on his mission to retrieve Gwenfrewy's remains, and the Gwytherin priest too refers to a vision which has urged him not to oppose the carrying away of her bones. Eventually, after paying off one Gwytherin man with a dissenting voice, we are told 'all were of one mind and kindly granted what had been requested'.²⁹⁷

The political context for the *translatio* is touched upon in the *vita* when we are told that the monks at Shrewsbury Abbey first seek the approval of the Bishop of Bangor²⁹⁸ and the Prince of Gwynedd²⁹⁹ before they embark on their endeavours to secure Gwenfrewy's remains.³⁰⁰ During the stability of Henry I's reign, the monks would have been able to move freely and relatively safely in their efforts to locate Gwenfrewy's grave, but when the king died after a mere week's illness, a period of great upheaval ensued.³⁰¹ Permission for their venture is sought from the Bishop of Bangor and the Welsh prince in the second year of King Stephen's reign, when Welsh and Norman lords had already claimed large tracts of land and fighting had somewhat subsided. This is significant because, in the *vita*, Prior Robert maintains that Gwenfrewy was neglected by her own people in Gwytherin, and gives that claim the authority of the Prince of Gwynedd.³⁰² The royal approval adds further justification to his acquisition of Gwenfrewy's bones.

²⁹⁵ Ellis Peter's first Cadfael novel, *A Morbid Taste For Bones*, creates a murder mystery out of the journey of the Shrewsbury monks to collect St Winifred's remains from Wales to bring them back to the Benedictine Abbey in Shrewsbury. The novel is sympathetic to the importance of a Welsh saint remaining among her people and shows the people of Gwytherin duping the English monks and retaining Gwenfrewy's bones.

²⁹⁶ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 82.

²⁹⁷ *ibid*, pp. 83-86.

²⁹⁸ James Ryan Gregory notes that in the 1130s Gwenfrewy's grave would have been in the diocese of the Bishop of Bangor; J. R. Gregory, *A Welsh Saint in England*, p. 75.

²⁹⁹ This is likely to have been Owain Gwynedd, eldest son of Gruffudd ap Cynan.

³⁰⁰ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, pp. 80-81.

³⁰¹ John Brown, Shrewsbury Abbey Official Guide, pers. comm.

³⁰² *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, trans. by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 81.

Professing that Gwenfrewy's remains brought honour and glory to the name of God, Prior Robert and his companions brought them, possibly in the *Arch Gwenfrewy*, to Shrewsbury Abbey in 1138. Naturally enough, there was no mention of the lucrative offerings they hoped to procure from vast numbers of pilgrims.



Figure 28. The shrine of St Winefride at Shrewsbury Abbey

The relics of Gwenfrewy did indeed make Shrewsbury Abbey a major pilgrimage centre, bringing coveted honour and prestige to its abbots, and to the town itself. Today St Winefride's shrine, a focus for pilgrims for more than seven hundred years, has almost vanished. All that remains is a small section of the reredos,³⁰³ under the St Winefride window.

³⁰³ A reredos is an ornamental screen covering the wall at the back of an altar.

Gwenfrewy became an important focus for prayer and supplication at Shrewsbury. In 1487, Abbot Mynde was given permission by Henry VII to establish the Guild of St Winefride. Membership of the guild was open to both men and women, and all were expected to assemble for Mass on the third of November, St Winefride's Day. The main purpose of the guild was to offer daily prayers for the King, the Abbot, and the Guild, and to support the Abbey with prayers and almsgiving. Two chaplains were supported by an annual endowment of £10 from abbey funds to pray daily at Gwenfrewy's shrine (see Figure 28).³⁰⁴

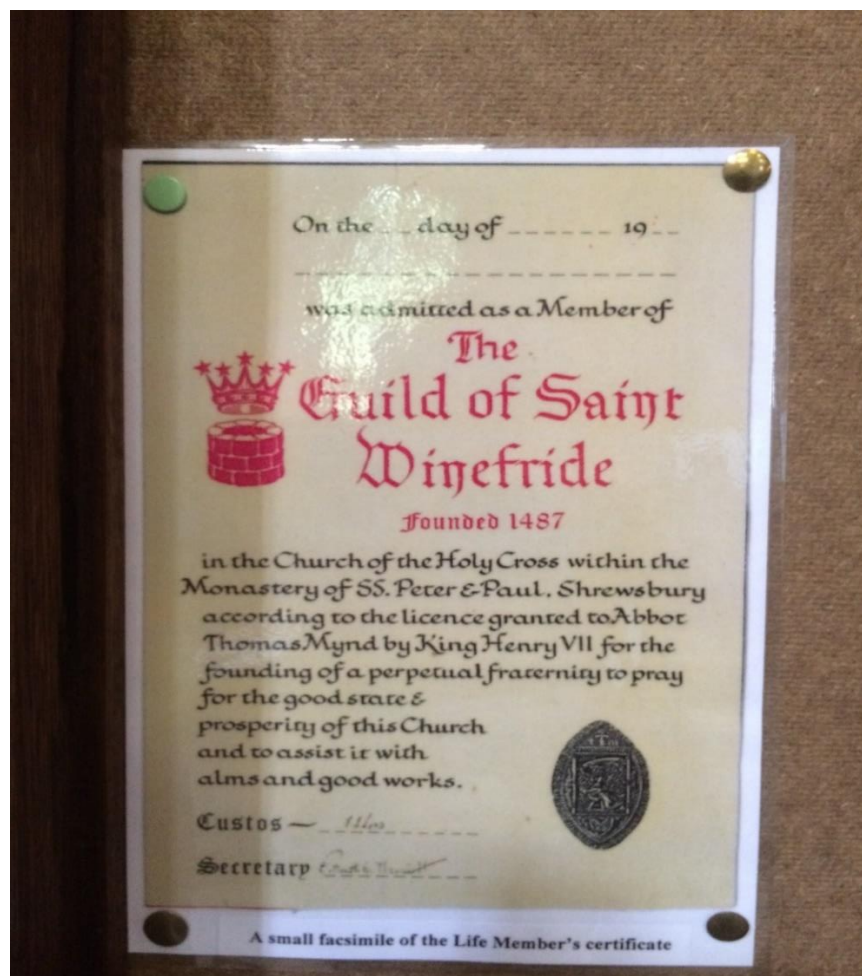


Figure 29. Details of the foundation of The Guild of St Winefride

Abbot Mynde commissioned a short folio text in honour of the founding of the guild, *The lyf of the holy and blessed vyrgyn saynt Wenefryde*, reputedly printed by William Caxton. A large bell with an invocation to Gwenfrewy and the Virgin Mary was also

³⁰⁴ information from Shrewsbury Abbey and John Brown, Shrewsbury Abbey Official Guide, pers. comm.

commissioned for the abbey in 1487. The bell was dedicated to Henry VII, probably generously funded by the wealthy wool merchants of Shrewsbury.³⁰⁵ Its Latin inscription to Gwenfrewy, translated, read:

Remember, holy Wenefrede, to God us recommend / That by His pity He
may us from bloody foes defend.³⁰⁶

The fifteenth-century seal of the Shrewsbury guild depicts Gwenfrewy's martyrdom and shows a formidable Caradog brandishing his sword above the virgin's neck. It bears the initials of Thomas Mynde, Prior of Shrewsbury 1459-99.



Figure 30. Fifteenth-century seal of the Guild of St Winefride, Shrewsbury Abbey

The Guild united monks and burgesses through mutual interests and at times drew the abbey and town together:

³⁰⁵ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 66.

³⁰⁶ *ibid.*

in June 1389 the bailiffs and commonalty of Shrewsbury assembled in the abbey in the presence of the Earl of Arundel, the abbot, and others, to draw up a composition concerning the government of the town.³⁰⁷

Unfortunately the Guild only lasted for fifty years, but was reinstated by the Abbey authorities in 1987.³⁰⁸

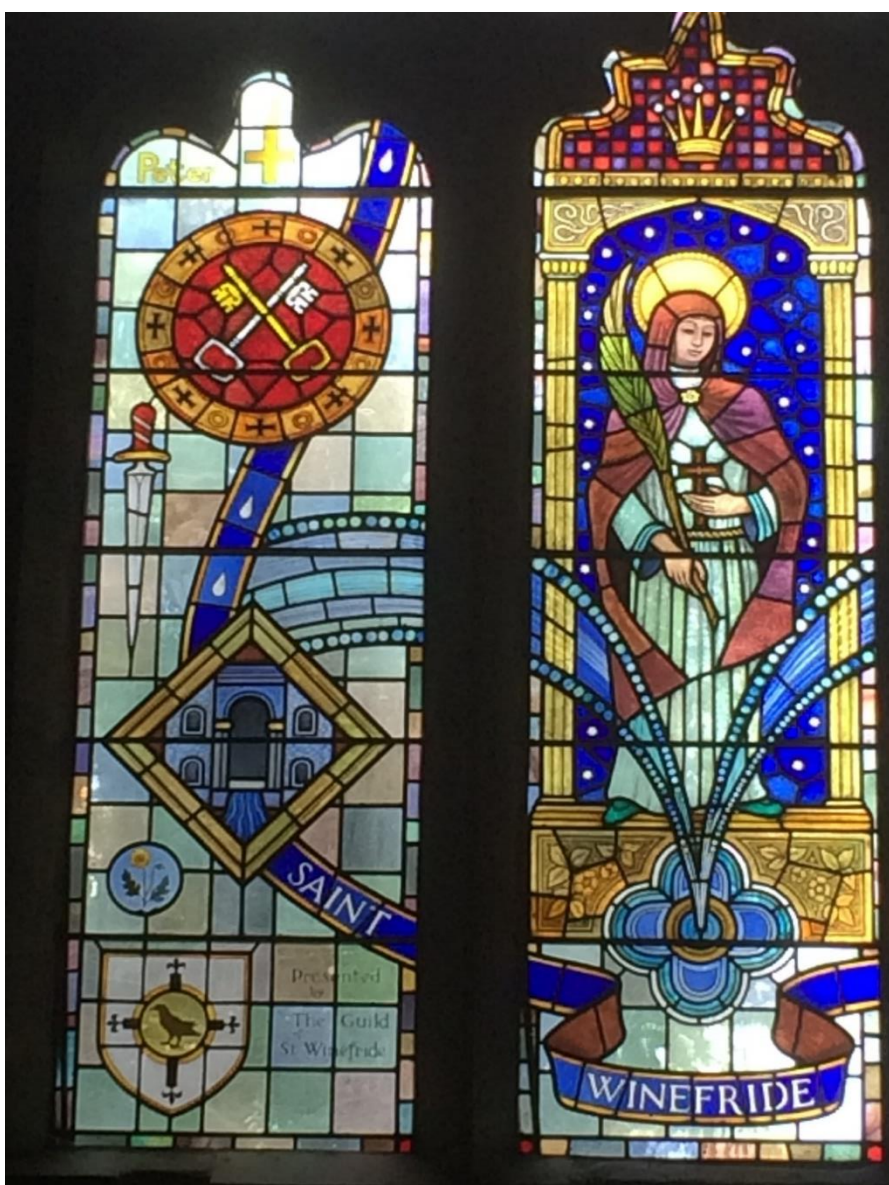


Figure 31. The St Winefride Window, Shrewsbury Abbey

³⁰⁷ John Brown, Shrewsbury Abbey Official Guide, pers. comm, and Shrewsbury Abbey – Shropshire [online]. Available: <http://www.shrewsburyabbey.com/History%20Page.html> <accessed 15 November 2014>

³⁰⁸ John Brown, Shrewsbury Abbey Official Guide, pers. comm, and D. N. Ford, *The History of Shrewsbury Abbey* [online]. Available: <http://www.britannia.com/church/studies/shrewsbury.html> <accessed 15 November 2014>

Above the shrine of Gwenfrewy is the St Winefride Window. Designed and made in 1992 by Jane Gray, the window portrays St Winefride's qualities of strength and reflects her faith, life and work. It illustrates the legend of her decapitation and depicts heraldic symbols such as the Welsh Poppy, in recognition of her Welsh nationality.³⁰⁹

Gwenfrewy's cult at Shrewsbury Abbey flourished until the Dissolution of the Monasteries began in 1536. Her relics were presumed to have been destroyed amidst the general despoliation, although a finger bone is said to have been saved and was eventually given to the English College in Rome.³¹⁰ A piece of this bone is said to have gone to the Roman Catholic cathedral built in 1856 in Shrewsbury. In turn that small piece was reputedly divided, with one half going to Holywell while the other half remained at the cathedral. Thus Gwenfrewy's relics were shared between 'the two places that had kept her memory alive for almost 900 years'.³¹¹

Apart from the finger bone, whatever else might have remained of Gwenfrewy's relics was finally erased during the time of the Civil War, when Shrewsbury was captured in a surprise night attack in 1645, and the abbey was occupied by Parliamentary troops.

³⁰⁹ information from Shrewsbury Abbey and John Brown, Shrewsbury Abbey Official Guide, pers. comm.

³¹⁰ *Two Medieval Lives of Saint Winefride*, translated by R. Pepin and H. Feiss, p. 11.

³¹¹ *ibid*, pp. 11-12.

Conclusion

Gwenfrewy's life as a saint began with her 'first death'. She is officially recognised by the Vatican as a person with an historical basis, who lived an exemplary religious life. In the 2004 edition of the Roman Martyrology, she is listed under 2 November with the Latin name *Winefridae* as follows:

At the spring located at Holywell in Wales, St Winefride the Virgin, who is outstanding in her witness as a nun.³¹²

There is no acknowledgement of miracles which she may have worked or been healed by, nor has she ever been formally canonised, yet she is recognised as a first-millennium saint by popular acclaim world-wide. She is commemorated in the current Roman Catholic liturgical calendar for Wales on the 3rd of November, since the 2nd of November is designated as All Souls' Day.³¹³

The sources of evidence for Gwenfrewy's legend date back to a pre-literate environment, and have their roots in the oral tradition of medieval female sanctity. The official Latin Lives and the *buchedd* provide us with information about all three cultic centres, but we learn the most about Holywell, and the least about Shrewsbury Abbey, understandably because the versions either end with the *translatio* or omit it entirely. Medieval poets have described and praised Gwenfrewy's miracles and healing, thereby enhancing our understanding of her legend, and how she managed to hold 'a place in the hearts of people of all ranks'.³¹⁴

The way in which Gwenfrewy's cult has survived is ironically due in no small measure to the way in which the largest cultic centre, Shrewsbury Abbey, was able to broadcast her legend and attract huge numbers of pilgrims, some of them royal, between the supposed acquiring of her remains in 1138 and the loss of them c. 1536. Holywell, with its awe-inspiring bubbling spring and Gothic stone shrine has retained its position as the primary cultic centre, laying claim to a long history of miraculous healings and its own share of famed and royal pilgrims.

³¹² *Martyrologium Romanum*, 2004, Vatican Press (Typis Vaticanis), p. 603.

³¹³ Liturgy Office England & Wales, *National Calendar for Wales* [online]. Available: <http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Calendar/National/Wales1.shtml> <accessed 19 December 2014>

³¹⁴ T. W. Pritchard, *St Winefride, Her Holy Well and the Jesuit Mission*, p. 8.

It can be argued that it is Gwytherin, however, that most successfully retained a large number of relics associated with Gwenfrewy for the longest period of time. The *Arch Gwenfrewy*, reduced to a fragment, is perhaps the oldest surviving physical evidence of a Welsh saint's cult. Extant documented information about Gwenfrewy's cult at Gwytherin is available from various sources, written and pictorial, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Fifth century archaeological evidence at the *llan* takes us back even further in our understanding of the spiritual significance of Gwytherin. All this allows us to triangulate evidence about Capel Gwenfrewy, the changing fortunes of St Eleri's church, the Llywarch horizontal sepulchral slab, and the surviving wooden chest. Nor is Gwytherin still without a sense of mystery – there remain the conundrums of Gwenfrewy's gravestone, the vertical sepulchral slab, and the standing stones.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its remoteness, there is something compelling about the quiet and natural setting for the *llan* site at Gwytherin, where the passing years have effected little change. Walking under the yew trees or on *Penbryn Capel* has the power to elicit connections with land that has been settled since pre-Christian times.

I lingered round them, under that benign sky: watched the moths fluttering among the heath and harebells, listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass, and wondered how anyone could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth.³¹⁵

³¹⁵ E. Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*, Chapter 34.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Examples of Bronze Age axes and palstaves found in Wales.³¹⁶



Object type: PALSTAVE³¹⁷

Unique ID: WMID-6A0226

County: Powys

Workflow status: Awaiting validation

A slightly incomplete cast bronze palstave axehead, dating to the Middle Bronze Age between 1500 - 1150 BC (length: 150mm; width at blade tip: 59.5mm; thickness at flange side: 29mm; weight:).

At the rear of the axehead, the butt is (although corroded) rounded in plan and terminates to a point in side-section. The septum of the artefact is 68mm long and 19mm wide with flange facets that extend upwards on the front and back of the artefact as well as to either side on each face by approximately 10mm in height. The stop half way down the palstave is more prominent on one side in comparison to the other (height: 8mm), with a slight ridge (approximate length: 48mm) running down the centre of the length of the blade, particularly visible on one side only. The blade spalls outwards towards the blade tip (see width above) with none of the original cutting edge remaining. In side section, the triangular profiled blade from its greatest thickness of 16mm narrows to a point at the blade tip (thickness of the blade tip: 3.5mm). Overall, the palstave axehead is in a worn and corroded condition with very little of the original brown patina remaining, with areas of bronze disease, particularly on one side of the blade.

³¹⁶ Portable Antiquities Scheme Website [online]. Available: <http://finds.org.uk/> <accessed 12 December 2014>, p.1.



Object type: FLAT AXEHEAD

Unique ID: WMID-798FF7

County: Powys

Workflow stage: Published 

An almost complete decorated Flat Axe / axehead of Early Bronze Age Period, date (2000-1700 BC). The general form of the axe is complete, however it has suffered significant loss from corrosion at both the cutting edge and the butt. In plan the axe is broadly rectangular with narrow rounded butt and expanded / splayed cutting edge. In profile the axe is lentoid. In section the axe is broadly rectangular (rectangular with rounded edges) and there are no signs of raised flanges or hafting augmentation. There is also no sign of a proto stop ridge / median bevel. The surface patina has been poorly preserved and the majority has flaked away because of laminating surface corrosion. One face is better preserved than the other. The remaining surface patina shows evidence of decoration - specifically small lentoid shaped depressions aligned vertically on the axe blade. This form of decoration is known as rain pattern and is common on some axes of the later early bronze age. The long edges of the axe are also poorly preserved, again it is possible there are some facets possibly suggesting cable like decoration. The axe is a light green to light brown colour and has an uneven polished patina; elements of the axe are still coated in soil. The axehead is best described as coming from the later phases of the Early Bronze Age of metalworking stage IV which corresponds to Needham's (1996) Period 3 circa 2000 - 1700 CAL. BC. This axe is very similar to those identified as Type Migdale Variant Biggar (Burgess and Schmidt: plate 18-19. 220 Knapton or 229 Stamfordham).



Object type: AXE

Unique ID: [NMGW-7B0ADE](#)

County: Ceredigion

Workflow stage: Awaiting validation 

Early Bronze Age bronze Flat Axe, possibly of Type Migdale (Schmidt & Burgess, 1981, p 35-44)[\[1\]](#), of Metalworking Assemblage III, corresponding to Needham's (1996)[\[2\]](#) Period 2 - 3 and probably dating to c. 2,200 - 1,900BC.

The axe is incomplete, missing the butt and with peripheral damage (with a surviving length of 103.3mm and a weight of 264.2g). The break at the butt occurred in antiquity and there is the suggestion of bending towards one of the faces, prior to breaking. The axe is of rectangular section at the break (with a width of 26.4mm and a thickness of 8.3mm), which is flat and at a slight angle to the sides. The sides curve gently towards the blade for most of the length before curving more sharply at the blade. The blade tips are eroded (giving the blade a width of 60.8mm) and the blade edge is comparatively straight, now appearing to be angled although the original blade edge does not survive. The axe has a consistent rectangular section with no surviving evidence for developed features. Both faces are gently convex across their lengths before thinning at the blade.

Analysis to ascertain the elemental composition of the axe and was carried out[\[3\]](#) using a CamScan MaXim 2040 analytical scanning electron microscope (SEM), with an Oxford Instruments Inca energy dispersive X-ray spectrometer (EDX). The results show the metal composition is a tin-bronze alloy (with mean readings of copper: 87.08% and tin: 12.27%), with a significant trace of antimony (with a mean reading of 1.25%) and nickel (with a mean reading of 0.24%), but no arsenic. The lack of arsenic as an impurity makes the alloy difficult to fit into Northover's (1980, p 229-243)[\[4\]](#) Early Bronze Age metal groups but the comparatively high levels of Nickel may suggest that the alloy is closer to his 'G' metal.

The highly-corroded and incomplete state of the axe makes typological identification difficult. However, the lack of any surviving developed features and the simple, curved-sided form to the axe are suggestive of Type Migdale dating to c. 2,200 - 1,900BC.



Object type: PALSTAVE

Unique ID: NMGW-6B14F5

County: Wrexham

Workflow status: Awaiting validation 

Early - Middle Bronze Age Group I palstave of Primary Shield Pattern Palstave form and of Acton Park Type (Schmidt & Burgess, 1981, p 117-125)[\[1\]](#)

The palstave is near-complete, with some peripheral damage to the blade, butt and flanges (with a length of 172mm and a weight of 445.3g). The butt (with a width of 21.8mm) is now corroded and of uncertain form. The flanges begin a little before the butt and were comparatively high (now damaged on one face), rising to their maximum height just behind the stop (with a maximum surviving height of 35.5mm). One of the flanges has an indentation, probably the result of a casting flaw. The septum (with a thickness of 7.3mm) is gently concave. The sides are straight and near-parallel, slightly divergent as far as the stop (where the palstave has a width of 25.8mm). The stops are near-straight and flat (with a height above

the septum of (12.7mm and 12.2mm). The casting seams are discernible on the sides where the surface survives and have been neatly finished. To the front of the stops, the sides are concave and gradually increase in divergence to the blade. The blade is moderately expanded and the blade tips have been damaged (giving the blade a surviving width of 64.4mm). Both faces are decorated with the characteristic 'shield-pattern' (31mm long) defined by a depression and without a moulding. The faces are flat across their widths and most of the length, before curving to the blade but without a discernible blade facet. The surface has a dark brown patina with areas of dark-green surface loss.

The palstave may be seen as significant being of Acton Park type and found 2100m South East from [\[m1\]](#) the eponymous hoard (Savory 1980, no. 262, p 116) [\[2\]](#). Acton Park palstaves are dated to 'Acton Park 1' with a suggested date in the 16th century BC (Needham 1996, p 133) [\[3\]](#), within Needham's (ibid.) Period 4.