

Using the 'Monastic Wales' website (www.monasticwales.org) choose one monastery and answer the following question: Who founded it?

"Vale of flowers" was a name given the now defunct abbey of Strata Florida, located at Pontrhydfendigaid in the present county of Ceredigion, Wales. Built within reach of the river Teifi, it's first known origins date from the year 1164, when a group of Monks under the patronage of Robert Fitz Stephen, an Anglo-Norman Lord, began construction on a monastery, initially built at a site known as "Yr Hen Fynachlog"¹ before being later moved to the said position nearby where its remains may still be seen to this day. The following piece aims to discuss the origins of the abbey, and ascertain its founders.

During the period of the abbey's development, twelfth century Europe was increasingly adhering to a papal supremacy intent on dismembering traditional ruling entities. The clerical hierarchy was asserting its claim to become the sole channel of supernatural authority under principles such as discipline and organisation, which thus allowed for the controlled instatement of both the thoughts and activities of an obedient and receptive laity². One way in which laities subsequently sought to appease their church was through becoming patrons for various monastic orders. In the case of Strata Florida, the founding order was Cistercian, an offshoot inclined by wish of former Benedictine monks who were in pursuance of an undertaking to reform their asceticism by returning to values they believed were more representative of the earlier years of the Rule of St. Benedict; ideals which placed more emphasis on manual labour and self-sufficiency.

The strictness of their Cistercian ethos is perhaps one of the most dominant reasons for such rapid expansion, since the age in question was one very much compiled of holy affinity. Ecclesiastical communes would provide an array of services to local communities, regions, and even kingdoms themselves, depending on the strength of their particular creed. Many people were genuinely fearful of the prospect of not reaching heaven, and would go-about seeking repentance for their wrong-deeds through prayer and offering. Those of nobler birth may have even enlisted larger groups of ecclesiastics by providing generous patronage, such as the founding of an abbey, priory or monastery. It would have therefore been beneficial for Robert Fitz Stephen and Rhys ap Gruffydd, the latter of whom assumed responsibility of Strata Florida in 1165 to develop an alliance with the Cistercian order, since their reputation for hard-work, would in the eyes of a believer, most likely stimulate one's own chances of attaining a favourable position

¹ S. Williams, 'Strata Florida Abbey' *History*, (1989) p. 5.

² Southern, R. 'The Penguin History Of The Church 2', *Western Society And The Church In The Middle Ages*, Reprint (London: Penguin Books, 1990) p. 38.

in heaven. Monastic investment however was not only beneficial from a personal note, but also from an economic standpoint, for such organisational rapture did indeed begin to envelop the said abbey with a flourishing wealth, just as Gerald of Wales acknowledged when stating that Strata Florida was enriched far more abundantly with oxen, studs of horses, herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, than all the houses of the same order throughout Wales,³ an idea which is substantiated in another publication which claims that, the principal source of wealth no-doubt lay in wool production".⁴

Although Robert Fitz Stephen is credited with drawing a small colony of monks from Whitland (the house from whence Strata Florida derived) and settling them at the site of the initial abbey (Yr Hen Fynachlog)⁵, It may be concluded that as an initial runner in the founding of Strata Florida, Robert Fitz Stephen, due partly to his limited time as patron, must be excluded as a possible claimant. The greater part of his discrepancies are endowed primarily to Robert's Norman affiliation which should singularly discount him as leveraging any substantial political input to the benefit of the abbey, especially since it has been noted that Strata Florida was strongly Welsh in outlook, sympathy and membership, as were the Cistercian orders throughout Wales, which identified themselves with the Welsh political cause; a cause, very much opposed to Norman conquest.⁶

Upon absorbing responsibility for the Abbeys patronage, it was Rhys ap Gruffydd who endowed a charter proclaiming gifts of land and other donations of benefit. Moreover, the abbey was still in the throes of extensive building work in 1188, thus highlighting his commitment to the site, hence why some sources also understandably credit him with being the true founder⁷; and In-fact, to further strengthen that claim, Robert Fitz Stephen, the abbey's prior patron was at one point a prisoner of Rhys's, a man who it has been said, provided the impetus for the religious orders to expand into the Welsh heartlands by renouncing rents and services, and providing a protectionist agenda.⁸

There is however a missing element to our founding force; for emphasis, wherever one may look, tends to fixate upon the nobler knights; the Princes and Lords. Perhaps it has become our tradition to apply such rights to those of "royal blood" - those whose roots stem from the "ultimate" hereditary line, for we seemingly fail to

³ D. Robinson et al, *The Cistercian Abbeys Of Britain, Far From The Concourse Of Man*, (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd., 1998) pp. 176-177.

⁴ Williams, S. 'Strata Florida', p. 7.

⁵ D. Robinson et al, *The Cistercian Abbeys Of Britain*, p. 176.

⁶ Pennington M. B. et al, *Studies In Medieval Cistercian History*, (Spencer: Cistercian Publications, 1971) pp. 112-114.

⁷ S. Williams 'Strata Florida', p. 6.

⁸ R. Turvey, *The Lord Rhys, Prince of Deheubarth* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1997) p. 85.

equate peaceful and non-violent mechanisms of foundry with the same level of legitimacy that sword and shield does gain; that gallant fellow of amorous and masculine decant riding horseback to shake the heathen and plant away at God's seed. Challenging the idea that neither Robert Fitz Stephen or Rhys ap Gruffydd should be granted with "founders" status, I'd like for us to reacquaint ourselves with the Cistercian order and the line from whence Strata Florida originated. My conclusion aims to bring-about the notion that there can indeed be multiple founders of any given scenario, for had it not been for the 'driving force of Abbot Bernard of Clairvaux,⁹ the inspirational motivator behind the Cistercian creation, expansion and subsequent construction of Strata Florida, then this very essay would be no more than a fictional tale. Nevertheless one must acknowledge that even with the given latter, and the power that exuded from such; other factors were equally forceful in the founding of the abbey at Pontrhydfendigaid. For instance one might argue that had the Normans, to which the Cistercians shared at least regional constiances, not held control of key positions along the Welsh frontier, known at the "Marches", then the possibility of settlement may have proved far trickier. Furthermore the existing Benedictine communities within Wales at the time, were predominantly Anglo-Norman in political affiliation, including the very motherhouse of Strata Florida itself (Whitland). However, and to indeed conclude; even though the Welsh tended to treat the Norman houses with the same disdain and level of destruction usually reserved for their towns and castles, it was Rhys ap Gruffydd, Prince of Deheubarth who actively patronised and encouraged their development; thus protecting the Cistercian cause and allowing for the sustained existence of the abbey at Strata Florida.¹⁰ Therefore all parties may be deemed as founders.

⁹ Williams, H. D. *The Welsh Cistercians*, (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001) p. 1.

¹⁰ R. Turvey, *The Lord Rhys, Prince of Deheubarth*, pp. 82-83.

Pennington, B. et al, *Studies In Medieval Cistercian History* (Spencer: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1971).

D. Robinson et al, *The Cistercian Abbeys Of Britain: Far From The Concourse Of Men*, (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1998).

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Williams, S. '*Strata Florida Abbey*' History, (1989) p. 5.