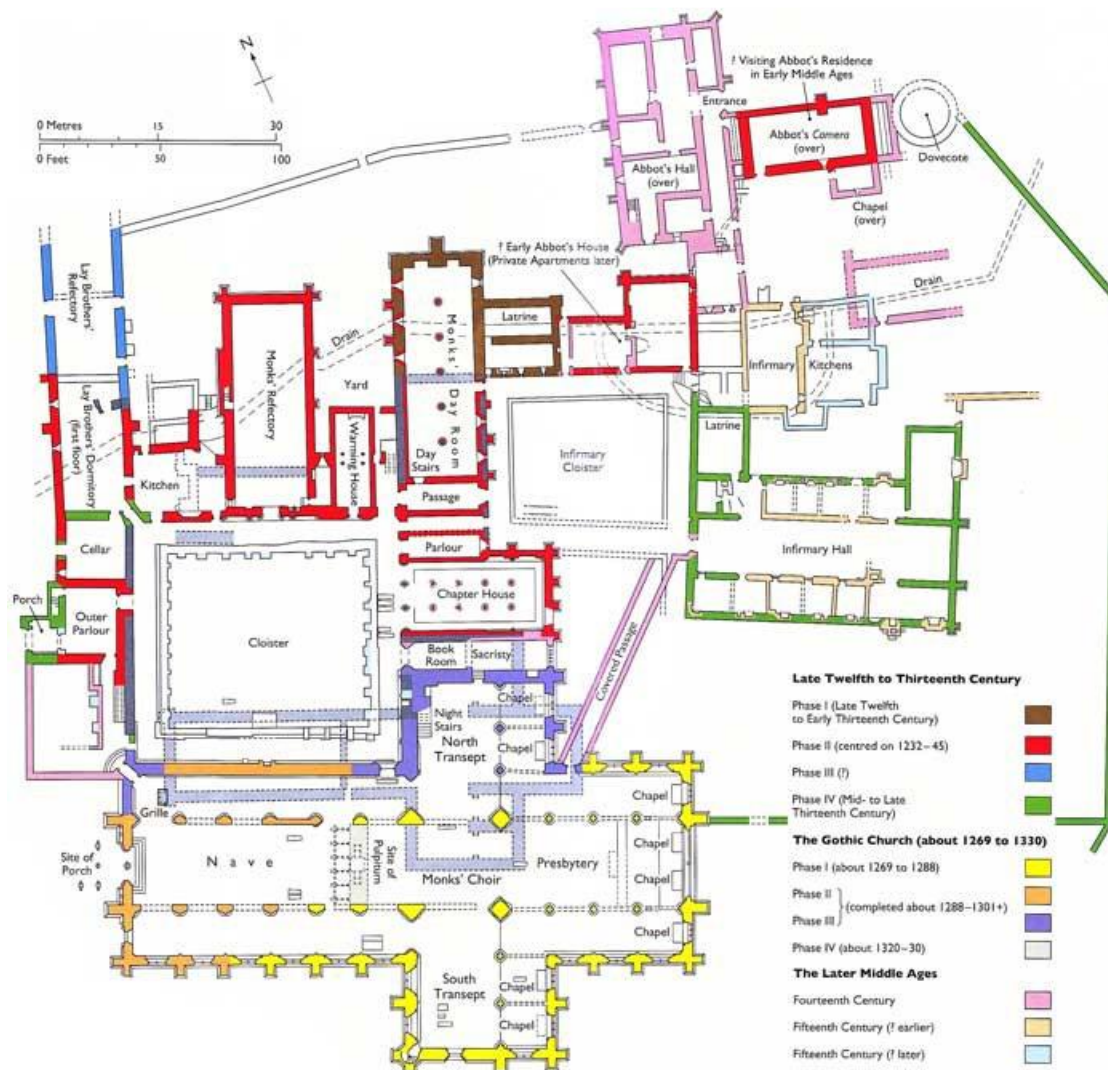


Commentary 2 – HPHI 6911 – From desert myths to sheep tales. The Cistercians in the Middle Ages.

Zen Redgrave - 1903175

Commentary on supplied floor plan of Tintern Abbey

Supplied image



The first thing of note with the supplied image is that some of the colours on the date key are difficult to distinguish, thus making the dating of some sections of the abbey quite difficult. However, there are still many things that can be noted from the floor plan.

The most obvious thing of note is the time scale that the abbey was built over. The initial section of the key indicates late 12th to early 13th century, with the last section being dated to

the fifteenth century. If we look at the section of the CADW¹ website that relates to Tintern Abbey, we can see that it was founded in 1131.² The castlewales website expands upon this and notes that the patron for the abbey was Walter de Clare, the then lord of Chepstow.³ This then could raise questions as to whether the initial monks and abbot at Tintern were indeed going out into the desert or wilderness as it was suggested that they should do within the Rule of St Benedict, although this would be a topic for a separate discussion. We can also see from the date key on the supplied image that the last section has been dated as the fifteenth century. It should be noted that King Henry VIII of England, as part of the break from the Catholic church in Rome, was responsible for the dissolution of the monasteries between 1536 and 1540.⁴ As such, from the timescale on the supplied image, we can assume that the abbey at Tintern was still functioning and potentially having building work done on it up to this point. Indeed, the castlewales website notes that ‘Tintern was surrendered to the King’s visitors on 3 September 1536’.⁵

We can now turn our attention to the physical layout of the abbey and in particular the main church. We can see from this that it is arranged in a roughly cruciform shape, with this being typical of Cistercian churches and what is referred to as a claustral plan, that is, relating to the Latin word *claustrum* meaning the ‘central section of the complex of buildings that constitutes the abode of a religious community’, as noted by Paul Meyvaert.⁶ Meyvaert also notes that the *claustrum* was also referred to by St Benedict himself within the Rule of St Benedict which gives us a potential source for the layout of the abbey.⁷ We can see a similar cruciform shape if we look at the floor plan of Bylands Abbey, an image of which can be found in appendix one of this commentary, which would also suggest that this shape may have been a common one.⁸ However, what we can also see by comparing these two floor plans, is the different positioning of the main cloister between the two abbeys, with Bylands Abbey having the cloisters positioned to the south of the main church, whereas Tintern Abbey has the main cloister positioned to the north. Castlewales has suggested that the more normal positioning of the main cloister would be to the south of the main church and also postulates that this difference may have been for purely pragmatic reasons such as the positioning of drains.⁹ Indeed, we can see from looking at the supplied floor plan that there are drains marked to the north of the church and cloisters, although it is not evident from the image if this made use of a natural feature to create the drains or if the drains were dug in this location for a separate reason. In contrast to this, Thomas Coomans notes that within the Rule

¹ CADW (meaning to protect) is a Welsh government agency responsible for protecting Welsh heritage sites and monuments.

² CADW, *Tintern Abbey* (2022) < <https://cadw.gov.wales/visit/places-to-visit/tintern-abbey> > [accessed 22 November 2022].

³ Castlewales.com, *Tintern Abbey* (2009) < <http://www.castlewales.com/tintern.html> > [accessed 22 November 2022].

⁴ English Heritage, *The Dissolution* (2022) < <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/dissolution/> > [accessed 22 November 2022].

⁵ Castlewales.com, *Tintern Abbey* (2009) < <http://www.castlewales.com/tintern.html> > [accessed 22 November 2022].

⁶ Paul Meyvaert, ‘The Medieval Monastic Claustrum’, *Gesta*, 12.1 (1973), 53-59 (p.53).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ English Heritage, *Byland Abbey* (2015) < <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/siteassets/home/visit/places-to-visit/byland-abbey/history/byland-abbey-phased-plans.pdf> > [accessed 22 November 2022].

⁹ Castlewales.com, *Tintern Abbey* (2009) < <http://www.castlewales.com/tintern.html> > [accessed 22 November 2022].

of St Benedict there is only one mention of the layout of an abbey, this being chapter 66 which states

If it can be done, the monastery should be so established that all the necessary things, such as water, mill, garden and various workshops, may be within the enclosure, so that there is no necessity for the monks to go outside of it, since that is not profitable for their souls.¹⁰

From this we could understand that whilst there may have been other written instructions specific to the Cistercians that prescribed the ideal layout of an abbey, any such proscriptions were not based directly upon the Rule of St Benedict. We can also see from looking at the identifying text on the supplied image, that the abbey at Tintern does not necessarily conform to the ideal as noted by St Benedict, as there is no mention of a mill, gardens, workshops etc. It also may suggest that the positioning of the cloisters to the north rather than the normality of the south, may not have actually been that significant.

We can also note from the supplied image that the main church has the nave and presbytery oriented south-south-east rather than true east as might be expected from a Christian church. Thomas Coomans notes this normal orientation, with the main church axis running east-west, and that between the 4th and 8th centuries it was normal for the main entrance of the church to be in the west.¹¹ We can also see that the main entrance for the church was in the east rather than the west. Coomans has also noted that this change in position of the main entrance arose in the Carolingian period as a result of ‘liturgical reasons’.¹² To understand the non east-west orientation of the church, we need to look at the work of Stephen McClusky. McClusky notes that the orientation of a church may have been derived from the orientation of the sunrise on the date that the church was founded, or that it may have been from the position of the sunrise on a specific feast day for the saint that the church was dedicated to.¹³ The website for the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance lists two separate days that are dedicated as feast days to the Virgin Mary, to whom all Cistercian churches are dedicated, these being May 31st and September 8th, so it is possible that the main axis of the church at Tintern was aligned to the sunrise on either of these days, although if we accept McClusky’s hypothesis we are left with three separate options for the non east-west alignment of the church.¹⁴ Further work by Arneitz et al which looked at the orientation of churches within Germany, noted that the east-west orientation of the church can be affected by the foundation soil on which it was built, pre-existing buildings and streets within a town as well as the natural

¹⁰ Thomas Coomans, *Life Inside the Cloister. Understanding Monastic architecture: Tradition, Reformation, Adaptive Reuse*, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2018), pp. 21-22.

¹¹ Thomas Coomans, *Life Inside the Cloister. Understanding Monastic architecture: Tradition, Reformation, Adaptive Reuse*, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2018), p. 28.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Stephen C. McClusky, ‘Orientation of Christian Churches’, in *Handbook of Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy*, ed. by Clive L. N. Ruggles (New York: Springer, 2015), pp. 1703-1710, viewed as an abstract available via < [Orientation of Christian Churches | SpringerLink](#) > [accessed 15 November 2022].

¹⁴ Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, *Calendar* (2022) < <https://ocso.org/resources/liturgy/calendar/> > [accessed 22 November 2022].

surroundings,¹⁵ so we can perhaps excuse the deviation from true east-west orientation that is found at Tintern Abbey.

Finally, Michael Carter, a senior properties historian with English Heritage, has noted that ‘by the end of the 13th century the clauses in the legislation of relevance to art and architecture had all but ceased to apply’.¹⁶ As has been seen from the dates on the supplied image, and from the specific date for the foundation of Tintern Abbey, we can see that Tintern would have been within this time frame that Carter is suggesting. We can also see that during the lifetime of the abbey, there was ongoing building and, considering the overlaying of the colours on the key for the same buildings within the abbey complex, remodelling and modification of existing buildings. Castlewales has suggested that the coat of arms of Roger Bigod, the patron responsible for the rebuilding of the church, was displayed within the main east window out of gratitude to him.¹⁷ Carter further notes that

In 1289 and again in 1316 the decrees concerning coloured window glass...were replaced with a general, vaguely worded clause forbidding superfluity and novelty’.¹⁸

This change of edict from within the Cistercian hierarchy would potentially have allowed for this inclusion without punishment of the abbot at Tintern. It may also have allowed for the large amount of rebuilding work that is suggested by the supplied image, which has left us with a magnificent architectural and religious monument today.

Word count: 1334

¹⁵ Patrick Arneitz et al, ‘Orientation of Churches by Magnetic compasses?’, *Geophysical Journal International*, 198.1 (2014,) 1-7 (p. 5) < <https://doi.org/10.1093/gji/ggu107>>.

¹⁶ Michael Carter, ‘It would have pited any heart to see: Destruction and Survival at Cistercian Monasteries in Northern England at the Dissolution’, *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 168.1 (2015), 77-110 (p. 790 < https://d1wqtxts1xzle7.cloudfront.net/52764323/168-77-JBA-38Carter_1-with-cover-page-v2.pdf?Expires=1669132894&Signature=QxwPdSLIOKKHadvuOZCleQNG6Dob8RFGJpH7R0QRNjjQS7pq8QRti8WDnKI3JwVjCq4AdrBzLlVKTdSXaG7IYuMBvmC9BH25gW87yjdqPeP1s1ANzPsz0q0EMcJlu9~NxLONZVoRST3YOTI Q1vHCYErICMNvalRUOSmY5xEmeF-Tn9yJglopjQ2wtBQ9nWH9pO9xMgrZV4EHZM02cax-UZzD3LT8bkBhQlbWtmj6SIlb03IJw-jvLfqa8me46q9aWpF8PjN5i9wWvtSj0yymFpZfZXZOA3IjY6vEJl-6E2wntIzawsvEj019Zrt~-ftFHdIB6OWI30dSd3wvhSZ-jg_&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJLOHF5GGSLRBV4ZA> [accessed 22 November 2022].

¹⁷ Castlewales.com, *Tintern Abbey* (2009) < <http://www.castlewales.com/tintern.html>> [accessed 22 November 2022].

¹⁸ Carter, ‘It would have pited any heart to see: Destruction and Survival at Cistercian Monasteries in Northern England at the Dissolution’ (p. 79)

English Heritage, *Byland Abbey* (2015) < <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/siteassets/home/visit/places-to-visit/byland-abbey/history/byland-abbey-phased-plans.pdf> > [accessed 22 November 2022].



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