



Neath Abbey gothic church ruins in the background of National Heritage plaque.¹

Neath Abbey

The history of Neath starts from the moment when Sir Richard de Grenville, one of the Twelve Knights of Glamorgan built a huge Castle, and funded Neath Abbey.

Yet even though the history of Neath dates back to the early Middle Ages, most of the stories, many albums and books predominantly focus on the coal and ironworks, which seems to be the small town's biggest glory. This probably happens due to people's dreams about a better life, which Neath, as a place of the industry, was able to provide. Each Neath factory or huge business frequently has an incredible story and these stories are often repeated by the townsfolk in such a way that Neath's Dark Ages become covered by their shadow.

This was the case with the old Cistercian Abbey, which during the age of iron has been used as a wasteyard to such a degree that rubbish absolutely covered those massive medieval ruins.²

Located in South Wales - Neath, the ruins of the old abbey are incredibly valuable for approximating medieval culture and techniques. It is places like this, the chronicles, rare paintings, and ruins of castles and churches that shed light on the times of knights and their Christian God as well as help us understand the medieval times better. The well-preserved ruins of Cistercian Monastery are stunning in their size. Neath Abbey was funded in 1129,³ and to fully understand the significance of this place, it is important to realise that rising any buildings at that time required an immense amount of work. All the houses were made from wood and straw and even those were very hard to acquire. All the tools were made by hand, so even cutting the trees required a lot of work, as these were done with a simple axe and hand saw. Moving wood from one place to another once again: was difficult, tools often dulled, and nails were made by hand. The process of wood preparation would take much longer than now, and the ability to read and write was extremely rare, therefore knowledge about tool-making or fixing was passed orally. Such

¹ Robert Pawlikowski, 'Gothic Church – Neath Abbey – Side View', [photography], (2023), Private Collection.

² History Points, *Neath Abbey Ruins, Neath*, N.A., <<https://historypoints.org/index.php?page=neath-abbey-ruins-neath>> [accessed 26 January 2023].

³ Ancient And Medieval Architecture, *Neath – Cistercian Abbey*, N.A., <<https://medievalheritage.eu/en/main-page/heritage/wales/neath-abbey/>> [accessed 26 January 2023].

a background for the people who lived in Wales at that time makes Neath Abbey even more important. The Abbey was built out of stone, in the Romanesque style, akin to the old church which didn't survive as it was later on replaced,⁴ and already at that time was of staggering size.



Abbey Ruins – The Oldest Buildings, Front.⁵

Raising huge stone structures like castles or churches worked as means to show might and instil fear and respect in all of those who would like to oppose it. In regards to the castles the „power” was connected to the ruler of the area, in regards to the place of worship it was about the power of God. The early Middle Ages were the time when Christianity was only officially a religion. At that time the rites were performed in Latin, and knowledge about the new God was not well-known to villagers who were raised to follow their forefather's beliefs. Making such a significant structure, made of stones (some of the stones were too big for one person to carry) would make an enormous impression on local people.

Nowadays, ever since civilisation has grown and progressed, people do not really pay attention to the details anymore. They tend to forget how hard it was to create paper or simple bricks. At the time, when holding a hammer in your hand was an honour, making such a place like Neath Abbey was a remarkable event.

The well-preserved Cistercian Abbey with a beautiful entrance gate shows the mastery of stone craftsmanship. Small stones, hewn stones and huge stones together, all of that remained in such a way that it can be seen almost as it was



Abbey Ruins – The Entrance⁶

⁴ Ancient And Medieval Architecture, *Neath – Cistercian Abbey*.

⁵ Robert Pawlikowski, 'Abbey Ruins – The Oldest Buildings, Front', [photography], (2023), Private Collection.

⁶ Robert Pawlikowski, 'Abbey Ruins – The Entrance', [photography], (2023), Private Collection.

ages ago.

This whole construction would be impossible to make with current cement materials. Constructions like the old Abbey are a clear confirmation that buildings at that time were created through long, hard and dangerous labour. Bonding the stones in a way that they would not only create a structure but that the structure would also last for centuries requires breathtaking abilities which probably came from ancient Rome.⁷ The main ingredient of mortar is limestone, which to be prepared for places like old Abbey requires burning in forges and cooling in water.

Limestone rock is one of the softer rocks you can mine and is much easier to break off in chunks. The rock would be taken to a kiln and placed in alternating layers of rock and coal until it was full up.

The heat causes all of the carbon dioxide to be burned off and converts the limestone into calcium oxide, also known as quicklime. This is a very dangerous substance and the smoke from burning limestone can blind people, so the poor local village boy working on a kiln would have to risk losing his eyesight everyday in exchange for little wages.⁸

Production of mortar at the time was more complicated as it required many people who were either forced or bribed to undertake very dangerous work, which probably they didn't even fully understand:

The coal would eventually turn into ash and start to fall out the bottom, along with pieces of limestone. Some poor local who couldn't find a safer job would have to stand at the entrance with a long rake type tool, and pull out all the pieces of white hot chunks of quicklime as they fell out the bottom.⁹

The real significant structure which was part of Neath Abbey and survived until these days as remarkable ruins is a typical, 67 meters long, gothic church on a Latin cross layout, dated from



Neath Abbey – Gothic Church, Front.¹⁰

7 Katie Hunt, *Mystery Of Why Roman Buildings Have Survived So Long Has Been Unraveled, Scientists Say*, 2023, <<https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/roman-concrete-mystery-ingredient-scn/index.html>> [accessed 26 January 2023].

8 Bushcraft Buddy, *Medieval Mortar Recipe*, 2019, <<https://bushcraftbuddy.com/medieval-mortar-recipe/>> [accessed 26 January 2023].

9 Bushcraft Buddy, *Medieval Mortar Recipe*.

10 Robert Pawlikowski, 'Neath Abbey – Gothic Church, Front', [photography], (2023), Private Collection.

1280-1330.¹¹ The view of its ruins fits beautifully with the plaque marking the national heritage on the fence. This, built for the glory of God, structure has been raised with the idea of showing people how weak their life is, and how powerful Christian God can be. Incredibly high, long, and slender, truly frightening.

At the time of church reformation, in 1539 the monasteries were donated to the Crown, from that moment on they started to be used as residences, just like located on the south-eastern edge the Tudor mansion, first owned by Sir Richard Williams.¹² This mansion up until today leaves a lasting impression with its Renaissance windows.



Neath Abbey – Tudor Mansion¹³

As for now, access to ruins is open to everyone. The place is mostly forgotten, not many locals or tourists can be seen there. This – especially at night, induces unusual, frightening feeling, most likely similar to what people felt ages ago when they were walking nearby.

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13 Robert Pawlikowski, '*Neath Abbey – Tudor Mansion*', [photography], (2023), Private Collection.

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