

Into the Field: Landscape Characterisation

This Landscape Characterisation will primarily focus on the ¹landscape of religion and its effect on the physical landscape of Strata Florida. Religion was a key factor of Strata Florida's popularity throughout the ages, most easily seen through the Cistercian Abbey at the heart of Strata Florida. The impact that the abbey and potentially earlier religious influence had on the landscape surrounding Strata Florida is clear to see. Even in the present day, it could be argued that the tourism brought in by previous religious activity has affected the landscape. We must also be able to define "Landscape" which is not a simple task. Sam Turner states "that 'landscape' is ubiquitous, and secondly, that there are many different ways of living in it, experiencing it, studying and understanding it"² For the purpose of this landscape characterisation, a landscape is going to be defined as something that can be lived through consistently. Therefore, even as religion changes throughout the centuries, it is still consistently present in the area of Strata Florida and so can be considered a landscape.



Throughout Strata Florida, there is plenty of evidence of pre-cistercian religious involvement ³with the site. Many early formations of Religion are present around Strata Florida from the very earliest formations of religious beliefs in Bronze age Wales to the celtic pagans that spread across Europe with main pockets being found in Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Brittany.⁴ It may not be in the traditional idea of a religion, but there is certainly evidence that, at the very least, religious ideology had been present in Strata Florida before the cistercians. An example of this would be in the many bronze age burial cairns found throughout the Strata Florida Woods.⁵ While burial cairns aren't explicitly religious, the belief to bury the dead is, quite often, tied to religious beliefs and the ritual of burying the dead is quite often seen as religious practice. These burials, especially in the bronze age as compared to the neolithic age, were very personal, with the deceased often being buried with things of importance to



¹ Image, Laura Singleton, (2025).

² Sam Turner, *Landscape Archaeology for the Past and Future: The Place of Historic Landscape Characterisation*, (2007), p.40.

³ Image, Laura Singleton, (2025).

⁴ Britannica, *Celtic Religion*, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Celtic-religion>>, (2025), accessed: 18th May 2025.

⁵ Strata Florida Trust, *History*, <<https://www.strataflorida.org.uk/about.html>>, (no date), accessed: 16th May 2025.

them.⁶ So while burial cairns are not religious as they are, it could be argued that the belief behind burning people in such ways with things that were important to them in life, may be perceived as early religious ideology. These cairns are spread throughout Strata Florida and have a large impact on the landscape, especially within the woods. Another potential example of pre-cistercian religious involvement in Strata Florida is the baptismal font within Strata Florida abbey. The font, which is placed near the back of the abbey and in misalignment with the rest of the abbey, could potentially be older than the Cistercian abbey. It would explain why the font is not in a placement that is typical of a cistercian abbey, that would, instead, have it placed near the entrance to the abbey to allow for baptism upon entrance.⁸ The strange placement of the baptismal font may suggest that it predates the Cistercian influence of the area and therefore would be an example of religious influence on the landscape predating



1184. There is the possibility that the baptismal font could have previously been a Welsh sacred well from celtic paganism before being taken over by christianity why the cistercians entered into Strata Florida in the 1160s, thought most Welsh sacred wells were taken over by the church in the sixteenth century with the Protestant Reformation.⁹ Further evidence of it being a Welsh sacred well, would be that another sacred well was found in Strata Florida by archaeologist Caroline Earwood in 1999.¹⁰ This clearly shows that there is evidence of pre-cistercian and even pre-christian religious ideology that has shaped the landscape into how it is today.

The abbey itself is the clearest example of how the area has been impacted by religion. The Cistercians built the abbey in 1184, after having been settled in the area since 1164.¹¹ While there is evidence of parts of the abbey having been older than the known structure such as the baptismal font mentioned earlier, the abbey structure itself is a very obvious cistercian influence on the landscape. It changes the whole layout of Strata Florida as it is the most-eye catching part of the area. With the introduction of the abbey, Cistercian monks will have moved to the abbey and therefore will have needed food and transport routes to other places. This will have shaped the surrounding lands into farm lands and brought in travel routes which will have

⁶ Bannau Brycheiniog, *Bronze Age*, <<https://beacons-npa.gov.uk/planning/heritage2/archaeology/timeline/bronze-age/#:~:text=Round%20Cairns%20%E2%80%93%20these%20are%20sites,such%20as%20Neolithic%20Chambered%20Tombs.>> (2025), accessed: 16th May 2025.

⁷ Image, Laura Singleton, (2025).

⁸ Pastor Rich Lusk, *Entering Through Baptism: A Short Note on the Placement of the Baptismal Font*, <<https://trinity-pres.net/essays/baptismalfont.pdf>>, (no date), accessed: 16th May 2025.

⁹ Welsh Country, *Sacred Springs and Holy Wells*, <<https://www.welshcountry.co.uk/sacred-springs-and-holy-wells/>>, (2024), accessed: 16th May 2025.

¹⁰ The Guardian, *Well of Mystery in Welsh Forest*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/1999/nov/22/maevkennedy>>, (1999), accessed: 16th May 2025.

¹¹ Strata Florida Trust, *History*, <<https://www.strataflorida.org.uk/about.html>>, (no date), accessed: 13th May 2025.

shaped the landscape to benefit the monks. As well as being, structurally, a massive change to the landscape, it will have also changed the social landscape of strata florida. The arrival of the Cistercians will have also changed the religious landscape through the increase in christianity in the area throughout the 1100s. The evidence of sacred wells in the area suggests that the lands of Strata Florida were once home to pagan celts and without knowing when Christianity began to take a strong foothold in the area, it is logical to suggest that the introduction of the Cistercian abbey would have been a turning point for christian ideology in the area. There is also evidence of potential earlier christian involvement in the area with the known Roman roads in the Strata



Florida Woods. This includes a Roman road that¹² stretches from Lampeter to Llanio.¹³ The Romans had originally been considered pagan, but in 313 AD, Christianity had been legalised by the Edict of Milan and in 380 AD Nicene Christianity was made the official religion of Christianity.¹⁴ Though, in 1054, Christianity did split during the Great Schism into Roman Catholic Christianity and Greek Orthodox Christianity after the mutual excommunication of the Patriarch of Rome (The Pope) and the Patriarch of Constantinople.¹⁵ As the Romans first invaded Britain in 43 AD and left during the early 5th

century¹⁶, the Roman roads in Strata Florida could have been built by original Roman Pagans, Roman Nicene Christians or Roman Catholics. Without more information on when the Roman Roads were built, there is no way of knowing whether they were built before or after the conversion to Christianity. No matter when the Romans were present in Strata Florida, they would have still had a deep effect on the religious landscape of the area.

In the modern day, Strata Florida is a tourist destination that is mainly known for its religious history, particularly the abbey. Therefore it is logical to say that the tourism brought in by the religious landscape of the area has also had an impact on the physical landscape of Strata Florida, such as the car parks and visitors centre that would have needed to be put in place to accommodate the tourists brought in by the religious history. The tourists are brought in by the rich history such as it being the resting place of welsh princes and potentially David Ap

¹² Image, Laura Singleton, (2025).

¹³ Coflein, *Roman Road, LLanfair Clydogau*, <<https://coflein.gov.uk/en/site/309950>> (2021), accessed: 17th May 2025..

¹⁴ Rhodes College, *Rome's Conversion to Christianity and its Lasting Legacy*, <<https://sites.rhodes.edu/coins/romes-conversion-christianity-and-its-lasting-legacy>>, (2023), accessed: 17th May 2025.

¹⁵ Britannica, *East-West Schism*, <<https://www.britannica.com/event/East-West-Schism-1054>>, (2025), accessed: 17th May 2025.

¹⁶ English Heritage, *The Roman Invasion of Britain: The Earliest Campaigns AD 43-7*, <<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/romans/invasion/>>, (no date), accessed: 17th May 2025.

Gwilym.¹⁷ Not only does it have a long history that pulls in tourists, but even more recently key figures such as Prince (now King) Charles visiting in 2021 to open the Arddangosfa Mynachlog Fawr Exhibition.¹⁸ With the new exhibition and the publicity brought in from the appearance of the Prince of Wales, Strata Florida will have brought in even more tourism which again would have had an impact on the landscape surrounding Strata Florida. Strata Florida also has a pilgrimage route to it which will also bring people to visit the abbey and grounds, whether they are just walking or are visiting for religious reasons, it is still going to have an impact on the physical landscape and the religious landscape of Strata Florida.¹⁹

To conclude, the religious landscape of Strata Florida has impacted the area over a vast period of time. From celtic pagans and Romans to Cisterians and modern Christians, Strata Florida has played host to multiple religions throughout time and will continue to play host to a vast variety of beliefs in the future, just as these religions will impact and influence the area of Strata Florida well into the future as they have done for generations. Strata Florida plays host to many examples of Religious impacts on the landscape, such as the bronze age cairns, the abbey and the roman roads. It is clear to say that Religion has had a significant impact on the area over a prolonged period of time and will continue to do so.

¹⁷ Cadw, *Strata Florida Abbey*, <<https://cadw.gov.wales/visit/places-to-visit/strata-florida-abbey#:~:text=The%20Cistercian%20abbey%20of%20Strata,the%20river%20Teifi%20since%201184.>>, (2025), accessed: 18th May 2025.

¹⁸ Cambrian News, *Prince Visits Strata Florida*, <<https://www.cambrian-news.co.uk/news/prince-visits-strata-florida-504293>>, (2021), accessed: 18th May 2025.

¹⁹ British Pilgrimage Trust, *Strata Florida Abbey/ Abaty Ystrad Fflur, Strata Florida*, <<https://www.britishpilgrimage.org/places/strata-florida-abbey-abaty-ystrad-fflur-strata-florida>>, (no date), accessed: 18th May 2025.

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