

HPAR6004 - Landscape characterisation: Strata Florida

This characterisation will focus on the medieval period at Strata Florida Abbey but taking into consideration previous periods which impact upon the development of the area geologically and environmentally as well as culturally.

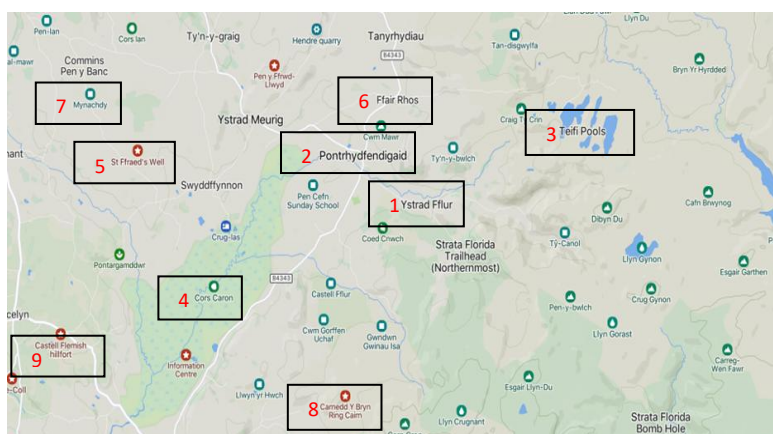


Strata Florida Abbey, Abbey Road, Pontrhydfendigaid, Ceredigion, Wales, SY25 6ES (Maps 1, 2.1,3.1; Cadw, 2025), grid reference SN74656577 (Teifi Faith Trail, 2025), is on the Western side of the Cambrian mountains east of the village of Pontrhydfendigaid (Maps 2.2, 3.2) on the B4343 between Tregaron and Aberystwyth (Austin, 2022, p.4) and is approximately 40 miles North of Carmarthen (Sables, 2015, p.8). Strata Florida translates from Latin as Vale of Flowers and is called Ustrad Fflur in Welsh (Discovering Britain, 2025). The ruins of Strata Florida Abbey, post-medieval church of

Saint Mary's, the Georgian vernacular style 18th–19th-century farmhouse (Mynachlog Fawr) and associated buildings are built mainly of local stone. The abbey had substantial ranges from which there was utilisation of resources, for instance there is evidence of spoil heaps from old lead mines from throughout the Cistercian period (Heneb, 2025). Surveys carried out by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW) and Andrew Fleming show possible prehistoric field boundaries and two sepulchral cairns at Troed-y-Rhiw, 2km east of Strata Florida that later belonged to the abbey (Coflein, 2021).

12,000 years ago, glaciers shaped the landscape by a process of erosion and abrasion as they moved down the hills creating U-shaped valleys, freezing, thawing and depositing debris until the glaciers melted into lakes such as the Teifi pools (Map 2.3). The fast-flowing water cut gorges into the hills such as the Glasffrwd (Map 3.4). Approximately 10,000 years ago, all glacial traces had gone, and the bare land was replaced by vegetation, trees such as birch, hazel, elm, pine and oak. Approximately 7,000 years ago Mesolithic hunter-gatherers moved through the landscape looking for animals such as deer and wild cattle and alder trees started to replace pine (Austin, 2022, p.9). 5,000 years ago, elm trees started to decline, thought to be attributed to 'Neolithic arable farming and settlement, disease, or hunter management,' and peat began forming, evidence of which can be seen at Carnedd-Y-Bryn Ring Cairn (Map 2.8). Surveys carried out at Strata Florida showed pre-19th-century spoil heaps that may date back to Bronze Age mining (Sables, 2015, p.8). The Iron Age in Britain

c.700 BCE lasted until the Romans took over (c.80-150 AD) (Austin, 2022, p.3). It was during this time Iron-Age hillforts surrounded the site of Strata Florida, such as Pen-y-bannau (head of the peaks) to the north (Map 3.5), and Castell Flemish to the south-west (Map 2.9). The area had complex communities with 'tribal hierarchies' that ruled over the lowland farming communities (Austin, 2022, p.3). Roman roads in Britain such as the Sarn Helen that once cut across all of Wales through the forests and mountains were completed by c.100 AD allowing Roman troops and goods to be transported across the country (Lewis, 2025; Johnson, 2025). The Romans introduced Christianity to Britain and by c.314 AD it had become legally established (Johnson, 2025). In the Middle Ages farms were occupied all year round, laws had been set, boundaries changed and attempts to extend territories and farmland were made on the uplands, increasing the acidity of the soil which impeded tree regeneration (Austin, 2022, p.7, 10, 16). The landscape around Strata Florida was initially used as open pastures with enclosures for cattle and other animals to be managed during their movement at different times of the year (Austin, 2022, p.7). From the Bronze Age (c.2000 BCE), humans began to settle in permanent farms, maintaining their hunting activities and protecting their land from predators, with the mountain tops remaining relatively treeless (Austin, 2022, p.8,10).



Map 2: Strata Florida (Map Carta, 2025).

Strata Florida	1
Pontrhydfendigaid	2
Teifi pools	3
Cors Caron	4
St Ffraeds Well	5
Ffair Rhos	6
Mynachdy	7
Carnedd-Y-Bryn Ring Cairn	8
Castell Flemish hillfort	9

Water was one of the most vital resources to life in every period in history, the river Teifi (Map 3.3) flows west to Teifi Pools (Map 2.3) and turns south into Cors Caron (Map 2.4) before entering the Irish



Image 1: Strata Florida Holy Well (The Curious Scribbler, 2017).

Sea near Cardigan (Austin, 2022, p.4). Cors Caron is on the flat glaciated floor of the Teifi Valley and was previously much larger, the glacial meltwater slowly filled in with silt and peat to create the wetlands (Austin, 2022, p.6, 7, 9). The river Teifi joins its tributary river Glasffrwd, on the south side of the abbey which comes from its source at Blaenglasffrwd. Within the hills at Glasffrwd ancient upright stone monuments can be found as well as cairns and narrow paths near an ancient lake now filled

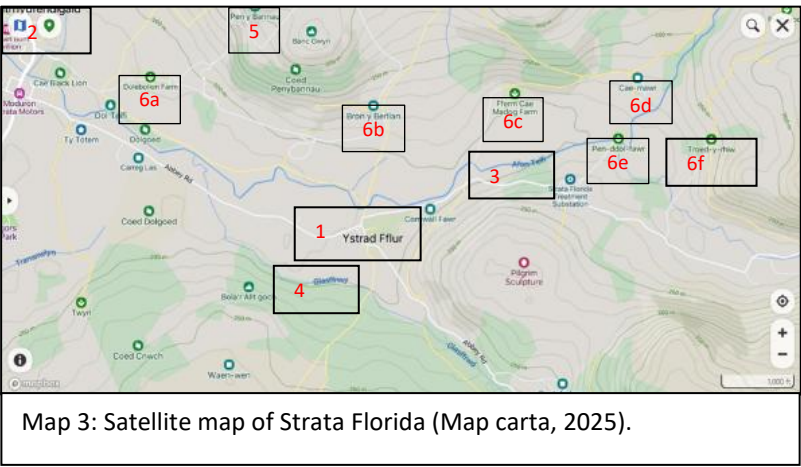
with peat, on boggy ground with numerous springs and was probably used as a 'water worship or celebration site' (Austin, 2022, p.4). Glasffrwd holy well was uncovered by forestry workers in 1982, buried under four feet of peat it had three steps and a rectangular cistern, and may have been a medieval well for medicinal purposes to treat eye complaints (Primary Reference Number: 36494 in Archwilio, 2025; Austin, 2021). The river Ystwyth cut into the Teifi valley at Pontrhydygroes making it shorter and becoming the source of the Teifi pools. Teifi pools are a series of small glacial lakes in the Cambrian mountains, famous for having an abundance of fish and also good for supplying clean drinking water (Discovering Britain, 2025). Strata Florida's Well (Image 1) and St Ffraeds Well (Map 2.5) belong to a group of holy wells in the upper Teifi valley (Austin, 2022, p.28, 30).

The Cistercian Monks were a Christian religious order that formed in 1089AD, they followed the rule of Saint Bernhard who founded the order of Abbot of Clairvaux, living away from temptation on low-lying land surrounded by water that contained other valuable resources such as woodlands and minerals, the water was used for transportation of goods, sanitation, and for working their machinery. The Cistercians offered the surrounding communities protection from violence and hunger and large numbers of men and women joined their order as unpaid or paid workers whilst expanding new ideas and technologies (Sables, 2015, p.9). The monks accepted payment in kind from the locals, known as spiritualities, including tithes and gifts of piety (Austin, 2022, p.44). Pilgrimages to monasteries were regularly occurring during the periods when Strata Florida was flourishing, and an abbey with potentially healing water would likely have been attended by pilgrims, as well as being a stopover place for travellers generally (Austin, 2022 and 2021). Ysbyty Ystwyth situated between Ffair-Rhos (Map 2.6) and Pont-Rhyd-y-Groes is thought to have been the property of the Order of the Knights Hospitaller of St John of Jerusalem due to the dedication of the church to Saint John the Baptist, however, may have been a hospice belonging to Strata Florida (Ceredigion Historical Society, 2025) or used by travellers to Strata Florida (Discover Ceredigion, 2025). The former Cistercian monastery of Strata Florida was first founded in 1164 by Norman Barron Robert Fitz Stephen and then re-founded by Lord Rhys the Welsh Prince of Deheubarth who gave the Cistercian monks the land (Austin, 2022, p.2; Heneb, 2025).

Sheltered by the Cambrian mountains, in a remote landscape, the monks could dedicate their lives to prayer, helping others whilst supporting themselves and making money. With wool being an important commodity, the Cistercian monks had large sheep flocks and there was plenty of good grazing land on the hills (Austin, 2022, p.8; Discovering Britain, 2025; Sables, 2015, p.10). The hills were also rich in minerals such as lead, zinc and silver which would have been extracted by the monks. Lead was used for various tasks such as making stained glass windows or using it on roofs

(Discovering Britain, 2025). Quartz with its high resistance to physical and chemical weathering is found in abundance at Strata Florida and is a frequent component of mineral veins of all types, resistant to most acids it can trap and preserve inclusions which can reveal information on temperatures and mineral compositions when they were crystallised. Nearby mines such as the Frongoch a lead and zinc mine in Devils Bridge produced large beds of single pyramid crystals from 4-10cm in size and Hendreffelin mine, Ysbyty Ystwyth produced slightly smaller crystals, in addition, remnants of ruined buildings scattered within the landscape point to a more industrial past in this area of Ceredigion generally (Museum Wales, 2025; Discover Ceredigion, 2025).

The Abbey Woods are approximately 200 acres of deciduous woodland 1½ miles South of Strata Florida, founded on an earlier site (a farm called Hen Fynachlog) in the upper Teifi Valley. Historic management and archaeological earthworks on the woodland floor demonstrate the land may have been agricultural land before woodland. The woodland may have been planted in the twelfth century when the abbey was founded and would have been the main source of wood for the abbey for building and fuel (Austin, 2022, p.40; Austin, Bezant and Barker, 2022, p.1; Discovering Britain, 2025).



Map 3: Satellite map of Strata Florida (Map carta, 2025).

Strata Florida	1
Pontrhydfendigaid	2
Teifi	3
Glasffrwd	4
Pen y bannau	5
Dôl-ebolion	6a
Bron-y-berlan	6b
Cae-Madog	6c
Cae-Mawr	6d
Dôl fawr	6e
Troedy-rhiw	6f

The abbey may have taken over some of the surrounding pre-existing farms listed in the 1184 charter to provide themselves with ‘food, fuel and materials’ such as is seen in the fields (Map 3.6a-f) Dôl-yr-ychain ‘the meadow of the oxen’, Bryn-hope ‘the hill of the pigs’, Dôl-beidiau ‘the meadow of the cow sheds’ or dairy, Dôl fawr ‘the great meadow’ used for hay (Map 3.6e), Dôl-ebolion ‘the meadow for the foals’ (Map 3.6a) for the horses, Bron-y-berlan ‘the slope of the orchard’ for growing fruit (Map 3.6b), Cae-Madog ‘Madog’s field’ (Map 3.6c), Cae-Mawr’ (Map 3.6d), a big field which was both used for growing grain and one farm on the south side of the abbey sacrificed to create the abbey woods (Austin, 2022, p.40). In 1295 it was recorded that the monks had 428 cattle

and approximately 1,327 sheep however, they probably had more at Troedy-rhiw (Map 3.6f) which had sheds, pens and reservoirs for handling the animals (Austin, 2022, p.41).

The Cistercians were skilled farmers who developed new irrigation methods and introduced crops from Europe such as rice, sugarcane and citrus fruit. The monks were also skilled craftsmen and engineers who developed watermill technology, using them to pump water for irrigation and process crops. Watermills shifted industrial organisation and power out of urban centres and into more rural areas such as Strata Florida. Before the thirteenth century fulling was done manually, workers would stamp on or beat the cloth and the process was labour-intensive, the fulling mill (such as Mefenydd Melyn Irryd Vendigid, Reference: 12955 in Archwilio, 2025) allowed the work to be done with wooden hammers powered by water and could be overseen by just one person. The waterwheel was one of the oldest sources of power used for grinding grain, driving sawmills and processing textiles and the rivers Glasffrwd and Teifi would have powered Strata Florida's mill (Reference: 12819 in Archwilio, 2025; Discovering Britain, 2025). The mill possibly provided power for activities such as hide tanning, rock crushing, beer brewing, wood cutting, forging metals and sewage disposal, playing an important role in the monks daily life. Mills saved time and money, increasing the production of goods and work completed for markets, helping to provide financial independence which opened up greater economic opportunities in the area (Anastasi, 2023). Medieval markets included craft stalls, food and entertainment, goods such as livestock, tools, salt and spices and a place for communities to come together to socialise (Wales Past, 2025). The nearby town of Tregaron is the oldest market town in Wales, receiving a Royal Charter in 1292 and is at the beginning of a known drovers road that led across the Cambrian mountains to the markets in England (Tregaron Heritage, 2025).

In 1238 AD. Llywellyn ap Iorwerth held a council in the abbey receiving allegiances from the other Welsh princes 'which led to the abbey being seen as the spiritual home of the Welsh people in comparison to the Norman Cathedral at Saint David's in Pembrokeshire'(Sables, 2015, p.10), this brought them in direct conflict with the English crown who were unhappy with the support for Welsh identity and independence (Austin, 2022, p.2). Expansion of the Cistercians was impeded by the fourteenth century due to the Hundred Years' War and the Black Death reducing numbers and cohesion which allowed the disruption caused by the Normans. Strata Florida abbey ceased to be called a monastery in 1539, and in 1547 Ferrers of Staffordshire was appointed as bailiff of the whole estate, including abbey granges, such as the Mynachdy (Map 2.7), the house at the site of the monastery, and all other houses, buildings, barns, stables, dovecots, walled gardens, and orchards. The area around the old monastery called Demesnes was classed as a different property. The Steadman family bought the estate in 1571 (Austin, 2022, p.68) and mineral rights on former abbey

lands, mining lead, funded ambitious building projects for mansions and parklands and Strata Florida's income went to Nanteos (Powells) rather than the Steadman mansion (Austin, 2022, p.80).

Overall, the site of Strata Florida was ideal for the Cistercians to settle, it had a good source of clean and even potentially healing water, a landscape offering protection through the hills behind, plenty of woodland and stone for building, and a fertile glacial valley to grow crops and feed animals. In addition to this the multiple lead deposits in the area offered not only the ability to produce their own leaded windows and roofs, but also to supply all the needs of the granges belonging to Strata Florida as well as being able to trade the excess to help fund the abbey which would ultimately been quite wealthy as a result.

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