

UWTSD

History and Theory 1

The story of St Illtyd Church

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Figure 1 – Approach to St Illtyd Church (Author, 2025)

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St Illtyd, Neath, is a small grade II listed church built during the 13th or 14th Century, with the earliest reference to the church being an advowson in 1344 (Eaton, 1982). The grounds the church is built on is theorised by local historians to be the location St Illtyd stayed during lent in the 6th century. Here he was said to have constructed a small oratory, (Heyward, 1997), on the riverbank.



Figure 2 –St Illtyd Church in Wales
(Google Earth et al, 2019)



Figure 3 – Location Plan
(Author, 2025)

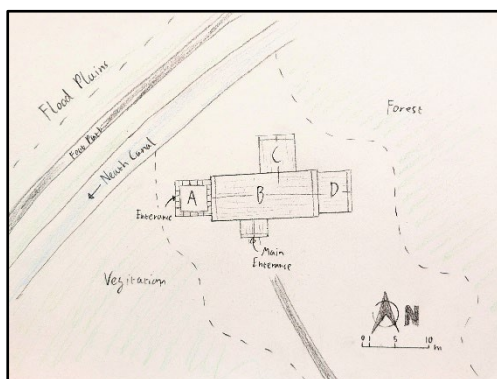


Figure 4 – Site Plan
(Author, 2025)



Figure 5 – Ground View
Labelled (Author, 2025)

There is little proof St Illtyd stayed at the River Neath or the River Nedd, however, there is evidence, in an anthology, that he visited the River Nadawan in the summer where “he constructed a covering of reeds”, (Rees, 1853, p. 469). I could find no other instance of the term ‘Nadawan’ in reference to Wales other than this story, however, there was a prominent 1st century roman fort built next to the River Neath named ‘Nidum’ (Wright, 1949). Therefore, due to the similarities of the river names this could be an old name for the River Nedd.

The church can be divided into 4 structures, the oldest and most prominent is the 14th century Norman style square tower, (figure 5, A). Over time the church has gone through 3 major renovations, the first being in the 16th Century where the nave, (figure 4, B), was built, possibly a reconstruction. The canal that sits next to the church, built in-between the church and the river (figure 4), was constructed in 1795 by Thomas Dadford, (Neath & Tennant Canals Trust, 2025); This is now a major feature of the church. After this the church underwent a large Victorian renovation which occurred in 1859, the floor was lifted 0.45m to avoid flooding from the canal and the windows replaced with new stained glass, (Coflein, 2021). Additionally, the church was expanded, and extensions were built, (figure 4, C&D), completing the current form of the church today.

The turret tower has wide stone battered walls extending up to a prominent parapet with crenelations. Due to the small windows and practical features British Listed Buildings, (2021), claims it could have been used as a defensible structure.



Figure 6 – Tower from door
(Author, 2025)



Figure 7 – Tower Windows
(Author, 2025)



Figure 8 – Tower Door
(Author, 2025)



Figure 9 – Decoration
(Author, 2025)

There are a few small windows on the tower with one interesting exception, two twin Victorian stained-glass windows, (figure 7&8), that is placed above a wide segmental arch doorway. The window lintel extends down partially on each side, and between the windows; this part of the façade seems to be of the original construction. The windows are adorned with old stone carvings above them, set under the lintel. Only one of these circular symbols are legible, (figure 9), and look to have either three arms or four, (figure 10). I suspect that the symbol could depict the

Celtic cross, (figure 11), or a cross pattée (figure 12). The Celtic cross is a symbol that has been used in Wales since the 7th century and was adapted in many Romanesque structures over time (Edwards, 2001, p. 29). The cross pattée, a similar four-armed symbol, has a more modern significance in Neath due to its use by Neath RFC, the symbol does also have historic significance in South Wales. The two windows sit skewed to the side of each of the carvings, I suspect this could be because during one of the extensions the windows were widened to let more light into the tower.



Figure 10 – Decoration
Interpretation (Author, 2025)



Figure 11 – Early Christian
Crosses (Bell, 2025)

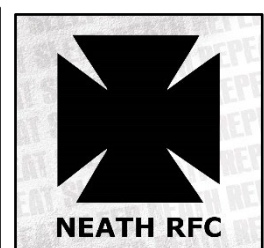


Figure 12 – Neath RFC
(Chapman, 2025)

There are multiple inset gravestones and plaques on the exterior walls. One of these is an extruding structure off of the nave with four gravestones placed to form the shape of a cross, (figure 14). Due to the varying dates on the gravestones, ranging from 1617 to 1749, I assume the graves were placed there



Figure 13 – West Face Inset Gravestones (Author, 2025)



Figure 14 – Gravestone Cross (Author, 2025)

due to their importance, or after a need for relocation. The plaques on the East face, (figure 13), have lintels and bare multiple entries on both plaques like a list, ranging from 1701 to 1793. Due to their placement on the Victorian extension, they could have been made to commemorate famous figures of the church or just reused from the original construction.

The aisleless nave of the church points East, and after an extensive interior renovation in 2003, (Afon Nedd Ministry Area, 2022), the interior stone walls have been clad with lime mortar, and the floor redone in stone. The clean and warm interior of the church contrasts greatly with the starker and harder exterior. The intricate timber truss

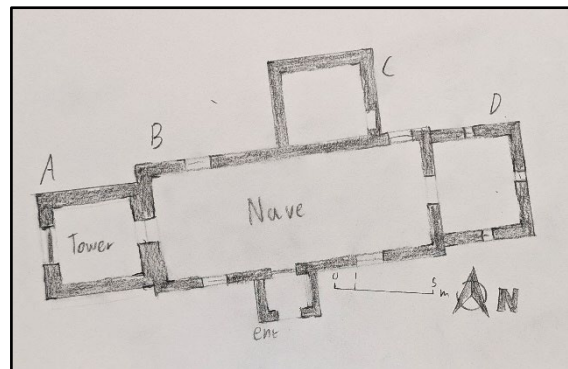


Figure 15 – Floor Plan (Author, 2025)



Figure 16 – Nave (St Illtyd Church, 2021)

roof extends across the narrow nave, lifted off of the stone walls to help the room appear taller. This also helps to create a gradual change between wall and ceiling, softening the impression of the space, (figure 16). The wooden struts extend up at an angle from rafter to rafter, as they intersect they are jointed flush, (figure 17), this roof was probably installed in the Victorian renovation of the church. The trusses are now illuminated by electrical lighting brought in by the latest renovation, splitting their shadows across the roof and creating the illusion of a warm fire or candle, forming a comfortable atmosphere.

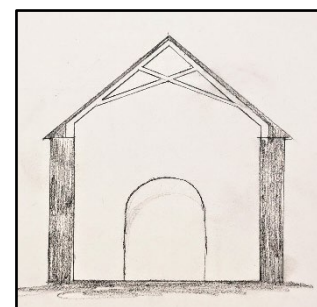


Figure 17 – Section (Author, 2025)

The tower base, nave and Victorian extension have been brought into one room by large semi-circular arches. The Victorian extension is raised to a double decker pew and the other Victorian extension to the North is used for storage and personal prayer. The nave can be accessed by either the wide tower door or by the smaller main entrance depending on the event, (figure 15). The church is currently regularly used every Thursday and the first Sunday of every month; it is also used as a location for weddings and funerals.

The main materials used in its construction is solid stone, with lime mortar clad on the interior and evidence of lime mortar on the tower and Victorian extension. The roof is timber, with a damp proof course laid beneath slate tiles, while the floor is dressed in large stone slabs. The double pew is constructed from wood and all the chequered stained-glass windows are from the Victorian renovation.

Despite the churches small size, it has a deep history that reflects on every corner of the churches form, structure and decoration, yet the church stands in near obscurity with even the local historians refraining to investigate it. A story of Neath is told through this building, from Celtic Christian origins to a decorative Victorian renovation. This church is a testament to how time can affect a structure. Through this investigation I have learned to not just to look for the large details a building can offer but also looking for stories in the smallest details and forms.

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