

Medieval Wales

The Medieval period was a time in history that had reshaped many nations and caused a big impact throughout Europe. Through advancements in mining productions or diseases spreading throughout the continent, this period of time created some ideas and documents that still have meaning in modern times. Wales is no exception to this development and even the smallest villages hold some very important history that has yet to be rediscovered.

Llanllyr is a village located in the Aeron Valley in Ceredigion. The Aeron valley is named after the river Aeron and is home to many farms. Located in Llanllyr is a farm with the present house being built in 1826. This farm houses many sheep and cows, as well as a garden that has been there since the 18th century by the Lewis family. The Lewes family had purchased this house in 1720 and still own it today.

While this farm is known for its animal and water productions, there have been many discoveries made throughout its fields. During a field excavation, it was discovered that there lied a cistercian nunnery that would have been founded around the year 1180. This had been a great discovery since cistercian nunneries were not common in Wales during the medieval times. The mother-house for this particular nunnery was the cistercian abbey located in Strata Florida. The nunnery was founded by Rhys ap Gruffudd and had originally consisted of sixteen nuns. At this nunnery they would have farmed sheep and cattle as well as tended mills, orchards, and fishponds ([Medievalists.net](https://www.medievalists.net), 2014). It was dissolved on 26 February, 1537 because of the 1536 Act of Suppression which saw the dissolutions of monasteries under Henry VIII. After the dissolution of the nunnery it was converted into a tudor mansion most likely by Morgan Lloyd, High Sheriff of Powys 4 times (Britain Express). The Lewes family had purchased the land in 1720 and had planted a garden on the estate. In 1826 they had rebuilt the house again using the stones from the original dwelling to build the new one.

Nunneries during this time were very important and also very rare, especially in Wales. Since women did not have the same rights as they do now, leading a free life would have been very challenging during that time since women were expected to marry and run a house. The women in nunneries were able to have access to higher education, social welfare provisions, and not have to worry about social structures, which are things that women not in nunneries would not have access to (Landesmuseum Zurich, 2020). The reasoning for there being so few nunneries in Wales was because the Cistercians were opposed to the idea of having women join their order and they had even asked the pope to not allow monks to visit the nunneries in fear of corruption (Laidlaw, 2020). There were also very few women who had possession of land during this time and did not have money to fund the monastery, men were also dissuaded from becoming patrons of nunneries which made it difficult since they would have had possession of most things. This did not stop a few nunneries from appearing in Wales and creating a big impact on the Cistercian order.

The Cistercian abbey located in Strata Florida was one of the most important monastery in Wales. It was first founded in 1164 by Rhys ap Gruffudd, meaning he opened the nunnery sixteen years later than the mother house. This land where the monastery stood was very sacred, even when the first settlers had begun to set up farms in Wales. Rhys had given these farmers a lot of land in order to properly run their farms, which led them to become very loyal to him (Cadw, 2026). This land had a very prominent Welsh culture surrounding it. Once the monasteries were built, the monks who lived there would write many of the central Welsh texts that are still important to this day including the tales of the

Mabinogian (Cadw, 2026). Since this place was very Welsh centric, the English who were residing in Wales had a great disdain for it and once Henry VIII had dissolved the monasteries, Strata Florida had to be shut down. Many stories and items that are important to Welsh history come from this land and it has remained very influential even after the medieval times.

Mining played a very crucial role in Welsh history and the Cistercians were very involved even though they were not supposed to partake in the economic aspect of society. The monks of Strata Florida had very rich silver deposits and there was written evidence which included the words 'all the fatness of the earth below', which suggests they were using the minerals from the ground (David Sables, 2015). Even so, there are not many documents that provide evidence that the Cistercians did in fact mine the resources near their abbeys, but there are many resources that were used by them that would suggest this theory (David Sables, 2015). Other than in the monasteries, mining was very important for Wales. Wales is known for the vast amount of minerals that can be found throughout the land, including coal which was a very profitable industry. During the medieval period it was mostly coal that was dug up using in-filled shafts and spoil heaps which would eventually become the North Wales Coalfield (LCMLA).

Ceredigion used to be a kingdom of its own. Cardigan's first castle was built by the normans, but the Welsh revolted against them in 1136. They had a decisive victory even though they did not manage to take control of the castle. Rhys ap Gruffudd, also known as Lord Rhys ap Gruffudd, was among those who fought against the normans, he was a descendant of Hywel Dda and was a prince of the house Dinefwr (Middle Ages, 2019). He became the ruler of Deheubarth at the age of 25. Deheubarth was a kingdom which was comprised of Ceredigion, Ystrad Tywi, and Dyfed. Dyfed in the modern day covered many counties, such as Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire, most of Swansea, and some Ceredigion. Rhys had reclaimed and demolished the castle that the normans built in 1165 as well as capturing the nearby Cilgerran castle. Rhys had decided to build a new stone castle at Cardigan and upon its completion has held a festival in 1176 which would be known as the first Eisteddfod (Middle Ages, 2019). He would also be a benefactor for the Cistercian abbey in Strata Florida and had founded Talley Abbey.

Before Wales had become a united nation, it was filled with familial feuds, until one family was able to ascertain power over Wales and unite the country which were the princes of Gwynedd (Cadw, 2026). Originally Wales had been separated into different kingdoms, this included Brycheiniog, Powys, Deheubarth, Gwent, and Morgannwg until the Gwynedd brothers rose to power (Middle Ages, 2019). Throughout this period of time Wales was fighting against the Normans who were wanted to conquer Wales, who were already attempting to conquer England, which led to a lot of rebellions which ensued. During this time was also when many of Welsh castles were built as signs of rebellion. After Lord Rhys had died, the kingdom of Deheubarth was broken up by his legitimate and illegitimate sons and eventually an uneasy truce was formed once the English crown recognised the costs and instability to conquer Wales. Wales was also affected by many of the issues faced by other countries, most notably the Black Plague which killed up to one third of the Welsh population, but also starvation and other diseases which threatened the lives of those living during this time (Middle Ages, 2019).

Wales has seen a lot of development throughout its history. The middle ages allowed Wales to become a united nation and develop a sense of connection between the people which was not there before. They were also able to progress with the help of the Cistercian order that produced many of the important documents that are still relevant in the present.

Llanllyr also had a big impact on the development of the country since it produce the remains of one of the only nunneries that existed in Wales during the middle ages.

Sources

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