

The Carmarthen Priory

Founded by King Henry I as a Benedictine Priory (c.1110), Carmarthen has a complex and interesting history. Monastic orders followed codes which members organized their lives by. They were ‘tools of virtue for right-living monks,’¹ emphasizing different avenues of religious life, but always focusing heavily on worship and prayer. The orders, as Krijn Pansters says, established ‘unity through scriptural interpretation, spiritual edification, and the enunciation of precepts and prohibitions.’² For St. Benedict, fostering a religious community was vital. The focus was not on the individual’s journey, but on perfection reached by exemplifying and exchanging virtue *for* one another.³ Through the ‘labor of obedience’⁴ one could shuck off his old skin of willful disobedience and return to the Lord.

King Henry gifted the church cell to Battle Abbey because he ‘cherished...’ the Abbey ‘with great affection’⁵ and so, in honor of St. Peter, he founded Carmarthen. Nobles established monasteries because it gave them a sense of status but also because the prayers of religious men and women devoted to God were highly valued.⁶ As the founder, the monks of the monastery would pray for Henry’s salvation; those prayers held enormous weight for Medieval people. On top of the salvific element, Henry strengthened his position by entrusting ‘loyal Anglo-Norman magnates with strategic holdings in Wales.’⁷ Carmarthen Priory could be seen as another avenue of reinforcing that authority in Wales.

The location of Carmarthen is veiled in mythical history as the wizard Merlin was said to have been born there and even buried there, “entombed” underneath a hill by his lover, Nimue.⁸ This geographical tie to Merlin connected the monastery to a golden age of Britain when the country

¹ St. Benedict, *St. Benedict’s Rule for Monasteries*, (trans.) Leonard J. Doyle (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2015), p. 114 [Project Gutenberg].

² Krijn Pansters, *A Companion to Medieval Rules and Customaries*, 93 (Boston: Brill, 2020), p.4 <https://brill-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/display/book/edcoll/9789004431546/BP000001.xml?body=pdf-133841> [accessed 23 October 2025].

³ *Ibid.*, p 50.

⁴ St. Benedict, *St. Benedict’s Rule for Monasteries*, p. 7.

⁵ Janet Burton and Karen Stober, ‘Carmarthen- Details of Foundation, C.1110’, *Monasticwales.org* <<https://www.monasticwales.org/event/88>> [accessed 25 October 2025].

⁶ English Heritage, ‘Episode 125 - Ask the Experts: Everything You Want to Know about England’s Monasteries’, *SoundCloud* (2021) <<https://soundcloud.com/englishheritage/episode-125-ask-the-experts-everything-you-want-to-know-about-englands-monasteries>> [accessed 25 October 2025].

⁷ Janet Burton and Karen Stober, ‘Carmarthen-king of England, lord of Normandy,’ *Monasticwales.org* <<https://www.monasticwales.org/person/67>> [accessed 10 November 2025].

⁸ Robert Davies, ‘Ancient History Brings Modern Benefits’, *Farmers Weekly*, 140, 6 (Sutton: Mark Allen Group Ltd., 2004), p. 71.
<<https://www.proquest.com/docview/224737892/fulltextPDF/4BC3937BF01D4E57PQ/1?accountid=130472&sourcetype=Trade%20Journals>> [accessed 25 October 2025].

symbolized an eternal empire, a “second Troy.”⁹ This is reminiscent of the monastic desire to return to the purity and simplistic nature of apostolic life.

One of the most significant moments in its history was the switch from a Benedictine to Augustinian Order c. 1125 resulting from a jurisdiction dispute between Bishop Urban of Llandaff, a native Welshman, and Bishop Bernard of St. Davids. Bishop Bernard was loyal to King Henry and protected his interest in Wales. If his diocese diminished, the royal authority in those areas would diminish as well. Wishing to recover the priory and ‘relentless’¹⁰ in his fight, Bernard convinced Henry I to grant it back to St. Davids, displacing the Benedictine monks and replacing them with Augustinian Canons. This allowed him to fortify royal influence in an area already strongly in support of the Anglo-Norman authority. It was imperative for the King to ensure ‘Bernard episcopal rights over the lands which they held in temporal or ecclesiastical jurisdiction.’¹¹ Bernard chose Carmarthen as he already had ties there due to ‘collecting military aid owed to the king by the men of the honour of Carmarthen.’¹² Edward Knight notes that the areas where ‘the fighting between the Anglo-Normans and their supporters and the followers of Gruffydd ap Rhys took place, were often to be the areas where the Llandaff dispute centered.’¹³

The Rule of St. Augustine emphasized a community with one heart and one soul, focusing less on strict asceticism. His observances understood individuals as unique; food and clothing should be dealt out ‘to each one in proportion to his need’¹⁴ and it was recognized that one should only fast to the extent their health could handle it. Accommodations were made for those who could not endure what stronger men could.¹⁵

It was under this order, c. 1250 that a single scribe compiled *The Black Book of Carmarthen*. Considered one of the oldest surviving manuscripts in the Welsh language, it is at its heart a book of poetry. Three poems are related to Merlin, though only ‘Myrddin a Taliesin’s Conversation’ refers to him by name. However, Geoffrey of Monmouth calls Merlin the prophet of these verses.¹⁶ *The Black Book* adds to the corpus of legend surrounding Carmarthen and Merlin.

⁹ Geoffrey Of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. by Aaron Thompson. rev. by J.A Giles (Ontario : In Parentheses Publications, 1999), MEDIEVAL LATIN SERIES, p. 13

<https://www.yorku.ca/inpar/geoffrey_thompson.pdf> [accessed 25 October 2025].

¹⁰ Janet Burton and Karen Stober, ‘Carmarthen- Details of Dissolution, C.1125’, *Monasticwales.org*

<<https://www.monasticwales.org/event/89>> [accessed 25 October 2025].

¹¹ Edward Charles Knight, ‘The Life and Career of Bishop Bernard of St. David’s (1100-1148)’, (Doctoral Thesis, Swansea University, 2000], p. 100. < <https://cronfa.swan.ac.uk/Record/cronfa42284>> [accessed 11 November 2025] .

¹² Ibid., p. 85.

¹³ Ibid., p. 82.

¹⁴ George Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), Ch. VII.

¹⁵ Ibid., Ch VII.

¹⁶ National Library Of Wales, ‘Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin - Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru’, *Llyfrgell.cymru*

<<https://www.llyfrgell.cymru/darganfod-dysgu/arddangosfeydd-arlein/llawysgrifau/yr-oesoedd-canol/llyfr-du-caerfyrddin>> [accessed 25 October 2025].

During the Owain Glyn Dŵr rebellion, the priory was pillaged and for the next 18 years, it suffered under the mismanagement of its prior. In 1421, Henry V handed it over to John Russel and the prior from Llanthony Secunda for administrative management. In 1534, portending its eventual suppression, Prior Griffin Williams affirmed Henry VIII's authority as the head of the English Church, severing ties with the Roman Pope's as he refused to grant Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon. The Act of Supremacy was followed by the Act of Suppression and in 1537, the Priory of Carmarthen was dissolved. Tragically, none of the structure survives.

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