

Trail Two – The Cain Valley Trail

St Garmon, Llanfechain

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Llanfechain

Llanfechain lies off the main Llansantffraid to Llanfyllin road. The village has developed between this road and the River Cain, with the church of St Garmon and its large, raised circular churchyard at its centre. As well as the church, the village has a school, village hall, and the Plas yn Dinas inn. Llanfechain is the birth place of the Welsh poet, Gwallter Mechain, born 1761.

Towards the end of the nineties there was a growth in the population with the development of three housing estates within the village boundary. The village is set in a truly rural position surrounded by farms and smallholdings. The population of the village is around 500; many are self-employed and work in farming but a number travel to work in nearby towns. The Church in Wales Primary Controlled School was built in the 1940's and at present has 40 pupils. There are Mothers Union and Women's Institute branches, a Friendly Club, Bowls Group and Football team all active in the village. Llanfechain Village Show is staged on the field annually on August Bank Holiday Monday.

Amenities

Unfortunately, the village now has no shop but the Post Office opens on Thursdays in the Village Hall. There are no toilet facilities in the village. The village hall has a car park that visitors to the village can use. Plans to enlarge the village hall and extend its facilities are advanced the improved facilities and wider opening may be in place by 2010.

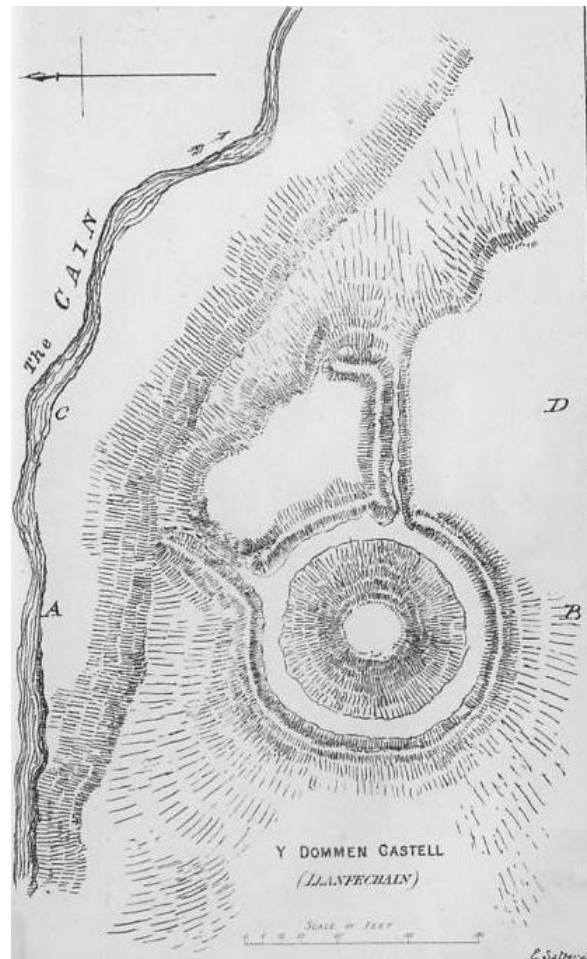
Places of interest

St Garmon's Well is said to be a Holy well used by St Garmon, having great medical properties in it.

Buildings - the road through the village is lined with a variety of traditional stone and black and white timbered buildings. The oldest of these is Plas Cain dating back to 17th century on the bank of the River Cain. The Plas yn Dinas Inn is also another fine example of 16th Century timbered building and was originally a Court House.

Domen Castle

The remains of a motte and bailey castle lie behind the Mount which runs alongside the road to Llanfyllin.



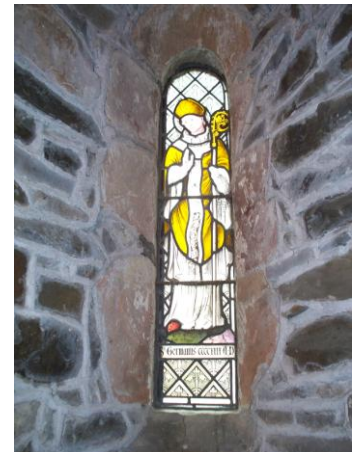
Source: *Montgomery Collections Volume 5, 246*

St Garmon's Church

St Garmon's is significant as it is considered the most complete Norman church remaining in Montgomeryshire. The magnificent roof of heavy and simply carved oak timbers dates from the 15th century. The Victorians were responsible for external features, such as the red tiles roof and slender wooden spire, along with some internal alterations, which distinguish the church today. The preaching mound of St Garmon remains on the north side of the churchyard.

The Norman Church

The earliest part of the church dates from the c12th where the remains of a simple single cell rectangular church survive. The remains of this church can be seen in the three deep, splayed windows on the east elevation. The glass in the right hand window is Victorian work and depicts St Garmon.



The Norman church had two south doors. The priest's door has been blocked but second door, with its chamfered semi-circular surround is easy to spot.



It is thought that most of the masonry shell is original c12th work, with the exception of the west wall which has been rebuilt. The early church was built using irregular shaped blocks of grey brown shale with built in a random pattern. The walls are thicker at the bottom and can be seen to gradually thin out as they reach the roof when viewed internally.

Fifteenth to seventeenth centuries

The nave has a fine arch-braced roof with foiled struts in the apex, dating from the c15th. The wagon ceiling over the chancel was inserted by the Victorians.



The south porch was added during the 17th and restored during the c19th as it was considered dilapidated. Gashes in the stone door surround may well be the result of sword blades sharpened before battle, possibly during the civil war of the mid-seventeenth century when the church was involved in skirmishes. The use of stones from the church to sharpen weaponry in this way was very common. Soldiers may have believed it transferred God's blessing on their plight.



The interior fittings of the church also bear the marks of the civil war in Llanfechain. The stone font is decorated with Tudor roses and its pedestal was damaged during the Civil War. The impressive carved cover, complete with pulley mechanism, is a magnificent survival. The dove above the cover is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, coming down at baptism.



The pulpit is dated 1636 and is a fine example of timber carving from the Jacobean period. A Victorian writer referred to it as “the redeeming feature of the interior”. The 1630’s were the highpoint of Archbishop Laud’s attempts to reinstate splendour and beauty into churches after the Reformation of the c16th, when many items were destroyed, so this pulpit fits into a wider historic movement.



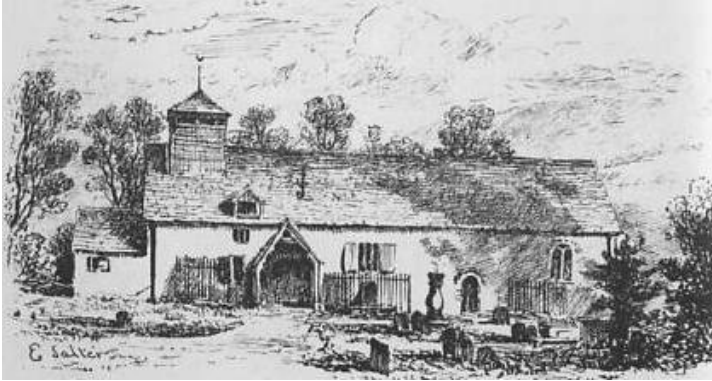
The Church has three bells that were hung in 1730 and 1737. According to local tradition, the new bells were to be installed to replace the c18th bells, but the road from Llansantffraid to Llanfechain was too muddy and so the bells were installed in Llansantffraid Church instead!

Victorian restoration

St Garmon's underwent two Victorian restorations – the first in the 1850's under the direction of R.K Penson, and the second on 1883 under the direction of John Douglas.

The 1850's Restoration

St Garmon's before Jenson's 1850's restoration, sketched by E Salter and printed in Volume 5 of the Montgomeryshire Collections



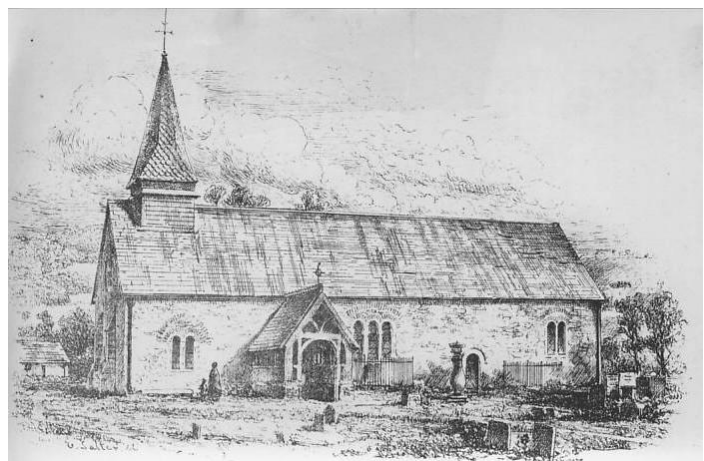
The restoration of the late 1850's mainly affected the appearance of the west end of the church. By 1850, a small single story extension had been built on the west end, probably used as a meeting room, a schoolroom and vestry. A wonderful article written in 1872 for Volume 5 of the Montgomeryshire Collections gives us an idea of what the church was like before and after the first restoration, and refers to the west end extension as "a greater deformity can scarcely be conceived". The extension was removed in the 1850's. The writer also refers to windows "of the most hideous form imaginable, such as would not be inserted into any decent stable". The form of these windows can be seen in the sketch of the church before the work. By the end of the 1850's they had been replaced with the windows still in place today.

A sketch of St Garmon's Church from 1872, after the 1850's restoration.

The church looks familiar to us as it is very like the church that survives today.

The west end extension has been removed and the windows have been enlarged. The distinctive timber bell turret, that so characterises the church today, is in place. It was also at this time that the wheel window was inserted into the west end.

Source: *Montgomeryshire Collections Vol 5, 231*



The 1880's Restoration

The 1850's restoration was concerned mainly with the west end of the church and with the exterior. The 1880s restoration involved mainly internal alterations. The internal plaster was stripped away, leaving the masonry exposed. Most of the woodwork dates from this phase, including the screen, west end gallery, the choir stalls and the carved reredos, designed by John Douglas and carved in Chester.

The impact of the exposed masonry on the interior is dramatic. Originally the walls would be coated in lime plaster and this would be limewashed, making the interior space lighter, warmer and more coherent. Masonry would only be left exposed in this way when the stones were dressed (cut to fine shapes). Scraping the walls of the internal plaster was very popular with Victorian restorers. The industrial mass production of brick made it a common building material and meant stone buildings regained a higher status – showing off the stone was desirable.



By the 1870's there was growing opposition to this type of radical make over on church interiors and in 1877 the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) was set up by William Morris to try to save the authenticity of the historic fabric. The SPAB was criticised for being 'anti-scrape' by keen 'restorers' and a philosophical debate over the nature of conservation began. St Garmon's interior would seem odd to its Norman builders: to them it would be like leaving breeze blocks exposed today. The monuments are fixed to the walls in a sea of vertical crazing paving. But many people like the atmosphere created by the exposed stone. The debate continues!



Painting of St Garmon's before 1850 on display in the church.



Postcard of St Garmon's from the 1920's

St Garmon

Little is known about St Garmon. According to tradition, he lived in the c9th and preached from a mound in the churchyard at Llanfechain. The remains of this 'preaching mound', Twmpath Garmon' are still evident today on the north side of the church. Graves have been dug into the mound. According to the recollections of 19th villagers, recorded in Volume 5 of the Montgomeryshire Collections, cockpits were dug near to the mound so cock fighting could take place. Fynnon Garmon, the Holy well associated with Garmon, lies to the south east of the village.

Churchyard

The circular churchyard is not unusual in the area. According to popular belief, it was created that way so as to leave no corners for the devil to hide in. The gravestones on the south side have been laid flat and grassed over to create an open space at the centre of the village.

The churchyard contains a sandstone sundial dated 1770, including a carved pillar on a stepped base and still carrying a dial plate.



The lychgate on the south side of the churchyard is the village war memorial.



Access

The church is open throughout the day.

There is limited roadside parking is available by the lychgate on the south side. Access into the church is via the south porch. Access throughout the nave is level and there are two small steps into the chancel.

Further information

There is a guidebook in the church, giving outline details of the layers or architectural history at St Garmon's. An entertaining account of the church from a 1870's perspective is available in Montgomeryshire Collections Volume 5, *A Slight Historical and Topographical sketch of the Parish of Llanfechain in the County of Montgomery*. Author unknown

Sources:

P Haslan, 1979. *The Buildings of Wales – Powys*, 129. Penguin
Montgomeryshire Collections Volume 5, 203 – 286. *A Slight Historical and Topographical sketch of the Parish of Llanfechain in the County of Montgomery*. Author unknown
CPAT Montgomeryshire Churches Survey: Historic Environment Record 16408
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