

Trail Two – The Cain Valley Trail

St Ffraid, Llansantffraid

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Llansantffraid

Llansantffraid is a linear village and lies parallel to the disused railway and along the A495. It is a village in three parts: the high ground on the north side of the road is occupied by the church, school and the vicarage, with some new housing developments. The buildings either side of the road consist of the Lion Hotel and some brick and timber cottages around the agricultural food mill which dominates the sky line of the village. The third part of the village is by the c18th bridge which crosses the river Vyrnwy, which is surrounded by houses built in the 1830's and 1840's.

Over the last few years there has been building development. The village has a collection of pubs and restaurants, shops, a school, community centre, church and chapels. The village is renowned for its football pitch made famous by T.N.S. The community is generally rural and a number of caravan sites on the edges of the village promote tourism.

Amenities

There is a supermarket combined with a post office where parking facilities are available. Toilet facilities are opposite the entrance to the car park on the other side of the road. There is a second supermarket at the petrol station. There is a good selection of places to eat in Llansantffraid. As well as two inns where food is available, there is a fish and chip shop and restaurant called the Station House.

Places to visit

The Foel Camp is a site of archaeological interest on Foel Hill, west of Winllan Road. It bears the marks of an iron age fortification and the spot on the top is known as 'Soldiers Mount'.

Plas-yn-Dinas

St Ffraid's Church

The fabric of St Ffraid's Church has a complicated history going back to the c12th or c13th. There is evidence of different generations adding to, and altering the building, sometimes moving stonework from one part of the building to another. The different layers add richness and interest to the building, but they have confused the experts trying to date the exact sequencing, causing one to comment, "the whole building is made of odds and ends of repair". This building is particularly attractive because of the beautiful craftsmanship that can be seen all around, even on the gutters!

The medieval church

At the core of St Ffraid's church lies a c12th building that was extended in the c14th. The exact location of the c12th church, and the direction of the c14th extension is baffling experts, as it appears the builders reused bits of the early building when they built the new! Some experts date the masonry to the c12th by the survival of a small window in the north wall, others think this window may be have been moved here in the c14th.

A blocked up doorway on the south side could have been the priest's doorway that was blocked up when the church was extended. The drop in the roof line and quoins in the stonework west of the is door show the church was extended westwards, probably in the c14th. The shouldered window east of the blocked doorway is in the style of the decorated period, most popular in the c14th. The plastered barrel ceiling over the nave dates from the c15th, unlike the carved ceiling in the chancel, which is Victorian.

The north window that makes it difficult to date the sequence of building as it may not be in its original position.

The blocked door in the south elevation and the stone quoins to the east of the window and door where the roof line drops indicate a different phase of building.



Another example of the reuse of old masonry, which is confusing the experts is the shape of the present south doorway. In its present form, the doorway is almost round-headed, which would make it Norman, but it has a slight off-centre point, and yet it is not convincingly c14th or c15th, when the arched doorway was popular. So, it is either a reuse of old, carved and valuable masonry, or it has moved!



Another consequence of the alterations is that the piscina, a stone recess used originally to store unused bread and wine, was chopped in half!



The stone surround to the c14th east window was moved to the west end by the Victorians in order to put an 'improved' c14th style window in its place at the east end!



The font is a simple stone bowl, thought to date from the c13th. It was given a new plinth by the Victorians.



Sketch of the font from 1871 when it stood on a simple base, before the restoration when it was aggrandised with a new plinth.

Source: *Montgomeryshire Collections Volume 4*,



The seventeenth century layer

Many of the distinguishing features on St Ffraid's church were added during this period. The charming windows were inserted into the south elevation and the door was blocked up. The timber bell turret was constructed in 1618 and with new bells. According to local tradition, the bells had been destined for St Garmon's Church at Llanfechain, but the road was too muddy for the cart to get them there, so they were hung at St Ffraid's instead! The south porch was constructed sometime later in the c17th. The attractive dormer window above the south porch was added in 1669 and suggests a gallery may have been added internally around the same time.



Many of the interior fittings added during the c17th survived the Victorian restoration and have greatly enriched the internal space. The timber choir stalls and pulpit date from this period.



The eighteenth century layer

The most significant extension to the church is the north transept, added in 1727. The traditional approach of using materials already available in the church to make the alterations was very much in evidence; the timbers for the transept were taken from the rood loft and its pillars. The classical architecture of this elevation is typical of the c18th and an unexpected surprise when visitors walk round the north of the church as it contrasts so markedly with the materials, scale and design presented by the south elevation.



Victorian restoration

Like many churches, the interior was given a 'makeover' by the Victorians. At St Ffraid's the work took place between 1891 and 1893, so was relatively late. The architect was John Oldrid Scott from London (son of George Gilbert Scott). Photographs taken in 1892 give us a glimpse of the interior before the changes.



St Ffraid's looking east, 1892



St Ffraid's looking west, 1892

The east window seen in this photograph has now been moved to the west end of the nave, but the main changes are the removal of the high backed box pews. In true St Ffraid's tradition, these were recycled and turned into wall panels, which can still be seen fixed around the nave walls at dado level.

As well as moving existing fittings to new places around the church, several items were added, mainly to section off separate spaces in the interior. Until this point, the whole interior read a single space. A two bay stone arcade was built to separate the nave from the transept, and the fan ribbed carved timber screen was inserted to separate the chancel from the nave. Galleries in the nave and transept were removed in this period and the floors relaid in wooden blocks.



Externally, the work seemed to focus on repair rather than restoration. The chancel was reroofed and new shingles (wooden tiles) placed on the spire.

Sketch of St Ffraid's Church from 1871 before the Victorian restoration, showing the external appearance of the building remained largely unaltered compared to the interior. Some of the graves have been cleared on the south side of the church.

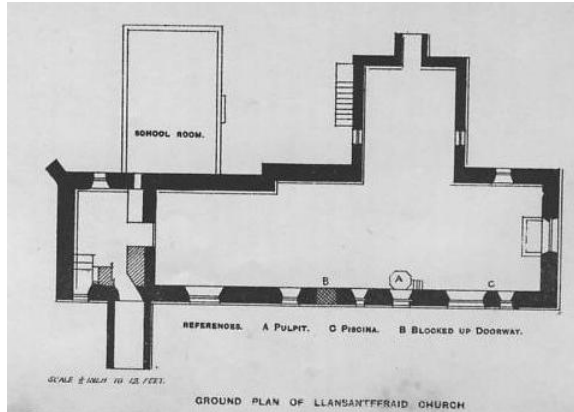


Source: Montgomeryshire Collections
Volume 4, 1871.

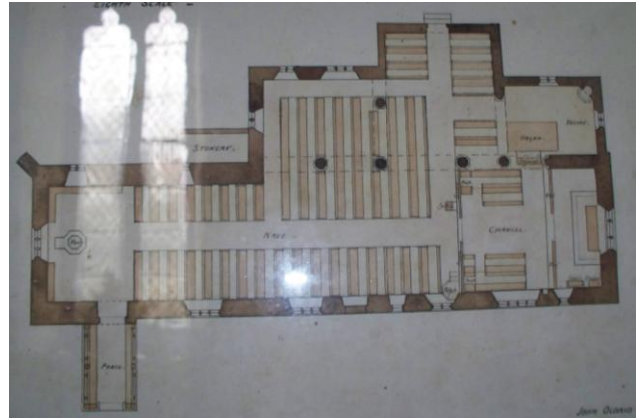
View of the church today with the repaired spire, which now has a clock face.



Plans of the church from 1871 and 1893 show a radical change to the footprint of the church. A schoolroom on the northwest side was demolished, a short aisle built on the north side and a vestry added on the northeast corner.



Source: *Montgomeryshire Collections, Volume 4, 1871.*

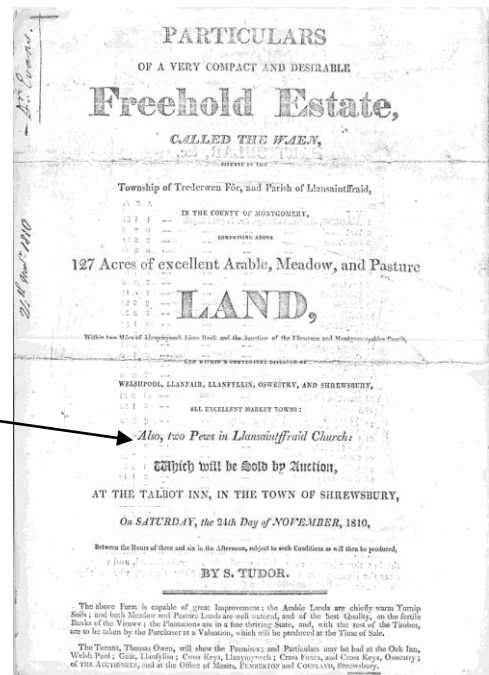


Photograph of the 1893 plan made by John Olred Scott in February 1893. The plan is displayed in the vestry.

The gutters (sometimes referred to as 'troughins' in this part of the country), and the downpipe hoppers are worth a look. They are cast iron with unusual decoration on the faces, and are thought to date from the late-19th century restoration.



Like many Anglican churches during the c19th, St Ffraid's Church reflected the strict social order of the time. This segregation was evident inside the church, where pews could still be appropriated and reserved for a fee. A bill posted from 1810, for the sale of an estate included "two pews from Llansaintffraid Church" as part of the lot.



It was also evident outside the church where there was a tradition that the burial ground was divided into the 'Rich Ground' in the front of the church and east end, and the 'Poor Ground' which was west of the sundial. When parts of the churchyard were cleared in the 1960's (mainly the south side) it is believed the stones were thrown in the local pond!



Llansantffraid around 1900 showing the elevated position of the church in the village.

St Ffraid

Ffraid came from Ireland in the c6th and was also known as Bride or Bridget. She was the daughter of Cadwrthai, born in Ulster, and well respected as a nun before she left Ireland where she was tutored by St Mel, the nephew of St Patrick. According to tradition she possessed miraculous gifts, which her father opposed, so she sailed across the Irish Sea on a clod of earth and when she arrived in the Dovey Basin, she turned the rushes into trout! According to Volume 3 of the Archaeological Journal, her remains are preserved by the Jesuits in Lisbon.

Churchyard

The rectangular shaped churchyard has been extended twice in recent times in a northerly direction, in 1903 and the 1970's. Many gravestones near the church were cleared at the time of the later extension. The earliest remaining slab is dated 1679 and two stones dating from the late c17th or early c18th either side of the porch have interesting inscriptions. One has a skull and cross bones, the other an hour glass with a spade underneath.

Mature yew trees grow along the original perimeter of the churchyard, particularly on the south and southwest sides.

The views from the churchyard across the landscape are worth seeing. To the north the Foel hill can be seen in the landscape.



Access

The church is open throughout the day.

There is very limited roadside parking available by the lane 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.

Sources:

P Haslan, 1979. *The Buildings of Wales – Powys*, 149. Penguin

The life and times of Llansantffraid, 2006

Montgomeryshire Collections Volume 4, 1871. *History of the Parish of Llansantffraid*

CPAT Montgomeryshire Churches Survey: Historic Environment Record 16890

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