

The Mystery of Cwmhir Abbey and the Cistercians

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Considerable mystery surrounds the abbey at Cwmhir and many questions are asked about it. As it sits today in the 'long valley', it represents a gaunt reminder of the past, a mere shadow of its former glory. The abbey is one of Wales's most iconic places, with a reminder of the long-gone age of monastic worship and order and the additional dimension of the putative burial place of Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, the last true Prince of Wales. Many who visit find it evocative of a previous age, an island of calm in a modern world of hustle and bustle. The weather and atmosphere of the upland valley seems to give rise to a special presence. Has the ancient abbey always enjoyed such calm; are there other factors to look for which might explain some of its long history?

Many mysteries surround Cwmhir Abbey. There is some debate about when exactly the abbey was founded and by whom. The remains, as they stand today appear to be incomplete, suggesting that the building of the abbey was never finished. Snapshots of the abbey's history indicate that it never reached the full complement of monks required to run the affairs of the establishment and that it had been seriously damaged in the rising of Owain Glyndwr in the early fifteenth century. The abbey, in common with most of its contemporaries, possessed a number of distant granges, beyond the home grange of Gollon and Cefn Pawl but again, knowledge of these and the way in which they worked, is very sketchy.

In an attempt to answer some of these questions the Abbey Cwmhir Heritage Trust has embarked on a project entitled *Demystify the Abbey* in which existing approaches, which have largely failed to answer any of the questions about the abbey, are rigorously challenged and new thinking considered. In this the Trust has been very fortunate to have been given the opportunity to collaborate with the *Sacred Landscapes Project*. This is a programme of academic research co-ordinated by the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and the University of Leeds. The main object is to study the history and development of monasteries situated in upland areas and compare it with those located in a lowland region. Strata Florida, which has already been well-researched, was an obvious choice for one of the upland examples and the less well explained Cwmhir serves as a comparative. This of course, gives the opportunity to bring academic study to the mysteries of Cwmhir, with the lowland monastic houses which are located along the River Witham, to the south east of Lincoln.

The Cistercians were comparatively late arrivals on the monastic scene in the British Isles. Their origins lie in the abbey of Cîteaux in northern France in the year 1098 and from there they established abbeys at Savigny in 1105 and Clairvaux in 1115. The rules of the order were set down by St Bernard who encouraged his monks to go out into the world and establish new monasteries. It was through this that the Cistercians established a network of abbeys in Europe and in the British Isles. The successful Norman invasion of England in 1066 gave them new lands in which to establish their religious houses. They were encouraged by the Norman barons who doubtless saw the monks of northern France, being sympathetic to their cause, occupiers of large tracts of land and reliable allies.

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The evidence suggests that the Cistercians in Wales were very independently minded and developed strong ties with the native Welsh princes.

The Cistercians were a centrally organised order. This gives the researcher something of an advantage in that knowledge gained in one location can give clues to the mysteries of another. They adopted a system of "abbey planting". It was considered the duty of an abbey, once well established, to go to a distant location and found a new abbey, known as the daughter house. It was rather akin to the modern notion of church planting where a successful church is able to start another, thus creating a network of success.

The first Cistercian monastery to be founded in Wales was Neath, started by monks from Savigny in 1130, followed by Tintern in 1131 and Whitland in 1140. The latter is significant as the mother house of Strata Florida which was founded in 1164 and Cwmhir in 1176. There is some debate about the founding of Cwmhir and a date of 1143 has been suggested, when an abbey was said to have been built further down the valley, alongside the Clywedog river and just below Ty Faenor. This theory appears to be based on the discovery of a primitively carved head, now in the Radnorshire Museum, close to the location just described. There is no other evidence. The site in question is very small and finding carved and other stone material at some distance from the present abbey site is commonplace. In an area of poor building stone, removal of the good quality stone was inevitable. It was quite usual for temporary premises to be built, usually of wood, whilst the permanent structure was under construction. These structures were close to the final site of the abbey.

The chief Welsh benefactors of Cwmhir were Cadwallon ap Madoc and Maradedd ap Maelgwyn. Two foundation dates have been suggested, 1143 and 1176. The latter fits more easily than the former. Research by Professor Janet Burton of UWTSO suggests that Whitland experienced great difficulty in getting itself established and had to call in assistance from Clairvaux. In this context, it would be difficult for Whitland to be establishing another distant abbey at the same time. However, the link between the two houses is well established. The Mortimer family, the Marcher Lords of Maelienydd, were also benefactors of the abbey, an interesting alignment between the local Welsh rulers and the incoming Normans. The question of who financed the building of the abbey remains unanswered.

Sometimes it is necessary to challenge long established ideas about events in history. Very often the view we hold of events of the past is based on what was taught, or perhaps mis-taught, at school. The accepted wisdom was that the Cistercians adopted a totally virgin site as far away from other habitation as possible and remote from opportunities to travel elsewhere. This is not necessarily so.

It is necessary to examine the spread of the Cistercians in Wales and the background to their speedy 'colonisation' of the country. Almost all of the Cistercian monasteries in Wales were established in the twelfth century. This was an age of religious fervour which can be set against the long drawn-out background of the Crusades. In this, Christian Europe set itself against the rise of Islam in the Middle East and the perceived need to protect the holy sites of Christendom. In 1182 Archbishop Baldwin of Canterbury was accompanied by Giraldus Cambrensis, Gerald of Wales and Archdeacon of Brecon, on a peregrination around Wales, drumming up support both in terms of manpower and funding, for the crusades. Baldwin himself was to die in battle at Acre. Those who had wealth were keen to leave a sign of their

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good works and what better in those turbulent times than to endow a chantry, church or even an abbey so that God would see their good works!

It is possible to trace a long line of Cistercian abbeys across Wales. Margam and Neath, Whitland, Strata Florida, Cwmhir, Strata Marcella, Valle Crucis and Basingwerk, most no more than thirty miles apart and with regular routes easily discernible. Research shows that they were not totally remote from habitation. It has to be remembered, in the nature of human development, there was always somebody there before. In fact, Cwmhir (1176) was well-placed between Strata Florida (1164) and Strata Marcella (1170) and close to a network of now ancient route-ways. Did something attract them to the place they occupied alongside the Clywedog?

There had been a strong Christian presence in the area for a long time before the arrival of the monks from Whitland, possibly as much as six hundred years. St Harmon, less than six miles away, was thought to be a 'clas' church and recent research supports that view. Documents in the archives of St David's refer to it as Clasgarmon. There are only three known clas churches in Radnorshire, the others being Glascwm and Glasbury, the derivation of the place-name being clear.

A closer examination of the site of the present St Harmon church is revealing. The 'llan' or enclosure, is almost perfectly round and evidence of the original embankment is clearly to be seen inside the much later churchyard wall. It is noticeable that the church is built on a raised area within the llan. The raised area is indicative of pre-Christian worship within the enclosure and a long period of human habitation in this part of Wales. Early curvilinear churchyards are recorded at Nantmel, Llanddewi Ystradenny and Llangurig. The latter is also considered to be a clas church.

The church at St Harmon was probably a Monasteria, in Wales an early form of a monastic settlement and a very important site. It contained a number of clerics whose job it was to go out into the surrounding area, minister to the poor and needy and spread the word of God. This form of ecclesiastical organisation was in place by the eighth century. The importance and status of this site is underlined by the fact that one of the townships in the parish of St Harmon is called Clasgarmon, a delineation which was still being used in the nineteenth century to record the census returns. Tradition has it the St Harmon was home to an ancient relic, St Gurig's crozier.

It is possible that clerics from the monasteria at St Harmon found their way to Cwmhir and established a cell, possibly near the site of the present church of St Mary's. The churchyard at Abbey Cwmhir contains two ancient yews of some size. One expert has estimated their age to be over a thousand years, in other words, they predated the establishment of the abbey. The yew is a tree widely associated with both pagan and Christian sites, for thousands of years regarded as symbolic of the journey of the soul from this life to the next. It was regarded as a sacred tree in pagan worship, long before the coming of Christianity. Here pagan and Christian beliefs become mixed. In 601AD, Pope Gregory suggested that places of pagan worship could be converted for use as Christian churches. This line of development would fit well with what is known of the history of St Harmon.

Is it that the Cistercians found evidence of early Christianity in the long valley which influenced their choice of site? Could they have discovered indications of an anchorite or eremite cell? Were the sacred yews from that time? Apart from the

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abbey itself, the earliest known church was the chapel of ease built by the Fowlers around 1680. There is no firm evidence of another.

St Harmon has other significance in the story of Cwmhir. Part of the *Sacred Landscapes* investigation is a detailed analysis of abbey's home grange of Gollon. The boundaries of the granges were last investigated by David Williams, the leading expert of his time on the Cistercians and published in *The Welsh Cistercians* in 2001. Since then there has been a considerable development in the methods available to landscape historians.

Using modern technology, combined with field walking, it is possible to gain a clearer idea of the extent of the medieval grange. This has been underpinned by an examination of the charters relating to the benefactions of the abbey thus providing a clearer picture of the grange. It has become obvious that the St Harmon township of Cenarth was part of the Gollon grange. This work has been supported by regressive searches of various post-dissolution property sales.

The Grange of Gollon and Cefn Pawl was purchased by William Fowler of Shrewsbury in 1565 and it is possible to work back to that position by a study of various estate sales as the Fowler estate broke up between 1760 and 1820. Interestingly, Fowler appears to have owned the abbey's Dolhelfa Grange, also in the parish of St Harmon. The data from the study has been recorded using a Geographical Information System which provides accurate mapping and can be interrogated to probe deeper and suggest areas of further ongoing research.

Attention now must be turned to the standing remains of the abbey and seek explanations for the depleted state of its fabric. As has already been stated, the Cistercians operated a top-down system of organisation. The result was monastic establishments which were all built to broadly the same plan unless the geography of the site mitigated against it. The initial aim was to get the main buildings under way, even if they were of a temporary nature. At this stage an abbot and twelve monks were required, with the intention of increasing this number to an ideal sixty monks. In order to serve God and live within the rule of the order, first the oratory was constructed, followed by the refectory, dormitory, guest quarters and the gatehouse. The cloister, where the monks spent time in contemplation, learning and writing, was always to the south of the church unless the geography of the site prevented it. Tintern, for example, which was situated in a particularly narrow part of the lower Wye valley was of necessity orientated on a north to south axis. The claustral buildings which included the Chapter House, refectory, kitchen, dormitory and lavatorium were set around the cloister. For the purposes of personal cleanliness, hygiene and liturgical reasons there would have been an excellent water supply and circulation system and an extensive drainage system. The discovery of such at Cwmhir would greatly assist in calculating the position of the ancillary works.

Cwmhir Abbey, like a number of other Cistercian abbeys in Wales, is orientated slightly offset from the true east-west usually adopted. This again is for reasons of site limitation. Where the standard siting is used, the sun will shine directly through the east window at dawn on midsummer day. However, since the church is offset, the sun shines directly through the west window or door on the autumnal equinox. The survival of pre-Christian associations with the sun is remarkable.

The construction of the abbey took careful planning and much time. It commonly took thirty years to get the basic construction done and the work of a large

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number of skilled craftsmen. The masons were of prime importance and they appear to have worked in teams. Surviving stones within the Cwmhir structure bear a variety of mason's marks. Each craftsman had his own mark which served both his pride in doing a good job and the tallying of his output to ensure that he was properly paid. Of almost equal importance was the team of carpenters and joiners who bore responsibility for erecting the timber scaffolding necessary as the building developed as well as the roofing and other joinery of such a building. The various craftsmen usually lived on site throughout their association with the project. It is worthy of note that some of the masons' marks found at Cwmhir also occur at other abbeys, among them Strata Florida and Valley Crucis. Workshops and yards for the various trade would be set up for the craftsmen to carve the stone and shape the wood.

The site layout would be completed by the senior master mason. Although without the benefit of modern technology, the work was done with great accuracy. The south wall was carefully lined up on the chosen line of orientation, ideally east – west, before building commenced. A survey of the surviving arcading in a number of the Cistercian monasteries in Yorkshire, Fountains, Rievaulx, Byland and Kirkstall showed a maximum run-out of less than 10mm, indicating great precision in setting out the site.

The Cistercian abbeys conformed to certain layouts and proportions, a result of the centralised organisation of the order. The proportion of the various elements of the building was commonly set at three to one. This can be demonstrated at Cwmhir by a simple test. The length of the nave is 75m, equalled only by Winchester and Durham. The width of the nave is 25m. Some of the transept walls have survived and measurement shows them to be 8.2m, one third the width of the nave. This simple geometric formula enables further calculations to be made and so, in theory, the size and disposition of the other buildings which would have been part of the monastery can be made.

The summer of 2018 was very dry, a boon to landscape historians and archaeologists, showing potential places of interest and investigation. The aerial photography over Abbey Cwmhir revealed a number of parch marks. To the west of the abbey and the present Home Farm a series of small rectangles were revealed. The following year an archaeological excavation was undertaken by CPAT. It soon became apparent that these represented a burial ground. The graves were shallow at about 60cm, with no evidence of surviving human remains because of the action of the acidic soil. The graves pre-dated the use of wooden coffins. The body would have been wrapped in a simple shroud before interment. The graves were thought to be late medieval or early post-medieval. This is another example of early occupation of land close to the abbey. Further parch marks indicate house platforms close by.

The same photographs also suggested parch marks close to the abbey ruin, with potential indicators of the cloister and the now disappeared east end. Using the formula of 3 to 1, some work on the photograph itself showed a basic outline of the lost buildings. Work on the ground, measuring and marking out in an eastward direction would create a possible outline of the east end of the church, containing the sanctuary, presbytery, transept and side chapels. Using this theory the overall length of the abbey church would extend to within 2m of the present fence line to the east, making the overall length of the church some 100m, one of the largest in Europe. Grand designs indeed.

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One of the many mysteries of Cwmhir is the debate around whether or not the east end was ever completed. Just because there are no marks on the ground today, it does not mean that it was never built. There are numerous examples of monastic houses of which there are no visible built remains. This is especially so in areas like Cwmhir where good building stone was in short supply. The source of much of the building stone also presents another mystery. To build a church of such proportions requires tens of thousands of tons of stone. Two types of stone are evident in the building. There are large blocks of Cambrian stone which is quarried locally. However, this stone is too hard to work easily. It requires the softer sandstone which is seen in the capitals.

For some time it was thought to be of a type of sandstone which is found around Grinshill, to the north of Shrewsbury. So far it has proved impossible to pinpoint the precise quarry and inevitably other locations have been considered. A characteristic of the sandstone used in the construction of Cwmhir is the presence of mica, a deposit which occurs in fluvial deposition, requiring shallow marine or riverine conditions. The Permo-Triassic Grinshill sandstones were deposited in a dry desert environment. There has been speculation that the sandstone is a Devonian fluvial deposit from the Epynt area to the south, a location from which it would be much easier to transport the stone. The Silurian sandstone to the east also contains mica. Further research is required to solve this particular mystery, as a growing number of experts question the use of the Grinshill stone. Microscopic examination of thin sections of the material might provide an answer.

To bring building stone some distance by cart along a turbulent and precarious border was no small undertaking. To be successful a right of safe passage would have to be negotiated. This would involve the Marcher Lords who controlled the border, as well as the Welsh princes. Much of the construction of the abbey took place at a time of relative peace along the border but great challenges would have remained.

An important factor in the building survival is what might loosely be termed the build quality. By modern standards of construction, the building standard appears bizarre, although on the face of it the abbeys look very substantial constructions. The study of a number of Cistercian monasteries, including some which have no visible remains above ground level, show very shallow footings. Vale Royal, Cheshire, for example, has a foundation depth of only 15cm, others no more than 29.5cm, the Roman foot. The walls were built up on this shallow trough which was lined with pebbles and small stones. The outer leaves of the wall were filled with rubble and mortar. Evidence of collapse is common. At this shallow depth, traces of the wall can be ploughed out over time, to leave little or no trace today.

In their way, the monastic building were organic, constantly evolving to suit the changes of the times whether it be architectural style or practical usage. The most common changes were to the size of the windows and the location of doorways. The addition of a tower over the transept or, indeed, a taller tower, could cause disaster. The alterations threatened the integrity of the structure, the stonework was put under stress and collapse was commonplace. A good example of building stress is to be seen at Llanthony Priory. One of the transept arches is seriously distorted and flattened after an attempt to alter the transept tower. Buttressing was required in an attempt to prevent collapse. The abbot of Fountains Abbey was up to this and

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constructed the tower as a free-standing building and it's still there! Damage from a serious collapse could be extensive. In the straitened circumstances in which many monasteries found themselves as time went on, rebuilding was out of the question. Cwmhir could have been overtaken by a collapse which was never repaired.

There has been much debate as to whether or not Cwmhir was ever completed. Over the years there seems to have been an easy assumption that the builders started with the nave, because that is what remains to be seen today but got no further. Why start with the nave, surely the wrong place to begin? As stated earlier, the priority when establishing a new monastery was the holiest part of the church, the oratory and the basic claustral buildings. The nave would come later.

There are examples of 'incomplete' monastic churches. Talley Abbey, near Llandeilo, is a good example. The abbey, the only Premonstratensian abbey in Wales, was not completed because the main benefactor ran into some political trouble. He lost his wealth in the process. However, before that happened, the important east end was completed as a priority, as we can see today. Another lesson in building priority is to be seen at Llanthony Priory. The architecture of the church shows that it was built in stages. The east end of the church clearly shows a twelfth century style with Romanesque influences. The west end, however, is built in the later thirteenth century Early English gothic style, again showing the priority to construct the most sacred area of the church first.

The ideal complement of clerics required for the efficient operation of the monastery was considered to be an abbot and sixty monks. To date, no evidence has been found that Cwmhir ever reached such a figure. At the time of the Glyndwr rebellion, in the early 1400s, the abbey appeared to have a mere three monks, five at the time of the dissolution. However, this was by no means a unique situation. A visitation by the Bishop of St David's to St Dogmaels in 1402 revealed only six monks and their abbot. This was an important abbey, in a prime position, on the Pilgrimage route to St David's.

There are records of distressed abbeys in the late thirteenth century Calendar of Patent Rolls, court records, which highlight a general problem at that time. For example it records that the abbey at Missenden sought the King's protection for four years because the abbey was "in danger of dispersion and ruin by murrain among the sheep and horses, failure of crops and accumulation of debts" and "relief of their decayed condition". Similarly, the abbey at Flaxley was also in trouble, "burdened by debt and impoverishment both by murrain among the sheep upon which the abbot, monks and many others depend for their subsistence ... as well as 'by others consuming their goods'. They required the King's protection for three years. Flaxley was well-situated next to Tintern's Woolaston Grange, on good land between the Forest of Dean and the River Severn. Murrain is disease or epidemic, most likely anthrax or foot and mouth disease for which there was no cure.

A study of the palaeoclimatology of the later medieval period suggests a serious deterioration of conditions which had a wide-ranging impact on agriculture. Food shortages led to increased mortality in all sections of the community. As the fourteenth century went on, the country was hit by successive waves of bubonic plague, which again impacted on the numbers available to take holy orders. By 1350 the population had fallen by as much as 60% in some areas. It was no longer possible to staff religious houses on the scale of earlier times. For many, the writing was on the wall.

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Aerial photographs which show parch marks and modern photogrammetry appear to indicate the line of a possible wall which divides the nave into two approximately equal halves. This has been interpreted as a reflection of the lack of resident monks. Furthermore, it has been suggested that as a result of this the monks worshipped in the eastern half of the church and lived in the western section of the nave. Given that the monastery appears to have had an adequate range of claustral buildings, this seems unlikely. There is a parallel. The church at Valle Crucis shows a similar division. There is evidence here that the church was divided as a reflection of depleted numbers and the domestic arrangements were modified but nevertheless were kept separate. The extent to which this was common practice is unclear.

The changing demographic forced wider changes on the monasteries and Cwmhir was no exception. In common with many others, it possessed a number of distant granges, traditionally managed by lay-brothers and converseri, with profits accruing to the abbey. In general terms the grange consisted of a chief farm, well developed with a good range of buildings and other lesser farms and farmsteads grouped around it. Cwmhir had a number of granges. The distant upland grange of Cwmbuga was devoted to sheep and cattle farming whilst the lowland grange of Cabalva, with disparate farms and good arable land, served as the bread-basket of the abbey. As time went on abbey granges generally were manorialised, tenanted and with an income obtained from the rents. Even so, Cwmhir seems to have remained a poor abbey. At the dissolution its income was less than £30 a year, about £12,600 in modern terms. There is considerable interest in the granges. As part of the *Demystify Research Programme*, the Abbey Cwmhir Heritage Trust is beginning to unravel this complex part of the abbey's history.

Whilst it is not possible to be dogmatic about it, the balance of probability is that the church was completed but begs the question of why an abbey church of such proportions was built in a location which had a very sparse population and which could be very turbulent. Some idea of the grandeur of Cwmhir can still be appreciated. Not only does the iconic ruin still stand but sections of the church arcading can be viewed at Llanidloes. A major part of the object of the dissolution was to raise funds for the monarch, Henry VIII, who was seriously short of cash, having squandered the considerable inheritance of his father. Almost immediately a return was required. The agents of Thomas Cromwell were tasked with making the churches unusable and the easiest way was to remove the roof, in part or in whole. Artefacts and fittings were sold, as well the building materials and decorative stone. In 1540 the parish church of Llanidloes was being rebuilt. Five bays from Cwmhir Abbey were acquired to form the north aisle. They were transported to the town and re-erected and have remained there ever since, well preserved, as can be seen today. It is still possible to appreciate the beautiful stone carving and the workmanship of the thirteenth century columns. The quality suggests a very high status building. When at Cwmhir the columns were at least 1m higher. The roof boarding is said to have come from the abbey but there is no evidence to support this.

Further losses of stone would have taken place over a long period of time as it was removed and used for other purposes. It is worth noting that no records of a post-monastic principal house exist although the Fowler estate was very extensive. A report exists from the time of the Civil War when the Royalist garrison at Abbey Cwmhir was overwhelmed by the Parliamentarians.

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It describes “Mr. Fowlers house”, built of large blocks of stone, being rendered unusable. It is quite possible that the Fowlers used some of the surviving claustral buildings as a residence, maybe the Abbot’s lodging or the gatehouse and almonry. This was a common practice and there are many examples of the survival of monastic buildings because they were put to practical use after the dissolution. Following the Civil War a younger member of the Fowler family was living at Brondrefawr. The years following also saw the construction of Ty Faenor, initially as a hunting lodge but destined to be converted to a farmhouse in the early years of the eighteenth century and the church, a little later c1680.

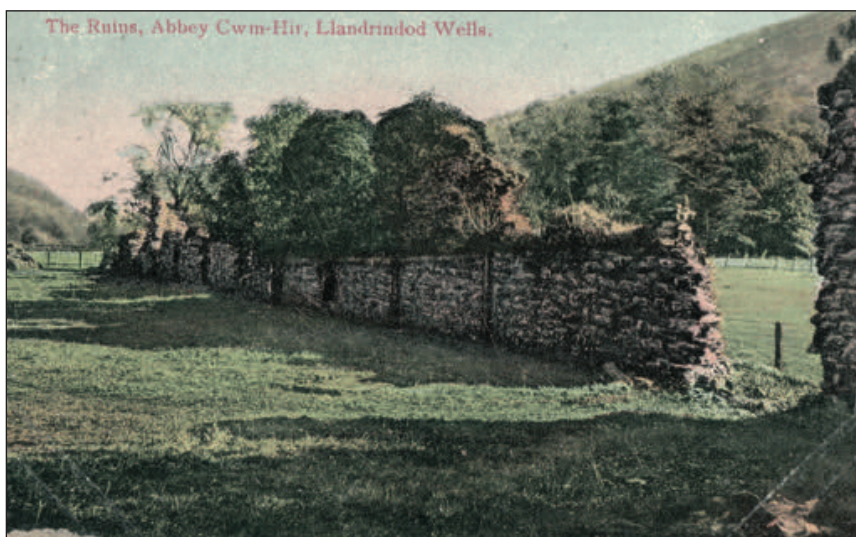
There are comparatively few artefacts remaining from monastic times. Early attempts at 'archaeology' were not helpful. The site was cleared by Thomas Wilson c.1830 when he constructed a house on the site of the present Hall. He then went on to create a garden which took in the abbey ruins, the romantic ruin which so engaged the landscape designers of Georgian times. Little remains to be seen of this. The mound or Mount close to the western end of the nave could have been constructed as a Prospect Mount, from which visitors could view the parkland to the north or it could have been an elevated position from which the open-air Court Leet was conducted. Such locations were also used in earlier times for the dispensing of justice, a Judgement Mount. In a note appended to the Layton Cooke report on the Abbey Cwmhir Estate, 1822, Wilson records that he created 30 acres of gardens. There is little evidence of this today. However, a planned landscape included a garden, a Little Park, for pleasure and a Great Park for hunting. It is the garden which is still sought!

The site was also excavated by Stephen William Williams in the closing years of the nineteenth century. This activity was concentrated on revealing the claustral buildings and the results appear in a paper published in *Archaeologica Cambrensis*. Again few artefacts have survived.

Modern survey methods have been more helpful in solving some of the mysteries of the abbey. Aerial photography of parch marks which formed as the result of the dry summer of 2018 revealed the outlines of a possible burial ground. It is probably post-medieval but indicates the area around the abbey has been occupied for a long time. A geophysical survey carried out in the 1990s gave some indicators of earlier building but it is hoped to carry out another survey using different techniques. Photogrammetry has played an important part in revealing land use in the valley around the abbey. There is clear evidence of early cultivation practices and possible precinct boundaries, all part of the jigsaw that researchers are trying to piece together. Cwmhir Abbey continues to fascinate, almost 500 years after the dissolution. The work continues to interpret this iconic part of Welsh history.

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