

THE RADNORSHIRE SOCIETY TRANSACTIONS 2022
 NEW OLD CARVINGS FROM CWMHIR ABBEY
 and Catalogue of capital designs.
 Roger Coward

The reason for this apparently contradictory title is that the Abbey Cwmhir Heritage Trust has recently made new exact copies of five carvings from the medieval Abbey by using the very recent technology of 3D digital scanning and printing.¹ This has also involved a great deal of research into these fascinating objects which is what this article is presenting. The project was grant assisted by Cadw and they are exhibited in the Exhibition Room at the Abbey.

The five carvings are two capitals from the Abbey built into St Idloes Parish Church where five arcade arches (six pillars and capitals) were re-installed after the Dissolution. A Tympanum from over a door; A Twelfth Century Corbel found at Ty Faenor House, Abbey cwm hir and a corbel probably from over a fireplace featuring a rare image of a woman's head which we have called the Llanbister Princess which also reflects where it was found.

Perhaps the most culturally interesting is the Tympanum whose carving is believed to represent the Assumption of Mary.



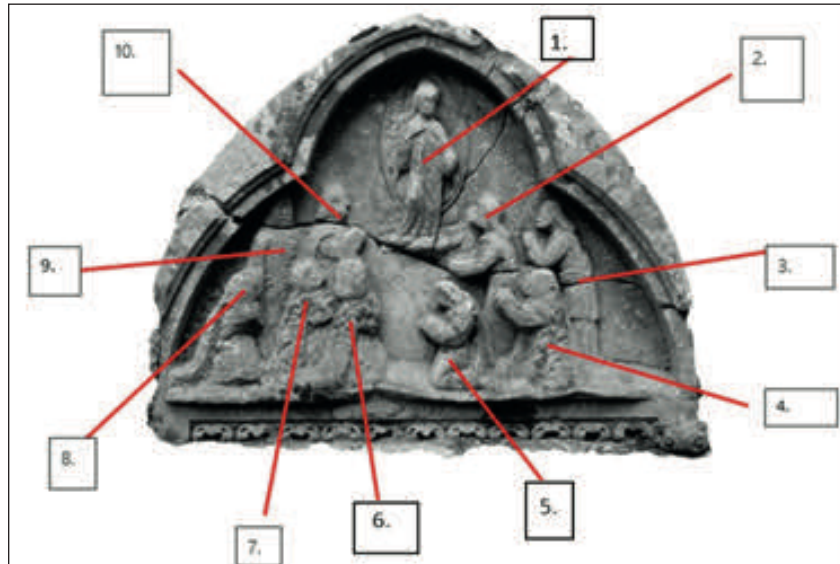
All Cistercian Abbeys were dedicated to the Virgin Mary who can be seen sitting on a throne in the middle of the repaired Great Seal of Cwm hir Abbey (left). Several Cistercian Abbeys were dedicated to the *Assumption* of the Virgin Mary and Cwmhir had a Tympanum illustrating this event from over a door. The Assumption of Mary is not much known in Protestant Britain but was the belief that Mary was assumed in body and soul to heavenly glory. This does not appear to have been a part of early Christian doctrine but appears in apocryphal texts and was gradually accepted by the Christian Church. The Byzantine feast of the

Assumption was celebrated from the time of Pope Sergius I (687-702) and observed in the west from the late eighth century on fifteenth August. It became official doctrine in the Roman Catholic church in 1950.

One of the earliest Cistercian Abbeys to be dedicated to *The Assumption of Mary* was founded in 1142 at Kutna Hora, near Prague in Czechoslovakia but in 1421 it was attacked and burned to the ground by Hussites. Later, from 1691, a Cistercian Abbey of *The Assumption of the Virgin Mary*, was built at Fürstenfeld, in Upper Bavaria, Germany, the church in the Baroque style.

The Tympanum at Cwmhir was found broken in two in 1955 on the lawn at Home Farm by the new owners and eventually re-assembled and built into the garden wall in 1964 where the original remains today much eroded by rain and wind. The photo over the page taken in 1992 by the Royal Commission on the Ancient & Historical Monuments of Wales shows it when more defined. Recognising the deterioration, the Abbey Cwmhir Heritage Trust, assisted by Cadw, had it scanned and a 3D print made.

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The image shows the Virgin Mary above in an oval aureole or aura ascending to heaven possibly supported by the two figures closest to her (2 more than 10). These are normally depicted as angels as in the painting (below) but in this case (2,3,4,6,7) they look more like monks wearing a scapular or the protective covering worn over their clothing when they do manual labour. You can also see the way the tunic is tied at the waist (2 & 4). Some seem to have facial hair.

The abbey church was probably completed around 1230 and although depictions of the Blessed Virgin Mary were not approved by the Cistercian General Chapter until 1316, examples are known from the mid-thirteenth century. The Cwmhir tympanum could therefore be one of the earliest Cistercian images of Mary.

Although its former location within the Abbey is not known it clearly formed part of a significant, if modestly sized doorway.

It would be correct to mention that when the Tympanum was copied in 1865 to go over the doorway of the new Parish Church, St Mary's, it came out unmistakably as the Ascension of Christ which, some experts have claimed it to be arguing that the erosion on the lower face on the original is hiding a beard.^{1A}

One of the greatest mysteries of Cwmhir Abbey is whether there was ever a chancel at the east end or possibly an earlier building built between its founding in 1176 and 1200 when Roger Mortimer took over. This twelfth century corbel strengthens the possibility of there having been a substantial stone built church before the existing building on the present site at Abbey Cwmhir.^{2A}



John Davies

The Corbel found at Ty Faenor 1970.

The Devannor Corbel



The Corbel is kept today in the Radnorshire Museum, Llandrindod Wells.

Is this strange head the answer to one of the biggest mysteries of Cwmhir Abbey? The flat top of the head shows it would have been used on a wall to support a structure such as a beam, balcony or a sculpture.

It was unearthed in 1970 by Jack Griffiths of Ty-faenor (Devannor) (the first big house on the right as you approach Abbey Cwmhir from Cross Gates). The 3D sculpture print is the same size as the original which is now in the Radnorshire Museum, Llandrindod Wells. As it is weathered mainly on the right side, the stone was probably from an external southern wall or if used internally was exposed to the weather on this side after the building was damaged.

But which building? The large eyes and flat nose suggest it is from the Romanesque period (before 1200) whereas the building whose ruins remain at Abbey Cwmhir was from the later Early English period (after 1200). Is it evidence for an earlier building at Ty Faenor? This is considered unlikely because of the rough rocky terrain. Or an earlier building at Cwmhir as some have speculated?

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Cwmhir Abbey Exhibition Room, 2022, with the full size Capital 4 on the left and the full size Tympanum centre and Capital 5 above. The two Corbels are on the shelf below.

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The Virgin Protector of the Cistercians by Jean Bellegambe 1507. Note two angels holding the robe and the golden gate of heaven behind. Inspired by a deceased monk who communicated that he saw no Cistercians in Heaven whereupon his living tutor had a vision in which the Virgin opened her robes and showed the 'so affectionate Cistercian monks & nuns she was protecting.' Recorded by Caesari Von Heisterbuck in his 'Dialogus Miraculorum' (1219-1223). Picture from Musée de Chartreuse, Douai, Belgium.



The Llanbister Princess



She is a bit chinless but considering her likely journey over the centuries from Cwmhir Abbey to Prellwydion Farm, Llanbister, where she is now kept, perhaps it is not too surprising.

This carving was found in the chimney breast of Vicarage Farm house next door when it was being demolished in 1994 to be replaced by a bungalow. The sculpture is the same size as the original although her depth has been shortened to enable the fitting in the Exhibition Room. Her full depth is nearly one metre which is unusual and needs some explanation. It is thought to be a corbel from a fire place in the Abbots House at Cwmhir Abbey supporting a stone beam to a similar corbel on the other side, the depth reaching into the fire's inglenook. After the Dissolution the Abbey was used as a quarry for stone and this piece was transferred to Vicarage Farm at Llanbister and used as infill for a wall. The farm was apparently farmed directly by the vicar of Llanbister.

Does the female face represent a historical person? Perhaps Mabli? Could Thomas Wilson's Abbey Cwmhir (1824-1837) fictional poem about Abbot Rhiryd (c.1200) falling in love with Mabli have some truth in it? We have called her the Llanbister Princess because she must have been someone important as there were few carvings of women in those days.

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 ABBEY CWMHIR NAVE
*'A construction of quite astonishing conception'*⁴



St Idloes Church

By chance as a result of Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries (Cwmhir: 2 March 1537) five arches and six pillars of the original abbey were transported in 1542 to Llanidloes to form the North arcade of St Idloes parish church. Imagine twenty eight of these arches - fourteen on each side - down the long length of the Abbey nave, the longest Cistercian nave in Europe and longer than Westminster Abbey's. The capitals that have been 3D scanned and printed near full size are, from the left, the first (Capital 5) and second (Capital 4)



St Idloes Church

A Cwmhir Arch at Llanidloes Parish Church showing the base of a pillar, the triple sandstone shafts (shortened by four feet), the capital and the arch. The distance between the bases fits the surviving bases at Cwmhir. On top of each of the eight bundles of triple sandstone shafts of the pillars is a beautiful capital. These are difficult to see high up in the church so we have scanned them and exhibited them at a lower level at Cwmhir Abbey. The base heights of the two at the Eastern end are higher and may indicate an earlier raised sanctuary.³

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The best carved capital in Wales.

Capital 5



Drawn by Worthington Smith for Stephen Williams 1894 report on his, the most recent, archaeological dig, at Cwmhir Abbey³.

This claim for this thirteenth capital is substantiated by the foremost Architectural Historian and Welsh Cistercian Abbey writer Dr David Robinson who wrote that *'The prime candidate for the best in Wales.'*⁶ *The culmination of early Gothic developments in the Cistercian churches of Wales is the nave at Cwmhir'* This capital displays richer florettes with luxuriant and deeply undercut foliage in rich overhanging and windblown patterns.⁶ On the extreme left there is a capital with a variant of water leaf design with an upward loop motif. The half capital six has similar foliage. Compare with Capital four's 'stiff leaf' carving. The 'sumptuousness' (Roger of Wendover 1231) of the building suggests a very ambitious and wealthy patron. Perhaps the Norman Marcher Lord Roger Mortimer of Wigmore who gave a large grant of land to the Abbey in 1200 but died half way through its construction, perhaps enabling Llywelyn the Great to finish it?

The fact that there are different designs on each pillar capital brings up the question as to whether the builders of St Idloes reconstructed this Abbey arcade exactly as it was originally at Cwmhir or improvised. Judging by the muddle of capitals it seems the latter - although Capital two is nearly all water leaf design and Capital one is 'Stiff Leaf'. At least we get to see the six or more patterns from different periods they chose from. Next is a preliminary attempt to identify them in which effort I have been helped by several experts.³

Catalogue of Capital Decorations

It becomes apparent that the capitals at St Idloes Parish Church, Llanidloes are not a re-creation of how they were at Abbey Cwmhir because the shaft heads have been jumbled up on each capital (Robinson 2013 P 168).

However it is possible to make a short catalogue (Haslam 1992 P 141) of the designs and to give them an approximate period of carving thus helping with the dating of the building of the Abbey. This is merely a preliminary attempt to catalogue them as the North sides of the capitals were not scanned or photographed.

The six capitals and five arches were taken from the North East corner of Cwmhir Abbey and so can only strictly be said to represent that part of the abbey. Who knows what was under the other twenty-three arches! But probably very similar Capitals are numbered from the East End starting with and including the East Respond which is only a partial capital.



The Tri-Lobed leaves towards the base of each shaft head (or are they Fleur de Lys?) have a wavy line over the top which could be the edge of a scallop shell.



3D Multi-Polymer plastic material exact copy of Capital 5 – left hand side — in Abbey Cwmhir Exhibition Room. Also on Capital 2 & 3.



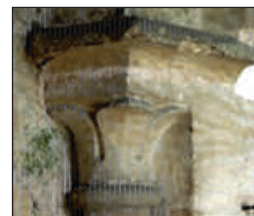
Tri-lobed leaves or fleur de lys linked together by stems.

3D Multi-Polymer plastic material. Exact copy from Capital 4.



Water Leaf design. Early c.1190 (Haslam).

3D Multi-Polymer plastic material. Exact copy from Capital 4.



St Nicholas Church,
Kennet, Cambridgeshire.

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Richer florettes with luxuriant and deeply undercut foliage in rich overhanging and windblown patterns. (Robinson 2006 p110) Some heads droop.

A later design circa 1215.

3D Multi-Polymer plastic material exact copy of part of Capital 5.



Stiff Leaf Carving. About 1200.

3D Multi-Polymer plastic material. Capital 5.

Also on part of Capital 4.



Variation on Stiff Leaf Carving.

1st Capital (Eastern Respond - half capital)

St Idloes Church, Llanidloes.



Further Variation of Stiff Leaf Design.

Capital 6 or Western Respond (partial capital).

St Idloes Church, Llanidloes. Late deep stiff leaf carving.



Stalks of corn motif.
Part of Capital 4.

St Idloes Church.

Notes and Bibliography

1A: The 3D scanning was done with an Artec Leo Scanner at 80 frames per second. The 3D printing was powered by Stratasys J750 which is an additive method of manufacturing a physical object by laying down successive layers to build up the object in a multi-polymer material but with a honeycomb structure inside.

2A: Robinson 2006 P 110;

3A: Williams S. Capital 5 displays richer flourettes with luxuriant and deeply undercut foliage in rich overhanging and windblown patterns. (Ibid) On the extreme left there is a shaft capital with a variant of water leaf design with an upward loop motif. The half capital 6 at the West End has similar foliage. Compare with Capital 4's 'stiff leaf' carving.

All pictures by Roger Coward except where stated.

¹ Brooksby, H Arch Camb by V01. 119 (1970) P132 - 4

² Burton J. & Kerr, J. *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages* (Boydell 2011)

³ Brooksby H

⁴ Haslam/ Pevsner '*Buildings of Powys*' (Penguin 1979).

⁵ Robinson/Pevsner '*Buildings of Powys*' (Penguin 2013) Also Robert Scourfield, Richard Haslam, John Davies, John Kenyon, Frances Lynch, Gavin Watson.

⁶ Robinson, David R, '*The Cistercians in Wales*' (Society of Antiquaries 2006).

⁷ Williams, Stephen (*Transactions of the Honorable Society of Cymmrodorion 1894-5*)

We are grateful to Cadw for their generous grant towards the 3D scanning and improvements to the Exhibition Room at Cwmhir Abbey.