

A small town in the Vale of Glamorgan with a history that extends back to the time of the Romans.

Llantwit Major



In the Heart of the Vale of Glamorgan, and just inland from the coast, Llantwit Major (in Welsh “Llanilltyd Fawr”) is by repute one of the most ancient centres of Christianity in Wales if not the entire British Isles, for a church is reputed to have stood on this spot for over 1,500 years. Indeed, some would claim that there was an even earlier Christian community here even prior to this. When the remains of a large Roman Villa (not now visible) were excavated to the north of the village in 1888 the skeletons of 43 people were found buried in one of its rooms. At the time this was thought to have been the result of a massacre of the last occupants, but a subsequent re-appraisal of the evidence suggested that these were early Christian burials made at a time when the building was already in ruin. If correct, then this in turn perhaps suggests that the villa had a religious significance for this community, arguably extending the Christian connections at Llantwit back into the Roman era.

According to legend the building of the first church dates to the arrival of a monk named Illtyd from Brittany about the year 500 AD. He settled here as a hermit, but his reputation soon spread into the surrounding area attracting disciples for whom he built the church, a school, and a monastery from where his pupils spread out into the surrounding countryside carrying his teachings with them.



No trace of this early Christian centre now remains, and even the location of the monastery has been lost as everything was destroyed when the Normans conquered Glamorgan at the end of the 11th century - the reforming zeal of the Roman Catholic Church eradicating all trace of its "heretical" Celtic predecessor. The western end of the present church is believed to stand on the site of the original one founded by Illtyd, though the architecture belongs to a much later time. Later, during the medieval period, a new church that is the present place of worship was then erected on its eastern side extending the building in that direction.

The church of St Illtyd is undoubtedly one of the most interesting in Wales with a fine collection of monuments and memorials from all periods of its history up to the present day. Normally it is open for visitors, and when I last visited a few years ago there was an excellent booklet on sale which provided a good illustrated guided tour of the interior and its treasures



Whilst the church is the central attraction the picturesque old town of Llantwit is itself well worth exploring, especially as most traffic has now been diverted away from its narrow and crooked streets. At its heart is the market square and Town Hall which (or so I have been told) was originally created in the 16th century by converting a pre-existing medieval barn.

Particularly conspicuous in the north-west of the village is The Old Place (also known as “Llantwit Place” or “Llantwit Castle”) which is the abandoned shell of a former Elizabethan mansion built about 1595 but incorporating elements of an earlier building. Elsewhere around the village are several houses, still in occupation, which exhibit architectural features dating back to the Tudor period and earlier.



Amidst the fields on the slope of the hill to the west of the church are the remains of “Abbot’s Llantwit” which was the grange of Tewkesbury Abbey to whom the property of the former Celtic monastery was given following the Norman conquest. Particularly conspicuous is the circular dovecote which stands virtually complete in one of the fields, though of the nearby tithe barn only some of the foundations are now visible. On the adjoining lane stands a former gatehouse that once gave access to the domestic and administrative buildings of the grange, though of these nothing now remains above ground.



Abbot’s Llantwit

Llantwit Major is one of those places “not a million miles from home” to which I frequently pay a visit, particularly when the weather is fine, and enjoy a leisurely stroll around the old town soaking up its unique atmosphere. It is a peaceful place; one that is home to the present, but with roots firmly and proudly in its past.

