

Although standing in the County Borough of Neath & Port Talbot, the medieval Abbey of Margam and the estate which succeeded it has had a profound influence upon the lands forming the western part of the present County Borough of Bridgend.

The Origin of Margam Abbey



Margam Village and the former Abbey Church.

Today Margam lies within the County Borough of Neath and Port Talbot which borders the western side of Bridgend County, but historically it formed part of a large territory with the unusual name of “Morgan” which lay between the rivers Ogmore and Afan. The history of the abbey founded here in the 12th century, and the estate that subsequently developed from it, has therefore exercised considerable influence upon those lands west of the river Ogmore within the modern County.

Most of this land called Morgan remained in the hands of a Welsh chieftain following the invasion of Glamorgan in 1093, and its history prior to its complete annexation by Robert, Earl of Gloucester circa 1145/6 is obscure. By the end of the century “Morgan” had become “Margan” and then “Margam”, though the latter name now refers only to the abbey, village and parish of that name.

Having annexed Morgan the Earl promptly established the Borough town and castle at Kenfig, and then founded the Abbey only a few weeks before his death in October 1147. He and his successor William also allocated to their followers some of the land on the coastal plain, leaving the native Welsh to occupy the hilly interior around the Llynfi Valley. To maintain and sustain its development the new community was given land between the Afan and Kenfig which, others have speculated, may have been intended to also act as a kind of “demilitarized zone” between the Welsh and the Norman coastal settlements.



Capel Mair

In recent years there has been a growing suspicion that there was already a monastery at Margam at the time of the Earl's grant because of the number of Christian monuments that have been recovered in the area dating from the centuries prior to 1147. This would have been a Celtic monastery where the monks worshipped according to a form of Christianity which the Roman Catholic Church deemed heretical. Hence, the Normans, as good Roman Catholics, suppressed this institution and replaced it with a new one on a far grander scale. This earlier monastery would have been a simple affair – a small thatched church surrounded by huts which were the cells of the monks. Until now its name and exact location have not been identified, but I would like to believe that my own research has now come up with these answers.

Amongst the earliest charters from the Cistercian Abbey founded here by Earl Robert there are some which refer to an Abbey known as Pendar and its Abbot named Meiler. Upon notification of the Earl's grant the Abbot at the Cistercian Order's parent house at Clairvaux in France would have despatched an Abbot and 12 monks to Margam to take possession of the land and build the new abbey. Pending their arrival it seems Abbot Meiler received several bequests of land on their behalf.

The location of "Pendar" has long puzzled historians, and several fanciful guesses have been made, but arguably it must have been closer to Margam than Neath Abbey which was already in being and as another Cistercian community would have been the logical candidate to fulfil this caretaker role. What seems to have escaped everyone's notice to date is that behind the Cistercian Margam Abbey on the west rises an impressive spur known to this day as "Cefn Pendar". Part way down its slopes is a large platform which looks to be partly artificial, and on it stands the enigmatic ruins of a medieval chapel known as Capel Mair.



The Chapter House with Capel Mair and Cefn Pendar in the background.

On architectural grounds Capel Mair dates to the 15th century, but its purpose has always been a mystery. The most plausible theory so far is that it was erected to provide a place of worship for the tenants of Margam Farms who, as laymen, were not allowed to worship in the Abbey church. In view of the possibility that this was the site of an earlier monastery it occurs to me that the real reason was to mark the former sanctity of the spot at a time when the former animosity towards the Celtic Church had largely been forgotten.

The Abbey built by the Cistercians was on a far grander scale than its humble predecessor as is immediately apparent from its ruins today. As well as the church there were on the south side three ranges of buildings arranged so as to form a hollow square with the church forming the fourth side. Here too was the chapter house – a 12 sided feature that is almost unique in the architecture of Cistercian monasteries. The Abbey Chronicle says that the consecration of the high altar took place in 1187, an event which probably marked the completion of the church, if not the entire complex, some forty years after Earl Robert's foundation charter.



Throughout the 12th and 13th centuries the community acquired extensive lands over and beyond those designated in their foundation charter – mainly in the area between Margam and the Ogmore River. Following the dissolution of the monastery by King Henry VIII, most of these, and the site of the Abbey itself, were acquired by the Mansel family. By a quirk of fate thousands of documents generated by the acquisition and administration of this vast estate, from the 12th century onwards, have been preserved, providing modern researchers such as myself with a valuable resource for a detailed insight into the past of our area.

Access to the Catalogue to the Penrice & Margam MSS at the National Library is available at <http://cat.llgc.org.uk/cgi-bin/gw/chameleon?lng=en>.

Most of the former Abbey Church is now the parish church in the village of Margam, but the ruin of the east end, the chapter house, and the domestic buildings lie in the grounds of Margam Park along with the later Orangery and mansion house. There is easy signposted access to both village and the park from Junction 38 on the M4. Capel Mair can be reached by footpaths from the car parks at Margam village.



The Abbey church, ruins, and the Orangery from Capel Mair