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## St Melangell's Church

### The building

There has been a church on this site for over 1200 years, and some of the present building is over 800 years old. The church is long and narrow, and the nave is less than half the length of the building, giving importance to the east end shrine.

The oldest part of the building is the stonework around the arch of the doorway and much of the north and western wall of the nave, including the small lancet window, which dates from the twelfth century. The roof structure dates from the fifteenth century.

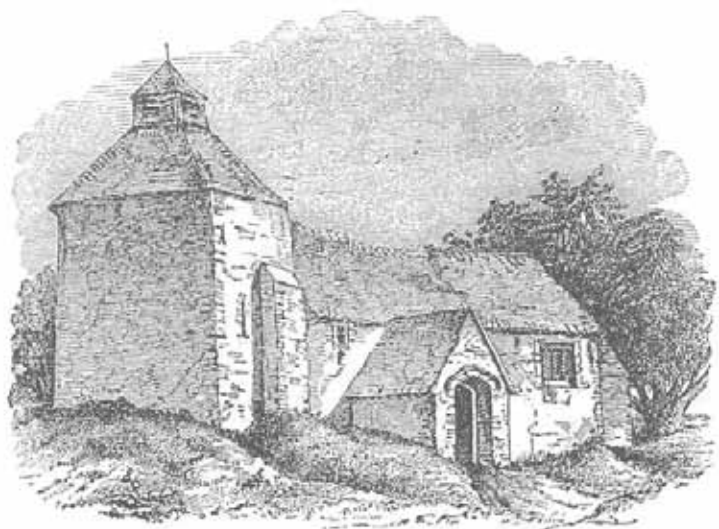
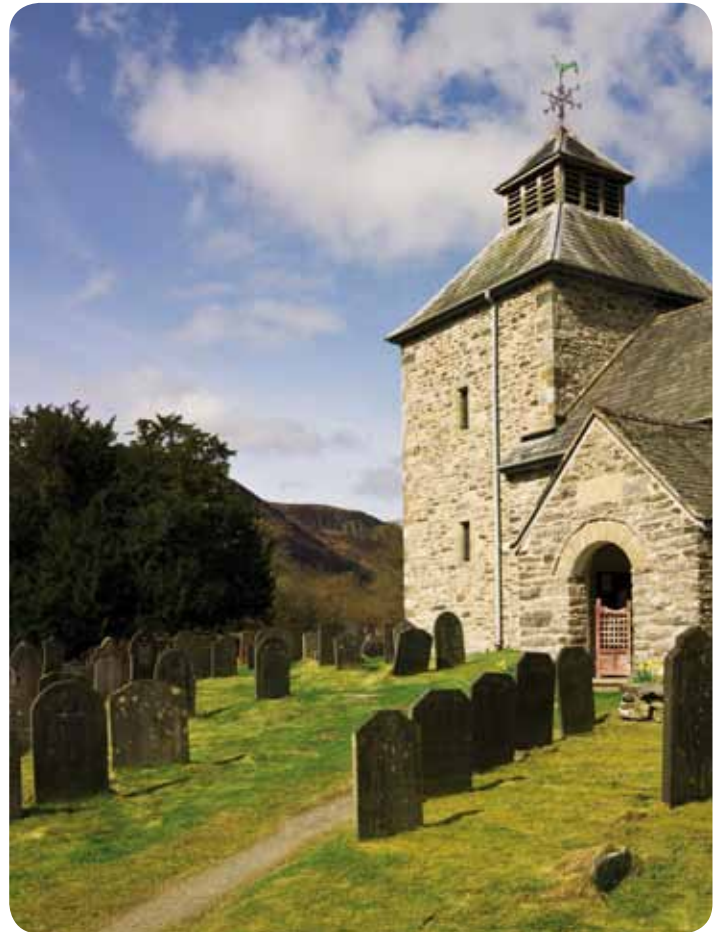
The church has been restored three times. The first was in 1876-77, when the tower and bell turret at the west end were completely rebuilt and the separate priest's door to the chancel was removed.

The tower has retained its original form. The low, square timber bell turret is typical of Montgomeryshire churches (similar turrets can be found on the towers of the churches at Llansantffraid, Llanfechain and Llansilin on this trail).

### Saint Melangell

In the year 604, Prince Brochwel Ysgithrog was hunting in Pennant when his hounds pursued a hare into a bramble thicket where they found a beautiful virgin at prayer. The hare took refuge under the hem of her garment, and the dogs fled, howling.

The Prince discovered that the maiden was Melangell, a king's daughter who had fled Ireland fifteen years before to escape a forced marriage, and lead a life of contemplation. Brochwel gave her the valley as a place of sanctuary. Melangell remained in the valley where she founded a nunnery.



*View of the church showing the turret in the first half of the c19th after a sketch by R Kyrke Penson (Archaeologia Cambrensis 1848). Montgomeryshire Collections, Vol 82, 115*

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### 1980's restoration

By 1987 the condition of the church was so poor that its future came in to question, and the possibility of allowing it to become a ruin and transferring the shrine to the Welsh Folk Museum was considered. Fortunately, the unique setting and value of the church was recognised and a major scheme of restoration was begun in 1988.

This involved the radical decision to demolish the eighteenth century cell y bedd and rebuild the east end as an apse, based on archaeological evidence, which showed the footings of an earlier apsidal sanctuary. The shrine was reconstructed in the chancel. A full account of the excavation can be found in Volume 82 of the Montgomeryshire Collections.

### St Melangell's Shrine

The shrine of St Melangell is of international significance and the only Romanesque shrine to survive in Britain. It was constructed around 1160, to hold Melangell's relics, and remained in its original position until sometime after 1561, when orders came for the removal of all relics within eight days! Rather than disposing of the stones, they were built into the walls of the lychgate and the wall of the nave, until they were recognised in 1894. In 1958 they were rescued from the wall and the shrine was reconstructed in the cell y bedd, where it remained until 1989, when the shrine was rebuilt in its present position in the chancel.

Many visitors and pilgrims to the church leave prayer cards on its base, continuing a tradition that began over a thousand years ago. If the shrine had been placed in a museum, it would have ceased to serve the community as a focus of prayer and pilgrimage.

In its reconstructed form, in its original setting, it serves as 'living stones'.

Concrete was used to indicate the new work so that it cannot be confused with the original stonework. This approach is known as 'honest repair'. Carved stones of a similar design have been found at St Dogfan's Church in Llanrhaeadr and suggest it may also have had a shrine of this nature.



*The c18th cell y bedd before its replacement by the apse in 1989.  
(Crown copyright RCAHMW)*



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### Features: Effigies

The male effigy by the north wall of the chancel dates from around 1315 and is thought to be that of Madog ab Iowerth or Iorwerth Dryndwn (Edward of the broken nose) – eldest son of Owain Gwynedd. The legs are thought to have been damaged after an attack by Thomas Jones, the vicar between 1757 and 1782, known for his fits of rage! The female effigy by the south wall of the chancel dates from the late fourteenth century and is thought to represent Melangell at prayer. The animals either side of her arms are intended to be hares.

### Font



The plain circular tub shaped font dates from the second half of the c12th and is considered to be contemporary with the earliest surviving stonework in the church. It is made from sandstone, similar to that used to make the shrine. During the 1988 restoration it was moved from the north west side of the nave to its present position.

### Hare sculptures



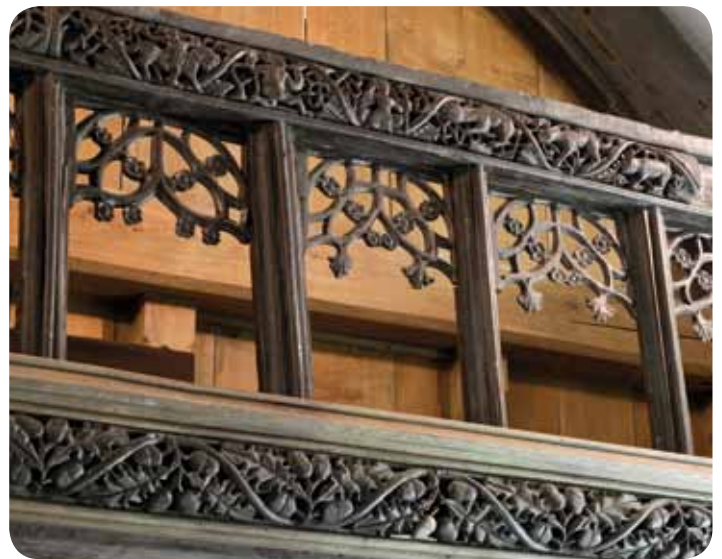
As the hare was given refuge by Melangell, it has come to symbolise the peace and sanctuary that can be found at Pennant Melangell. The tradition of incorporating the hare into the fittings of the church (such as the rood screen) is continued today in the

carved stone hare sculptures by Meical Watts along the north side of the nave. Many of the stones have acquired a shiny surface where pilgrims to the church have touched them.

Other items of interest to look out for are the timber candelabrum of 1733, the 'Giant's Rib', the eighteenth century reredos, now above the screen, and the Royal Arms of George I, painted on canvas and now hung over the arch.

### Rood Screen

The rood screen dates from the late fifteenth century. It was moved from its original position in the early eighteenth century and used to form a gallery above the west end of the nave. In 1988 it was moved to its current position. The remarkable frieze carved into the solid oak represents the earliest surviving account of the legend of Melangell. The figures of Melangell, the hare, the prince, his huntsman and two hounds can be seen in the centre.



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### Churchyard

The church lies within a Bronze Age site. The churchyard is roughly circular and contains several yew trees, some of which are thought to be almost 2000 years old. The yew tree on the north side of the church dates from the 1876 restoration and is near the site of a cockpit.

The sundial by the graves to the south of the porch is made from the shaft of the old medieval cross. A detailed survey of the graveyard was carried out 1986 and this forms the basis of the booklet on the Pennant churchyard in the Monumental Inscription Series (a reference copy is available in the tower shop). It contains a map of the graves and inscriptions.

There are a number of interesting graves around the churchyard. A number of earlier pilgrims to St Melangell's carved the shape of their shoe on to the stone of some of the graves slabs. They may have done this as a way of connecting with the church, but a local tale is that the carvings were done by a cobbler to keep a record of people's shoe sizes!. Some of these faint carvings are still visible on several of the grave slabs close to the southeast side of the church.



### Further information

For those wishing to find out more, several booklets are readily available from the shop at the base of the tower. St Melangell's Church – A History and Guide, by John Hainsworth, and Pennant Melangell – A Place of Pilgrimage by A. M. Allchin both give detailed accounts of the church, saint and its importance to pilgrims. Volume 82 of the Montgomeryshire Collections is devoted entirely to Pennant Melangell and includes sections on the excavations of 1988, the contents of the church and the conservation philosophy behind the reconstruction of the shrine.

### Saint Melangell's Today

St Melangell's is no longer a parish church, but serves a wider community in the same way as it has since the early middle ages, as a place of pilgrimage and sanctuary. Visitors come here from throughout Wales, Britain and the world.

### Saint Melangell Centre

The Saint Melangell Centre is about 100 yards further up the lane from St Melangell's Church, on the left. Here there is a meeting room where groups can be received and courses and retreats are held. Visitors to the church are welcome to the Centre, where there are toilet facilities and drinks available. The Centre is open on most days. For further details, contact the Centre Coordinator on **01691 860408** or email [saintmelangell@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:saintmelangell@tiscali.co.uk). The website address is [www.st-melangell.org.uk](http://www.st-melangell.org.uk).

