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St Ffraid's Church

St Ffraid

Ffraid came from Ireland in the sixth century and was also known as Bride or Bridget. She was the daughter of Cadwrthai, born in Ulster, and was well respected as a nun, being tutored by St Mel, the nephew of St Patrick. According to tradition she possessed miraculous gifts, which her father opposed, so she sailed across the Irish Sea on a clod of earth guided by an oystercatcher, and when she arrived in the Dovey Basin, she turned the rushes into trout! According to Volume 3 of the Archaeological Journal, her remains are preserved by the Jesuits in Lisbon.

The building

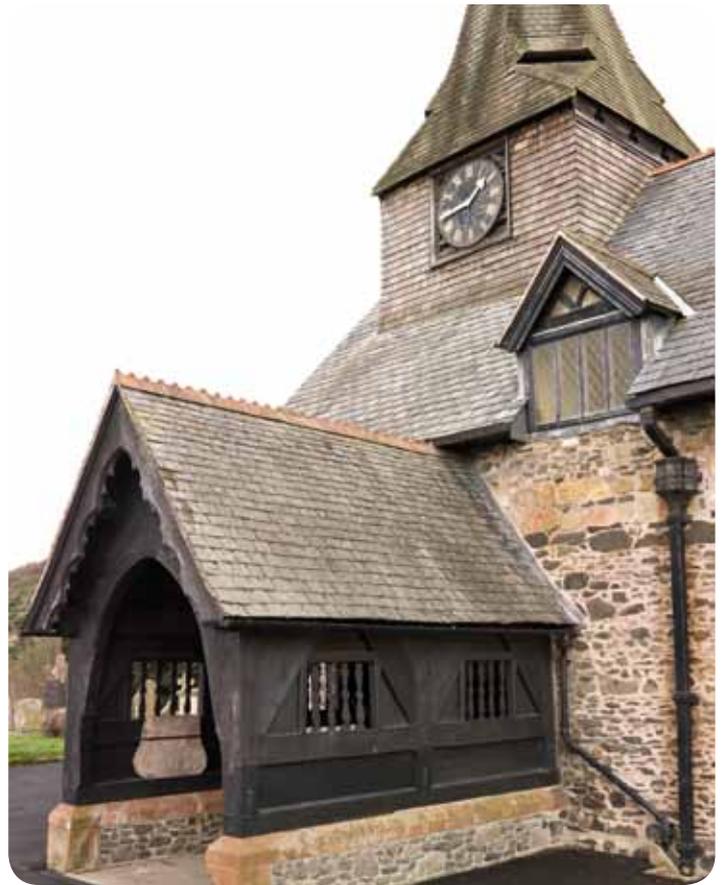


At the core of St Ffraid's church lies a twelfth century building that was extended in the fourteenth century. The exact location of the earlier church, and the direction of the fourteenth

century extension, are baffling experts, as it appears the builders reused bits of the early building when they built the new! Some experts date the masonry to the twelfth century by the survival of a small window in the north wall, others think this window may have been moved here in the fourteenth century.



A blocked up doorway on the south side could have been the priest's doorway that was blocked up when the church was extended. The



drop in the roof line and quoins in the stonework west of the door show the church was extended westwards, probably in the fourteenth century. The shouldered window east of the blocked doorway is in the style of the Decorated period, most popular in the fourteenth century. The plastered barrel ceiling over the nave dates from the fifteenth century, unlike the ceiling in the chancel, which is Victorian.



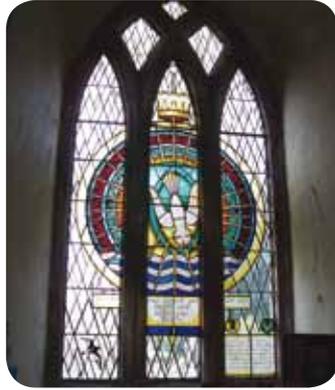
Another example of the reuse of old masonry, which is confusing the experts, is the shape of the present south doorway. In its present form the doorway is almost round-headed, which would make it Norman, but it has a slight off-centre point, suggesting it might be fourteenth or fifteenth century. So, it is either a reuse of old, carved and valuable masonry, or it has moved.



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The piscina, a stone recess used originally for pouring away water used in the mass and for rinsing the chalice and paten after communion, was chopped in half during alterations.



The stone surround to the fourteenth century east window was moved to the west end by the Victorians in order to put an 'improved' fourteenth century style window in its place at the east end.



The font is a simple stone bowl, thought to date from the thirteenth century. It was given a new plinth by the Victorians to make it appear grander. A sketch of 1871 shows it standing on a simple base (Montgomeryshire Collections Volume 4).



The seventeenth century layer

Many of the distinguishing features of St Ffraid's church were added during this period. The charming windows were inserted into the south elevation and the door was blocked up. The timber bell turret was constructed in 1618 and given new bells. According to local tradition, the bells had been destined for St Garmon's Church at Llanfechain, but the road was too muddy for the cart to get them there, so they were hung at St Ffraid's instead!



The south porch was constructed sometime later in the seventeenth century. The attractive dormer window above the south porch was

added in 1669 and suggests the gallery may have been added internally around the same time.

Many of the interior fittings added during the seventeenth century survived the Victorian restoration and have greatly enriched the internal space. The timber choir stalls and pulpit date from this period.



The eighteenth century layer

The north transept was added in 1727 using materials already available in the church; the timbers for the transept were taken from the rood loft and its supporting pillars. The classical architecture

of this elevation is typical of the eighteenth century and an unexpected surprise when visitors walk round the north of the church, as it contrasts so markedly with the materials, scale and design presented by the south elevation.

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Victorian restoration

Like many churches, the interior was given a 'makeover' by the Victorians. At St Ffraid's the work took place between 1891 and 1893, under the architect John Oldrid Scott from London (son of George Gilbert Scott). Photographs taken in 1892 give us a glimpse of the interior before the changes.

The east window seen in the photograph below has now been moved to the west end of the nave, but the main changes are the removal of the high backed box pews. In true St Ffraid's tradition, these were recycled and turned into wall panels, which can still be seen fixed around the nave walls at dado level.

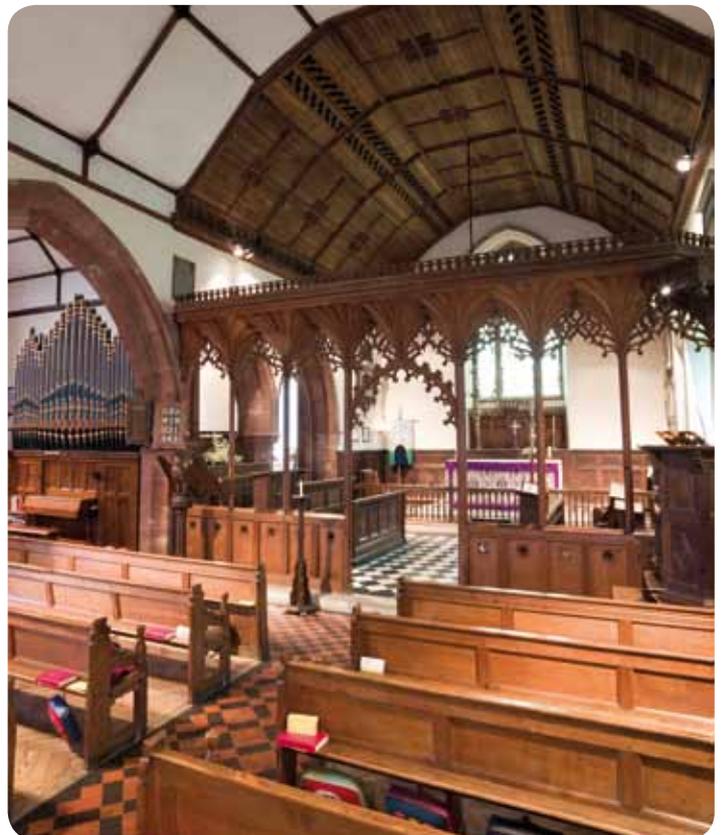
A two bay stone arcade was built to separate the nave from the transept, and the fan-ribbed carved timber screen was inserted to separate the chancel from the nave. Galleries in the nave and transept were removed in this period and the floors relaid in wooden blocks.



St Ffraid's looking east 1892



St Ffraid's looking west 1892



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Externally, the work seemed to focus on repair rather than restoration. The chancel was reroofed and new shingles (wooden tiles) placed on the spire.



Sketch of St Ffraid's Church from 1871 (before the Victorian restoration), showing the external appearance of the building remained largely unaltered compared to the interior. Some of the graves have been cleared on the south side of the church. Montgomeryshire Collections Volume 4.



View of the church today, with the repaired spire, which now has a clock face.



The gutters (sometimes referred to as 'troughins'), and the downpipe hoppers are worth a look. They are cast iron with unusual decoration on the faces, and are thought to date from the late nineteenth century restoration.

Churchyard

The rectangular shaped churchyard has been extended twice in recent times in a northerly direction, in 1903 and in the 1970s. Many gravestones near the church were cleared at the time of the later extension. The earliest remaining slab is dated 1679. Two stones either side of the porch, dating from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, have interesting inscriptions. One has a skull and cross bones, the other an hourglass with a spade underneath.



The Meini Bywiol Living Stones Heritage trail consists of 15 churches and chapels in north Montgomeryshire. See the trail leaflet and the website for information about the other sites on the trail www.living-stones.info