

# Peaceful places of inspiration along the **River Wye**

Venture off the beaten track to discover  
peaceful places and landscapes of belief






Map showing location of the early Welsh Kingdom of Ergyng.

Ergyng's capital was possibly at Ariconium (today's Weston under Penyard). Ergyng included parts of the Forest of Dean at some points in history.





## Early Celtic sites of the Lower Wye Valley and Ergyng (Archenfield)

### Setting the Scene

The Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is dotted with sites which have strong historical links to the early Celtic (British) Church. Christianity was introduced here by the Romans and when they left, around AD 410, their centralised system of political control was replaced in Wales with a series of small kingdoms. The Welsh kingdom of Ergyng (Archenfield) stretched across what is now southern Herefordshire, from the Black Mountains to the river Wye and to the south down the Wye Valley. Welsh was spoken across this area and Welsh place names, in what is today England, reflect the changing boundary.

Ergyng became a stronghold of the old Celtic church, one of its last outposts in Britain. Christianity survived here because it was remote from the invading Saxons, who brought Germanic paganism to England in AD 449. Many hamlets and villages grew out of the tiny

religious 'cells' men and women founded in the 5th and 6th centuries.

By the 6th century a Bishop called Dyfrig led the Christian community here. He seems to have played an influential role in ensuring that the Celtic church's faith and traditions flourished in the borderlands beside the Wye. This was at least a century before St Augustine was sent by the church in Rome, in AD 597, to spread Christianity in Britain.

Hints of early Celtic church sites can be found in place names. 'Llan' is the old Welsh word for a cemetery or church, suggesting early Christian activity at places such as 'Llandogo' or 'Lancaut'. The dedication of a church to a Celtic saint hints that a church was there before Norman times. Circular churchyards, slightly raised above the surrounding ground, and nearby springs and holy wells are also thought to indicate early Christian activity.

## The Age of the Saints

In the 5th and 6th centuries Celtic saints travelled great distances spreading Christianity through Wales and along the coasts of Cornwall, Brittany, Ireland and Scotland. Celtic saints were often kings and princes, men and women of rank who renounced their privileges to live in prayerful seclusion. The 'Lives of the Saints' were written down in the 11th century, a mix of Celtic mythology and fact passed through the generations.

## Who was St Dyfrig?

In Wales the 'Age of the Saints' began with St Dyfrig (Dubricius). He kept Christianity alive in Eryng and may have been the most influential man in the creation of early Christian Wales.

He was the grandson of King Peibio of Eryng who tried to kill his unmarried daughter when he discovered she was pregnant. Princess Efrddyl survived and her son Dyfrig was born beside the Wye. Legend has it that Peibio's leprosy was cured by the touch of the baby's hand.

Dyfrig established a teaching monastery at Llanfrother near Hentland, where thousands of students came to study. It's claimed that one of his students was St Illtud, who went on to set up his own monastery at Llantwit Major, famed for its Christian teaching and missionary work.

Dyfrig is also said to have taught St Teilo (St David's cousin), St Samson and St Junabui and worked closely with St Cadog. Dyfrig set up a second monastery at Moccas near his birthplace, on land his grandfather,

King Peibio, had granted to him. He spent his last years as a hermit on Bardsey Island in North Wales.

Three churches in the Wye Valley are dedicated to Dyfrig - Hentland, Ballingham, and Whitchurch.

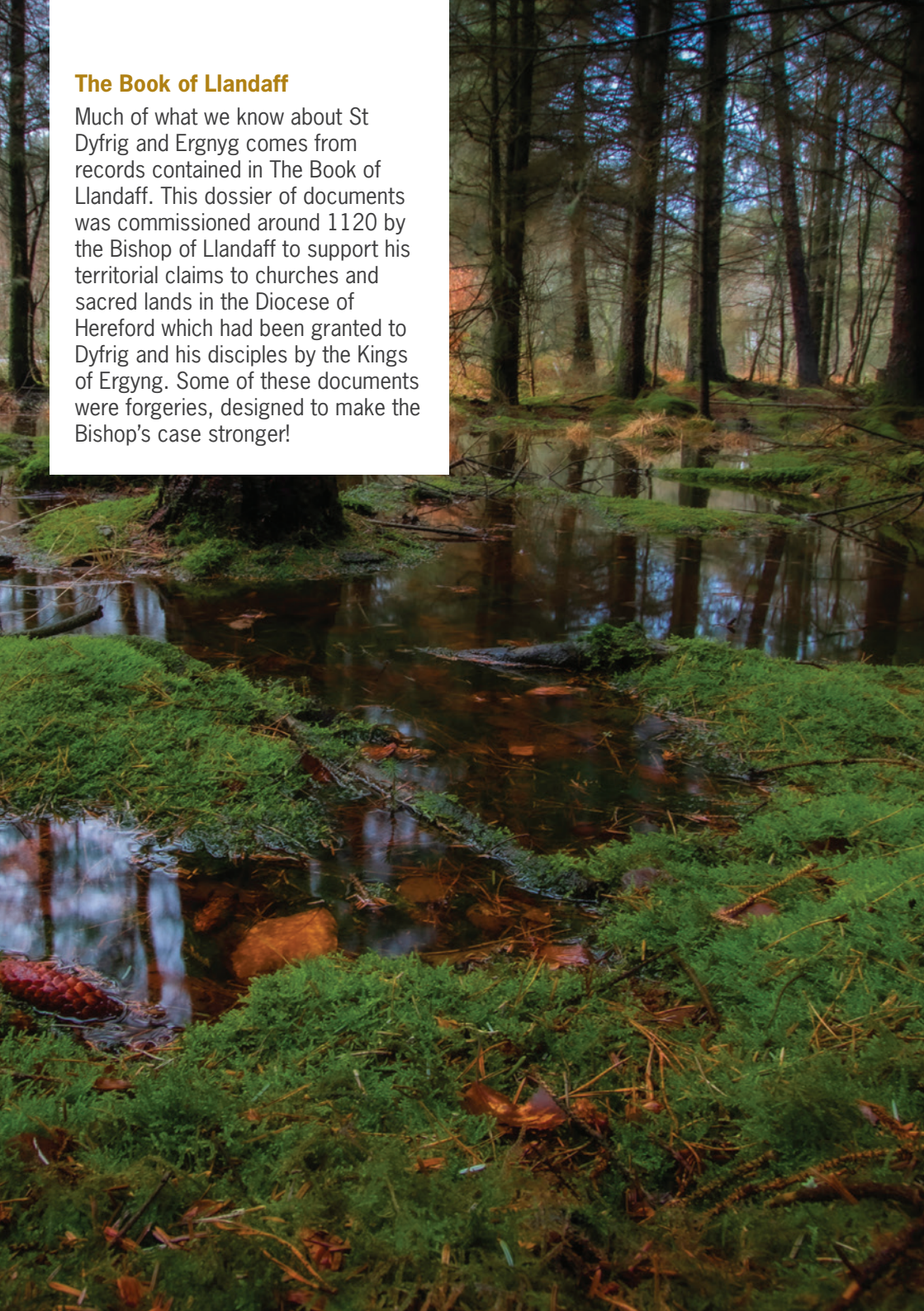


St Dyfrig is remembered in this stained glass window at Hentland Church (13). Can you spot the hedgehog, which was the symbol of ancient Eryng (Archenfield)?



## **The Book of Llandaff**

Much of what we know about St Dyfrig and Ergnyg comes from records contained in The Book of Llandaff. This dossier of documents was commissioned around 1120 by the Bishop of Llandaff to support his territorial claims to churches and sacred lands in the Diocese of Hereford which had been granted to Dyfrig and his disciples by the Kings of Ergyng. Some of these documents were forgeries, designed to make the Bishop's case stronger!





Reconstruction of an early Celtic Church, based on St Illtud's Church Llantwit Major. This church was established by St Illtud, said to have been a student of St Dyfrig at Hentland Church. Image reproduced courtesy of the Rectorial Benefice of Llantwit Major. [www.llanilltud.org.uk](http://www.llanilltud.org.uk)

## A landscape of belief

### A word of warning

Early Celtic churches were made of timber and thatch which hasn't survived, so visiting these locations won't bring you face to face with the architecture of early Celtic Christianity. The churches standing today date from later periods, but you will find yourself immersed in a landscape of belief. Throughout history people have expressed their religious beliefs by connecting to the landscape, to rivers, lakes, springs, mountains and ancient trees. Water held huge significance for the Celtic saints and most of the locations in this leaflet are beside or close to the River Wye. Following the Wye Valley Walk will take you to many of these places.

### What did early churches look like?

Early Celtic churches were single roomed buildings (called 'cells') where the saints could conduct their religious duties. As congregations became larger the 'nave' was built to provide shelter for the people and the 'cell' became the chancel of a church. Some large churches grew out of early monasteries set in circular churchyards, whilst some were the private chapels of local Welsh rulers. Many Norman churches were built on the same floor plan as the earlier Celtic churches, with the altar at the east and the entrance at the west end. The Normans rapidly stamped their authority on the Welsh church, a process which helped obliterate much of its early history.



# Celtic church sites in the lower Wye Valley and Ergyng

## 1 St Tecla, Beachley

Next time you cross the old Severn Bridge look out for the tiny island of Chapel Rock on which stand the ruins of St Tecla's chapel. Tradition has it St Tecla was a 4th or 5th century princess from north Wales, who left to follow a religious life. In the 6th to 7th century a Welsh saint called Twrog kept a beacon burning to warn ships of the treacherous rocks in the dangerous tidal waters. The ruins, which include a holy well known for its healing properties, date from the 13th century, although it's thought a much older chapel stood on this site.

🚫 No Access: Grid Ref ST548900

## 2 Chepstow

The Book of Llandaff refers to a church at Chepstow first mentioned in AD 625. It may have been the seat of a bishop.

🚫 Access: Grid Ref ST 534939  
(current day church)

## 3 Lancaut

The present day ruins of St. James may occupy the site of a very early church called Llan Cewydd. Cewydd was a 5th century Welsh saint and this is probably one of the earliest Christian sites in the Wye Valley, first referenced in The Book of Llandaff in AD 625. It is thought there may have been an early monastic community here, although excavations have yet to confirm this. This is a stunningly remote and peaceful riverside location which you can easily imagine appealing to the early Celtic saints.

🚫 Access: On foot only from Lancaut Lane parking area (Grid Ref ST 541965). A longer walk, *Discover the Lancaut Peninsular* leaflet, will take you from Chepstow Castle, above limestone cliffs where peregrines nest to the lost medieval village of Lancaut and the ruins of St James' Church. (Download at [www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk](http://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk))



## 4 St Arvans

According to legend, St Arfan established the first church here between the 6th and 9th century. He was a hermit who supported himself by coracle fishing for salmon in the nearby Wye, where he unfortunately drowned. The church is mentioned in the Llandaff Charters c. AD 955 and stands in a circular churchyard. Inside the church is a broken 10th century Celtic cross-shaft with bird like symbols and interlacing. Early artefacts found in nearby fields suggest an early Christian settlement here.

📌 Access: Easy by car or on foot. Grid Ref ST517965. *St Arvans Roundabout Walk* passes St Arvans and Penterry churches. (Download at [www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk](http://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk))

## 5 Penterry



Located in an elevated position with wonderful views across the Wye Valley, Penterry is mentioned in the Llandaff Charters in AD 955.

📌 Access: Very short walk from car park across field to Grid Ref ST519987. Longer *Penterry Circular Walk* from Tintern follows old monks' path from Tintern Abbey to the grange at Penterry. (Download at [www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk](http://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk))

## 6 Tintern

The Llandaff Charters refer to Tewdrig, who gave up his Kingdom of Gwent to live as a hermit at Tintern. Around AD 630, when invading Saxons attacked the local monasteries Tewdrig came out of retirement to defend the church against these pagan raids. The present day church stands on the banks of the Wye at an important Roman river crossing.

📌 Access: S0531007  
Easy access with small car park adjacent. The church is on the Wye Valley Walk. To arrive on foot follow the *Tintern Circular Walk*. (Download at [www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk](http://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk))







## 7 Llandogo

St Oudoceus became the third Bishop of Llandaff around AD 580. He probably built a small private chapel or monastery in Llandogo, with the earliest mention of a church here in the Llandaff Charters in AD 625. It appears again in AD 942 as the meeting place of bishops, suggesting that the bishopric moved to Llandogo from Welsh Bicknor around 900. Legend tells of the King of Glamorgan hunting on the Wye and a stag escaping the King's hounds by lying on St Oudoceus' cloak. All the land the stag had run over on that day

was given to St Oudoceus by the King, land which now forms the parish of Llandogo. The present day church is built on slightly higher land just a stone's throw from the Wye. It stands on top of earlier foundations, in a churchyard ('llan') that is probably 1500 years old. The Tithe map shows the churchyard was originally circular.

📌 **Access:** Easy, car parking adjacent Grid Ref S0526042. The 3 mile circular *Wordsworth Walk* passes the church. (Download at [www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk](http://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk))



## 8 Penallt

This peaceful and isolated site is on a steep hillside high above the Wye. An ancient yew stands in the churchyard and is probably old enough to have been planted by a saint! This church has lost its dedication, but because it is mentioned in The Book of Llandaff (c.1199 – 1216) it is likely to have been dedicated to one of the four patron saints of Llandaff - Peter, Dyfrig, Teilo or Euddogwy. There are several wells nearby which may have religious significance, and an early date is suggested by the partially curving churchyard.

📌 **Access:** Grid Ref S0523107. Car access via narrow lanes from Penallt. *The Redbrook Circular Walk* from Redbrook passes the church. (Download at [www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk](http://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk))

## 9 Monmouth

The Book of Llandaff mentions a church in Monmouth in AD 733, dedicated to a Celtic saint, St Cadoc. A charter of c. AD 910 refers to a St Mary's and this could have been on the present site of the church in Monmouth. On the English side of the river in Wyesham there is a building known as 'The Cell', now a private house, which was originally the church of St Thomas the Martyr, first mentioned in a papal bull in 1186.

📌 **Easy access to present day St Marys.** Grid Ref S0508129

## 10 St Peter's Dixon



The first mention of a church here, called Llan Tydwg, is in AD 735, in the Book of Llandaff. Tydwg may have been one of St Dyfrig's students. The church was referred to as 'Hennlann' (meaning 'old church' in Welsh), suggesting there had been a church here for many years and could possibly have been a monastic foundation. The church was probably destroyed by the Welsh prince, Gruffydd ap Llywelyn in 1055, when he led a raid up the Wye to Hereford, devastating many riverside settlements. Following the invasion of 1066 Ergyng was the first part of Wales to be over-



run by the Normans. It's likely the church was rebuilt soon after and re-dedicated to St Peter. The parish straddles the border between England and Wales and parish records illustrate the battles for control between the Dioceses of Llandaff (in Wales) and Hereford (in England). Most recently, parishioners elected to remain in the Church of England in 1920, so the church is in the Diocese of Hereford although geographically in Wales.

📌 Access: Grid Ref SO519135. The best way to arrive is a 15 minute riverside stroll from Monmouth Rowing Club, along the Wye Valley Walk.

### 11 **Whitchurch St Dubricius**

This is one of three local churches dedicated to St Dubricius (Dyfrig) and its Wye-side location is just across the river from the site of a Romano-British villa. The oldest part of the church standing today dates to the 13th century. There is an early sculpture on the right hand side of the chancel which looks more Anglo Saxon than Norman and a font which is also possibly late first millennium. The earlier eastern part of the church was probably washed away by the Wye. Steps lead down from the church to the river, a reminder of the importance of water for early Celtic Christians. This was the way many people arrived to worship, and was also the route along which Christianity spread through the Wye Valley.

📌 Access: Easy access. Grid Ref SO557175. A pleasant way to approach the church is to take the hand ferry from Symonds Yat East and follow the riverside footpath north to the church.





## 12 Welsh Bicknor

The Book of Llandaff mentions a church here in c. AD 575. However, there are two other possible locations for this 6th century church - Whitchurch or Hentland (on the banks of the Wye opposite Symonds Yat). Wherever it was, it was a place of importance, called a 'Bishop's house'. If it was located at Welsh Bicknor it was the bishop's seat from the late 6th to early 10th century. Legend has it that one Bishop of Ergyng was captured by Vikings on a raid up the Wye in 914. At this time the bishopric was Welsh, and remained Welsh speaking until the 17th century. A stroll around the riverside site reveals apple trees and an ancient cider press. It's not hard to imagine the monks enjoying cider in this delightfully remote riverside setting. Deer in the churchyard are not uncommon today.

Access: Grid Ref SO593176. Car access is via narrow lanes from Goodrich. The Wye Valley Walk passes the church and you can enjoy a circular walk from Coppet Hill.

## 13 Hentland (Llanfrother)

Hentland was the first 'llan' granted to St Dyfrig by the King of Ergyng in the 6th century. It is thought that this site was actually at Llanfrother (meaning 'llan' of the brethren), 3 km north of the current Hentland parish church and much closer to the Wye. This was where Dyfrig established his first teaching monastery. Today Hentland church is dedicated to St Devereux (the French form of Dyfrig). A stained glass window depicts St. Dubricius and includes a hedgehog (the symbol of ancient Ergyng/Archenfield). There is a woody glade below the graveyard at Hentland where a spring runs into a crystal clear lipwell pool. These pools were divided, one side for humans to drink from, the other for animals. Springs had special significance to early Christians.

Access: Grid Ref SO542263  
Car access via narrow lanes from A49 at Harewood End. Footpath from Hoarwithy leads uphill to farm at Llanfrother.



## 14 Llangarron

Early holy teachers set up hermit cells which are recognized in place names today with 'kil' or 'cil', such as Kilreague near Llangarron. About 20 'kils' were set up in the Garron Valley by hermits. Tradition suggests that St Deinst, a Celtic saint who died c.AD 584 founded a church here. It is mentioned in the Book of Llandaff, when King lthel returned eleven churches (previously belonging to Dyfrig) to Bishop Berthwyn, following a Saxon attack in AD 745. Today's church dates to the 14th century.

Access: Grid Ref S0530211  
car park adjacent to present  
day church.

## 15 Sellack

The Book of Llandaff shows a grant made to the Bishop of Llandaff, of Lann Sulac (Sellack), in the 7th century. It may have been one of the most important monasteries in Eryng as it had three chapels - at King's Caple, Marstow and Pencoed. Its dedication to St Tysilio, who died in AD 640, is unique in England but common in Wales. Tysilio was the son of the King of Powys and his mother was the daughter of the first Bishop of Bangor. He chose to avoid a military career, becoming a monk and travelling through Wales founding small religious communities. The churchyard is an oval-square shape, slightly higher than the surrounding ground and close to the river, suggesting an early religious site.

Access: Grid Ref S0565276 Car  
access is via narrow lanes. The  
nicest way to arrive is on foot over  
Sellack Bridge on the Hoarwithy  
Circular Walk. (Download at  
[www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk](http://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk))



## 16 Foy Church

Standing on a peninsular on top of a small cliff of old red sandstone and commanding views over the Wye, this site fits the idea of isolation sought by the founding saints. The Church was originally dedicated to St Tyvoi or Ffwy, probably a disciple of Dyfrig, in the late 5th and early 6th century. The site appears in the Llandaff Charters in AD 866 as Lann Timoi. The Normans didn't recognise Celtic saints and the dedication was changed to Saint Faith (Ancient French - Foye), and later St Mary. The hedgehog symbol of the ancient Welsh kingdom of Eryng appears on a carved screen inside the present church.

Access: Grid Ref S0598284 Car access is via narrow lanes. A pleasant way to reach it on foot is to cross the Wye at Foy Bridge. For a circular walk from Ross on Wye follow the Wye Valley Walk to Foy bridge and return on the Herefordshire Trail.

## 17 Ballingham

Another Charter in The Book of Llandaff mentions an early church at Ballingham, or Carey a mile south west of Ballingham, which was given to Bishop Inabwy by King Gwrgan around AD 620. Located on a spur above a loop in the river Wye, and with a curvilinear and raised churchyard, it could be an early 7th century monastic church.

Access: No public access.  
Grid Ref S0576316







Map showing the location of all the numbered sites mentioned in the leaflet.







Tintern Abbey was not established until 1131, long after the Age of the Saints. The Cistercian monks who built the Abbey were undoubtedly attracted by the same seclusion and riverside setting which the early Celtic saints had sought. Today, Tintern Abbey is the centre piece of the Wye Valley's most famous landscape of belief.



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Photography Gemma Kate Wood.

Find out more at: [www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk/landscapesofbelief](http://www.wyevalleyaonb.org.uk/landscapesofbelief)

