

History of the Diocese of St Davids (Wales)

The history of the present diocese of St Davids is long and varied. Celtic saints and Welsh princes, mediaeval bishops and Victorian legislators, Reformation scholars and Puritan divines, ascetic monks and Georgian parsons — all have left their mark on an extensive sacred landscape.

The names of churches and holy wells preserve the memory of the cults of Dewi, who gave his name to the diocese and cathedral, Teilo, Meugan, Brynach, Illtud and Padarn and those countless holy men and women who took up the torch of Christianity the Roman Empire. They tended the flame of Christian discipleship and learning through the Dark Ages. Neither Viking rapine nor Norman conquest extinguished their faith nor terminally damage the mother churches and hermitages, the tradition of scholarship and asceticism, the skills of carving stones and illuminating manuscripts.

It was the Normans who largely gave the diocese the shape it retained until 1923, when, following Disestablishment the Diocese of Swansea and Brecon was carved out of its Eastern edge. It is still today the largest diocese in Wales, but it once extended to the English border to include parishes in Herefordshire, Gwent and Powys. It was the Normans, too, who created the parochial system through which the diocese still operates at grass roots level.

It was during the period between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries that so many of our parish churches were built, extended and beautified, almost invariably on much more ancient sites. The mediaeval church served the whole community through its liturgical celebration of the rhythms of life through the sacraments Pilgrimage, too played a major part in church life both locally and at internationally recognised sites such as St Davids Cathedral.

The Reformation of the sixteenth century largely left the religious landscape in place with the exception of the religious houses, but with its adaptation of the mediaeval liturgies to highlight the newly recovered primacy of the Word of God, the interiors of church buildings became much starker. Bishop Richard Davies, Precentor Thomas Huet and Bishop William Morgan, key figures in the enterprise of translating the Holy Scriptures into Welsh, were all associated with the Diocese at this time. Later phases of the Reformation led Puritan soldiers to vandalise the cathedral leaving it in semi ruin for centuries. The lands and property of the church in the diocese were sequestered during the Commonwealth

The Restoration of Charles II led both to recovery on the part of the Anglican Church and the emergence of the Dissent on the part of dissatisfied Puritans. But the financial consequences of lay appropriation of religious property at the Reformation, led to pluralism, endemic poverty among many of the clergy, ruined and badly maintained buildings, which contributed to the rise of Dissent and Methodism in the Georgian church.

The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the Evangelical and Tractarian Revivals, which, allied both to the vision of bishops like Horsley, Burgess, Thirlwall and Basil Jones and the ecclesiastical

legislation of the period, saw new energies released which led to significant church restoration and rebuilding even in rural areas as well as the building of new churches to serve the expanding population of newly industrialized areas.

The most recent phase of the diocese's history begins with the watershed of Disestablishment. Bishop John Owen, who had contested the progress of disestablishment and then fought hard to secure the best for the church in the aftermath, led the diocese during the formative period of the new church in Wales

The diocese weathered the storms of mass unemployment, agricultural depression and world war, only, in common with the rest of the Church in Wales, to experience from the 1960's onwards a decline in numbers and a contraction and concentration of energies which led to the closure and redundancy of church buildings which should never have been built or restored in the Victorian period.

<http://www.churchinwales.org.uk/david/tourism/history/>