

Priory Church of St Mary

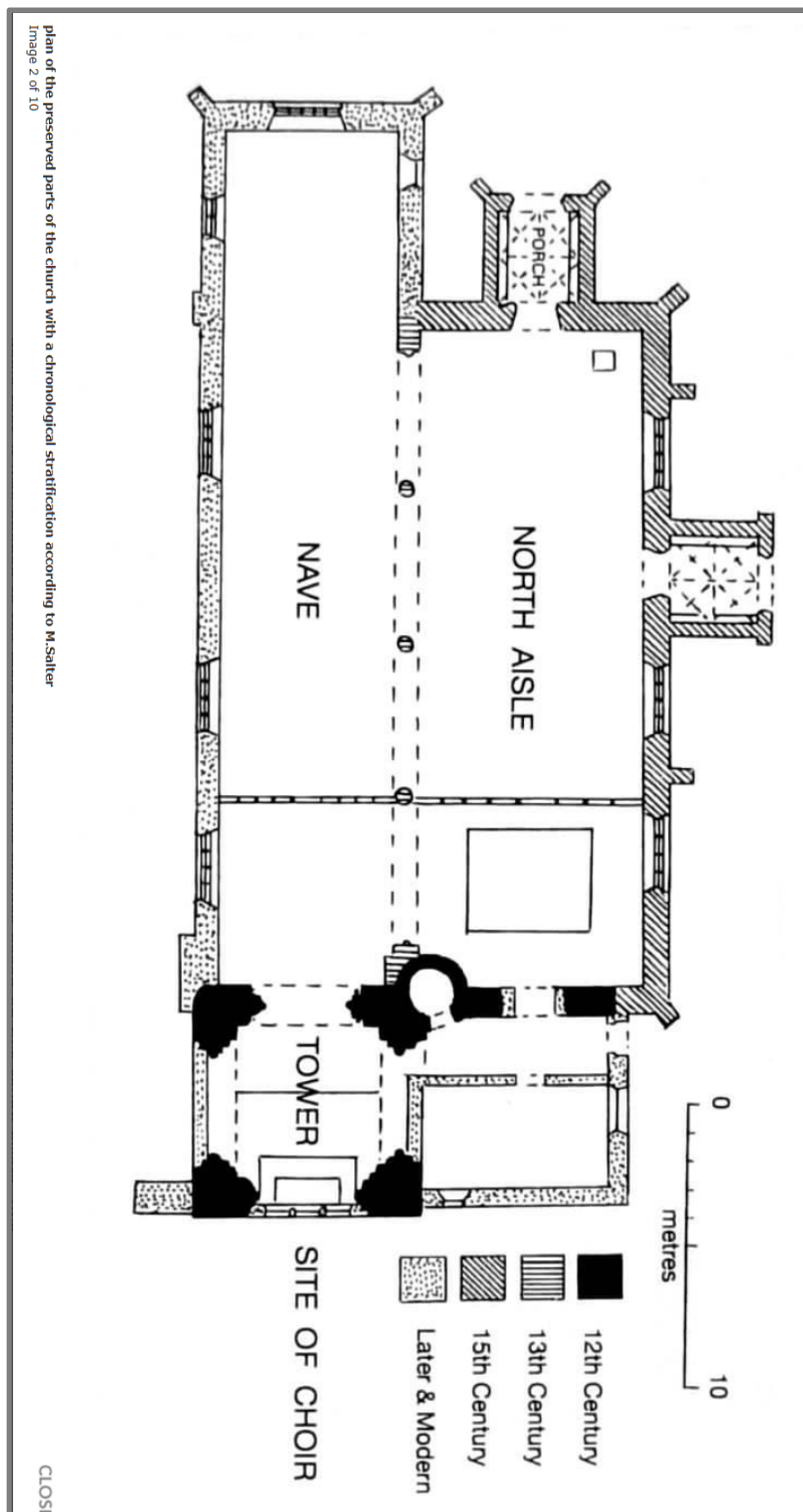
Step Back in Time

Discover medieval secrets,
stories and treasures through the
people who lived in and around
the church.

Starting with the Priory's earliest residents.



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1: Origins of the Priory (Richard de Clare)

Following the Norman Invasion of England and Wales the Marcher Lord, Richard (Strongbow) de Clare, Earl of Hertford and Lord of Usk, founded the market town of Usk. He founded St. Mary's Priory in 1135. His coat of arms can be seen in the stained-glass window above the west door. It was also found on tiles, excavated from the original chancel floor.

His son Gilbert continued the development of the Priory until his death in 1152.

The charter to establish a Priory of Benedictine nuns in Usk was granted by Richard Strongbow, 2nd Earl of Pembroke in 1176.



The earliest part of the church is earlier than the foundation of the building as it stands now and is mentioned in the **foundation charter**. This means the nuns took over an existing church and it is possible there may have been an informal community here before the formal endowment of the priory.

As with all churches of this time in Britain, St Mary's was a Catholic church and was led, in faith, by Rome

The church was a **conventual church** (intended for men or women of monastic life to use for their worship- in this case the female nuns).

St Mary's Priory was one of only three female convents in medieval Wales. The priory church was also used as a parish church for worship by local people. The nuns would have used the **conventual** or monastic part of the building (the chancel and transepts). The **nave** would have been separated and provided with a nave altar for the parish church.

The de Clare family had the right of patronage over the church until 1322.

King Edward II gave the patronage to Hugh Despenser (a favourite of his). Five years later in 1330, Elizabeth de Clare confirmed the patronage and she supported the Priory- leaving a generous inheritance after her death of £6 and two gold cloths.

The church has undergone many changes over the years. Parts of the original church were built over the remains of the Roman fortress and these parts suffered from subsidence. Repairs in centuries past were unsuccessful and the north and south transepts and the eastern apse no longer exist. Repairs were carried out in the early 15th century following the campaign of Owain Glyndŵr to regain Welsh control over the area. These repairs and changes made at that time, including the porches on the north and west walls, were funded (in part at least) by William Herbert of Raglan- his crest can be seen over the north porch gate.

Further changes were made to the church following the dissolution of the monasteries in 1535/1536. Restoration, excavation and work to modernise the church (for safety and continued use) have been ongoing throughout the church's history and St Mary's, Usk remains a well-used parish church in the Monmouthshire Diocese.

2: Origins of the Benedictine Order

Principles of St Benedict-Ora E Labora (Prayer and Work)

The Benedictine order was founded by St Benedict of Nursia, Italy in 529 AD. His twin sister, St Scholastica, founded the first Benedictine convent in 529 AD. Over the centuries, the order of both monks and nuns spread throughout Europe and the United Kingdom.

It was Richard de Clare, Earl of Hertford and Lord of Usk who founded the priory of Benedictine nuns at St Mary's church, Usk in the 12th century.

It was not unusual in those days, for the wealthy to set up religious orders as they wanted the nuns and monks to pray for them on a daily basis.



The nuns followed the rules of St Benedict and took vows of poverty, obedience and chastity. Although it was not a silent order, silence was expected to be maintained. Most of the day was devoted to prayer. Given the time devoted to prayer, together with domestic requirements, it seems unlikely that the nuns were greatly involved with the local community.

Paintings of St Scholastica, show a simple black habit and veil with a white head dress (a wimple) covering the head. The hair was cut short. The under garment was a simple shift and it seems that this was worn while bathing. It is likely that this dress was adopted by Benedictine nuns.

Bathing, it seems, would have depended on the availability of water, and how it was transported to a private area for washing.

3: How the church may have looked

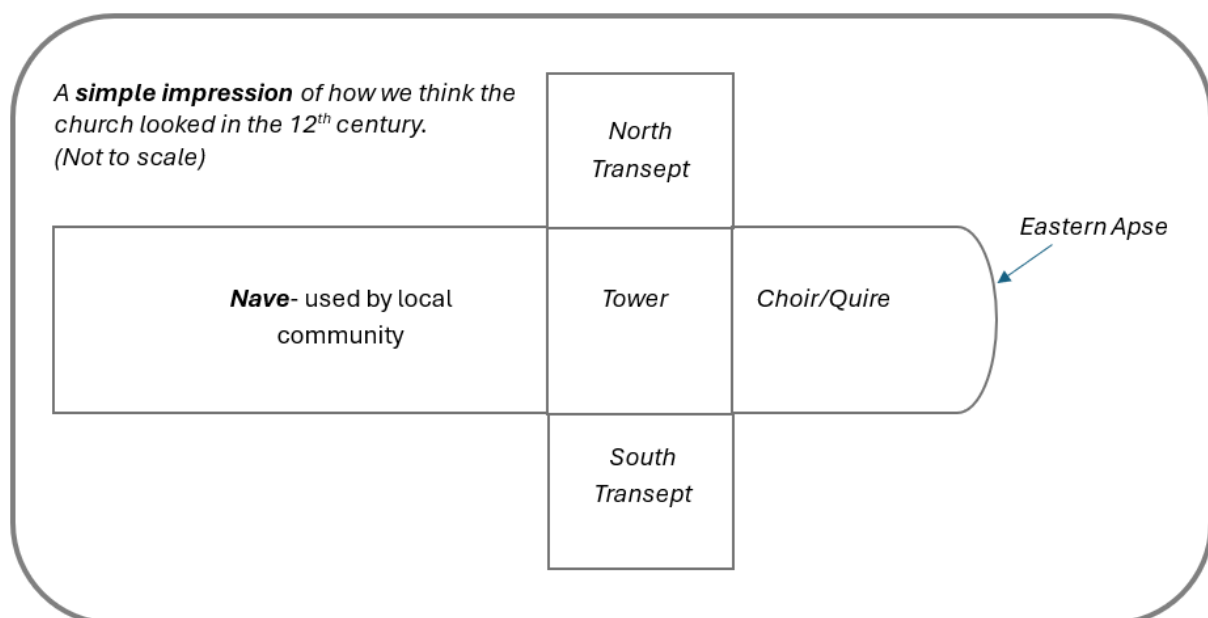
The original Priory Church was larger than the church as it stands today and was a **cruciform** (cross-shaped) church. It is thought to have had a central crossing tower and eastern **apse** (extension from the crossing tower).

The monastic church ran east and west of the tower, with transepts (long demolished) north and south- creating the cross shape.

It is likely that the Priest and the nuns from the Priory would have worshipped in the **Choir/Quire** which was in the **apse** when the church was first built in the early 12th century. This means that local people worshipped in the **nave**, separated from the nuns, with an altar in the nave to serve parishioners.

There was originally a north and south transept. As the Priory buildings were on the south side of the church, it is thought there was a door leading into the church from the Priory, somewhere along the south wall. The location is not exactly known but could possibly have been through the south transept or in the wall nearby.

In the 13th century the church was enlarged. The north aisle was built and a screen separated the original nave and the extension to the church. The nuns took over the use of the original nave and the parishioners would have worshipped, separately, in the newer nave in the north aisle.



4: The Nuns of St. Mary's Priory, Usk

The Priory at Usk was significant as it was home to the only community of Benedictine nuns in Wales. It was one of only three monastic houses in Wales for female religious orders before the **Reformation**.

The religious community was founded by five nuns and grew to thirteen. Little is known of the first century of the nunnery's history. The first documented evidence of the community appears in 1246 when the community received licence to elect a new prioress. There are letters of protection, obtained by the prioress, in 1247. Wales at this time was a dangerous place and it is very likely that the Priory benefitted from being 'within an arrow's shot' of Usk Castle.

The nuns in St Mary's Priory were all of **noble birth** (belonging to a family of high social rank). It seems probable that the community at Usk began with a group of such women probably from the local community, and possibly even the household at Usk Castle, who were unmarried or widowed. The religious **piety** (strong religious belief shown in the way someone lives) of such women and, indeed, sometimes broken romances led some noble ladies to the seclusion of religious life.

In 1246 the nuns of Usk were granted the right to elect their own prioress. There is evidence to tell us the names of some of the prioresses after this time:

B (December 1269; January 1270)

Bridget (1394; 1400-1407)

Joan Lewis (1491-1497)

Agnes (1498) (1500-1501)

Joan Harryman (1518-1529)

Eleanor (Ellen) Williams (1529-1535)

As with all communities, the Priory was not without some 'disputes'. Joan Harryman's election as prioress was contested as there was a case between her and Catherine Kemmys in 1516. Catherine, titled Prioress of Usk, had seemingly been elected to office and received papal dispensation to retain this, despite the fact that her election was null and void. She appealed against Joan Harryman, taking her grievance to Canterbury. From the 1400s, The Welsh Catholic Dioceses were administered from Canterbury because Wales had lost political independence.

On 12th June 1526 a papal commission was appointed to look into the matter and decided in Joan's favour.



The Benedictine Nuns of St Mary's Priory, Usk

St Mary's History Group-Lent Workshop 2025

5: Daily Life of the Nuns

The Rule of Saint Benedict revolves around five practices: **Prayer, Work, Study, Hospitality** and **Renewal**. Prayer being the foundation to the monastic life.

We know that the nuns were not expected to carry out hard manual work so their daily tasks would have consisted of sewing, embroidery and perhaps gentle house-hold chores and gardening, with servants being employed to carry out the heavier chores.

Their routine would have been based around their daily prayer, starting at 5am.

Most of the food eaten by the nuns would have been grown in the garden at the priory. Breakfast would have been bread and milk or possibly a weak ale (water was unsafe to drink and usually contaminated).

The priory was poor and it is possible the nuns would have gone without lunch at times. If lunch was taken it would have been a simple snack or porridge.



The evening meal would have been shared in the refectory. A soup, followed by seasonal fruit is most likely. One of the nuns would have read aloud during the meal- a story of one of the saints.

The day would have ended with evensong, hymns meditation and silent work. The nuns would **Pray the Holy Rosary** in solitude. Before going to bed, in darkness, the nuns would lie on the floor (prostrate) and beg each other for forgiveness if they had caused one another pain that day.

The nuns would have slept on straw mattresses, fully clothed so that, *'If death came for one of them she'd be clothed and ready to enter the next life.'*

The Benedictine life was one of complete enclosure and separation from the world. Archbishop Peckham, during his visit in 1284, seems to have acknowledged that some flexibility of the rule was needed. He instructed the nuns that they should not go outside the cloister without suitable companions, nor should they stay in lay people's houses for more than three or four days.

He also reported that the nunnery was in the 'most desolate state' due to financial problems. He recommended that two of the nuns were appointed as treasurers, they would manage the income and spending and provide accounts to the Prioress and senior nuns at Lent, Michaelmas and Whitsun.

The nuns were also to have a senior priest to oversee their spiritual wellbeing and to be 'master of all their goods'.

The nuns had chapels dedicated to **St Mary Magdalene** and **St Radegund of Poitiers**. These were sites of pilgrimage and offerings formed part of the tithes of Usk.

6: Points of Interest

Our Treasure

The common seal of Usk Priory represents the Madonna with a child at her knee. This seal can be found in the stained-glass window above the High Altar and a model of it can be seen within the church. The original seal, we believe, is stored in the British Museum.

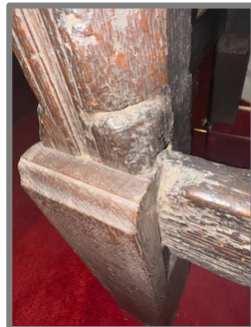
On 11th September 1534 the Priory Seal was changed to acknowledge **Royal Supremacy**. On the stained-glass window, the image is surrounded by crowns.



The Altar



There is a claim that the **altar table** is an old refectory table (thought to be from the nunnery). If this is true, the table must come near to being pre-reformation, although it does not have five consecration crosses, which would be expected.



The Chancel

The **floor of the chancel** was probably laid with stone slabs and embellished in places with **decorative tiles**, four of which have been recovered.

The four tiles depict motifs of a **fleur-de-lys**, the **arms of the Mortimer family** (a shield within a shield), a **white rosette**, and the **arms of the de Clare family**. Two other tiles, one depicting a **curly-tailed, up-winged dragon**, are believed to have come from Usk as well and probably date from 1430-1450.

The church suffered significantly from subsidence, and it has been thought that the *"subsidence effects on what was no doubt designed to be an impressive floor must have been both distressing and dangerous for the Sisters in their daily offices."* (Mein). The floor, at least the part with the tiles, was re-laid twice.

7: Rood Screen and Plaque Commemorating Adam of Usk

In the 15th century, elaborately carved rood screens were placed across both parts of the church. The screen is set on a panelled dark wood base, which is dated later than the actual screen. The design of the screen is described as 'English in character'. Within the screen is a carving of the Virgin Mary.



The paint on the chancel screen is modern but shows how the screens might have looked in the Middle Ages. The screen has open cusped tracery below the middle rail to nave; the arched doorways are 2-bays wide. The nave screen was coloured by Halliday, around 1900, and has an inscription to middle rail. The screen on the north aisle is dark stained and has no crest or middle rail.

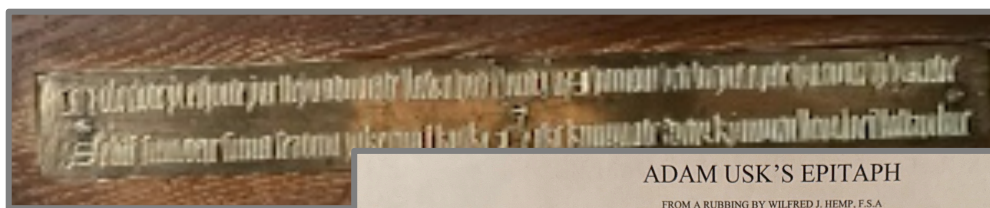
Ages. The screen has open cusped

At the time the rood screen was installed (early 15th century) the nunnery was in a poor financial state due to bad book-keeping and non-payment of rents from tenants. Also, at this time, the town and parts of the Priory were destroyed by raids carried out by forces of Owain Glyndŵr (1402, 1405).

Adam of Usk (1352-1430) a priest, lawyer and historian obtained a **Papal Indulgence** in 1404 which restored the finances of the nunnery. Adam sent requests to the pope for the possibility of giving indulgences by the sisters for pilgrims visiting the chapel of St Radegund, because of the devastation made by the war.

Adam of Usk's petition to the Pope reveals the damage inflicted upon the convent by the Glyndŵr revolt. It also drew attention to potential problems of stability, similar to those described by the Archbishop of Peckham after his visit in 1284. Adam reported that the monastery was in such a poor state of repair that unless something was done quickly, the nuns would be forced to beg for food and clothing by wandering about the country, or to stay in the private houses of friends which, he feared, could lead to scandals arising.

Tucked away on the chancel screen is a brass plaque commemorating Adam of Usk. It is written in very old Welsh and, we believe, says, '**A Solomon he was, of astounding wisdom; and under Usk is now his sleeping bed.**'



ADAM USK'S EPITAPH

FROM A RUBBING BY WILFRED J. HEMP, F.S.A.

Nole clode yz ethrode yz lley n aduocade llawhade llundeyn Abarnour bede breynt apibe ty nev aro ty hauabe
Seliff funnoeir finna fe adam vsk eua l kufke Deke kummode doctor kymmen llen a loe i llawn o leue

TRANSCRIPTION

Nole clode yz ethrode yz lley n aduocade llawhade llundeyn Abarnour bede breynt apibe ty nev aro ty hauabe
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Around this time much rebuilding was undertaken in the church and the priory. This included two new porches on the west and north faces of the church- thought to be funded by the foundation of Sir William Herbert (the builder of Raglan Castle). His crest can be seen above the north porch.

8: Adam of Usk's Petition to the Pope, 1404

I, the writer of this history, delivered to the pope the following petition:

"Holy father, in the town or borough of Usk, in the diocese of Llandaff, is a certain most honourable monastery of a prioress and convent of nuns, under the profession of the order of Saint Benedict, who serve God with the greatest devoutness, which was of old sufficiently endowed with possessions, rents, and other profits ; and in this monastery none but virgins of noble birth were and are wont to be received. But now, owing to the burnings, spoilings, and other misfortunes which have been caused by the wars which raged in those parts, or otherwise, this same monastery hath come to such want that, unless ready help be forthwith found by your Holiness, the sisterhood will be forced to beg for food and clothing, straying through the country, or to stay in the private houses of friends ; whereby it is feared that scandals may belike arise. And, seeing that within the walls of the same monastery there is built a certain chapel in honour of Saint Radegunde, virgin nun, once queen of France, where that they are baptized with water, these three marks are made, partly as a token of gentility, and partly as the completion of their baptism. There are also Jews in the country, and these bear two marks, one on either cheek ; and the Saracens have but one, to wit, on the forehead, extending halfway down the nose." Colonel Yule, in his learned note upon the passage, refers to the early mention by Matthew Paris, under the year 1237, of the practice among the Jacobite Christians of branding their children on the forehead before baptism. It appears also to have been the custom in Abyssinia and other parts of Africa to cauterize the temples of children, to inure them against colds. Ariosto, referring to the emperor of Ethiopia, has :

*"Gli e, s'io non piglio errore, in questo loco
Ove al battesimo loro usano il fuoco."*

Salt, the traveller, mentions that most of the people of Dixan had a cross branded on the breast, right arm, or forehead ; which he explains as a mark of attachment to the ancient metropolitan church of Axum. And in Marino Sanudo it is stated that "some of the Jacobites and Syrians who had crosses branded on them said this was done for the destruction of the pagans, and out of reverence to the Holy Rood unto the men of that country bear great reverence, and which they ofttimes, and specially at the feasts of Easter and Whitsuntide, are wont to visit ; now therefore, prayeth your Holiness your faithful chaplain and auditor of causes of the sacred palace apostolic, who first drew breath in the same town or borough, and of whose blood are some of the same sisterhood, that, having pity with fatherly compassion on that monastery and prioress and nuns, you will deign graciously to grant to all Christian people who, so often as, on the second days of the said festivals, for all time to come, they shall visit the same chapel, shall stretch forth the hand of help thereto, some indulgence, as your holiness shall think fit, with necessary and proper clauses, as inform." And the pope signed it thus " So be it, as it is asked," for five years and as many periods of forty days, as appeareth in the same chapel.



9: A Life of Prayer

The Benedictine nuns would have typically prayed through the "Liturgy of the Hours," which involves chanting psalms from the Bible at set times throughout the day, often accompanied by Gregorian chant (music sung in unison as part of Catholic worship). There was also personal prayer time for reflection and meditation on scripture.

Prayer was centred around the concept of "ora et labora" (pray and work), meaning their prayer life would have been integrated with their daily tasks and community life.

Key aspects of Benedictine prayer:

- **The Divine Office:**

This is the core of Benedictine prayer, consisting of set prayer times throughout the day including

- **Lectio Divina:**

A practice of deep reading and reflection on scripture, often involving a cycle of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation.

- **Silence and Solitude:**

Benedictine prayer often emphasises periods of quiet reflection and listening to God's presence.

- **Community Prayer:**

Benedictines typically pray together as a community, which is considered an important part of their monastic life.

- **Integration with Daily Life:**

Benedictine spirituality encourages seeing all aspects of life as an opportunity for prayer, not just designated prayer times.

According to the Rule of St. Benedict the community of people sharing the aspiration to grow ever deeper into the spiritual life is a support and guide for the nun on her journey to God. It is also a challenging "school of the Lord's service" in which one learns over a lifetime how to live, by the grace of God, in peace with oneself and a particular group of human beings to whom one is committed for life.

The daily prayer liturgies have seven main points. At the time the nuns lived in Usk Priory, prayer times would have been recorded in canonical hours. These are the equivalent, modern, times:

| | | |
|-----------------|------------------------|---|
| Vigil | night-time | eighth hour of the night to 2am |
| Matins | night-time | a later portion of Vigil, from 3am to dawn |
| Lauds | dawn | dawn approximately 5am |
| Prime | first hour of daylight | the first hour of daylight, approximately 6am |
| Terce | third hour | third hour, 9am |
| Sext | Sixth hour | noon |
| Nones | ninth hour | 3pm |
| Vespers | sunset/evening | approximately 6pm |
| Compline | end of the day | approximately 7pm |

There would also have been the daily mass celebrated by a chaplain from one of the surrounding communities.

10: Food and Medicine

Food eaten by the nuns in Usk Priory would have been typical of food eaten generally in medieval times.

Nearly all the food eaten by the nuns would have been grown in their own garden. The kitchen garden would have been walled to keep the chickens in. Inside it would be divided into rectangular beds, each surrounded by wattle fencing. Vegetables and herbs would have been grown here. Fruit trees would also have grown in or near the garden.

Gardening advice from books at the time would offer advice such as:

'Cabbages should be planted with the old moon.

Parsley sown on the eve of the March Lady Day (24th March) sprouts after 9 days.'

Foods typical of the time were:

| | |
|--|--|
| Vegetables | beetroots, peas, beans, lentils, onions, cabbages, leeks, garlic, carrots, beans, chicory and celery lettuce, spinach, sorrel and cucumber |
| Root Vegetables | parsnip, horseradish and turnips |
| Herbs (to provide aromatic flavour) | tarragon, rue, parsley, dill, chives, borage, fenugreek, coriander, chervil, basil, bay, rosemary, thyme, mint, hyssop and fennel |
| Fruit | apples, pears, cherries, quinces, plums, berries (strawberries, blackberries and raspberries), black and red currants almonds and walnuts |
| Bread | made from wheat, barley or rye flour |
| Eggs | |
| Fats | lard, butter, oil (derived from almonds, walnuts, sunflowers seeds) |
| Meat | Meat was a luxury, they would more commonly have eaten birds, tripe and chitterlings (pig's intestines) |
| Honey | To sweeten food and drink |
| Drink | water (if pure- from springs), milk, ale made from barley and other grains, possibly cider made from apples and pears. Wine was kept for the celebration of the Mass. |
| Salt | Coarse, white and black- used to conserve meat. Not universally used |





A section of the garden would have been given to the growing of **Medicinal Plants**. They may even have had a separate garden devoted to medicinal plants (a monastic Physic Garden). Flowers would also have been grown, particularly rose (for its medicinal properties), lily and violet.

Some of the medicinal plants, familiar to the nuns include:

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Angelica | A cure-all, for long life, protect against plague |
| Anise | Many uses, including treating upset stomachs |
| Borage | Used as an anti-inflammatory |
| Betony | Important for at least 35 different illnesses |
| Chickpeas | Diuretic and to ease constipation |
| Camomile | For 'women's ailments' |
| Faba beans | Sleeplessness, hot headaches |
| Garlic | An antiseptic and used for a range of diseases |
| Goosefoot | Diuretic and used to treat intestinal parasites |
| Mallow | To make a paste to clean teeth |
| Mint | Toothache, antidote for poison, hiccups and nausea |
| Pot marigold | Used on the skins, mainly for scars |
| Mug wort | Applied for epilepsy and fever. Thrown into the midsummer fires of St. John |
| Poppy | To help with sleep |
| Rose | Petals used for heart and intestinal problems Used to make a fortifying drink |
| Rue | For scars, against spells and used in times of plague |
| Southernwood | To relieve headaches, stomach aches and skin parasites |



11: The End of an Era

The Act of Supremacy in 1534 declared Henry VIII the Supreme Head of the Church of England, separating England from papal authority. This and later acts gave the Crown the authority to disband monasteries in England, Wales and Ireland and remove their assets.



With this act, Parliament declared Henry VIII the Supreme Head of the Church of England, formally rejecting the authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

This meant that the lives of all religious communities, at that time, was about to change.

Eleanor Williams was prioress at this time and still lived at the priory with five other nuns.

The convent was 'surveyed' by the Commissioners for South Wales (agents working for Henry VIII to create an inventory of all religious buildings) on 8th June 1536 and it was **suppressed** thirteen weeks and three days later on 29th August 1536.

During Henry VIII's time the priory was valued at 69 pounds, 9 shillings, 8 and halfpenny (gross value).

There is evidence, at this time, of finances of the convent which give an insight into the management of the priory:

The expenses of the nuns during the thirteen-week interim (between survey and suppression) were recorded as £10 and included small 'wages' or 'pocket money' to the nuns and their servants, the purchase of sheep, barley, wine and beer, the smith's fee for shoeing of horses.

*Other outgoings recorded for 1535 included fees for the Steward, Charles Herbert- £2; the Auditor, George Taylor-£2; the Bailiff, Phillip Llewelyn ap Morgan received a **corrody** of £3 (this suggests he may have been a resident of the priory as his corrody was for his fee, meat and drink and livery) and the chaplain £2.*

When the nunnery was dissolved the lead on the roofs was valued at 52/4d (not a very large sum).



The prioress, Ellen Williams was awarded an annual pension of £9.

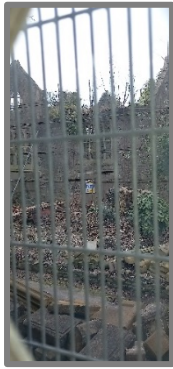
The former prioress, Joan Harryman, was still receiving her corrody in 1535 but may have died before the suppression as there is no claim for her annuity to continue in the documentation.

The nuns were given a small pension and returned to life in the community or with their families.

12: Site of the Former Priory Buildings

The two tall narrow **lancet** windows were added during rebuilding work carried out in the 15th century or later.

The nunnery cloisters and other buildings used by the nuns were enclosed on the south side of the church and would not have been accessed by members of the local community.



Looking through the lancet window on the south side of the church, the current priory building can be seen.

The nuns left the priory in 1536, following the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII. The site was eventually sold in 1544 to a Llangybi man, Roger Williams.



Little remains of the original priory, but the buildings and cloisters used by the nuns would have been on the south side of the church and the current priory house was built in the 19th century, in a gothic style. The house is believed to be on the site of some of part of the original buildings.

Much of the original building material was saved and reused.

In the years before the Dissolution, the prioress Eleanor Williams, had some remarkable panelling installed in the conventual buildings, possibly in her own apartments. The cornice was embellished with a frieze of shields decorated by the **IHS monogram**, the **Five Wounds** and the **Instruments of the Passion**. There were also symbols of royalty, including Catherine of Aragon's pomegranates (a brave statement of support in the 1530s).

The frieze and the panelling were incorporated into the Priory House but much of the carving was removed in about 1860 to a local mansion, Cefn Tila. Some drawings were made of the frieze (Rickards, 1904)

Other archaeological excavations from around Usk have unearthed fragments of Bathstone mouldings, thought most likely to have come from the priory building.

(IHS is called a "**Christogram**," and is an ancient **way of writing "Jesus Christ."** - found in many churches, particularly Catholic Churches.)

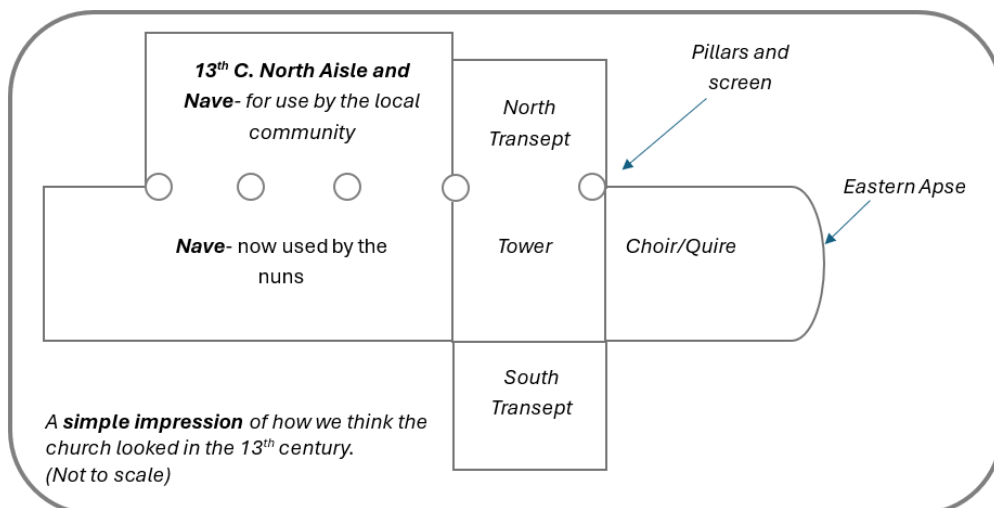
13: Addition of the North Aisle- 13th Century

Pairs of small holes can be seen on the pillars running down between the pews in the nave (east to west).



During the 13th century the church was extended by the local people. A new nave, on the north side of the church, was built for the parishioners to use when worshipping. A screen would have run between the pillars, the holes showing where the screen would have been fixed. The nuns then took over the original nave as part of their area of worship. The screen separated the people of the town from the parts of the church used by

the nuns. Although separated by the screen, the parishioners would have been able to hear the nuns chanting, see the lights from their candles and smell the incense being burnt.



1: Tomb of Saint David Lewis

Just outside the west door is a memorial to David Lewis.



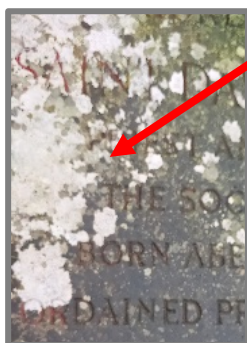
David Lewis was born in Abergavenny in the year 1616. He was brought up as a Protestant but later became a Catholic. Both his parents died in 1638 and that same year, David set off for Rome. He entered the Venerable English College on 6th November 1638 to prepare for ordination to the Sacred Priesthood. David Lewis assumed the name of Charles Baker (a common practice in those days of persecution). He completed his studies, receiving Minor Orders in June 1641 and was ordained to the Priesthood on 20th July 1642.

Father David Lewis entered the Jesuit Novitiate at Sant' Andrea in Rome on 19th April 1645. After Profession, his superiors immediately sent him to Wales. He was recalled to Rome after only a short stay, to take up the role of Spiritual Director at his old College.

This lasted One Year, as the Mission in South Wales, which had been founded in 1620, petitioned for Father David's immediate return to his homeland. This being granted by his superiors, Father David was sent back to Wales, to the Jesuit Mission of St. Francis Xavier at a place called 'The Cwm' in 1648, where he was to work for the next thirty years. On Sunday 17th November 1678 Father David Lewis was arrested at Llantarnam as he was preparing to say Mass.

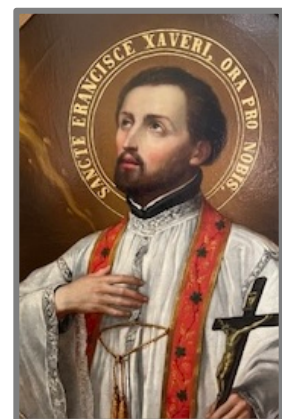
At his trial, he was condemned as a Roman Catholic Priest who said Mass, which was considered high treason against the Crown. For this, he was executed at Usk on Wednesday 27th August 1679.

St David Lewis is one of The Forty Martyrs of England and Wales. They were a group of men and women who were tortured and executed for their faith during a period of anti-Catholicism from 1535 to 1679.



Red lettering, seen here on the gravestone of St David Lewis, was used to honour his martyrdom.

'The blood of the martyrs is the seedbed of the Church'.



St Francis Xavier

The Catholic Church, Usk is dedicated to St David Lewis and St Francis Xavier, both Jesuit Priests.

A shrine dedicated to the martyr- Saint David Lewis is sited in a chapel upstairs at the church of SS David Lewis & Francis Xavier, in Usk and is open each day.

The Benedictine Nuns of St Mary's Priory, Usk

St Mary's History Group-Lent Workshop 2025

2: Priory Gatehouse and Porches

A wall can be seen running from the church, on the south-west corner (left of the west porch), between the church and the Priory Gatehouse.

This wall would have formed part of the medieval churchyard.

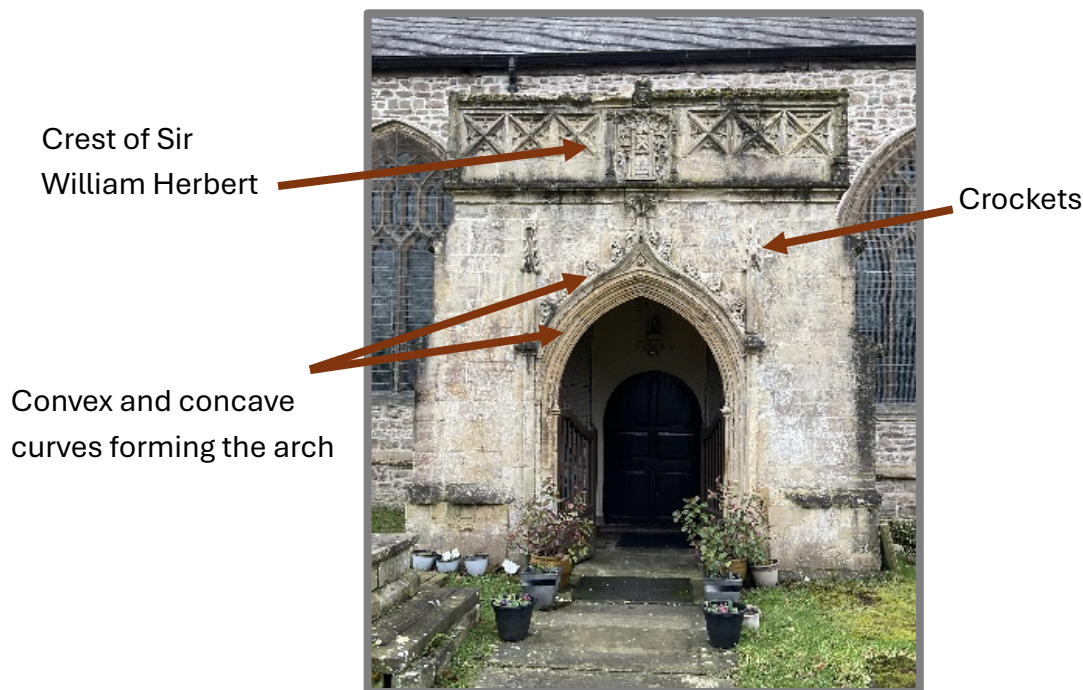
The churchyard would have been an enclosed area, used by parishioners worshipping at the church and would have been completely separate from the areas used by the nuns- whose buildings and cloisters were on the south of the church.

The Priory Gatehouse was built just before 1535, not long before the **suppression** of the convent. It remains today, giving access to the current priory building (not owned by the church) and is undergoing repair and conservation.

The north and west porches were added to the building in the early 15th century, when further rebuilding work took place.

The work is thought to be funded by the foundation of Sir William Herbert (the builder of Raglan Castle). His crest can be seen above the north porch.

The arches on the porch are known as **ogee arches** and are decorated with **crockets**. An **ogee arch** is a design used in the late 14th century and early 15th century and is formed by using a convex and concave curve. **Crockets** are the stylised carvings of curled leaves, buds and flowers used to decorate.



3: Base of Medieval Cross



'The Cross sanctified the churchyard and provided a memorial to those buried there in unmarked graves. The Cross was a focal point for festivals, especially Palm Sunday and Corpus Christi when a large wooden cross would have been carried from the Church around the building to the Churchyard Cross, while the clergy and the parishioners sang psalms. Various gatherings took place beneath them as well as public announcements.'

'During the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century most of Monmouthshire's Crosses suffered greatly, with practically all losing their heads; others were not so lucky with only stone sockets or steps surviving.'

'A plain square base, with a mortice for the shaft, is all that is left of the old cross in Usk Churchyard. It stands on the North side of the Church and is 3ft square'. (Elizabeth Harcourt Mitchell 1893).

4: Tomb of Eleanor Williams

To the north side of the main path through the churchyard, about 25 metres from the gates, there is a late medieval tomb. There is a weathered medieval tomb slab with a worn effigy of a figure in civilian dress.



Information from **Cadw** (2004) tells us this tomb was originally thought to be covering the resting place of *Eleanor/Ellen Williams, the last Prioress* (serving from 1529 until 1536).

The tomb is also listed in the 1971 journal: **Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies** as being, 'A medieval stone effigy in St. Mary's churchyard, Usk, Monmouthshire.' And describes the tomb as, '15th century recumbent figure with dog (no text). A male civilian figure.'

Which leaves some doubt over who is actually resting here.

5: Mass Burial of Remains Found During Archaeological Dig (20th Century)

In 1987, when the churchyard was extended, an archaeological dig was carried out in the grounds of the Priory building.

During this work, a number of graves were found. The graves contained the remains of women, and this is believed to be a burial area for nuns of the priory. One of the women was found buried with the remains of a child tucked into her arm.

The remains of one man were found. His legs were broken, and it is believed that this was because he was tall, enabling him to be buried in a casket. It is suggested these might be the remains of Adam of Usk.

All the remains were reburied in one mass grave, inside the churchyard and marked with a shared gravestone.



6: The Original East End

Former
Choir/Quire
and Apse



Former
Northern
Transept

Scars can be seen on the exterior east wall, showing the site where the original choir/quire was positioned.

Excavations and observations in 1987 identified a wall on the line of the Garden of Remembrance and the new burial area. It ran north - south for 9.5m and is believed to have been the east end of the presbytery. This would have made it 22.6m in length.

Pieces of medieval pottery were found, also 73 burials, believed to date from 13th- 16th century.

Similar markings can be seen in the north wall above the vestry extension, where the original north transept would have been positioned. An ancient well (date unknown) was also found in this area.

The information collated by St Mary's History Group is based on our research from many sources and this is our best interpretation of the history of the Priory Church of St Mary, Usk.

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