

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 30: St Maelrhys, Ysgo, Llŷn Peninsula

As I approached the church of St Maelrhys, along winding lanes heading over the hilly farmland of the Llŷn Peninsula, I kept catching glimpses of a far steep-sided hill seemingly enveloped in roiling cotton wool. Only when I reached my destination, overlooking Porth Ysgo and the Atlantic Sea beyond, did I realise that I had been looking at Bardsey Island, the remote haunt of many an early saint and pilgrim, and still a favourite retreat for those seeking contemplative simplicity and silence.

Below the church Porth Ysgo is reached by descending a valley leading down to a secluded cove. Now owned by the National Trust, the site echoes to the memory of the sights and sounds of industry, with a mine extracting manganese (I could see mine entrances dotted along the grassy cliffs) and a jetty where ships were loaded.

St Maelrhys is named after an ancient local saint, possibly of Breton origin and honoured on Bardsey Island. This Small Pilgrim Place stands in lone splendour among treeless stone-walled pastures. Susan Fogarty, SPPN hospitaller, met me in the churchyard and explained that the middle section of the church is the oldest, with later extensions to the east and west. The church is very simple in design, just a rectangular space with chancel and nave accessed through a west door, and furnished with Georgian box pews and benches. On the east wall behind the altar is a large, plain arched window. No need for further ornamentation when the view beyond is of the bracken and heather-covered western flanks of the Penafynid hills.



The East window



The nave and chancel

A narrow staircase near the west door leads up to a small room holding a collection of books, old photos and memorabilia reflecting the interest of many visitors to this

isolated little place of worship: the priest and poet RS Thomas (1913-2000). In fact while I was talking with Susan a small group of the poet's devotees came in, bringing with them lots of questions which Susan, herself an admirer of Thomas, expertly fielded. Thomas was vicar here for a decade or so and continued to worship and take services at St Maelrhys following his retirement in 1978; he travelled here from his home in the nearby village of Y Rhiw.



St Maelrhys church and churchyard

Susan showed me a simple inscribed slate in a corner of the graveyard, commemorating Thomas' wife, the artist, mural painter and book illustrator Mildred Elsi Eldridge. Just nearby is a similar slate in memory of priest, wordsmith and publisher Jim Cotter, who died in 2014. He published many books of prayers and hymns, some (such as Pilgrim Prayer) now modern classics.

He moved to Wales in 2001, and the poetry of his predecessor RS Thomas was an inspiration and encouragement to him. Jim's works have been a favourite on my bookshelves over many years and I interviewed him for one of my books. More

importantly he was also the founder of the Small Pilgrim Places Network, so it was a special privilege to visit his place of ministry here.

Ali Green