

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 31: St Hywyn, Aberdaron, Gwynedd

St Cadfan, a sixth century Breton nobleman, is said to have become the founder-Abbot of a monastery on the island of Ynys Enlli, or Bardsey, off the coast of the Llŷn Peninsula in north-west Wales. Ever since then the island has been regarded as a "thin" place, attracting monks, pilgrims and other visitors, as it still does today. The last staging post before crossing to the island is St Hywyn's Church, and my visit there was my 44th destination around the Small Pilgrim Places Network.

Twixt Land and Sea



St Hywyn stands right next to the shore

Like the church of St Tanwg at Llandanwg, another SPP not far away, St Hywyn's stands right next to the beach, braced for the prevailing south-westerlies blowing across Aberdaron Bay. The perils to seafarers of strong winds and seas on this coastline are echoed in the name of the large bay to the east, known as Hell's Mouth. The church is now protected by a sea wall, the tides having eaten away land that once lay between the original building and the shore.

The ancient pilgrimage routes leading here are still trodden today, along the well-marked Llŷn coastal path that skirts around the south-western tip of the peninsula, and also the North Wales Pilgrim Way

linking this church with the Dee estuary to the east of St Asaph's Cathedral.

Destination Bardsey

The church here began as a *clas* settlement, a native Christian church in early medieval Wales. The *clas* was founded by St Hywyn, a disciple of St Cadfan. It gained importance through the Middle Ages after Bardsey, the "Island of 20,000 Saints" (together with St David's in Pembrokeshire), was declared a place of pilgrimage, and welcomed large numbers of pilgrims intending to sail across the sea to Bardsey Abbey. They were fed and watered in the Great Kitchen (*Y Gegin Fawr*) next to the church. The present building dates from the 12th century with additions in the 14th and 15th centuries.

After the Reformation the church declined, and by the Victorian period it had become ruinous. A new church built nearby proved to be unpopular, so the original building was restored. It is now a Grade I listed building and an active church with regular services and an outreach to pilgrims, tourists and casual visitors alike. Another attraction is that a previous incumbent here was the poet priest RS Thomas.

Susan Fogarty, Warden in the local Ministry Area of seven churches in the Bangor diocese, showed me round the interior. There are two naves, the older being to the north, and this now serves as a welcoming space for pilgrims and anyone seeking a pause for rest and reflection. It is here, where seats are arranged 'in the round' below the altar, that Susan hosts a short midweek evening service. There are also weekly bilingual services of Holy Communion. Of particular historical interest in the north nave are two stones with inscriptions dating from around the time of St Hywyn or shortly after. They are gravestones commemorating two early presbyters, *Veracius* and *Senacus*.



Seating in the north nave is arranged "in the round".



Two ancient presbyters' gravestones

Becoming a Swallow

Near the west door is a small display area offering literature connected with pilgrimage, RS Thomas and another later incumbent, Jim Cotter, also a priest and poet, as well as the founder of the Small Pilgrim Places Network. Susan told me that Jim had spoken of those visiting the church as residents - the regular worshippers- and swallows. These were the ones who appear for a short time and then fly off on their way to other climes. That evening, I became a swallow myself. I had judged the timing of my visit to chime with the weekly evensong, so after a supper at the pub next door I headed back to St Hywyn's and a short, candlelit service of readings, music, prayer and silence in the north nave, the perfect end to a day of pilgrimage.

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