

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 31: St Tecwyn, Llandecwyn, Gwynedd

Snowdonia National Park embraces the highest peaks in Britain south of the Scottish Highlands and covers over 2,000km². Near the western coast between Harlech and Porthmadog, just inside the park boundaries, lies Llandecwyn, a tiny settlement consisting of barely more than a small church and a 17th century cottage built into the churchyard walls, perched high on a hilly shoulder with stunning views southward to Harlech Castle and Tremadog Bay, and to the north the Snowdonia massif.



The view from the porch towards the lychgate

I approached the church on a rocky track, at one time the main route over the hills to Maentwrog in the Vale of Ffestiniog to the north, and possibly Neolithic in origin, but these days little more than a footpath. It is now part of the newly signposted Arduwy Way long distance path.

The church here is surrounded by a treeless, grassy graveyard of leaning slate headstones entered through a substantial lychgate of large stone blocks under a slate roof. Its patron is St Tecwyn, who was a member of the college of Bardsey, and is thought to have arrived in Britain from Brittany with Saint Cadfan. He founded Llandecwyn in the 6th century. The building standing today is thought to be medieval in origin and rebuilt in the Victorian period; it remains in use for worship. Of special interest to me was that this is the first church to become part of the Small Pilgrim Places Network, founded by the Revd Jim Cotter twenty years ago. That network has now grown to well over sixty sites across Wales and England.

Sadly I couldn't look inside the church because of COVID precautions, but before leaving there were two things outside that caught my eye. The first was a group of three Chough in the field beyond the church. These are rare corvids, easy to distinguish by their bright red beaks and legs. They were busy working their way through the grass tussocks, perhaps feeding on emerging leather-jackets.

The second equally rare sight was what appeared to be a scarecrow dressed in priest's vestments in front of a table on a promontory further up the track. Sheer curiosity drove me up the hill, to find not a scarecrow but an actual priest in surplis and stole, standing very still and apparently talking loudly to himself. After a cheery greeting he told me he was about to start a service being live-streamed via YouTube to his group of local parishes.



The church with Tremadog Bay in the distance



Outdoor worship above St
Tecwyn's Church

Another voice then rang out, seemingly from the ether, telling him to stop talking and stand still as the service was about to begin. I realised that a carpet draped nearby was obscuring the sound and cameraman, hidden under cover for the sake of a better recording. The pandemic may have been keeping the doors of St Tecwyn's shut, but viewers would be worshipping online to a backdrop of this ancient place of worship and, further afield, a background of beautiful mountains, sea and sky.

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