

Small Pilgrim Places Journal 34: St Tanwg, Gwynedd



Bunds protect the church from encroaching sand

My first glimpse of the church of St Tanwg, just south of Harlech on the western coast of Wales, took me back to the little church of St Winwaloe at Gunwalloe on the coast of Cornwall, also a Small Pilgrim Place, with the rare boast of having its feet right on the sandy sea shore. St Tanwg is in a similar coastal location and is understandably nicknamed the "church in the sand", bunkered down as it is behind high sand dunes defending it from the reaches of the Irish Sea to the west, and with bramble-topped bunds on the other sides. A stone, slate-roofed lychgate guards the single place of entry to the east. The one small door, in the west wall, is kept from the encroaching sand by a palisade of slate tombstones standing shoulder-to-shoulder.

St Tanwg is thought to have been a Breton who lived in the 5th century and founded a church here in about 435AD, around the time that St Patrick was consecrated Bishop. He travelled to Ireland and then sent missionaries back to Britain. Llandanwg, where this church stands, would then have offered the best anchorage along this stretch of coast, and from here ancient routes radiated inland, some skirting the Snowdon massif and stretching towards the Dee and Severn valleys.

The original church on this site was much smaller than the present building, which dates from the Middle Ages and was extended eastward in the 14th century as the congregation grew. In Victorian times a new church was built nearby at Harlech, and St Tecwyn's fell into disrepair, but the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings got the roof repaired, and more restoration has been undertaken since. It is one of the oldest sites of continuous Christian worship in the country. Nowadays there are regular services throughout the year here, including Christmas Day, attended last year by 100 people.



St Tanwg, the "church in the sand"

Waiting for me as I approached the church I found Pam Odam, recently ordained Deacon, who told me that she normally spends two or three afternoons a week welcoming visitors and telling them about St Tanwg's. I was immediately struck by the warm light filtering through the plain windows and across the stone floor and weighty dark timber beams. Pam explained that some of these timbers had previously belonged to ships - the immediate area has a long history of ship-building. I could smell the woody fragrance of these seasoned beams, mingled with a slight smokiness; they had sustained some fire damage in the 1700s.

In the chancel, Pam pointed out two inscribed pillar tomb stones. One, she told me, was of blue stone that had come from Wicklow - so another clue to the ancient connection with Ireland. The dark roof beams, white wall and shafts of bright autumnal sunshine created a chiaroscuro reminiscent of a Vermeer interior. It added to the sense that this was very much a thin place where the presence of countless pilgrims and worshippers over many centuries had laid a tangible patina of continuous prayer.

Leaving the church, I wandered out across the saltmarsh, sand dunes and sandy shore of the bay, taking in the far-reaching views toward the mountains of Snowdonia in the distance.

Ali Green

The nave, chancel and east end

