

## A Story of a Yew

St Dogmaels (also known as Llandudoch in the Welsh language) is a large village in Pembrokeshire, situated on the south side of estuary of the river Teifi, a mile downstream from Cardigan, county town of neighbouring Ceredigion. At the heart of the village are the ruins of St. Dogmaels Abbey and to the north of the abbey, within its former precinct, stands the parish church of St Thomas the Martyr. Immediately adjacent to the church is the Yew tree that is the subject of these notes.



Church as seen from the south-west



Church and tree seen from the south

The tree is growing within a circular stone enclosure 3.6 metres in diameter with walls about 1.45m above the surrounding asphalt-surfaced path just 3 metres from away the south porch. The structure of the enclosure has been reinforced by two substantial iron bands fitted around its circumference.



## The Yew at the Church of St Thomas, St Dogmaels

The tree has little by way of a distinct trunk but arises as a mass of congested woody branches growing up on the far eastern side of the enclosure, partly overhanging the stonework, where an old iron post has been provided as a prop.



Its form makes it difficult to provide accurate dimensions but a tape placed diagonally around the tree (as illustrated in the photograph above, roughly at the narrowest point), gave a girth of 5.7 metres. The height of the tree above the top of the stonework is about 10 metres making its overall height above the surrounding ground level about 11.5m.

The material within the enclosure is mounded up in the centre and comprises more or less compacted soil and stone with adventitious roots spreading over the surface. It is likely that this in fact represents the original leaning trunk of the tree, now buried and presumably largely decayed.





## The Yew at the Church of St Thomas, St Dogmaels

Current crown condition is good, with dense foliage forming a rounded canopy as a result of repeated trimming over the last several years. This has prevented it from encroaching on the nearby church building and as a result the crown spreads to a radius of roughly six metres all round other than towards the church, to the south, where it is only about 4 metres.



JPR 2012

This form has, however, varied greatly over the years, as can be seen from the record held by the Ancient Yew Group, based on information gathered and photographs taken by Tim Hills in 1999 and reproduced below



Photographs from <https://www.ancient-yew.org/> Copyright © Tim Hills – 1999)

As Mr Hills notes, these images shows the tree 'drastically reduced'. However the pruning wounds can be seen to be rather small showing that the material that was cut back was itself regrowth from an earlier, and possibly even more drastic pruning.

## The Yew at the Church of St Thomas, St Dogmaels

Two other observations are worth noting in these images photographs of the tree in 1999: firstly, the ivy that covered the enclosure and which extended right up into the canopy back then is no longer present, and secondly that the iron bands that now secure the stonework of the enclosure had not been fitted at that time.<sup>1</sup>

Tim Hills also observes in the AYG listing *“We do not know how many centuries ago the tradition of building a high wall around this tree began. The problem created is that the yew will always be expanding and the wall will from time to time need maintaining and even rebuilding.”* The presence of these two steel bands attest to the truth of this latter statement, these having been fitted to reinforce the masonry and to prevent it breaking apart. It seems that cracks may also have been repaired earlier: the date 1977 has been incised into cement on the top of the wall on the north side, leading one to presume that the stonework was repaired and repointed at that time.

As to when the walls were built, there are a number of old images of the site that provide some clues as to the history both of the tree and also that of its enclosure. A wood engraving by Hugh Hughes, published in 1823 (and later hand coloured) shows the scene looking north-west to south-east. By coincidence, Tim Hills’ photograph taken in 1999 was taken from the same viewpoint with the same ruined section of the north transept of the abbey in the background.



Coloured wood engraving by Hugh Hughes, dated 1823

However, back in 1823 the tree was very much more intact, with a substantial but strongly leaning trunk that appears to be decayed at its base. It should also be noted that what appears to be the top of a low, stepped, rectangular enclosure is clearly shown on the two visible sides of the tree.

A few years later, in the 1830s, the artist Henry Gastineau (1791-1876) published *“Wales Illustrated”* a series of engravings including one of *“The Remains of St. Dogmael’s Priory”* which, on its left side, includes a representation of part of the church and the yew tree. This section of the original painting (in an engraved and coloured version by J.C. Varrall, dated 1832) is reproduced

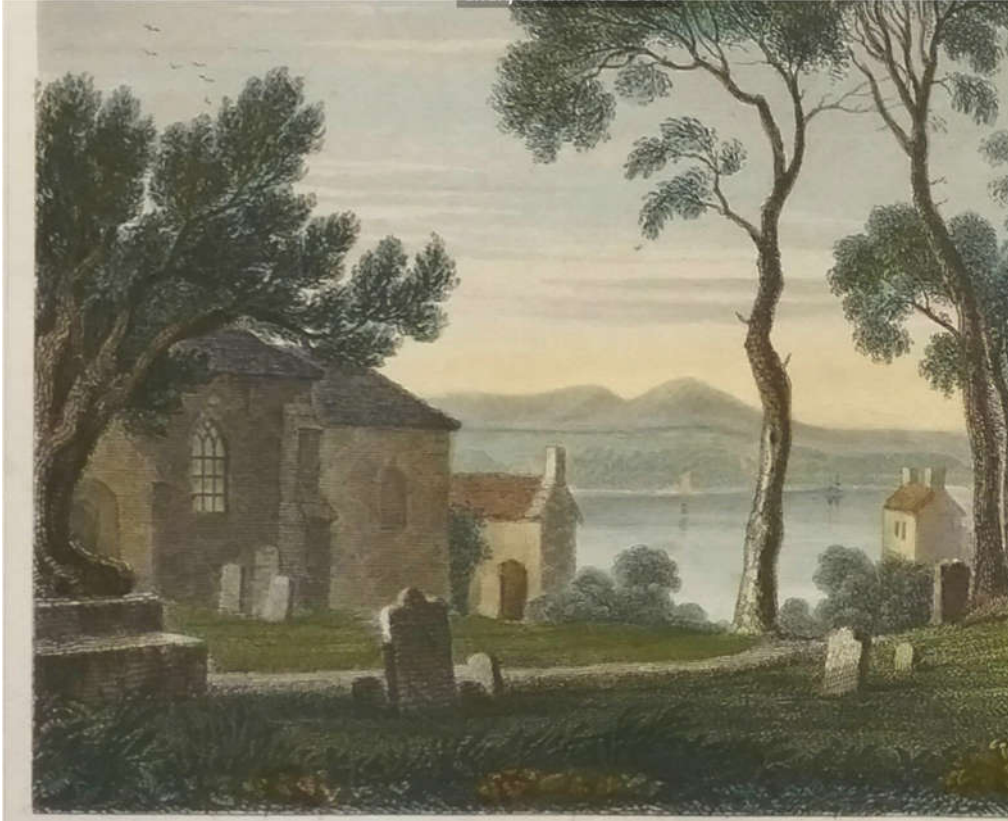
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<sup>1</sup> A plaque attached to the stonework identifies the tree as a Yew and suggests it is 500 years old. The plaque itself is dated 2013, which suggests that this may be when these bands were fitted



## The Yew at the Church of St Thomas, St Dogmaels

below. It clearly shows a stepped enclosure, quite unlike the present circular one. That part of the tree that is included in the picture shows it with substantial, upright boughs and spreading foliage.



"Remains of St. Dogmael's Priory" by H Gastineau (detail) 1832. Coloured engraving by J.C.Varrall

Going yet further back we have a written reference to the tree and another image. This was included in a volume called '*A Tour throughout South Wales and Monmouthshire*', published in 1803 with both text and illustrations by John Thomas Barber Beaumont.

Of one of his tours he writes:

*"Early in the morning after my reaching Cardigan, I made an excursion in search of St. Dogmael's Priory, about a mile and a half distant. This fragment of antiquity is very much dilapidated, and boasts scarcely any picturesque appearance; the few parts standing are converted into barns, sheds, and habitations; but enough remains to shew the original extent of the church; which was cruciform, of no considerable dimensions, and of the early Gothic style; in the cemetery adjoining the ruin, and the village church,*

*— "a church-yard yew,  
Decay'd and worn with age,"*

*has a pleasing characteristic effect: and here the scene, finely interspersed with wood, and overlooking the Tivy, is undoubtedly picturesque.<sup>2</sup>*

His illustration (overleaf) shows the tree more or less in its entirety, strongly leaning, with dense growth low down but with the taller, quite substantial branches with rather sparse foliage, suggesting some degree of dieback or retrenchment<sup>3</sup>. A comparison of this image with the one above, made some thirty years later by Gastineau, suggests that these declining upper branches may have been cut back at some point in the intervening years.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36643/36643-h/36643-h.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Crown retrenchment: the process whereby an old tree 'grows down', allowing the outer crown to die back while consolidating growth lower down, sometimes resulting in the tree becoming 'stag-headed'

## The Yew at the Church of St Thomas, St Dogmaels



St Dogmael's Priory with St Thomas' Church; engraving by J.T.Barber, 1802

Barber's drawing does not include the surrounding wall and it gives the impression of the tree being much further from the church than is the case now. However rather than representing their true relationship, I believe this is the result of how Barber's on-site sketches of the tree and the church were subsequently worked up in his studio to create the 'picturesque' arrangement for the published engraving. However we are left in no doubt that a yew tree stood here at the outset of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that was recognised as being of considerable antiquity at that time.

The building shown in these images from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is not the structure that now stands on the site as the church was rebuilt over the period 1848 to 1852. We have another engraving, this one published by Rock & Co and dated 1852, the date indicating that it must illustrate the new building very soon after it was reopened. (Note the absence of the south porch, which was only added in 1925).



"Church & Abbey of St. Dogmaels". Line engraving by Rock & Co. London. Published December 1852 with later hand colouring



## The Yew at the Church of St Thomas, St Dogmaels

In this 1852 image, the stepped enclosure is no longer present having been replaced by a stone wall structure, seemingly the same circular one that is still present.

The tree, however, is much altered. There may be some artistic license at play here, but it is clearly a very much smaller tree than was shown in any of the earlier illustrations. The somewhat windswept appearance of the crown in the later image suggests that it is composed of flexible, slender branches rather than the sturdy, and largely inflexible boughs shown in earlier pictures. This suggests to me that at around the time the church was rebuilt, the large boughs were cut hard back and what is shown in the picture is the subsequent young regrowth from the bole: in effect, the tree was pollarded.

The current branch structure, with the crown borne on numerous, *relatively* slender (and therefore relatively young) branches all arising from roughly the same level, is very much what one would expect to see in a tree that has been pollarded:



In fact the sizes of the branches now present appear to be too small to represent regrowth that arose following cut-back in the 1850s, suggesting that the tree has been subjected to such a process more recently and perhaps on a number of occasions over the past 170 years.

The rebuilding of the church was necessary because “*for a considerable time [it] had been in a miserable state of dilapidation*”<sup>4</sup>. It seems likely that the walls of the enclosure surrounding the old tree and close to the south door of the church were also in poor repair and that it was felt that they should be replaced by a structure more in keeping with that of the new building. It is also quite possible that while an earlier generation felt, like John Barber, that a tree “*Decay’d and worn with age has a pleasing characteristic*” and should be valued as being “*undoubtedly picturesque*”, Victorian sensibilities may have been less appreciative and more inclined towards the tidy rather than the picturesque.

Both Barber’s and Hughes’ images show trees with a strongly leaning trunk and the latter one, from 1823, clearly shows damage and decay at the base. Assuming that we can regard these images as being reasonably accurate representations (not *too* influenced by notions of the Picturesque!) they suggest that the degree to which the tree leant to the west may have increased over the twenty year interval, perhaps due to decay leading to partial and gradual failure of the trunk, or else as a result of deterioration of root function in that quarter and a subsequent loss of roothold.

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<sup>4</sup> Malkin, cited by Johnson, 2013

## The Yew at the Church of St Thomas, St Dogmaels

The lean of the tree would result in branches extending further and lower to the east, where they could have begun to cause some obstruction. It may be that for this reason, in the Gastineau picture from 1832, much of the low growth shown in previous pictures appears to have been removed to relieve that obstruction, while the higher branches have the appearance of having been lopped back somewhat.

Moving forward to 1852, we now see a round and seemingly rather smaller enclosure taking the place of the pre-existing square walls. One might reasonably suppose that the original walls would have been built with the base of the tree more or less central; yet over the years the crown had effectively 'migrated' to the east, with little or no live growth in the west. We have no idea of the dimensions of that earlier structure, but when it was decided to rebuild it, may have seemed appropriate to reduce its size on that western side, enclosing the leaning trunk more closely.

The removal of the old, square walls and their replacement by circular stonework would undoubtedly have resulted in some disruption of the tree's roots. Any roots that may have survived to the west may have been severed, but elsewhere within the confined volume of soil, other roots would have been in close contact with the old stonework. Indeed it's likely that some would have penetrated the old mortar between the stones, contributing to the wall's deterioration. Dismantling the structure would inevitably have resulted in damage to the root system which would in turn be highly likely to have led to dieback in the crown and may in fact have resulted in further subsidence of the trunk, leaving it more or less prostrate.

The situation we see now is but a fragment of the original tree but one that survives and continues to flourish, entirely confined to the easternmost part of enclosure, the mounded surface to the west no doubt reflecting the presence of the decayed trunk below the surface. One reason that the tree *does* continue to flourish is no doubt as a result of fungal action breaking down old, dead material within the enclosure, freeing up nutrients for the tree to re-absorb. The mounded central area is no doubt composed in large part of the decayed remains of the original trunk. Decay can also be seen to be proceeding in exposed parts of the tree where a red-brown cubical rot is apparent, typical of decay caused by the sulphur polypore fungus [*Laetiporus sulphureus*], a species that commonly affect yews.



West side of the base of the tree showing cubical rot. Note also the surface roots, exploiting the decayed material derived from the breakdown of the dead woody material.



## The Yew at the Church of St Thomas, St Dogmaels

We therefore have what I believe is a plausible explanation for the current *form* of the tree; however the question of its age remains. While this will never be known with any certainty, certain clues are present. Tim Hills of the Ancient Tree Group wrote, “*We do not know how many centuries ago the tradition of building a high wall around this tree began*” and has pointed out that there are several churchyards in South Wales that also have yew trees surrounded by walls of varying design<sup>5</sup>. Many of these may have been simply to make the surroundings ‘tidier’, but the enclosure here, nearly 1.45 metres high, while no doubt fulfilling that function, seems likely to have been constructed with some other specific reason in mind. Furthermore, the effort and expense of providing the apparently substantial walls seen in the engravings from 1823 and 1830 suggest to me that the tree must have been regarded as being of some considerable significance. Its presence would, after all, have been something of an inconvenience to those attending the church and would have made the process of rebuilding that much more awkward. But rather than regard it as a mere obstruction (as I fear many contemporary developers would), the builders of previous centuries took considerable pains to protect and preserve it.

The walls may simply have been built to protect the tree from physical damage, to keep people and perhaps livestock away (although as the crown extended well beyond the walls, they would not have prevented animals browsing on the potentially poisonous foliage). Furthermore, had the walls been purely protective one might expect them to be free-standing, which is not the case. Instead it is my suspicion that when the earlier church was built it was found necessary to create a level area for the building and for access around it. To achieve this the ground level around the tree had to be lowered, with walls being constructed to retain the soil around the tree.

If this conjecture is correct, that the tree was enclosed at the time the church was built, the next question is when that was. There is some doubt as to when a church was first built on this site. A church of St. Thomas the Martyr was referred to in 1357<sup>6</sup>, but it seems likely, as Glen Johnson has suggested, that the building that immediately predated the present church was “*probably first occupied after the dissolution of the Abbey in 1536*”. This supposition is given credence by the writing of one Richard Fenton in 1811 that the church was ‘*evidently raised from the ruins of the Abbey, as windows of the chancel... exhibit remains of workmanship that could never have been meant originally to furnish such an edifice*’ [...as a parish church].<sup>3</sup>

Thus it seems likely that while a church may have been here for many centuries, it has been rebuilt on a number of occasions. The present church, built in the last century, replaced an earlier structure constructed around the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, making use of material robbed from the Abbey. That, then, may also be when the walls around the tree were built. If that is the case it would date the earlier enclosure to about 500 years ago (which, no doubt by chance, is the age suggested by the plaque fitted to the enclosure in 2013).

However in order to justify the effort and expense of this structure, the tree that was being protected must have already been of considerable importance and no doubt of considerable age. This would suggest that it was significantly *older* than 500 years.

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<sup>5</sup> Other yews surrounded by stone walls can be seen at churchyards at Llangathen, Llywel, Ystradgynlais, Ciliau Aeron, Llanfair Clydogau, Llanpumsaint and Cenarth (*Tim Hills, pers. Comm*)

<sup>6</sup> Ludlow, 2020

## The Yew at the Church of St Thomas, St Dogmaels

I have perhaps already stretched matters somewhat beyond the strictly evidential. However I would make one last proposition regarding the origin, or at least the *significance* of this tree.

St Dogmael's abbey was founded in about 1115 by the Norman lord Robert FitzMartin<sup>7</sup>. However the abbey occupied the site of a much earlier, pre-Norman monastic establishment dating back to the sixth century. This was dedicated to the sixth century preacher and monk Dogmael (alternatively known as Docmael, Dogfael, Dogmeel or Dogwel). As well as giving his name to the village and the abbey, he is also associated with a number of other churches in Pembrokeshire, as well as in Anglesey where the church of Llandogwel is dedicated to him. Although clearly a significant figure, little is known of him other than that he was reputed to be descended from the kings of Wales and that he was a preacher who was very active in Pembrokeshire, having what has been described as a cult developing around him, centred south of the River Teifi around the communities of Cemais and Pebidiog.

Clearly he was a much venerated figure. Could it be that this yew was a 'preaching tree' under which Dogmael proclaimed Christianity to the early mediaeval residents of the area?

Although it is generally accepted that yew trees can survive for well over 1000 years (the Fortingall yew in Perthshire is estimated to be between 2000 and 3000 years old), it is probably fanciful to suggest that the currently extant tree dates back 1400 years to the man himself and it certainly can't be proven from any evidence I have presented here. Nevertheless, a direct *association* with the saint, even if only by long-held tradition, now evidently forgotten, that this was 'his' tree, would explain its curious position and the efforts that have been expended over the centuries to preserve and maintain it.

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01/09/2021

### REFERENCES

- Hills, Tim (1999) in the Ancient Yew Group website: <https://www.ancient-yew.org/>
- Johnson, Glen (2013) "Parish Church of St. Thomas" in <http://www.glen-johnson.co.uk/parish-church-of-st-thomas/>
- Ludlow, Neil. (2020) "St Dogmaels, St Thomas the Apostle and St Thomas the Martyr" in the 2020 Journal of the Pembrokeshire Historical Society pp 5-21

Except where otherwise stated, all photographs are by Jerry Ross, taken in 2021.

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<sup>7</sup> *As an aside, J.T. Barber comments, in his book 'Tour through South Wales & Monmouthshire':*

'This priory was founded for Benedictine monks by Martin de Turribus\*, a Norman chieftain, who first conquered the surrounding territory called Kames or Kemish, and deluged it with the blood of its natives. This was a common trick for cheating the devil, practised by the organized plunderers of that day. After pillaging a country, and enslaving or massacring the legitimate proprietors, they hoped to expiate their crime, and quell the rising qualms of conscience, by appropriating a part of their booty to a monkish foundation—to a set of idle jugglers, scarcely less inimical to the rights of society, though less ferocious, than themselves.'

\* [Martin de Turribus was in fact the father of Robert FitzMartin, who is generally recognised as the founder]



**St Dogmaels Yew**  
Additional photographs



Yew tree viewed from north to south



Base of tree SW to NE



Date 1977 incised in cement



Plaque on east side of enclosure



Base of tree, south side



# Map of St Dogmaels

