

Preface

My earliest memories of the saints of Cymru are not from books, museums, or history lessons, but from the first of March in the school hall. Beneath paper dragons and hand-painted Welsh flags, we sang songs celebrating Dewi Sant, St David, the patron saint whose name every Welsh child seemed to know before they knew much else about the history of their country. At the time, those celebrations felt simple and familiar, woven naturally into the rhythm of school life. Looking back now, I realise they were my first encounter with something much older: the enduring presence of the saints within the identity, memory, and landscape of Wales itself.

The saints never felt distant to me. They did not belong solely to the pages of medieval manuscripts or to a remote and forgotten past. Their names surrounded us constantly. They appeared in village names, churches, wells, islands, valleys, and roads passed every day without a second thought. Even as children, we sensed that these places carried stories older than ourselves, stories rooted deeply within the landscapes around us.

That feeling grew stronger through visits to some of those places. School trips took us to ancient churches scattered across the Welsh countryside, places whose stones seemed worn smooth by centuries of prayer, weather, and memory. I remember standing inside rural churches such as St Cynog's at Penderyn and feeling a kind of silence unlike anywhere else. Not emptiness, but presence. Ancient yew trees shaded churchyards, weathered gravestones leaned at odd angles, and old stone walls seemed to carry the weight of countless generations. These places felt connected to something much older than the modern world around them.

Perhaps nowhere inspired that feeling more than St David's Cathedral. Even before I understood the history of Dewi's monastery, the importance of pilgrimage, or the cathedral's place

within Welsh history, the site felt extraordinary. Sheltered within a hollow near the western coast of Pembrokeshire, it seemed less like a building and more like the centre of a wider sacred landscape stretching across cliffs, islands, sea mist, and the Atlantic horizon beyond. It was impossible to stand there without sensing that the landscape itself formed part of the story.

As I grew older, I began to realise that the saints of Cymru were inseparable from the places associated with them. Their stories emerged from valleys, springs, mountains, forests, tidal islands, and coastal headlands that already possessed meaning long before Christianity arrived. Sacred wells flowed from hillsides. Islands offered isolation and contemplation. Mountain passes disappeared into mist. Ancient pathways linked communities across difficult terrain. Christianity did not enter an empty landscape. It entered a world already rich with memory, symbolism, and sacred significance.

This book grew from that realisation. The saints were not simply missionaries moving across a blank map. They became part of an older sacred geography deeply rooted within the landscape of Wales itself. Churches rose beside springs that had long attracted people. Monasteries developed in places shaped by isolation and reflection. Pilgrimage routes followed ancient pathways across the countryside. Over time, older understandings of sacred landscape were not entirely erased, but reinterpreted through Christian belief, worship, and tradition.

A central idea runs throughout *The Cymru Cycles*: the history of Wales cannot be separated from its landscape. That principle is especially important when exploring the saints. Their lives, communities, and traditions were shaped by the rivers, valleys, coastlines, mountains, and islands in which they lived. Understanding the saints therefore requires understanding the landscapes that inspired, sustained, and preserved their memory.

Like every volume in this series, this book is intended as a framework rather than a catalogue. The lives of many Welsh saints survive only through later traditions, medieval texts, place-name evidence, and local memory. Historical certainty is not always possible, and different interpretations often exist. Throughout this book, the aim is to present the interpretation that appears most consistent with the available evidence while recognising that alternative views may also be valid.

The chapters that follow therefore explore more than biography alone. They examine the relationship between saints, landscape, belief, and community across Wales. Some saints became famous far beyond Cymru, while others remained deeply local, remembered only within a single church, valley, or well. Together, however, they helped shape the spiritual landscape of Wales during the centuries following the end of Roman rule.

In many ways, this book is also a journey back through the places that first inspired my fascination with Welsh history. Back to school halls filled with songs every March. Back to quiet churches hidden among hills and valleys. Back to St Davids and the western edge of the land. Back to the saints whose names still echo across the landscape today.

For the saints never truly left these places. Their memory remains within the churches, wells, islands, pathways, and landscapes of Cymru itself, carried forward by the land as much as by the stories that survive about them.

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The Cymru Cycles