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MELANGELL WITH A THOUSAND ANGELS

Little known outside Wales and Great Britain, the secluded Welsh shrine of St. Melangel, deep in the Berwyn Mountains, is dedicated to a sixth-century Irishwoman, an anchorite who lived here for many years, alone and unknown. An early Christian treasure, it is the oldest existing Romanesque shrine in northern Europe. When the church was restored in the 1960's, Melangell's relics were discovered under the chapel floor, and now more than 10,000 pilgrims a year come to ask for her intercession.

The shrine of Pennant Melangell, consisting of the church and a few small houses, is situated in a place of great natural beauty deep in the Berwyn Mountains. The small river, Tanat, runs by a narrow lane from the nearby village of Llangynog into a quiet green valley surrounded by high hills and the rugged promontory of Moel Ddu Maw (Moel Dimoel). For most of the year, powerful waterfalls cascade down the cliff-sides.

A Christian church and pilgrimage site for over 1200 years, the former Bronze Age site is ringed by ancient yew trees estimated to be over two thousand years old. A Bronze Age pre-Christian community erected a wall in the midst of the oak forest, which covered the valley, and they found safety hidden in this remote place.

Little is known about St. Melangell beyond the bare tradition that she was a daughter of the royal house of Strathclyde, and came from Ireland at the beginning of the 7th century to convert the Welsh and set up a small religious settlement. Such fragmentary information, however, only makes it apparent that her presence and her prayer must have been quite extraordinary, as attested to by the devotion the Welsh people have always paid her, even following the Reformation.

The Norman church, parts of which date from the twelfth century, is dedicated to St. Melangell (in Latin, Monacella), and incorporates materials of an

Photo: Pilgrim's trail near Pennant Melangell.

even older shrine. The present stone church and reliquary-shrine, replacing older wooden structures, were built c. 1100 by order of the king in thanksgiving for peace in his lands and because, by that time, the saint herself had become extremely important in Welsh life¹. In 1450, an oak screen was installed, separating the nave from the chancel, and elaborately carved with the traditional account of the meeting of Melangell and Prince Brychwel. A great oak carving of Christ on the cross was also installed, although this cross was later destroyed and a replacement in bronze now hangs in its place. One of the two medieval effigies near the rebuilt shrine is thought to represent St. Melangell herself. The original Norman font was later joined by a Georgian pulpit, a chandelier, a commandment board, and a series of stone carvings of Melangell's hare by the sculptor Meical Watts.

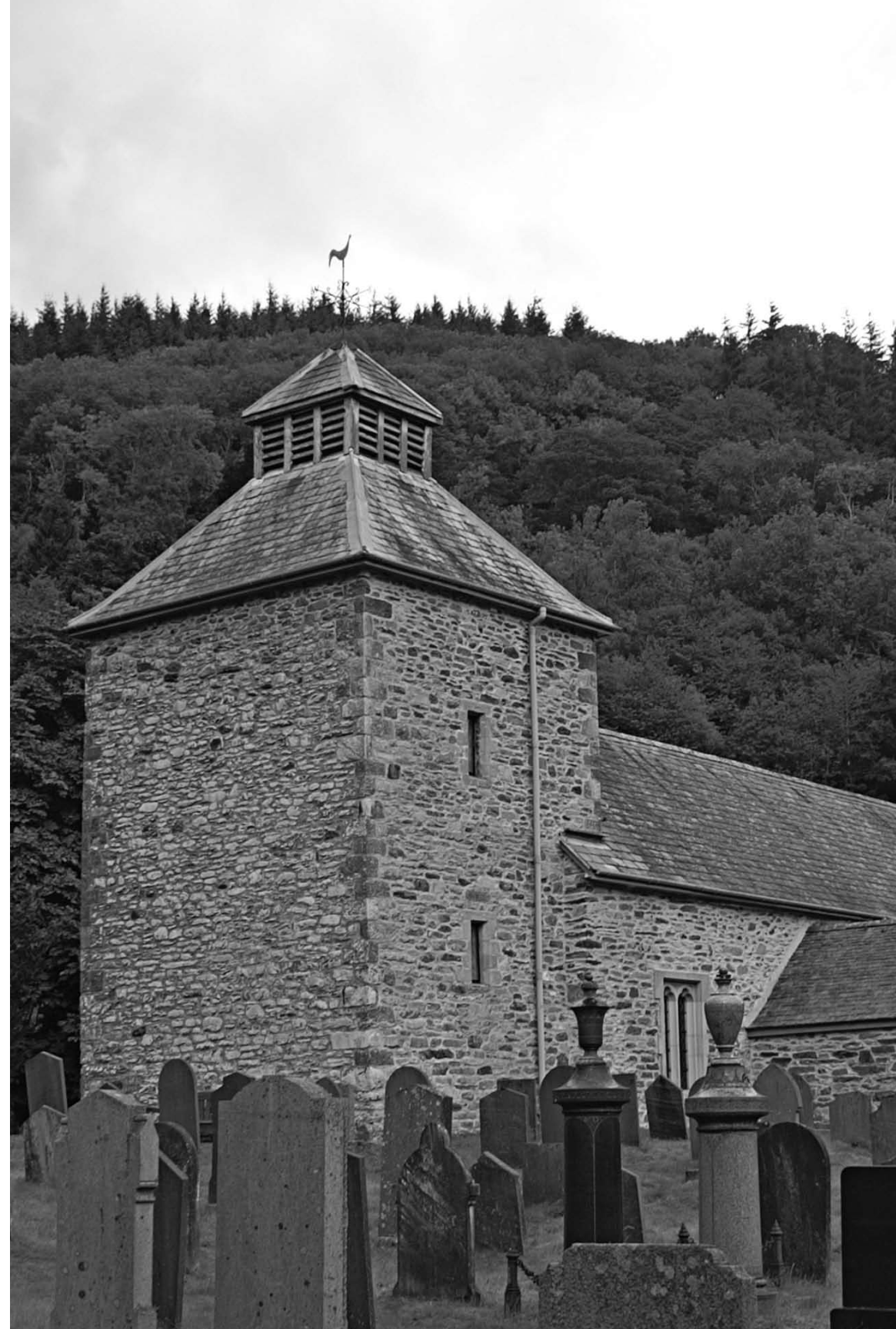


St. Melangell.

The entrance to the shrine bears the inscription, *Perindod Melangell*, “Melangell’s Pilgrimage,” and above the gate is a poem inscribed in Welsh: “Lean purely towards prayer in your heart. Take care when praising God; God only is good, and it is good to give Him honor here.” In 1537, during the Reformation, the shrine and reliquary were removed by local Christians and hidden in the three-foot exterior walls of the church to prevent destruction. In 1630, the western tower was added, along with a square room (possibly a hermitage) against the exterior east end of the church’s sturdy three-foot thick walls. 1876 saw the tower rebuilt, a new roof, and some interior work. Another restoration followed in 1958 and part of the shrine was removed from the outer walls and badly erected in the interior of the former church – then the village school room. From 1989 to 1992, the church was fully and faithfully restored under the guidance of architects, historians, archivists, and builders. Saint Melangell’s Romanesque reliquary-shrine, beneath which her relics are laid, was

Photo: Pennant Melangell.

¹ From the inaugural lecture of Rev’d Canon A.M. Allchin, Director of St. Theosevia’s Centre, Oxford, and Hon. Professor of Celtic Spirituality at Univ. of Wales, Bangor.





also restored along with the church. This is the oldest Romanesque shrine in northern Europe. In the Middle Ages, pilgrims in search of healing were laid beneath the stone reliquary canopy.

At the start of the restoration, Rev. Paul and Evelyn Davies moved into a tiny cottage beside the church to oversee the work and Evelyn organized the appeals campaign that eventually raised £300,000. The church was rededicated on July 28, 1992 by the Anglican Archbishop of Wales and has since been an important site for pilgrims – approximately 10,000 a year come for prayer. In 1994, Evelyn built the Cancer Help Centre in the garden and many healings have taken place at the shrine. Anglican, Catholic, and Orthodox pilgrims come to venerate the relics and to pray; the ministry continues today for all Christians.

Dr. William Morgan, translator of the Bible into Welsh, was the rector of Pennant Melangell from 1588-1595. Nearby Llangynog was later a well-known centre of harp-making. Both Thomas Lloyd, an early-20th-century quarry worker at Llangynog and winner of competitions for both harp-making and playing, and internationally-famous Welsh harpist Nancy Richards, are buried at Pennant Melangell.

The well-known story of Melangell and the hare comes down to us from the Welsh oral tradition through carvings, songs, and poetry, some only recently discovered and translated.

St. Melangell and the Hare

In early 7th-century Wales (Powys), there lived in the town of Pengwern Powys (now Shrewsbury), Prince Brychwel Ysgithrog, also Earl of Chester, whose dwellings were located where the later College of St. Chad would stand, nine miles from today's Welsh border. The prince was known to give generous alms for the service of God and the poor.

One day in 604 AD, Brychwel went hunting in a remote area of his principality called Pennant. When his dogs started a hare, the prince, shouting encouragement, pursued it on horseback into a thorny bramble thicket, but instead of retrieving the hare, the dogs fled howling. In the midst of the brambles he came upon a clearing in which a beautiful woman stood deep in prayer, the hare lying boldly under the hem of her garment. Seeing the woman, the astonished prince asked how long she had lived alone in such a wilderness. Ac-

Photo: Yew Tree, Pennant Melangell.

cording to the medieval Latin sources, she replied, “For the past fifteen years, I have not looked on the face of a man.” “But whose daughter art thou, and from where hast thou come? “I am from Ireland,” she replied, “the daughter of a king, and because my father decreed that I was to be given as wife to a nobleman of Ireland, by God’s leading, I came here instead, to serve God and the spotless Virgin with a pure body and heart for as long as I remain on earth.”

The prince asked the woman’s name, to which she replied, “Melangell.”² After considering her state of life, her well-being, and her solitude, the prince replied, “Most worthy Melangell, I perceive that thou art a handmaid of the true God. Because it hath pleased Him for thy merits to give protection to this little wild hare from the attack and pursuit of the hounds, I give and present to thee with willing mind these my lands for the service of God, to be a perpetual asylum and refuge. If any men or women flee hither to seek thy protection, provided they do not pollute thy sanctuary, let no prince or chieftain be so rash towards God as to attempt to drag them forth.”³ Another version adds, “If, on the other hand, any guilty person enjoying your sanctuary shall go out to do any kind of wrong, then let those governing your sanctuary who know of these wrongs, deliver them to the officials of Powys.”

Melangell continued her solitary life near Pennant for over thirty-seven years. The wild hares befriended her throughout her life, and were ever after called Wyn Melangell (St. Melangell’s lambs). Other chaste women settled nearby [who may have come with her from Ireland], to live together out of love of God, intent upon prayer and divine services.

After the death of the illustrious Prince Brychwel, his son Tysilio held the principality of Powys; then Cynan, Tysilio’s brother, and afterwards, Tam-bryd, Curmylk, and Durres the Lambe. All of these decreed that the place of Pennant Melangell should remain a perpetual sanctuary for those devoted to God and the needy, confirming the acts of the prince.

After Melangell departed from this life in 607,⁴ a nobleman by the name of Elise came to Pennant Melangell, who, desiring to ravish and defile the virgins, came to a wretched end and perished suddenly. From that time on,

Photo: Burial Slab, Pennant Melangell.

² Early versions of her story all record her name with the Latin Monacella, by which she was known for centuries. Melangell, (roughly pronounced “Meh-lan-ghekh”) is the Welsh variant.

³ Translated from a 17th-century manuscript by Professor Oliver Davies of St. David’s College, Lampeter. St. Melangell and St. Winifred of Holywell are the only two Welsh female saints with a medieval Latin hagiography.

⁴ 670 AD is the traditionally accepted date of Melangell’s death, although one source puts it at 590.





whoever violated the liberty or holy order of this place rarely escaped divine vengeance.

So strong a tradition of her influence prevailed that, until this day, no one in the parish of Cwm Pennant will kill a hare, and for centuries, if a hare was pursued by dogs, it was firmly believed that if anyone cried, *Duw A Melangell A'th Gadwo* ("God and Melangell preserve thee!"), the hare was sure to escape.

Her festival is May 27.

The following play on her name was ancient even when it was recorded in Welsh in the registry of the church in 1723:

Mil engyl a Melangell
Trechant lu fyddin y fall.

Melangell with a thousand angels
Triumphs over all the powers of evil.

Ministering at Pennant Melangell

Reverend Evelyn Davies lived at Pennant Melangell for many years, first with her husband, the Rev. Paul Davies, who was the Anglican rector there. After her husband's repose, Evelyn herself took Anglican orders and remained as the rector of Pennant Melangell until 2000, when she took over as the vicar of St. Hywyn's Church, another ancient shrine in Aberdaron, where Road to Emmaus interviewed her. She now runs a center for the sick and dying.

RTE: Reverend Evelyn, as many of the lives of the Celtic saints, St. Melangell's hagiography has almost a fairy-tale quality, but some interesting archeological evidence came to light in the early 1990's, when you and your husband, who was then rector of Pennant-Melangell, initiated and oversaw the restoration of the shrine. Can you tell us about it?

REV. EVELYN: Yes, Melangell's remains were found for the first time in 1958, when a partial restoration of the Church of Pennant-Melangell took place.

Photo: St. Melangell's Reliquary Shrine, Pennant Melangell.

They boarded the ceiling and did some repair work to the floor in what was the old school room after the Reformation – a square edifice at the end of the church, where the little apse is now. They covered the floor with concrete, but underneath the concrete they found the gravespace of Melangell, and when they lifted the slab they discovered a lead coffin-box in the grave itself – not a whole coffin, but a smaller box containing bones. There were also some bits of debris in the coffin with Melangell’s remains, mostly particles of plants, which had perhaps been added when they moved the remains into this coffin-box.

RTE: So we can suppose that her relics had been exhumed, perhaps when the shrine was destroyed after the Reformation, and the bones then put into the smaller box?

REV. EVELYN: Yes, I think so. My husband and I kept the box in our house during the later restoration in 1990. At that time, my husband had a great friend who was an orthopedic surgeon, and he came and laid the relics out on a table. They were fairly complete, except for some disks missing from the back-bone, as well as the bones from an arm and leg. So, the remains were put back into the coffin-box and the box into the shrine when we finished rebuilding it in 1992. They remain there until now.

RTE: Were the relics identified as St. Melangell?

REV. EVELYN: The carbon-dating was pre-9th century. Now, in the later 1990 restoration, the archeologists excavated outside the north wall of the church and found the remains of six more skeletons tucked right by the wall. These were also pre-ninth century, and were deemed to be female. There were vestiges of linen shrouds in which they had been wrapped, and on top of each shroud were laid small white stones, denoting the years of monastic profession. There were six on some, three on another, and nine on one. I’ve heard that this is a tradition in other countries, and it is certainly a tradition in Europe and here in Wales. This was only done in the case of monks and nuns, so we know that these women were nuns.

Two years after the restoration, as I was looking into the history of the Earl of Powys, I read that, at the Reformation, the Powys family who then owned Pennant Melangell remained Roman Catholic and sent their children to the English Jesuit College at St. Omer in northern France to be educated in the Catholic faith. The college had collected relics from all over northern

Europe, including Britain, to save them from desecration, and I believe that the parts of Melangell’s remains that were missing were probably taken to St. Omer for safekeeping and perhaps to help the children of the family be accepted into the school.

Now, a very good historian in North Wales, who has researched St. Winifred of Holywell in the Vatican library, found evidence there that holy relics of St. Melangell were lodged in St. Omer, and that, in 1830, when the seminary closed, the relics were transferred to the local Catholic parish church. I have written to the priest of St. Omer to ask if they are still there. I’ve not had a reply, but I am going to Brittany next spring and then I will go to St. Omer myself.

RTE: Reverend Evelyn, you in turn became pastor of Pennant Melangell after your husband’s repose, and over the past twenty years, you’ve been very involved with ministering to pilgrims. Do people still pray to her, and do you feel that there has been evidence of her intercession?

REV. EVELYN: Very much so. There were three instances that I especially remember. I was in the church once, locking up one night about 6 o’clock, when a young family came running up the path: a husband and wife with two little girls with them. The woman was carrying a baby boy and she was distraught. She had just come out of hospital, two weeks after having had the baby. The doctors had told them that the infant had severe hydrocephalous, and that they were to bring the baby back on the following Monday so that they could drain the excess fluid and put a shunt in. They warned them, however, that he would certainly be left blind and mentally handicapped. They wanted prayers, so I asked them to kneel at the altar.

The baby was in his mother’s arms, very quiet and sleepy, and I put my hands, not on his head, but a little further away, and we all prayed for quite a long time. When I took my hands away, I was shocked to see the marks of my fingers quite clearly on his head, even though I hadn’t touched the child; my hands were nowhere near. I thought, “Somehow, I’ve damaged this child. What have I done?” I was very upset, but the parents were happy and, after promising each other that we would continue to pray, they took the baby home.

When they took the baby to the hospital a few days later, the doctors examined the baby and said that there was no need for the shunt, that the condition had inexplicably cleared, but, nonetheless, the baby would be physically

and mentally handicapped. I saw him two years later -- a wonderful little boy, perfectly normal. We looked at each other; it was one of those moments when I looked into his soul and he looked into mine. It was absolutely wonderful. He is now about twelve years old. I haven't seen him since, but I hear that he is a remarkable young man.

Another miracle that the staff at Pennant Melangell witnessed is that of a woman who came in great distress after she was told that she had advanced breast cancer and that she would have to have surgery. We prayed with her for a long while and she stayed at the shrine for some time. When she returned to the doctor a fortnight later, the cancer had completely cleared.

There was a third time that was also amazing. We sometimes have mentally ill people coming from day care centers. One time they brought two young men who were both schizophrenic. One was very loud, and they warned us outside, "He always shouts, he won't be still." I said, "It doesn't matter, bring him in." The other ill man hadn't spoken a word in years. When they came into the church, the other people from the day center walked around or sat in the pews, but these two in particular went straight up to the shrine, and the monosyllabic chap who never spoke, began to sing – with the most amazing, keening singing. It was beautiful. The other, who was always noisy, fell absolutely silent and didn't say a thing. Those two men weren't completely cured, but I was told that they were both much better afterwards, and kept asking to go back to the shrine.

There were other things as well, wonderful spiritual things where people without any faith at all have come to faith, and others have been healed of deep anger or hatred.

I miss the shrine terribly, but I knew that God had called me here, and I have to live without the shrine. I still miss Pennant Melangell. ✦

Gwasg Santes Melangell, *the shrine church of Pennant Melangell, Llangynog, Powys, North Wales SY10 OHQ (off the B4391 from Llanfyllin to Bala, two miles from Llangynog). St. Melangell's church is open daily 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. May to October, and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., November to April. Tel. from within Great Britain: 01691 860455. Tel. from outside of Great Britain: 44 1691 860455. E-mail: eleme@tiscali.co.uk*

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