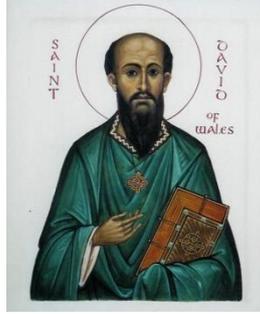


## Saint David the Patron Saint of Wales



(500 AD?? – 589 AD)

No historical account of Saint David was written when he was alive or indeed shortly after his death. This is because biographies of the saints were usually written some 500-600 years after they died. Therefore much of what was written about each saint was meant to depict that person in as positive a light as possible. This means that any attempt to write an accurate version of the life of Saint David is fraught with the certain difficulties and obstacles.

The medieval churchmen who were the “Writers of saints lives” or hagiographers as they are known, always wrote very positive and praiseworthy accounts. In many ways the authors therefore acted more like modern-day political spin doctors than as professional historians or biographers. The accounts that have been handed down to us were usually written to establish and promote a saint’s holy reputation and in so doing raise the status of the monastery, church or shrine that these individuals were associated with.

Whilst some of the stories about Saint David are based on oral tradition handed down from generation to generation they are also a reflection of the political and religious tensions that were affecting Wales in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century AD.

This was caused by the Norman invasions of Wales from around 1068AD onwards. This foreign political influence increased the desire of Welsh Church leaders to promote and defend the independence of their institution. Welsh Churchmen sought to oppose Canterbury’s influence over them through enhancing the claims of Saint David’s as the seat of the original archbishop of Wales. From here it was thought a Welshman could lead the independent Welsh Church without the interference of a Norman whose see was in faraway Kent.

As a result virtually everything we know about St David is based on the work of the 11<sup>th</sup> century monk, Rhydyfarch (d 1099AD.) His writings on Saint David (c.1080AD onwards) are mainly based on things we might regard as myths and legends.

His biography of Saint David’s life was written to promote David as a saintly figure, a herald of truth, a worker of miracles and most importantly as the independent archbishop of Wales free from the control and whims of Canterbury. It was never intended to be a balanced historical account of a saint and of a man who had lived some 500 or so years earlier.

Rhydyfarch’s version of Saint David’s life like that of the other Welsh saints and is not an attempt to accurately record the life of a Welsh religious figure. Its purpose is rather to enhance David’s national status as the key Welsh saint. For example we are told that Saint David made a mound rise from his beneath his feet so that his audience could hear him speak the better, when he gave a sermon at Aelfyw or Elvis

Other Welsh saints have similar famous stories about them too. Saint Cadog helped an infertile woman to conceive, Saint Beuno brought his murdered niece back to life and caused Saint Winifred's spring to magically appear at Holywell. Samson the 6<sup>th</sup> century Welsh saint and bishop had fire pour forth from his mouth and nostrils when he was consecrated.

One outstanding Welsh historian, professor Geraint H. Jenkins has called these accounts "No more than fairy stories" and argues that it would not be the first nor the last time that a myth-making Welsh elite has sought to add their own individual touches to our own national historical record.

In his "**Concise History of Wales**" professor Jenkins warns us that the material left behind by the medieval Welsh writers is "Engrossing and exciting" but also warns that it is still more than slightly tinged with a certain amount of fiction. Therefore much of what has been written about Saint David must be taken with a very large pinch of salt.

Rhydyfarch's *Vita Davidis* (*Life of Saint David*) was composed at the monastery of Llanbadarn Fawr, near Aberystwyth in the present day county of Ceredigion. It was finished in the 1090'sAD. It was originally written in Latin and was translated into Welsh as **Buchedd Dewi** in the later Middle Ages. The Welsh version led to David becoming regarded as the patron saint of Wales. Yet in his own lifetime David was not a national figure, nor when he died around 589AD. His main area of influence was South-West Wales where he was the abbot-bishop of the church that still bears his name.

Interestingly some of the earliest references to David are to be found in Irish sources and he seems to have been an important influence on the early Christian Irish population. He is the only Welsh saint to be included in *Oengus of Talaght's* account of Irish martyrs. This account was written around 830AD which was over 250 years before Rhydyfarch's biography of Saint David. Furthermore the Welsh scholar and monk Asser, who worked at the court of Alfred the Great of Wessex from the 890sAD mentions Saint David in his writings. Meanwhile according to the *Armes Prydain* (The Prophecy of Britain c.930AD) sees David described as a militant warrior-saint whose "Pure banner" would rally all Welshman to unite against the invading Saxons.



Saint David's Flag

We could therefore assume that Rhydyfarch's account of the life of Saint David is based on a mixture of oral traditions passed down from generation to generation and fused with scraps of "Evidence" from the few available written accounts. Rhydyfarch claimed that he based his book on existing archive material though there is little evidence for him having this material to hand when he wrote.

As time went by and Saint David's reputation gathered more and more momentum dozens of

churches, wells and shrines were dedicated to him. Almost all of these religious sites are in South Wales. Here Saint David became a very potent symbol of Wales and of a distinctive, independent identity for the Welsh Church in the early Middle Ages.

What follows therefore is not an attempt to tell the truth about Saint David but to summarise some of the traditional stories that are told about him whilst giving an account of his life based on what medieval writers have said about him. There is also coverage on the fate of his grave and his shrine following his death.

Saint David lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD and was one of the early saints who spread Christianity in western Britain. He spent a large part of his life in Saint David's or Mynyw as it was then called. It was here that he founded a monastery. We do not know the exact date of his birth but he died around 589AD. The 1<sup>st</sup> day of March has been accepted as the actual day of his death. It is of course Saint David's Day or Dydd Gwyl Ddewi.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> day of March is taken as the day that Non his mother died. He was buried in the grounds of his monastery where the cathedral at Saint David's now stands.



Saint David's Cathedral

According to tradition he was around six feet tall and was physically strong. He was said to be able to lift a wooden yoke and to be able draw a plough as well as any team of oxen. However his stated diet was rather Spartan and he ate only bread and herbs. He drank only water and took no wine or ale. He is one of the many Welsh saints known as "Watermen" as a result of his self-denial principles. It is said he would stand up to his neck in water reciting the psalms as a self-imposed penance.

He was attractive in appearance and was accompanied everywhere he went by an angel. He possessed remarkable powers and could work a range of different miracles, healing being a key one. He was the most charismatic of all the Welsh saints and was both a mystic and an ascetic.

He ruled his monastery firmly but was a man of godliness, humility and of an unassuming nature. He sent missionaries to Ireland and received saintly men and women as visitors from other Celtic lands but from Ireland especially. He spoke early Welsh, Latin and possibly an early form of Irish too.

David's birth was said to have been foretold by both pagans and Christians. Allegedly this list of foretellers includes Merlin and Saint Patrick. Legend has it that Saint Patrick wanted to

found a monastery at the site of Saint David's but was told by an angel that the task would be completed by another who would appear in thirty years' time. The downhearted Patrick then received a vision that he would be granted his own mission which was to convert all of Ireland to Christianity.

A churchman, possibly the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD Welsh monk Gildas also foretold of David's birth.

Non David's mother  
(Also knowns as Nonna or Nonnita)



Stained glass window in St. Non's chapel. (Note the well.)

This occurred when David's mother Non attended a service whilst she was pregnant. Gildas said that another preacher greater than he was present in the church that day and that unless Non left with her son still in the womb then he Gildas could not continue with the service as a greater speaker than he was present at the service. In those days tradition demanded that the lesser preacher could not speak in the presence of an acknowledged greater one.

The circumstances of David's conception and birth are also very dramatic. It was said that his father Sant raped Non when he was out riding one day; and having set his eyes upon her desired her there and then. Our Saint David's birth was therefore the result of this criminal and sinful act by his father. During the act of conception two standing stones appeared magically one at Non's head and one at Non's feet to signify that David would be born to her as a result of Sant's actions that day.

Months later when Non was due to give birth a local chieftain thought the unborn child would be a threat to him when he became an adult because of the prophecy that "He who will come whose power will fill the whole land." Wild storms, lightning bolts and floods fell upon West Wales and both Non and her unborn son were able to escape to safety this danger.

At the moment of David's birth a spring of crystal clear water appeared at his mother's feet and the appearance of water springs is often associated with many of the stories told about Saint David as a result.



Saint Non's Holy Well or Sacred Spring (Pembrokeshire)

David was baptised by Aelfyw or Elvis who was his cousin and who became Bishop of Munster. During the ceremony the infant David was held by a blind monk called Movi. At a key point in the service baptismal water splashed on the blind man's eyes and his sight was immediately restored. Once again a spring of pure water rose from the ground to mark the spot where the miracle took place.

The young David received his education first at the hands of his uncle Gustilianus and was then later tutored by Paulinius at Llanddeusant in northern Carmarthenshire. David's first conscious miracle was restoring the sight of Paulinius. David later moved to the monastery in Whitland called Hen Dy Gwyn.



Remains of Whitland Abbey  
Hen Dy Gwyn

In his “**Life of Saint David**” Rhydyfarch gives a vivid account of life in a Celtic monastery. The day began with early morning prayers and this was followed by manual work in the fields.

On returning from the day's work on the land the monks spent their time reading, writing and praying until darkness fell to signal the end of the day.

Other chores included caring for the sick, the needy and any pilgrims visiting at the time.

Clothes were to be animal skins apart from those textile ones worn for church services. All the property of the church was held in common and this was how land was owned within Wales at that time for those at the bottom rung of society. These people were known as the “Unfree,” “The Bondmen” or the **Taeogion** in Welsh.

It was customary for the family of a man entering monastic orders to make gifts of land to the monastery that he was joining. However David did not accept gifts from families when new recruits proved awkward or demanding as novices.

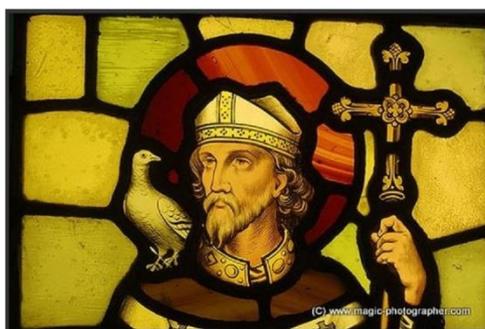
Pilgrimages were a key part of David's life and he was drawn to the great and holy shrines across Christendom. He is said to have visited both Rome and the Holy Land. During his lifetime the Holy Land was ruled by the Byzantine Christians and not the Arab Muslims. Visiting the Christian holy sites would have been far easier for David than for later pilgrims. Christians found it far harder to visit the Holy Land following the fall of Jerusalem to the Muslims in 638AD and of course later in 1187AD when the Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem

was conquered by Saladin, following the crushing defeat of the crusader army at the Battle of Hattin that same year.

David's pilgrimage to Jerusalem was under the guidance of an angel and he was accompanied by two other Welsh saints Teilo and Padarn. Saint David was granted the gift of tongues for the journey and became the interpreter for the rest of his travelling party. At Jerusalem the group was received by the Christian leaders of the city and David was consecrated as an archbishop by the Patriarch of Jerusalem. David and his two key companions were given the same four gifts. These being a bell, a staff, a tunic woven with gold and an altar.

In around 545AD David was made first among the bishops of Wales. The ceremony took place at Llanddewi Brefi. On the way to this meeting David is alleged to have performed one of his greatest miracles by restoring a widow's dead child back to life. A spring, Ffynnon Ddewi near to the church at Llanddewi marks this spot.

When David arrived at the meeting he placed his handkerchief or shroud (*The Latin word used has more than one meaning*) on the floor to speak. A mound rose from beneath him and a snow-white dove rested on his shoulder. The dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit and David is often depicted with a dove resting on him thus.



From this point onwards David's fame and reputation grew dramatically. Another story told about him is that he heard a nightingale singing so beautifully one night that it distracted him from his prayers. David then prayed that the bird might never be heard within his diocese every again.

David acquired many of the aspects associated with earlier Celtic heroes and gods. This includes an alleged lifespan of 147 years. However it has been accepted that he died in 589 but we do not know his exact birth year and therefore cannot calculate his actual age at death.

His last words to his grieving followers were "Do little things that you have heard and seen through me."

On Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> March the monastery where he died was said to be filled with angels as his soul was received by Christ our redeemer. Saint David's body was buried within his own monastery and his remains are believed to have been preserved in the west wall of the Chapel of the Holy Trinity.

They were placed in a niche behind the high altar of the cathedral behind a cast-iron grille in a wooden casket. The casket contains a reliquary given by the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1925. This contains the bones of two men, one short and one tall. It is assumed that the bones of the taller man belong to Saint David. The shorter man's remains

are assumed to be those of Saint Stinan who was David's friend and confessor. The bones could also be that of a third saint, Caradog, who was an 11<sup>th</sup> century hermit and whose tomb is also in the cathedral.

The relics of Saint David were then preserved by the Celtic Church and include his hand bell, a copy of the Gospel of Saint John written by David himself and his staff and his robe. His body would have remained where it was laid as the veneration of saints' bones was something that did not become popular until the late 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, when this Norman tradition became more popularised as a result of the invasions of Wales by the Norman Marcher Lords.

At various points after his death his relics and remains have been the subject of dispute and conjecture. In the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries Saint David's suffered from Viking raids and David's tomb was neglected and overgrown. Also in the 10<sup>th</sup> century the church at Glastonbury claimed to possess David's relics.

In 1081 AD the Welsh rulers Rhys ap Tewdwr (King of Deheubarth in South-West Wales) and Gruffudd ap Cynan (King of Gwynedd from 1081) both swore an oath of friendship on the relics of the saint. This was just before they fought and won the Battle of Mynydd Carn against their combined Welsh and Norman enemies. In 1089AD this shrine was stolen and plundered. The monks of Glastonbury again claimed that they had possession of the relics of Saint David.

In the following century the site of David's grave seems to have passed from memory because Bishop Bernard (1115 - 1146AD) the first Norman bishop of Menevia was unsuccessful in his attempt to locate David's remains.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Prior of Ewenni claimed he was told in a dream to search for David's remains near the south porch of the cathedral. Excavations shortly after were conducted according to the Prior's exact instructions and this work revealed David's body at the exact location described by the Prior.

In 1275 a new shrine was built to Saint David by Bishop Richard de Carew (Bishop at Saint David's 1256AD - 1280AD). The shrine included a *feretrum* or receptacle to display David's remains. A canopy was used to cover the shrine and it was decorated with painted figures of Saint David, Saint Patrick and Saint Denis.



Saint David's Cathedral

The Shrine of Saint David prior to its reconstruction in the early twenty-first century.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century and as a result of Henry VIII's split with Rome and then his Dissolution of the Monasteries items were seized from Saint David's by Bishop Barlow who was the cathedral bishop at that time. The items included two heads with silver plate enclosing two rotten skulls, arm bones and a worm-eaten book with silver plate. It is not known what finally became of these treasures or if they belonged to Saint David or not.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Sir Gilbert Scott carried out significant restoration work on the Cathedral and in 1866 building work uncovered the recess in the west wall of the Chapel of the Holy Trinity. This led to bones being discovered embedded in the old mortar on the sill. The care taken in concealing these bones has led some people to believe that are the remains of Saint David, Saint Stinan and may be even Saint Caradoc.

Saint David gave his life to God and to humanity. He gave his name to the smallest city in Britain. He left his legend to his homeland and became the patron saint of Wales for his countrymen. His final words were recorded as "Brothers and sisters be cheerful and keep your faith and belief and do the little things that you have heard and seen through me."

If only some of the stories about him are true it is clear to all who read or hear these accounts that Saint David lived his life in humility and charity and for the benefit of others. That alone means that we as members of the Commemorative Order of Saint Thomas of Acon should always cherish his memory.

The members of the Commemorative Order of Saint Thomas of Acon in the county of Pembrokeshire West Wales have their "Chapel" based in Fishguard. Given the unique location of this branch of our Commemorative Order and because Saint David is so closely linked with the history and religious affairs in this part of our province; the founding members rightly and appropriately named their Chapel after Saint David the patron saint of Wales.