

EWENNY PRIORY AND CHURCH

History

The first religious building on the site probably dates from before the Norman Conquest as some Early Christian Monuments of the 10th and 11th centuries have been found near Ewenny.

An indication of the date the church was founded is given in a letter written by the Abbot of Gloucester in 1145. He says a church was built at Ewenny by William de Londres who held Ogmores Castle from 1116 to c. 1130. William is said to have given the church to the monks of Gloucester Abbey and the Abbey's Chronicle for 1141 says that his son, Maurice, gave the churches at Ewenny and St. Bride's Major plus the chapel at Ogmores to the Abbey for them to set up a monastic house. As we know the Abbey already had the churches, Maurice must have confirmed the gift and perhaps granted money to set up the priory for a prior and twelve monks.

The de Londres family continued to aid Ewenny and the church became their burial place, until the direct line of succession ended in 1274. The priory continued as a branch of Gloucester Abbey until Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in the 1530's. The priory's property was then granted to Sir Edward Carne and held by the family until it died out in 1700. It then passed to the Turbeville family and from them to Colonel Picton Warlow who took the name Turbeville and the house is still owned by a Picton-Turbeville.

The nave of the priory church seems to have always been used as the local parish church and it continues in this role today though the rest of the priory's remains were handed over into Government care in 1949.

The Buildings

The church and priory buildings lay within a walled enclosure much of which can still be seen. The walls were built at varying dates and parts have walkways and battlements. These were chiefly to impress visitors, as the east side was most likely to be attacked and this has a simple, unfortified wall. This east wall and the south-east tower are probably the oldest part of the defences. They can be seen, at a distance, across the private garden from the door in the south presbytery wall.

The north gate dates from the 12th century with 13th century alterations and can be seen from the road leading to the church. Like the south gate it had a portcullis but the south gate has had more alterations as it was used as a summerhouse in the 19th century. The walls can be followed from the north to the south gate and the late medieval priory barn can also still be seen.

The oldest part of the church is the 12th century nave, though little of the original can still be seen. At first, it probably had a low wooden roof and no central tower. The chevron patterning inside probably indicates the line of the earliest roof. When the roof was raised, the style of architecture, Romanesque, suggests it was done in the late 12th century. The large round windows in the nave are of a similar date - note how those on the south side are higher than on the north to avoid the cloister roof. The rectangular window at the east end of the south wall added in the 16th century to make the parish church lighter. The font at the west end is on a modern base but the bowl dates from the 12th century.

The lower part of the western arch beneath the tower was filled with a stone screen wall in the 13th century to separate the parish from the priory church. Behind the screen, note how the tower is carried on four arches and where the line of chevrons have been interrupted in the presbytery to insert corbels when the roof was raised.

In the presbytery, the medieval piscina, where sacred vessels were washed, still remains but under a modern arch. The altar is reconstructed from the original slabs. The lower part of the wooden screen dates from the 16th century, the upper from the 14th. It was probably originally in the nave.

The south transept has two blocked arches which used to open on to two now ruined chapels. These may be seen through the presbytery's south door. The low height of the arches suggest the chapels belong to the early church. When the roof was raised, a room was built over them - the entrance to it can still be seen above the arches. The corner turret with its circular stairway led to a passage to the eastern part of the church. Another passage, lit through the small arches in the transept wall, was put in when the roof was raised to give access to the tower, where the bells are, to the wallwalk behind the south transept battlements and to the space over the presbytery. The roof of the south transept is modern - the line of the old higher roof can still be seen on the outer tower wall.

The north transept and chapels were similar to the south but have been in ruins since 1800. The modern vestry now stands on part of this area. The foundations can still be seen as well as traces on the surviving walls - the roof line and a piscina, for example. Note how the windows here and on the south wall are positioned to give a view of the altar. Such windows are known as hagiocopes.

The Monuments

A collection of the remains of a number of monuments are found in the south transept.

There are five Early Christian Monuments -

- a) an 11th century one with a Maltese cross
- b) an 11th century fragment of a cross base with interlaced design
- c) part of a 10th or 11th century headstone with a double ring round an almost flower-like cross
- d) part of a 10th or 11th century headstone with a roughly-cut square-shaped cross.
- e) similar to the previous one but with a spike at the cross base and dated by its finish to the 12th century, so showing how native styles continued after the Normans arrived.

There are eight medieval monuments -

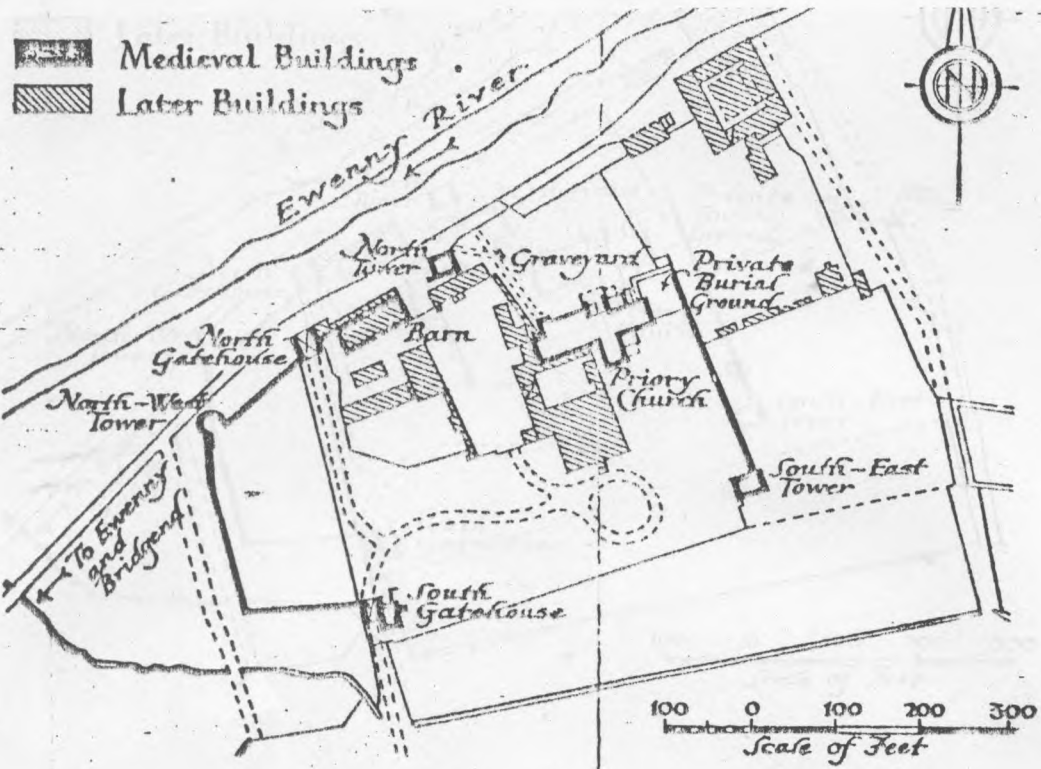
- a) a tapered slab with elaborate cross and decoration. The Old French inscription means "Here lies Maurice de Londres, the Founder. God reward him for his work. Amen". The decoration shows it was set up c. 1200. As Maurice is known to have died before 1170, the tomb was probably set up in the presbytery when the roof was raised.
- b) a fragment of a similar slab with a more elaborate cross of 13th century date, probably from the tomb of the second William de Londres.
- c) a flat slab with the Latin inscription meaning "Here lies William de Londres", probably the third of that name, son of the second.
- d) a slab with a staff and leaf decoration, probably commemorating a 13th century prior.
- e) a tapering slab with a figure of a lady in a long dress. The Old French inscription reads: "Pray for the noble lady, Hawise de Londres. Remember and chant for her soul two Our Fathers". She died in 1274 and was the last de Londres.
- f) broken effigy of a knight in chain mail and surcoat, probably from the 13th century

g) }
h) }
i) } three long slabs set in the floor, each with a cross flanked by two small pillars
mark the graves of three 13th or 14th century monks. One was reused for an
inscription to an Adam Nicholl in 1615.

There are many more recent monuments to members of families associated with Ewenny in the church but one in the south transept is of note. It was set up by Martha to commemorate her husband, Edward Carne who died in 1650 and was later also used for their great-grandson, John, the last Carne at Ewenny, who died in 1700, aged 15.

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EWENNY PRIORY CHURCH

