



Neath: 'The Fairest
Abbey of all Wales'

In the closing years of the eleventh century and the first decades of the twelfth, the Normans under the leadership first of Robert fitz Haimon (d. 1107) and then Robert Consul (d. 1147) extended their control westward across the fertile lands of lowland Glamorgan.

The advent of the Normans brought an influx of new settlers and many of the native Welsh were displaced to the uplands. There, the Welsh lords were left largely undisturbed until the thirteenth century if they acknowledged the Normans' suzerainty. Only the Welsh lords of Afan managed to retain their lands stretching down to the sea in the vicinity of modern-day Port Talbot.

One of the first Norman adventurers to venture beyond the river Neath was Richard de Granville, the constable, or chief military officer, of the lord of Glamorgan, Robert Consul. Granville established a castle on the west bank of the river — its location is still a subject of debate — and, using it as a base, he seized lands up to the river Tawe from the Welsh.

Around 1129, Granville decided to relinquish the lands he had taken from the Welsh and retire to his estates in Devon. With no heir and his wife, Constance, ill, he resolved to give the lands to a religious house, but not St Peter's Gloucester or Tewkesbury Abbey, the traditional Benedictine monasteries favoured by Robert fitz Haimon and the other Norman conquerors of Glamorgan. Granville, instead, decided to grant his land to the Norman abbey of Savigny, on the south-western frontier of Normandy, not far from his likely place of origin.

Vitalis of Mortain established the community at Savigny around 1105, after a decade living as a hermit and wandering preacher. For the monks who gathered around him there, Vitalis wrote a simplified rule of life based on the *Rule of St Benedict* — the dominant template for monastic life in the medieval West. The house became the Abbey of the Holy Trinity of Savigny between 1112 and 1115.

Savigny prospered and began to establish new monasteries first in Normandy and then in Britain and Ireland. The first British house was founded in 1124 at Tulketh in Lancashire by the influential noble, Count Stephen of Boulogne and Mortain. The community would move to Furness in Cumbria three years later and Stephen would become king following the death of Henry I in 1135.

Granville and his wife, Constance, offered a rich endowment to Savigny for the new monastery at Neath. The grant is detailed in the foundation charter that is preserved by the West Glamorgan Archive Service in Swansea. Granville gave the monks 'all the waste' — undeveloped lands — in the area bounded by the rivers Neath, Tawe, Clydach and Pwll Cynan on the Glamorgan coast. It has been estimated that this may have amounted to some 8,000 acres of land.

In addition, he granted the monks the chapel of his castle (no doubt for their services on their first arrival), a mill on the Clydach, half the fishery on the Neath, tithes from the region and other properties, including the village of Nash in the Vale of Glamorgan. The charter is clear that Richard and Constance were making the gift for the 'salvation of the souls of Robert, count of Gloucester and Mabel, his wife the

countess, and William, his son, and for the salvation of our own souls, and those of our ancestors’.

Count Robert took the new community under his patronage and protection and undertook that its abbot would be canonically elected. On 25 October 1130, Abbot Richard and 12 monks arrived from Savigny to begin what would extend to more than 400 years of monastic observance at Neath.

Sometime later, the monks’ holdings were extended by two further grants from Richard of Granville and Constance. We only know of these gifts because they were repeated and confirmed in later documents — a common practice in the middle ages. The monks received Granville’s castle, all of the land between the Neath and the Tawe, the churches of St Cadoc and Cilybebyll and all of the tithes of the area and all of Granville’s fisheries on the Neath and the Tawe.

The establishment of the monastery reinforced the Norman presence in what was still a contested region. Indeed, as late as 1224, Morgan Gam, the Welsh lord of Afan, attacked and burned one of the abbey’s properties, killing four servants, gravely wounding a monk and a lay brother and destroying 400 or more sheep.

Neath would only remain a Savigniac community for 17 years and little is known of its history during that time. The death of Richard, the first abbot, is recorded in 1145, but there is little other early documentary evidence for the abbey’s history. Study of the surviving buildings at the abbey, particularly the south transept, have produced only tantalizing and inconclusive suggestions about the possible character of the early church. Thus far, archaeological excavations have not provided any useful insights.

The congregation of Savigniac monasteries had grown without a strong structure for government and the responsibility for supervising the communities scattered from Normandy to Ireland rested heavily on the abbot of Savigny. In 1147, Abbot Serlo of Savigny found the burden of that responsibility too great. Impressed by the organisation and discipline of the Cistercians, Serlo petitioned them to absorb the Savigniac houses.

The appeal was received favourably and the entire Savigniac congregation of 33 monasteries was absorbed into the expanding Cistercian Order. With many similarities between the Savigniacs and the Cistercians, this was a natural union.

The Cistercians originated in 1098 when Robert of Molesme and a group of monks left the monastery of Molesme to establish a new community at Cîteaux in Burgundy. The pope soon compelled Robert to return to Molesme, but the rest of the group remained at Cîteaux. Like many monastic reformers of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, they believed that monastic observance had grown lax and had departed from the simple model set out in the sixth-century *Rule of St Benedict*. The Cistercians’ goal was to obey the *Rule* ‘in every jot and tittle’.

The Cistercians’ strict interpretation of the *Rule* led them to reject many of the customs and practices that had developed over centuries amongst the Benedictines — known as ‘black monks’ from the colour of their habits. The Cistercians wished to

revive the 'purity of the *Rule*' in matters such as diet and dress. Because of their insistence on wearing undyed woollen habits as a mark of their humility and simplicity, the Cistercians became known as the 'white monks'.

The Cistercians found no authority in the *Rule of St Benedict* for the possession of 'churches or altars, offerings or burial dues, other men's tithes, ovens or mills, villages or peasants' (*Exordium Parvum*), so they renounced these sources of income that traditional Benedictine houses, and, in fact, Savigniac Neath, had accepted from donors without qualm.

They were determined instead to live by the labour of their own hands as prescribed by the *Rule*, and welcomed grants of undeveloped land, unencumbered by tenants and obligations, which they could bring into cultivation. However, the early Cistercians found it difficult to realise this goal while also performing the full round of choral services required of monks. They therefore decided to welcome illiterate laymen into the Order as *conversi* or lay brethren.

While *conversi* were also present in other monastic groups, the Cistercians accorded them particular importance and integrated them into the structure of the Order. 'It was then that they enacted a definition to receive, with their bishop's permission, bearded lay brothers, and to treat them as themselves in life and death — except that they may not become monks — and also hired hands; for without the assistance of these they did not understand how they could fully observe the precepts of the *Rule* day and night.' (*Exordium Parvum*)

The lay brethren took vows of obedience, but they were not bound by the strictures of the *Rule*. They were, therefore, not expected to undertake the liturgical duties of the literate choir monks — they had a simplified 'office' that they learned by rote — leaving them free to work. Moreover, they could leave the monastery to administer and cultivate its lands. The lay brethren were a crucial component of the Cistercian grange economy that developed in the twelfth century. Granges were self-contained agricultural holdings managed by lay brothers to supply the monastery or support it through the sale of surplus.

There were several granges in the immediate vicinity of Neath Abbey, including Cwrt Betws, Tetteberne Grange (Cwrt Herbert) and Cwrt Sart. Others were more distant, including Monkash, the lands granted by Richard de Granville which the Cistercians transformed into a great 800-acre arable grange. The well-preserved central core of Monkash grange covers 20 acres and still preserves the remains of an imposing monastic barn and a dovecote.

While the lay brethren were an integral part of the Cistercian Order, they were largely separated from the monks in their day-to-day activities. Cistercian houses were generally constructed to a standard plan in which the range on the west side of the cloister provided accommodation for the lay brethren. Neath conforms to this pattern and the upper floor of the west range would have been the dormitory, where the lay brothers slept. The west range is the earliest surviving part of the abbey and cannot have been begun much later than 1170.

Although Neath Abbey continued to acquire lands in Glamorgan and Gower, in the estimation of F. G. Cowley, the distinguished historian of monasticism in medieval Wales, 'at the end of the twelfth century the abbey estate was still a collection of comparatively minor holdings offering little prospect of real consolidation'. The 1190s also brought renewed instability in the March after the Lord Rhys, prince of Deheubarth, returned to the offensive after the death of Henry II in 1189. The monks of Neath therefore actively began to consider moving the abbey to Exford, an estate that they held in Somerset. The foundation of the Cistercian abbey of Cleve in 1198, scarcely 16 kilometres (10 miles) from Exford, scotched those plans, and the monks of Neath resolved to consolidate and develop what they had at home.

This decision sowed the seeds for disputes with the neighbouring Cistercian house of Margam Abbey that extended well into the thirteenth century. Margam, which stands just under 13 kilometres (8 miles) to the south-east of Neath Abbey as the crow flies, had been founded by Robert of Gloucester in 1147, the same year that Neath had been absorbed into the Cistercian Order. Located in such proximity, their interests repeatedly clashed. Records attest that Cistercian abbots mediated on some occasions, but Gerald of Wales asserts that in one instance the two houses pursued their feud by using prize horses from their studs to fight as their champions.

The eagerness of the monks of Neath to secure their hold on their estates no doubt accounts for the two confirmations that they secured from King John in 1207 and 1208. They paid the king 100 marks (£66 13s 4d) and a palfrey (a riding horse) for confirmation of their possession of the former site of Richard of Granville's castle and all the land that Granville had granted them between the Neath and the Tawe. In the second charter, the monarch confirmed a succession of grants that the monks had received from a range of patrons beginning with Richard de Granville. King John visited Neath on 21 May 1210 while on his way to Ireland.

In spite of the disputes with Margam and the occasional depredations of the Welsh on their granges, the community at Neath pursued works that eventually saw the buildings on the south and east sides of the cloister rebuilt by the middle of the thirteenth century. What preceded these buildings here at Neath is unknown, but these ranges, along with the cloister, provided the basic setting for the life of the Cistercian monk when they were not engaged in their liturgical duties.

The entire first floor of the east range was the monks' dorter or dormitory, where they slept. It has been calculated that it could have accommodated 80 to 90 brethren, but there is no evidence to indicate that the number of monks at Neath ever reached that number. The dorter was connected to the reredorter, or latrine block, to the east at first floor level via a bridge. The ground floor of the east range contained a number of rooms. At the north end, closest to the church, was the monastery's library. Next to it was the chapter house, where the monks gathered every morning to hear a chapter of the *Rule of St Benedict* read, to conduct the business of the house and to confess their faults. Adjacent to the chapter house was the parlour, where rule of silence observed in the monastery was relaxed and necessary conversation could take place.

A slype, or passageway, ran through the east range providing access to the entrance to the large chamber that occupied the south end of the range. This was probably

the day room, which could be used as a place for monks to perform their regular manual labour or for other purposes. The room, which survives with its vaulted ceiling intact, is one of the finest monastic spaces in Wales and is well known from appearances in a wide range of television programmes including the BBC's *Dr Who*.

Located at the eastern end of the south cloister range was the warming house — the only place in the monastery that a fire was permitted apart from the kitchen or the infirmary. Next to the warming house was the refectory, where the monks ate. Fragmentary column bases remain to show the location of the entrance. Standing between the refectory and the west range would have been the kitchen, in an ideal position to serve both.

The end of the thirteenth century brought with it significant challenges and changes for Neath Abbey. In 1269, the Cistercian General Chapter (the governmental body for the Cistercian Order) was told of the 'frequent and rash audacity of certain lay brothers of Neath'. They had absconded from the house with the horses of the father abbot. The General Chapter threatened excommunication and imprisonment if they did not return, but their fate is unknown. Neath was not the only Welsh Cistercian house to experience disciplinary difficulties with their lay brethren in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries and, by the closing decades of the thirteenth century, recruitment to the lay brotherhood was in widespread decline.

Adam of Carmarthen became abbot of Neath around 1266 and would have had to address these issues. These were by no means Adam's only concerns, for during his time as abbot the rebuilding of the abbey church was begun around 1280. Apart from a few suggestive alignments of masonry in the south transept and some other tantalizing suggestions, there is no evidence for the earlier church that had probably been erected in the Romanesque architectural style of the twelfth century. The new church was raised in the Decorated Gothic style of the late thirteenth century, marked by large windows and sophisticated window tracery.

In December 1284, King Edward I visited the abbey. A chronicle records that 'he entered the abbey and gave to Abbot Adam a most beautiful baldachin.' A baldachin was an altar canopy. While the king's gift was undoubtedly welcome and brought with it great prestige, it would not have helped the monks to meet what must have been the considerable costs of building their new church.

The community's concerns over the financial demands of the ongoing construction project may explain, in part, the agreement that Adam of Carmarthen made with Gilbert de Clare, Lord of Glamorgan on 13 April 1289. Adam ceded extensive holdings to Gilbert including all of the abbey's lands and tenements in Briton Ferry, the land lying between Kilvey Hill and the river Neath and the mountain land between the Neath and Tawe rivers. The monks retained, however, all of their fisheries and weirs between the abbey and the sea. In exchange for these extensive concessions, Gilbert de Clare granted to Adam and the monks of Neath £100 of rents annually from properties in the burghs of Neath, Cowbridge, Cardiff and Caerleon and from the manors of Llaniltud Fawr and Llanblethian.

This agreement represented a departure from the ideals of the early Cistercians, who had rejected rents and other income derived from the work of others, and

marked Neath Abbey's first recorded move away from the grange economy. Gilbert de Clare, eager to gain more effective control over the upland territories, may have placed pressure on the monks to agree to the exchange. Abbot Adam may not have been entirely reluctant to accept the arrangement. We know that he had experienced difficulties with some of his lay brothers and the abbey may also have had troubled relations with a few of its lay neighbours, so he may have welcomed the prospect of relinquishing the lands in return for the promise of a reliable income.

The likelihood of some linkage between the exchange and the ongoing building work on the abbey church is increased by the fact that Gilbert de Clare made another grant to the monks on the same day. He allowed them to take all the timber necessary from his woods in Glyntawe, Glynneath and Glyndulais for the erection of the monastery and the houses within it and for reasonable maintenance of the same and for the grange of Tetteberne (Cwrt Herbert) and the sheepfold of the grange, lying near to abbey, between the abbey and his castle of Neath.

Just two years after the exchange with Gilbert de Clare, the abbey's annual income was assessed at well over £230; Margam was the only monastic house in south Wales with a higher income. In addition to its recently acquired urban interests, Neath had an arable estate of more than 5,000 acres, almost 5,000 sheep and around 200 cattle.

The abbey's estates and possessions in Glamorgan suffered serious damage during a Welsh uprising that followed the death of the young Earl Gilbert de Clare at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. These disturbances may have contributed to Neath's continuing abandonment of the grange economy. In 1322, the grange of Exford, in Somerset, was leased for the first time.

The abbey church was completed around 1330. Around ten years later, an elaborate tile pavement was laid in the eastern limbs of the church. The inlaid tiles were decorated with heraldic arms, tracery patterns, hunting scenes and images of knights in combat. The prominence given to tiles bearing the Montagu and Despenser arms prompted J. M. Lewis to suggest that the pavement's donor may have been Elizabeth Montagu, who held Neath in dower and wed Hugh Despenser between 1338 and 1341. Extensive sections of the pavement remained in situ until the late 1980s, when they were lifted and moved into the monastic day room to protect them from weathering and damage.

The massive social changes occasioned by the devastating mortality caused by the Black Death (1348–50) and subsequent outbreaks of plague in the fourteenth century effectively brought an end to the Cistercian lay brotherhood. The nave, where the lay brethren had performed their devotions, probably now provided space for additional altars and other liturgical functions.

Further trials were to come in the early fifteenth century. The house suffered in the turbulent conditions created by the uprising of Owain Glyndŵr and its aftermath. In 1423, Pope Martin V issued a papal bull authorising the abbot of Margam to excommunicate unknown individuals if they failed to restore books, chalices, ecclesiastical ornaments and other goods that they had despoiled from Neath Abbey.

Although the ensuing years were not without upheavals, the abbacy of Thomas Franklin (1424–41) initiated a period of renewal at Neath Abbey. He later became abbot of Margam (1441–60) and a dispensation of Pope Eugenius IV in 1445 recognised that he had ‘repaired and restored [both monasteries] alike in the number of their monks and ministers and divine worship, and in their possessions.’ In 1468, Richard Neville, earl of Warwick and lord of Glamorgan, issued an important charter confirming the abbey’s possessions.

A new programme of building may reflect the restored stability of the abbey by the end of the fifteenth century. One of Neath’s last abbots built a new block of lodgings for himself incorporating the southern ends of the monastic refectory, dormitory and reredorter. Although early Cistercian abbots slept in the monastic dormitory in accordance with the *Rule of St Benedict*, separate accommodation for abbots, who were often figures of considerable importance locally and beyond, became commonplace from the thirteenth century. The abbot’s appropriation of sections of Neath’s monastic accommodation may indicate that the buildings had already fallen into disuse as the number of monks dwindled.

Neath’s last abbot, Leyshon Thomas, who assumed office around 1510, would watch the storm clouds of the Reformation gather from the comfortable rooms of the abbot’s lodging. He was an Oxford graduate and a figure of importance in the wider Cistercian Order; in 1532, for instance, he was one of five abbots appointed to visit Cistercian houses in England and Wales.

An awdl written by Lewys Morgannwg (the bardic name of Llywelyn ap Rhisiart) celebrates the hospitality of Abbot Leyshon and the splendour of Neath in the early sixteenth century. The poem is, of course, a work of art and not strictly a historical source, but it powerfully evokes the monastery in the decades immediately before its suppression.

Lewys Morgannwg’s verse reveals that, over four centuries after the foundation of Cîteaux, the Cistercians had departed from their early ideals of austerity in ecclesiastical art and architecture.

Here ... is the gold-adorned choir, the nave, the gilded tabernacle-work, the pinnacles, worthy of the Three Fountains. Distinctly may be seen on the glass, imperial arms; a ceiling resplendent with kingly bearings, and on the surrounding border the shields of princes; the arms of Neath, of a hundred ages; there is the white freestone and the arms of the best men under the crown of Harry; the church walls of grey marble.

The vast and lofty roof is like the sparkling heavens on high, above are seen archangels’ forms; the floor beneath is for the people of earth, all the tribes of Babel, for them it is wrought of variegated stone. The bells, the benedictions, and the peaceful songs of praise proclaim the frequent thanksgivings of the White Monks.

(George Grant Francis, Original Charters and Materials for a History of Neath and its Abbey, with illustrations)

The poem also indicates that Lewys had enjoyed the bounty of Abbot Leyshon’s table and no doubt hoped to sample it again.

Here are the flowing streams of the grape; the animation of the multitudes; the three colours of wine, and the ready service: the abode of evening conviviality, as in the dwelling of kings for the congregated hosts. ... In this compact retreat will be found the warmth of hospitality and welcome banquets, and deer from the parks of yonder hill above, and salmon from the ocean, and wheat and every kind of wine — these from the bounteous land and sea.

The poem also suggests that in the early sixteen century Neath was celebrated for its learning (though the assertion that Neath was a university should not be taken at face value):

The university of Neath, lo! It is the admiration of England; the lamp of France and Ireland; a school greatly resorted to by scholars, for every science, as if it were Sion itself. With organs for the men attired in white, and great applause for contending disputants; arithmetic, music, logic, rhetoric, civil and canon law.

The knowledge that the storm of the Reformation would overwhelm Neath, like every other monastery in Britain, just a few short decades later lends a certain poignancy to Lewis Morgannwg's lines.

In March 1536, Parliament passed the first Act of Suppression decreeing that all monasteries with a revenue of a clear yearly value of less than £200 should be surrendered to the king. According to the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* — the 1535 valuation of the church's revenues commissioned by King Henry VIII's chief minister, Thomas Cromwell — Neath Abbey fell well below that threshold with an assessment of just over £132.

However, monastic life did not come to end at Neath in 1536, like it did at so many other monastic houses across England and Wales. Abbot Leyshon Thomas paid the Crown the substantial sum of £150 to secure the monastery's survival. It was evidently around this time that the Tudor antiquary, John Leland, visited the house. He would later record that Neath 'semid to me the fairest abbay of al Wales.'

Ultimately, Leyshon Thomas's efforts to preserve monastic life at Neath came to naught. On 9 February 1539, the abbot and the last 7 monks at Neath surrendered all of the community's possessions into the hands of the Henry VIII's commissioners. Neath Abbey was one of the last great Welsh houses to succumb to Thomas Cromwell's design to suppress the monasteries across England and Wales.

Leyshon Thomas received an annual pension of £40 and the rectory of Cadoxton. The monks were granted pensions that ranged in value from £3 6s 8d to £4. The valuable contents of the monastery — its plate, jewels, fine textiles and any other treasures — would have been carted away to the king's treasury. The proceeds from the sale of goods that could not be easily transported would likewise have flowed into the royal coffers. The lead was stripped from the roof of the abbey, but as late as 1547 two fothers (nearly two tons) remained. Four bells from Neath were sent to Bristol, after their purchase by a London grocer, John Coore.

The monastery and the greater part of its estate would eventually pass into the hands of Richard Williams, who, according to John Leland, had been born in the Glamorgan parish of Llanishen. He was the son of a Putney brewer of Welsh origin, Morgan Williams, and Catherine Cromwell, the sister of Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's chief minister and the architect of the suppression of the monasteries. Richard faithfully served his uncle from 1530 and took his name, so he often appears in the records as Richard Cromwell or Richard Williams alias Cromwell.

Richard Williams alias Cromwell took an active part in the visitation and suppression of monastic houses in 1536 and he acquired a number of monastic properties. Knighted in 1537, he established his principal seat at Hinchinbroke in Huntingdonshire, the site of a former Benedictine nunnery.