



South elevation of St Mary's, Kenderchurch.

## Church in Focus: St Mary's, Kenderchurch, Herefordshire

**Tim Bridges** is a Conservation Adviser for the Victorian Society, member of Hereford DAC and trustee of the Herefordshire Historic Churches Trust.

The visitor's first glimpse of St Mary's from the busy road between Hereford and Abergavenny is of the small church on a hilltop behind the extensive Pontrilas Sawmills. The backdrop of the higher Black Mountains tells of the proximity to the border with Wales, and this part of Herefordshire was Welsh-speaking for much of its history. Indeed, in the pre-conquest period churches here were administered from Llandaff, before the area was absorbed into Hereford Diocese, as it remains today.

The earliest reference to Kenderchurch seems to be as Lann Cruc, of which 'cruc' means tumulus, suggesting a pre-Christian significance to the site. However, Kenderchurch is apparently a translation of Llangynidr or Lanncinitir, being a reference to a Welsh saint called Cynidr, whose feast day is 8 December and who may have founded a church at Kenderchurch in the 6th century. Cynidr seems to have been a grandson of Brychan Brecheiniog, the legendary 5th-century King of Brecon. Little is known of Cynidr, though he may have been a bishop whose seat at Kenderchurch would make the church site an important one from the 6th century. Whilst there are several churches dedicated to Cynidr around Glasbury in Breconshire, where he is believed to be buried, the only other reference to him in Herefordshire is to a hermitage said to have been founded by him on an island in the River Wye at Winforton. However, a further early mention of Kenderchurch comes in the Book of Llandaff, where Lanncinitir is referred to as a place where the 11th-century Bishop Herewald consecrated the church and appointed the priest. Whilst the hilltop site with its near circular churchyard exudes antiquity, little remains above ground from these mysterious times, although in the churchyard there is a poorly preserved slab incised with a cross, which may well date to Herewald's time.

The present church building dedicated to St Mary has been rebuilt at least twice in its history. When William Gladstone's brother-in-law, Sir Stephen Glynne, visited Kenderchurch in 1867 on his travels along the Welsh Border, he described the medieval church as 'only a nave and chancel with the outer walls whitewashed' and in poor condition. However, Glynne noted features such as a Norman tympanum and Perpendicular east window, which were lost when the church was rebuilt just four years later. This thorough Victorian reconstruction was conducted by a Hereford architect, William Chick, who rebuilt several medieval Herefordshire churches, including Stretton Sugwas and Little Birch.





Plate 1: View from the chancel.

Plate 2: East window (1881), possibly by Clayton and Bell.



Plate 3: Zigzag rim on the Norman font bowl.

At these churches he retained earlier features, though at Kenderchurch it is unclear why the carved Norman tympanum did not survive. Was it an example of the Herefordshire School of Sculpture – as Kenderchurch is midway between the churches with famous carvings at Rowlestone and Kilpeck? In Chick's church, which comprises nave and chancel presumably on the earlier foundations, there is a prominent bellcote rather than the previous timber belfry, along with a south porch and north vestry. Earlier fabric includes two Tudor windows and the south doorway in the nave, the fine early 16th-century chancel roof with its castellated wall plate and carved bosses (plate 1), the piscina and the stoup in the porch.

Most interior fittings date to Chick's time, whilst the east window has stained glass dated 1881, probably by Clayton and Bell (plate 2). However, the font is Norman, with a carved zigzag around the bowl (plate 3), and the pulpit woodwork is 17th century with characteristic decorative blank arches. This is likely to be from a three-decker pulpit, of which a fine example exists nearby at Clodock. A 17th-century altar table and chest also remain. The medieval rood screen, altered in the 17th century, was rebuilt by Chick, who retained parts of the coving, posts and the bressumer with green men and carved vine ornament of unique design (plate 4), but the loft has been lost. A 13th-century stone coffin lid incised with a cross also survives in the nave (plate 5), whilst reset in the vestry there is an 18th-century memorial tablet to William Pytts and his son. The bell dates to about 1500.

The churchyard remains in use and is not vested in the Friends. Some fine Georgian headstones stand amongst more modern graves. The 15th-century



Plate 4: Carved medieval rood screen, rebuilt in the 19th century.  
Opposite: Plate 5: A 13th-century coffin lid hangs above the font.

churchyard cross base has a recess, for placing the host on feast day processions in the medieval church calendar, although the cross shaft and head date to 1896.

My first visit to Kenderchurch was in 2012 as Church Buildings Support Officer for Hereford Diocese, when a new use and future was being sought for the church. It seemed a sad place then, abandoned and forgotten next to the 21st-century main road and sawmills. How wonderful that the church should now be preserved by the Friends for generations to come. A visitor's final glimpse might be looking down from the road behind the church on the way to the great monastic church at Dore Abbey, where St Mary's appears below on its hill bearing witness to the long history of Kenderchurch.

\*\*\*

We are delighted that St Mary's, Kenderchurch was finally vested with us in February. We are currently carrying out surveys and developing a plan for repairs, with a view to starting on site in 2025.

### References:

- D M Annett; *Saints in Herefordshire* (1999)  
 Alan Brooks and Nikolaus Pevsner; *The Buildings of England, Herefordshire* (2012)  
 Leominster History Study Group (ed); *The Early Church in Herefordshire* (2001)  
 John Leonard (ed); *Herefordshire Churches through Victorian Eyes* (2006)  
 Robert Scourfield and John Haslam; *The Buildings of Wales, Powys* (2013)  
 Michael Tavinor; *Saints and Sinners of the Marches* (2012)  
 Richard Wheeler; *The Medieval Church Screens of the Southern Marches* (2006)  
 Sarah and John Zaluckyj; *The Celtic Christian Sites of the Central and Southern Marches* (2006)  
*Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, volume 10 The West Midlands (with thanks to Richard Halsey)



