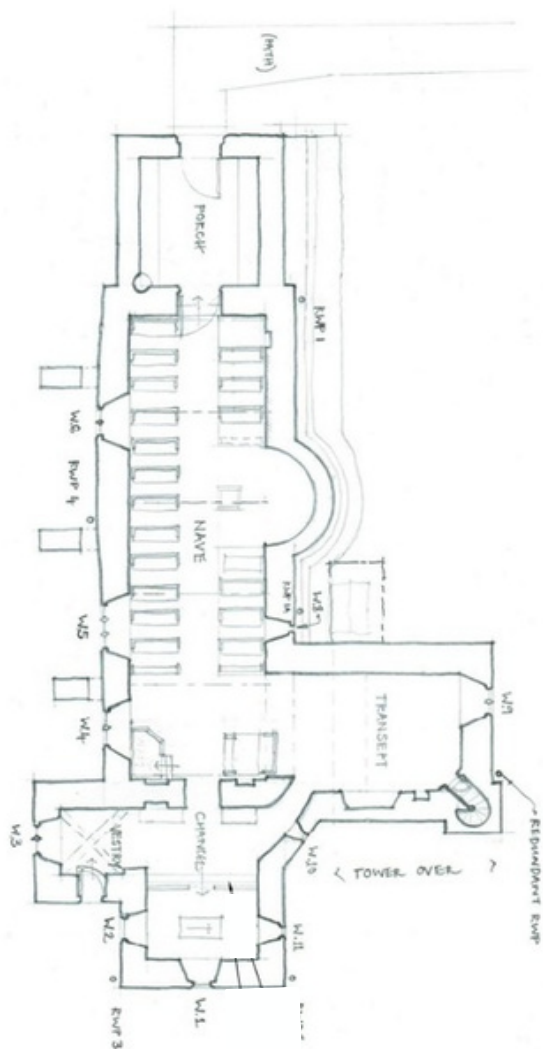


 **FRIENDS OF FRIENDLESS CHURCHES** 



Rescuing
St Lawrence's, Gumfreston, Pembrokeshire



Floor plan

Sketched by church architect, Andrew Faulkner

St Lawrence's, Gumfreston

A mile and a bit from Tenby, stands a church that has been healing people for the best part of a thousand years. Three holy wells gurgle in its churchyard, each thought to cure a different ailment. For centuries, the sick have travelled to this place and returned home, they hoped, a little mended.

And then the healer fell ill.

By 2023, St Lawrence's was almost past curing. Swallowed by ivy, shedding slates, fungi blooming on the timbers. A church that had cared for others for a thousand years had no one to care for it.

This is the story of how it was healed
and restored to life.





Gumfreston's gurgling wells

What came first

... the wells or a church?

This is a question we are asked a lot and, of course, no one knows for certain. Popular opinion, supported by *Source*, The Holy Wells Journal, however, is that the three springs would have carried spiritual significance for early Christians in Wales, with the divine associations of water with rituals and the baptism. The journal suggests that a holy man or woman settled close to the springs, perhaps used the waters for baptism, and latterly a church was built close to the watery site.

Now, the church forms a historically important group with the three holy wells in the south of the churchyard. Each well is believed to offer a different cure. The top well is believed to be pure spring water and held to cure problems with legs. The middle well has chalybeate rich waters, as evidenced by the rusty crust lining the walls, and was believed to offer a remedy for issues with hands and arms. The lower well was thought to have sulphurous waters and could cure issues with eyes.

All this, coupled with the ability of the church to cure your soul, means Gumfreston in the Middle Ages really was the one-stop shop for all your healing needs.

But the appeal of the waters of Gumfreston endured far beyond the Middle Ages. In *Age of Reason*, Dr David Davies from Carmarthenshire, physician to William IV, analysed the well waters at Gumfreston and found them to be rich in iron and ‘as good as the water in the wells at Tunbridge [Kent]’. In the 19th century Dr Golding Bird, Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, also analysed the well waters, and praised it as one of the ‘purest hitherto noticed’. His analysis can be found overleaf.

Dr Bird was a native of Tunbridge Wells in Kent, and suffered poor

health. In 1851, rheumatism led him to take an extended holiday in the spa town of Tenby; no doubt this trip was what led to his investigations into the waters at Gurfreston.

Bird's health conditions overtook him just three years later and he died aged 39. The Golding Bird Gold Medal for sanitary science was instituted after his death to commemorate his legacy and encourage others in the pursuit of scientific advancements.

Dr Golding Bird's Report

In consequence of the shallowness of the basin, this water is apt to vary in composition after heavy rains, from its undergoing dilution; this however applies nearly exclusively to the *solid ingredients*, as the evolution of carbonic acid gas from the subjacent strata is so considerable that the water is, under all circumstances, *saturated* with the gas, so as to sparkle vividly in a glass, and undergo violent ebullition when placed on the air-pump and very slightly exhausted.

This water is remarkable for its singular purity, the quantity of the *saline ingredients* being exceedingly small. An imperial gallon contains but five grains of lime, part of which exists as carbonate, and is held in solution by an excess of carbonic acid. The exceeding minute quantity of sulphuric acid is remarkable, less being present than in the purest river water. The quantity of oxide of iron is about 2.4 grains in each gallon.

The Gurfreston water is, however, one of the *purest luthero noticed*, and owes its medical properties to the iron, and to the large quantity of the carbonic acid it contains. This extreme freedom from saline ingredients (the presence of which constitutes the *hardness* of water) would render this water of great value to those patients who cannot bear the ordinary chalybeate waters.

The Gurfreston water resembles that of Malvern in its purity, and of Tunbridge Wells in the quantity of iron it contains, exceeding all other chalybeate waters in Great Britain in the large quantity of carbonic acid held in solution.

In cases of chlorosis, and other forms of deficiency of red blood in the system, this water would be invaluable.

[Quoted in Samuel C. Hall & Anna M. Hall, *The Book of South Wales, the Wye, and the Coast*, first pub. London 1861, republished EP Pub. Ltd 1977. Gurfreston is described pp. 442-7, illustration of the well p. 446.]



Dr Golding Bird

This article is reprinted from

SOURCE

The HOLY WELLS Journal

A quarterly magazine devoted to the appreciation, study, history and conservation of holy wells throughout the British Isles.



A lost way of life

The community that created St Lawrence's

*An extract from an article by the late Professor John Morgan-Guy,
formerly Trustee of the FoFC*

Today St Lawrence's serves no nucleated community. The cottages which once surrounded the church are no more, other than the ruin of one used until c.1845 as a school. Only Gumfreston Farm and the 1873 former Rectory remain. No wonder the church declined.

St Lawrence's is, however, a large and complex building. Its history spans the 13th to the 15th centuries, reaching its final form sometime in the latter, as the 1869 restoration by T G Jackson was light touch. By then, Tenby was re-awakening from long decline, especially after 1863 when the railway arrived and turned a genteel resort into a popular destination. St Lawrence's, only a mile and a half away, became a picturesque 'must-see' for Victorian visitors.

The history of Gumfreston church takes us back to a now almost forgotten way of life in this corner of Pembrokeshire.

Tenby was, and still is, a walled town dominated by its castle, the remains of which now house the museum. The late 13th-century walls protected it from the landward side, though it remained vulnerable from the sea. Its prosperity relied on seaborne trade, supported by a small anthracite coalfield. Tenby Roads opened onto Carmarthen Bay and the Bristol Channel, leaving ships exposed to pirates from Lundy Island and the Holms.

Like Haverfordwest, it depended on trade, and Haverfordwest's rise in the 16th century coincided with Tenby's decline. Both ports traded internationally in corn, wool, hides, salt, fish, soap, cheese and wine. The Port Books of Haverfordwest record imports of

19,000 fish from Newfoundland in 1566. Valuable goods required secure storage before sale or onward transport to destinations such as Bristol or the continent. Undercrofts near Haverfordwest quays survive as evidence of this trade.

David Glennerster noted similar storage buildings along the River Ritec. Today a quiet stream, it was once tidal as far as Gumfreston, flooding the surrounding land. Even now, maps show boggy ground and saltings, reminders of conditions before 1811, when Sir John Owen began building the embankment along Tenby's South Beach to reclaim land. Though partially successful, the Ritec ceased to be tidal and Owen's efforts contributed to his bankruptcy in 1841.

We must look beyond these 19th-century changes to when the Ritec was tidal. At the right tides, goods could be transported from Tenby harbour to storehouses near Gumfreston. Merchants used small boats to move goods upriver, storing them safely in undercrofts, with living quarters above for stewards or foremen. Here goods were secure from attack until needed, then returned to Tenby for sale or shipment.

Merchants themselves lived in Tenby, in houses such as the Tudor Merchant's House on Quay Hill.

It was members of this community who built storehouses at Gumfreston and likely financed the building or expansion of St Lawrence's on higher ground, safe from flooding, to serve the families of their workers.

In the 17th century, Tenby declined as a port. By the late 18th century, Sir Joseph Banks described it as 'the most complete ruin.' The decline of the Ritec storehouses echoed this. They became barns or fell into decay. Today, St Lawrence's is all that remains of this once flourishing but forgotten way of life.



A potted history

St Lawrence's nestles into a clearing in a small woodland at the bottom of a short narrow lane. The thick trees engulf the lane in shade, but during the first half of the year the woodland floor glows with winter aconite, their golden petals breaking through the mud.

The church's origins lie in the late 12th century, and the building embodies successive phases of development from the 13th to the 15th centuries.

The earliest surviving elements appear to be the chancel and possibly the nave, both dating from the 12th or early 13th century. During the 13th and 14th centuries, the church was expanded to its current arrangement, including the vaulted south chapel. By the 15th century, the church acquired its most visually dominant feature: a tall tower in the tapering style typical to Pembrokeshire. This tower, substantial in scale compared to the modest body of the church, reflects the prosperity of the area during the later medieval period, likely linked to the mercantile wealth of nearby Tenby.

One of the most significant aspects of St Lawrence's is the survival of its medieval wall paintings. Fragments discovered on the nave walls point to a richly decorated interior in the Middle Ages. These paintings, along with blocked openings, squints, and recesses, give the building an unusually complex and layered interior character.

The church underwent restoration in 1869 under the architect T G Jackson, a significant figure of the Gothic Revival. Unlike many Victorian restorations, Jackson's intervention was notably conservative: he stabilised the structure, added buttressing, and installed a new roof, but avoided drastic alteration or "improvement." As a result, St Lawrence's remains a small rural medieval church, with its accretion of historical phases still legible.

Closure



St Lawrence's closed in 2021

On this sign, pinned to the south door of the church, someone has written
'Please re-open'

Buying Time

Between 2021 and 2023, we organised working parties and applied whatever grants we could obtain to patching the church, to buy some time until the day St Lawrence's ship would come in...



Libby, Amy and Lucy get to grips with the ivy



Rachel digging out the north drainage channel

Church vs Ivy

Persistent and pernicious, the ivy that cloaked St Lawrence's got everywhere. It wound around roof timbers, jacking open the stonework. A fir tree was growing out of the side of the tapering tower, evicting the birds that had made the dovecote their home. The roof was shedding slates faster than the trees shed their leaves, the downpipes were clogged solid, and a perimeter drain lay hidden beneath more than a metre of sludge - compacted vegetal matter, plastic flowers, and a shard of rusting gutter, dug out by hand.

None of this was good news for any building. For one whose story reaches back nine hundred years, it was close to fatal — and there was so much to lose. The cavernous east end is pure magic: the walls arch up and peel away, the light catching in corners and niches and squinches. All of this, all nine hundred years of it, was slowly being reclaimed by ivy and water.

By January 2023, it was worse than ever. The breath of abandonment hung in the air. Water had pooled and ponded on the floor. Wet rot bit into the timber furnishings, and fungi bloomed bright and frilly on the roof timbers. It was a scene of melancholy and awe.

By 2023, we had already done whatever we could to buy the building time - patching, propping, clearing drains by hand - alongside architect Andrew Faulkner, a native of Tenby who has known St Lawrence's most of his life, and stonemason Thomas Alun Kinghorn-Evans, who has a way with old lime and older stone.

We are a small charity. There was no cavalry coming to help us.

The repairs could, in theory, be phased over a decade. But the scaffolding alone is deceptively expensive. It costs a fortune to put it up and take it down. Far better, if we possibly could, to do it properly and only once. The bill for doing it in one go was £600,000 – a daunting number for a charity with, at that time, just one and a half members of staff.

We would look at that number and wonder, honestly, whether this was the one we'd have to let go. You can't save them all; we know that. But standing in that dripping chancel, with the bat droppings collecting on a floor where the timber was turning to mush, none of us wanted St Lawrence's to be the one we walked away from.

What we needed was a stroke of luck.

We applied to the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF), the self-styled "funder of last resort", and made our case as hard as we knew how.

And luck was on our side. The NHMF backed us, and their grant was followed by: Cadw's Heritage at Risk scheme; the Pilgrim Trust, a generous supporter who left the church a legacy in their will and our wider membership, who rallied for St Lawrence's.

At last, we could begin.



Before we started



Before we started

Against the odds

This report came from the pen of our Director, Rachel Morley, in May 2024, after the grants had been awarded. The scaffolding was up, the roofs were coming off.

Day by day, against the odds, the venerable church of St Lawrence is emerging from the stranglehold of decay.

I can't quite believe the transformation that is taking place at St Lawrence's. Twelve months ago, we still didn't have a grant for the repairs secured, the church was choked by ivy, the pews rotting in pools of rainwater, and we had grave concerns about the dilapidated roofs surviving another winter.

In 2023, a grant from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF), truly a lifeline, turned everything around. It covered 74% of the costs. This was followed by a grant of £212,932 from Cadw's Heritage at Risk scheme which closed the funding gap further. No time was wasted in getting to site. Once ecology licences and local authority permissions were in place, the work was tendered and the contract won by Tree & Sons, a heritage contractor based in Milford Haven. Tree & Sons started work in October 2023, and the first month was spent getting the site ready; that is, organising a welfare cabin and toilets, erecting an access bridge over the churchyard wall, assembling full scaffolding and a temporary roof. Given the persistent wet weather, that temporary roof has proved a life-saver, as it's made it possible to work on the roofs throughout the winter and spring.

Starting from the top: there are three different types of roofs at St Lawrence's. The slate and batten slopes to nave, chancel, transept and vestry; a heavy Red Sandstone roof over the porch, and a metal roof on the tower. The repair of all of these roofs is nearly complete. That means, the structural timbers have been replaced, mended or



strengthened as needed, new battens have been laid, slates relaid, new ridge-tiles cut and bedded, and new flashings installed to provide extra protection at junction points. Seeing as poor old St Lawrence's has been leaking in one way or another for about 200 years, we really want to do the best job possible with the roofs this time, and are taking great care with materials and detailing.

After the roofs, our next priority was the walls. Built of limestone rubble, the walls were packed out with rock-hard cement mortar and snail-creep pointing. This was trapping moisture within the rubble core of the walls, and had to go. The contractors carefully cut out this impervious cement, and repacked deep voids with a hot-mixed lime mortar. They then harled the tower with a hot-mixed lime. This involves a flick of the whisk and flinging mortar at speed onto the wall. This is a traditional technique, but the harling action gets the mortar into all the crevices, and creates a rough-cast finish. At the time of writing, the tower has had three coats of creamy lime-wash. It will get one more before the tower scaffold is dismantled.

We know this change in appearance in the tower will surprise a lot of people, but there is evidence that the tower was historically rendered and white-washed, rather than bare stone, and furthermore, this coating will give the structure another layer of protection against the elements.



Churches never fail to surprise: the 1950s concrete roof on the tower was, we discovered, reinforced with an iron bed-frame!



A message from our Victorian predecessors, hidden high in the gloom of the roof trusses



Dressing slates ready for the new roof



Project team



Glazier Bruce Brockweir installing new windows



Gloriously sticky lime mortar

Glittering like the firmament with stars

Limewash. Even in today's world you would hardly find something more divisive. Some people love it, some people adore the reinstatement of historic finishes... some people think it ruins a building by obscuring masonry, and others think the case for historic lime finishes is a fiction invented by heritage fanatics. We reinstated the lime render and lime wash to the tower and porch at St Lawrence's for technical, rather than aesthetic, reasons.

The following is based on an article by Michael Freeman which first appeared in our members' magazine in June 2024.

Historically, many churches in Wales were whitewashed externally, partly, it is thought, to make them stand out in the landscape and also to form a protective coating to poor masonry.

There is evidence that some Welsh churches and castles were whitewashed in medieval times. For example, Gruffydd ap Cynan (King of Gwynedd), (c. 1055 – 1137) is reported to have 'made Gwynedd glitter then with limewashed churches like the firmament with stars'. However almost no records of the methods or costs of carrying out this frequent task have been found except in churchwardens' accounts. Those parishes for which records survive for many successive years show that churches were whitewashed externally quite frequently, sometimes as often as every other year. The interiors of churches were also whitewashed, but perhaps less frequently. Some medieval churches were whitewashed during the 18th and 19th centuries but those built or rebuilt during the 19th century with good stonework might not have needed an external protective coat of lime and there is little evidence that churches were regularly whitewashed after the end of the 19th century.

The distribution of whitewashed churches in Wales was not restricted to areas where lime was easily available (Glamorgan, south Pembrokeshire, Denbighshire and Anglesey). Lime was transported by boat from these areas to many ports and beaches in Wales because it was used to ‘sweeten’ acid soils and thus improved fertility. Little evidence for the external whitewashing of churches in England has been found in records. There are vestiges of limewash on many English medieval churches (and castles), especially in areas with poor quality stone. However, the tradition of ongoing re-limewashing of buildings seems to have died out in England a lot earlier than in Wales.

One form of evidence for the rarity of whitewash in England from the 18th century onwards comes from English tourists who noted it in Wales because it was novel to them — in particular the Welsh practice of whitewashing roofs — though not all admired the practice. While on the road from Swansea to Carmarthen in 1796, William Williams of London wrote: ‘It was on this road that we had repeated occasion to remark the peculiar turn of the people to whitewash, not only the walls but the roofs and chimney tops of their houses; the walls of their gardens and outhouses; and the walls roofs and steeples of their churches.’

There are few documented references for whitewashing churches in Wales until the early 18th century. One exception is a memorandum dated 26 December, 1620 for Trefdraeth, Anglesey which records that ‘Lewis ap William, slatter, [agreed] to ... washe the church with lime soe often as need requireth ... foure shillings yearly for his paines.’ The report of a visitation to the deanery of Penllyn and Edeirnion, Merionethshire, by the Rev. John Wynne, in February 1730 suggested that several of these churches be ‘whitened and washed’, but it is not clear whether he meant the inside, outside or both. At Bettws Gwerfyl Goch he ‘ordered the church to be washed over and whitened in the way and manner of the country within 3 months’ which suggests that whitewashing was a common practice there.

A relatively small quantity of lime was required to whitewash exterior and interior walls, towers (sometimes the battlements only), spires and occasionally the roofs of churches. Churchwardens’ records show that lime was often purchased by the sack, load or barrel (sometimes measured in ‘bushels’, ‘winchesters’, ‘teals’ or ‘strikes’) and that the delivery of a load of 26

lime was almost as expensive as the lime itself. In all cases at Llangybi (Monmouthshire), the delivery charge was at least three quarters the cost of the lime. Transporting unslaked lime was cheaper because it was lighter than slaked lime, but much more dangerous because it gives off a great deal of heat when made wet. None of the records indicate what sort of lime was delivered to churches, and if unslaked, how it was slaked when required for use. The advantage of using unslaked lime is that when it is mixed with water, the heat assists the emulsification of tallow which could be added to make the whitewash more waterproof, but none of the churchwardens' accounts include the cost of tallow, which was quite expensive because it was used to make candles.

Many Welsh churches were small and had a bellcote rather than a tower, so the task of whiteliming was relatively easy and required little work on ladders which were presumably supplied by the limer. There are, however, a few references to very long ladders in churchwardens' accounts: Llywel has the most detailed: in 1784, new staves (rungs) were set in the church ladders; in 1790 a carpenter was paid five shillings for making a new ladder from an alder tree, 23 ft long with heart of oak staves; in 1798 12 shillings was paid for a new ladder of ash, 22 feet long, with steps of oak. They might have needed two ladders, one to get up to the eaves and the other on the roof itself, which often required repair.

Some churches with towers required special equipment. Llywel had a tower (sometimes referred to as a steeple) which required frequent repairs. The churchwardens' accounts show that in 1734 there was an agreement with Charles Price 'for making a new chair etc. for the tilers' for 3s. In 1766 a carpenter was paid 11s 6d 'to make a chair or stool that is sufficient for to carry the workmen or plasterer on to make the said work on the steeple or tower'. In 1768 David Walter was commissioned to point the steeple chimneys using the pointing stool. Presumably this chair or stool was hung on ropes from poles fixed across the top of the tower and was let down to the required level. In 1791, the limer was allowed as many poles for scaffolding as was required, and scaffolding was also mentioned in 1799 for use when retiling the roof. Scaffolding poles were also referred to in 1770 at Llangybi, where there was also a bell tower.

Records suggest that the cost of whitewashing a church was relatively small when compared with the annual sums spent on other regular items such as communion wine and washing surplices.

Most records of payments show that a tiler or mason was commissioned to whitewash the church but occasionally the parishioners were paid in ale for doing so. For example, at Llangybi in 1766, an (illegible) sum of money was spent on ale for the whitelimers. Also at Llangybi, five shillings was spent on ale for the men who whitelined the tower in 1825. At Gelligaer (Glamorganshire) 1s 5d was expended on a whiteliming brush in 1802, a year for which there was no payment to a limner but the usual quantity of lime had been purchased, suggesting that the liming was done by the parishioners that year at no recorded cost.

The evidence from these churchwardens' accounts suggest that churches were whitewashed irregularly but at least three or four times each decade. At Lywel in 1736 a 'Bond for whiteliming the church for 20 years' was agreed with an individual, so an annual payment was recorded, whether or not liming was carried out. During the 111 years for which records survive (1736-1848), the outside of Lywel church was whitewashed at least 39 times, an average of once every three years. For some churches the chancel was sometimes specifically included or excluded from the contract for painting, possibly because the tithe owner was responsible for it.

We, The Friends of Friendless Churches, continue the traditional practice of limewashing. This age-old treatment offers these ancient buildings protection from the elements as well as elevating them the landscape. At St Lawrence's, lime rendering and lime washing was a must. The tower and porch were built from rubble stone which would funnel water into the core of the walls, and into the building itself. It was a major contributor to the damp internal conditions. The new coat of lime will need regular renewal to be effective, but it is certainly already doing its job at helping the church to dry out.



The church tower in its gleaming coat

**A photographic interlude for St Lawrence's constant companion:
Ivy**



Undated 19th-century image from Michael Freeman
Do note the white-washed porch



1800s - almost completely submerged



Gumfreston Church, Terby.

Photographed in 1922



Watercolour by Mrs Jane Vickerman née Harvey of Hean Castle,
painted on 15 August 1864



A Victorian postcard with a view from the northeast corner

Unbreakable

Sancta Maria Ora Pro Nobis *Holy Mary, pray for us*

Since it was cast in Bristol in the 14th century, this is the prayer – the plea – the bell in Gumfreston tower has made. The bell, which weighs 200 kg (440 lb) is older than the tower that houses it. In fact, it's probably older than most other bells surviving in Pembrokeshire. Internally, the tower is peppered with small niches: a columbarium, or dovecote. Dovecotes in towers are not common, so St Lawrence's single bell, wrapped in a bird sanctuary, is a rarity.

But these aren't the only ways in which St Lawrence's bell is special. It also has a poem penned in its honour. The undated, anonymous verse laments:

It clangs from its home in the old ivied tower,
And weak is its voice through the waning of power.
It clangs and it clangs through each hallowed day
And this is its message – 'Come in and pray'
For centuries six it's patiently cried
That message that claimed the whole countryside.
Me thinks 'twas once lusty and rang through the dell:
Today there's some sadness
In Gumfreston Bell.

The great bell was not the only survivor at Gumfreston. There is a second bell, a bronze sanctus handbell from the 16th or 17th century, now cracked.

Legend has it the crack came from an exorcism, here in the church, by bell, book and candle. As the rite was spoken, an angry spirit appeared in a flash and lashed out at the bell. It cracked. It did not break.

For safe-keeping this small but remarkably heavy bell is now on display in the Treasury of St David's Cathedral.



Hidden in plain sight

For most of its life, this was not a plain church.

In the Middle Ages, the walls of even the humblest country church blazed with colour and story. Travelling painters moved from parish to parish with earth pigments – red and yellow ochre, lime, charcoal – and laid down saints and sinners, devils and judgement, directly onto the plaster. Few in the congregation could read. The walls were the book: a sermon you could stand inside.

Then came the Reformation, and the whitewash. Image after image was limewashed over, plastered across, painted out. At St Lawrence's, the colour went under and was forgotten, and, as it turned out, saved. The same coats that hid the paintings protected them, waiting in the dark for someone to come looking.

Historians have known for some years that the north wall held some treasures. A fragment had been recorded there, but the church had been in such a state for so long that no one had been able to say what it was or how old it was. When we first arrived, the wall was soaked through from a blocked gutter outside, the surface furred with green algae, a crack running floor to ceiling across whatever lay beneath.

And the ivy had got in here too, not just over the paintings but into them, rootlets no thicker than a hair worming under the paint and lifting it, the thickness of a single layer, away from the wall.

So the work had to be impossibly gentle. Once the building was watertight, the conservators moved in – Jane Rutherfoord and Naomi Cox, between them carrying decades of this delicate, patient craft.



Ivy roots *under* the plaster and through the paint layers



An eye peeps through: the first suggestion of paintings on the chancel arch



... and before long, the Bishop appears with his crozier

Hair-fine roots teased out without taking the paint with them. Calcite bloom, leached from the plaster and clouding the surface, eased away. Slow, close, careful work, inches at a time.

The north-wall painting, it's now clear, is a Warning to the Sabbath Breakers – Christ's body ringed by tools, each one prolonging his suffering, a sermon against working on the Lord's day. Only the lower part survives: his legs, and a scatter of implements — a saw, shears, bellows.

It's one of only four known in Wales, and the others — at Llangybi, Skenfrith and Llanblethian — all date to around 1450. There's no reason to think this one is any different.

Below it, at knee height, runs a bold harlequin pattern in black, red and white – a motif found elsewhere in Wales, closest perhaps to the scheme at St Illtud's, Llantwit Major.

The biggest surprise was the chancel arch, where we had expected nothing at all. There turn out to be at least seven pre-Reformation schemes here, one laid over another across the centuries — there are flowers, scrolls, a bird, a stag and no fewer than five figures. We are not pulling them apart; to reveal one would be to lose the one above. We are taking off only the later, damaging layers and letting be what lies beneath.

A figure has emerged: a mitred bishop, crozier in hand, his other hand raised in blessing towards a face only half-uncovered. The shape of his mitre – two horns, for the Old Testament and the New – may place him in the 13th century. We don't know yet. His hand is raised in blessing: at his hip are two small, tonsured figures.

For more than half a millennium, St Lawrence's has kept this secret. It will take a bit more careful coaxing to get it into the light and to fully understanding these paintings. But we have time, we are in no rush. We have waited this long. When it comes, it will be very special.



Day after day, conservation work revealed riddles – and hidden stories

Healed

At last, after years of careful tending, St Lawrence's is well again. The church that had no one to care for it has been nursed back to health.

Our contractors stripped out the hard cement that trapped the damp and packed the joints instead with lime, so the old stone could breathe again. When they had finished that, they mended the sodden floors, and laid new drains, and fixed the roofs so that rainwater would no longer trouble its interior. The ivy too was gone, no longer strangling the church. Now, the only trees growing at St Lawrence's are in the churchyard. Inside, the conservators painstakingly coaxed the medieval paintings back into the light, revealing a five-hundred-year-old secret. St Lawrence's has the look now of something rested and recovered, the glow of a body that has been cared for and has come back to itself.

That is the whole point of this work. We are not here to transform a church, but to renew it: to uncover what was always there, to give it back its lustre and its confidence, to reconnect it to its own core.

And to restore it to the community, and the nation. Because churches like St Lawrence's are part of the fabric of our landscape, our history, our identity – and our future.

There is so much more to learn from this church – the walls are only just now giving up their secrets — and when we have researched and deciphered the paintings, we will share more information about their provenance and meaning.

Watch this space...



St Lawrence's interior - by our wonderfully talented church architect,
Andrew Faulkner

Who are the Friends of Friendless Churches?

The Friends of Friendless Churches was established by a group of friends in 1957 to save redundant (closed) historic places of worship in England and Wales from demolition, decay and unsympathetic conversion. We care for and celebrate their rich architectural legacy and history, and support their local communities. To date, we have over 70 places of worship in our care, and as more close every year, we take more into our ownership to preserve them for posterity.

These buildings are our greatest architectural and cultural legacy, shaping landscapes and lives for hundreds of years. They are the spiritual and artistic investment of generations, and they should survive for the benefit of future generations.

The Friends of Friendless Churches is a small, independent, nondenominational charity which receives no government funding in England, and a modest grant in Wales. We rely on the support and generosity of members of the public to sustain our work. We take pride in our lean operations and put as much as possible into saving and repairing churches.

Will you support our mission to save churches?

Please, will you join in and help us? Maintaining and repairing these places is a huge challenge. We rely on the generosity of people like you... To learn more about how you can become a member, volunteer or donor, please go to our website **fofc.org.uk**





Gumfreston's Open Day – sharing repair works with our members, supporters and local residents



Jess, our smallest and most dedicated volunteer



July 2024, Richard Tree inspecting pointing



August 2024, Ian Walker, Billy Davies, and Rachel Morley take in the gleaming tower



Tree & Sons

Thank you

It's the greatest privilege to care for those buildings, to crawl around the timbers, to get to know them so intimately, and to know, as the scaffold comes down, that you will be the last person to be up in the roof space with the trusses for at least a generation, maybe more. Mending all churches is a creative collaboration between people separated by centuries, people who will never meet but who share a purpose.



This project wouldn't have happened without some key people, and to them we offer our heartfelt gratitude: Andrew Faulkner, Jane Rutherfoord, Billy Davies, Richard Tree, John Amblin, Thom Kinghorn-Evans, Naomi Cox, Ian Walker, Sian Williams, Ross Cook, Peter Haywood, Ralph Barnett and Joshua Barnett, Pippa Williams, Anna Davies, Margaret Blackledge and to the many other people who have given their time, support and advice along the way,

And finally, of course, we wouldn't be able to rescue St Lawrence's without the grants from Cadw, the National Heritage Memorial Fund, and The Pilgrim Trust. Our heartfelt thanks also go to our member who remembered St Lawrence's church in their Will and to all our supporters, donors, and members who made this project possible.

Thank you.



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