

# CLWYD BRANCH NEWS

September 2009



## Wenlock Priory and Windy Ridge Oct 10th



Wenlock Priory, Lavabo in cloister, Much Wenlock, Shropshire. V. J. de la Haye. Lantern Slide. Shrewsbury Museums Service (SHYMS: P/2005/0414). Image sy9257

Wenlock Priory is the ruin of the largest Cluniac Abbey built in Britain, re-founded in 1079 by the Norman Earl Roger de Montgomery. The abbey took over forty years to build. It was heavily endowed with timber from the royal forests by Henry III, a regular visitor to Wenlock.

An earlier Anglo-Saxon Abbey had been founded on this site in 680 by the convert King Merewald of Mercia and his wife St Ermenburga. His daughter, Princess Milburga, the second abbess for over 30 years was canonised for performing miracles including levitation.

Originally a double monastery comprising communities of men and women, the nunnery was destroyed by the Danes circa 878. Milburga's relics were rediscovered in 1101 by two boys playing on the site whilst the monks were repairing the old church of the Holy Trinity. According to legend when the monks opened Milburga's tomb there was a heavenly fragrance, recalling the paradise of the lost monastery garden.

Milburga's abbey garden was designed to create a foretaste of heaven and was believed to reflect the the fragrance of her spirit and beauty of the human soul redeemed through the grace of God. Her gardens were said to be full of the choicest flowers, the orchards bore the sweetest fruits, and the very peace of heaven was found within its walls. Milburga was said to have delighted in tending the herbs and had a mysterious power over birds which

avoided damaging the local crops when she spoke to them. In art, Saint Milburga holds the abbey of Wenlock, and sometimes geese are near her.

Wenlock priory has an interesting lavabo in the cloister garth. Originally housed inside an octagonal building, this was where up to 16 monks made their ritual ablutions. The three tiered marble fountain has an early central column, encircled by later masonry with C12th carvings, supporting a circular trough. Water for the lavabo supplied from Milburga's Well was said to cure sore eyes.

The elaborate and intricate designs of the Cluniac order are seen in the Chapter House with a beautiful length of interlaced blind arcading with its richly carved capitals and embellished mouldings. East of the Infirmary there is a fishpond with a long raised causeway. The ruins of the square tower of the gate house as well as parts of the huge Norman abbey still remain.

The C15th Prior's house (now known as Wenlock Abbey) remains intact and is a private residence. This has a rare double stair-case - a newel stair case leads to an attic chamber in the same circular stairwell as the infirmary's stair. Sir Watkin Williams Wynn saved the ruins of Wenlock Priory by preventing the continued pillage of stone and other materials. The priory is where King Arthur is said to have hid his crown jewels. Today the grounds have striking topiary dating from the late 1800's cut with teddy bears and hens from green and golden yew.

# The Monastic Garden

The earliest written reference to medieval gardens was in 795 during Charlemagne's reign. This is a list of 73 plants and fruit trees to be grown in each administrative region of the Empire. No original medieval monastic garden survives but archaeological and documentary evidence records their existence.

Medieval monasteries in Britain were based on the Rule of St Benedict founder of Europe's first monastery at Monte Cassino AD 530. St Benedict decreed that gardening was 'a worthy, virtuous and godly occupation'. Monasteries in Britain existed before the time of the Danish invasions but it was the Normans who were responsible for the many large foundations throughout the country.

The 9th century St Gall Plan preserved in Switzerland, though never actually built, is the earliest visualisation of a Benedictine monastery. It details some three acres of gardens including a gardener's house, a list of plants, the cloister garth, derived from the 1st century Roman peristyle villa, the physic garden, a large utilitarian garden or vegetable garden with 18 parallel beds and the cemetery orchard. Later references include a guest house garden, the Prior's garden, vineyards and fish ponds.

The cloister garth is the chief characteristic of the Benedictine monastic garden. There is no evidence that this was planted with anything other than turf. Occasionally there were paths, a fountain or lavabo. The colour green, a metaphysical symbol of rebirth and everlasting life, provided refreshment to encloistered eyes. The cloisters, opening onto the garth, were used by the monks illuminating manuscripts to gain the maximum amount of light.

The physic garden near the infirmary was the responsibility of the Infirmarer. As the infirmary resembled a nursing home for retired monks with the incurable diseases of old age, a wide range of pottage and medicinal plants for treating the sick were grown; kidney bean, savory, rose, horsemint, cumin, lovage, fennel, tansy, lily, sage, rue, flag iris, pennyroyal, fenugreek, mint and rosemary.

The Cellarer was responsible for the supply of vegetables (brassicas, leeks, parsley, leaf beet, parsnips, turnips and skirrets), herbs, hay for latrines, rushes, mints and meadowsweet for strewing and juices from the orchards and vines. Orchards, planted with medlars, quinces, pears, peaches and apples, were often the burial ground for the monks.

In the early Middle Ages gardening and agriculture were purely utilitarian, for food and medicine. The symbolic flowers such as the rose, lily, peony and violet were grown for the altars and religious festivals. Only later were flowers grown for aesthetic

reasons, adorning the guest house garden and the Abbot's private gardens for entertaining important visitors.

Monastic gardens varied according to the order. The four main orders were the Benedictines, Cistercians, Carthusians and the Cluniacs. The Cistercians, strict reformers, refused to accept gifts other than land. They chose remote fertile valleys with running water for their sites. Taming the wilderness the Cistercians were renowned for their expertise in water engineering and sanitation systems using night soil for growing vegetables. Agriculture and sheep farming dominated their manual activities.

The Carthusians were known as the gardening monks, reflected in the plan of Mount Grace Priory in Yorkshire. Each of the thirteen small cells, representing Christ and the twelve apostles, had its own individual garden; the whole was enclosed by a wall with the door of each cell opening onto a broad cloister.

The Cluniac order arrived with the Normans. Wenlock Priory belongs to this order. Cluniacs known for communal worship, elaborate church services and ritual were also dedicated to caring for the sick and the poor of the local community. Medicinal herbs would have been grown for this purpose in the infirmary garden. The monks also valued scholarship and manuscript illumination. Plants such as saffron and heliotrope might have been grown for the extraction of the yellow and blue dyes for illuminating their manuscripts.

After the Dissolution of the Monasteries elements of the monastic garden lived on. Lessees continued to cultivate the outlying orchards and some of these developed into the nurseries which supplied the thousands of trees needed in later fashions of landscape gardening. The brewing industry we know today also owes much to the monks' knowledge of viticulture and brewing.

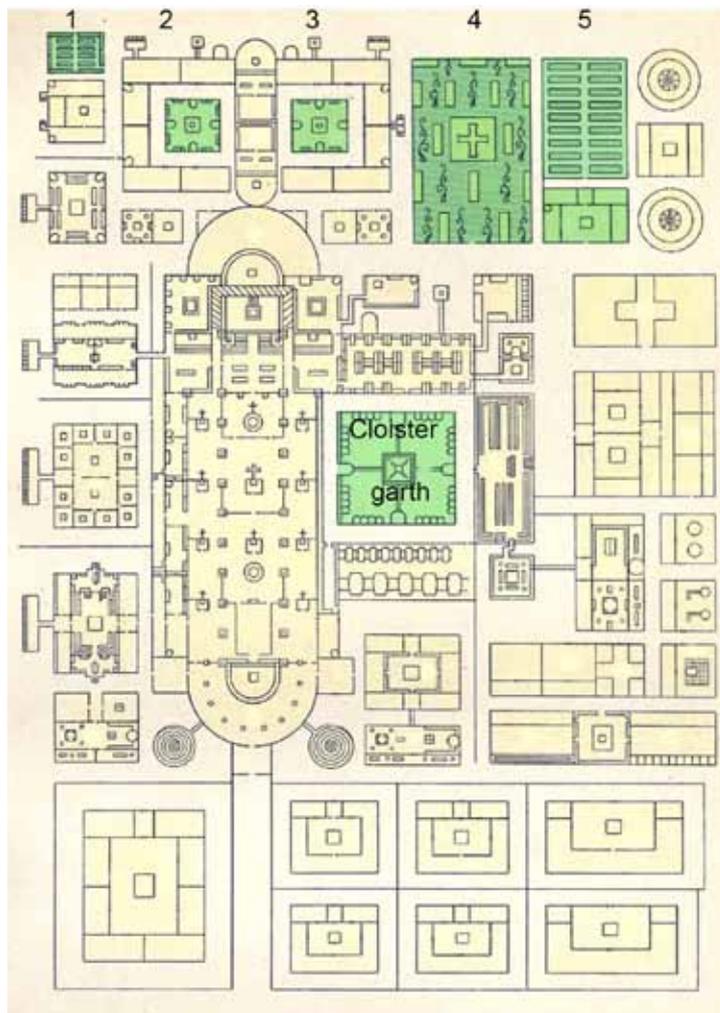
Our knowledge of medieval monastic gardens is fragmentary but garden archaeology is remedying this situation. Research continues at Norton Priory, and in Wales at Monknash with its fish pond and dovecote, Llanthony with 12 acres of orchards, Strata Florida Abbey, St David's with vines, pleasure gardens and orchards, and Llandaff Cathedral with a garden wall furnace.

See: *'Garden Archaeology in Wales'* by Stephen Briggs (pp138-159) in *Garden Archaeology* by A.E. Brown (Editor) Publisher: Council for British Archaeology (July 31, 1991) Report 78. <http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/ads-data/cbaresrep/pdf/078/07811005.pdf>

Many Thanks to Maureen Thomas who has provided much information on the monastic garden. You will be able to talk to Maureen on the visit.

**Booking:** see booking information enclosed.

**Meet 10.15** Introductory tour, Much Wenlock Priory. **11.00** A private visit to Wenlock Abbey (formerly the Prior's lodging). After lunch in Wenlock **Meet 2.00** at Windy Ridge, Little Wenlock where tea will be served before departure. Members £12, Non Members £16



*St Gall Plan circa 820. Note the central Cloister garth*

#### Key to St Gall Plan

1 Walled Physic / herb garden; 2 Cloister of the Infirmary; 3 Novitiate Cloister; 4 Cemetery Orchard with 13 kinds of tree (including medlars, mulberries, chestnuts and walnuts); 5 Utilitarian or Vegetable Garden (eighteen beds named for different vegetables such as leeks, onions and culinary herbs such as chervil and parsley).

The St Gall cloister is exactly 100 feet square and the placing of columns, arcades and buttresses displays great regularity and exact symmetry. The monastery was planned according to a 40:40 module and used the Golden Rule proportions. The square cloister plan is revealed to be based on Neoplatonic aesthetic theory.

St Gall Plan survived, as a copy, in a Life of St Martin in the St Gall library, drawn by Abbot Haito or Reichenau (763-836) for Abbot Gozbert of St Gall. Haito was an ambassador to Constantinople where one of his pupils was Walafrid Strabo, author of 'Hortulus' the most famous garden poem of the Early Middle Ages, Haito had a passion for architecture and gardens.

## Windy Ridge

For those interested in plantsmanship Windy Ridge at Little Wenlock in Shropshire is a new garden developed with over 1000 species. Fiona and George Chancellor have reclaimed this garden from a state of neglect when they moved in 23 years ago and have extended it into an adjacent field.

Most of the plants are labelled and a plant list is available. David Toyne will give a talk on some of the planting which includes the rare and unusual.

The garden sited halfway up the 1,334 ft Wrekin hill, once a celtic fort, is in the the landscape which inspired Tolkien's Middle Earth in Lord Of The Rings. Geologists say the Wrekin consists of pre Cambrian rock, but it is well-known that the hill was made by a giant. At Windy Ridge you will find the boots of the Wrekin giant, the mythical ogre who made the hill. The interesting volcanic geology of the Wrekin also may explain some of the success of the exuberant planting within an area which was once part of the royal hunting forest.

Windy Ridge, winner of the Daily Mail national gardens competition, was chosen from over 2,000 gardens and found to be the best designed for all seasons and variety of vistas. The garden has been praised by Roy Lancaster.

## A Welsh Giant

The Welsh giant Gwendol Wrekin ap Shenkin ap Mynyddmawr had a grudge against the Shrewsbury fishermen who had stolen his eels from a huge eel trap found in the Bristol Channel. He set off across the mountains towards Shrewsbury to dam the River Severn intending to drown everyone living there.

Lost near Wellington and tired with carrying a giant spade of soil, the giant asked directions from a cobbler, carrying a sack of shoes for mending, on his way home from market. The cobbler asked why the giant was going Shrewsbury and Gwendol replied that he was off to flood the town to be rid of all its inhabitants.

Wishing to save his customers, the quick thinking cobbler explained that it was a very, very long way to Shrewsbury and showed all the shoes that he had worn out walking back from there. Tired and exhausted with his heavy load, Gwendol was tricked into believing that he had days of walking ahead of him. He decided to return to Wales and dumped the soil beside him creating the Wrekin hill. Scraping mud from his boots he made the smaller Ercall hill before heading home never to be seen again.

*Shropshire Folk-Lore: A Sheaf of Gleanings by C. S. Burne and G. F Jackson, London 1883.*

## Visit to Sycharth and Llangedwyn

This was a pleasurable and interesting visit thanks to Emyr and Carys Evans who explained the history of Owain Glyndwr and interpreted the site at Sycharth.

Our group received a warm welcome by Captain and Mrs Bell at Llangedwyn Hall who gave a history of the house and gardens. In its heyday Llangedwyn employed 24 gardeners who cultivated the two 3 acre walled gardens as well as the pleasure grounds. When the family was in London the garden produce was sent by train to arrive in time for breakfast! The gardens are still productive today and the ornamental gardens were beautiful to see during the sunny afternoon.



## Burgage Plots Ruthin

Branch member Betty Downs has successfully 'called in' a planning application compromising the remaining burgages of Ruthin. This application involves an infill development for affordable housing in the gardens of 51 The Royal Oak, reputedly the 4th oldest house in Wales and 47- 49 Clwyd Street. These burgages back onto a popular foot path, the Cuning Green linking Castle Street and Mill Street alongside the castle walls. The remnants of an old orchard in these ancient green spaces forms a key historic vista towards the gaol from the Cuning Green (*a corruption of 'coney' and the site of a medieval rabbit warren*).

The long narrow plots with houses on the street frontage, were laid out by Reginald de Grey Lord of Ruthin, beyond the outer bailey and were leased out to freemen, the burgers entitled to practice a trade. By 1324 Ruthin had 100 burgages held by 71 different people. Medieval in origin, burgages are amongst the oldest gardens in Wales, a precious and irreplaceable asset characterising the medieval street plan.

The loss of other burgages to development increases the importance of the remaining intact plots, integral to the setting of the listed building and the character of the Conservation Area. Recent excavations have discovered a Roman villa in one of the gardens.

Ruthin Town Council voted against this planning application. The Cuning Green and other principal civic spaces invite both the native and the visitor to linger. As this application is contrary to local and national planning policy the Branch will write to the Assembly Planning Inspectorate in support of Betty and the Ruthin Town Council.



Llangedwyn: photos David Toyne

**New website** see: <http://www.whgt.org.uk>  
Please feel free to comment or to contribute.

## Garden Party at Dedwyddfa

This was a great success thanks to the hospitality of Ann and Basil Thomas. Over £400 was raised and those who supported this event enjoyed a glorious afternoon in their lovely garden.

## Membership

A warm welcome to those who have recently joined. Anyone wishing to become more involved in our branch should contact Maureen. Our branch is in urgent need of a Treasurer, if you can help please contact Elizabeth. **The WHGT subscription is now £15 individual or £25 joint membership.** If you are paying by bankers order please check if this has been up dated.

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