The Strata Florida Project

A walk through the graveyard of St Mary’s Church, Strata Florida
The graveyard around St Mary’s church in Strata Florida is an atmospheric place, situated next to the iconic ruins of Strata Florida Abbey founded in 1164. Both are surrounded by the most peaceful and powerful countryside. Both resonate with the vibrations of the near and distant past, and both are ready to impart their deeply laid history to those willing to look.

It is hoped that the following account will help open the pages of this historic site to you as you walk around the graveyard. By looking at the gravestones we learn a great deal about the history of the people who lived nearby within the parish of Ystrad Fflur and of those from further afield who chose to be buried in the graveyard.

Although the graveyard in St Mary’s has been in existence for the last 1100 years nearly all the gravestones here today date from the last 300 years, as they do in most Welsh cemeteries. Before that burials were marked in more temporary ways, if marked at all. The size, shape, colour and position of the stones and other grave furniture can tell us a great deal about the social history of the area over that period of time, and that would fill a whole book. This can only be an introduction to the place and take you on a brief tour.

The graveyard in St Mary’s has great significance to the local community who pay respect to the dead members of their families by placing flowers on their graves. These range from real flowers, to silk and plastic, whilst from Victorian to more recent times there has been a practice of having ceramic flowers under glass domes. Several of these can be seen in St. Mary’s graveyard.

We hope that you enjoy your visit and can respect the place for all that it means to the community and those who have loved ones buried here.

This booklet has been produced as one result of a long-term research and student training project conducted by the School of Archaeology, History and Anthropology in the University of Wales Trinity St David, based on its Lampeter Campus with the co-operation of Gaenor Parry, instigator of the Abbey School. For further information please go to www.strataflorida.com. Part of this work and the production of this booklet have been enabled by a grant from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the Welsh Government.
The map is a sketch guide through the graveyard. The green lines mark the pathways. Please keep to them where you can. The letters can be found in the following account.

The main entrance is through what is known as a lych gate (literally a ‘corpse gate’) wide enough to allow access for a coffin and its bearers. Here the cortege paused before the final procession to the church. Although relatively recent in its present form, the Strata Florida lych gate is a very fine specimen and, surprisingly, out of all the examples of these gates that exist in the world, a photograph of it is used by Wikipedia to demonstrate what they look like. Here it is decorated for a wedding. The gate is dedicated to ‘Tom Gof’, Thomas David Davies of Ystrad Meurig who died in 1994.
A. As you go through the lych-gate into the graveyard the first gravestones on either side are recent and belong to those who have died in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The headstones on these graves are all about the same height, are nearly all of grey or black granite and are laid out in well-defined rows.

B. As you walk further towards the church the headstones on the left were erected during the 1930’s through to the 1950’s & 60’s. These headstones appear more individualistic and there is a lack of uniformity. The sizes and shapes of the gravestones are much more varied and include a few crosses and pillars. There is also, for example, one tombstone that looks like an obelisk, a favourite symbol of memorial drawn from the interest in Egyptian symbols which began in the late Victorian era. The materials used for headstones in the early part of the last century were also more varied compared with the material used today. These early headstones were made from slate, red granite, marble, limestone and even quartz. Several of the graves in this area contain no headstones – they are what we call ‘bed type’ family graves with multiple commemorative inscriptions on small pedestals, on the surrounding kerbs or on single tombstones.

C. As you walk further down the main path towards the church door, some of the gravestones are in small groupings, a few even with low iron fences around them. These are family plots and the stones often contain multiple names as members of the same family are buried sometimes over several generations.

You will notice also that there are several flat gravestones, a style that represents an older tradition.
D. One of these flat stones, laid near the north wall of the graveyard, carries a remarkable inscription in verse:

Unknown  
Died in a snowstorm by  
Teifi Pools Feb. 1929  
He died upon the hillside dreer,  
Alone where snow was deep,  
By strangers to be carried here  
Where princes also sleep.

Local accounts say that from a scrap of paper found in his pocket it is possible that this unknown man was a veteran of the Second Afghan War (1878-80).

E. On the right hand side of the path, cut into a rising embankment made from the rubble of the ruined Abbey, there are graves of a similar date and type with a narrow path separating them from the earliest part of the graveyard.

F. At the top of this narrow path, there is a particularly large black granite pillar which is a memorial to the James family who were great benefactors in the parish. Many of their endowments and bequests are still remembered today by the name of the house they used to visit, Pantyfedwen, which lies just above the Abbey. Sir David James and his wife Lady Grace were prominent members of the London Welsh and he is best known for his involvement in the early growth of cinemas.

The church of St Mary’s bears the same dedication to the Mother of God as the Abbey itself once did. It has a simple rectangular plan and was re-built, in its present form, in 1815 and then refurbished again in 1875 and 1914. In the 1960s four splendid new stained glass windows were given by the James foundation and made by Powell and sons of Whitefriars, London. The church replaced an earlier
structure of similar type and proportions which can be seen on the earliest illustration of the churchyard on the left-hand side of the engraving of the Abbey remains by the two Buck brothers, Samuel and Nathaniel, published in 1741. This may have been the original medieval parochial chapel that lay within the precinct of the Abbey. Inside today, the church is beautifully plain with few monuments, including one to the last Stedman to have occupied the gentry house (now Mynachlog Fawr farmhouse) shown in the Buck print. The church has a small, west-end wooden gallery.

The walls of the church also provide historical evidence for the past. They are of many different stone types, which can be distinguished by their different colours. Most are grey in colour and were quarried from local sedimentary rocks which are very hard to work into regular shapes. Other, more workable stones were brought, therefore, long distances for places such as corners, windows and doors. These can be seen on the church especially around the west door. Beneath the lichen many are yellow in colour and are of Jurassic limestone from a quarry close to Dundry, a village situated just south of Bristol from where they were brought to Strata Florida originally to build the first Abbey church in the late 12th century. These yellow Dundry stones have subsequently been taken (‘robbed’) from the ruins of the Abbey following its dissolution in 1539 and used to build the present church and probably also its predecessor. This is shown by an interesting stone to the left of the church door which has a date inscribed into its surface, 1768, but which has actually been
turned upside down when taken from its original location. It is possible that the stone originally marked the date of an earlier refurbishment of the church.

G. To the right of the church, on its south side the land slopes up towards the Abbey’s north wall and this is probably one of the earliest parts of the cemetery. Particularly distinctive are a number of striking graves called ‘table tombs’. As their name suggests they are raised to about waist-high above the ground on stone or brick plinths with the inscribed marker stone laid flat on top. Some are a little higher and some a little lower, and some of them are very close together whilst others stand alone. These are among the earliest graves in the graveyard, belonging to the 18th century, a time when only the wealthier members of the community would have been given permanent, stone memorials. However as the 19th century advanced an increasing number of people acquired wealth and education and they too chose to be buried in these table tombs close to the abbey. The rise of this middle class is also shown by the move from stone to brick in their construction, since brick was at the time regarded as a higher status material than stone.

These gravestones were highly decorated (often neo-classical) and their position, close to the famous abbey and on the favoured south side of the church, meant that they wanted to be remembered as being important. However, today, because of severe weathering the condition of some of these table tombs makes it very difficult to decipher the inscriptions and decorations and many have their surfaces shattered. Nevertheless some of the decorative motifs, etched into their surface, are still visible from angels to cherubs and flowers. Indeed, there are many different motifs on the gravestones of all types throughout the graveyard and there are people who study these and interpret their symbols. Examples of these symbolic meanings are:-
Anchor/Ships: Hope or Seafaring profession
Angel Flying: Rebirth/Resurrection; Angel Weeping: Grief/Mourning.
Arch: Victory in death.
Arrow: Mortality.
Bird: Eternal life; Bird Flying: Resurrection.
It is interesting to note that many of the early graves were inscribed only in English with a few only in both English and Welsh. Even here the English was used to indicate whose grave it was and the Welsh restricted to a verse in the form of an englyn, a traditional Welsh short poem form. As the nineteenth century wore on, Welsh, first the language of the locality, became the dominant language on the gravestones. This reflects the resurgence in the language’s fortunes, as it rose with the Welsh nation’s growing sense of its own identity, especially following the uproar after the notorious publication of the 1847 Education Report, known as the Blue Books.

H. At the east end of the church is a stone resting against the wall. It has a cross shape embedded into it and there are five sunken depressions in the stone. This is the earliest grave-marker from the graveyard. It is 10th century and dates to long before the Abbey was founded. The stone seems to have been discovered when the graveyard was being extended in the mid-19th century, and may indicate that there was a church and burial ground here at the time of the Welsh kings.

J. Walking to the left or north of the church you see a large yew tree and it is believed to mark the grave of Dafydd ap Gwilym, the most famous of Welsh medieval poets, who lies beneath it. Tradition has it that he was born at Brogynin, Penrhyn-coch (at the time in Llanbadarn Fawr parish), Ceredigion n the early fourteenth century. His father, Gwilym Gam, and mother, Ardudfyl, were both from noble families. As one of noble birth it seems Dafydd did not belong to the guild of
professional poets in medieval Wales, and yet the poetic tradition had been strong in his family for generations.

K. Just to the north of Dafydd’s yew can be seen a long embankment running south-west to north-east across the graveyard and this may be the surviving remains of the early cemetery boundary as it existed in the Middle Ages. Indeed its proximity to the yew gives strength to the veracity of the poem by Dafydd’s contemporary, Gruffudd Gryg, which talks of the poet’s grave and the yew next to the wall of Ystrad Fflur and which begins:

Yr ywen i oreuwas,  This yew-tree for the best of men,
Ger mur Ystrad Fflur a’i phlas;  Near the wall of Strata Florida and its mansion;
Da Duw wrthyd, gwynfyd gwŷdd,  God’s blessing on you, happy tree,
Dy dyfu yn dŷ Dafydd.  for growing as a house for Dafydd.

L. Near Dafydd ap Gwilym’s grave is a single headstone which has a picture of a leg carved into it with an inscription which states "The left leg and part of the thigh of Henry Hughes, Cooper, was cut off and interred here, June 18, 1756." Later the rest of Henry Hughes set off across the Atlantic in search of better fortune and his leg was never reunited with the rest of him, except perhaps in the life hereafter.

M. In the same area, but closer to the front of the church doo, is the grave of Sapper Robert M. Thomas who died, aged 21, on active service in 1940 and who was buried in the family plot. He is commemorated twice: once with the traditional monument of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission shown in the picture, and also on the gravestone of his father, Morgan, of Elder Court in Pontrhydfendigaid, along with his mother Bertha who died much later in 1961.

N. To the south and east of the church, the graveyard extends a surprising distance further and clearly contains many other quite old graves. However, they are more scattered partly because many of the stones originally standing here have fallen down or been taken away.
Partly also some of the earlier grave markers were made of wood and these have long since decayed and vanished. Some of these gaps can also be explained by the presence, discovered in the 1930’s, of shallow burials of miners and their families, some of whom were buried quickly and clandestinely. There are still a few table tombs alongside headstones, some large and some very small.

At the very far end of the graveyard there is an extension added in very recent times with burials made in the last few decades. The headstones here are like those we saw at the beginning of this tour, albeit with a wider variety of etched designs and headstone styles.

From this short journey around the graveyard you can see that there is much here to help build a picture of the local community, its people and families who have lived around the abbey for hundreds of years. It also an ancient burial ground which carries us back to a past without documents and a world of spirituality we can still feel today, standing among so much memory and memorial. For more about The Strata Florida Project visit: www.strataflorida.org