

St Winefride's Well Holywell North Wales



Sir Derek Jacobi as Brother Cadfael in the ITV series 'Cadfael'

If you enjoyed Sir Derek Jacobi's performances in the ITV series Cadfael, you may recall the episode entitled 'A Morbid Taste for Bones'. It features a fictional version of a real historical event in 1138 when the monks of Shrewsbury Abbey travelled to Gwytherin, the burial place of St Winefride, to disinter the bones of the Welsh saint. They removed them to Shrewsbury with the aim of making the Abbey a place of pilgrimage to the saint.

I decided to investigate what the 7th century saint's legend in Holywell, North Wales, where St Winefrede is reputed to have been slain by her suitor, Caradoc, and then miraculously brought back to life by her uncle St Beuno.

While in 1138 the monks would have travelled from Shrewsbury through northern Shropshire to Flintshire, I chose to go from Sedgley on the M6/M56! Even by motorway, the trip is quite long and more than you would really want to undertake there and back in a day - an overnight stay would be preferable.



The Dee Estuary from Flintshire

From the M56, the village is off the A55 North Wales Expressway between Queensferry and Colwyn Bay. As you approach Holywell, you are greeted with rousing panoramic views of the Dee Estuary from the top of high coastal hills.

The well of St Winefride is outside the centre of Holywell on the B-road to Greenfield - it is initially signposted by brown heritage signs although in the centre of Holywell they give up, and abandon you to guess the route! There is free parking space opposite the site.

According to legend, St Winefride's Well first erupted at the spot where her would-be rapist Caradog, a Welsh prince, cut off her head with his sword. Restored to life with the prayers of her uncle St Beuno, Winefride became a nun and after her uncle's departure for the Monastery of Clynnog Fawr she joined a community at Gwytherin where she became Abbess. She lived there until her 'second' death 22 years later. Her shrine at Holywell became a place of pilgrimage where it is said, miracles occurred and continue to this day.



Henry V invoked St Winefride's assistance before the Battle of Agincourt

Indeed Holywell has now been a place of pilgrimage and healing continuously for over 13 centuries: Henry V invoked her aid at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 and in the following year he made a pilgrimage of thanksgiving from her tomb at Shrewsbury Abbey to her well. Royal pilgrimages continued with Edward IV who is said to have placed soil from the site on his crown; Richard III conferred an annuity of 10 marks to sustain the chapel and maintain a priest.



The shrine and gardens

The present shrine is a two-storey perpendicular Gothic building erected in the early 1500s. It's a Grade 1 listed building and a scheduled ancient monument. Entry is through the shop area; the shop part itself has a distinctly 'Catholic church piety stall' feel to it, filled as it is with rosary beads, devotional cards and other prayer items (entry is only 80p for adults; 60p for concessions).



The St Beuno and St Winifrede diorama

You then pass through into an exhibition devoted to the legend of St Winefride. The most striking feature is an illuminated diorama of St Beuno teaching his niece St Winefride by St Beuno's stone. The exhibition is not particularly engaging (just words on boards) and could really do with an overhaul using more modern interactive interpretive techniques. However this would undoubtedly raise the entrance fee.

You exit to a terrace where there is a rack containing scores of sets of crutches from the late Victorian that have (reputedly) been discarded after disabled people have been cured at the well. In the gardens that approach the shrine, there is a weather-eroded statue of St Winefride.



A well-worn statue of St Winefride in the gardens



Rosary beads hung on railings by the shrine

Although the shrine had only two other visitors while I was there (early March), the railings by the shrine were adorned with scores of rosary beads left there by pilgrims (the shop is filled with such articles and statuettes for sale).

The main features of the shrine are the bathing pool (with rather uninviting murky green waters), and an elaborate two-storey building behind it, which was built and endowed with money from Lady Margaret, Countess of Richmond, the mother of Henry VII. The first Tudor king later had a statue of St Winefride made for his chapel in Westminster Abbey.





Changing tents for pilgrims who bathe in the pool; below, St Winifrede's pool

Holywell is still a major place of pilgrimage, especially for Catholics, and visitors can still bathe in the waters of the well by arrangement - in fact, there are a set of changing tents by the side of the pool to enable pilgrims to get changed in privacy.



Chapel by the pool



The well pump, where you can 'take the waters'

To the left is a chapel with an altar to the Virgin and Child, where candles may be purchased and lit by pilgrims. There is a pump on the wall by the pool whereby you can drink the waters pumped up straight from the well.

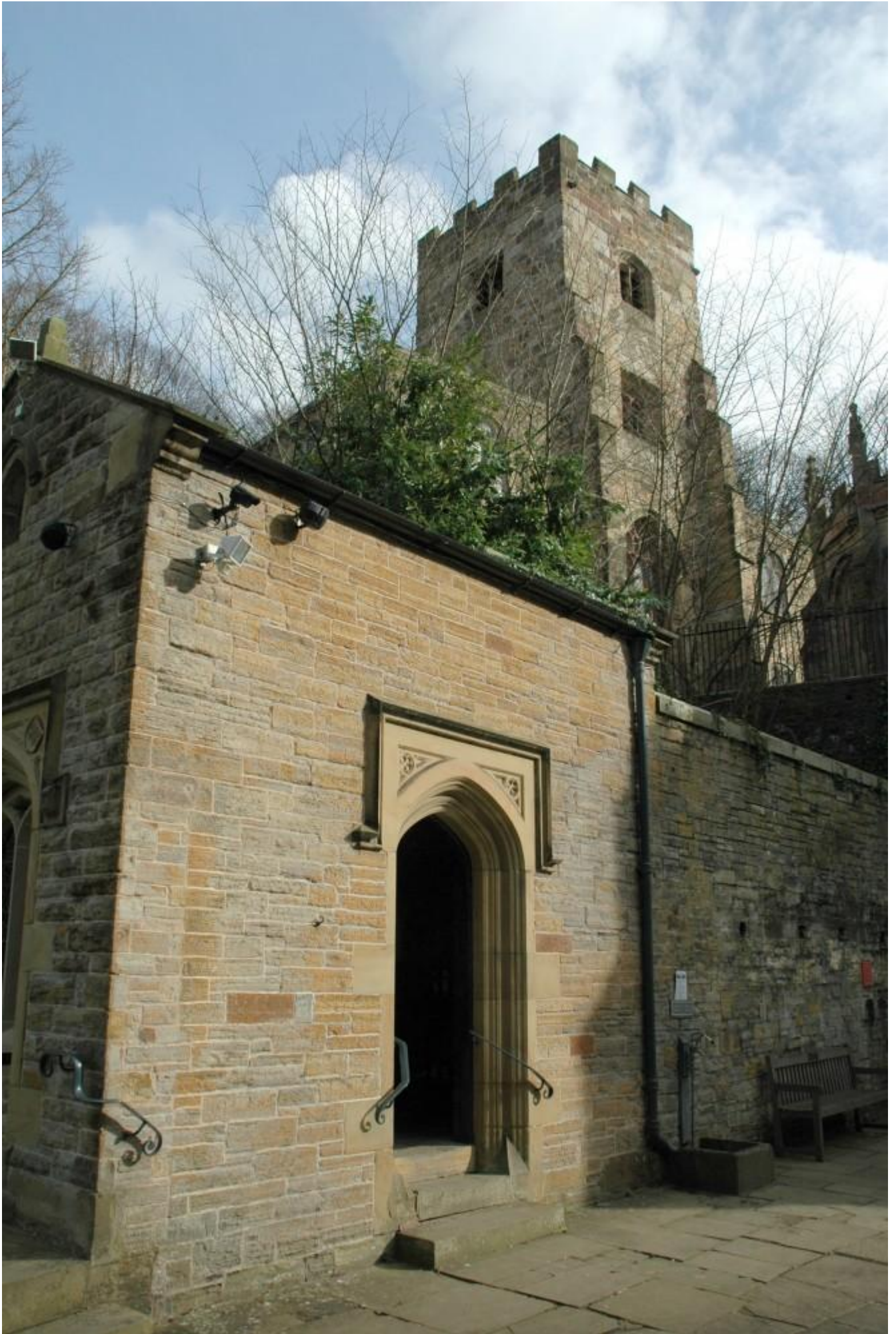


The vaulted ceiling with central decorated boss

Entering the shrine, you are struck by the intricacy of the pillars and the elaborate vaulted roof structure with sculptured ceiling bosses, (reminiscent of the Chapter House at Worcester) which bear the emblems of members of the Tudor royal family and distinguished nobility of the day.

There is also much graffiti scratched into the stone, consisting of prayers to St Winefride for a cure, or the initials of pilgrims who have visited the site. During the Reformation, the shrine was a bone of contention between the Crown and Catholic 'recusants' who continued to worship there despite being banned from doing so. It is said that local inn keepers were ordered

to make lists of people who stayed with them to visit the shrine, to be turned over to the authorities so offenders could be punished.



St James's (Church of Wales) sits on the hill above St Winefride's shrine. Below is a small chapel.



'The Mill on the Hill' Tea Rooms by the Shrine



St Winefride's Catholic Church in Holywell

There is a church (St James's, Church of Wales) high on the hill above the shrine which has its own entrance and is not accessible from the site. There is also the Catholic church of St Winefride further up the hill just off the roundabout in the town of Holywell, about 1/4 mile away.

After my visit I called into the former woollen mill, now the 'The Mill on the Hill Tea Rooms' that has been converted by the local council into a charming, bright modern cafe. Chatting to Cerys Sullivan the proprietor, it seems that the well and shrine are very popular, particularly in summer, not only with coaches of Catholic pilgrims visting, but also with tourists, walkers, cyclists and locals.

For information contact The Custodian, St Winefride's Well, Holywell, Flintshire, **CH8 7PN**. Tel: 01352 713054.

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To book meals for coach parties etc at The Mill on the Hill, call Cerys Sullivan on 01352 711004 or 07702 118565; or email: themillonthehill@hotmail.co.uk

For a more detailed description of the pilgrimage site and its history:

[Click here](#)