

ST AELHAIARN CHURCHYARD, GUILSFIELD

Ref No	PGW (Po) 54 (POW)
OS Map	126
Grid Ref	SJ 219117
Former County	Powys
Unitary Authority	Powys
District	Montgomeryshire
Community Council	GUILSFIELD
Designations	Listed building: St. Aelhaiarn's church Grade I, churchyard wall and gates Grade II, Jones Monument Grade II. Conservation Area: Guilsfield village.
Site Evaluation	Grade II*
Primary reasons for grading	Well preserved medieval church of great national architectural interest and a circular walled churchyard, around the periphery of which grow superb examples of ancient managed yew trees.
Type of Site	Village churchyard with high arboricultural interest, trees planted in a designed scheme.
Main Phases of Construction	c. 1300 - west tower, c. 1400 - main body of church, c. 1600 main planting, c. 1879 restoration by G. E. Street.

SITE DESCRIPTION

St. Aelhaiarn's church lies in the old village centre of Guilsfield. It stands at the centre of a raised circular churchyard which is surrounded by a stone retaining wall. Three gateways lead into the churchyard on the south, south-west and north-west, with converging paths leading to the porch on the south front. Ancient yew trees grow inside the periphery of the churchyard wall.

The principal houses and shops of the village are grouped around the outside of the churchyard. The church is a substantial stone building in the Perpendicular style described by Haslam as having 'architecturally one of the richest medieval church interiors in the county'

(The Buildings of Powys). A squat battered tower with corner buttresses, a castellated parapet with corner pinnacles and a narrow slate hung spire sits at the western end of the church. To the east, the nave and chancel run for about 30m under a continuous slate roof. Inside the church there is a fine late ribbed Perpendicular timber roof with bosses at the intersections. On the south front of the church there is a projecting porch of two storeys with a high pitched roof. To the west of this there is a recessed porch, or shed, built into the church to house the hearse and dated 1739. All of the windows are stone dressed mullions in a Perpendicular or Tudor style. The church, named after a local Saint of the sixth-century, is believed to date from about 1300 when it was in the possession of Strata Marcella Abbey in Merionethshire (Gwynedd). In about 1400 the original nave and chancel were demolished to be rebuilt in a larger and more substantial form to the east of the bell tower which survived. The tower was later refaced with stone masonry in the sixteenth century, by which time the church had passed into the possession of Christ Church, Oxford as part of the Welshpool diocese.

In the late seventeenth century the church was in possession of the Powis family and suffered in the early eighteenth century as a result of the Powis family's change in political fortune following the Civil War and Restoration of Charles II. Tithes were paid to the Bishop but no Vicar, or priest, was made available to administer to the village. During the early nineteenth century Guilsfield was a relatively poor farming village but local gentry families, who included the Myttons of Garth and Jukes of Trelydan Hall, ornamented the church with fantastic monuments and paid towards the building's upkeep. In 1877-1879 the architect G.E. Street carried out a full scale restoration of the church which included erecting the present gates of the churchyard and redesigning the interior; erecting regular pews in the place of the box pews which were described in 1858 as 'needing cleaning' and having an 'absurd appearance'.

Guilsfield churchyard is roughly circular in shape and covers about one acre of ground. The church lies slightly to the west of the centre of the raised churchyard which stands between 1 and 2m above the level of the lanes which surround it. A stone retaining wall, partly dry-stone and partly mortared, supports the churchyard. Three entrances break through the wall on the south, south-west and north-west. The south entrance is the main one and opens on to a 2m wide tarmacked path which runs in a straight line to the church porch. The other two entrances connect with footpaths which lead diagonally towards the church, intersecting a short length of path which runs around the west end of the tower to the porch. Nineteenth-century iron gates and gate posts survive at each of these entrances.

The main feature of the churchyard layout are the regularly spaced yew trees which grow around the perimeter of the area. Some have been lost, stumps remain, but there are about 20 trees presently growing in the churchyard. The largest, and oldest, trees are located along the south and west boundary, younger trees along the east. Each of these trees is well maintained, the trunks being straight and clean for at least 2m off the ground and the crowns partly clipped to form neat mushroom canopies.

The churchyard has been closed since 1907 and all burials since that date have taken place in the village cemetery in the south-east of the village. The headstones within the churchyard date mainly from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and include some fine

examples of funerary art. In the north-west and north-east of the churchyard there are elaborate family graves of the local gentry families including a Gothick tomb erected for the Myttons of Garth. Dotted about the churchyard are various evergreen shrubs and trees which included Lawson cypress and golden yew.

It is believed that the form, the shape and level, of the churchyard has remained much the same since the late medieval period. The rebuilding of the church taking place within the existing graveyard in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The position of the gateways dates from at least 1840 when they were recorded on a tithe map. The date of the yew trees is more uncertain. It is probable that the medieval churchyard contained yews but the clearest indication of the dates of the older trees comes from a grave, the Jones monument, inside the south gate on the west. A headstone, now barely legible, reads:

Here lyeth ye body of Richard Jones
of Moysgwin, gent.,
who was interred December ye 10th 1707
aged 90
Under this yew tree
Buried would hee bee
For his father and hee
Planted this yew tree.

The tree above the grave has a girth of at least 4m at ground level and a canopy circumference of about 12m. In 1871 this same tree was recorded with a girth of 9ft at 6 1/2ft off the ground with a crown at least 35ft in circumference. From the epitaph it would appear that the tree was planted in about 1630. An even larger tree, which is being propped up, stands opposite, on the other side of the path. The church guide book suggests that the yews were all planted during the reign of William and Mary (1689-1702) but does not record the source of this information, or indicates who paid for the trees to be planted in, what appears to be, an ornamental as well as a functional manner. Some of the surviving yews are recorded on the 1888 Ordnance Survey map on the south-west, west and north-west boundaries of the churchyard, the younger trees in the east appearing on the 1904 map.

Sources

Primary 1840 tithe map, National Library of Wales

Secondary Haslam, R., The Buildings of Powys (1979), pp. 105-107
Ramage, C. T., 'The Calculated Age of the yew trees in Guilsfield Churchyard', The Montgomeryshire Collections vol. 4 (1871), pp. 443-45.

Anon., The Parish Church of St. Aelhaiarn (Guide, St. Aelhaiarn's Church).