

The Legacy of Llangiwg Church

St Ciwg's Church, Llangiwg, near Pontardawe, Swansea Valley



<https://tinyurl.com/Llangiwg-Church-Master-2026>



<https://tinyurl.com/Llangiwg-Church-FB>



Lizzy the Jug my four-legged companion and I embarked on a journey to explore Llangiwg Church, nestled near the town of Pontardawe in the Swansea Valley. The expedition commenced with a thrilling drive along a narrow, steep road that wound its way up the solitary mountain where the church stood. Doubts lingered about whether our campervan could conquer the challenging path, but we pressed on and triumphed.



We spent a few hours there talking with the volunteers who made us welcome to the open day run by The Llangiwg Trust (www.llangiwgtrust.org), whose mission is to be the stewards of the former St Ciwg's Church at Llangiwg, situated near Pontardawe.

This church stands majestically in a serene, picturesque location, perched 700 feet above sea level on Barley Hill in the Upper Swansea Valley. It holds within its walls an ancient legacy, steeped in both historic and architectural significance dating back to the 6th century, known as the age of Celtic saints.

Their goal is to honour this rich heritage by preserving and thoughtfully developing this iconic structure for sustained and meaningful use by the local community. They aspire to provide a hub that serves the greater good, focusing on social welfare, education, culture, and the environment.

By fostering a vibrant and engaging space, they aim to create an invaluable resource that enriches lives and offers a deeper connection to the roots of our shared history and culture.

Upon arrival, our anticipation was met with awe-inspiring reality. Our purpose for visiting was to meet with a knowledgeable guide named John Williams, who graciously offered to give us a detailed tour of the church. He promised to provide historical insights into why this place of worship was situated in such an isolated locale.

The origins of Llangiwg Church trace back to a Celtic foundation, dedicated to Ciwg the Confessor, a revered 6th-century hermit and saint who introduced Christianity to the region between AD 542 and 568 during the era of St David, the Age of Saints. Initially, structures were made of wattle and daub, and the transition to a stone church likely occurred about four centuries later, after the Norman conquest of Britain.



The present-day church structure we admire was rebuilt during the Tudor period around c.1500 and underwent substantial alterations in 1812, as evidenced by a plaque on the southern external wall. The church's tower potentially holds remnants of its Norman roots, though its height had to be reduced to ensure stability. The interior preserves a Norman font, a precious link to the church's earlier construction.



Llangiwg Church proudly holds a Grade II listing, boasting an unusually elongated chancel and nave without a partition. In the 19th century, significant renovations included repaving and reseating the nave, substituting stone roof slates with Caernarfon slates, and introducing new windows. The current roof, as we see it today, was installed by the Church in Wales in 1997.



Intriguingly, a tangible link to the early Christian era emerges from the midst of history: the fragment of an early Christian cross, believed to hail from the 9th century, or quite possibly an even earlier period. This fragment comprises the top portion of a round-headed stone, intricately incised with primitive crosses, potentially once constituting a vital element of a standing or preaching cross, a place for open-air worship in those times.

It stands as a tangible connection to the pre-Norman church and serves as one of the closest artefacts we possess that harks back to Ciwg's era in the 6th century, preserving a glimpse of the religious practices and beliefs of that time.

Additionally, within the churchyard's southern section, not far from the church entrance, lies another significant discovery: a socketed stone associated with the construction or installation of a cross. This socketed stone, expertly dated to the 9th to 12th century range, further corroborates the historical depth of this sacred site and the evolving expressions of faith and reverence across centuries. These artefacts collectively narrate a story of enduring spirituality and the evolving ways in which the community expressed its devotion and connection to the divine.

Historically, Llangiwg began as a Roman Catholic church, acknowledging the authority of the Pope until the Reformation in 1534 during Henry VIII's reign. In the 12th century, a dispute arose between Bernard, the Bishop of St David's (Pembrokeshire), and Urban, the Bishop of Llandaff, regarding the diocesan boundaries. Ultimately, it was proven that Llangiwg belonged to the diocese of St David's, overturning the Pope's earlier decree.

Through various historical periods, Llangiwig saw changes in patronage and financial endowments. In 1563, it was apportioned to the Hospital of the Blessed David in Swansea. Over the years, the church remained a central spiritual hub for parishioners, especially local farmers residing in the upland farms of the region. The Maendy Inn nearby provided a post-Sunday service gathering place for churchgoers. Interestingly, remnants of the parish clerk's house, believed to have been Ciwg's cell, lie beneath the ruins of the inn. After the morning service, congregants engaged in ball games against the church tower and other outdoor activities, including local cattle fairs.

As industrialisation took root in the valleys, the population shifted to the valley floor, prompting a need for a more conveniently located church. This led to the construction of St Peter's Church in Pontardawe, starting in 1858 and completing in 1860. Additionally, during the cholera epidemic of 1866, the Llangiwig graveyard became a final resting place for victims from distant areas, reflecting the sombre history of the time. Paupers from Pontardawe Workhouse were also interred here during that period.

Within the confines of the Llangiwig Church, dedicated to St Ciwg, lies a restored well (51.734534, -3.849899), a historical artefact that has been given new life in recent years.



This well, steeped in antiquity, evokes intrigue, possibly pre-dating the arrival of Ciwg in the fifth century CE.

The notion arises that the well may have existed on this site long before Ciwg established his cell, hinting at a potential pre-Christian origin.

Perched atop the hill's crest, the location offers a panoramic view encompassing the south-western Mynydd Carn, Llechart, and the south-eastern Mynydd Drumau (Carreg Bica), fostering suspicions of pre-Christian practices tied to the landscape. The church itself retains vestiges from a time preceding the Norman era, preserving fragments of its ancient heritage within its sacred walls.

The Transatlantic Journey of Ezra Whitney Rhodes

During my first visit to Llangiwg Church, I came across a gravestone that caught my attention, that of Ezra Whitney Rhodes. Intrigued by the presence of an American in this quiet Welsh churchyard, I began researching his story and uncovered a fascinating connection between Wales and the maritime world of 19th-century New England.

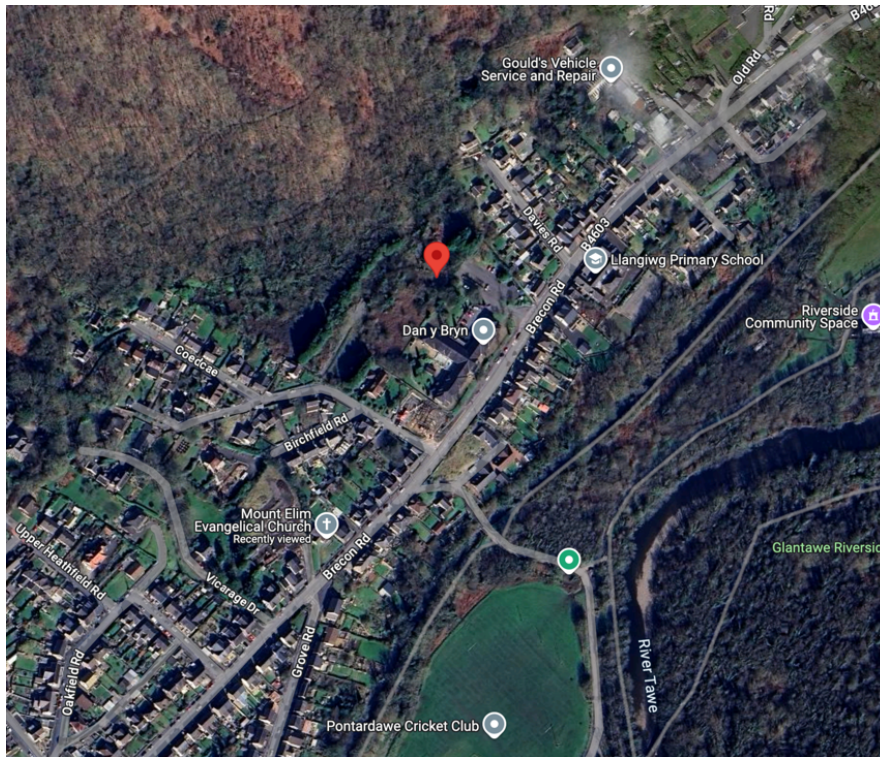


[findagrave.com: Ezra Whitney Rhodes](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/111111111)

Ezra Whitney Rhodes was born on 12 April 1867, in Rockland, Maine, USA, into a family deeply rooted in the community.

In 1913, while staying in Ystalyfera, he fell gravely ill. With no local doctor available, he was taken to the Pontardawe Workhouse, part of the Pontardawe Poor Law Union, established in 1879. The workhouse served several local parishes, comprising seven parishes that had previously formed part of the Neath and Swansea Poor Law Unions, namely Cilybebyll, Llanguicke, Mawr, Rhyndwelydach, Ynysymon, Ystradgynlais Higher and Ystradgynlais Lower, offering care and shelter for the impoverished, sick and elderly, with a capacity for 130 inmates.





It was situated to the north-east of Pontardawe, on a sloping site on the north side of Brecon Road. It provided essential medical facilities, often serving as the only source of care for those in need. However, conditions were austere, with strict rules and basic amenities. Despite the treatment available, Ezra's condition worsened, and he passed away on 13 September 1913. He was buried in Llangiwg Cemetery, with his family in America funding the burial and headstone. A few years later, a woman from America travelled to visit his grave, preserving his memory.

His father, James Edward Rhodes, was a Civil War veteran who later served as mayor of Rockland from 1904 to 1906.

findagrave.com: [James Edward Rhodes](#)

His mother, Celestia “Lettie” (Whitney) Rhodes, was also an active member of local organisations, including the Woman's Relief Corps, where she served as state president.

findagrave.com: [Celestia “Lettie” Rhodes](#)

Rockland's thriving industries likely shaped Ezra's life and career. The town was known for shipbuilding, fishing, and its renowned sardine and fish canneries, which supplied goods across the United States and internationally. This maritime influence may have drawn Ezra to a life at sea, and it may explain why he found himself in Swansea, Wales, a city known for its own fishing and canning industries, at the time of his death.

Ezra passed away on 15 September 1913, in Pontardawe, Glamorgan, Wales, at the age of 46. He was laid to rest in St Ciwg's Churchyard, Llangiwg, Neath Port Talbot. Though he lies far from his native Rockland, his legacy lives on with a memorial in Achorn Cemetery in Rockland, Knox County, Maine.



Ezra's family in Rockland was similarly marked by a spirit of service and dedication. His brother, Albert Woodbury Rhodes, was a respected member of the Sons of Veterans and served as a corporal in the Tilson Light Infantry until his untimely death in 1890.

His sister, Lucie Ellen Rhodes, devoted her life to teaching and civic leadership in their hometown. Ezra's life, along with his family's contributions, reflects the ties between Rockland's maritime heritage and the broader Atlantic world, a connection that spanned oceans and brought him to rest in a small churchyard in Wales.

Also Captain Orris Rhodes, Ezra Whitney Rhodes's grandfather, was a seasoned mariner whose life exemplified the enduring maritime tradition passed down through generations in the Rhodes family. Known for his skill and dedication, Captain Rhodes spent his career navigating major transatlantic routes, connecting North America, Europe and the Caribbean. His leadership and expertise earned him respect in the seafaring community.

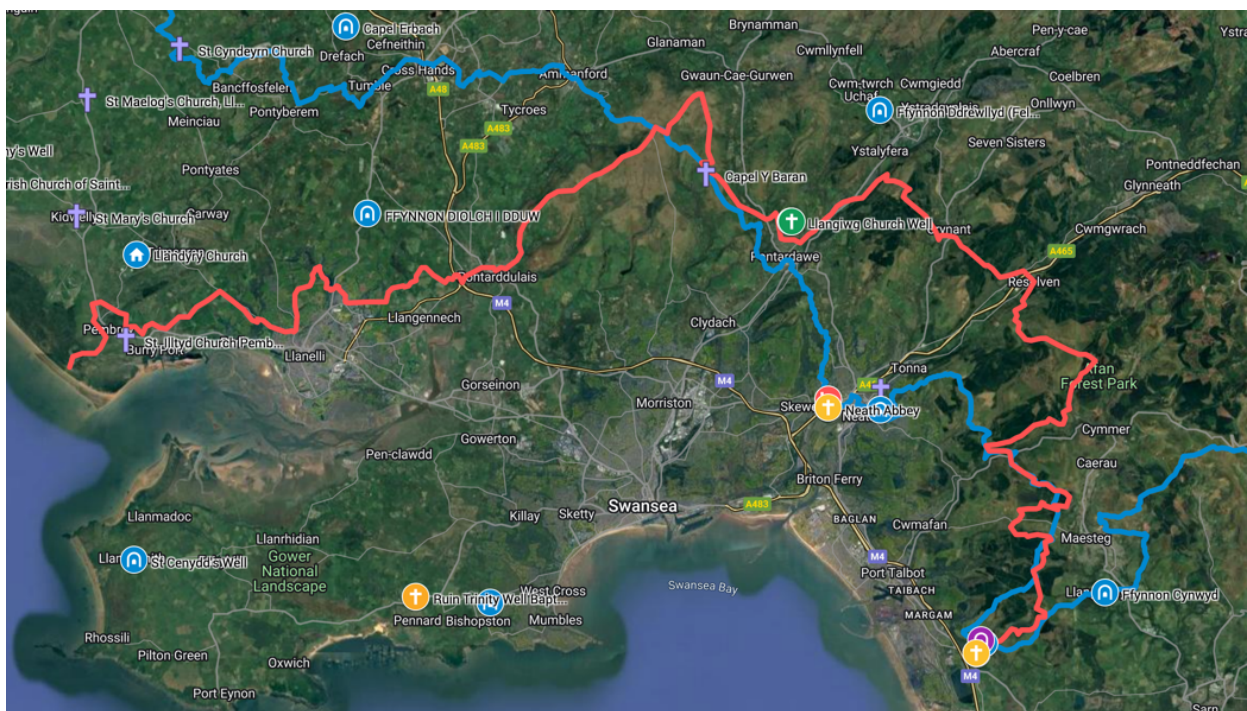
Captain Rhodes's final journey was aboard the schooner *Aldana Rokes*, where he passed away en route from Belfast, Ireland, to Matanzas, Cuba, at the age of 59 years, 10 months and 16 days. Following the custom of the time, he was laid to rest at sea. This traditional burial, a common practice for sailors who died at sea, left his resting place in the very waters he had sailed throughout his life.

The legacy of maritime life continued through his grandson, Ezra Whitney Rhodes, whose own life and travels eventually led him to South Wales. Like his grandfather, Ezra was drawn to the sea and the bustling industry surrounding it, connecting the Rhodes family to ports and communities across the Atlantic. This shared calling across generations reveals the deep ties between the Rhodes family and the maritime world, a legacy that spanned continents and left an indelible mark both in America and, finally, in a quiet Welsh churchyard.

The Significance of Llangiwg Church in Welsh Pilgrimage Routes

Llangiwg Church holds a unique place in the network of historic Welsh pilgrimage routes. Its location places it close to two notable paths: St Illtyd's Way and the Cistercian Way. These routes were historically significant paths for spiritual seekers, connecting holy sites across Wales and offering opportunities for reflection, devotion and connection with sacred landscapes. Today, these routes continue to draw pilgrims, historians, and those interested in Wales's rich religious heritage.

This map illustrates the network of Welsh religious sites and historic pilgrimage routes, tracing pathways that have guided pilgrims through the Welsh landscape for centuries. The routes connect key sites of spiritual and historical significance, showcasing Wales's rich heritage of faith and devotion. Each path reflects the enduring legacy of pilgrimage in Welsh culture, linking sacred places across the country.



[Interactive map: Welsh Religious Sites](#)

St Illtyd's Way

St Illtyd's Way is named in honour of Saint Illtyd, a revered 5th- to 6th-century saint known for founding one of Britain's earliest centres of Christian learning at Llantwit Major. This pilgrimage route spans from **St Illtyd's Church in Pembrey** to the **Church of St Illtyd in Neath**, passing through a diverse array of landscapes, from coastal stretches to serene woodlands and ancient hillsides.

St Illtyd's Church, Pembrey

[People's Collection Wales: St Illtyd's Church, Pembrey](#)



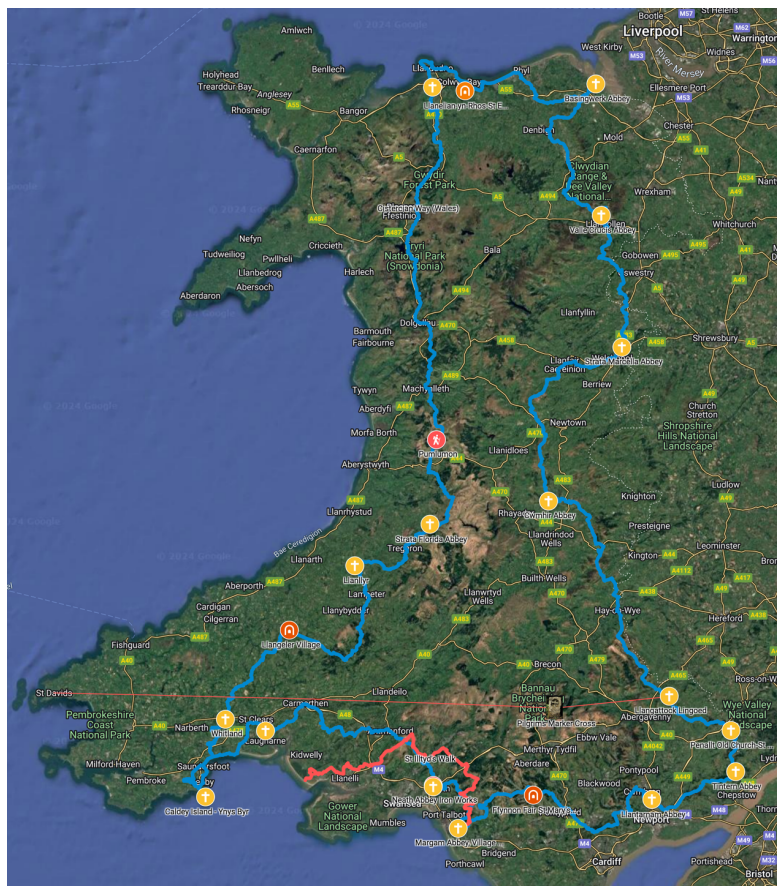
The route celebrates St Illtyd's legacy of scholarship, faith and community. Along the way, pilgrims encounter medieval churches, sacred wells and historical sites connected to St Illtyd's monastic tradition. This route is part of a larger tradition of pilgrimage paths that highlight Wales's monastic heritage, blending natural beauty with opportunities for spiritual reflection. Llangiwg Church, though not directly on St Illtyd's Way, lies near enough to this path that many pilgrims visit as a place of prayer, adding a quiet chapter of reflection on their journey through the spiritual landscape of South Wales.

Church of St Iltyd in Neath



The Cistercian Way

The Cistercian Way is a circular pilgrimage route that traces the Cistercian order's impact on Welsh spirituality and society. This path connects various Cistercian abbeys around Wales, such as **Tintern Abbey**, **Strata Florida** and **Margam Abbey**, creating a network that explores the rich legacy of the Cistercian monks in Wales. The order was renowned for its devotion to prayer, self-sufficiency and land cultivation, and the Cistercian Way celebrates these contributions to Welsh culture and spirituality.



Following the Cistercian Way allows modern pilgrims to experience Wales's breath-taking rural landscapes, from river valleys to mountain passes, all while reflecting on the monastic history that shaped these regions. Llangiwg Church and its Holy Well, with its proximity to sections of this route, serve as a peaceful resting point for those tracing the steps of the Cistercians. Here, visitors can pause to reflect on the historical and spiritual legacy of the monks who played a vital role in Welsh religious life during the medieval period.

The History of Llangiwg Church and Saint Ciwg

Llangiwg Church is a historic and spiritual landmark that has stood the test of time. The church, dedicated to the little-known Saint Ciwg (or Ciw), carries a rich heritage dating back to the early days of Christianity in Wales. Its history weaves together ancient faith, local traditions, and centuries of community reverence, making it a valuable piece of Welsh spiritual and cultural history.

The Legend of Saint Ciwg

Saint Ciwg, the church's patron, is a somewhat mysterious figure, as little historical information has survived about him. He is believed to have been a Welsh saint who lived during the 5th or 6th century, a time of great monastic growth in Wales. Like many early Welsh saints, Saint Ciwg would have been part of the Celtic Christian tradition, which emphasised asceticism, monastic life, and a deep connection with nature.

Although details about his life are scarce, Saint Ciwg was likely a contemporary of other Welsh saints, such as Saint Illtyd and Saint David, who were instrumental in spreading Christianity throughout Wales during this era. His dedication to spiritual life and his influence on the local area were enough to inspire the establishment of a church in his honour, which would eventually become known as Llangiwg, translating to “the church of Ciwg.”

Early Christian Roots

Llangiwg Church is believed to have been founded sometime in the early medieval period, likely between the 6th and 8th centuries. This period in Wales was marked by the spread of small monastic communities, where monks lived in simplicity and focused on prayer, study and manual labour. The early church at Llangiwg would have been a modest structure, possibly a wooden building with a thatched roof, and it likely served as a spiritual centre for residents and travellers alike.

The church's location near ancient pilgrimage routes, including St Illtyd's Way and the Cistercian Way, hints at its importance as a waypoint for those undertaking religious journeys across Wales. Pilgrims travelling through South Wales would have found a place for rest and reflection at Llangiwg, drawn to its quiet beauty and the sanctuary it provided.

Medieval Developments and the Stone Church

Llangiwg Church is an Anglican parish church with medieval origins, altered in 1812. Located in one of the more remote and picturesque areas of Glamorgan, the church is historically significant, retaining its medieval fabric despite its isolation. The church has long been a focal point for the community of Llangiwg and beyond, remaining a key site despite being declared redundant in 2004. It is now cared for by the Friends of Llangiwg Church. Historically, the church was part of the Lordship of Gower and served as a destination for pilgrims during the late medieval period. The site itself is a rich historical landscape, comprising the church, churchyard, well, and possibly an early Christian platform.



The church's architectural interest is evident in its medieval core, which retains the basic plan from around 1500. The early Christian font and stones provide direct evidence of the earlier medieval structure.

According to the Royal Commission's *Glamorgan Inventory*, an important early medieval trackway passes near the church, suggesting that the area held religious significance even before the Norman period. Contrary to common belief, the extent of 19th-century rebuilding has often been exaggerated.

Much of the medieval fabric survives, except for a rebuilt section of the north chancel wall. The church follows a typical medieval plan with an undivided nave and chancel, a porch, and a west tower.

The porch and tower are non-liturgical additions. The porch, traditionally used for meetings and agreements, retains stone benches and a holy water stoup. The tower, an embellishment housing a ring of bells, was an extravagant feature for upland churches, though few were able to build such towers. The tower opens to the nave through a rough, pointed arch and appears to be of the same period as the nave.

The tower's thick walls are pierced by putlog holes, and it originally had three floors: a ground-floor chamber, a ringing chamber with two small loops (one facing the nave), and a bell chamber that once housed a large bell. The top of the tower is crenelated, and its unusual placement is offset to accommodate a blocked doorway in the west nave wall.

This doorway, along with the thick wall, suggests the presence of a stone mural stair, which was likely lit by a surviving Tudor-style window at the upper level. Further archaeological investigation is needed to fully understand the area's architectural mysteries.

Inside the church, most of the fabric dates from the 19th century, likely in two phases. The first phase is marked by an inscription under the eaves of the south wall, reading, "This Church was new roofed and considerably altered. A.D. 1812." This phase included the addition of a Georgian plastered ceiling, which likely replaced an earlier open roof.

Other alterations involved the re-paving of the church, re-pewing, and the rebuilding of the north chancel wall. Some of the pews, featuring enclosed benches with raised panels and

moulded rails, may date from this period. A later phase of 19th-century work involved the installation of Early English style windows and the reordering of the chancel.

Although the church has ceased regular use, the font has been preserved. This large circular Norman font, made of Sutton stone and featuring a plain moulding at the base, serves as a precious link to the church's Norman predecessor. The church also contains early Christian stones, including a "disc-headed" cross located in the porch.

This cross, dated to the 9th century, is described in the *Glamorgan Inventory*, which also discusses its provenance. Additionally, a socketed stone for small standing slab or cross remains in the churchyard, dating from the 9th to 12th century.

The churchyard, a large quadrangular space rising steeply to the north, is enclosed by a drystone wall, with access points from the west (to the well), south (the main gateway), and north (via steps over the wall). The churchyard is home to a variety of memorials spanning from the 17th to 20th centuries.

A concentration of 18th-century altar tombs and other memorials can be found on the east and south sides. On the north side, there are several coffin-shaped graves defined by pitched sandstone slabs. Among the 19th-century burials are those of victims of cholera epidemics, while 20th-century graves include casualties from the World Wars.

The Decline and Restoration of Llangiwg Church

Like many ancient rural churches, Llangiwg faced challenges in maintaining its structure and congregation as communities shifted and modernised. By the 19th century, the church had fallen into disrepair, and its congregation dwindled as people moved to more urban areas or attended larger, more modern churches nearby. Eventually, services ceased, and the church was left largely abandoned.

In recent decades, however, interest in preserving Welsh heritage sites has led to a renewed focus on restoring Llangiwg Church. The Llangiwg Church Trust was established to protect and maintain the church, ensuring that its historical significance is not lost to time.

Through the efforts of local historians, volunteers and conservationists, the church has been stabilised and partially restored, allowing visitors to continue to connect with this remarkable site and the legacy of Saint Ciwg.

Llangiwg Church Today

Today, Llangiwg Church stands as a symbol of Welsh heritage, thanks largely to the dedicated efforts of the Llangiwg Trust charity. This charity, established with the mission to preserve and restore the church, is working to revitalise the historic site and reintegrate it into the life of the local community.

[Llangiwg Trust](#)

The Trust's restoration work focuses not only on preserving the church's physical structure but also on reimagining its role as a vibrant community space. Through careful restoration, the charity aims to make the church a multi-functional venue where local events, educational programmes and community gatherings can take place.

By breathing new life into Llangiwg Church, the Llangiwg Trust charity is ensuring that this treasured landmark remains a living part of the community, accessible to future generations for both historical appreciation and community enrichment.

Llangiwg Church's location along historic pilgrimage routes gives it a special place in the Welsh landscape. Pilgrims, historians, and travellers alike are drawn to its quiet beauty, where they can reflect on the lives of those who came before.

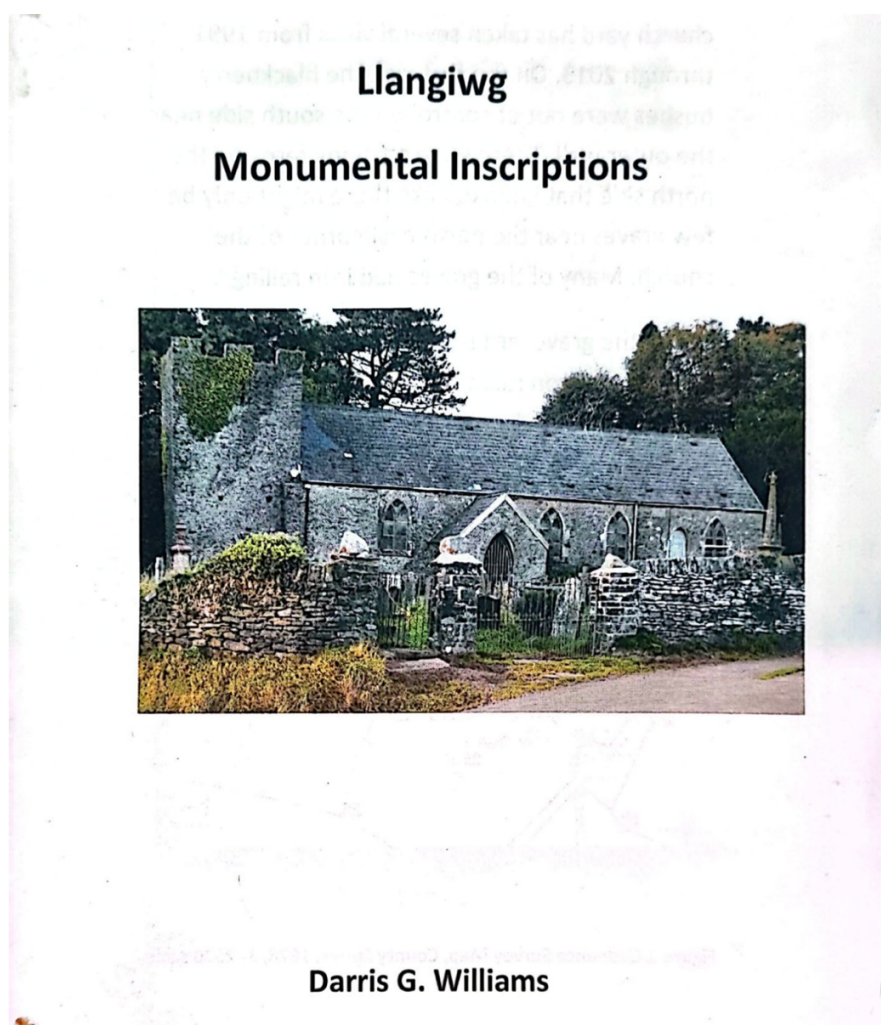
The church is both a spiritual sanctuary and a historical site, bridging past and present, Welsh and American, in a quiet testament to faith, heritage and resilience.

Darris G. Williams: Inscription Survey

A special mention to the survey of grave memorials at Llangiwg Church Cemetery, undertaken by Darris G. Williams over multiple visits from 1991 to 2013, reflects his ongoing pursuit of family history.

During the initial visit, the blackberry bushes on the south side near the outer wall had grown wild, and the north side was so overrun with ferns that only a few graves near the north-east corner of the church were visible. Many of the graves were enclosed by iron railings.

Today, the graveyard is beautifully maintained, and most of the iron railings have been removed. It is now a peaceful and well-kept space, where visitors often stop to enjoy the serene surroundings.



Timeline of Llangiwg Church

AD 542–568 — Ciwg the Confessor, a 6th-century hermit and saint, brings Christianity to the area during the Age of Saints; the first wattle and daub church is founded.

6th–8th centuries — Early monastic community established near ancient pilgrimage routes including St Illtyd's Way and the Cistercian Way.

c.9th century — The early Christian disc-headed cross fragment is carved.

9th–12th centuries — The socketed stone for a standing cross is placed in the churchyard.

Post-Norman conquest — Transition from timber to a stone church, around four centuries after Ciwg's time.

12th century — Boundary dispute between Bernard, Bishop of St David's, and Urban, Bishop of Llandaff, resolved in favour of St David's diocese.

1534 — The Reformation under Henry VIII ends Llangiwg's allegiance to Rome.

1563 — The church is apportioned to the Hospital of the Blessed David, Swansea.

c.1500 — The present-day church structure is rebuilt during the Tudor period.

1812 — Substantial alterations recorded, including a new roof and Georgian plastered ceiling, as noted in the south wall inscription.

1858–1860 — St Peter's Church, Pontardawe, is built as the population shifts to the valley floor.

1866 — Cholera epidemic; victims and Pontardawe Workhouse paupers are buried at Llangiwg.

19th century — The nave is repaved and reheated, Caernarfon slates are introduced, and new windows are installed.

1867 — Ezra Whitney Rhodes is born in Rockland, Maine.

1879 — The Pontardawe Poor Law Union is established.

1890 — Albert Woodbury Rhodes, Ezra's brother, dies.

1904–1906 — James Edward Rhodes, Ezra's father, serves as mayor of Rockland.

1913 — Ezra Whitney Rhodes falls ill in Ystalyfera, is taken to Pontardawe Workhouse, and dies in September; he is buried at Llangiwg.

1991–2013 — Darris G. Williams conducts the inscription survey of Llangiwg Church Cemetery.

1997 — The current church roof is installed by the Church in Wales.

2004 — The church is declared redundant and is cared for by the Friends of Llangiwg Church.

2024 — Visit recorded, and article written by Graham T Emmanuel.