

Tourist Information Pamphlet

Question Time!

This pamphlet operates around a sequence of questions that seek to help you engage further with the strong connection that the Welsh community had to St. John's church during the medieval period.

Look out for the questions in **bold text!** Reflecting on these questions will enable you to get closer to the Welsh voices that speak to us in the beautiful space of St. John's.

The 'Outsider'

- **Can you imagine how it would feel to be seen as an outsider in this peaceful, religious space?**
- **How would you feel if you walked through these ancient walls and people reacted to you with suspicion and hostility?**

This was the situation that faced the Welsh people (*cymry*) when they travelled into medieval Chester; and places such as St. John's church became multi-cultural, a site where the Cestrians and the Welsh interacted. In this modern age, humanity is more thoroughly integrated than ever before, through social media and technology, so how can we begin to understand the Welsh relationship to St. John's ?

'Divisions'

There is a long and complex history between the city of Chester and the Welsh people. The most important date to remember is 1282, when King Edward I of England finally defeated the last Welsh Prince; Llewelyn ap Gruffudd or 'Llewelyn the Last', and secured his

conquest of the country. Edward immediately began the colonisation of Wales to ensure military security; and Chester provided a fundamental support network for English armies during this period. Tensions between the Welsh and English were felt keenly in Chester, due to the city's role in the colonisation. Chester was viewed as a stronghold for English royal power, which was acting directly against the Welsh people.

- **How do you think this history would influence Welsh links to Chester, and to St. John's Church?**

'To the Cross at Chester'

As you walk around the beautiful building of St. John's, it is easy to view it as a purely Cestrian place, however you are currently exploring a space that contains Welsh and English, as well as Cestrian heritages. This begs the question:

- **How can we explore Welsh heritage with regards to St. John's?**

Medieval Welsh poetry offers us a unique opportunity to hear voices from the past! Many Welsh poets wrote directly to St. John's Church, as it was home to the legendary 'Holy Rood of Chester' – a silver cross said to contain relics of Christ's cross, reportedly washed up on the shores of Chester by the sea. The relics were believed to have miraculous healing powers, and as such St. John's became an important site of pilgrimage.

These poems lend us key insight into St. John's as a site that contains Welsh hopes and emotions; allowing us to walk in the footsteps of Chester's medieval Welsh visitors. Maredudd ap Rhys (c.1420 – 1485), a recognised Welsh priest and poet, writes directly to the Rood, praising it as a 'high-ranking Doctor' after he received a 'miracle from God', healing his wounds. The cross draws the pain from his 'angry thigh' to his knee, 'from the knee to the

foot' before being taken 'tame and calm' by the wooden relics. St. John's, and the relics it contained, was a place blessed by the power of God, referred to by Maredudd as 'the Man who owns the world'. The miracles worked by Chester's Holy Rood served as a reminder of God as a higher authority, showing that English colonial power was not absolute. The healing that Maredudd experiences shows that the Welsh community were included in God's love and worthy of his blessings, in contrast to the suspicion and exclusion they often experienced when visiting Chester.

Another Welsh writer, Gruffudd ap Maredudd ap Dafydd (1352 – 1382) renowned for his poems to Chester, continues the depiction of St. John's as a place in which Welsh faith and hopes were invested.

- **Do we still attribute feelings of hope to religious spaces such as St. John's?**

The relics are described by Gruffudd as a 'source of grace and support for the weak' – a clear confirmation of God's support for the Welsh people that visited St. John's. Gruffudd compares the Welsh people directly to the biblical Israelites, God's 'own people', who were oppressed by the Egyptians. The 'Holy Rood' at St John's and the miracles that it performed for members of the Welsh community acted as physical evidence of God's love, freeing them from 'long suffering at the hands of enemies' - just as God's love for the Israelite people allowed them to be freed from slavery.

Try it yourself! Can you pronounce Gruffudd ap Maredudd's poetry?

(lines 87 - 89) : *'Dawn a phlaid gweiniaid, uwch gwynion – foroedd*

A phrifdeg lysoeddd ffrydau gleision'

Translation: 'Source of grace and support for the weak, above the white seas,

And the fair courts of the blue currents’

Redeemed by Religion!

The religious dimension of Chester, as detailed in the above extracts, was one of very few admirable aspects of the city in Welsh eyes – it is evident that they weren’t always so praiseworthy! Lewys Glyn Cothi is vocal about his feelings in his ‘Satire on the Men of Chester’ – ‘On Monday, because of my blindness, I moved to Chester/ It would have been better if I’d got lost!’

From Medieval to Modern: ‘Hryre’

‘Hryre’ (meaning ‘ruin’ in Old English) is a new artwork by Nayan Kulkarni that illuminates the ruins of St. John’s with fragments of medieval texts about Chester. ‘Hryre’ represents the interaction between the communities that populated medieval Chester – mixing texts written in English and Latin with those by Welsh poets Maredudd ap Rhys and Lewys Glyn Cothi. The installation represents the rich, multi-cultural heritage of Chester and is most striking when viewed at night – prompting thoughts about memory, time and decay in a the calm space of St. John’s. The piece visually demonstrates the importance of Chester and St. John’s Church to the Welsh community through the Welsh words projected onto the stone, and allows modern visitors to experience a part of this medieval dialogue.