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## St Garmon's Church

### St Garmon

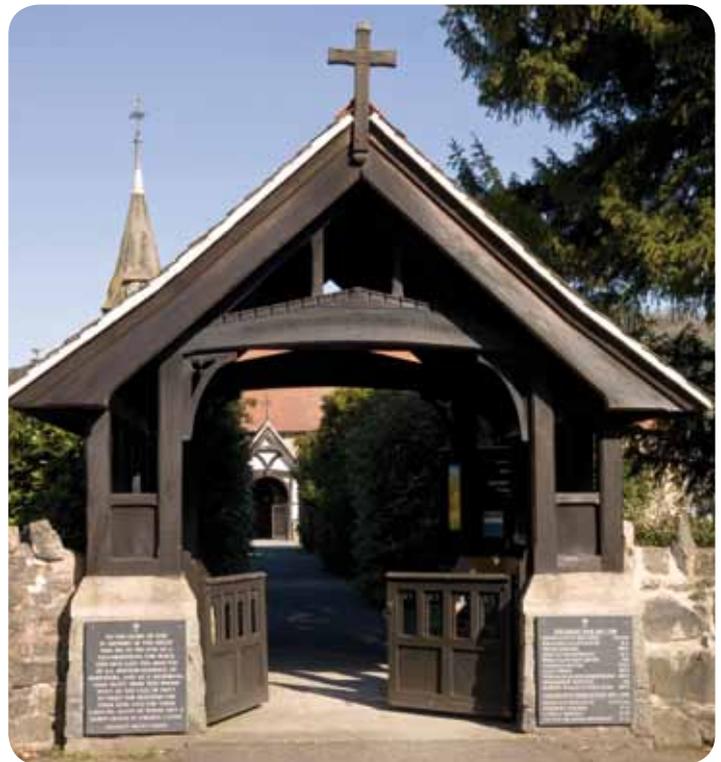
Little is known about St Garmon. According to tradition, he lived in the ninth century and preached from a mound in the churchyard at Llanfechain. The remains of this 'preaching mound', 'Twmpath Garmon' are still evident today on the north side of the church. Graves have been dug into the mound. According to the recollections of nineteenth century villagers recorded in Volume 5 of the Montgomeryshire Collections, cockpits were dug near to the mound so cock fighting could take place. Ffynnon Garmon, the Holy Well associated with Garmon, lies to the south east of the village.

### The Norman Church

St Garmon's is thought to be the most complete Norman church in Montgomeryshire. The earliest part of the church dates from the twelfth century, and the remains of a simple single cell rectangular church survive in the footprint and walls of the east end of today's church.

The remains of this church can be seen in the three deep, played windows on the east elevation.

The glass in the right hand window is Victorian work and depicts St Garmon.



*The Norman church had two south doors. The priest's door has been blocked but the second door, with its chamfered semi-circular surround, is easy to spot.*

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### Fifteenth to seventeenth centuries

The nave has a fine arch-braced roof with foiled struts in the apex, dating from the fifteenth century. The wagon ceiling over the chancel was inserted by the Victorians.



The south porch was added during the seventeenth century. Gashes in the stone door surround may be the result of sword blades sharpened before battle, possibly during the civil war, when the church was involved in skirmishes. The use of stones from the church to sharpen weaponry in this way was very common. Soldiers may have believed it transferred God's blessing on them.



The interior fittings of the church also bear the marks of the civil war in Llanfechain. The stone font is decorated with Tudor roses and its pedestal was damaged during the civil war. The



impressive carved cover, complete with pulley mechanism, is a magnificent survival. The dove above the cover is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, coming down at baptism.

The pulpit is dated 1636 and is a fine example of timber carving from the Jacobean period. A Victorian writer referred to it as "the redeeming feature of the interior".



The Church has three bells that were hung in 1730 and 1737. According to local tradition, a fourth bell was to be installed, but the road from Llanantffraid to Llanfechain was too muddy and so the bells were installed in Llanantffraid Church instead!

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### Victorian restoration

By 1850, a small single story extension had been built on the west end, probably used as a meeting room, a schoolroom and vestry. A wonderful article written in 1872 for Volume 5 of the Montgomeryshire Collections describes it as "a greater deformity can scarcely be conceived". The extension was removed in the 1850s.

The writer also refers to windows "of the most hideous form imaginable, such as would not be inserted into any decent stable". The form of these windows can be seen in the sketch of the church before the work. By the end of the 1850s, they had been replaced with the windows still in place today. The sketches on the right show St Garmon's before Jenson's 1850's restoration, sketched by E Salter and printed in Volume 5 of the Montgomeryshire Collections.



*Painting of St Garmon's before 1850 on display in the church*

A sketch of St Garmon's in 1872 from the Montgomeryshire Collections Volume 5 shows the familiar church that survives today. The west end extension has been removed and the windows have been enlarged. The distinctive timber bell turret, that so characterises the church today, is in place. It was also at this time that the wheel window was inserted into the west end.



### The 1880's restoration



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The 1850's restoration was concerned mainly with the west end of the church and with the exterior. The 1880's restoration involved mainly internal alterations. The internal plaster was stripped away, leaving the masonry exposed. Most of the woodwork dates from this phase, including the screen, west end gallery, the choir stalls and the carved reredos (behind the altar), designed by John Douglas, and carved in Chester.



The impact of the exposed masonry on the interior is dramatic. Originally, the walls would have been coated

in lime plaster and this would be limewashed, making the interior space lighter, warmer and more coherent. Masonry would only be left exposed in this way when the stones were dressed (cut to fine shapes). Scraping the internal plaster off the walls was very popular with Victorian restorers. The industrial mass production of brick made it a common building material and meant stone buildings regained a higher status – showing off the stone was desirable!

By the 1870s, there was growing opposition to this type of radical make over on church interiors and in 1877 the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) was set up by William Morris to try to save the authenticity of the historic fabric. The SPAB was criticised for being 'anti-scrape' by keen 'restorers' and a philosophical debate over the nature of conservation began. St Garmon's interior would seem odd to its Norman builders: to them it would be like leaving breeze blocks exposed today. The monuments are fixed to the walls in a sea of vertical crazing paving. But many people like the atmosphere created by the exposed stone. The debate continues!

## Churchyard

The circular churchyard is not unusual in the area. According to popular belief, it was created that way so as to leave no corners for the devil to hide in. The gravestones on the south side have been laid flat and the area grassed over to create an open space at the centre of the village.



The churchyard contains a sandstone sundial dated 1770. The sundial's carved pillar is on a stepped base and still carries a dial plate. It is thought the base could have also been the base of a medieval cross.

The stone cross close to the entrance of the church is the inspiration for the logo of the Meini Bywiol Living Stones trail.

The lychgate on the south side of the churchyard is the village war memorial.

## Further information

There is a church guide sheet in the church, giving outline details of the layers of architectural history at St Garmon's. An entertaining account of the church from an 1870's perspective is available in Montgomeryshire Collections Volume 5, A Slight Historical and Topographical sketch of the Parish of Llanfechain in the County of Montgomery. Author unknown.