

The Story of the Shrine of Our Lady of Cardigan

During the middle ages there was a notable pilgrimage in honour of Our Lady in Cardigan. A beautiful legend describes how a statue of Mary was found by the side of the river Teifi, "*and her sonne upon her lappe, and the taper bernynge in her hande*". It was taken to the parish church but would not remain there, returning three or four times to "*the place where now is buylded the church of our Lady*", the present St. Mary's church. A chantry priest sang Mass daily in honour of Our Lady for pilgrims who came to pray and leave gifts. They lodged with the Knights Hospitallers of St. John, where the Angel Hotel now stands.

St. Mary's dates from 1158. If it was built to hold the statue then Our Lady of Cardigan is indeed ancient. It resembles an earlier shrine in the city of Arras, which was then in Flanders. Did Flemish merchants, who settled in Cardigan and traded in Welsh wool out of the port, bring the statue back with them?

Outside town, on the old pilgrim track, lie the ruins of a building by a stream. It is called Capel Bach (Little Chapel), and may have been an oratory where travellers prayed before walking the last mile to the shrine. It is the same distance from St. Mary's as Walsingham Slipper Chapel is from the shrine there.

St. Mary's was a priory church of Chertsey Abbey. Benedictine monks cared for it until 1538, when they were expelled and the shrine destroyed.

Devotion to Mary was once universal in Wales. Many places are called Llanfair or Capel Mair (Mary's church, chapel), and dozens of flowers and plants bear her name. No girl was given the name Mair (Mary), as it was reserved for Our Lady.

There was a lesser taper shrine in Haverfordwest. The most notable is at Cagliari in Sardinia, where in 1370 a Catalonian ship foundered offshore, and a statue of Our Lady of the Taper was brought to land. A church was built for it on a headland, and named Santa Maria di Bonaria (of the good air), for people said its presence had cleared the place of a pestilential atmosphere. Spain controlled Cagliari, and its sailors adopted Santa Maria di Bonaria as their shrine.

Ransomer priests cared for it. They were great seafarers, as their vocation was to rescue Christian captives from the Moors. They became chaplains to the Spanish navy, and sailed with Columbus, bringing their devotion with them. They founded a shrine in Cuba. Others, named La Candelaria, are to be found in Tenerife, Guatemala and Rio de Janeiro. Buenos Aires was once called Santa Maria de los Buenos Aires (the Spanish name for the Cagliari shrine).

We do not know how the devotion transferred to Barcelona and Cagliari. In the 1320's and 1330's Catalonian sailors had thronged British waters. Did they come to Cardigan, see the shrine and copied it?

In 1904 Breton monks, in exile near Cardigan, revived the devotion, giving the title Our Lady of Cardigan to their abbey church and also to the little church they opened in town in 1912. They left in 1916, and another generation passed before the name was heard again.

In 1952 Martin Gillett, who later was to found the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, told Bishop Petit that Cardigan had once possessed a famous shrine. The Bishop instantly decided to restore it. In 1956 a new statue was blessed by Cardinal Griffin in Westminster Cathedral and then taken to every parish in the diocese of Menevia before arriving in Cardigan. On 27 May 1956, a great concourse from all parts of Britain bore it to the little church of Our Lady of Sorrows. On 23 July 1970 Bishops Petit and Fox consecrated the new church of Our Lady of the Taper, named after the shrine. Three days later pilgrims transferred the statue there.

The original statue did not prove durable, and Mother Concordia, O.S.B., was asked to make another one in bronze. Designated as Welsh National Shrine of Our Lady, it was blessed in Cardiff Metropolitan Cathedral and brought all over Wales before, on Pentecost Sunday, 18 May 1986, it was solemnly installed in the presence of 4,500 pilgrims. Its beauty catches the imagination and arouses devotion. Pope John Paul II wrote a special message for the occasion, and a taper he blessed in Rome was placed in the hand of the statue and lit.

Its symbolism is that Mary presents her Son to us, as she did to the Wise Men, to be adored. The taper testifies that he is Light of the World. Pilgrims come to pray individually and in groups. May they learn to treasure the word of God in their hearts, as Mary did, and live by the light of her Son, who is her Saviour and ours.