

The church roof at St Mary's, Cilcain

Cilcain parish church roof is one of several notable hammer-beam roofs with angel terminals in Wales and the March dating from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The distribution of these roofs is mapped in *Houses of the Welsh Countryside* (2nd ed., 1988), Map 57, pp. 680-1, and there is a concentration in north-east Wales. These roofs are celebrated for their dramatic impact and enriched timberwork. The roof at St Mary's Cilcain is particularly massive and ornate with the full late gothic decorative repertoire of roll mouldings, cusping, carved bosses and terminals.

The roof has been regarded as too large and too ornate for a county parish church like Cilcain, which is not otherwise architecturally distinguished, and more appropriate for a town church or monastic building. Fred H. Crossley (*Archaeologia Cambrensis* XCIX 1947, pp. 346-51) considered it possible that it derived from Basingwerk Abbey, which was dissolved in 1535. Edward Hubbard's view in the 'Pevsner' is stronger: the roof 'was obviously brought from elsewhere' (*The Buildings of Wales: Clwyd* (1986), p. 377).

The current scaffolding of St Mary's has provided an opportunity for close inspection of the roof. It is quite apparent that the roof (although much repaired) was purpose-built for St Mary's. There is no indication whatsoever of the structural adjustments that inevitably have to be made if a roof is reused. Everything fits as designed, including the hidden parts of the roof behind the panels at wallplate level. The wallposts of the hammerbeams relate awkwardly to the arcade in places but this seems to have been a small price to pay for an ambitious reroofing. The roof has not been brought in from elsewhere but was purpose-built to replace an older roof at St Mary's.

The roof probably dates from the 1530s and replaced a roof destroyed by fire in 1532. There are several literary references to the destruction of the church, and Browne Willis cites a brass inscription, now lost, which recorded the date of the fire. The new roof was part of a prolonged campaign typical of the period (cf. Gresford) to beautify the church, which reached completion about 1546 when the glass in the chancel window was installed. The 1546 inscription, also lost, was noted by Sir Stephen Glynne.

The hammer-beam roof at Llanidloes provides an instructive comparison with Cilcain. The ornate roof at Llanidloes was supposed to have been derived from Abbey Cwmhir at the Dissolution. Tree-ring dating demonstrated that the timber with full sapwood used in its construction was felled in Summer 1538, and therefore could not possibly have been derived from the dissolved Abbey. The completion of the roof four years later is confirmed by the 1542 inscription on one of the angel shields. The details are reported in *Vernacular Architecture* 34 (2003), pp. 120-21.

The tree-ring dating of Cilcain church roof is desirable but the roof is so finely moulded that the visible parts of the trusses do not appear to retain any sapwood. However some of the unmoulded timbers behind the traceried wall-top panels do retain sapwood and are possible candidates for sampling. The task is difficult and will entail removing panels in each bay of the roof, but sampling will be worthwhile if complete (or nearly complete) sapwood is found.

Visited 17 March 2015 at the suggestion of Robin Wolley, architect.

The photographic record made by Iain Wright will become available on Coflein (RCAHMW's online database).

R. F. Suggett/RCAHMW/18 March 2015.