

**EWENNY PRIORY.  
MONASTERY AND  
FORTRESS; PP.3-101**

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Ewenny Priory. Monastery and Fortress; pp.3-101 by J. P. Turbervill

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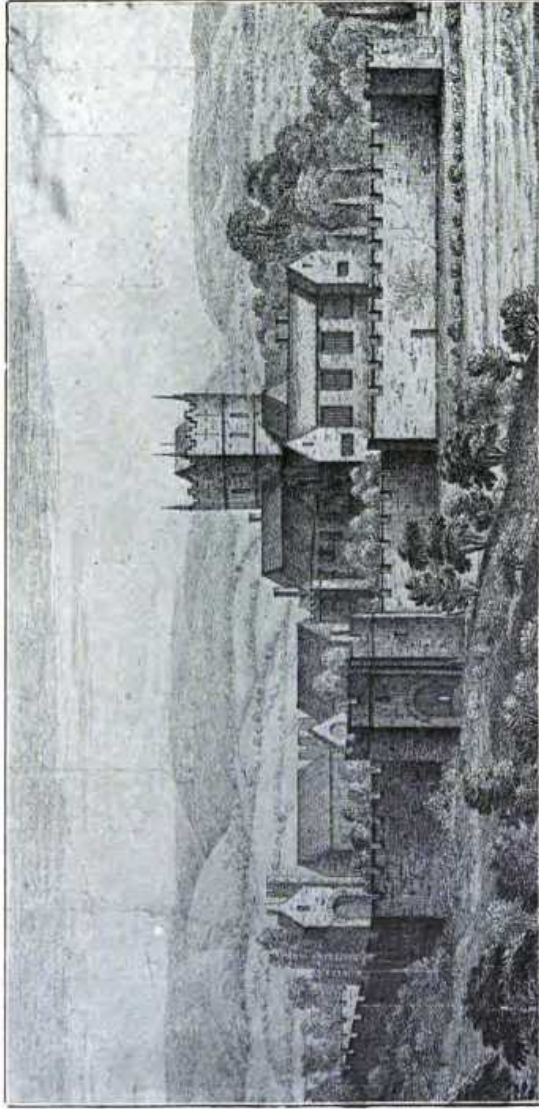
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THE SOUTH-WEST VIEW OF EWENNY PRIORY IN THE COUNTY OF GLAMORGAN IN 1741.  
(From engraving by Buck.)

[*Prospect*].

# EWENNY PRIORY

MONASTERY AND FORTRESS

BY

COLONEL J. P. TURBERVILL

*WITH ILLUSTRATIONS*

LONDON

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## PREFACE

EWENNY PRIORY is a striking illustration of the truth of the old saying, that places, as well as prophets, are without honour in their own country.

'Who on earth has ever heard of Ewenny?' will probably be the exclamation of the vast majority of those, antiquaries not excepted, who read the title of this little book, and echo will answer, 'Who?' Yet in Germany the name is familiar to all who study the text-books on architecture, in which Ewenny is described as being the best specimen of a fortified ecclesiastical building which Great Britain can show.

To make so interesting an edifice better known to those who are likely to appreciate its unique character is the object of this venture into print.

In considering the position and peculiar features of the Priory, it must, above all, be borne in mind that it was at one and the same time a monastery and a 'Castle Dangerous,' built at a time when the Norman invaders had hardly secured their footing in the vale of Glamorgan, and as yet occupied only a long strip of country between the sea and the northern hills, over which the war-cloud ever lowered.

While from within the Priory church rose the voice of prayer and thanksgiving, without it were heard the clang of arms and the tramp of the mail-clad sentry. On the Welsh borderland, as on the Scotch, men

'Carved at the meal  
In gloves of steel,  
And drank the red wine through the helmet barred.

Next to its fortifications the most marked peculiarity of Ewenny is the pure Norman architecture of the entire building. Whether owing to poverty or to some other cause, its Priors never followed the changing fashions, contenting themselves with the rude, massive grandeur of their ancient church, the result being that scarcely a trace of Early English or of any later style is to be found in it.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, indeed, the church fell upon evil times, suffering severely from neglect and mutilation, but was mercifully spared the last indignity of 'restoration' in the style then in vogue.

The description of architectural details can lay no claim whatever to originality, having, for the most part, been copied verbatim from a pamphlet by the late Professor Freeman, who took a great interest in the place, and made many valuable suggestions as to repairs.

Having, unfortunately, only the most distant bowing acquaintance with architecture and archæology, I am but ill qualified for the task which I have undertaken. All that I can do is to describe, with whatever of clearness and accuracy in me lies, the grand old church and its guardian walls, which have been familiar to me for nearly half a century.

If, as is only too probable, I have altogether failed to do justice to my subject, I would venture to remind my readers that 'half a loaf is better than no bread.'

To their charity I commend my labour of love.

To those who have assisted me in various ways—Miss Talbot of Margam Abbey, Canon Bazeley of Gloucester, Mr. de Gray Birch, of the British Museum, and Mr. Harold Breakspear, F.S.A.—I offer my sincere thanks.

J. P. TURBERVILL.

EWENNY PRIORY,  
*October, 1901*



the choir, transept, and presbytery, which never belonged to them. Two distinct churches, in fact, formed one continuous building.' The division between the monastic and parochial portions of the building was made by a solid wall across the western arch of the lantern, 'acting, of course, as the reredos of the parochial church and the rood-screen of the Priory.'

#### PORCH AND NORTH AISLE.

A pathway through the graveyard leads to a north porch of the Tudor period, through which is the entrance to the north aisle; this is separated from the nave by an arcade of four bays, so solid and simple in style that visitors to Ewenny in the early years of the nineteenth century generally described them as 'Saxon.' The square bases of the columns are perfectly plain, as are also their capitals, whilst the pillars themselves are extremely massive in proportion to their height, and the arches constructed with very few and very simple mouldings. The half pillar at the east end of the east bay has mouldings which differ from those of the other pillars and are not quite so simple.

All the pillars are grooved in various places; in one or two instances it appears to be tolerably certain that this was done in order to let in screens, which may have divided the bays into separate chapels, but the object of other cuttings is by no means clear. The only one of which there is certain knowledge is the easternmost pillar, into which was fixed an old-fashioned 'three-decker' pulpit, removed more than thirty years ago. The aisle is lighted by three Tudor windows, two in the north wall and one at the west end. Close to the latter window can be seen the bonding stones which were inserted into the west wall of the original Norman aisle, while above the arches on the south side there still remain two distinct lines of corbels, which tell their own story. At the east end is a small doorway, formerly the entrance to the transept and now to the new vestry, on each side of which have been laid down some very well-preserved

mediæval tiles, with various designs, which were dug up close to the east wall, within a yard or two of their present position.

#### NAVE.

The west wall of the nave is perfectly plain, and was built in the beginning of the last century, when the church was shortened by about 15 feet. The length of the nave is 56½ feet, and its breadth, including the aisle, 34 feet 9 inches.

At a short distance from the west wall is the font, which in the opinion of some is even older than the church, and which, indeed, if it be not Saxon, is very early Norman.

Over the piers of the bays, and opposite to them on the south wall, are three perfectly plain, round-headed Norman windows, while half of a fourth one is blocked up close to the west wall. Near the east end of the south wall is a small, mean Tudor window, inserted apparently with the intention of throwing light on the communion-table.

On the south side of the second pillar from the east end are two small and somewhat rudely cut niches, regarding the object of which various conjectures have been hazarded. Over one of these the wall is marked as if there had been a canopy.

On the west side of the same pillar there are the remains of a fresco, so much damaged that it is impossible to state positively what was its subject, unless it be the Virgin and Child. Some faint remains of frescoes may also be seen on the sides of one or two of the Norman windows on the south.

The roof of the nave, a plain wooden one, is now much too low down, leaving very little space above the windows. It might, with much advantage, be raised to its original height; but then, in order to preserve the right proportions, it would be necessary to remove the modern west wall, and give back what remains of the nave beyond it. The nave is

separated from the eastern limb\* of the church by a solid wall,  $8\frac{1}{2}$  feet in height, which, in Freeman's opinion, was undoubtedly original, and built for the express purpose of separating the parochial and monastic portions of the building. Above this wall is a carved oak beam. 'Concealed from view by the hangings which cover the rough face of the wall are two pointed doorways (just analogous to those in St. Cuthbert's screen at St. Albans) leading into the choir, while at right angles to the southern one is a blocked-up doorway, formerly communicating with the cloisters.' At the east end of the third bay is a step carried across the whole building, and 6 feet further east two similar steps in front of the communion-table.

On the space between these two inner steps stand the pulpit and reading-desk. A number of old tombstones, which were formerly in that part of the churchyard on which the new aisle has been built, form the pavement. The oldest of them bears the date of 1668, and has the peculiarity of a second inscription running lengthways, and at right angles to the first one. Other tombstones form part of the pavement immediately in front of the communion-table, amongst them being one to the memory of Henry Jones and his family. It describes him as 'Vicar of Llandivodug and Minister of this Parish,' so he must have served two parishes, at least twelve miles apart. His death took place

\* 'The eastern limb (Arundel Church) had never been the chancel of the parish church: it had originally been the property of a monastic house, which had afterwards been converted into a college of secular priests, and on the dissolution of this college, in the time of Henry VIII., it was granted by him to the Earl of Arundel and his successors' (Stephen's 'Life of Freeman,' vol. ii., p. 201).

'Dunster, of which we have the history, gives the key to Eweny in Glamorganshire. Here, unlike Dunster, part both of the monastic and parochial church has been destroyed; but enough is left to show the distinction in the most marked way. The western limb of a cross church forms the parish church, fenced off by a solid reredos across the western arch of the tower. The monks' choir is fenced off by another open screen across the eastern arch, just as at Dunster. The transept and crossing are, as they once were at Dunster, neutral. Since the "restoration" of Dunster, Eweny, unless that, too, has been "restored" out of its historical value since I was last there, remains the most perfect example of churches of the class' (Freeman's 'English Towns and Districts,' p. 350).