

# Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidiog St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society

## St Jerome's Church Llangwm – Site Visit

St Jerome's Church at Llangwm has a number of claims to fame ... not only is it a church with ancient roots it also has retained a fine medieval chapel (saved from Victorian 'restoration') with the tomb effigies of a knight and lady from the days of the Crusades but also has the distinction of reflecting the Flemish history of Pembrokeshire!



A literal translation of Llangwm meaning the valley of the church and the grave-markers dating from the 10<sup>th</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> century suggest an age of the village well before the Norman Invasion. Alternative interpretations for the name of the village are derived from the Vikings – who would pull their boats ashore on the banks of the Cleddau to shelter from inclement weather!

Along with William the Conqueror came his army – which included a large number of mercenaries to make up the numbers and these were predominantly from the area of Flanders. The men of Flanders were renown at the time as fighting men and due to over-population in their home territories they were willing to fight for anyone who paid them – in the case of William, Duke of Normandy he paid them with lands that they helped to conquer in England and Wales. As Wales was prone to unrest and in-fighting in the 12<sup>th</sup> century as William's successor, Henry I, spread



across the country the Flemish mercenaries were added to by immigrants granted land by King Henry I as a result of "... a tremendous storm on the coast of Flanders, the sand hills and embankments were in many places carried away, and the sea inundated a large tract of country" (1106, Samuel Lewis). These immigrants became "odious" in the areas they had settled in England so Henry had them 'transferred' to the remote farming settlements in the district of Rhôs, in South Pembrokeshire (the Chronicle of the Welsh Princes - *Brut y Tywysogyon* - records 'a certain folk of strange origins and customs occupy the whole



*cantref of Rhôs the estuary of the river Cleddau, and drove away all the inhabitants of the land* - thereby establishing 'Little England beyond Wales'. In creating the frontier between the Norman holdings in the south and the native Welsh to the north the king went about building 50 castles – forming the Landsker Line including Roche Castle at the most westerly end.

Roche was selected as the site of the stronghold within the holding of Adam de la Roche, the eldest grandson of Godebert the Fleming (himself born in Pembroke 1094, thought to be son of one William's mercenaries who settled in Llangwm around 1120 in the area of Great Nash Farm ... the Barony of Roche created around 1100-1130). Adam completed the building of Roch Castle in the 1180s (**see report of visit to Roch**) and also funded the building of Llangwm Church - built by Flemish craftsmen around 1185 (complete with piscina) along with the founding of Pill Priory. Stories of Adams burial are confused and in addition to the stories linked to Roche and Llangwm he is also claimed to be buried at the Priory he founded at Pill! Subsequent generations of de la Roche held lands in the cantref of Rhos – through the male line Adam and wife Blandina were parents to David fitz Adam de la Roche (b. 1190) who married Joanna and their son John de la Roche (1220–1251) and wife Maude de Waleys produced son Thomas de la Roche (1250 – 1314).



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The family certainly still held their castle in Roch – as the building was extensively repaired after having been struck by lightning (1314 – coincidentally the same year as Thomas died!) - but they may well have been living in the more comfortable manor in Llangwm, as it is Thomas' wife **Lady Margaret de la Roche** (1254–1315) who is the mostly likely candidate for the effigy of a lady commemorated in the De La Roche Family Chapel in the Church of St Jerome (based on research into dating her costume).



With its lack of easily accessible water supply and small size Roch would not have been a particularly attractive permanent residence – not if you had a number of other manors to choose from – but records suggest that six children were born to the couple in Roch Castle. According to church records in the same year as Lady Margaret's death Godbert's descendant, Sir David (del la) Roche, married a Lady Joanna in St Jerome's church. In the family chapel, lying adjacent to Lady Margaret, is thought to be the effigy not of her husband Thomas but (based on the style of the effigy) the knight is thought to represent her grandson Sir Robert de la Roche (1315-1347 possibly son of second son Thomas?).

Whilst thriving in Ireland Godbert The Fleming's Welsh links with Llangwm and Roch died out – including the hanging in 1402 of Sir Roger de Clarendon (husband of Margaret Fleming, a de la Roche cousin) being implicated in a plot against Henry IV - as the subsequent generations moved away (when Thomas de la Roche died in 1420 his land was inherited by his daughters who eventually sold up their Pembrokeshire holdings).

The story of the arrival of the Flemings in Llangwm/Langum has been extensively researched and recorded through the great efforts of a group of dedicated villagers – keen to preserve both the church and the considerable history associated with the village. With the aid of an archaeological dig, documentary research and the DNA testing of seven local men (showing a genetic link to not only Flemish ancestors but to other descendants of these ancestors) six tapestries have been stitched to show the story from



**Princess Mathilde of Flanders** (hence Flemings making a third of his army) waving to husband William, Duke of Normandy, as he sets out to invade England in 1066 through to the death of the last de la Roche heir in 1382 (Margaret died 20 years before her husband was hung in 1402). The work of children from local schools was used to create the tapestry and the 'Talking Tapestry of Langum' is available as an app @



[www.heritagellangwm.org.uk/tapestry](http://www.heritagellangwm.org.uk/tapestry).