

Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidiog
St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society

'The Slebech Story' Knights Hospitallers and Pilgrimage
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The Knights Hospitallers (Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem) were established in Jerusalem, around 1023 by Gerard Thom (first Grand Master), to provide care for pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land. During the First Crusade the role evolved to also protecting pilgrims making the dangerous trip across Europe so the Pope recognised the Order as a religious and military order in 1099. The Knights Templar (Order of Solomon's Temple) were formed in 1119 as a military order, not only protecting pilgrims and fighting in the Crusades but also the first 'bankers' – where pilgrims could travel with a promisory note, rather than carrying their gold with them, and be reimbursed when they reached the Holy Land.

The Church in the Middle Ages allowed the nobility to 'buy' their way out of Purgatory, as well as pay pilgrims to go on Pilgrimage for them, so money also flowed into the coffers of the Hospitallers, as well as land, so they could then raise more money, through rents, and use this to support their work in the Holy Land. It took 1 manor to support each single knight that was recruited to join the forces of the Order and there were 1,000 Commanderies throughout Europe! The land around Slebech was donated to the Order (c. 1148) to found their Commandery and headquarters of the Knights Hospitaller in West Wales – the 3rd richest of the religious houses in Wales. Legend has it that the hearts of Knights of the Order, slain in the battlefields of the Holy Land, were



returned and buried here on Holy Island (where the crusader sword was also unearthed). In addition to managing the manors in the ownership of the Order and collect rents part of the local role of the Hospitallers of the Slebech Commandery was to provide hospitality and protection for all manner of pilgrims on their way to St Davids. Resources were stretched to cater for beggars who flocked to the Knights for a share in the hospitality! At Minwear Systeme House was thought to have been the 'Sisters House' or nunnery where female pilgrims stayed, before taking the ferry to cross the river to the Commandery on the Slebech side, on their way to St Davids (being a male religious Order women may have been catered for elsewhere)! Recent research claims the extent of the ruins are too large to have been a nunnery but that it was built as the house of one of the Barlow brothers who bought the land in the C16th – contemporary with Slebech Hall.



As a religious Order in addition to the Commandery (now beneath Slebech Hall) they built the original church of St John the Baptist which was '*dignified with a tower ... the floor of the nave being covered with small painted bricks*' owning in addition to manors the Commandery included at least 2 mills and a quay on the Eastern Cleddau as well as a number of churches in nearby villages ... all providing sources of revenue to help support the role of the Hospitallers in the Holy Land. A Pope also granted the Order the right to provide Sanctuary – when reaching the Hospitaller's church the accused could claim Sanctuary, on consecrated ground, and after confessing their sins (whether they had committed the crime or not!) they would be freed by the 'Coroner' but must embark on a ship and leave the country. At Slebech stone steps lead from near the ruins of the church to a place where they would then board a vessel.

Throughout the C12th and C13th large gifts of money and land enabled Slebech to send English Knights to join the Order abroad ... until Henry VIII split from the Catholic Church and claimed all the monastic lands for the Crown at the time of the Dissolution in 1538. Then the Slebech Estates were sold to the Barlow brothers 4th June 1546 for the grand total of £750 (a fortune at the time), confiscated then sold back after changes in the family fortunes. After the end of the Barlow line in 1757 the estate passed through a number of owners till Nathaniel Phillips sold his slaves in Jamaica to buy the estate, then to Baron de Rutzen, through marriage to Nathaniel's daughter. The graveyard of the church also has the claim of the resting place of the first Lady Hamilton.

