

Wales's wonderful places of worship

Old churches can be the key to unlocking local history. Clive Nicholls makes a lightning visit – by bike and on foot – to some of the most intriguing places of worship in Wales

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS

The Pembrokeshire Coast Path is spectacular; Below left, Dave from Preseli Venture gives us instruction; Below right, Jemima Nicholas's tombstone in Fishguard



Travelling by kayak, we close in on Fishguard Fort; Below left, The Coast Path is signed all the way; Below right, Cardigan makes an effort for visitors



HIKING, BIKING and kayaking... I'm on an historical tour of Wales with a bit of a difference. I'm leaving the car in the car park as much as possible and using a little muscle power to get me around. Churches, and their graveyards, are often the most reliable way of unlocking a nation's history so that's where I'll begin my tour. Starting in the north-west, on Anglesey,

it is definitely cycling country: leafy lanes, almost traffic-free with plenty of places to stop and rest awhile, enjoying the fabulous views across the rolling countryside. I've always been a bit of a cyclist but I haven't done much in recent years because of the heavy traffic close to home. Anglesey was very different; I hardly saw a car and those I did stopped to ask me for directions. Elinor, from Green Lane Bike Tours,

bought along an electric bike for me to ride. You've got to try one... Headwinds, steep hills – no problem at all. You just tap in a bit more help on the little controller on the handlebars. If you want to work a bit harder, reduce the electric power to almost nothing. If you want to take the stress out of cycling, this is the way to go. Our first stop was at St Cadwaladr's Church in Llangadwaladr. Its medieval

stained glass window dominates the eastern end of the church and depicts Cadwaladr himself. Built into the north wall of the nave, is the seventh century tombstone of Cadfan: the ruler of Gwynedd, who died in AD 625. The inscription reads: "King Cadfan, the wisest and most renowned of kings". They're certainly bigging him up. Modified and added to over the centuries, it's one of those churches that could tie up a history student for a lifetime.

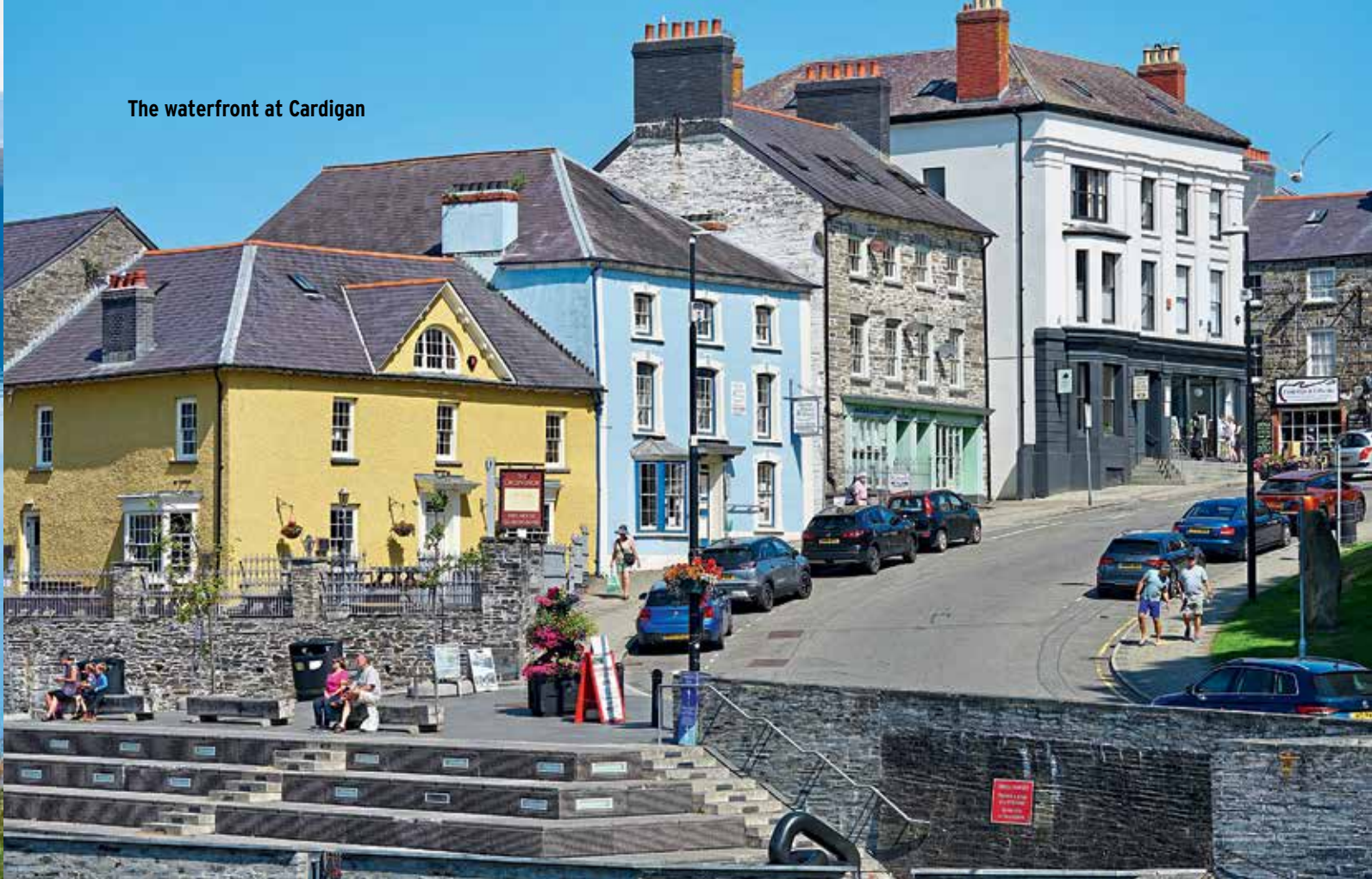
Back on the bike and a gentle breeze helps to cool the hot summer sun; cycling again is such a pleasure. The roads are quiet and it's possible to potter along at a few miles an hour without holding anyone up. Next it's St Beuno's church in Aberffraw. Set up here in the seventh century by St Beuno, there's nothing left of the original church but the present building does date back to the 12th

century, though with two naves, it has certainly had an extension or two over the years. It is thought that the princes of Gwynedd may have used the church as a royal chapel, but there's a bit of guesswork involved in this. The village itself is pretty and an ideal place to spread out my packed lunch: cheese and pickle sandwiches, orange juice and a piece of cake for pudding – just perfect. I'm loving the cycling and it's downhill

Christine on the walk to St David's;
Below left, St Non's Chapel; Below
right, Aberffraw



The waterfront at Cardigan



all the way to one of the strangest churches in Wales: St Cwyfan's, 'The Little Church in the Sea'. On the tiny island of Cribinau, St Cwyfan's is cut off from the mainland for a few hours at high tide. You can imagine the local vicar luring parishioners into the church on a rising tide and then, with a captive audience, delivering a four-hour sermon that he's always wanted to preach.

On the ride back, my electric bike comes into its own. The steady uphill is easy and the bike makes me want to

keep riding all day. Unfortunately I have a longish four-hour drive down to the south-west of Wales before my head can touch the pillow.

I'm staying in Goodwick, near Fishguard and the ferry terminal to Rosslare. And, guess what? The area is really pretty and steeped in history.

I wake up at first light and I'm out enjoying the town at 6am. It's the best time of the day; I have the place to myself, the light is good for pictures and I've got breakfast to look forward to in a

couple of hours time. What more can you ask for?

The early-morning sun adds sparkle to the streets of Goodwick, and even St Peter's church looks inviting despite being slightly careworn and closed for business. Fishguard is just a little over a mile away but I take the car.

Lower Town is exquisite and there's free parking on the quayside – how good is that? The tide is out but it's still pretty as a picture; you can see why it's been used as a film set. I take a walk along

the harbour wall and a local dog, an indeterminate lurcher type, tags along with me. I stop to take a few pictures and he sits down beside me. He's a bit scruffy, but then so am I. We spend 20 minutes together but, as I can almost smell the bacon cooking, I need to head back for my breakfast. He's happy enough and goes off to look for a new best friend for the rest of the day. Wiping the brown sauce off my chin, I check the atlas. It looks like it's about a 25-minute drive down to St David's to meet Christine

from Guided Pilgrimage, where I'll sample the last stage of the pilgrim's walk from Solva to St David's (*Choice*, May).

History tells us that in 1123 Pope Calixtus II declared that two pilgrimages to St David's were equal to one to Rome. I don't think that the little bit of walking I did will count for anything, but I do know that the Way of St David, taking in the Pembrokeshire Coast Path, is a magnificent walk in its own right.

I meet a couple going the other way who have just spotted several choughs

close by. These rare birds are a little like jackdaws with red beaks and feet. They are making a bit of a comeback and at the moment there are thought to be 400 breeding pairs in the UK. Did I see them? No – but knowing that I could have was still a bit of a moment.

Christine added the history as we stopped off at St Non's Chapel, said to be the sixth-century birthplace of the patron saint of Wales, St David. Named after his mother, Nonna, the original chapel is a ruin with St Non's

Cwyfans, “The Little Church in the Sea”;
Below left, The cross at St Non’s; Below
right, Fishguard Lower Town



Arrival at St David’s



My electric bike and, right, prawns at Goodwick



◀ Cross, a large stone from the same field, standing upright in the corner. There’s no certainty that the cross is from this site but it is of the period. Just past St Non’s Well (thought to have sprung up when David was born), a much more recent chapel stands close by and is a quiet place of reflection for modern day pilgrims – a rather special place.

Arriving at St David’s is an eye-opener – it’s magnificent. Considering that St David’s is the UK’s smallest city, with fewer than 2000 inhabitants, to have such a centrepiece is quite remarkable.

A magnet for pilgrims for more than 800 years, the original shrine to St David (including a golden casket, thought to contain his bones) was removed by Bishop Barlow in the 1530s. A new shrine, built in the original arches next to the high altar, was opened in 2012 and is today an important site for pilgrims.

I’m up early again in the morning. Yesterday I spotted a headstone at St Mary’s Church in Fishguard and I’m going back for a better look. The inscription reads: “Jemima Nicholas of this town, The Welsh Heroine who

boldly marched to meet The French Invaders who landed on our shores in 1797.” Apparently a French army, made up of convicts and thieves, landed on the shore and started drinking heavily. Armed with a pitchfork and supported by a group of local lasses, Jemima captured a dozen of the vagabonds and locked them in the church. I learnt more about the story later in the day.

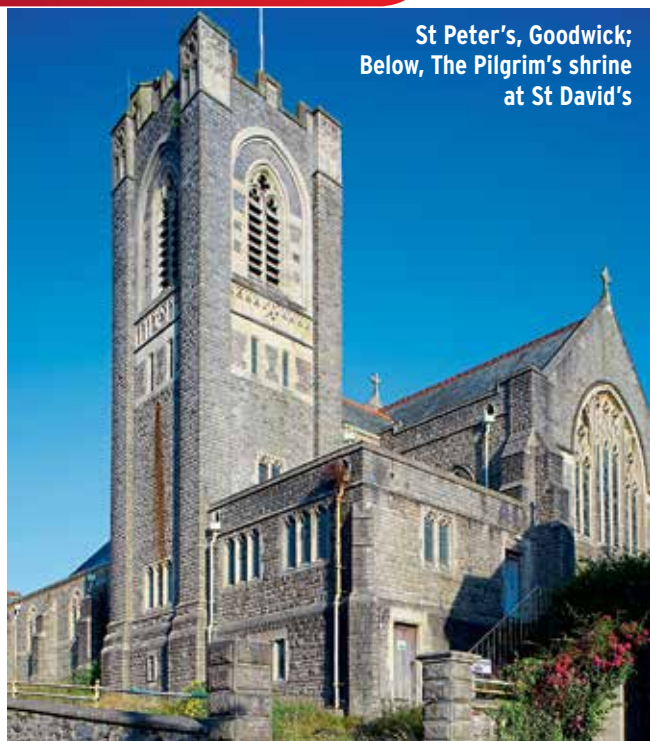
I went kayaking from Old Town harbour and, as we headed for the waters under the cliffs near Fishguard Fort, Dave, my instructor from Preseli



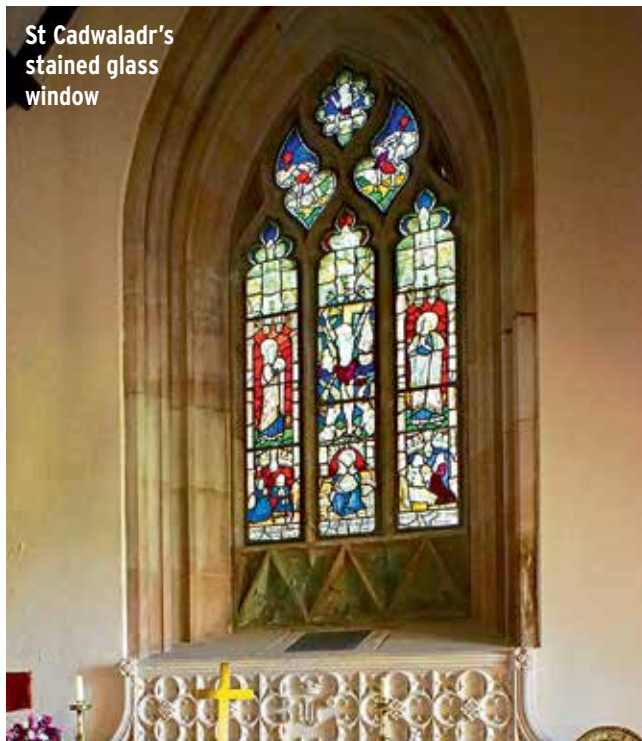
St Cadwaladr’s



St Beuno’s



St Peter's, Goodwick;
Below, The Pilgrim's shrine
at St David's



St Cadwaladr's
stained glass
window



◀ Venture, told the tale that Jemima dressed a few locals in national costume and marched them round and round the fort to create the impression that there was a large garrison stationed there. The fort was short of ammunition but fired off a few blanks to intimidate the French invaders. The ruse seemed to work and, once they'd drunk the pubs dry, the raggle-taggle army surrendered.

The kayaking was good fun. We followed the coast, dipping into caves and getting quite a different view of local landmarks. It's all very safe with wet-suits, lifejackets and helmets but you are likely to get a bit wet. I passed several compass jellyfish but, for me, seeing a group of oyster catches on the rocks just a few feet away was a bit special.

In a lightning visit to both North and South Wales, I've done so much, seen so much and had a really good time. Whether you are religious or not, churches are often the best-preserved records of local history, and even the graveyards have many a story to tell. Travel on foot, use pedal or paddle power and you'll see the sights at a relaxed pace.

If you resort to the car, as I did from time to time, allow a few minutes extra for your journey. The roads are quiet but they're not motorways. I never had a problem parking; it was often free or good value.

Keep a few pound coins in the glove box and you won't go far wrong. If you don't need them for parking, you can always buy an ice cream...

Find out more

The trips featured here form part of a new set of travel experiences launched by the National Churches Trust in Wales. The charity, which is dedicated to supporting the UK's places of worship by promoting church visits and tourism, as well as providing grants for repairs and maintenance, has unveiled a series of bespoke tours combining Wales' sacred places and beauty spots as part of its 'Exploring Sacred Wales' programme. They include kayaking along the Pembrokeshire coast, cycling through Anglesey, churchyard stargazing and willow weaving workshops.

The National Churches Trust is working with a number of local partners, businesses and experts in the region, including Visit Wales, the Church in Wales, Addoldai Cymru and Cadw, to develop original tours and experiences that reveal the best of Wales' rich culture, history, heritage and environment.

Each of the tours will shine a spotlight on some of Wales' finest churches and chapels. A number of itineraries are available, appealing to all ages, including hands-on activities and themed visits, complete with trips to local pubs and restaurants.

The tours are hosted on the Explore Churches website which showcases more than 500 historic places of worship across the country with suggested itineraries linking them together. For more information visit: (www.explorechurches.org/discover-our-experiences).