
PENRHYN TYDDEWI AC YNYS DEWI

ST DAVIDS PENINSULA AND RAMSEY ISLAND

Landscape description

Geologically old rocks, mainly Pre-Cambrian and Cambrian, with later igneous intrusions have formed St Davids Peninsula and Ramsey Island at the north west end of the Pembrokeshire coastal plateau. The low and windswept land surface gently undulates between 30 and 60m above OD, but harder and more resistant rocks have created spectacular cliffs along the coast, and small, isolated rocky outcrops or monadnocks inland, the highest of which rises to 181m above OD at the summit of Carn Llidi. Sheltered from the north, the poorly drained valley of the River Alun is still characterised by areas of marsh and moor, historically used as common.

The area contains relict evidence of land use, ritual and religious activity from the prehistoric period onwards, continuing into the Christian era as Dewisland, home and territory of St David (Dewi Sant), the patron saint of Wales. Here possibly is one of the most culturally significant and esteemed landscapes in Wales today.

The rocks forming the cliff line of the northern coast are unbroken, with no landing places and backed by the heights of Carn Llidi, Carnedd Lleithr and Penberry. To the south, on the western side of the peninsula, are the wide sands of Porth-mawr or Whitesands Bay, used as a landing place and embarkation point to Ireland from at least the early medieval period. The inclusion of St Davids Head (Octapitarum promontorium) in Ptolemy's Geography suggests Roman familiarity with the western Atlantic seaways.

Although only about a kilometre wide, the fierce tidal races of Ramsey Sound make communication with Ramsey Island difficult even today. Yet by the 13th century, if not earlier, the island was a valuable part of the episcopal estate and arable farming has continued until recent times. This has all but obliterated traces of earlier, probably prehistoric, field systems in contrast to the well preserved traces over the whole of St Davids Head, which are possibly contemporary with the Iron Age promontory hillfort there. Earlier dates for the field system remain a possibility, however, for the evidence of Neolithic settlement, in the form of chambered tombs for the burial of the dead and finds of stone axes, is here supplemented by excavated material of Neolithic date from Clegyr Boia, a fortified stronghold on one of the small upstanding monadnocks.

It is however, the secular and religious settlement patterns of the early medieval period, particularly with the location of the cult centre of St David at Mynyw (Menevia), which has shaped the area and still defines its distinctive historic character. A recent study suggests that the religious site-types of the early medieval period, unenclosed cist cemeteries, holy wells and chapels, were preserved, and indeed developed, to meet the demands of the high medieval pilgrimage industry. Local details were added to successive versions of the saint's lives to explain and exploit the topographical associations of traditions of Dewi and his followers, which became, and remain, imprinted on the landscape to the present day.

By the 9th century the cult of Dewi was firmly centred at Menevia and by the 10th century he was recognized as 'the chief intercessor of the saints of Wales'. Despite their determination to reform and reshape the native Welsh church, the incoming Norman Bishops, like Bishop Bernard, used, indeed manipulated, their Welsh inheritance, partly to serve their metropolitan ambitions. This is physically evident in the Cathedral close today, whose 14th century walls and gates probably perpetuate the line of the pre-Norman monastic enclosure. A similar adaptation, rather than imposition, can be discerned in the settlement pattern of dispersed farms and small hamlets, with small open field systems and extensive commons, although this is yet to be demonstrated archaeologically. Historical and placename evidence also attest to Irish settlement on the peninsula.

Sparse medieval documentary sources show some farms to be of at least 13th century date. St Davids was a remote, poor area from the early modern period onwards, despite retaining the see at the 'city' of St Davids. Its farming economy was supplemented by some coastal trading and fishing. The small harbour of Porth Clais and its limekilns exemplify the scale of such operations. A few intact examples survive of the distinctive vernacular building traditions of outshuts on lateral walls and massive round chimneys, described and drawn by Romilly Allen in the 19th century. The 'city', Cathedral and surrounding area are today one of the leading tourist attractions in Wales, with all the attendant problems as well as opportunities for the local economy.

Selected sources

- D.W. James, *St David and Dewisland: A Social History* (University of Wales Press: Cardiff 1981).
- H. James, 'The Cult of St David in the Middle Ages', in M. Carver, editor, *In Search of Cult: Archaeological Investigations in Honour of Philip Rahtz* (Boydell Press: Woodbridge 1993), 105–112.
- S. Rees, *A Guide to Ancient and Historic Wales: Dyfed* (HMSO: London 1992).

SUMMARY

Ref number	HLW (D) 4
Index map no.	6
OS map	Landranger 157
Former county	Dyfed
Unitary authority	Pembrokeshire
Principal area designations	The area is entirely within the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park. St Davids Peninsula is within the Preseli Environmentally Sensitive Area. The area includes: Ramsey Island, St Davids Airfield Heaths, St Davids Peninsula Coast and Ramsey Island Sites of Special Scientific Interest; St Davids Bishop Palace Guardianship Site; Carn Llidi hut circles and ancient enclosures, St Davids Cathedral close Scheduled Ancient Monuments; St Davids Conservation Area.
Criteria	2, 5
Contents and significance	A peninsula and island situated on the north west end of the Pembrokeshire coastal plateau, containing extensive and well-preserved evidence of land use and intense ritual and religious activity from the prehistoric period onwards. The area includes: Neolithic chambered tombs and settlement; Iron Age forts, field systems; Menevia, the early medieval cult centre of St David; St Davids Cathedral, close and 'city' and their settings which are of continuing supreme cultural significance and importance in Wales as Dewisland.