

Research design: Llantwit Major 2025 season

(GeoArch Report 2025/05)



The Globe Field near the end of the 2024 season: the excavation location lies to the south of the Parish Church of St Illtud, close to the centre of what is believed to be the early medieval monastic enclosure.

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Summary

Llantwit Major has long been believed to be the site of a monastery associated with St Illtud in the late 5th and early 6th centuries and which became a royal burial ground in the 8th – 10th centuries (the Parish Church houses a remarkable collection of early medieval inscribed stones). The site seems to have waned in importance during the 10th and 11th centuries and was granted to Tewkesbury Abbey around the beginning of the 12th century by Robert Fitzhamon.

The archaeology department of Cardiff University, funded by the Dr D.G. Smith Memorial Project, is conducting work to place the interpretation of the monastery on a sounder footing by seeking the physical evidence that has previously been lacking. This work was initially desk-based and geophysical, but excavations were undertaken in 2022 at a related secular site in Boverton and in from 2023 in 'The Globe Field' in the heart of Llantwit.

A model for the monastic enclosure was developed, employing an approach fostered in the historical town surveys of Ireland (Swan 1971, 1985, 1994; Prunty & Clarke 2011), in which the earthworks in the 'Great Ley' (commonly known as 'the Dovecote Field') may be a part of the early medieval monastic enclosure, rather than simply fields associated with the medieval Rectory (often referred to as the Grange). This substantial potential enclosure would be commensurate with other significant early medieval monastic sites, and measures 500m N-S and 300m E-W (10.8ha), with the inner enclosure (70m by 60m) around the church lying somewhat asymmetrically within its northern part. Surviving features within this enclosure, including the internal 'fields' at the rectory site and the churchyard, together with long-lived property boundaries in the village, suggest elements of its subdivision.

The summer 2023 field season started the testing of this model by examining the remains of drystone field walls that appear, in plan, to be part of this system of internal sub-division. It was shown these walls date from the late 11th or early 12th century. They probably relate to a broader phase of refurbishment or re-imagining of Llantwit, that included construction of the Norman church and the writing of the surviving 'Life' of St Illtud. Whether the outer enclosure is of the same date remains unknown.

In addition, two test-pits were dug in 2023 on the western side of the valley with the objective of testing the extent of a potential inhumation cemetery, suggested by the discovery of at least two inhumations dating to the period AD660-780 from a badger sett in the grounds of Chantry House. Further human remains representing a minimum of two individuals were recovered, of a similar date, but they had been disturbed by later activity. Remains of a further two individuals have been recovered more recently from the badger sett.

The 2023 season in 'The Globe Field' also produced evidence for four phases of activity before construction of the drystone walls and these were further investigated in 2024. The first of these includes burnt features that remain to be investigated, but probably a corn drying kiln of early 7th century date, the second a phase of metalworking of late 7th-8th century date, followed by a phase of inhumation burials, initially of young children, but later adults, of late 8th-9th century age. This was followed by the cutting or erosion of a feature in the S of the site, heavily trampled by livestock and with redeposited human remains, that was subsequently back-filled with a stoney fill.

The programme of work for 2025 continue the investigation of these earlier phases broadly within the same trench footprint, but with minor extensions to include more of what appears to be a Norman agricultural building associated with the drystone walls, to permit excavation of an inhumation discovered late in the 2024 season and to permit excavation of a full section across the stone filled feature in the south.

As with the 2023 and 2024 seasons, the excavations will be delivered as part of the university's teaching programme, involving a core group of undergraduates, with additional graduate and local volunteers, managed by Dr Tim Young.

Administrative background

A programme of research, funded by the Dr D.G. Smith Memorial Project, is being undertaken by the archaeology department of Cardiff University to attempt to clarify the nature and location of early medieval activity in Llantwit Major (Young 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). The research has involved geophysical survey, together with an analysis of patterns of landholding from medieval and early post-medieval documentary sources and is moving into some focused excavation of key localities, starting with Boverton (December 2022; Young 2023b) and The Globe Field, Llantwit (August-September 2023, Young 2023a, 2024a; May-June 2024, Young 2024b, 2024c).

This document provides an updated Research Design for a third season of work at 'The Globe Field', with the excavation planned for the period 19th May 2025 – 13th June 2025. Further details of the programme of work and its rationale are present with the Research Design documents for the previous seasons (Young 2023a, 2024a) and this document is intended to be read alongside them. As with the previous seasons, the excavation will be run as a training excavation for Cardiff University.

Archaeological and historical background

The church of Llantwit Major has long been associated with the site of the monastery of Illtud (see Wooding 2017, 142-147 for a recent discussion of the identification). Illtud (Eltutus) was described in the *Vita Prima Samsonis* (probably dated to the last decades of the seventh century or the first of the eighth; Wooding 2107, 140) as a classical, not just religious, teacher. The detail provided in this 'Life', coupled with independent evidence for the presence at Samson at the Council of Paris AD556x573 (arguably AD561; Wood 2017, 103) enhances the credibility of a historical Illtud. Samson's biographer claimed to have visited Illtud's monastery, presumably at some point in the late-7th century, describing it as magnificent. The development of a royal burial ground and cult centre at Llantwit Major by the mid-8th century suggests that if the site was then identified as that of Illtud's monastery, it would likely be the same as the site identified as Illtud's when Samson's biographer visited in the late 7th century. The likely date of the visit by Samson's biographer would fall within Phase 2 of the current interpretation. This permits the almost certain identification of Llantwit Major as the site of Illtud's monastery, with only short gaps in the chain of identification.

A model for the monastic enclosure has been developed (Young 2023a), employing an approach fostered in the historical town surveys of Ireland (Swan 1971, 1985, 1994; Prunty & Clarke 2011), in which the earthworks in the 'Great Ley' (commonly known as 'the Dovecote Field') may be a part of the early medieval monastic enclosure, rather than simply fields associated with the medieval Rectory (often referred to as the Grange). This substantial potential enclosure would be

commensurate with significant early medieval monastic sites in Ireland and Scotland, and measures 500m N-S and 300m E-W (10.8ha), with the inner enclosure (70m by 60m) around the church lying somewhat asymmetrically within its northern part. Surviving features within this enclosure, including the internal 'fields' at the rectory site and the churchyard, together with long-lived property boundaries in the village, suggest elements of its subdivision. Such a rectilinear system of subdivision has not been noted at examples of early medieval monasteries in Ireland or Scotland.

The bounding bank and the internal sub-divisions seen as earthwork features in the 'Great Ley' form part of the scheduled monument GM142 'Llantwit Major Monastic Settlement', commonly referred to as Llantwit Grange (NPRN 307122; MG48 'The Grange of Abbot's Llantwit', RCAHMW 1982, 299-303). The initial field investigation therefore avoided this area; the summer 2023 field season started the testing of the enclosure model by examining the remains of drystone field walls in 'The Globe Field' 40-50m S of the modern churchyard, that appear, in plan, to be part of this same system of internal sub-division. These walls date from late 11th or early 12th century (excavation Phase 6) and had passed out of use by the late 13th or early 14th century (excavation Phase 8).

This unexpected outcome suggests that the sub-division of the enclosure may relate to a broader phase of refurbishment of Llantwit, including the Norman church and perhaps to the writing of the 'Life' of St Illtud, probably in the period immediately following the Norman invasion (i.e. excavation Phase 6). Moreover, the 2023 excavations suggest that the areas in 'The Globe Field' previously used for metalworking and inhumation suffered livestock trampling and erosion in the 10th - 11th centuries (i.e. excavation Phase 4). This broadly corresponds to the period during which Llantwit is absent from the documentary record (although the carved stone pillars interpreted as perhaps supporting the screen in a wooden church, are of this period).

The inscribed stones of the 8th-9th centuries form the tangible evidence for the earlier heyday of the cult centre, although they are also supplemented by contemporary references to the Abbot of Llantwit (*abbas Ilduti*) as a witness for charters in the Book of Llandaff (where the place appears as *Lanildut* or *Podum sancti Ilduti*). At least one of the stones has a reasonable provenance, for the Samson (or Illtud) Cross was moved with some archaeological observation in the early 20th century which suggested it had been *in situ* and associated with a cist burial (and post-dating even earlier burials; Halliday 1903). The 8th-9th century high status burial ground was thus reasonably certainly on the site of the modern church.

The recent work has demonstrated, however, a much wider extent of inhumation across the valley south of the church. To the east of the stream in the Globe Field, remains from four infant and one adult inhumation, together with two redeposited infant skull fragments in a later Phase 3 adult grave and one adult bone redeposited in Phase 4 sediments, all date to excavation Phase 3 (dating to the 8th-9th century – broadly the same period as the high status monuments near the church). Many other pieces of disarticulated human remains were also recovered from the ploughsoil in the trench, suggesting their derivation from upslope. In that direction, undated inhumations were reported from The Hayes Croft at some point before 1886 (Anon 1887; *The Western Mail*, 6th January 1886).

To the west of the stream, human remains from the badger sett at Chantry House (95m S of the churchyard) have an MNI of 4, with two individuals dated to the period AD660 to 780, slightly earlier than the burial evidence described above. Further south, Testpit 2 of 2023 (130m S of the churchyard), produced the reworked remains for two further individuals (dated to AD650 to 780). These burials thus all fall into excavation Phase 2.

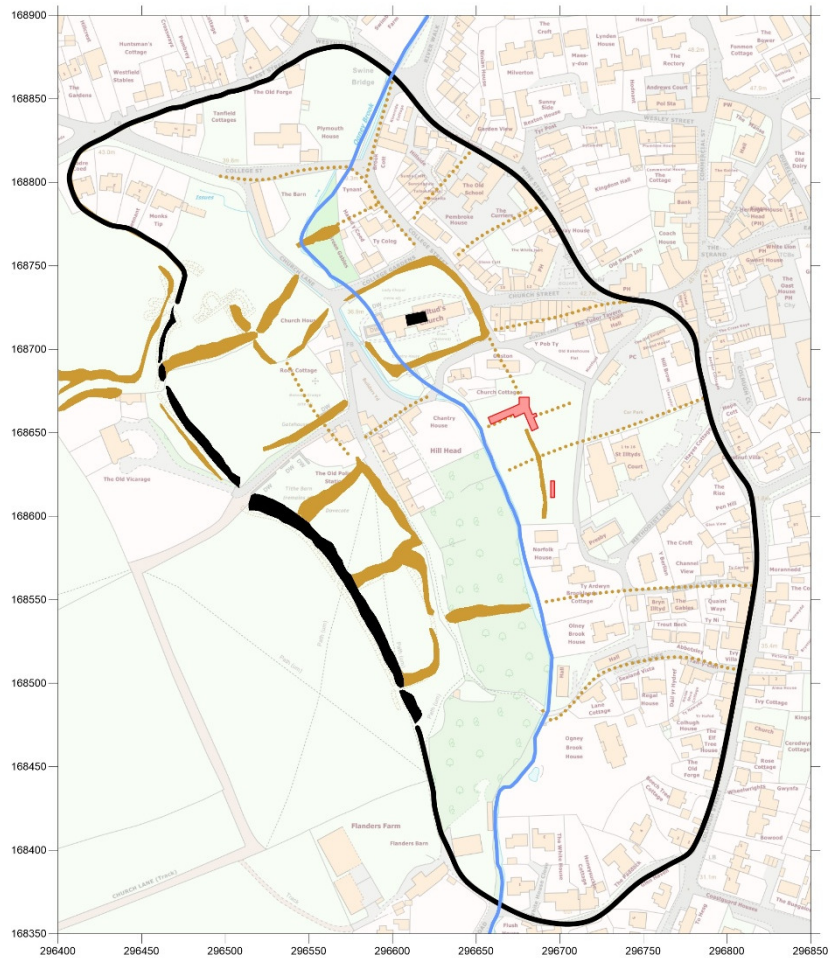


Figure 1: planned location extent of the trenches in The Globe Field (red) in relation to the proposed early medieval enclosure (black) and its internal subdivisions (brown).

Although the dataset is currently very small, these findings suggest that in the late 7th-9th century heyday of the cult centre, burials took place across a wide area of the central part of the proposed monastic enclosure, yet (if the evidence for the dating of the drystone walls is also applicable to the churchyard enclosure), much of this area was excluded when the churchyard was enclosed in the 11th or 12th century, after the 10th-11th century hiatus or reduction in activity.

The date of the metalworking activity in the NE of the site (excavation Phase 2) is provided by a charcoal date from the single hearth excavated so far, and by charcoal residual in younger contexts. Those contexts have so far produced over 0.5 tonne of slag accompanying the residual charcoal, which, together with the charcoal from the hearth, all dates from AD 650-780. Thus, in excavation Phase 2 there appears to have been inhumation west of the stream and metalworking east of it.

Evidence for activity in the earlier 7th century (Excavation Phase 1) includes features so far only partially revealed in the sides of Phase 3 graves. Burnt grain is abundant in a layer lying on a burnt clay surface and it is likely that a corn drying kiln is represented. The fills of the cross-cutting graves have also produced a good assemblage of burnt fish bones – so it is possible that fish smoking was also undertaken. Samples of grain from two different contexts have yielded similar radiocarbon dates of approximately AD590-660.

Planned fieldwork

The fieldwork to be undertaken in 2025 aims to complete the 'L'-shaped excavation (Trench 4) started in 2024, that in part wraps around the trench (Trench 1) excavated in 2023. The 2025 work in Trench 4 will thus involve reopening the 2024 trench with some small extensions. The specific goals in the existing trench footprint include:

- clarifying the nature of the Phase 1 (6th-7th century) occupation,
- clarifying the remains of the Phase 2 workshop,
- completion of the excavation of the Phase 3 infant cemetery,
- the investigation of the focus of the infant cemetery,
- locating any further inhumations,
- the investigation of the area between the known cemetery and the stream to the west

The extensions will permit:

- the investigation of the possible Phase 6 building in the N corner of the site,
- the excavation of a shallow Phase 3 burial cut by the NE baulk
- excavation of the Phase 4 stone-filled feature in the SE.

In addition to the furtherance of the main trench, it is intended, subject to the size of the allocated workforce, to place an exploratory trench (Trench 5) further south within the Globe Field to test the significance of geophysical anomalies in that area and determine whether the early medieval activity extends south of the Trench 1/4 area.

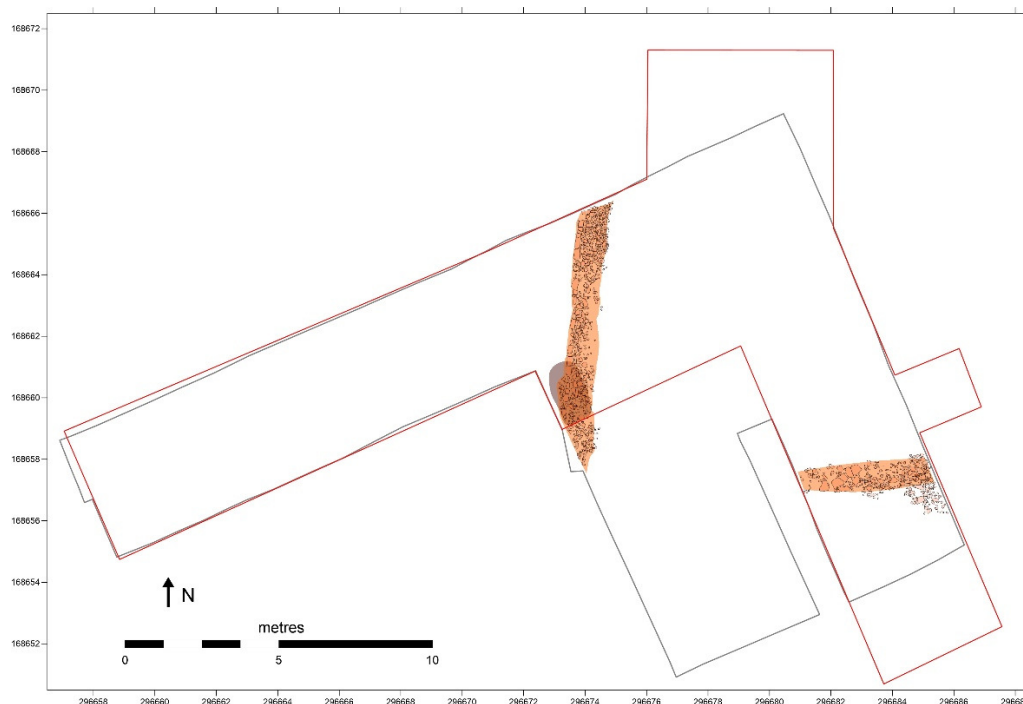


Figure 2: relationship of the 2025 proposed trench (red), to Trench 1 of 2023 and Trench 4 of 2024 (combined outline in black), showing features relating to Phase 8-10 (post medieval).



Figure 3: as Figure 2, but with features relating to Phases 6-7 (12th-13th centuries).



Figure 4: as Figure 2, but with features relating to Phase 4 (10th-11th centuries).



Figure 5: as Figure 2, but with features relating to Phase 3 (8th-9th centuries).



Figure 6: as Figure 2, but with features relating to Phase 2 (7th-8th centuries).



Figure 7: as Figure 2, but with features relating to Phase 1 (6th-7th centuries).

Methodology

1. The excavations will be undertaken by members of Cardiff University, together with volunteers, with appropriate levels of supervision from suitably experienced supervisors.
2. The topsoil will be removed from both the trenches by machine, but all underlying deposits will be hand-dug.
3. All discrete features to be defined and planned. All discrete cut features to be half-sectioned, as a minimum, and recorded.
4. All linear cut features to be defined, planned and a minimum of 50% excavated; sections to be recorded. All drawings and plans to be recorded at scales appropriate for purpose (1:10, 1:20).
5. Built features will be defined, planned and sectioned where appropriate.
6. A full digital photographic archive of the work required will be maintained, with photographs of at least 16MP.
7. A vertical digital photographic archive will be maintained, with a minimum of 27MP, subject to appropriate weather conditions for drone use.
8. All planning and height data will be tied-in directly to National Grid using high-resolution RTK GPS within the main site and indirectly to National Grid using an EDM for the test-pits where tree cover precludes the use of GPS directly.
9. Any articulated human remains encountered will be fully recorded in situ and specific remains may be lifted under license and placed in the registered repository in Cardiff University for further research under the aims and objectives as outlined above.
10. Any finds will be retained, cleaned, catalogued and stored under the supervision of a qualified conservator, in accordance with standards set in the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' Standard and guidance for the collection, documentation, conservation and research of archaeological materials (2014).

11. Finds recovered that are regarded as Treasure under The Treasure Act (1996) will be reported to HM Coroner for the local area.
12. The fills of all potentially early features will be sampled, since the recognition of early medieval contexts is likely to be entirely by means of scientific dating.
13. Deposits with a significant potential for the preservation of palaeoenvironmental material will be sampled. Should significant potential be established for enhancement of understanding of the site through palaeoenvironmental work, the advice will be sought of a specialist environmental archaeologist. All environmental sampling and recording will follow English Heritage's Guidelines for Environmental Archaeology (2011).
14. Specialist input on any finds arising from the works will be provided by specialist colleagues from Cardiff University and NMW as required.
15. All excavations will be made secure using Heras fencing (or equivalent) outside working hours. Importantly, the excavations must be left at night with a means of escape, should a badger (or other mammal) fall into them.
16. The site archive (excluding human remains) will be housed in the first instance at the offices of GeoArch.
17. Large volumes of metallurgical waste are expected. These may be 'power-washed' on site, sorted, quantified, and then reburied, with only selected materials being retained.

References

All GeoArch reports are published online at:

[https://www.geoarch.co.uk/report library/](https://www.geoarch.co.uk/report%20library/)

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A translation of the *Vita Prima Samsonis* may be found at:

<https://archive.org/details/lifeofstsamsonof00sams>

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