

# Belief in and devotion to the Immaculate Conception in medieval England

Fr Timothy Finigan

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## Early indications of devotion to the Immaculate Conception

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England was known in medieval times as a place of particular devotion to Mary. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and the celebration of the feast of the Conception of Mary developed especially in England.<sup>1</sup> We will consider some early indications of this, then look at the period of Anselm and the early schoolmen. Considering the great 13th century schoolmen, we will see how the doctrine was nearly lost from the Church but then triumphantly vindicated in these lands by Blessed John Duns Scotus. Finally, I will consider a few of the popular manifestations of this faith which persisted vigorously until violently suppressed at the Reformation.

### Cynewulf

Cynewulf was a poet of the second half of the 8th century about whom little is known except his four poems which show some dependence on the famous "Dream of the Rood". In his poem *Crist*, he wrote of Mary:

Hail, thou glory of this middle-world!  
The purest woman throughout all the earth.  
Of those that were from immemorial time  
How rightly art thou named by all endowed  
With gifts of speech! All mortals throughout earth  
Declare full blithe of heart that thou art bride  
Of Him that ruleth the empyreal sphere.  
So too, the highest in the heaven's above,  
The thanes of Christ, proclaim aloud and sing,  
That thou by might of holiness art queen  
Of the hosts of glory, of the ranks of men  
On earth 'neath heaven, and of hell's habitants,  
For thou alone of all the race of men  
With noble aspiration didst resolve  
To bring thy maidenhood unto the Lord,  
To offer it in all thy sinlessness...

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<sup>1</sup> Thurston, H "England and the Immaculate Conception" *The Month* CIV (1904) p.562-576. Thurston's work was groundbreaking and was used subsequently as authoritative, for example in the *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique*. As a parish priest, I am not in a position to check all of the sources nor to consult a comprehensive collection of recent periodicals. Therefore I apologise to the reader if I have been unaware of any subsequent developments or corrections of the positions established by Thurston.

Thou should'st be held immaculate for aye.<sup>2</sup>

The word translated here by "immaculate" is the Anglo-Saxon *unwemme*, meaning "spotless". This is probably the earliest vernacular poetry in honour of Our Lady in the West.

### Bishop Æthelwold

In the first half of the 9th century (50 years before Alfred the Great), the "Book of Cerne" contains the following prayer:

"Holy ever-virgin Mother of God, happy, blessed, glorious and noble, untouched and pure Mary, Immaculate, chosen and beloved by God, endowed with singular sanctity and worthy of all praise, who are the mediator for the whole world when faced with danger, hear, hear, hear us, Holy Mary. Pray and intercede for us for we trust and we know for certain that you can obtain everything that you wish from your Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Omnipotent God, King of All Ages, Who lives with the Father and the Holy Spirit without end. Amen"

The book of Cerne was probably compiled under the patronage of Æthelwold, Bishop of Lichfield from 818-830. The phrase "noble, untouched, pure, Mary Immaculate" is another Anglo-Saxon indication of early popular acceptance of the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

## The Liturgical Celebration in England

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### First liturgical celebration

As well as these indications of the Immaculate Conception in poetry and prayer, the celebration of the feast in the liturgy in England and Ireland is of importance.<sup>3</sup> At the turn of the millennium, the English liturgical books show the feast of the Immaculate Conception on 8 December. For example, the pontifical used at Canterbury in 1023, the pontifical used at Exeter by Leofric who was bishop from 1050-1073 and the "Leofric Missal" all contain prayers for the feast of the Conception of Mary.<sup>4</sup> Although the prayers emphasise the holiness

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by Israel Gollancz

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Thurston, H "The Irish Origins of Our Lady's Conception Feast" *The Month* CIII (1904) p562-576 and Bishop, E "On the Origins of the Feast of the Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary" *Downside Review* (1886)

<sup>4</sup> Cf Vacant & Mangenot *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique* Paris 1927 Vol VII part 1 cols 990-991

of Mary and her singular privileges, the focus of the feast at this stage was on the historical event of the Conception of Mary, rather than the theological affirmation of her freedom from original sin. Before this time in the West, the feast was only known in Naples and Sicily where it had been introduced from the East.

Several possible influences may be responsible for the early celebration of the feast in England. It is likely that Æthelwold's influence continued in the monasteries that had a connection with him. Thurston suggested that the earlier Irish celebrations were influential and others have suggested an oriental influence. This may have originated with Theodore of Tarsus who was primate at Canterbury in the 7th century and may have been influenced by the Church of Naples via the monks of Winchester. Some of the early prayers have a decidedly eastern influence, bearing traces of the protoevangelium of James.

### **Eradication by the Normans**

The conquest of England by William I resulted in the temporary eclipse of the feast – it would have been seen by the victorious Normans as a particularly English celebration. Among the Normans, there was also some scholarly doubt about the wisdom of celebrating the feast because of the popular reliance on the apocryphal gospels in Saxon England. It was thought that the Immaculate Conception of Mary might simply be part of the mythical story concerning Mary's origin in the apocryphal gospel attributed to St Matthew.

Lanfranc, the Norman archbishop of Canterbury from 1070-1089, reformed the Anglo-Saxon calendar, resulting in the loss of the feast, especially at Canterbury and Winchester.

### **Elsi's Mission**

The demise of the feast was arrested at least in part because of the publication of the *Miraculum de conceptione*, relating the story of Elsi's mission. Elsi (or Helsin or Æthelsig) was a monk of Canterbury who, in about 1070, was sent by William I on a mission to Denmark. The legend has it his ship was in danger, an angel appeared to him and saved the ship after he promised to celebrate the feast in his Abbey of Ramsey. News of this story spread widely and was used later in breviaries in England, Normandy and Denmark. The diplomatic mission is historically well attested. Whether the legend of the vision itself is historically true or not, its widespread popularity was influential in promoting the celebration of the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

### **Re-establishment by the younger Anselm**

Pope Paschal III sent the young Anselm (a nephew of the saint) as papal legate to Henry I and the archbishop of Canterbury. In Rome he had been

abbot of the monastery of St Sabbas which had known the eastern usage of celebrating the feast of the Conception. In 1120, Anselm became abbot of St Edmund's, Bury. Under his influence, the feast began to be celebrated once again in England and even spread to Normandy but not without considerable opposition.

### **The Council of London**

Influenced by the younger Anselm, Osbert of Clare introduced the feast to the Abbey of Westminster. Following protests by two bishops, Roger of Salisbury and Bernard of Menevia, a Council of London was called in 1129. Opposition to the feast was based partly on the argument that there was no reason to celebrate it as an historical fact since it added nothing to the existing feast of the nativity of Mary. The council decided in favour of the feast, causing Bishop Gilbert of London to adopt it for the diocese. Subsequently, the feast was celebrated more widely in England although as a feast of a private character, and not a holyday of obligation. The controversy over the feast in London was of importance in the development of the doctrine because in defence of the feast, both Osbert of Clare and Eadmer began to teach that the feast was important not simply as celebrating an historical fact but because it celebrated the singular privilege of Mary's being conceived immaculate.

### **Lyons and the protest of St Bernard**

In 1136, the feast was introduced by the canons in Lyons Cathedral who had known Anselm the younger. This occasioned the vehement protest of St Bernard who considered it to be an innovation that did not have the approval of Rome. St Bernard also taught that Mary was sanctified after her conception. As with many others, Bernard considered that the act of carnal conception would necessarily pass on original sin and that therefore Mary could only be sanctified after her conception.

### **Nicholas of St Albans**

After the death of St Bernard, the controversy over the celebration of the feast continued. Nicholas of St Albans defended the feast as celebrated in England against the Bishop of Chartres, Peter de Celles. He said that our Lady's heart had been pierced by the sword twice: once at the foot of the cross and a second time when St Bernard wrote against her feast.

It must be stressed at this point that the theological discussion was not over Mary's sinlessness. Theologians on both sides of the debate could sing of her as *flos de spinis spina carens*. The debate focussed exactly on the conception itself, whether Mary was conceived immaculate or was sanctified in the womb after "animation".

## Alexander of Neckham

Born in 1157, Neckham studied at Paris and then became professor successively at St Albans, Dunstable and Oxford. He was opposed to the celebration of the feast and purported to continue teaching on 8 December as though it were any other day. However, each year, he was struck ill and unable to teach. Influenced by this and by the advice of friends, he became an advocate of the doctrine, asserting that although it was a general law that we were conceived with original sin, this did not prevent there being an exception. He referred as others had, to the text of Augustine “I wish that whenever there is question of sin, there should be no mention of the Blessed Virgin.”<sup>5</sup>

## Early discussions on the doctrine

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### Eadmer

Eadmer was the “disciple, spiritual director and biographer of St Anselm” of Canterbury, living in the second half of the 11th century to 1124. Thurston says of him:

“It was he who first in explicit terms and in due theological form inaugurated the discussion which was carried on by so many countrymen of his upon the lines he first indicated.”<sup>6</sup>

Eadmer wrote the tract *De conceptione Sanctae Mariae* in defence of the celebration of the feast of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>7</sup> In response to the Norman criticism of the feast, Eadmer spoke of a popular feast of the Conception of Mary, celebrated by simple, devout people, now attacked by ampler learning and an “overweening spirit of criticism”. Eadmer’s is the first defence of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in the West.

We must remember that the physical process of conception was not well understood at this time (as it was much better understood by the time of Pius IX). Eadmer and others understood a distinction between active and passive conception, i.e. the active sexual act itself by which conception occurs and the passive conception of the flesh. It is unlikely that there was a clear understanding of conception as the moment in which a person was first constituted. So, for example, the pseudo-Abelard said that “conception” took place when the Blessed Virgin did not yet exist.

Nevertheless, Eadmer regarded the Blessed Virgin as one who was free from Original Sin from the beginning of her existence as a person. He promoted

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<sup>5</sup> Augustine *De natura et gratia* 36

<sup>6</sup> Thurston, H “England and the Immaculate Conception” *The Month* CIV (1904) p.562-576

<sup>7</sup> Until 1904, this tract was commonly attributed to St Anselm

the celebration of the feast of the Immaculate Conception because that was when the flesh was conceived from which the flesh which redeemed us would be taken.

### Anselm

St Bernard and Richard of St Victor said with Anselm that Mary was “sanctified” before birth in her mother’s womb. This view is not compatible with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception according to which no sanctification or purification was necessary because Mary was conceived immaculate.

The reason for the reluctance of these writers to assert the Immaculate Conception was the historically strong reaction against Pelagianism. Countering this heresy, St Augustine stressed the universality of Original Sin. Anselm, along with others, agreed with the universality of Original Sin but held that Mary was cleansed before her birth by the merits of Christ’s future death on the cross.<sup>8</sup>

## The 13th century schoolmen

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### Major writers opposed to the doctrine

Alexander of Hales, St Bonaventure, St Albert the Great and St Thomas Aquinas all agreed with the earlier consensus that Mary was purified in the womb from the sin in which she had been conceived. The key obstacle to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was, as we have seen, a strong understanding on the universality of sin and the consequent need of all for redemption.

Bonaventure carefully and sympathetically expounded the view that although the rest of mankind had fallen over the precipice into sin and was rescued from the pit, Mary was saved on the edge of the precipice, into which she did not fall. However, Bonaventure in fact took the opposite view as more reasonable, more common, more in accord with the fathers and with devotion ruled by the faith. Bonaventure’s reluctance gives us an idea of how the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception appeared as “dangerous territory” to the schoolmen of the 13th century.<sup>9</sup>

### St Thomas Aquinas

In his commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, St Thomas discussed in detail the question of whether the Blessed Virgin could have been immune from original sin, and in particular, whether

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<sup>8</sup> Anselm *Cur Deus Homo* II.16

<sup>9</sup> It is sometimes asserted that St Albert the Great regarded the Immaculate Conception as “heretical” but only because of a failure to understand the debate. On one occasion, Albert did use the expression but only of the idea of the sanctification of the flesh before animation – an idea that is certainly not easy to see as in any way orthodox.

she was sanctified before her conception was completed. He also discussed whether it was possible for the Blessed Virgin to receive the grace of being immune from original sin in the very instant of her “animation”. In both cases, he answers in the negative. He was particularly concerned that her preservation from original sin would compromise the unique privilege of the flesh of Christ who alone is our redeemer.<sup>10</sup>

In the *Summa Theologica*, St Thomas dealt explicitly with the question of whether the Blessed Virgin was sanctified before animation. Again he answered in the negative. He set out clearly the doctrine that Original Sin is transmitted to all men through generation<sup>11</sup> Therefore the Blessed Virgin would need to be sanctified after “animation”

“Since the Blessed Virgin needed redemption and salvation which is from Christ, she was only sanctified after animation”<sup>12</sup>

There has been considerable discussion on this point.<sup>13</sup> In an 1877 edition of the *Summa*,<sup>14</sup> there is a footnote referring to the work of Aloysius Lambruschini who argued that by comparing later texts with earlier, it was apparent that a number of emendations had been made, affecting the legitimate sense of the text, especially in matters relating to the Immaculate Conception. However, the editorial note to 3a 27.2 in the 1947 edition of the translation of the *Summa Theologica* by the English Dominicans

<sup>10</sup> The text *Quae a peccato originali et actuali immunis fuit* (in IV Sent 1.1 dist 44, q.1 a.3 ad tertium) is often cited as evidence that St Thomas in his earlier work affirmed the Immaculate Conception and only later rejected it. However the text as it stands does not prove this. It is necessary to show that the Angelic Doctor intended immunity from sin at the time of conception rather than resulting from sanctification *in utero* after conception. His lengthy discussion and conclusions on the subject show that he shared the common view that Mary was not conceived (or indeed animated) free from original sin.

<sup>11</sup> St Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* (ST) 1a2ae 80.3

<sup>12</sup> ST 3a 27.2 *conclusio*

<sup>13</sup> For an example, see Balic, C *The Medieval Controversy over the Immaculate Conception up to the Death of Scotus* in O’Connor, D *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception* University of Notre Dame Press 1958 p196. In a lengthy footnote, Balic demolishes the argument of Rossi which is based on 3 minor texts of St Thomas. At a time of great Marian devotion and the great respect in which St Thomas was held, it is perhaps understandable that the idea of the great Doctor opposing the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was hard to bear. Nevertheless, it is surely no disrespect to St Thomas to find him on rare occasions reluctantly agreeing with a consensus of doctors, to be bested later by another brilliant and saintly Doctor.

<sup>14</sup> Nicolai, Sylvii, Billuart & C.-J. Drioux 10th edition Paris 1877

accepts that in a matter which was not then *de fide*, St Thomas was “a witness to the expression of the faith of his time.

In the commonly accepted thinking of the time, the body was first conceived through seminal generation, (by means of which the defects of original sin is transmitted). Then, later, this matter is animated by first the vegetative, then the sensitive and then the spiritual soul. The flesh before animation cannot be the subject of original sin or of preservation from it, or of sanctification, because as flesh, it cannot be the subject of grace. Therefore, the common view was that the soul had first to exist and then to be sanctified. As we shall see, the argument against this necessary succession of events in time was one of the principal points of Scotus’ defence of the Immaculate Conception.

### Robert of Grosseteste

Grosseteste was appointed bishop of Lincoln in 1235 by William of Ware and held office until 1253. He was the protector of the first Franciscans at Oxford in 1224 and was their professor of theology for four or five years. William of Ware tells us that Grosseteste affirmed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception but gives no other information.

### William of Ware

William of Ware was a Franciscan of Oxford and taught at Oxford and Paris. According to Franciscan tradition, he was the teacher of Duns Scotus.

He considered the traditional justification for the immaculate conception “*deicit, potuit ergo et fecit*”<sup>15</sup>, arguing that he would prefer to err in excess of devotion to Mary than in lack of devotion.

He said that the flesh of Mary was purified in the instant of its seminal conception. He said “purified” rather than “sanctified” because only the soul can be sanctified and in Mary’s case there was no need. He summarised his teaching by speaking of the flesh of Christ as *mundus de mundo*, that of Mary as *munda de immundis* and that of the rest of the human race as *immundi de immundis*.<sup>16</sup>

Because it was possible to preserve Mary from sin, it was also fitting for Christ to do so and therefore he did so from filial devotion. William of Ware’s thesis was advanced particularly to support the celebration of the Conception of Mary in the “immaculist” sense and not simply as the celebration of an historical event.

<sup>15</sup> “It was fitting, [God] could do it, therefore he did it”

<sup>16</sup> viz. “clean from clean (Christ), clean from unclean (Mary) and unclean from unclean (us)”

## The triumph of Duns Scotus

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It was in the 14th century that the dispute over the Immaculate Conception really became a major debate in the schools with the public defence of the privilege at Paris by Blessed John Duns Scotus. The controversy saw the Franciscans on the side of the Immaculate Conception and the Dominicans opposing the doctrine.

### Scotus at Oxford

Scotus began to teach at Oxford at around the turn of the 14th century. In his commentary on the Sentences *Opus Oxoniense*, he deals explicitly with the question “Whether the Blessed Virgin was conceived in Original Sin”<sup>17</sup>

Sometimes, the teaching of Scotus is summed up in the tag *deciuit potuit ergo et fecit*. This can give a false impression of a purely devotional *tour de force*. In fact, Scotus’ contribution to the debate was a brilliant triumph of theological originality and genius. Not for nothing was he called *Doctor Subtilis*.

Scotus proceeded in the customary fashion by enunciating authorities on either side from the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. He then enumerated the arguments against the privilege and answered them. One important argument was from the excellence of Christ. This he answered by saying that it was a more excellent benefit to preserve Mary from Original sin than to permit her to be conceived in it and then deliver her from it.

Another important and brilliant distinction made by Scotus regarded the transmission of Original Sin. He argued that the flesh did not act as a physical cause in the transmission of Original sin and that Original Sin was not a positive vice. He said that the flesh was a moral cause in the sense that it contained the reason or condition why God did not give sanctifying grace to those who were conceived without the primitive integrity (viz. of our first parents). Therefore it was perfectly possible for God to make an exception to this privation of sanctifying grace in the case of Mary. If, on the other hand, the “infection” of sin was caused by the flesh, Scotus pointed out that a baptised baby also has this flesh and receives sanctifying grace: therefore Mary could receive the same grace at the instant of her conception.

Scotus answered the argument of St Bonaventure and others, that Mary had to be a daughter of Adam before becoming a daughter of God. He said that there was a logical priority but not necessarily a temporal priority. God could create Mary a daughter of Adam and in the same instant of time make her a daughter of God by sanctifying grace.

He also dealt with the problem of distinguishing between Mary’s immunity from sin and Christ’s. Mary was free from sin because of the grace of God. Christ was free from sin by right of being – Mary was “preserved” free from sin, Christ simply is free from sin by his very nature.

The modest conclusion Scotus reached in his work at Oxford was that the Immaculate Conception was possible and that therefore it was reasonable to believe it.

In response to the question of the universality of redemption, Scotus followed the teaching of his master, William of Ware in distinguishing between redemption from sin and redemption that preserved from sin. However, Scotus went beyond William of Ware in that he did not posit the purification of the flesh as necessary beforehand.

### A more excellent benefit

The excellence of the work of Christ in the Immaculate Conception was a key point in his reasoning. Mary would have contracted original sin unless she had been prevented from doing so by the grace of Christ the mediator. So she did indeed need Christ as her redeemer. However, others need Christ’s redeeming grace in order to remit the stain of sin already contracted. Mary needed Christ’s redeeming grace in order to prevent her from contracting the stain of this sin.

Christ is the most perfect Redeemer. Therefore it is fitting that he should have saved at least one person from contracting original sin which is a greater and more excellent thing than remit the stain already incurred.

### Scotus in Paris

Scotus treated the subject a second time in his *Reportata parisiensia*<sup>18</sup> It has been suggested that he was less assertive in this work and therefore less sure of himself. However, at this time, having been asked as a young professor to contribute to a major debate, it is understandable that his argument was reserved and prudent. He simply argued for the possibility of the Immaculate Conception against the objection that Mary was at the same time in sin and in grace and dealt with other disputed points, defending his doctrine.

The opinion contrary to the Immaculate Conception was in possession of Oxford and Paris. Duns Scotus forced all to re-examine this and won the day.

### The Incarnation and the Immaculate Conception

In the debate over the question “Whether the Word would have become incarnate if man had not sinned”, Scotus famously differed with Aquinas, arguing that

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<sup>17</sup> In IV Sent 1.3 dist 3 q.1

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<sup>18</sup> 1.3 dist 3 q.1

the incarnation (and therefore the existence of Mary) was decreed independently of sin. It can seem puzzling therefore that he should have argued for the Immaculate Conception from the point of view of the universal need for Redemption. It is sufficient to note here that the method of Scotus was to argue for the possibility of the Immaculate Conception *even against* those who held the opposite view of the incarnation. It would certainly be possible to make a beautiful case for the Immaculate Conception following Scotus' teaching and the Franciscan tradition on creation and the incarnation but that would be beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>19</sup>

## **Enduring love of Mary in England**

We may be rightly proud of our heritage in England which saw such vigorous defence of the celebration of the Conception of Mary and of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. From the 11th century at least, England was known as the "dowry of Mary" because of the singular devotion of the English people. The shrine of Walsingham rapidly became one of the most important shrines in western Christendom, known as "England's Nazareth". Even today, pub and place names such as "The Angel", "The Flowerpot", "Maryvale" "Ladywell" speak of the widespread devotion to Mary that inspired so many dedications. In Wales the place name "Llanfair"<sup>20</sup> is the prefix to many place names still used today.

This attachment to Mary did not become "corrupted" in the middle ages as is so often supposed. It was, as we have seen, the focus not only of popular devotion but of academic debate at international level in which scholars from this island played a decisive part. (We must recognise, of course, the Scots origins of Duns Scotus.) As has been comprehensively demonstrated by Eamonn Duffy<sup>21</sup>, at the eve of the Reformation Catholicism was a popular, vital, healthy and much-loved element of every area of English life and society. The confiscation of the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham by King Henry VIII and its desecration and burning in Chelsea was an act which outraged popular piety. At the same time it demonstrated the ruthlessness which would be necessary if the "old

religion" was to be extirpated. The breaking of windows, whitewashing of frescoes, smashing of statues and execution of martyrs up and down the country which ensued during the reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth I was the only way in which England's traditional love for Mary could be suffocated.

It is fitting that England should once again be suffused with Marian devotion and it is right that we should work to bring England back to Mary and Mary back to England. If we may use a variant on the scholastic tag that has featured in this paper, it is *possible* because to God all things are possible that are not contrary to his wisdom, it is *fitting*, especially in view of our history – we must therefore pray *Decet, Potes, ergo, Domine, Fac.*

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<sup>19</sup> Such themes are often dealt with in *Faith Magazine* which promotes just such a "Scotist" view of creation and incarnation.

<sup>20</sup> Often known to tourists from the longest place name "Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlilllantysiliogog ogoch" The full name means "St Mary's Church in the Hollow of the White Hazel near a Rapid Whirlpool and the Church of St. Tysilio near the Red Cave" although the name is nowadays reduced to "Llanfair PG" except for the tourist attraction.

<sup>21</sup> Duffy, E. *The Stripping of the Altars* Yale 1992