Excavations carried out at St Patrick’s Chapel and the analysis of the remains of those who were buried there, have the potential to transform our understanding of Christian communities who once lived and died in Pembrokeshire during the early medieval period.

This project would not have been possible without the help of the project’s volunteers and the effort and enthusiasm of staff from Dyfed Archaeological Trust.

We hope to secure future funding in order to continue the research into St Patrick’s Chapel.

Thanks must also be given to Cadw, the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, the Nineveh Trust, the British Academy, and the University of Sheffield, for their generous support.

Further Information
A. B. Badger and F. Green. ‘The Chapel traditionally attributed to St. Patrick, Whitesand Bay, Pembrokeshire’, *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 80 (1925), pp. 87-120.


If you wish to contact us about the project please e-mail Dr Katie A. Hemer (University of Sheffield): stpcexcavation@gmail.com or Ken Murphy (Dyfed Archaeological Trust): k.murphy@dyfedarchaeology.co.uk
The early Christian cemetery at St Patrick’s Chapel, located on the sand dunes which overlook Whitesands Bay offers a valuable insight into Pembrokeshire’s early medieval Christian communities.

Coastal Erosion has been a concern at the site since the 1920s and was worsened by severe winds which battered the coast of Wales in the winter of 2013/14.

Since 2014, Dyfed Archaeological Trust with funding from the Welsh government through Cadw together with support from the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, local volunteers, and the University of Sheffield, have excavated the cemetery at St Patrick’s Chapel.

Excavation has been essential to prevent further loss of archaeological evidence at this Scheduled Ancient Monument, and to preserve, ‘by record’, Pembrokeshire’s coastal heritage.

The Early Medieval Cemetery

Excavation of the cemetery has revealed a significant burial site with over 45 burials discovered to date. Radiocarbon dates from the first phase of excavation in 2014, suggest that burial activity at the site began before the 7th century AD, and continued into the 11th century AD.

One of the most significant discoveries at St Patrick’s Chapel was the burial of a well-preserved skeleton of a woman, approximately 18-25 years old when she died.

Osteological analysis has revealed that she stood approximately 5 feet tall and showed no visible signs of disease or trauma. Defects on her lower front teeth, however, suggest a period of ill-health during childhood.

Analysis of the chemical elements in her bone collagen and tooth enamel will allow researchers to discover what she ate and whether she came from the local area.

The woman was buried in a well-built cist grave with her hands crossed and resting on her pelvis. A fragment of copper alloy wire was found near the hands, which may have been a pin used to secure the body in a shroud.

At the head of the grave, excavators uncovered a cross-shaped grave marker made from a bluish-grey stone found in the local area. It was possible to see part of a ring-cross carved on the lower surface of the stone. This burial is a particularly significant discovery as it is the only example from Britain of a cross-carved grave marker found in situ at the head of a cist grave, radiocarbon dated to the 7th-9th century AD.

A unique burial rite was also identified: occasionally, burials of young individuals were covered with an arrangement of white quartz pebbles placed over the lintel slabs, perhaps so that the top of the grave remained visible.

Analysis of the human remains undertaken at the University of Sheffield has revealed a mixed population consisting of men, women and children of all ages.

Most graves were oriented east to west with the head at the west end, and the deceased received no possessions in keeping with Christian burial tradition. Burials consisted of stone-lined graves known as cists that were constructed from rock native to the area, and capped with large, flat slabs; a burial tradition common across much of west Wales during the early medieval period.

Analysis of the chemical elements in her bone collagen and tooth enamel will allow researchers to discover what she ate and whether she came from the local area.

The young woman’s grave

Excavating a burial

A quartz-covered cist burial

Cross-shaped grave marker

Exposed to the elements

A skeleton emerging from the sand

Excavation underway