

Mediaeval lost property

Mick Dean, Diocesan Property Officer, makes an exciting find

Medieval pilgrimage was a serious, and often hazardous, undertaking. St Davids Cathedral fared highly in the spiritual stakes, as two pilgrimages to St Davids were worth one to Rome, and three were equal to Jerusalem (though perhaps one's pilgrimage points were somewhat diluted if you happened to live in Haverfordwest rather than London!) Apart from the usual robbers and natural disasters, the journey throughout Wales had the added difficulties of crossing numerous rivers and estuaries.

My story begins and ends in Ferryside, a village situated on the banks of the River Towy, eight miles south of Carmarthen. As the name suggests, during medieval times (and beyond) a ferry used to carry pilgrims and their belongings over to Llansteffan, to continue the journey to St Davids, possibly taking in the nearby St Anthony's Well which is another story in itself. Interestingly, it is believed that the ferry was operated by the Knights Hospitaller, a medieval Christian military order with links to the more famous Templars.

Fast forward 800+ years and I am walking Beau the dog along the Ferryside shoreline, with a borrowed metal detector. After finding two 2p pieces in quick succession, I came across a strong signal. Digging six inches down into the sand, I uncovered a tiny, shaped piece of lead, which I thought was probably from the nearby train track workings. As it was raining, I put the lead into my pocket without really studying it, and returned home.



After lightly cleaning up the piece, I discovered that it was a miniature ampulla [pictured] - a container purchased at shrines of revered saints and sacred sites, to carry holy water or oil.

This was a type of pilgrim's badge, worn around the neck or on clothing, in the belief of gaining saintly help and protection against life's ills. Note the 'X' inscribed on the front, signifying Christ. The use of 'X' became popular in Europe from the early 1500s, which, in turn, dates my piece from circa 1540.

Wearing a pilgrim badge could also have been proof of pilgrimage and an interesting and meaningful memento of the journey. Much the same as a visit nowadays to a National Trust/Cadw property where badges and fridge magnets are extremely popular at the gift shop.

No doubt the person who lost their ampulla at the ferry crossing would have been upset, but it has given us a rare glimpse into life 500 years ago.