

1st March marks age old link between Wales and Kildare's county town

The first days of the spring months are marked by the feast days of two great saints of the early Christian church in these islands. Here in Kildare we have celebrated the significance of the 1st February as the feast day of St. Brigid, storied abbess of a great monastery at Cill Dara. The 1st of March carries significance in the calendar of early Christian saints in that it is the feast day of Saint David. Now David might be thought of mainly in terms of his position as patron saint of Wales but his memory is also kept alive in Co. Kildare where, for some years now, the day is marked in Naas which, since the 12th century, has had a connection with the Pembrokeshire peninsula of south-west Wales.

St. David never visited Naas but rather he was imported in to the locality in the 12th century by the Normans who landed on the Wexford coast having made the crossing of the Irish sea from Wales. The barony of Naas was granted to Maurice Fitzgerald who had direct family connections with the area of St. David's monastery and cathedral at the extremity of the Pembrokeshire peninsula.

Mediaeval Naas acquired many of the features of a Norman outpost with a moat, mills, walls and gates all being recorded. But just as important as their physical reinforcement was the way in which the Normans brought a cultural impact to bear with traces of Norman-Welsh Culture being welded to existing Irish custom and practice. One of the most striking similarities between Kildare and Pembrokeshire is in the names of townlands and localities. Overlay a townland map of Co. Kildare on to a map of south-west Wales and the coincidence of naming is remarkable. Townland names such as Herbertstown, Sherlockstown, Craddockstown in the Naas area of county Kildare are to be found in Pembrokeshire. An obvious Norman import for example is Kerdiffstown (as in Cardiff in Wales) while it may come as a surprise to Kildare folk that there is another Punchestown – in this case the name of a locality near Fishguard on the Pembrokeshire peninsula.

As well as leaving their placenames and settlement patterns the Norman settlers of the 12th century and later also brought their own patron saint from Wales. David was a saint of the early Christian era who became known for his sanctity and wisdom. He is thought to have lived about the years 530 to 601AD. His church in a valley near the coast of Wales became a place of pilgrimage and was expanded to become an abbey and cathedral. When six centuries later the Normans sailed from their strongholds in Wales to find new fortune in Ireland they translated this dedication to David across the Irish sea where it was to find permanent expression in Naas. It was to prove a dedication of great longevity despite the many changes, trials and divisions experienced in Naas over the centuries. Indeed St. David's day was, it appears, celebrated in Naas over several centuries. According to one old recollection an amusing incident occurred in the late 1700s when a regiment of Welsh soldiers was marching through Naas. They noticed that the townspeople were wearing green leeks in their hats and having something of a party. The Welshmen took this as some form of dishonour to their national patron (the leek, of course, being a symbol of Wales) and were about to take on the Naas folk when it was explained to them that this was the normal custom in the town on the feast of St. David (1st March). This explanation not alone calmed the situation but brought a strong fellow feeling between the Welsh soldiers and the Naas residents, and both groups are said to have joined together in celebration of their common patron into the small hours of the night.

In later generations the commemoration of the link with St. David was continued albeit in a much more sober format. When the new Catholic church was built in 1827 on the Sallins Road in Naas it was named after Our Lady & St. David, an identical title to that which attached to the old Augustine priory at Great Connell near Newbridge. In the early 1900 there was still sufficient awareness for the town council to confer the name St. David's on a new housing estate.

However it seemed as if the connection between Kildare's county town and Wales might have faded completely in the twentieth century until in 1990 a number of local historians in Naas succeeded in influencing a positive Urban Council to conclude an official twinning between Naas and the cathedral city of St. David's in Pembrokeshire. So this March the Welsh dragon will fly from outside the Town Hall in Naas as it might have flown over the town back in the 12th century when the Normans found space – among all the Irish saints – for the patron saint of Wales.