

Society's excursion St Mullins, Duiske Abbey and Borris House 9 July 2017

The County Kildare Archaeological Society's annual one day excursion took place on 9 July 2017 in beautiful sunshine to St Mullins, Duiske Abbey (Graignamanagh) and Borris House.

St Mullins

The day began with tea/coffee and scones at the delightful Mullicha Café. Afterwards, the large group of members were joined by Bridie Lawler, a local historian, who was the Society's guide for the visit to St Mullins. This scenically enchanting village, which is steeped in ecclesiastical history is located on the eastern bank of the river Barrow in the shadows of Mount Brandon and the Blackstairs mountains.



The river Barrow flowing gently along with the famous 'Carlow Gate' (granite stone post and rail fence) in the foreground.
(Photo Anne O'Byrne)

The village retains many physical features of the various periods in history including its extensive evidence of an early Christian monastic settlement. The village once had a milling tradition, however, this ceased in 1966 when the owners closed the facility. The Odum family, who were the last mill owners, had a number of houses constructed for their workers

which Bridie pointed out and the family is credited with the planting of the many magnificent trees to be found around the village.

The village, though, takes its name from St Moling, the founder of a monastery there in the seventh century. He is credited as the scribe of the Book of Mulling commonly called the Book of Moling, which text includes copies of the four Gospels and is now housed in Trinity College, Dublin. Bridie described the work of Moling, who is referred to locally as a prince, poet, artist and artisan who worked with the builder 'Gobban Soar' in the building of the monastery, the plan of which can be found in the Book. Moling also excavated a watercourse by himself by hand 'as an offering of penance' to supply his mill, the track of which remains and this was outlined during Bridie's guided tour. The monastery was plundered by the Vikings in 951 and destroyed again in the twelfth century, after which an Abbey was constructed with some of these medieval ruins still surviving. At the Motte and Bailey, a Norman defensive structure dating to the late twelfth century, Bridie explained the significance of the motte which is a manually constructed earthen mound on top of which a timber castle was erected, while the bailey adjoining the motte provided accommodation for the garrison who manned the bailey.

Bridie concluded her guided tour by outlining the many artefacts in the cemetery including the medieval church ruin, penal altar used during the period of the penal laws in Ireland, the base of the round tower, the graves of the MacMurrough Kavanaghs, and also the former Church of Ireland church which was built in 1801 and is now used as a heritage centre. Time did not permit a visit to St Moling's well some distance away, however, the President, on behalf of the Society members, thanked Bridie Lawler for a wonderful guided tour and presented her with a copy of the Society's Journal and a copy of the recently published book; *War Memoirs of C.M.L Clements* former President of the Society. Bridie said she was honoured to act as guide to the Society during its visit and delighted to have the opportunity to thank the Society's past-president, Con Manning in his Archaeologist role for his support and assistance to the community of St Mullins.



Presentation to Bridie Lawler (Photo Martha Donagh)





Duiske Abbey

The second part of the excursion was to the historical Duiske Abbey which dates back to the thirteenth century, once the church of a Cistercian monastery and now the catholic parish church of Graignamanagh. Here the group was given a very warm welcome by the parish priest, Fr Gerry Byrne, followed by a guided tour and commentary on the history of this magnificent ecclesiastical complex.



The Abbey was founded in 1204 by William Marshall, the earl of Pembroke, and is regarded as one of the finest of the thirty-four medieval Cistercian monasteries in Ireland. The monks came from Wiltshire and by 1228 the size of the community was recorded as thirty-six monks and fifty lay-brothers.

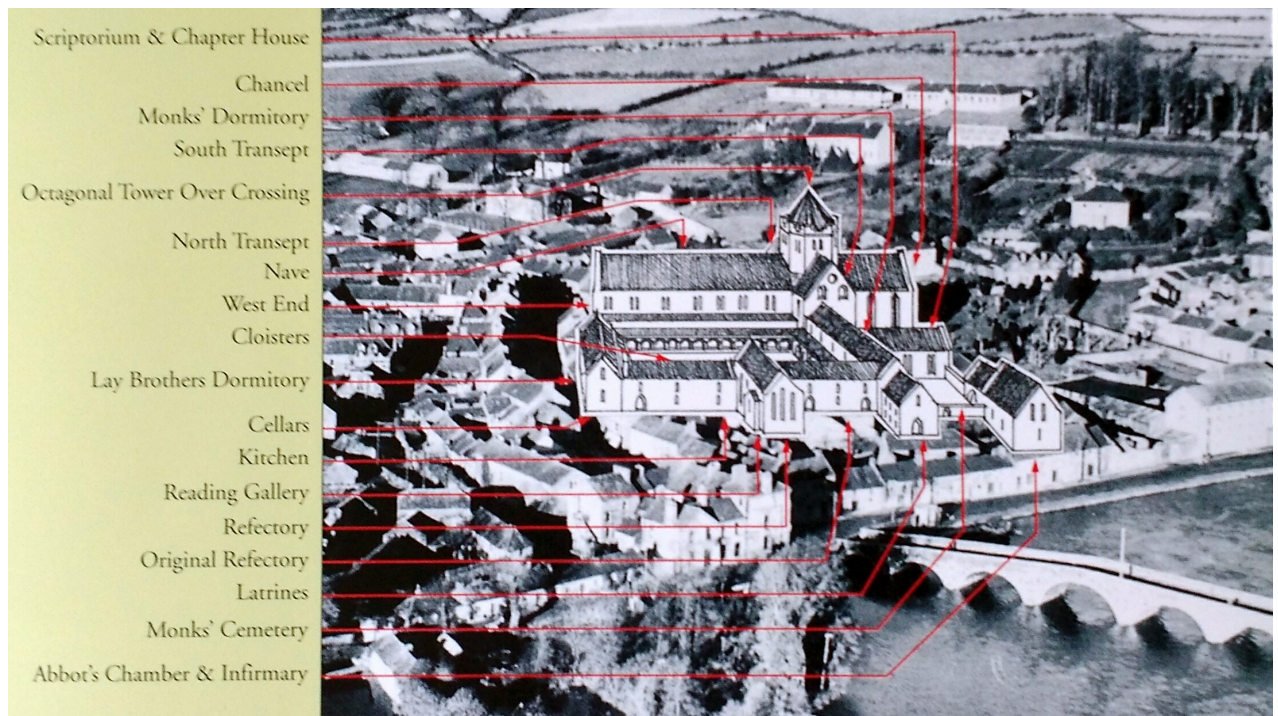
Duiske Abbey fell victim to the Dissolution of Monasteries between 1536-1541 under the regime of Henry VIII and following the dissolution the structure began to deteriorate while the lands passed to the Butler family. The central tower of the original structure collapsed into the nave in 1744 bringing down the vaulting of the chancel and portion of the nave arcade leaving it in a ruinous condition. In 1754, the Church of Ireland congregation re-roofed part of the west end of the Abbey church, however, they later decided to build a new church nearby. During these building works they removed the roof which had been erected at the Abbey and incorporated it in the new church.

In 1812, the Abbey church was returned to the local Catholic community and the following year the chancel, the north and south transepts, and part of the nave were re-roofed for use

as a Catholic church. In 1886 the remaining western arches of the nave were roofed and it remained in use until the mid 1970s when fresh restoration works began under the direction of the Dublin architect Percy le Clerc. This restoration project was completed in 1980. While it is not a recreation of the medieval church, nevertheless, the works have been tastefully and sensitively carried out to reflect the original fabric in as much as is possible. Thankfully, some of the early stone artwork can still be seen such as the stone carvings, samples of Gothic and Romanesque architecture and samples of the original medieval floor tiles. The new open-framed roof was constructed with Irish oak and elm sourced mainly locally using medieval techniques involving the fixing of joints with dowels and wedges. Windows in the north and south transepts which had been blocked up were restored while the stone-faced walls in the nave are lime-washed to provide an impression of the original walls.



There is a most realistic model of the Abbey and the monastic buildings located in the church which is of great assistance to the visitor in the interpretation of this wonderful ecclesiastical complex. Further information on this wonderful National Monument can be gleamed from the conjectural reconstruction drawing by Brian Lalor which can be found in the local publication; *Duiske Abbey*.



The Society members will be glad to note that archaeological testing works were carried out on the site during the later refurbishment works by the late John Bradley, a contributor to the Society's Journal, and the Society's past-president Con Manning. The results of their works were published in the; *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, Vol. 81C (1981), pp 397- 426. Their discovery included portion of a thirteen-century tiled pavement and thirty-three different decorative inlaid tiles having a large selection of motifs.

To conclude the visit to Duiske Abbey, the President, thanked Fr Gerry for the welcome received by the Society members and presented him with a copy of the Society' Journal and a copy of the recently published book; *War Memoirs of C.M.L Clements*, who was a former President of the Society. In response, Fr Gerry said he was delighted that the Society had chosen to visit Duiske Abbey and he was thrilled with the response of the members during the visit.

Borris House

The concluding visit of the excursion was to Borris House in County Carlow which is one of the most beautiful and historic of the Irish Country Houses. This property is located in spectacular scenery having a backdrop of Mount Leinster and the Blackstairs Mountains with the river Barrow flowing alongside. Borris House has been the ancestral home of the

McMorrough Kavanaghs, once the High Kings of Leinster, and is one of the few Irish estates that can trace its history back to the royal families of ancient Ireland. It is both a home and working farm for Sara and Morgan Kavanagh who are the sixteenth generation of McMorrough Kavanaghs to have lived in this beautiful home set in over six hundred and fifty acres of walled private park and woodlands.

The party was greeted by Morgan at the spectacular Tudor style entrance gate before proceeding along the avenue to the House. Morgan gave an outline of the house and the demesne, alluding to the demand placed on the family for maintenance and restoration in order to protect the building over the past twenty years. Referring to the many projects under development and the continuous programme of restoration he said they could not continue without the generous support of their visitors. The group then visited the private chapel of St Moling at Borris House, frequently described as a stunning example of Tudor revival architecture. This is a detached single-cell structure built around 1828 designed by Richard Morrison and incorporates an undercroft, buttresses, turret and truncated tower. The interior retains the original apse with minor balconies, west gallery and rib-vaulted ceiling. While in the chapel, Morgan gave an account of the various members of the family through the ages, their travels, exploits, marriages and inheritance etc. One of the most remarkable of these being Arthur MacMurrough Kavanagh who was born without full limbs, however, this impediment did not hinder him from hunting shooting or sailing. He inherited the estate when both his older brothers pre-deceased him and served as an M.P. for many years.



Borris House and St Moling's chapel (Photo Anne O'Byrne)

Borris House was rebuilt in 1731 under the guidance of Richard Morrison and his son William and using their architectural skills revamped the existing house that had existed from earlier times with a thin Tudor Gothic disguise. In doing so, they added a crenellated arcaded porch on the entrance and decorated the windows with rectangular and ogival hood-moulds. Inside the house, they created an exuberant series of rooms beginning with the most florid room of the house, the entrance hall, where a circle is created within a square space with the clever use of pairs of scagliola columns and richly modelled plasterwork. The ceiling is in the shape of a great wheel with its shallowly coved circular centre from which eight beams radiate outwards. The plasterwork is profuse with festoons in the frieze, eagles with outspread wings in the spandrels and swirling acanthus in the cove of the ceiling. The various features were enthusiastically pointed out by Sara and Morgan as well as a room by room description of the exceptional architecture, antique furniture, carpets, porcelain, silver and paintings on display. Due to weight precaution, members were also brought upstairs in small groups to visit the library and given the opportunity to view the colourful genealogy records of earlier family members. Time did not permit an opportunity to explore the grounds of the estate and stroll along the woodland paths to enjoy the beautiful specimen trees.

Before departure, the President on behalf of the members thanked Sara and Morgan for their hospitality and as a token of appreciation, presented the family with a copy of the *War Memoirs of C.M.L. Clements*.

The event concluded with a beautiful meal in the Lord Bagenal Inn in Leighlinbridge during which the President, on behalf of the Society, thanked the Secretary, Bernadette Doyle for all her work in organising such an enjoyable event.

Hugh Crawford

President.