

Duiske Abbey Graignamanagh - Abbey Triumphant

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1974 will be remembered in the Barrow Valley Town of Graignamanagh not only because of the historic visits by the late President Childers and An Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave but also at that time began the work of restoring Ireland's largest and richest Cistercian Abbey. Ten long and anxious years passed since the parish was asked to face the reality of major structural defects in the existing roof and Church fabric. Many there were who sincerely believed that breathing new life into the Ancient Abbey was to be avoided and in saying so overlooked the long Cistercian tradition and deep attachment of the majority in the Parish to the Abbey which gave the town its name and beginnings. Likewise in their enthusiasm for a new Church they forgot or at least were not conscious of the wonderful local tradition and attachment to the Abbey itself and also forgotten were the efforts of successive generations to embellish their Church so recently restored to Parish status. Television through an excellent An Radharc Programme; Visits by Kilkenny Archaeological Society, The Butler Society and kindred organisations; talks by Dr. Sean O'Faolain; Published lectures by Fr. Kilian Walsh, O.C.S.O., Mount Mellary Abbey, entitled "Abbey in Crises;" Press articles by Des Moore and others. all contributed towards a massive vote in favour of continuing the work so courageously begun in 1813.

The appointment of Rev. Patrick Dunny, C.C., to be Co-ordinator together with a generous financial subscription by Most Rev. Dr. Lennon, Bishop of the Diocese, caused the Parish to close its ranks and get down to the serious business of Fund Raising. Mr. Percy Le Clerc who directed the work at Rothe House, Ballintubber Abbey and Holy Cross was commissioned to prepare necessary Plans, Estimates and Projections against a continually changing economic climate of inflation and rising costs.

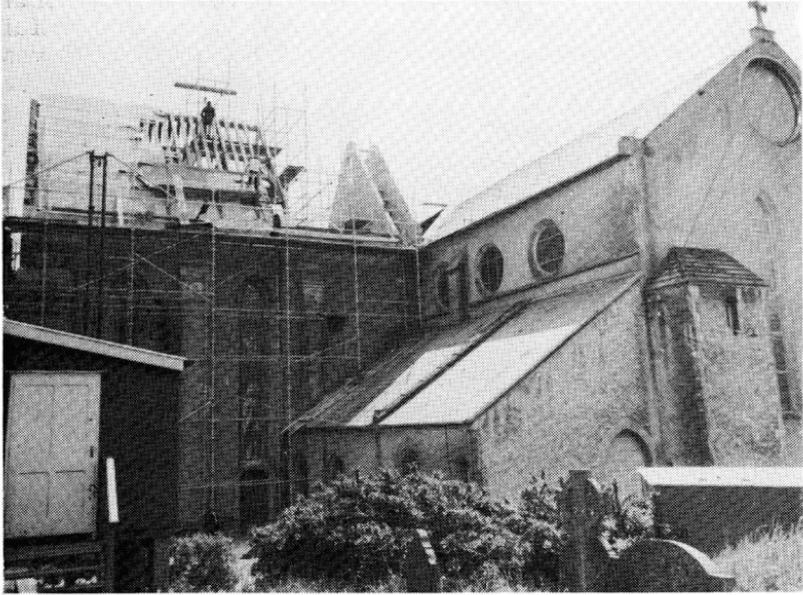
Undaunted the Parish went ahead, a survey of wage earning units revealed an overall number of 800 families excluding the out Parish of Skeoughvosteen. Never having been called upon to underwrite School Building; major

Church or Community development, Parishioners were unaware of what their real obligation might be. To up-date this, and to organise the Parish the help of a Professional in the person of Mario Martinez was sought. By tactful persuasion and ground carefully prepared, the burden was equitably distributed throughout. During the years prior to 1974 the Parish conducted its own Fund raising campaign which helped in building up a starting Fund of approximately £50,000 but at least an additional £150,000 was required to complete the essential work. This involved over the four year estimated time for completion an annual income of £37,500. Of this, roughly one half was expected from Parish subscriptions and the balance from activities organised within the Parish supplemented by generous and sympathetic support from outside. How well the Parish responded can be gauged from the initial effort resulting in a massive £35,000 odd for 12 months ending November, 1975. Hopefully the current year will see an improvement on this.

Let us now return to the beginning. Whilst the memory of the historic visit of the President and An Taoiseach was still with us our present Clerk of Works was appointed and helped by the initial fund, the task of setting up the work site commenced. Soon the network of scaffolding appeared, machines were installed and the interior was cleared of furnishings and altars. At last on June 6th, 1974, the first slate was removed from the Choir roof section. Inside, the ceiling area was demolished, galleries were removed and supplies of unseasoned Irish Oak began to arrive. Work on these, machining and fitting the trusses continued and all were stored until the wall plates, gables and other essential building to suit the new roof pitch was completed.

A matter of some concern must have been whether or not the original roof at eave level had crenellations like those added when the West gable was roofed over. Fortunately, the buttresses supporting the Choir walls retained their original tiling and from the condition of these, particularly the inner row, it could be safely assumed that the overhead and overhanging roof afforded protection from weathering which would not be the case if crenellations existed. Here, also, valuable information regarding the original wall plate levels was obtained.

Whilst clearing the way for further re-building of wall supports for the new roof in the Chancel area the exit from the staircase leading to the tower and apartments over the groined arches of the Choir were opened up.



CHOIR AND NORTH TRANSEPT

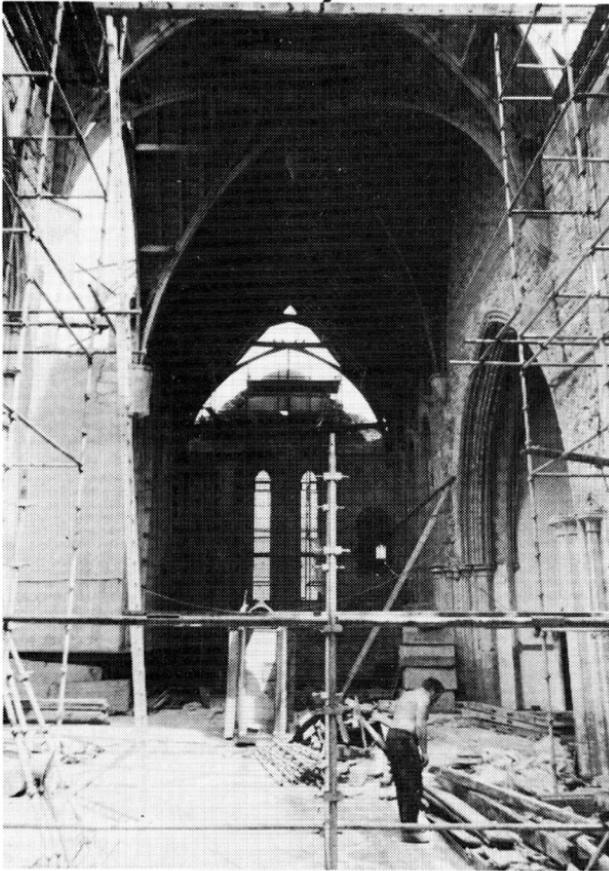
Here memories came rushing in as I gazed on this simple but notable discovery and for a moment I realised how past generations would have enjoyed this sight. As I descended the narrow steps built into the thickness of the wall, I thought of the passing years particularly since the structural collapse in 1744 and that we were probably the first since then to trod these steps made sacred by the footprints of those white robed monks. Or again how in that fateful year the humble goat saved the lives of many as they mounted the steps for their game of "Pitch and Toss" in the ivy clad apartments high over the ruined Chancel. In the way of most animals, the goat sensed imminent danger and thus forewarned, the men returned to safety minutes before the great Octagonal tower came tottering to the ground, bringing with it many of the gothic arches of the Nave and groined roof of the Choir. From the newly opened window high up in the empty Church a clear picture of the massive Cathedral-

like area stripped of galleries and furnishings could be really appreciated.

At ground level could be seen for the first time in generations, the well worn entrance from the North Transept to the spiral stone staircase. To open this doorway the work involved clearing away Centuries of accumulated rubble not only at the base of the staircase itself but in the Church area immediately in front of the doorway. This undoubtedly was a calculated effort because here lay exposed to view as they left the Tiler's hand, almost eight Centuries ago, were the Medieval tiles about which we heard so much from generations past. The late Patrick O'Leary referred to these in an article published in the Royal Society of Antiquaries Journal, 1892 Volume, and he gave examples which had in his time come to light. As happened in the early years of the present Century, the Reverend F. W. Glynn travelled from London to view the unusual design of David playing his harp as depicted on the Ullard Cross, yet again a distinguished London and International Authority on Medieval tiles, Mrs. Elizabeth Eames accompanied by our own Mr. Tom Fanning visited Graiguenamanagh and saw the tiles. A thorough examination in so far as this was possible within the restricted area available was carried out and the following extract from a preliminary Report deserves special mention whenever we are concerned with 13th Century floor tiling in Ireland :—

“A small area of paving uncovered in 1975 includes both plain glazed tiles and tiles with decoration inlaid in white clay. The designs on the decorated tiles suggest that they were made in the 13th Century. This paving is, therefore, probably co-eval with the earliest tile paving in St. Patrick's Cathedral and Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin. The tile paving in both Cathedrals was found in the 19th Century but was not accurately recorded although the best preserved were re-laid together in a small area of each Cathedral Church. The paving in Graiguenamanagh, therefore, offers what is at present a unique opportunity to record the exact arrangement of the Medieval tile paving in a great Irish Church. It is greatly to be hoped that permission will be granted for this investigation and a fund made available for it to be carried out.”

At last, early in 1975 we saw the first new main roof



FROM SOUTH TRANSEPT LOOKING NORTH

trusses hoisted into position over the East windows. Wedges and dowels were driven in to securely fix the timbers together. Soon the rafters were hidden by the various layers of wood sheeting, felt insulation and slates which were redressed and secured by copper nails to ensure a long life. The constant hammering resulting from this work was music to our ears, just as the tolling of the bell when it was first erected at the end of the last Century, caused the people in High Street, Tinnahinch, and elsewhere to come on to the streets in wonderment and admiration.

Autumn of 1975 saw the removal of the decayed roof over the Crossing and this exposed the outline of the

circular windows which hitherto lay hidden above the ceiling level. What a massive opening appeared in the North transept. Eight feet in diameter on the outside and 12 feet on the inside. Regretfully and to make provision for the low pitched 1813 roof almost one third of the carved stones forming the top section of the inner ring were removed. Some were found in the masonry used to build up the window itself as indeed were beautiful examples of foliage carvings likewise used to build up the two lancet windows in the East gable.

Thanks to a mild winter and good weather, work on the most intricate and difficult area of the Crossing commenced in February, 1976. During the previous months the heavy supporting timbers had been fashioned and prepared, walls were built and supporting capitals were set into the existing structure. These were specifically designed to ensure that nothing would in any way restrict or interfere with later restoration of the three missing arches under the Tower area. The same meticulous planning ensures that the roof taking shape will allow future generations to remove the 1813 walls of the nave and replace them with the four collapsed gothic Arches now safely preserved with the Medieval tiles in the rubble beneath the present Church floor.

By early Summer of this year (1976) the decorated centre piece was in position and the Crossing area finished. Before the annual holidays the North Transept was finished and refreshed by the August break. Attention was next directed to the South Transept.

Here as in the North Transept we saw for the first time the lighting arrangements for this area in use in Cistercian days. The circular Rose Window was opened and on either side could be seen two additional window openings, again built up until now and hidden in the darkness above the old ceiling level. These, like the window in the North Transept were badly damaged by removal of part, to lay the low pitched 1813 roof. As I write the craftsmen are carefully replacing the missing parts and building up these gables to strengthen and support the Rose Window which, incidentally, served as a pattern for a similar window in the restored South Transept of Holy Cross. Slating has also commenced on the Crossing area and hopefully the weather will permit this to be continued. Meanwhile in the workshops the massive trusses for the final assault on the Nave are beginning to take shape and these will be stored until required in the Spring of 1977.

Thanks to the dedicated Clerk of Works and a team of first-class craftsmen who take a pride in their work progress is on target and as projected. Supported by the generosity of the people both inside and outside the Parish which hopefully will continue, Graignamanagh Abbey will by 1979 rightfully join that select group including our own Rothe House of which we have reason to be justly proud.

Last, but certainly not least, our grateful thanks to Mr. Percy Le Clerc, ever generous with his advice and unsparing in his efforts much of the above that is new is due to him.



INSCRIPTIONS ON THE TOMBSTONES IN KILKENNY GRAVEYARDS

The inscriptions on the tombstones in several graveyards in the vicinity of Kilkenny have been transcribed during the year by Miss Rita Harte, the following having been covered: Ballycallan, Bennettsbridge, St. Michael's Church, Dama, Kyleballykeeffe, Kylebeg and Park.

These records and most of those already compiled have been bound with strong board covers by the Kilkenny Journal Ltd., free of charge. The Society is grateful for this service and also wishes to record its appreciation of Miss Harte's untiring efforts in collecting these records, as also her predecessors, the late Mrs. Madge Buggy, and our ever active, Hon Secretary, Mrs. Margaret Phelan and their assistants.

Thirty-four graveyards in the City of Kilkenny and its vicinity have been covered and all decipherable inscriptions recorded. A comprehensive index of the first twenty-eight graveyards dealt with has been compiled by Lt.-Col. Doheny formerly of Kilkenny Military Barracks.

This and all the records may be inspected in Rothe House. They have already proved of great service to genealogists and visitors seeking assistance in tracing their families, and many records are preserved which would otherwise be lost.