

# HUGH THE CLERK

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A number of medieval grave-slabs connected with the family of Hugh the clerk<sup>1</sup> have been recorded at the Augustinian priory of Kells, Co. Kilkenny. In the 1860s the Rev. James Graves recorded an inscribed slab commemorating William, son of Hugh the clerk<sup>2</sup>, which has since gone missing. The three at present in the choir of the church commemorate Johanna the widow, Stephen the son and another son<sup>3</sup> of Hugh the clerk. The latter three slabs were only uncovered and published in the 1890s when the floor of the handball alley, which then occupied the choir, was being extended. The anonymous author was curious to know who Hugh the clerk was and mentioned Hugh de Rous, one time prior of Kells and bishop of Ossory, who died in 1218<sup>4</sup>. The inscriptions were later published by Carrigan<sup>5</sup> who translated the Latin “hugonis clerici” of the inscriptions as “of Hugh le Clerc”, though he admitted that there was no record of the family in the documents connected with the priory. Leslie<sup>6</sup> corrected Carrigan by pointing out that “clerici” referred not to a surname but to an office or occupation and he translated the words as “of Hugh the cleric”. In medieval usage the word “clericus” can mean merely a clerk, someone with a knowledge of writing<sup>7</sup>, and therefore Leslie was not necessarily correct to imply that Hugh was in orders<sup>8</sup> and certainly had no justification or evidence for including Hugh among the curates of Kells parish. Lahert<sup>9</sup>, the first in this controversy to benefit from the publication of the medieval Ormond Deeds, pointed out that the name “Hugh the cleric” occurs in a deed of 1333 (recte 1331)<sup>10</sup> but was not inclined to connect him with the slabs at Kells.

If this deed were the only reference to a Hugh the clerk one might hesitate to make the connection but there are in fact a good number of references in these deeds to Hugh and especially to his sons and grandsons. Two of his sons are there named William and Stephen the very names recorded on the slabs.

Hugh himself is listed as a witness to five deeds, four of

which concern the transfer of the manor of Knocktopher from Edmund son of Milo le Bret to Walter de la Haye in 1292<sup>11</sup>. The fifth one refers to Sheepstown close to Knocktopher and has been dated to around 1300<sup>12</sup>. In one case he is called Hugh son of Henry, clerk<sup>13</sup>. The sons of Hugh are far more prominent in the deeds. Stephen, whose grave-slab is at Kells, appears nine times in the deeds between the years 1325 and 1346<sup>14</sup>. In five cases he is called Stephen son of Hugh the clerk<sup>15</sup> but in the four others merely Stephen son of Hugh<sup>16</sup>. In one case he is described as Stephen son of Hugh the clerk of Baligerath (Sheepstown)<sup>17</sup> and all except one, given at Rosbercon, are concerned with the area between Knocktopher and Kells.

The first of the sons to appear in the deeds and therefore probably the eldest is John. In 1309 he witnessed two deeds relating to the transfer of Knocktopher manor from Walter de la Haye to Nigel de Brun<sup>18</sup>. The manor was acquired by the Butlers in 1312 and an extent of that date lists John son of Hugh as the tenant of three carucates of land at Ballygeragh (Sheepstown)<sup>19</sup>. In one case he is given as John son of Hugh son of Henry, clerk, which confirms Hugh's father's name, but in two other cases merely as John son of Hugh<sup>20</sup>. A deed of 1346 granting land in Hugyneston to a certain John son of Hugh of Hugyneston<sup>21</sup> could possibly be a reference to the same man. A third son William, whose grave-slab was seen by Graves at Kells in the last century is mentioned nine times between 1323 and 1349 in every case as William son of Hugh the clerk<sup>22</sup> except one. William had at least four sons, Nicholas, Peter, David and Thomas all referred to as sons of William son of Hugh the clerk in deeds dating between 1338 and 1357<sup>23</sup>.

It appears therefore that Hugh the clerk and his family were a relatively prominent family in the Kells/Knocktopher area in the first half of the fourteenth century. Yet among all the deeds referred to above there is no connection with Kells priory that might explain their burial there. A possible explanation is suggested by the name of one of the recorded priors of Kells, Theobald son of Hugh<sup>24</sup>. He apparently served as prior for ten years around 1330 which would make him a contemporary of the other

sons of Hugh the clerk. If he was indeed a son of Hugh the clerk it would help to explain how Hugh's widow and two or three of their sons managed to get such a prominent burial place within the choir of the priory church. He would then also have been born locally and would fit well into the pattern of locally born priors at Kells from the beginning of the fourteenth century<sup>25</sup>.

The grave-slabs are coffin-shaped recumbent slabs with incised floriated crosses and Latin inscriptions in Lombardic lettering. Such slabs without dates on them could normally only be dated to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries generally<sup>26</sup>. A slab with a similar cross at St. Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny has a date in the 1280s<sup>27</sup>. Considering the evidence outlined above the slabs at Kells are likely to date to the first half of the fourteenth century. Grave monuments were often carved before the persons named on them died<sup>28</sup> and as these slabs are so similar it is likely that they were carved as a job lot possibly on the death of Hugh's widow. The slabs are therefore likely to have been carved within a decade or so of 1330 though we know that Stephen and William were still alive in the late 1340s.

It is unclear by what name this family was known in later times when it was no longer feasible to continue using Hugh's name. There is a possibility that the surname was Howlin because in 1338 and 1351 Nicholas son of William son of Hugh the clerk was involved in deeds relating to Stonecarthy while in 1340 a Nicholas son of William Howlyn was involved in a deed relating to the same place<sup>29</sup>. They may be the same person. Also in 1411 and 1412 members of the Howlyn family are recorded as paying rent for land in Sheepstown<sup>30</sup> where the sons of Hugh the clerk were established less than a century earlier. The Howlings were a prominent family in the area in the 16th and 17th centuries and one branch were lords of Kilree<sup>31</sup>. The Kilkenny Howlins changed their name to Holden, a surname still common in the Kells area.

## Notes

1. The translation "Hugh the clerk" is here preferred (see note 7)
2. *J. Roy. Soc. Antiqs. Ireland*, 8(1864-6), 186.
3. The third slab is incomplete and only the end of the inscription survives. This was read by Carrigan (see note 5) as follows: "...FIL HUGONIS CL[ERI]CI" i.e. son of Hugh the clerk. As these three slabs were reported as newly uncovered in the 1890s and as the fragmentary slab certainly has the contraction "FIL", it appears to be a separate slab from that recorded by Graves, which apparently had the uncontracted form "FILIUS". This latter slab is missing since before Carrigan's time.
4. *Journal of the association for the preservation of the memorials of the dead in Ireland*, 4 (1898-1900), 80-82. Fig.1 here is traced from the illustrations in the above paper which were based on rubbings done when the stones had been freshly unearthed. According to local information they were at that time set into the floor of the handball alley at the spot from which the ball would be served where they suffered considerable wear from generations of handball players. As a result the inscriptions are now barely legible.
5. Rev. W. Carrigan, *The history and antiquities of the diocese of Ossory*, Dublin 1905, Vol.4, 70.
6. Rev. J.B. Leslie, *Ossory clergy and parishes*, Enniskillen 1933, 281.
7. Rev. E.L. Cutts, *Scenes and characters of the Middle Ages*, London 1925, 215.
8. Leslie (*op. cit.*) suggested that Carrigan made "clericus" a surname in order 'to get over the difficulty of a clerk being married'. There are of course many instances of clerics in orders being married in medieval times but this is unlikely to be one of them.
9. Richard Lahert, *The history and antiquities of the parish of Dunnamaggan*, Tralee 1956, 94.
10. Edmund Curtis (ed.), *Calendar of Ormond deeds 1172 -1350*, Dublin 1932, 268, deed no. 632. It is actually William son of Hugh the clerk who is mentioned in this deed as a witness and the date is 1331. From here on the *Calendar of Ormond deeds* Vols. I and II (1350-1413, Dublin 1934) will be referred to as Curtis 1 and Curtis 2 followed by the number of the deed.
11. Curtis 1, 302-5.
12. Curtis 1, 351. Deed no.604 (given at Kilkenny in 1329) has a witness named Hugh the clerk, which might be the same Hugh.
13. Curtis 1, 305.
14. Curtis 1, 299 is wrongly dated to 1291. The correct date is 1345.
15. Curtis 1, 299, 681, 726, 788, 789.
16. Curtis 1, 577, 632, 643, 725.
17. Curtis 1, 726.
18. Curtis 1, 432, 433.
19. N.B. White, *The Red Book of Ormond*, Dublin 1932, 130. C.A. Empey,

- Medieval Knocktopher: A study in manorial settlement, *Old Kilkenny Review* (new series) Vol 2, No. 4 (1982), 329-42 (331).
20. Curtis 1, 659, 577, 741.
  21. Curtis 1, 786. This appears to be Hugginstown, Co. Kilkenny.
  22. Curtis 1, 562, 578, 594, 626, 640, 641, 726, 825. Curtis's translation of names is very inconsistent and the second part of William's and his brother's names is variously given as 'fitz Hugh, clerk', 'fitz Hugh, cleric', 'son of Hugh the clerk', 'son of Hugo the clerk', 'son of Hugh the cleric' and 'son of Hugo the cleric' while they are all the exact same in the Latin originals.
  23. Curtis 1, 713. Curtis 2, 1, 2, 24, 26, 44.
  24. N.B. White, *Irish monastic and episcopal deeds*, Dublin 1936, 312.
  25. C. A. Empey, The sacred and the secular. The Augustinian priory of Kells in Ossory, 1193-1541, *Irish historical studies* 24 (1984), 131-51 (146-7).
  26. J. Bradley, The medieval tombs of St. Canice's Cathedral, in A Empey (ed.), *A worthy foundation: The cathedral church of St. Canice, Kilkenny 1285-1985*, Mountrath 1985, 64-6.
  27. Bradley, *op. cit.* 55.
  28. Bradley, *op. cit.* 51.
  29. Curtis 1, 713, 743, Curtis 2, 1.
  30. Curtis 2, 415, 420.
  31. Carrigan, *op. cit.* vol. 4. 48-9.

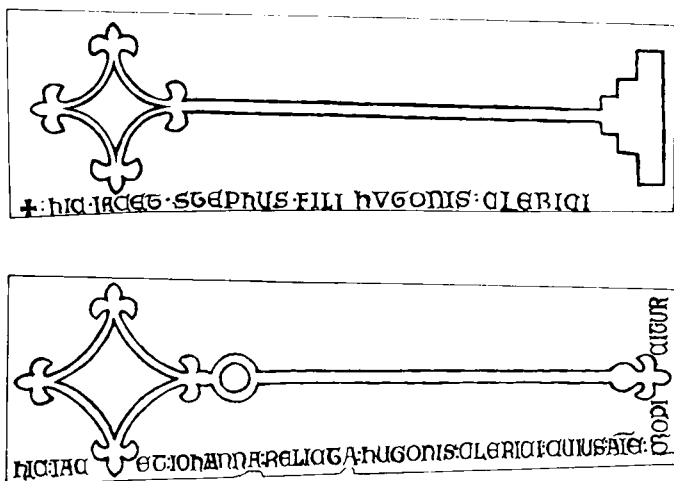


Fig. 1. The grave-slabs of Johanna the widow and Stephen the son of Hugh the clerk at Kells Priory, Co. Kilkenny.