CHAPTER 3

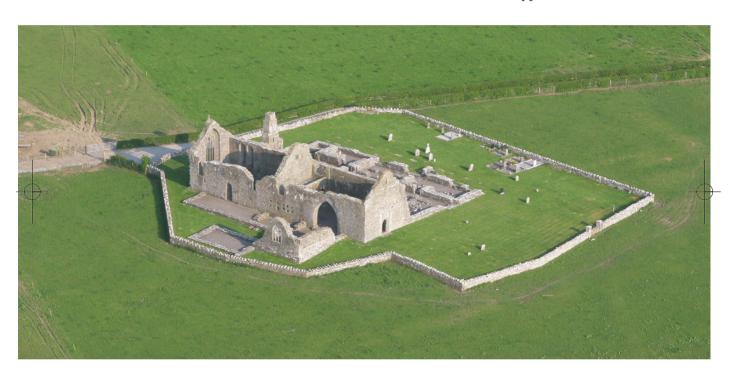
Clontuskert Abbey is the landmark with which the parish of Clontuskert is most closely associated. Known locally as the 'Old Abbey', it holds a special place in the hearts and minds of the people in the area. Situated in the townland of Abbeypark, it lies about four miles south of Ballinasloe on the road to Portumna.

The correct name of the ruin is not in fact the 'Old Abbey' or 'Clontuskert Abbey', but the 'Augustinian Priory of St. Mary, Cluain Tuaiscirt Ó Máine'. The priory was founded c. 1180 A.D. on the site of an earlier Celtic monastery founded by St. Baetán in the closing years of the eighth century.

The first written reference to the foundation at Clontuskert is in the *Annals of the Four Masters* where the year of St. Baetan's death is given as 805 A.D., although in the *Annals of Ulster* he is mentioned as dying in 809. The site at Clontuskert chosen by St. Baetán was situated in an area of Hy Many where the Mithighen and O'Kelly families held sway. We know from the *Book of Lecan* that Clontuskert was a centre of importance in early Christian times. The Mithighen family had granted land for the foundation of the monastery in return for which they expected to be remembered in the prayers and Masses of the community. Perhaps the best known Hy Many family associated with Clontuskert were the

O'Kellys, who became patrons of the Priory and had their traditional inauguration site on the large mound adjacent to the present monastic ruins. However, there was a local tradition that St. Baetán's original foundation may have been in a ringfort in Chapelpark. Beside this ringfort are the remains of a building once known as 'Behan's house', or 'Behan's Fort'. Incidentally, the archaeologists who excavated the ruins of the Priory in 1970, failed to find evidence of an earlier foundation on the Abbeypark site.

Aerial view of Clontuskert Priory.



A movement for the reform of Church organisation, a renewal of religious practice and the removal of incipient abuses, had swept across continental Europe in the eleventh century and reached these shores a number of years later. The diocesan system, which had been instituted by St. Patrick, was re-introduced and refined at the Synods of Ráith Breasail in 1111 and Kells in 1152.

Monastic control was to be replaced by the present diocesan system under the care of a bishop, with secular priests in charge of each parish in the diocese.

St. Malachy was one of the leading reformers in the Irish Church. Wishing to encourage a renewed fervour among the faithful, he was responsible for the introduction into Ireland of a number of religious orders from the continent, among them the Canons Regular of St. Augustine. He had become dissatisfied with the lack of religious zeal exhibited in many of the older monastic foundations. On a visit to the continent he arrived in the village of l'Arrouaise in Artois. There, he visited a priory where the Canons Regular of St. Augustine were looking after the spiritual needs of the people in the locality, as well as the many travellers who journeyed through the nearby forests. He was impressed by the dedication of these Canons to their ministry and arranged that they would establish a number of their priories in Ireland. One of these foundations was in Clontuskert.

The Canons Regular – 'Regular' means following a monastic rule - began their ministry in Clontuskert around the year 1180. They were not monks or friars in the strict sense but rather a group of secular clergy who lived together in a monastic dwelling attached to a church. The rule by which they lived was contemplative and strict, inspired by the teachings of the North African St. Augustine. Following a strict observance, they impressed the faithful by their good example and prayerful lives. Normally, the number of Canons resident in Clontuskert did not exceed twelve. The transition from the older Celtic monastic system went quite smoothly and the O'Kelly family of Urraghry continued as coarbs, or patrons of the new foundation.

The Canons had charge of the parishes of Clontuskert, Aughrim, Kilcloony, Creagh, Taughmaconnell and Killallaghton.

The nearest church under their care was the little church in Poolboy, known as the Teampoilín, the ruins of which are still standing. To provide easy access to this church, the Canons laid



The Teampoilín, Poolboy.

down a pathway across Kellysgrove bog, directly connecting Clontuskert Priory with the Teampoilín and other places where they ministered in the general Ballinasloe area. The remains of this walkway or togher, once known as the 'Monks' Pass' were discovered in 1946 during a major bog-drainage operation. This is dealt with in Chapter 4.

There are few written references to the priory in Clontuskert during the first two hundred years of the new regime. The *Annals of the Four Masters* mentions that Manus O'Connor murdered Melaghlin, son of Conor Mainmoy, in 1219 and in the process, took over the priory by force. However, the fact that the O'Connors are referred to, could mean that the Clontuskert mentioned is the one near Lanesboro in County Roscommon.

Eighty-seven years later, in 1379, the priory is again mentioned, this time in the *Calendar of Papal Petitions*. 'Nicholas O'Quinaeych, Augustinian Canon of St. Mary's Cluyctenagentomany' (Clontuskert Hy Many) 'in the diocese of Clonfert' was given a

dispensation to become prior of the monastery 'so long void by the death of the late prior.' There is an indication here that all was not well in the priory at that time, possibly due to internal disputes or to interference from the patron. The papal dispensation may have meant that the new prior was a layman.

Clontuskert is mentioned in the Papal Petitions later in the same year when the priory was given jurisdiction over the neighbouring Augustinian foundation at Aughrim. The granting of a small indulgence to anyone who would assist in the repair of the Priory building, was also mentioned. Whether it was because of fire damage or gradual neglect, no indication is given as to why the repairs were necessary.

Very serious fire damage to the structure is recorded in the Annals of 1404 when 'the monastery of Cluain Tuaisgirt Ua Maine was unfortunately burned by lightning.' Nine years later, an attempt was made to raise funds by means of the granting of an indulgence of ten years and ten quarantines to those who,

visit and give alms for the rebuilding, repair and conservation of the monastery of St. Mary, Cluantuasgerta of the order of St. Augustine of Arouaise, in the diocese of Clonfert, in which used to reside a prior and twelve canons which, with its church, books and jewels, ecclesiastical ornaments and other precious things has been totally destroyed by fire and which the prior and canons desire to rebuild and repair but lack the means.

The considerable rebuilding continued for much of the 1400s. Most of the architectural features in evidence today, were constructed at that time. These include the magnificent east window, the rood screen, the cloister arcade and the notable west doorway with the date 1471 chiselled into the stone. The

inscription over the door indicates that Matthew, Bishop of Clonfert, and a Canon of the priory, Patrick O'Naughton, were responsible for its construction.

Despite the amount of rebuilding that went on during the 1400s, Clontuskert Priory appears to have advanced in wealth, its valuation almost doubling between 1418 and 1463. The patronage of the O'Kellys was in large measure responsible for the increase in wealth. However, this patronage was something of a double-edged sword because it brought with it the privilege of appointing the prior, a privilege which opened the door to many abuses. Many disapproving Papal letters were addressed to the O'Kellys, now grudgingly accepted by Rome as rulers of the priory. An instance of this disapproval is to be found in a letter of 1473 where Donatus O'Kelly is accused of wasting the possessions of the priory, keeping a concubine and committing murder – hardly the behaviour of a man dedicated to the service of God.

In 1537, as part of Henry VIII's ecclesiastical reforms, the dissolution of the Irish monasteries was decreed. This led to the closure of about one hundred and thirty monasteries in the succeeding sixty years. Monasteries which were under the control of native Irish families did not suffer from the effects of dissolution for some time and this was the situation in Clontuskert also. However, indications of creeping change were becoming apparent. On August 10<sup>th</sup> 1551, Donatus O'Kelly, described as a chaplain, was confirmed in his position by King Edward VI 'in the vicarage of Kyllalaghten and sacristy of Cluanstutna O'Mane (Clontuskert Hy Many) of the Order of St. Augustin in the diocese of Clonfert'. This was an indication that the granting of ecclesiastical positions was no longer to be regarded as the prerogative of the native Irish families but of the English Crown.

A further indication of the changing situation at Clontuskert

priory occurred in 1544 when the priory and all its possessions were leased for twenty-one years to William Burke, brother of the first Earl of Clanrickarde. Later, in 1567, it was leased for a similar period to Redmond Burke, son of the same Earl. When Redmond died, the Priory passed to his sons Ulick and John, who in 1595 robbed and damaged the building, when they were in rebellion against English interference in their lands.

The priory was regranted to the fourth Earl of Clanrickarde in 1610. He leased the property to Thomas O'Kelly, a priest of Clontuskert who died in 1620. Thomas and some of his companions were able to continue their pastoral work in the area under the patronage of the Clanrickardes who were Catholics at that time. Whether they lived in the priory or not is open to conjecture, since according to a survey of the building conducted by the Surveyor General Michael Fitzwilliams, it was in a dilapidated condition: 'The Abbaye of Clontetoyshert O Many. The site thereof contayneth one acre, in which there are one hall, a dortory, a cloyster, and other Ruynose buildings. And a churche of long tyme wast which was a parishe church.' In other words, the priests' hall, sleeping area and cloister were then in a ruinous (ruynose) state. In addition, the church building had been in a serious state of disrepair for some time.

The Canons Regular, so long associated with the parish, had terminated their ministry in Clontuskert, and were replaced by the Augustinian Friars some time after the year 1630. The friars had no connection, apart from the name, with the Canons Regular of St. Augustine. Very soon they began to restore the buildings. The chancel area with its high altar, at the eastern end of the building, was re-roofed and a gable wall was built, dividing it from the nave. A doorway in this wall is dated 1637, giving a date around which the work of restoration progressed.

There is no evidence to indicate when the friars ceased to occupy the priory. The events of the Cromwellian Wars may have brought their tenancy to an end. A wall plaque in the southern wall



of the chancel would appear to suggest a rather abrupt termination. The unfinished inscription looks as if the stone mason was interrupted in his chiselling. 'Here l(i)es the burial of the sept of Urchary Bria(n) O'Kelly the 2nd May 1646. Hugh Kelly was ki ...' The inscription ends with the unfinished message that 'Hugh Kelly was ki'. Does the intriguing, unfinished message, mean, 'killed'?

O'Kelly Wall Plaque 1646

The effects of Henry VIII's break with Rome were not felt in the diocese of Clonfert for almost fifty years. However, because of their property and wealth, the situation was different for the monasteries. In 1551, two members of the O'Kelly clan received from the king, grants of land and moneys belonging to the priory. In spite of this, the ministry of the friars had not necessarily come to an end. Even though they were excluded from living in the priory, it is almost certain that they were allowed to continue in the performance of their duties in the surrounding parishes.

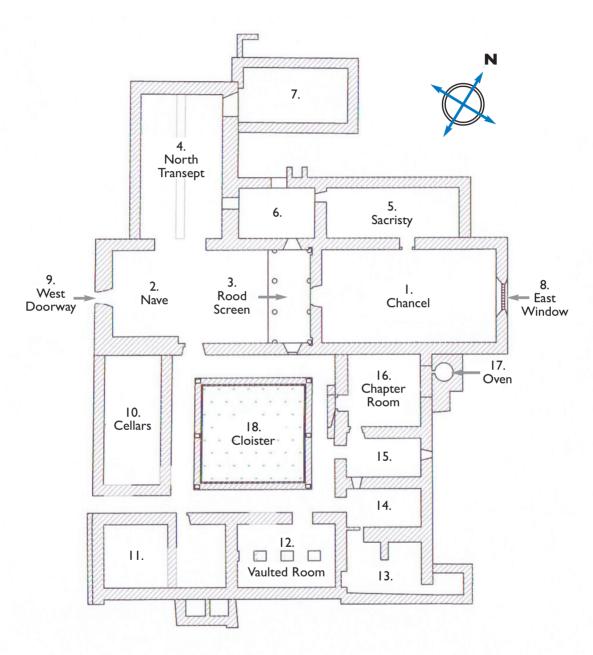
In 1567, Redmond Bourke was granted a twenty-one year lease of the priory site. Three years later, Richard, the  $2^{nd}$  Earl of Clanrickarde, became the owner. His descendants remained

Catholic for many years. However, despite their leniency to the Catholic priests, the priory remained uninhabited and fell into disrepair in the early years of the seventeenth century. Folk memory in the parish of Clontuskert has it that a few friars continued to inhabit the priory until the time of the battle of Aughrim.

In 1716, the Priory was leased to the Rev. William Fitzgerald, Church of Ireland bishop of Clonfert. There were indications during the excavations of 1971-2 that the domestic portion of the buildings were used as stabling and outhouses after 1716. The centuries-long Augustinian occupancy of the site had finally come to an end. However, their connection with the parish appears to have continued well into the late 1700s. In 1731, Stratford Eyre, High-Sheriff of County Galway, reported that there were 'friars at Atticoffey'.

## THE PRIORY BUILDINGS

When the preparatory excavation work of 1971-72 was completed, the outline of the church and the area where the canons lived became easier to discern. The main structure of the priory, stretching from the west doorway to the east window, is divided in almost equal sections by a wall, in the centre of which is a connecting doorway. The section containing the east window is known as the chancel, while the other section adjacent to the west doorway is the nave. The wall which divides the chancel from the nave is a late addition to the building. At one time, before the building of the dividing wall, the nave and chancel were separated only by a rood screen. Built at right angles to the nave is the north transept with its simple north-facing window.



Floor Plan of Priory Buildings [Drawn by John Tully, Lismanny]

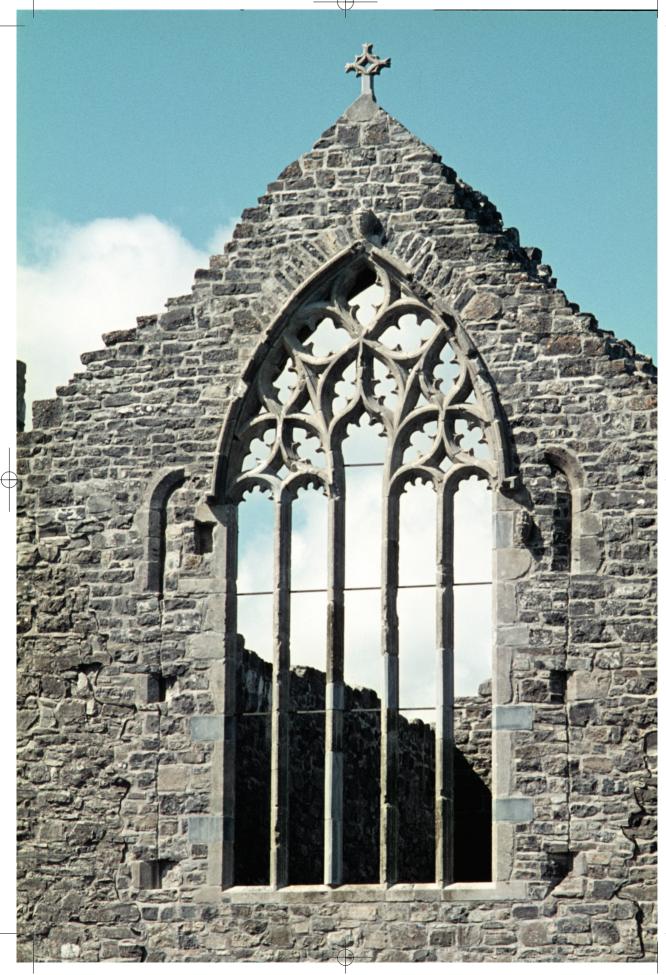
# THE CHANCEL (Floor Plan 1)

That portion of a church containing the high altar, which is normally reserved for the clergy, is called the chancel. This was the earliest part of the church buildings to be erected at Clontuskert, probably in the late 1100s. When the officers of the Board of Works commenced the archaeological excavations in 1970, many of notable features of the chancel in Clontuskert Priory had fallen into ruin. Most of the east gable had collapsed in 1918 and with it the

The Chancel



East Window. Luckily, almost all the stones of the window were found in the rubble of the collapsed wall. The wall was rebuilt and, fifty four years after its collapse, the magnificent east window was carefully restored to its former glory. This five-lancet window had replaced an earlier three-lancet window which was built in the late



1200s. At the top of the central section or lancet there is an arrangement suggesting the five petals of a flower in bloom. The side lancets have a similar arrangement, this time with the three petals of a flower. Unlike many church windows, the central section of this window is higher than the side sections. Above the exterior point of the window is an interesting crowned or helmeted head. No details are available as to the person who may be represented by this sculpted figure.

Nothing remains of the original high altar which once stood under the east window. In its place the tomb of a young soldier, Captain Manus O'Donel, now stands. He was from Newport in County Mayo and was a descendant of Niall Garbh O'Donnell, a first cousin of Red Hugh O'Donnell of Donegal. Manus was wounded in the wars against Napoleon and came to his sister Bessie, who was married to Brian Kelly of Kellysgrove House. She cared for him until he died of his wounds on February 13th 1812, aged thirty-seven years. On either side of where the high altar would have been, are two aumbries, or small recessed cupboards, where sacred vessels were placed during the sacred liturgy.

On the south wall of the chancel there are a number of interesting architectural features. In the centre are the remains of a sedilia where three ministers could be seated during liturgical ceremonies. Only about half of this sedilia remains.

Beside the sedilia is a piscina, or stone basin where the priests could wash their hands and rinse out the sacred vessels at the conclusion of the liturgy. On the other side of the sedilia is a late fifteenth century reconstructed tomb. The identity of the person buried there is, unfortunately, unknown. A little higher on the same wall and to the right, is a plaque - mentioned above - erected to the memory of Brian Kelly, in 1646.

Across the chancel, on the north wall, there is another

Piscina, remains of a sedilia and a wall tomb

aumbry and a door leading to a rectangular room which may have been a sacristy or a Lady Chapel. The principal reason for believing it might have been a Lady Chapel is that the priory was dedicated to St. Mary.



# THE NAVE (Floor Plan 2)

The other half of the main church building is the nave. This is where the faithful gathered for worship. A wall dividing chancel from nave was erected in 1637 as can be seen from the date over the

dividing doorway. Prior to this, a rood screen separated the two halves of the main church building.



A rood screen is a wooden or stone-carved

screen separating nave and chancel. In Clontuskert Priory, the rood screen was a beautiful stone-carved structure, much of which was

Date 1637 over dividing doorway.

dismantled when the dividing wall was built. Once again, during reconstruction work, the bulk of the structure was found at various locations on the site and faithfully restored. [Floor Plan 3] The screen is three bays in width across the body of the church and one bay from front to back. An overhead platform is supported by six beautiful arches. To appreciate the full beauty of the structure, the viewer must visualise it standing alone without the 1637 wall. It then becomes clear that the congregation could see all that was happening during ceremonies in the chancel.



The purpose of the rood screen was to emphasise the sacred nature of the chancel in the same way that the curtain of the Temple in Jerusalem separated the public area from the Holy of Holies. So that the congregation's view of the chancel would not be

Rood screen, looking towards Chancel and East Window beyond.

obscured, entry to the platform over the rood screen was made from the outside by means of a wooden stairs. Statues were displayed and blessings were imparted from this elevated vantage point. A cross was displayed on the platform over the rood screen; hence its name, the word *rood* deriving from an old English word meaning *cross*.

The master mason responsible for carving and erecting the beautifully executed rood screen, carved his name, *Johes*, on the upper portion of the south west column. 'Johes' is the abbreviated version of Johannes, the latin word for John. It is interesting to note that he signed his name in a similar fashion on the traceried windows of the south transept of the Dominican friary at Portumna.

## THE WEST DOORWAY (Floor Plan 9)

The great west doorway is without doubt the crowning glory of the Priory of St. Mary at Clontuskert. At the top and on both sides of the doorway, a wealth of fine carving is on display. The inscription at the top gives the date of its construction as 1471.

The doorway belongs to a fifteenth century school of stone-carving which is typical of a number of buildings in this area. Similar carvings can be found in the monastic ruins at Clonfert, Portumna, Lorrha, Abbeygormican and Kilconnell, as well as on the North Doorway at Clonmacnoise. The doorway is carved in the perpendicular style, standing square and tall, relieved by the rounded curve of the lintel. It comes as a surprise for the present-day onlooker to learn that the carvings were once painted in a rich variety of colours – blues, reds, greens and yellows – which made the figures more vivid to the people who viewed them when the doorway was first built.

The West Doorway

This was the main door to the priory church, through which the faithful entered for the divine services. As they passed through, they were afforded a sermon in stone as they observed the carvings on either side of the entry. The subject matter was taken from the Bible or from a long tradition of moral teaching stretching back to the Fathers of the early Church, including St. Augustine, from whom the Canons Regular took their name.

Medieval Church scholars had devised a series of books known as Bestiaries, which contained drawings of real or imaginary animals. Explorers returning from voyages to newly discovered countries brought with them accounts of strange, exotic animals which they had encountered on their travels. These beasts, real or imaginary, were used by theologians as symbols of virtues and vices in an attempt to impart the teachings of the church in a simple pictorial fashion to a largely unlettered faithful.

Close to the ground outside the right hand jamb of the doorway is the carving of a bird biting its back with a four-legged animal to its rear. Unfortunately, it is not possible to discover what this carving represents. Immediately above is a pair of ibexes with intertwined necks. The ibex is a wild goat found mainly in the



mountainous regions of southern Europe and North Africa. Again, the symbolism is unclear. A possible interpretation is that the ibexes are to be seen as protectors of the priory, keeping evil from entering its doors.

**lbexes** 

Just above the ibexes is the carving of the mermaid with a mirror in her left hand and a comb in her right. This figure is symbolic of vanity and lust and what the sculptor sees as the dangerously alluring nature of feminine beauty which might lead

men to their moral destruction, just as the fabled mermaid led sailors to shipwreck by the enticing allure of her singing. The lesson imparted here would have been dear to the heart of St. Augustine who knew more than most from his own experience, of the

dangers posed to the virtuous man by the pleasures of the flesh. However, help is at hand for the beleaguered soul. The mermaid is part fish and the fish is one of the earliest Christian symbols, dating back to the first century.



The Mermaid

Man is not abandoned by God in the counter-pull of vice and virtue represented in the dual nature of the mermaid so beautifully portrayed in this carving. It may be a coincidence, but the carving immediately above is that of a star, a beacon of hope which will guide the Christian soul through the perilous seas of life.

Where the curve of the arch begins to turn inward, the IHS monogram is situated. The first three capital letters of the Greek name for Jesus are IHS. The detailed manner of the carving is

interesting. The vine, a symbol of the Eucharist, intertwines through the three letters, the leading end becoming the head of a beast about to bite the top of the first letter. The Beast's tail ends in a vine leaf. The upright



IHS Monagram

bar of the middle letter forms the main beam of the cross at Calvary and as before, the vine leaf appears to grow from the tail of the letter.

The three carvings on the left jamb are equally interesting. First there is a heraldic rose, often used as a symbol in church

buildings of God's love for mankind as witnessed in the shedding of Christ's blood on the cross. This symbol counterbalances the star on the opposing jamb.

Immediately below, carved on yet another inserted stone, is a pair of mythical beasts from the medieval Bestiary, possibly griffins. These creatures were commonly depicted with the body of



a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. The battle between the things of the world and the things of the spirit may be hinted at in the contrast between the soaring eagle, the king of the beasts.

Two Griffins

The symbolism of the pelican depicted on the lowest lefthand carving is much easier to interpret. Pelicans have always been



symbolic of the caring love of God for humanity when Christ shed his blood on Calvary. Depicted in the carving is a pelican with her young in the nest. She wounds her breast, so that her flowing blood will feed her three hungry chicks.

The Pelican and her young.

The upper register of the doorway is most interesting. A tree grows from the highest point of the arch, dividing the four dominant figures at the top into two groups. The first figure from the left is a youthful-looking St. Michael the Archangel, holding the sword of retribution in his right hand and the scales in his left. Souls will be weighed in the scales of judgement and punished or rewarded accordingly. There is a touch of humour in the depiction of the characters in the balance-pans of the scales. In the pan on the

left, a devil with bat-like ears is hanging on to an unfortunate soul while another devil has the right-hand pan all to himself.



Beside St. Michael is the figure of John the Baptist. His role as the precursor of Christ is highlighted by the symbols in the carving. He is wearing a camel skin cloak with the hair next to his flesh, reminding us of his penitential sojourn in the desert. A disc in his hand bears a representation of the Agnus Dei, the Lamb of God.

On the other side of the central tree, the figure on the left is St. Catherine of Alexandria. She holds the sword of martyrdom in her hand. Her cloak is clasped in place by a typical Irish ring. She is easy to identify because of the partially hidden spiked wheel which was used in her torture and to which she was tied before being rolled downhill. Despite surviving this ordeal, she was later beheaded by a stroke of the sword. It is appropriate that she is of North African origin because of the Priory's connection with another native of that region, St. Augustine of Hippo.

A frieze of four notable figures

There is some doubt as to the identity of the final figure in the group of four, a bishop holding his crozier. Some authorities suggest that it may be St. Brendan, the patron of Clonfert diocese, while others believe it may be St. Patrick. However, the most likely candidate is St. Augustine, the patron of the Priory. This belief is based on the strongly held local tradition. His memory was



(above) Water-font

Angel with the Instruments of the Passion



perpetuated at the annual pattern held on August 28th just a few hundred metres to the south at the Holy Well, which was dedicated to his name. It is fitting that the two African saints are again commemorated in the beautifully carved holy water stoup to the left of the doorway beneath.

Around the arch beneath the four figures is a carved border of foliage, the left half of which is suggestive of a row of spectral, hooded figures. The figure of a smiling angel stands on either side of this band of foliage, each one holding a shield. Whatever was depicted on the shield of the angel on the left has been eroded by time. However, the instruments of the Passion are still clearly visible on the shield of the other angel – the hammer which drove the nails, the dice used by the Roman soldiers to gamble for possession of Christ's cloak, and finally, the pincers used to pull the nails when He was being removed from the cross.

On either side of the figures represented above the arched door-opening, two narrow trees are carved which appear to support the latin inscription above the doorway. People long ago

were of the belief that the inscription was written in a language that could not be deciphered even by the wisest scholars. It reads:

Matheu : Dei: gra : eps : Clonfertens : et : Patre' oneacdavayn : canonie' esti : domine : fi' fecert : Ano : do : mcccclxxi.

The English translation is:

Matthew by the grace of God, Bishop of Clonfert and Patrick O'Naughton, canon of this house, caused me to be made. Anno Domini 1471.

The bishop of Clonfert referred to was Matthew MacCraith who held office from 1463 to 1507, 'a discreet, prudent, pious and successful man, who carried out many good works in the church'. He is reputed to have died at the Franciscan Third Order House at Kilbought, Kilrickle.

# THE NORTH TRANSEPT (Floor Plan 4)

A transept is an extension built at right angles to the nave of a church building. Such is the case in Clontuskert Priory, where a substantial extension is built on the northern wall of the nave. The North Transept was one of the latest additions to the priory, built in the late 1500s.

Why was the transept built? Was there not sufficient room to house the existing congregations? A likely explanation might follow from a 1569 survey report which noted that it was a 'a churche longe tyme wast which was a pariche church'. The transept might have resulted from an attempt by the Augustinian Friars, who had succeeded the Canons in the early 1600s, to alter the church buildings to suit their reduced circumstances. A smaller church would better suit the requirements of a dwindling number of

clerics ministering to a smaller number of faithful. Building a small structure such as this would not have been as expensive as the cost of major repairs to the existing church buildings.



The North Transept.

A pointed arch stretches over the opening leading from the nave to the transept and there is a beautifully carved, three lancet window over the altar. The low wall stretching the length of the transept and dividing it into two segments, is a puzzling structure at first sight. It seems it was built at a much later date, possibly when the priory was in serious decline or when the religious had already left. The foundations were poor and were never meant to

rise higher than waist height. The most likely explanation for the wall is that it acted as a division between pens when the building was used to house animals.

# THE DOMESTIC QUARTERS (Floor Plan 10-18)

The priory of the late 1400s would have presented a very different profile to anyone looking from the Ballinasloe-Lawrencetown road, today. The buildings then on view would have been almost twice as extensive as the buildings currently on view. All of the domestic buildings - the living-quarters of the canons - stood on the south west side of the priory, the side nearest to the present main road. These buildings were two storeys high

The Cloister Garth



and roofed with thatch or slates, although no slate fragments were found during the excavations. All that remains of these buildings are the foundations of the main walls, which had been hidden for centuries beneath mounds of rubble and the numerous burials which had taken place in this venerated cemetery. However, it is still possible to trace the outline of the various rooms and to make a good estimate as to their possible use in the heyday of the priory.

The central area of the domestic buildings was centred on the Cloister Garth. (*Floor Plan 18*) This was a small garden open to the sky, on the four sides of which was an ambulatory or veranda covered by a lean-to roof, where the canons strolled during their recreation periods each day, irrespective of the exigencies of the weather. Much of this cloister was unearthed during the 1972 excavations and faithfully reconstructed. On each side of the Cloister Garth was a row of ten arches resting on pillars about a

Chapter Room, fire-place with the later addition of a bake oven



metre apart and decorated with carved foliage or the occasional human or animal face.

The range of two storey buildings was erected on three sides of the cloister. The eastern wing, (Floor Plan 13 - 16) faced onto the main expanse of the Abbeypark, and contained four large rooms with a dormitory area on the floor above. The first room was the Chapter Room, where the Canons assembled several times a day to listen to readings from Sacred Scripture or to a chapter from their Rule – hence the name Chapter Room. (Floor Plan 16) The Prior would have addressed them on issues relating to their religious lives or to their work in the surrounding parishes. Meetings and discussions were also held here. The seventeenth-century addition of the oven, fireplace and chimney have altered the original design of the Chapter Room. A door led from this room to the covered Cloister and another to a smaller adjoining room, which had a window looking east.

In addition to the Chapter Room, there were three other rooms on the east wing, two of them fairly small, the third much larger. (*Floor Plan 13 - 15*) A much smaller room jutted out from the corner of the third room and there is a deal of speculation as to its purpose, the most likely explanation being that it was the 'domus necessarium' or necessary room - the community lavatory.

Little is known as to the purpose of the rooms on the south wing, the wing facing towards the main road. (Floor Plan 11 - 12) There is evidence of a major fire which at one stage destroyed all of the domestic buildings. The remains of three central supporting pillars and the discovery of an amount of carved stonework on the spot, indicate that this room had a vaulted ceiling. Immediately above these was a refectory. There are some indications that the rooms of the west wing (Floor Plan 10) were constructed as cellarage for the storage of food and domestic necessities, with a dormitory

above for the lay brothers.

Following the collapse of the domestic buildings, an extensive mound of rubble remained, over which a covering of clay, resulting from decaying vegetation had accumulated. This area became the central portion of the modern graveyard and in order to facilitate the excavation of this portion of the site, most of the burials had to be disinterred and reburied in another part of the cemetery.

Numerous archaeological finds were unearthed during the work of excavation which throw additional light on priory life down through the centuries. Fourteen coins were discovered, some dating from the thirteenth-century. The majority of the coins discovered were minted in Ireland and England, although a few originated in Spain. Evidence of pieces of brass used in binding the covers of books and manuscripts, were also found – added proof of the existence of the books which were recorded as having been burned in the fire of 1413. Pottery fragments from the European mainland were discovered as well as an arrow head, Jews' harps, knives, harp pegs, and pipe bowls.

# THE CONSERVATION PROJECT

The work of those who had so painstakingly restored Clontuskert Priory, giving us a better idea of the magnificence of the original structure, must not be forgotten.

In 1955 Galway County Council carried out a tidying-up operation on the site. Loose stone carvings and parts of the structure were collected and covered with sand in anticipation of repairs to be carried out at a later date.

In 1970 the Commissioners of Public Works assumed guardianship of the ruins. The structure was in extremely poor

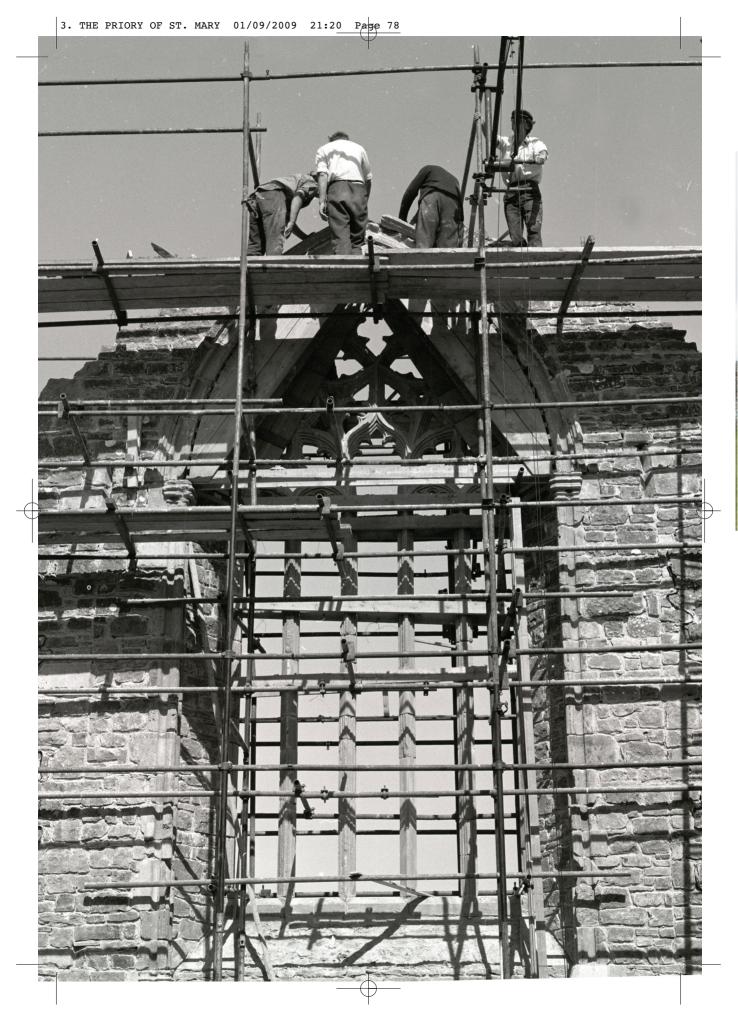
condition and when taken into State care, the Priory had reached a stage of near collapse. Thankfully this collapse did not happen, due to the fact that restoration work had commenced, preventing the final disintegration of the structure. An enormous amount of carved stone lay loose around the site before conservation work commenced. Some carved stones had been used as grave markers, and others had been used in the construction of walls in the surrounding district.

Ruins of Priory - 1950s



Work started on November 27<sup>th</sup> 1970. A huge task faced the architectural team under the direction of Thomas Fanning. It was proposed to repair the structure, to reassemble the vaulted rood screen, the east window and part of the cloister arcade.

Excavations were carried out in order to investigate the



The Priory of St. Mary at Clontuskert



archaeological content of the areas which would be affected by the conservation work, and to uncover whatever foundations and artifacts were lying beneath the rubble. Work began in June 1971 and continued for four months.

The badly decayed walls were extensively repaired. The project resembled the assembly of a giant jigsaw puzzle. Carved stones were carefully sorted and laid out in groups according to their historical period and architectural style. These groups were further examined to see what could be positively identified and replaced in their correct position.

The great East window was reassembled and rebuilt. Only two pieces of the original tracery could not be found and these were replaced with sawn limestone. A smaller window was

Priory - 2009

(previous page)

Work in progress on the East Window

reassembled and replaced in the gable of the North Transept. Most of the pieces were located for this window. The stone- vaulted rood screen was reassembled and now stands in its original position. This is a very rare surviving feature in Irish monasteries. The cloister arcade was reconstructed. One and a half sides were totally reassembled, while another one and a half were partially reassembled. Washed pebbles were spread over areas which were originally roofed, while areas which were open to the sky were sown with grass.

The Priory site marked on Herrman Moll's Map of Ireland A.D. 1714 Thomas Fanning of the Office of Public Works, Peter Geraghty, Clerk of Works and their teams have done a wonderful job of restoration which has to be seen to be properly appreciated. The Priory has been painstakingly preserved and the people of Clontuskert can be proud of the magnificent structure which has been so painstakingly restored.

