A THOUSAND YEARS
OF CHURCH HERITAGE
IN EAST GALWAY
A Thousand Years of Church Heritage in East Galway

PETER HARBISON
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East Galway contains a wealth of ecclesiastical built heritage of architectural, archaeological, historical, spiritual, artistic, visual and heritage significance.

The area presents a very fine collection of stained glass, in particular from the Celtic Revival Period. Whereas the stained glass at St. Brendan’s Cathedral, Loughrea is recognised nationally, the stained glass of the smaller churches in the other towns and villages of East Galway is more or less unknown outside specialist circles. This wealth of art, which Dr. Peter Harbison describes as “Ireland’s greatest gift to European twentieth century art,” was commissioned by the Churches, and paid for by local congregations. This great treasure trove of Celtic Revival art has been managed and conserved by both groups over the last century. The support, encouragement, and patronage of this art form, of a uniquely Irish nature, were, of course spearheaded in the West of Ireland by Edward Martyn of Tulira, and by his friends and associates. The clergy of the area also embraced this new art form wholeheartedly and have thereby left us this great gift and heritage resource.

East Galway also contains very important early Christian sites such as Clonfert Cathedral, Kilmacduagh, and Kilbennon. Magnificent medieval abbeys such as Abbeyknockmoy and Ross Errilly are another facet of the history of the church in East Galway.

The value of this under utilised resource was recognised by the Forward Planning Section of Galway County Council, in particular by Ms. Mary Flynn, Community Planner, during the implementation of the first first EU/Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government/Galway County Council co-funded Urban and Village Renewal Programme which took place from 1995 to 1999.

Galway County Council flagged the possibility of developing tourism trails based on this great resource in its application for funding for European Structural Funds in 1998, and also in its funding application under the Pilot Initiative on Tourism and the Environment of the Operational Programme for Tourism 1995-1999 at the same time.
Local Government and Ms. Jackie Donnelly, Architect, Department of Environment, Heritage & Local Government have also served on the steering committee for a period of time. Mr. Brian Flynn, Ireland West Tourism also attended various meetings of the steering group; as did Mr Alan Farrell, Galway County Council.

Ms. Sheena Doyle, Fáilte Ireland joined the steering group in November 2002 and Ms. Anne Melia, Ireland West Tourism joined in June 2004. In November 2002 Dr. Peter Harbison and Ms. Angela Bane were commissioned to undertake a baseline report on the Ecclesiastical Heritage of East Galway that would assess the potential for the development of these sites.

I am extremely grateful to Dr. Harbison and Ms. Angela Bane for the quality of the report which they produced. The steering group considered that it represented a very valuable resource and decided that the information contained therein should be disseminated to a wider audience.

It was agreed that a brochure entitled Galway East Ecclesiastical Heritage Trail as well as this book entitled A thousand Years of Church Heritage in East Galway would be published.

Funding for this publication has been provided by Galway County Council and by the Heritage Council under Galway County Heritage Plan 2004-2008 and also by the Heritage Council’s Publication Grant 2005.

I would like to pay a special tribute to all of the Mayors and elected members of Galway County Council, Ballinasloe Town Council, Loughrea Town Council and Tuam Town Council who have given support and encouragement.

I also wish to thank Mr. Pat Gallagher, Galway County Manager for his facilitation of the project through staff and resources allocations.

I would like to pay a special tribute to Ms Susan Waine, Ashfield Press for her expertise, skills and attention to detail in helping to ensure that this is a quality publication. Thanks also to Mr. Tony Roache and the Photographic Section of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Mr. Hany Marzouk, Mr. Jarlath Canney, Mr. Michael Concannon, Dr. Peter Harbison and Ms. Marie Mannion for their photographs which illustrate the pages of this publication, which we hope will serve as an educational, heritage, tourism and community resource, creating an awareness, knowledge and pride in the rich ecclesiastical heritage of East Galway.

Funding was not forthcoming at that point, but it was decided to continue trying to develop this magnificent resource. The theme was elaborated upon and subsequently expanded upon by the then County Manager, Mr. Donal O’Donoghue into one that would encompass a broader ecclesiastical theme. The Council’s Forward Planning Section was asked to look at the whole area of ecclesiastical heritage and potential trail development in the Eastern part of the County. The suggestion of an historically based route selection, comprising early Christian, medieval, and Celtic Revival Ecclesiastical Heritage routes was put forward, and developed with Mr. John Tierney, then Assistant County Manager leading a newly formed steering group which was established on 7th March 2000. The members of the inaugural steering group were Mr. John Tierney, Chair, Mr. Donal Guiffoyle, Bord Fáilte, Fr. Cathal Geraghty, Administrator, St. Brendan’s Cathedral, Loughrea, Rev. Canon Trevor Sullivan, Church of Ireland, Aughrim, Ms. Beatrice Kelly, The Heritage Council, Mr Martin Bradley, Ireland West Tourism, Mr Paul McMahon, Duchas, and Mr. Gus McCarthy, Forward Planning Section, Galway County Council.

Over the years there have been some changes in personnel representing the various organisations on the steering committee and the following is a list of people who have worked on the project.

In June 2000 Ms. Marie Mannion, was appointed Heritage Officer with Galway County Council and became a member of the steering group and Ms. Mary Flynn, Community Planner, Galway County Council became a member of the steering group in September 2000. Mr. Frank Dawson, Director of Service, Galway County Council took over the role of Chair of the steering group in March 2001. Mr. Enda Thompson, Strategic Projects Officer, Galway County Council became a member of the steering group in March 2001, while Ms. Karen Smyth, Galway East Tourism became a member of the steering group in March 2002.

Galway County Council Heritage Office established Heritage Networks throughout the County in 2002 and it was decided to invite three representatives of the Heritage Networks to join the steering group in March 2002 in order to represent the voice of the local heritage and community organisations. Dr. Tony Claffey was nominated to represent the Tuam and Oranmore Local Area Heritage Networks, Mr. Christy Cunniffe was nominated to represent the Ballinasloe Local Area Heritage Network and Ms. Claire Besnyoe was nominated to represent the Loughrea Local Area Heritage Network.

Ms. Frank Donnelly, Architect, Department of Environment, Heritage & Local Government and Ms. Jackie Donnelly, Architect, Department of Environment, Heritage & Local Government have also served on the steering committee for a period of time. Mr. Brian Flynn, Ireland West Tourism also attended various meetings of the steering group; as did Mr Alan Farrell, Galway County Council.

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Foreword by Peter Harbison

East Galway might seem to many to be a flat and uninspiring plain between Corrib and Shannon, encouraging motorists to speed through it so as to get faster to their destinations farther east or west. The reality, however, is very different. The Slieve Aughty hills in the south of the County offer wonderful opportunities for the walker or cyclist to sniff the mountain air and get away from the mudding crowd's ignoble strife, while the undulating countryside further north is full of surprises for the adventure-some traveller, as I discovered myself in 2003 when Angela Rane and I undertook a survey of the ecclesiastical heritage of East Galway for an enterprising and imaginative steering committee, comprising representatives of local government, tourist, church and community interests, whose names are given on the inside back flap. This book is the artistic and architectural fruit of that survey, which opened my eyes as to just how much of a thousand years of Ireland's Christian heritage is concentrated in the eastern half of County Galway.

To a certain extent, East Galway could be taken as a microcosm of the country as a whole, presenting - as it does - a remarkable panorama of medieval monastic buildings and modern churches of a kind found widely throughout the rest of the country. But East Galway has some very special features which are either unique or rarely matched elsewhere. For instance, the quality of its medieval masonry retained a high standard in simple structures like Kilbearn church, or the more complex Round Tower and O'Heyne's church at Kilmacduagh - Galway's all too often unsung gem that rivals Glendaugh both in the variety of its monuments and in its majestic setting at the foot of the Burren. As further examples, the carvings of the chancel arch in St. Mary's in Tuam, and the west doorway of Clonfert cathedral, can be seen as representing the apogee of Irish ornament in the Romanesque style that is almost baroque in the exuberance of its decorative patterns. That same style of architectural sculpture continued with vitality into the thirteenth century at Abbeyknockmoy and, more particularly, at Drumacoo, where it can be seen to merge gradually with the Gothic which had already long replaced it in areas east of the Shannon.

The day-to-day development of this project could not have taken place without the skill, interest, and professionalism of Ms. Marie Mannion, Heritage Officer, who gave so generously of her time, to all who worked with her over the years on this Steering Committee.

I am deeply indebted to Dr. Peter Harbison for his enthusiasm, dedication and sheer hard work which has ensured that A thousand Years of Church Heritage in East Galway will stand as testimony to an appreciation of our cherished ecclesiastical heritage in another thousand years.

Cead mile buíochas o gach einne whose hand touched this work.

Mr. Frank Dawson,
Chairperson,
East Galway Ecclesiastical Heritage Steering Group
One of the more notable features of the western landscape of the later medieval period are the abbeys and friaries of the continental religious orders – Cistercians, Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and Carmelites among others – and East Galway preserves some of the finest of these structures at places like Kilconnell and Claregalway, where their tall slender towers add a welcome vertical emphasis to the skyline. Their churches occasionally display fine flamboyant tombs, and among the memorable spectacles they offer are large east windows, with mullions weaving a variety of curving patterns that are, alas, devoid of the presumably coloured glass which one filled them.

But that loss is more than made up for in their twentieth-century counterparts. It was the realisation of the extent and quality of the stained glass in East Galway churches which surprised me most during the course of the survey, where I had initially expected it only in Loughrea Cathedral, one of the foremost showpieces of Irish stained glass. Loughrea, and the medieval churches already mentioned, have of course been well flagged by guidebooks as being among the highlights of a visit to East Galway. But what I hope this volume will make clear to a wide audience – both inside and outside the county – is the surprising richness of East Galway’s modern stained glass in more out-of-the-way places where one might not expect it.

The credit for this remarkable state of affairs must be given to one far-seeing and talented layman, Edward Martyn of Tullira, near Ardrahan, who wanted to counter the widespread import of repetitive foreign-made glass by getting Irish craftsmen and women to be the main producers of church furniture, including glass. His efforts, which started a nation-wide movement in his own parish church at Labane, found their culmination in a felicitous co-operation with churchmen in Loughrea to decorate the newly-built Cathedral there with imaginative Irish-made glass. This was largely supplied by Sarah Purser’s An Túr Glaine, ‘The Tower Glass’, which the Loughrea commissions helped to make into one of the two major Irish stained glass studios, whose products are among the country’s greatest contributions to European art of the twentieth century. But what makes East Galway even more remarkable – indeed unique – in this connection is that the distinguished lead given by the diocesan Cathedral percolated with panache down to subsidiary churches of the diocese – and not just into the more important examples such as St. Michael’s in Ballinasloe, but also into many of the smaller outlying parishes and indeed, even into the neighbouring dioceses in the county as well. Walking into a small country church and coming upon some unexpected stained-glass gem has been, for me, one of the real joys in working on this East Galway survey, and I can only hope that those who browse through the illustrations of this book will be able to share my own delight by going out and discovering these windows for themselves. It will be a treat that will have been very much worth the effort, and one which will add an unexpected richness to any visit to East Galway.

Obviously, it has not been possible to cover here every church in the area covered by the survey, and I hope that I may be forgiven if there are inconsistencies in the periodisation of monuments, and if my choice of sites has omitted items that others might consider more worthy of inclusion. If, furthermore, I may occasionally have erred in my artistic attributions, I might express the wish that this work may lead to further research on the material presented here – which, in turn, might encourage others to reveal the wealth of stained glass in other parts of the county and country.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity of thanking the many members of the steering committee who have been of such great assistance in a variety of ways, not the least of which was bringing some churches to my attention at places which I would not otherwise have visited. A special word of thanks to Angela Bane, who was co-author of the original report, and to Marie Mannion whose tireless efforts have ensured that the original survey format has been successfully transferred to book form with the ever-helpful guiding hand of the publisher, Susan Waine.
## Ecclesiastical Heritage Sites – Galway East

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Early Christian Sites
I. Clonfert Cathedral

Clonfert is undoubtedly the most important church in East Galway and is known far outside the bounds of Connacht and, indeed, Ireland as well. It owes its importance to the internationally-known saint who is traditionally said to lie buried somewhere within its walls – Brendan the Navigator. His reputation rests largely on the *Navigatio Brendani*, an only partially fanciful tale of the saint’s island-hopping voyages with his disciples in the north Atlantic, before he returned to Ireland and died at his sister’s convent at Annaghdown in 577/583, from where his body was borne to Clonfert for burial. Though in the style of the Old Irish *immrama* (travel tales), the *Navigatio* appears to have been written originally in Latin (possibly on the Continent) around 800 and, in subsequent centuries, was translated into many European vernacular languages – which is how St Brendan’s name became widely known throughout Europe.

A long approach-road leads to the Cathedral which can be seen as a gabled structure dominated by an almost incongruously tall tower standing above the famous Romanesque-style doorway in the centre of the west wall. Writing in *The Bell* in 1942, Frank O’Connor noted that the doorway gets added force from that preposterous and charming little tower which, for all its tapering Franciscan elegance, is far too heavy for the church-front and has an air of intense decorum wildly at variance with the reckless fantasy of the porch. If both were to come alive the tower would go to tea with the rector while the porch got run in for being drunk and disorderly.

The reckless fantasy he refers to is in the exuberant decoration of this sandstone doorway, which must be regarded as one of the great high-points of Irish architectural decoration in the Romanesque style, executed...
Given that Clonfert is the final resting-place of St. Brendan, Europe’s most famous mariner and ocean explorer of the Early Middle Ages, it is perhaps appropriate that the fifteenth-century chancel arch should bear the carving of a mermaid. She carries a comb and mirror – perhaps a symbol of her vanity.

A tall fifteenth-century tower above the doorway of Clonfert Cathedral adds stature to the much older church with decorative doorway that has been a diocesan centre for many centuries.

Around or shortly before 1200 by a group of masons who did St. Brendan proud by leaving scarcely any part of the doorway uncarved (the other great Galway high-points in the style being the chancel of St Mary’s Cathedral, Tuam and the window at Annaghdown, where St. Brendan died). The motifs on the engaged columns at Clonfert vary from interlace to chevron (zig-zag), plant and circular designs, and they bear capitals with feline faces and masks, among other things. The arches above stand out contrastingly in a very high relief, with ornamental bosses, animals biting a continuous semi-circular roll and other carvings more difficult to define, and conceived probably not without some influence from foreign – perhaps French – churches of the period. These arches are surmounted by the most ornamental tangent-gable known from Irish Romanesque, the lower part occupied by an arcade enclosing human heads at the top of the arches and leaving the remainder plain beneath (probably painted originally, perhaps imitating Limoges enamels as Françoise Henry suggested), while the upper part is filled with a network of triangles. These are alternatively in high relief with foliate decoration, or in the form of recesses from which bearded and shaven heads emerge – one in the centre being more portrait-like than the rest. The sides of the sandstone doorway narrow as they ascend, following the old Irish church tradition of inclining jambs, though this became less noticeable when a new innermost order in limestone was inserted in the fifteenth century, featuring two saints.

The richness and variety of the sculpture on the Clonfert Cathedral doorway, of c.1200, displays human and animal masks and other motifs beautifully carved from a colourful but friable sandstone that continues to suffer much from weathering.
As in so many other Irish cathedrals which were faced with the need for more space with an expanding congregation in the thirteenth century, the original twelfth-century rectangular building was extended around 1210-1225 with the creation of a new chancel with a very fine twin-light east window of close-fitting masonry, so typical of the so-called ‘School of the West’ at the time. The building was described in 1444 as being in need of repair, and this situation brought about further extensions to the Cathedral in the form of a north and a south transept (of which only the former survives in roofless condition), together with the erection of the afore-mentioned tower above the doorway. The arch constructed in the early thirteenth century to separate nave and choir must have been one of the parts of the building that was in need of repair, and it was duly replaced in the fifteenth century by the existing chancel arch bearing, incongruously, the helmeted head of an armed warrior of the period. The Shell Guide notes that the Cathedral was wrecked in the sixteenth century, partially re-edified for Protestant use in the seventeenth, and poorly restored in the eighteenth and nineteenth – the activities of the latter including the parapet of the tower and the removal of plaster from the internal walls.

In addition to a fifteenth-century baptismal font, the interior also preserves the earliest monuments surviving at Clonfert in the form of two cross-decorated gravestones – one asking for a prayer for Baclat, and the other recording the name Beegan, both of which could date back as far as the ninth or tenth century. Who these people were, we have no way of knowing, but they do not feature among the list of bishops and abbots that we know of from Clonfert in the early Irish Annals.

When, as part of the twelfth-century Church Reform movement, Ireland was divided up into bishoprics at the Synod of Rathbreasail in the year 1111, Clonfert was given diocesan status, which it still bears in both Catholic and Protestant churches. Air pollution, particularly within recent decades, has caused deterioration in the surface of the sandstone doorway, almost obliterating some of the decoration, and a plan was evolved in 2002 to do everything possible to stop the decay. So far, the doorway has been repointed, but the best method of tackling the stone decay has yet to be decided.

Not far away was an Augustinian abbey of St. Mary de Portu Puro, which
is alleged to have stood to the south-east of the Cathedral (according to Gwynn & Hadcock), and there was also a convent of nuns in the vicinity – neither of which have survived. Their nearest modern equivalent is the Emmanuel House of Providence founded in 1985 and standing out of sight behind the Cathedral. Adjoining it is the former Bishop’s Palace that goes back to the seventeenth century and which is now in a sad state of disrepair – and beside it is a splendid yew walk which has, regretfully, begun to lose its trees, but is being restored in association with the Tree Council of Ireland.

2. Drumacoo Church

The saint associated with the early monastery (or more probably nunnery) at Drumacoo is St. Sourney, or Assurnaidhe, and the site’s proximity to Galway Bay makes it understandable that she was also venerated on the Aran Islands.

The present ruined church there grew out of an earlier church incorporated into it – as can be seen in the small off-centre west doorway with flat lintel. How much earlier is a matter of debate though and, given the comparative lateness of some early-looking churches in East Galway, it could be as late as the twelfth century. Opinions also differ as to what happened when the church was expanded early in the thirteenth century, but it would seem that at least the lower courses of the masonry of the north wall remained intact, while the original east and south walls were dismantled, and their contents re-used in the extended rectangular church. The original stone church thus occupied what is now the northwestern corner of the present church ruin. This extended, and much larger, church was built in the first quarter of the thirteenth century. Its east wall was provided with two acutely-pointed lancet windows, both linked and framed by mouldings in the style typical of the so-called ‘School of the West’ in the period c.1200-1225, though – unlike most other examples of the School’s work – the exteriors of the windows lack corresponding mouldings. One of the windows is now blocked up with later masonry, and the capitals, though worn, suggest the form of fluted, perhaps scalloped, decoration on one, and foliate stems on a second – the third being too abraded to reveal its original decoration. There are two aumbrys, or niches, to the north of the window, and only one to the south – the reason for the latter to be explained below.

At the same time that the windows were built, the church was

The south doorway of the church at Drumacoo shows the masons of ‘The School of the West’ adapting their late Romanesque decoration of undercut chevrons to the incoming Gothic style with pointed arch. The fearsome animals (see overleaf) on the capitals are one of the most attractive features of this portal, which dates probably from the 1220s.
The outside walls, a ponderous doorway and a large north window admitting light to shine on the large recumbent slabs of the St. George family vault, which take up most of the interior. The last burial they record was in 1877. The slabs leave space for recording some more, should this ever be required. A plaque outside reminds us that the Irish Georgian Society restored the building – including the roof – in 1990. This acts as a parallel for the meritorious work executed by the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society around 1902 in providing new foundations for the old church described above.

The cult of St. Sourney has left its traces in the area near the church. St. Sourney's Bed is near the churchyard wall to the north of the church, and her bush lay near the path between the small car-park and the church. But the most noteworthy place of veneration is a well within a circular enclosure also to the north of the church where people may have bathed their eyes in the hope of a cure for which St. Sourney was famous.

3. Kilbennon

St. Benen, or Benignus, alias Mionnán, is frequently said to have been a disciple of St. Patrick who followed him upon the episcopal throne of Armagh, and is often depicted in stained glass as a small boy standing beside the national apostle. But it is quite likely that there were two saints of the name, one of them of Connacht origin, who is venerated at the first station on the climb to Croagh Patrick, and commemorated in the smallest oratory in the country on the skyline of the Aran island of Inis Mór. He is also the one whose name is associated with Kilbennon, some two and a half miles north-west of Tuam, and where Tuam’s patron saint, Jarlath, is said to have been his disciple.

The church surviving on the site may have been erected for the parish around or after 1428. It is a rectangular structure with a doorway of more recent vintage in the south wall, and windows in the east and west walls. Putlog holes in the interior of the west wall suggest that there was a gallery in the church there. But placed in the window high up on the west wall is a single sandstone Romanesque voussoir with floral decoration.
Sunday in July, known locally as Garland Sunday – the traditional day in pagan Ireland for a festival in honour of Lug, the good god of the pre-Christian Celts. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that the parish priest in the middle of the nineteenth century banned the patrún or pattern day here because he felt that it – and the Round Tower – smacked of pagan practices (he was one of those who thought that Round Towers were pagan Fire Temples). The pattern took place at Tober Bannon, St. Benen’s well, to the north-west of the church.

The exterior east wall of the church has a niche with the Virgin and Child on top, beneath which there is a large vault of the Browne family. To the north-east there is another, more ancient-looking, stone vault bearing an inscription of the Morris family which has been superimposed in the top right-hand corner with an IHS monogram. The remainder of the churchyard is choc-a-bloc with more modern graves and headstones.

Legends associated with Kilbennon
Folklore associated with the spot tells of Patrick and Benen calling forth the spring for the well by lifting the sod, and baptising and healing lepers there.

Another legend says that the well sprang up where a stone which St. Patrick gave Benen fell out of his pocket. There was, traditionally, an ash-tree at the well.

One final tale tells of Benen and his driver approaching the place in a chariot, and the driver, fearing an ambush, persuaded the unwarned saint to change places with him. When the ambushers beheaded the driver in place of the saint, a well sprang up where the driver’s head had fallen to the ground.

4. Killeely

Irish place-names beginning with Kil- usually incorporate the name of an early saint, but because nothing is known of the name Faoile which forms part of the name Killeely (Cill-Fhaoile), John O’Donovan, the great nineteenth-century savant of the Ordnance Survey, doubted whether the place was called after a saint at all.
some windows are, in contrast, round-headed rather than having a triangular top, that in the north wall having a curious hole beside it, the purpose of which is unclear. The quoins at the western end of the church seem to belong to the early thirteenth century, but most of the other masonry in the western third of the church is clearly inferior, jumbled and using smaller stones, indicating that this part of the church was almost entirely rebuilt, probably in the fifteenth century. The change in masonry style is best seen in the exterior north wall of the church. The original church may have had a (flat-headed?) doorway at the western end but, in the re-build, this was entirely removed, and replaced by the present, pointed doorway, which was placed in the south wall, with some surfaces decorated with hyphenated decoration of the kind often encountered on buildings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Noteworthy is the ‘eye-loop’ inside it which acted as the pivot for the vertical hinge of a long-vanished wooden door. Dating from the same period is a cusped piscina (for pouring away Mass water) that was inserted beneath the original south window near the eastern end of the church. The interior of this eastern end of the church is a symphony in grey – the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century tombs blending in colour with the splendid masonry of the interior walls. Only a few modern memorials at the western end of the church disturb the venerable ancientness of the church interior.

5. Killursa

Killursa is two churches in one. A small, low flat-headed doorway placed off-centre in the west wall belongs to the earlier of these, a small rectangular church, the slanting gable-walls of which can be seen incorporated into the larger and taller west wall which belongs to the second church. The smaller, older church was built of large stones, some of which are still in situ, but when the larger church was built, parts of the older church were presumably demolished, and some of its stones re-used in the bottom layers of the second church. The first church was built some time before 1200, the second probably in the fifteenth century, as its doorway and windows would seem to belong to that period.
6. Kilmacduagh

'THE CHURCH OF THE SON OF DUACH' is the most impressive Early Christian site in South Galway, one of the three most significant in the County (along with Clonfert and Tuam) – and one of the least known of the big monastic settlements of early medieval Ireland. Its name comes from the saintly hermit Colmán son of Duach, who was of local royal stock and kinsman of Guaire, king of the surrounding area called Aidhne – a man renowned in Irish tradition for his hospitality (see below under Folklore). Colmán retired as a hermit to the Burren in the neighbouring county of Clare, and it was around his tomb at Kilmacduagh – marked by yew trees and appropriated in 1852 by Bishop French for his grave – that a monastery grew up. For centuries, the buildings of this monastery would have been made of wood, and no

Much of its interior is taken up with small, uninscribed, rude head-stones.

Outside, in the churchyard, the most unusual memorial is a cylindrical, round-topped monument erected to commemorate a priest who died in 1767. But, at the entrance to the churchyard, is a statue to the seventh-century Saint Fursa after whom the church is called (Cill Fhursa, the church of Fursa), and who is traditionally thought to have been born in the locality. He left his homeland to spread the gospel, his monastic foundation at Cnoberesburgh in East Anglia earning for him renown in the Venerable Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English Church and People. He later worked in north-eastern France, and became famous for visions he had had. On his death, his uncorrupted body was taken to Peronne for burial, and there became an object of veneration for countless thousands of pilgrims who flocked to his tomb – showing that perhaps this small and ruined church in east Galway could become a draw, too, for English and French tourists.
its kind in the country. Its foundations, however, must have been somewhat insecure, as it leans two feet four inches out of the perpendicular – Ireland’s predecessor to the leaning tower of Pisa!

Of much the same vintage is that part of the western end of the Cathedral which is made up of large-block cyclopean masonry. The west wall contains a fine trabeate doorway (now blocked) that is topped by a heavy lintel the whole thickness of the wall. It has projecting stone corbels at the base of the roof which once supported heavy wooden bargeboards, and which would suggest a date no earlier than the twelfth century. Its fine-quality stonework is of a kind that continued to be practised possibly into the thirteenth century in South Galway (compare Killeely). Probably around the fifteenth century, the west gable was raised, the Cathedral was extended to form a nave and chancel structure with transepts, and provided with a new decorative doorway near the western end of the south wall (note the well-carved head above the door). The south and west traceried windows are well preserved, and the north transept contains two charming Crucifixion plaques and the figure of St. Colmán, all dating from the seventeenth century.

In a field to the east of the adjoining road is the church of St. Mary (with 9th/10th century grave slab). To the north of the Cathedral is the Bishop’s House, an unique thirteenth/fourteenth-century building (recently restored) and the very ruined church of St. John.

The dedications of these two churches suggest a date unlikely to be earlier than 1200, and probably later. Both may well have been built to cater for pilgrims, as Kilmacduagh continued to be an important centre of pilgrimage throughout the later Middle Ages – with the now-lost saint’s belt as one of the relics which pilgrims would have come to venerate.

The other building of note is O’Heyne’s church, reachable down a laneway to the west of the main complex of buildings. As its name implies, it was founded by the O’Heyne family for the Augustinians, in whose hands it remained until 1584, long after the Dissolution of the Monasteries had taken its toll of other religious foundations in the country. The stonework of this church belongs to what is known as ‘the School of the West’ – a school of masons that worked on various churches west of the Shannon in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, and which is characterised by superbly-fitting stonework, evidenced here in
moment, the saint’s legendary kinsman, Guaire Aidhne, famous for his hospitality, was having a great banquet where Gort now stands. But the friends he was entertaining were amazed when the Holy Man arrived. The saint thanked him, but left the selection of the site to Providence. The choice was made when the saint dropped his belt during a walk through a wood and, taking this to be a sign from heaven, he decided that this should be the chosen site for his monastery. The belt survived in the hands of its hereditary keepers, the O’Shaughnessys, until at least the seventeenth century. They were intermarried with the O’Heynes, who built the church named after them, and whose coat of arms included a wasp and a horsefly, both of which used to be prevalent in the locality.

The other, and more famous, story that concerns St. Colmán relates to the famous ‘Road of the Dishes’ near Keelhilla in the Burren. One Eastertide, we are told, St. Colmán ran out of food in his cave hermitage and sent his servant out to find some sustenance – which he signally failed to locate. But the Lord looked after his own for, at that same moment, the saint’s legendary kinsman, Guaire Aidhne, famous for his hospitality, was having a great banquet where Gort now stands. But the friends he was entertaining were amazed when the Holy Man arrived. The saint thanked him, but left the selection of the site to Providence. The choice was made when the saint dropped his belt during a walk through a wood and, taking this to be a sign from heaven, he decided that this should be the chosen site for his monastery. The belt survived in the hands of its hereditary keepers, the O’Shaughnessys, until at least the seventeenth century. They were intermarried with the O’Heynes, who built the church named after them, and whose coat of arms included a wasp and a horsefly, both of which used to be prevalent in the locality.

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7. Kiltartan

Kiltartan is a name that became widely known through Lady Gregory, who is commemorated in a Heritage Centre near the main Gort to Galway road, but the name goes back many centuries before her, to a saint named Tärten or Torten, about whom little or nothing is known, though the name could be a corruption of Atharacht, or Attracta, a female saint honoured at a famous well near Coolavin in County Sligo.

The medieval church bearing the name would not appear to have been monastic, and probably served as a parish church in the Middle Ages. While it may conceivably replace an older (wooden?) one on the site, this long, rectangular church (65 x 25 feet) is unlikely to be much earlier than 1200. In conformity with a number of other South Galway churches of roughly the same period, the structure is characterised by the use of fine, large-stoned cyclopean masonry. Typical of the period around the early thirteenth century are the narrow inward-splaying windows in the north wall. But, as was sometimes the case in South Galway, the western end of the church appears to have been entirely re-built from the ground up sometime around the fifteenth century – and in masonry inferior to that of the eastern portion. Whether the church was lengthened in the process – possibly to cater for an expanding population – is difficult to know. It is likely that (as was probably also the case at Killeely) a west doorway which originally provided the entrance was replaced by a new one inserted in the north wall. At the same time, the upper portions of the north and south walls were heavily rebuilt, creating a triple-cusped east window, but also inserting some of the narrow windows of the old church in the side-walls. A notable feature is the seemingly late-medieval simple arched tomb-niche with cusped (but otherwise undecorated) frontal. The interior is covered with modern grave memorials which are in bad need of care and attention, but the roots of ivy engulfing the walls have recently been severed.

Folklore

Outside the church was a stone which is said to have been tied around the neck of the mother of St. Colmán mac Duagh when she was thrown into a hole to drown her. But when she said “God help us”, the hole henceforth became known as Poll Dia Linn.

A modern crucifix occupies the niche of a fifteenth-century canopied tomb in the church at Kiltartan. The undecorated arches above ground level may once have been painted.
8. Tuam: St. Mary’s Church of Ireland Cathedral

Tuam, the site of a monastery founded by St. Jarlath in the sixth century and seat of the O’Conor High Kings of Ireland in the twelfth, became the centre of a new diocese in 1111, and was raised to the status of archdiocese in 1152. The present Protestant Cathedral must have had at least one predecessor, which collapsed in 1184, and it is reasonable to presume that the earliest part of the present Cathedral was built shortly after that. This is what was then and is now again the chancel of the Cathedral, a square area entered beneath an arch and with three windows in the east wall. The arch is one of the great glories of Irish Romanesque architecture, its span of about 18 feet being the largest of its kind known in the country. In five orders, it is richly decorated with a great variety of ornament, and its capitals have some superbly-carved stylised human faces, which were partially damaged in a fire of 1787. The three east windows are equally well carved in low false relief with animal ornament of ultimately Viking origin, and with a small Temptation scene which has never been satisfactorily explained. Not having been exposed to the elements, the carving on the windows has kept its pristine crispness.

In the later Middle Ages, a much more extensive chancel was built immediately to the east. Though ascribed by some to William de Bermingham, archbishop from 1289 to 1312, on the basis of historical references, it may, however, be up to a century later in date. It is a long rectangle in shape with triple (partially restored) windows in the north and south walls that alternate with external buttresses, and having an extensive five-light window (now with modern glass) in the east wall. The nave which was presumably intended to accompany it was never built, which is as well, as it would have entailed the destruction of the Romanesque chancel. Thus, from the time of its construction until the second half of the nineteenth century, this structure served as the main area of worship in the Cathedral. Access to it was through the...
Romanesque chancel which then served as a porch, and entrance from it to the chancel was created by knocking out the lower part of the central window in the east wall. Where the two chancels, old and new, met, a tower was constructed which was repaired in 1688 but was demolished when the third and final stage of building the Cathedral was reached in the 1860s.

It was then that Sir Thomas Deane, one of the most prominent architects of the period, was commissioned to design a new Cathedral in the neo-Gothic style, but with instructions to leave the existing Romanesque and Gothic chancels intact. What he constructed was a new nave (doubtless much larger than the old Romanesque one had been), with west doorway, side aisles, a north and south transept and an impressive tower with spire at the crossing. The construction lasted until 1878, and Tuam now had the largest Protestant Cathedral in Connacht, a consolation to make up for the loss of archiepiscopal status which it had suffered almost forty years before. Deane’s only alteration to the Romanesque chancel was to repair the damage done to the central east window, and blocking up the late medieval doorway in a way that makes it almost seem as if it were never there. The altar was now back beneath the east window, and to link the chancel to the crossing, he built a choir, where red sandstone was chosen for the inner walls to blend in with that of the Romanesque arch. In fact, Deane used sandstone widely throughout the building, leaving a gap between it and the outer limestone shell to prevent damp – but to no avail, as the Cathedral still suffers from the rain.

The entrance is now usually through the north transept door, rather than through Deane’s west doorway, which is normally kept locked. The late medieval chancel, having acted as chapter house (with eighteenth-century Piedmontese choir stalls now returned to Italy), library and synod hall, is now suitably restored as a community centre / display area. The ecclesiastical furniture is not of major interest, the bishop’s throne and chapter stalls detracting, if anything, from the interior appearance, and the largely late-nineteenth-century stained glass erected to various Victorian worthies is more notable for the flowing moustaches of its male figures than for any particular artistic interest.

JM Synge’s grandfather is buried in the graveyard.
of the Carthusian monastery survive. It is also said that the Priory was sold to the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem in 1306 but, while the Knights continued to hold the tithes and rectory right up to the Reformation, the actual sale of the monastery to them was apparently never completed. In 1321, the English Carthusian priors decided to send no more monks to Kilnaleghin because they could no longer get any rents from the Irish house, which would seem to have been finally abandoned some twenty years later. Certainly, by 1371, after the Carthusian cells had remained deserted for thirty years, it was proposed that the site should be granted to the Franciscans, for whom the de Burgos then founded a monastery. In 1400, Pope Boniface IX granted an indulgence to penitents visiting the house and giving alms for its conservation and repair – and many of the surviving buildings would fit in well with a fifteenth-century date.

The church would have been a long hall-type structure, but with an additional south aisle linked to it by an arcade supported on angular columns. It resembled Meelick in this, but also in having side chapels to the south. Careful inspection shows both to have windows restored in modern times, that in the eastern side-chapel at Abbey ingeniously so, and that in its more westerly counterpart making clever, if wrong, use of old tracery in its upper part which is surmounted by a stone head. A small building was later inserted between these two side-chapels, necessitating the blocking up of a window in the west wall of the east chapel.

The buildings were devastated after the Suppression of the Monasteries around 1540, but Richard de Burgo, Earl of Clanrickarde, bought the buildings from Queen Elizabeth and repaired the dormitories and other parts of the old monastery. It may have been he who built in the fine first-floor fire-place in the western wall of the otherwise poorly-preserved domestic quarters, together with the diamond-shaped chimneys typical of the late sixteenth century or the period around 1600. A sixteenth-century tombstone survives near the south-western corner of the old cloister garth.

The friars held a chapter in a neighbouring wood in 1609, and seem to have returned to the friary in 1615 to occupy and restore it. Sometime before that, the Dowager Countess of Clanrickarde had roofed the church, but her pious work does not appear to have survived the Cromwellian period, when the friars had to abandon their house again.
only to return once more after the restoration of Charles II in 1660. When the friars finally abandoned the monastery is not recorded, but it was probably before the end of the eighteenth century. Certainly, three eighteenth-century chalices have managed to survive from Kilnaleghin, and a fifteenth-century chasuble now in the Museum in Loughrea may have also come from here.

The noted Franciscan Micheál Ó'Cleirigh, one of the famous Four Masters, copied out here a life of St. Ceallach from the manuscript known as the *Leabhar Breac*, which the MacEgans of Duniry nearby may have loaned temporarily to the monastery, and this laudable act is recorded in a carving in Loughrea Cathedral as one of the important events in the history of the diocese. Frank Burke’s book on *The Abbey of Kilnalekhan* records that another event similarly commemorated in stone in the same Cathedral was the consecration of John de Burgo as bishop of Clonfert at Kinaleghin in 1642. It may also be noted in passing that the modern Catholic church in the village of Abbey near by has stained glass windows which neatly sum up the history of Christianity in the area – the figure of St. Fechin, and the arms of the Carthusians, the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem and the Franciscans.

One of the most interesting aspects of visiting Abbey is viewing the collection of seventeenth- to nineteenth-century tombstones in the two side-chapels. The roof over the eastern chapel, perhaps part of the rebuilding recorded in a plaque as having been undertaken in 1741 by Edward Burke of Meelick, has helped to preserve for posterity a number of Burke tombs. The largest, but not the most attractive, of these is that occupying much of the centre of the chapel and which was erected to commemorate the family of Sir John Burke of Marble Hill, who died in 1847. Of more artistic merit is that of Thomas de Burgo of Pallas, dating from 1649, with its two-tiered classical design and mason’s initials. Also classical in inspiration is the monument to John Burke of Reaghan erected against the south wall of the western side-chapel in 1745. The quality difference between the eighteenth-century hand-carved tomb inscriptions and those executed by template in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be seen by comparing headstones of different types in the churchyard. A walled enclosure near the road houses a family vault of the Nugent family.

**IO. Abbeyknockmoy**

*K*nockmoy *Abbey* is the only Cistercian house in our chosen area, but one of the most important of East Galway’s ecclesiastical monuments. It had royal origins, having been founded from Boyle in 1190 by Cathal Crobdhderg O’Conor, king of Connacht, who ordered that he be buried there in the habit of a monk upon his death, which occurred in 1224. In doing so, he set a trend for many of his descendants who were also interred there, though not as monks. During the controversy surrounding the Conspiracy of Mellifont in 1228, Knockmoy became affiliated to the famous French abbey of Clairvaux, where both St. Malachy of Armagh and the great Cistercian preacher, St. Bernard, are buried side by side in front of the high altar. But Knockmoy was disgraced twelve years later when the abbot allowed his hair to be washed by a woman! By the early fifteenth century, Knockmoy had become so poverty-stricken that its monks could not be maintained properly, though things can’t have been too bad, and must have been worth fighting for, because we know that, in the second half of the century, squabbles broke out as to who should become abbot of the community. The Abbey was suppressed at the Reformation when Hugh O’Kelly (apparently a layman) acknowledged the supremacy of king Henry VIII, and promised men and arms in return for a life grant of the property which, some forty years later, is known to have included 1260 acres of land – and Clare Island off the Mayo coast.

The Abbey buildings conform to the typical Cistercian lay-out – a church on one side of a cloister garth with lean-to cloister, the other three sides being formed by chapter-house, refectory and kitchen, and stores and dormitories. The somewhat severe nave, with pointed side-aisles, survives only in part, though it has some interesting carvings, particularly on one of the supports of the south aisle arcade. Each of the transepts has two side-chapels with some foliate capitals, but the main interest of the abbey lies in the chancel, which is locked. It is vaulted with undecorated stone ribs, but the pointed arch at the crossing has recently been rebuilt. The east wall has a set of three windows, joined on the outside by a string course typical of a western Irish school of masons active mainly in
Connacht during the first quarter of the thirteenth century. It was they who carved the attractive decoration on the exterior arches above the string-course level.

The take-over of the monastery by the O’Kellys of Ui Maine is illustrated by a large canopied tomb in the north wall of the chancel that was inserted as a memorial to Malachy O’Kelly, who died in 1401, and his wife Fionnuala, whose death is recorded two years later. The most unusual feature, however, is the late Gothic painting of c. 1500 beside it, depicting a Crucifixion, St. Sebastian and a representation of the tale of The Three Live Kings and The Three Dead Kings, accompanied by a now no-longer legible Gothic, so-called ‘black letter,’ inscription to the effect that ‘as you are now, so once we were; as we now are, so shall you be’. Time has not dealt kindly with the colours, which have almost entirely disappeared, though the black outlines have been preserved. The choir also preserves some nineteenth-century and earlier memorials, and the tower (or what remains of it) was probably inserted in the fifteenth century.

The east range of the claustral buildings still survives, having been built – like the church – in the decades between 1210 and 1230. The five lancet windows of the chapter house were finely decorated inside with heavily-undercut chevron ornament, but the whole interior space was ruined by the insertion of an internal wall in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. The remainder of the buildings around the cloister garth survive partially up to first floor level, but have no further features of particular interest. Portions of the ‘Dumb-bell’-style piers of the fifteenth-century cloister arcade were uncovered during excavations in the 1980s, but are not on public display, though the visible wall-foundations give an adequate idea of the extent and layout of the cloister.

One final point may be mentioned. Abbeyknockmoy can lay claim to having had a professional scribe within its walls – Diarmuid O’Culechain, who is known to have written a missal for the abbey – one of only two such scribes known in the records of the Irish Cistercian houses though, sadly, none of his products can be identified today.

The recently-restored wall-painting of c. 1500 on the north wall of the chancel of Knockmoy Abbey depicts the Three Live Kings and the Three Dead Kings in the upper register, and The martyrdom of Saint Sebastian beneath.
II. Annaghdown

T. BRENDAN IS THE ONE SAINT who spans the whole geographical arc of our chosen area. He is said to have been buried in Clonfert on the eastern edge beside the Shannon’s shores, but died at Annaghdown in 577 or 583 on the western fringe beside the waters of Lough Corrib. It was at the latter place that he had founded a convent of nuns for his sister Briga. But Annaghdown was much more than just a convent. It was a Cathedral and seat of a bishop from the twelfth until at least the fourteenth century, when the diocese was amalgamated with Tuam. It also had separate monasteries for the Augustinian and Premonstratensian canons and, in the sixteenth century, it is known to have had a secular college secretly run by four priests or vicars.

Little is known about the early history of the convent. We can only presume that its existence continued for centuries until it was subsumed by the Arroasian Canonesses of Clonard, in County Meath, during the course of the twelfth century, but when the Canonesses got a new head house for Connacht at Kilcreevanty around 1223, the Annaghdown nuns may have moved to the island of Inishmaine on Lough Mask. It was probably at that stage that the vacuum was filled by the arrival of the Premonstratensians, whose foundation had almost certainly become the

An aerial view of Annaghdown shows its rich collection of churches, two in the centre of the picture, the Cathedral near the left and the Augustinian priory lose to the lakeshore at the top.
The second building focus is the Cathedral, located further down the slope. This is a tall rectangular building with Gothic north doorway, with capitals resembling the carving on Kilfenora cathedral of c.1200, and with broad south windows inserted when the Church of Ireland restored the church for divine worship in 1798 at a cost of £461-10-9. The present east window may have been inserted at this time. It has the same dimensions as a gap that exists where an east window ought to be in the priory by the lakeshore to be mentioned below, and this has given rise to the oft-expressed view that the Cathedral window was taken from the priory – which is certainly a possibility. But, because masons have rarely succeeded in correctly re-assembling Romanesque doorways or windows centuries after they were originally carved, the comparatively good fit of the Annaghdown Cathedral window stones could negate the suggestion, and argue in favour of the window being in its original position, for although its style may differ from that of the north doorway just mentioned, the two need not be very far apart in date.

Whether in its original position or not, the window is undoubtedly the finest late Romanesque-style window to survive in Ireland from the period around 1200, and one of the greatest masterpieces of sculpture in Connacht before it was overcame by the Normans in 1235. Its decoration consists of a central roll with pointed bowtell moulding which starts at the bottom and continues without interruption around the arched top and down the other side, with the base of the north side ending in a splendid monster with contorted neck, found also on a window at Rath in central Clare where the mason would also appear to have been at work. The roll is approached from each side all the way round by triangles with pellet ornament and carved with stylised foliage and animals in very subtle low relief. All of this is, in turn, framed by a raised moulding with foliate block capitals, above which is a kind of pyramidal decoration.

The final group of ecclesiastical buildings is down near the lakeshore – the priory of the Augustinian canons, known as St. Mary de Portu Patrum, which may have been founded by Turlough O’Conor at the instance of the reformer St. Malachy some time in the 1140s. It is possible that its church may have been used also by the Canoneses of the same order. Like the Premonstratensian foundation, it was not without its contentious claims and counter-claims inside and outside the community and, like it, was closed down at the Reformation. Thereafter, it came into the hands of Richard, Earl of Clanrickarde, in 1562, and a lease in reversion was granted to the warden and vicars of King’s College, Galway, in 1578. The buildings consist of a church, with a cloister attached, that still has some of its domestic buildings surrounding it. The cloister was of the lean-to variety, and the stone finish of some of the windows suggests a thirteenth-century date at least for some of the buildings. The only interesting feature in the church is the south window of the choir, which has decoration in the Transitional style of around 1200.

But, of finer quality are the twelfth-century Romanesque-decorated fragments and face-mask capitals that are now assembled together near the south-western end of the domestic buildings. Together, these may have formed part of a chancel arch of an earlier church on the site and – like the east window in the Cathedral – show the high quality of stone carving in the area in the decades on either side of the year 1200.

One building no longer extant at Annaghdown is the Round Tower known to have been built in 1238 – the last of its kind to have been erected in Ireland.

While the surviving buildings at Annaghdown are diffuse, the stone-carved architectural sculpture, the association with St. Brendan – and the lakeside location – make this one of the most attractive sites in the whole area covered by this survey.
I2. Athenry Dominican Friary

More than a third of the Irish medieval friaries of the Dominicans were located in Connacht and, of the five in Galway, that at Athenry was one of the most richly endowed – and is still one of the best preserved (though see also Portumna). The priory of SS. Peter and Paul at Athenry was founded in 1241 by Milo de Bermingham, who provided land and money for the building of the church where he was buried in 1252. Many of his descendants chose to be interred there also, as did several bishops of Clonfert and Kilmacduagh. The founder’s son, William, who was archbishop of Tuam from 1289 until 1312, was interred in a splendid tomb in the friary, but there is no inscription to indicate which of the surviving tombs may have been his. The church was re-edified in 1327-45, and restored after a fire sometime around 1420. It may have been at that stage of its development that the tower was inserted, thereby adding an air of elevated distinction to the buildings, but it collapsed sometime after 1779.

The church consists of nave, choir, north aisle and transepts, built over a period of some two centuries – together with a sacristy of later date. Of Milo de Bermingham’s original church all that survives are the south wall of the nave and good parts of the north and south walls of the choir, where the tall, thin lancet windows are typical thirteenth-century features. The eastern end of the church must have been in need of repair by the following century, and its two eastern corners were heavily re-built with the addition of stout buttresses in the re-edifications executed in the period 1327-45. At the same time, the church was extended northwards to include a new transept and adjoining aisle (through which entrance is currently gained), though the existing pillars supporting the aisle arcade are a re-build of the fifteenth century. Probably fourteenth-century in date are the fine series of niches, grouped in threes, beneath the fine north window of the transept, which were sadly vandalised some decades ago and re-built partially in stone, but also in part replaced by unsightly re-enforced concrete. H.G. Leask attributes the cusped windows of these additions to the fourteenth century, but the surviving west window would seem to belong to the following century. It was probably after the fire of around 1420 that the original east window was dismantled, except for its outer case, and replaced by one with switch-line tracery, which has some fine heads carved on the exterior.

The church, of course, did not stand-alone, and was accompanied by domestic claustral buildings to the south of the nave. Unusually, we know the names associated with the building of certain parts of them – Phelim O’Conor the refectory, Eugene O’Heyne the dormitory and Cornelius O’Kelly the chapter house – all useful patrons to have had, each contributing a portion as donors of stained glass windows do in churches of our own day. However, of these domestic buildings, sadly nothing remains.

The friary is distinguished by its collection of medieval tombs, many trodden upon unnoticed on the ground. But those in the walls are worthy
Ballynakill Abbey

BALLYNAKILL 'ABBAY', about half a mile from Ginsk Castle, is a rather ruined structure. A century ago, H.T. Knox remarked on two windows in the east wall (now vanished) which suggested to him that the east/west-orientated hall-like church, 71 x 20 feet in extent, dated to around the thirteenth century. Around the fifteenth century, a (chantry?) chapel was added to the south, near the eastern end of the church, without the walls bonding into each other. The original floor level must have been considerably lower, as the doorway joining the two is unusually low, as is also the fine and well-preserved flamboyant window in the south wall. Note on the exterior of this window the foliage which emerges from the hood-mouldings, bitten on the east side by a human head.

The chapel underwent considerable changes in the early 1720s, as is seen by the broad windows in the east wall but more particularly in the monuments it contains – the creation of the largest of which has blocked of inspection, including some on the south wall of the nave dating from the thirteenth century (there is also a support with a finely-carved fifteenth-century angel among them). In the north wall of the church there is also a fine tomb with a carved mitred head (resembling another on the outside wall) and, closer to the east wall, there is a further tomb in the western style with a cusped upper canopy, and a lower part consisting of five cusped niches (without inscription) – and decorated with a Virgin and child arched over by bodies of slender animals. In the south-eastern corner of the choir is the massive and intrusive limestone vault of the de Burgh family, earls of Clanrickarde, but – while equally intrusive – much more attractive is the tall monument in the choir erected to the memory of the Rt. Hon. Matilda Bermingham, who died in 1788. It is decorated in fine classical style with London Coade stone, dated 1790, and is surmounted by an urn bearing in relief a likeness of the deceased. It was, sadly, vandalised in late 2002.

An interesting stone of 1631 is placed up against the wall not far from the entrance. Finally it may be mentioned that – as recorded on a stone near the churchyard gate – Mass was celebrated again in the friary in 1991 – 750 years after its foundation, and some 450 years after the foundation was closed at the time of the Reformation.

An early seventeenth-century Crucifixion plaque was built into the pediment of a memorial about a century later in the church of Ballynakill.
local tradition, as recorded by John O'Donovan in 1838 and much more romantic, has it that William was killed in a battle in France, where he had been loved by a lady who commissioned the effigy of a knight in armour which was taken from its former recumbent location (probably within the chapel) and placed up against the wall, in surrounds which were not originally made for it, but were assembled for the purpose in 1722. The inscription beneath it, in attractive English script, states that

Here stands ye effigy of William Burke ye First of McDavids Family who dyed in 1116 & erected by Henry Burke 1722.

The date of death is manifestly wrong, as is the identification of the knight, because the armour of the knight prompted the armour expert John Hunt to ascribe the figure to the early sixteenth century. Its importance lies in the fact that it is one of only two medieval effigies known to survive in Connacht and the only one of a knight in coat of mail of around this period.

Underneath his coat of mail, the knight wore a skirt over a padded garment, and on his head he wears a pointed bascinet over a leathern cap, his neck protected by a pisane of mail. Hanging from his belt is a sword with a peculiarly Irish form of pommel. His feet rest on a dog.

The family tradition, as recorded by Knox in 1902, was that the effigy represented William de Burgo, founder of the Augustinian Abbey of Athassel in 1205, and that it was sent to MacDavid as the head of the senior line of all the Burkes after the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1540. The
The Ballynakill Madonna and Child
According to a local booklet History in Glinsk, a stone sculpture of the Madonna and Child was discovered on the site of Ballinakill Abbey in 1998. Experts have viewed the sculpture and believe that it dates back to 1500AD. While images of the Madonna and Child are found throughout the world both on stone and in canvas, this presentation of the child Jesus in a standing pose is believed to be unique. The sculpture now adorns the porch of the present Catholic Church in Glinsk.

14. Claregalway

Claregalway is undoubtedly one of the best examples of what an early Franciscan friary church looked like in Ireland, as the house was founded around 1252, only a quarter of a century after the death of St. Francis himself – the Norman John de Cogan I having probably been the founder. Much of the surviving church dates from the thirteenth century, with its serried rows of lancet windows in each side-wall of the choir.

The original east window of the church was a cluster of five (or perhaps even seven) tall, lancet windows, but these were removed in the fifteenth century and replaced by a five-light window with more glass and less wall which allowed more light into the friars’ choir. Inserted into the south wall of the choir, under the first and second lancets from the east, was a triple sedilia which, to judge by the dog-tooth moulding on one of the capitals, can scarcely be more than half a century later than the construction of the original church. Opposite it, in the north wall, is a fine thirteenth- or fourteenth-century tomb-niche with cusped tracery with a male and female head as label-stops. Adjoining it to the west is a monument carved with a chalice and erected to the memory of two Franciscans, Gildas Bruodar and Loughlen Quealy, in 1676.

The tombstones laid flat in the choir include some wedge-shaped examples going back to the period not long after the foundation, while in the nave are much later recumbent memorials which are unique in giving us representations of ploughs used by the farmers they commemorate.
which was allowed to have a Gaelic friar appointed as guardian in charge. The report of the same commission gives the impression that Claregalway was also one of the Franciscans’ houses of study in Ireland. One of the community was granted a dispensation just over a century later for having wounded a layman in a game, which subsequently led to his demise. Could it have been hurling they were playing?

By the late sixteenth century, the friars’ possessions were six cottages and gardens, 24 arable acres, pasture for a like number of cows, and a water-mill, all of which were probably handed over to Richard de Burgo in 1570. He, however, allowed the friars to remain in the vicinity, which they did, until they were driven away by Sir Richard Bingham, Queen Elizabeth I’s Governor of Connacht, who converted the buildings into a barracks – probably around 1589 – which was probably when the fireplace mentioned above was inserted. The friars were subsequently allowed to use the buildings before being ejected for a second time. They tried to restore the monastery after 1641, the two friars Bruodar and Quealy mentioned above doubtless having helped in the process, and the inscription in the sacristy/chapel beside the tower referred to above shows that the Franciscans were in occupation again until at least the eighteenth century, but when they departed for the last time is not recorded.

15. Clontuskert

Clontuskert is said to be the site of an early Christian monastery associated with St. Baetan (Boedan), who died in 809, but no trace of it survives. All that is visible today formed part of a house of the Augustinian canons, founded by the O’Kellys some time after 1140, and which consisted of a long church with undifferentiated nave and chancel, and domestic buildings to the south. The chancel is the main survivor of that church – with its original lancet windows still intact in the south wall, though the inner and outer walls of the eastern range of domestic buildings also belong to this early period of Augustinian occupation.

For 200-250 years, there was little of any moment that happened to disturb the peaceful routine of the monastery, and it is not until the late
fourteenth century that snippets of its history are recorded—often concerning unfortunate incidents, such as the prior being removed by the bishop, whose successor was to tax it unlawfully, and who had returned to inhabit the place just less than a century after the priory had been suppressed at the Reformation.

Clontuskert is one of the most decorative late medieval priories of Ireland, its ornamental features giving no inkling of the occasional unhappy incidents that had bedevilled this place in the sixteenth century, when the O’Kelleys, in fact, had formally become hereditary priors during the sixteenth century. The pope had taken the priory under his protection in 1443 and, three decades earlier, a papal indulgence had been granted for the restoration of the church. The restored reredos and 1637 wall of the church of the Augustinian monastery at Clontuskert can be seen through the west doorway of 1471, one of the most decorative of its kind to survive from the Middle Ages in Ireland. The restored reredos and 1637 wall of the church of the Augustinian monastery at Clontuskert can be seen through the west doorway of 1471, one of the most decorative of its kind to survive from the Middle Ages in Ireland. The restored reredos and 1637 wall of the church of the Augustinian monastery at Clontuskert can be seen through the west doorway of 1471, one of the most decorative of its kind to survive from the Middle Ages in Ireland.
of the four saints and their varying sizes has led to the suggestion that the doorway is not as it was originally designed, but it is probably unnecessary to adopt this extreme view. The bishop and St. Catherine make a second appearance on a font just inside the door on the left.

After its foundation in the twelfth century, and its suppression in the sixteenth, the third major event in the priory's building history was its being taken over into guardianship by the Commissioners of Public Works in 1970. At that stage, many of the walls were covered in ivy and in bad need of repair. St. Catherine must have had their interests at heart because, after excavation by Tom Fanning in 1971, the monastic buildings were extensively repaired and restored. All except two pieces of the splendid east window that had fallen in 1918 were recovered among the rubble, permitting the admirable restoration that we see today.

But even more remarkable was the restoration of the rood-screen which had been already in ruins when the canons returned and built their wall across the western end of the chancel in 1637, as some fragments from the screen were found in this later wall. In fact, the screen had originally stood where the cross-wall now stands, and the decision was taken to re-build the rood-screen immediately to the west of the 1637 wall, using the many fragments that could be assembled for the purpose. The screen is a triple-arched stone structure with gallery above for a rood, or Crucifixion group (presumably of wood, and no longer extant). This is the most complete medieval rood-screen in the country, that in Sligo Abbey being one of the few other examples known which could have rivaled it. It is a fine piece of Gothic vaulting, its keystones decorated with floral motifs. Further small sprigs of foliage sprout from the stone here and in other places, such as on the column base of the partially-reconstructed cloister – some of the pleasant surprises afforded by a closer inspection of the stonework which also provides us with a number of masons’ marks.

But perhaps the greatest surprise of all on the rood-screen is the name IOHES (an abbreviation for Iohannes – John) carved at eye-level on the southern respond. One of the very few examples where a mason has signed his name rather than just making his mark on a late medieval building in Ireland, it shows how his achievement of erecting the screen must have been seen as something exceptional for the Augustinian community to

entirely occupied by another devil, trying to win the soul for itself as St. Michael weighs the souls on Judgment Day.

2. A bearded John the Baptist wearing a lambskin and with his finger pointing to the lamb on a disc which he holds in his left hand.

3. St. Catherine of Alexandria – a saint to whom all in need could pray for help – bearing a sword (point downwards) and with a wheel as her identifying attribute.

4. A mitred bishop holding a decorative crozier diagonally across his body. His identity remains uncertain, though the names of Saints Patrick, Brendan and Augustine have all been put forward as possibilities.

Beneath the latter two is an elongated animal growing out of a leaf, its long-outstretched front legs pointing towards a tree which separates the adjoining figures into two pairs of two and which emerges from an arc of similar foliage surmounting the arched moulding of the doorway. There is an angel in each of the resulting spandrels, that on the right having a hammer, two dice and a pincers (symbols of the passion) on a shield it bears. There are further angels on top of the side-crochets, from the bottom of which animal-heads emerge.

The sides of the doorway are also intermittently decorated on the left with a variety of motifs. Going from top to bottom on left, we have a heraldic rose, two animals (griffin and lion?) facing one another, and a pelican vulning or piercing its breast, symbolising the church bleeding itself to feed its flock. Correspondingly on the right we have, at the top, a human face biting foliage and then, further down, the IHS symbol for Christ, a ‘foliage service’, a mermaid with comb and mirror, two quadrupeds with interlocking necks and, finally, a bird biting its back, back-to-back with a quadruped eating its tail. The precise symbolism contained in the various elements of this doorway is difficult to ascertain, but the weighing of souls by St. Michael suggests the battle of good versus evil as a possible theme, with the mermaid (or siren) being emblematic of a temptation towards the latter. The animals with interlocking necks have been interpreted tentatively as a sign of warring off evil, though their action could also suggest discord but, on the whole, the rich animal imagery of the doorway is now sadly beyond our ken. The unusual choice
Creevaghbaun

Creevaghbaun Church, at first sight, seems like a normal small medieval parish church, though with the unusual feature of having a doorway in both the north and south walls. It also has a single cusped window in the east gable wall, and another in the south wall. What is unexpected is not only the rectangular building controlling entrance to the north doorway but, more particularly, the large vaults which take up a considerable portion of the eastern half of the church, which must have been inserted after the church had gone out of use. One, with the doorway facing north, is a massive limestone structure, with two heads on the roof-line guarding the door.

The second vault, beneath the east window, still bears the inscription:

I.H.S. This tomb was erected for the Rev. Frs of Criuaghbane by ye Rev. Will Barry, Grand Nephew to ye Revd James Barry Foundr of sd Convent Anno Domino 1780.

The Reverend friars referred to are the successors of the Carmelite friars who are said to have founded a house here in 1332, and which seems to have flourished until the friars left at some date unknown and went to Clare Island. It has been suggested that this happened during the Penal Days, but it is likely to have happened earlier, as it was during the Penal Days, sometime around 1730, that a new convent was founded by the Rev. James Barry mentioned in the inscription. Historical sources of the Carmelite order state that John Burk was elected prior in 1741, and he appears to have had a chalice made for Creevaghbaun, which is now in the possession of the Archbishop of Tuam. The community of friars would scarcely have numbered more than half a dozen, and continued in operation well into the nineteenth century. Two friars were professed in 1820, but only one in 1835. Some time before 1840, the prior left the contents of the friary to his nephew who, he believed, would become a Carmelite, but when he became a secular priest instead, his family took possession of half the land and half the convent, after which it presumably declined to its present ruined state.
17. Dunmore Abbey

The Augustinian friary of Dunmore was a somewhat neglected National Monument until it came into more public notice recently when a large supermarket was built close to it. It was founded by Walter (Mór) de Bermingham, Ninth Baron Athenry, in 1425. The O’Kellys were also considerable benefactors, and, in 1430, indulgences were granted to those helping to build and furnish the friary. The founder’s descendant was able to prevent its closure at the Suppression of the Monasteries, though the friars were forced to adopt a secular habit in 1547. It came into private hands later in the sixteenth century, but it was again a fully organised monastery with a congregation of over 30 in 1641. During Penal Times, the friars stayed in the locality but, in 1809, they finally left and moved to Athlone.

Angelo Maria Bigari’s drawing of the church at Dunmore as it was in 1779 (National Library, 2122 TX(3), p. 20) shows the open arches of the medieval nave arcade which have since been blocked up.

18. Eglish

The ruined friary at Eglish near Castlegar in the parish of Ahascragh stands on a long hill sloping down to boggy terrain to the east, which makes understandable the various names it went by in the medieval period which include the word for hill – Montecceancohe, Sleushancough, and the monastery of Isleibhe (from Sliabh).

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources, it is said to have been a Franciscan friary, but older accounts make it clear that this was a foundation of the Carmelites, one of the lesser-known of the four orders of mendicant friars who did so much for religion in rural Ireland during the later Middle Ages. Extrapolating from various pieces of information, it is likely that the friary was established when William O’Cormacain was bishop of Elphin in the years between 1393 and 1398. He, and Donald O’Kelly, lord of the area, gave the friars for their monastery an oratory which had been erected by local people after the discovery of a venerable cross around 1377 – a good reason for dedicating the monastery to the Holy Cross. In 1436, Pope Eugene IV granted facilities and privileges for
A lean-to altar-shelter with corrugated iron roof has been built up against the interior west wall (now whitewashed), and the originally four-light east window is now nothing but an ivied gaping hole. There is also one small window in the south wall, which, along with the north wall opposite, has suffered much demolition down the centuries.

The graves within the church date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but are undistinguished. The north-eastern corner of the church has been appropriated by the Mahon family as the vault for their dead, who are listed on a nineteenth-century headstone above it. Adjoining it, but outside the wall of the church and within the area of the former cloister, is an attractive early nineteenth-century monument erected in memory of members of the O’Daly family, as is made clear in an inscription on the top of the memorial. The exterior walls of the east and north sides of the domestic buildings of the cloister still survive to a remarkable extent – visible, not from the inside (where they are covered in ivy, but from the outside, where impressive remains of the masonry (including a gable) survive.

To the south-east of the church there is what appears to be a memorial chapel for the burial of members of the Mahon family, as it contains a number of their nineteenth-century memorials – among the shrubs which would need to be cleaned to make this into a visible monument.

The monastery was suppressed by King Henry VIII in 1537, when it passed to Sir Francis Sammes, but later returned to Crown ownership and, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, seems to have changed hands a number of times. Its owners were people of no particular note, and it was not until the mid-seventeenth century that it came into the hands of someone better-known in the form of the Earl of Clanrickarde – but at that stage, the church was probably only a little less ruinous than it is today – and it was the lands rather than the monastic ruins that were the valuable part worth obtaining.

Funding from The Heritage Council has helped to conserve the fabric of the building.
The latter is more likely, however, to judge by the surviving remains, none of which looks earlier than the fifteenth century.

It is, indeed, one of the best preserved of all the Franciscan friaries which have come down to us from late medieval Ireland, its majesty and beauty heightened by the various tombs of the period which are let into its interior walls. The original buildings consisted of a long nave continuing into a choir of equal width. There is also a cloister (of which only three sides may have been built) and, adjoining it further east, two storey-buildings containing domestic areas, with dormitories above. What is called the sacristy may have been some kind of writing room. The cloister and refectory building were probably built with assistance from William O’Kelly, who died in 1440. But about half a century later the finest parts of the abbey were built – the tall and graceful tower inserted almost exactly in the middle of the church and seeming to emerge out of its roof, the south aisle joined to the nave by an arcade, and the south transept that is accessible from both nave and choir. The tower is one of the best of its kind, and underneath its vaulting it has fine carvings of a shield-bearing angel and an owl, whose nocturnal vigilance was perhaps a reminder to the friars to keep awake during the night office. The flamboyant and cusped windows of the aisle and transept are of a high quality, but the flamboyant west window above the doorway may be an insertion of the sixteenth century.

The church has one of the most significant collections of late medieval tomb-niches anywhere in the country, of which the most important is that near the western end of the north wall. Historical sources are at variance about the date of its foundation by the O’Kellys of Ui Maine – The Annals of the Four Masters plumping for 1353, while other manuscript sources prefer a date of 1414.

The imposing fifteenth-century Franciscan friary church at Killconnell is dominated by the tall tower at its centre.
explain. The tomb dates from the second half of the fifteenth century, but the family that erected it is not known.

Another tomb, of roughly the same date but located in the choir, would appear to have been associated with the O’Dalys, though the plaque within bearing their name is modern. Probably older is the O’Kelly tomb in the south wall opposite, with an ogival canopy and – like the O’Daly tomb – plain in front. The friary also contains some remarkable

finally St. Denis of Paris wearing a monk’s habit and scapular. What surprises here is the presence of two French saints Louis and Denis, who do not feature elsewhere in Irish medieval iconography, and suggest a French connection which may have come through the city of Galway. Louis’s presence is understandable because he was one of the most prominent people ever to have joined the Franciscans, but the presence of Denis of Paris (who lived centuries before St. Francis) is less easy to

Kilconnell Franciscan friary contains the best collection of western Irish tomb-niches of the period around 1500, including that near the western end illustrated here. Beneath a pointed arch with tracery evocative of the flames of a fire are carvings of The Virgin surrounded by various saints which, surprisingly, include two from France – Louis of Toulouse and Denis of Paris.
seventeenth-century memorials with well-carved and, on the whole, well-preserved lettering, including the Bytagh stone in the south wall of the choir, and an O’Daly memorial of 1674 in the north wall.

But the most interesting of all from an historical point of view is that of Matthew Barnewall, twelfth baron Trimleston who, as the inscription records, was ‘transplanted into Connacht with others by orders of the usurper Cromwell and who died in 1667’. It is located in the Guardian’s house to the north of the choir.

Only the east range and part of the south range of the cloister arcade survive, and these are notable for the wide variety of mason’s marks carved into them. There is also a very large stone water basin in the cloister which must have come from the choir of the church. There are also the remains of two late-medieval tombstones in the transept, but these are uninscribed. A chalice of 1738 from Kilconnell was brought clandestinely to Louvain, but is now preserved in Dublin.

20. Kilcorban

THREE MILES EAST of Duniry is the Dominican friary of Kilcorban, where Thomas de Burgo, bishop of Clonfert, had granted a chapel and land in the fifteenth century to the brothers and sisters of the Third Order of St. Dominic, which at the time was not yet an organised religious order. The chapel was dedicated to the Holy Rosary, or the Blessed Virgin of the Holy Rosary. The remains comprise a church and side-chapel, with moulded west doorway and simple, but well-preserved traceried east window. There are also some good and well-carved exterior two-light windows with decorated spandrels.

One plaque on the interior wall commemorates Teige mac Eoca (Tadg Keogh, O.P.), bishop of Clonfert from 1671 to 1689, who revitalised the Diocese and asked to be buried in the friary. This was because of his devotion to Mary the mother of God and his reverence for the miraculous wooden statue of the Madonna venerated there at the time, and now – along with other statues probably from here – preserved in the Clonfert Diocesan Museum in Loughrea.

Another plaque records the restoration of the chapel in 1920 by Anthony Francis, Earl of Westmeath and Baron Delvin, whose family burial place this is. His ancestors had been transplanted by Cromwell from their estates in Meath, and were lords of the house to the north of the choir.

21. Loughrea Friary

ADJOINING THE ATTRACTIVE COMPLEX of the house and church of the Carmelite friars in the town is the ruin of the friary said to have been founded for their medieval predecessors by Richard de Burgo, Earl of Ulster, around 1300. However, the eastern end of the ruined church shows traces of what was probably a lancet window of five or seven lights which, together with the windows in the eastern end of the