

Saving the Medieval Building on Church Island, Lough Garadice — An Appeal

Lough Garadice, east of Ballinamore and just west of Newtowngore, is one of the largest lakes in County Leitrim. The Shannon-Erne Waterway, used by some thousands of pleasure boats each year, passes directly through the length of the lake — a distance of nearly three miles. The largest island in the lake, Church Island, covers 17 acres and contains an ecclesiastical ruin which has two gables and a north wall that are largely intact. The apexes of the gables are nearly seven meters high: the side walls are more than three meters high. The eastern third of the south wall is intact, but the central portion has collapsed to a height of one meter. (Please see photos taken in March 2005.) Since the ruin can be seen from the Waterway, tourists often make unauthorized visits to the structure, with considerable danger to themselves and to the monument — which is in a highly fragile condition

Conleth Manning, Senior Archaeologist, The National Monuments Service, Dublin, visited Church Island, March 4, 2005. He concluded, in part:

“The ruined church on Church Island (~43’ x ~17’ interior dimensions, walls ~3’ thick) appears to have been constructed in two stages. The west gable and central and western portions of the north and east walls appear to date from the early thirteenth century. The east gable and eastern parts of north and south walls appear to have been built in the fifteenth century. The east window at first sight appears to have an “ogee” head typical of the fifteenth century, but it is really a heavily cusped two-centred head. The smaller window in the south wall appears to be older, contemporaneous with the construction of the western parts of the building (although it is now inserted in the newer construction). It is made up from some of the stones of the original east window, which would have been a tall narrow lancet. There were sufficient inner jamb stones from this window to form the inner jambs of both the new east window and this south window in the 15th-century extension. The surviving flat segmental inner arches on both windows are typical 15th-century work. The original building had a width/length ratio of 1:1.68, which is within the ratio range of such buildings; the later addition changed that ratio.”

There is a “bullaunn stone” on the island — this is a type of artifact generally associated with Early Christian sites. The monastic settlement of Druim Air Bheallaich (anglicized as Drumreilly) flourished on the island for many centuries. The ninth-century *Martyrology of Tallacht* lists a feast of the “the nine bishops of Druim Air Bheallaich”. When Breifne was a major power in Irish affairs, Inis na d-Torc (now Cherry Island) — less than a mile across the lake from Church Island — was a main stronghold of the O’Rourkes, rulers of Breifne. The *Ordinance Survey Namebook* for the County Leitrim (page 69) reports that there was a burying place on Church Island “which is entirely reserved for the interment of the O’Rourkes.” The famous chieftain Tiernan O’Rourke (c1100-1172) and his wife Devorgilla (1108-1193) made generous contributions for church construction at Clonmacnoise, Mellifont, and elsewhere. They may have built the older parts of the structure that now stands on the Church Island. Church Island was the main center of the medieval “Rectory of Cinel Luachain” mentioned in eighteen papal documents during the fifteenth century. The O’Maelmucheirges (Earleys) were hereditary erenaghs of Cinel Luachain.¹ The first known bishop of the present Diocese of Kilmore, who died in 1149, had the same family name. The *Petty Survey*, carried out in 1656 after Cromwell’s victories, records that the Bishop of Kilmore owned 970 acres centered on Church Island. The Bishop’s title to this land presumably derived from the earlier monastic settlement, through the medieval rectory. In 1737, the Gore family constructed the present Drumreilly (Church of Ireland) Church on the mainland northwest of Church Island. The older island church was abandoned at that time, if not earlier. The eaves of the newer Drumreilly Church display two stone heads that came from the island church. They were probably parts of the fifteenth century extension. Church Island was pasture until the mid-twentieth century, when Coillte, the Irish Forestry Company, bought the island and planted it with pine. Timber was harvested in 2002: stumps and brush now cover the island. One source mentions “around the church ruins are signs of other buildings” but none are now visible. Perhaps photos taken before plantation of the island

¹ Joseph E. Earley, Sr. and Leonard E. Boyle, O.P., “Conflict over the Rectory of Cinel Luachain during the Fifteenth Century,” *Breifne*, volume IX, number 35, 1999, pages 103 to 113.

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might show indications of other structures. If any reader knows of any old photos taken on Church Island, or can provide other information about its history, please contact me at the address below.

In 1994, the Ballinamore Development Company (BDC) arranged for an archaeological survey of Church Island. More recently, BDC worked with local residents to achieve partial removal of vegetation from the area of the ruin. Under a grant from the Everan Foundation to the BDC, Conservation Architect Peter McGrath of Cavan surveyed the building and prepared plans for initial stabilization work. According to those plans, in summer 2006, mason Séan Moffatt of Dromod will use lime mortar and original materials to point walls, fill dangerous gaps, seal top surfaces, and stabilize the entrance arch, corners, and foundation. Archaeologist Blake Anderson, and his supervisor Dr. Kieran O’Conor, both of the National University of Ireland, Galway, also visited the island in March 2005. They will provide archaeological supervision of the planned stabilization work. The initial work will not involve excavation. The National Monuments Service has cleared the project to proceed. This project would preserve a fragile structure of historical significance that has an outstanding location for future development that would benefit both the local population and users of the Waterway. The Leitrim County Council has a grants program that may provide up to €13,000 as partial funding for this conservation work. Additional grants from other sources are expected. The Everan Foundation has raised €10,000 as matching funds for stabilization. If all anticipated major grants are received, an additional €2,000 will be needed for the stabilization to proceed. Some members of the Cumman Seanchais Bhreifne have already pledged €400 in support of this project. Please consider sending a contribution in support of this urgently needed work (or a pledge of a future contribution) to the editor. Please make checks payable to the Cumman Seanchais Bhreifne. Residents of the United States may make tax-deductible contributions directly to the Everan Foundation at the address below.

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