SMALLER CHURCH AT LIATH-MOR.  [G. J. Fogerty, R.N.]

LARGER CHURCH AT LIATH-MOR, FROM N.E.  [G. J. Fogerty, R.N.]
LIATH-MOR-MOCHOEMOG.


The traveller making his way from Thurles intent on visiting the site of the ancient Celtic monastery, which gives the title to this paper, passes first of all, near Two-Mile-Borris, but at some little distance from the road, the scanty ruins of the little church of Rathmannna. It measures roughly 38 x 20 feet, and has long lost every vestige of interest. It is said that an old road formerly led by it, and in an adjoining field the site of a closed-up cave is marked on the Ordnance Survey Map No. 146. Nothing is known of this church except that it is mentioned in the Papal Taxation of 1291, and is there valued at 4 marks; as there is no subsequent notice of it this may imply that it fell into decay at an early date.

On reaching the little village of Two-Mile-Borris (or Borrisleagh), to be distinguished from Borrisoleagh some miles in the opposite direction, we cannot help noticing first of all the splendid old castle, beside which the modern houses seem dwarfed and insignificant, but, as our paper is ecclesiastical, we must reluctantly pass it by. A little further on are the remains of the ancient parish church; both nave and chancel were in good repair in 1615, but it probably suffered during the Commonwealth period, as it was not used for Divine Service after the Restoration of Charles II. In its hey-day it must have been a fine building, for even at the present time, with its west end demolished, its total internal length is 82 feet. In the chancel is a curious tombstone bearing a human face, beneath which is a raised cross, the head of which is formed of four horseshoe-like curves placed back to back, which has given rise to the legend that it marks the resting-place of a bishop who met his death through a fall from his horse. Down one side runs an almost illegible inscription. The chancel-arch is especially noticeable as it is almost flat, being only a few inches higher in the centre than at the sides. In the eastern wall of the nave, to the north and south of the arch, are
recesses beside which altars may have stood; the north one contains hairpins, buttons, etc., which must have been placed there by their former owners for the purpose of getting rid of warts or toothache. The same offerings may be found in the piscina of the large church at Liath.

Continuing our course, and turning sharp to the left at the crossroads, we reach a lane on our right-hand side, down which we proceed, eventually taking to the fields, until at length we arrive at our destination, the site of the famous monastery, which lies in the townland of Leigh (pronounced disyllabically Lee-ugh). This is now represented by traces of low mounds and enclosures too indistinct to be made out, as well as by two churches about seventy yards apart, both of which are fortunately in an excellent state of preservation. The smaller, and more ancient of the two, with high-pitched gables, measures internally 20 x 12 ft.; it had one window in the east end, which was of the ordinary Celtic type, viz.: a circular-headed single light with wide internal splay. At present only the head remains, as the sides have been destroyed by vandalism. The little building has antae at the four corners. Beside it runs a very ancient road, with its outlines clearly defined, and which still serves something of its original purpose as it affords access to a neighbouring farm-house. The larger church presents a curious medley of architecture, and contains many points of interest. To begin with, it is built within the circle of a cashel, whose circumference can easily be traced. Close to the southwest angle, and still inside the cashel, are the remains of a small circular building of very ancient masonry, which seem to be the foundations of a round tower. Taking the above facts into consideration, it is highly probably that the large church is built on the actual site of the original Celtic monastery of the sixth century.

Internally the building is divided into nave and chancel. The former measures 42 x 13 ft. 6 in.; the latter 26 x 16 ft. Admittance into the nave is obtained through doors in the north and south walls respectively. The former, a round-headed one, bears much weathered remains of Celtic ornamental work on its sides, viz.: moulding, beading, and interlaced work; the latter appears to be very much older work, is devoid of all ornament, and has its arch rudely turned with flat slabs placed on edge. Above the arch are five stones, three of which bear human faces, while the remaining two have cut upon them what may be described as
“Siamese-twins” (i.e.), two full length draped figures side by side. Over the round-arched window in the north wall are the remains of three similar heads; on its inside are traces of mouldings, while high up in the splay of the opposite window is an interlaced ornament formed by two ovals. The window in the west gable is a single ogee light of the 15th century style, with square drip stone and spandrels externally; in its present condition it dates from the restoration of the building. In fact, it is quite possible that the entire gable was built at the same period, probably because the original west end was then in ruins.

In the north side of the chancel-wall is a recumbent human figure, with a tail, and a choice specimen of interlaced work. In the other side a stone has been built in which has cut upon it the head of a crosier. The arch itself has long since disappeared, and judging from the holes in the walls it would seem to have been filled by a rood screen at one time. The chancel presents some problems which we cannot unravel. The east window is a two-light trefoil-headed one, with mullion and transom of the 15th century style, while into one of its sides are inserted some portions of beading. Directly over it are the remains of the head of a Romanesque window, while externally it has a square dripstone and spandrels. But on each side of it are to be seen traces of an arch, evidently built prior to the window, and the purpose of which is far from obvious. Furthermore the internal north wall of the chancel and its vaulted stone roof were placed by the restorers within the chancel walls of the original building. By climbing up into a window the two walls on the north side can be seen distinctly, as there is a space of a few inches between them. The external wall may also be noticed at the back of the arched recess in the north side. The credence and piscina in the south wall are in excellent preservation; the latter has a six-leaved ope for water. A straight staircase in the same wall, lit by narrow slits, leads up to the now unroofed room over the chancel, which was probably a priest’s chamber. The floor of the chancel is popularly said to be covered with tombstones, but the owner of the place, Mr. Edmond Hayes, states that this is incorrect. There are only three to be seen there. The first a fragment of an 18th century tomb, with the words “Lie Y”; the second an uninscribed coffin-shaped slab with a draped figure of the crucified Lord; the third, a somewhat similar stone, with
a raised edge. Some distance to the east of this church are mounds beside a sluggish dyke, which seem to mark the foundations of a small rectangular building. Of the general restoration of the larger church, which probably took place in the 15th century, we can hope to learn nothing from documents, as all pre-reformation registers of the Diocese of Cashel have long since disappeared.

Having completed our description of the existing buildings we shall now proceed to give a brief account of the Celtic monastery, our excuse for brevity being that the principal facts concerning it may be found in the Annals, and in Canon O’Hanlon’s *Lives of the Irish Saints*, vol. III., Parts 30 and 31, for 13th March. Subsequently we shall endeavour to give all the items available for the history of the place from the Anglo-Norman Invasion to the Disestablishment of the Irish Church. The monastery was founded, probably in the end of the 6th century, by S. Mochoemog, or Pulcherius, a member of a Connaught family, and nephew to the celebrated S. Ita of Killeedy. He was educated at Bangor under S. Comgall, and was subsequently sent forth by that saint to found houses throughout Ireland. His first foundation was at Antrim, which he vacated in favour of S. Coemhan. He then proceeded to the territory of Eliogarty, the chieftain of which granted him a site for his monastery in a “certain lonely and deserted place, thickly covered with woods and near the bog.” Thither he was guided by a swine herd, and on reaching it his little bell, a present from S. Ita, miraculously tolled of its own accord. Here, too, they found under a tree a great wild hog, whose colour was *liath* or grey, and from this circumstance the place was named by Mochoemog. But there is no need to have recourse to legend for the origin of the name. Even on a summer’s day in the 20th century, with the high road running hard by, and traces of cultivation all around, the place is sufficiently grey, dreary, and lonely; how much lonelier it was a millenium and a quarter ago, we can well imagine.

The monastery founded here assumed considerable importance in the Celtic period. The following list of obituary notices of Abbots is to be found in the Four Masters, and shews that the lamp of religion was kept fiercely burning down the long centuries:—
A.D. 746. Cuangus died.
767. Edhniuch, son of Erc, died.
792. Conamhail died.
838. Reachtabhra died.
868. Dubhdathuiile died.
895. Flaithin, son of Nechtain, died.
900. Flannagan Ua Lonain died.
933. Maccleenna was slain.
1015. Cnaing, son of Finn, died.

The first-mentioned Abbot was evidently a man of more than local fame, as he is commemorated with the founder in the following verse:

"May Mochoemog protect us,
To the eternal protection to come;
Cuangus, the chaste, of perfect knowledge,
From Liath-mor, good the two men."

Both in legend and history Liath was connected with two famous Celtic monasteries, Emly and Daire-mor. It is stated in our saint's life that having on one occasion sent a monk, named Cuancheir, on an errand to the west of Ireland, the latter died at Emly on his return journey, and there was buried. Hearing of this Mochoemog set out for that monastery in order to obtain possession of the body, but the Abbot of Emly refused to allow it to be disinterred. In order to vindicate the lawfulness of his claim, Mochoemog went to the tomb, thrust in his hand through an opening which miraculously made its appearance, and drew out the monk alive and well. Another legend relates that a Bishop of Emly was once at Cashel, and, on being asked by the king his opinion of our saint, declared that if he ordered Sliabh Cua and Magh Feimhin to change places it would be done, so great was his power. Such legends are in themselves of no worth, except in so far as they tend to show that intercourse and friendly relations were established between the two houses. Liath was sufficiently prominent to attract the unwelcome attentions of the Scandinavian invaders, for in A.D. 851 they burnt it and Emly. Maccleenna, who was slain in 933 by the Eoghanchts, was Abbot of Emly and Liath.
The site of the other monastery, Daire-mor, is not certainly known. It is supposed by O'Donovan to be now represented by Kilcolman, in King's County. According to various readings it was one or four miles distant from Liath; and it is stated that S. Colman Mac Daire, who dwelt at that place, frequently saw angels passing in the air to visit Mochoemog. Between the dates 845 and 851 the Danes ravaged and burnt Daire-mor and Liath; while Conaing, who died in 1015, was Abbot of both houses.

It now remains for us to endeavour to trace its history from the Anglo-Norman invasion down, in the course of which we shall come across some extraordinary variants of its name. We learn, first of all, that Liath, or a considerable portion of it, formed one of the Archiepiscopal manors of the See of Cashel. In a list of those manors (1), drawn up in the time of John, Lord of Ireland (1177-1199), when most probably the greater number of them were granted, but dating in its present form from 1239, occurs the name of Lechomokenoc. Archbishop David MacCarwell founded Hore Abbey at Cashel in the middle of the 13th century. His philanthropic methods, in which he proved himself a worthy precursor of Henry VIII., have been detailed by us elsewhere. For the support of the new foundation he granted certain lands and possessions, amongst which were the chapel of Burgage Milath (Borresleigh), with appurtenances in Oleybath. The Pipe Rolls (2) of the end of the 13th century, and of 1332, also allude to the manor of Liath under the forms of Oleyanth' and Old Legh. In the Down Survey the lands of the Bishop of Cashel at Liath consisted of 377 acres, together with an extra portion of about 23 acres.

In the Papal Taxation for 1291, besides a mention of Burg'leth (Borrisleigh) and Rathmaunch' (Rathmanna), the following items occur:

- Kilmenadok... valued at £4 8 4
- Church of Old Leighlin... 1 14 0

From its position in the list the first name is almost certainly an attempt on the part of the scribe at Kill-Mochoemog, and, granting this to be correct, the entries are of great interest, as they seem to show that the two churches still standing were at that early date considered to be distinct, valued separately, and probably both in use. The second item most probably refers to the smaller and older of the two. The form

(1) Calendarium Rotulorum Chartarum, 1803.
(2) In Deputy Keeper's Reports.
Leighlin seems to be quite unwarranted, and is certainly calculated to mislead. Probably the editor of the volume found, "Old Leigh," or some form similar to those in the last paragraph, and then expanded it into the name of a better known place altogether distinct and many miles away.

But some considerable portion of Liath also formed part of the corps of the Treasurership in Cashel Cathedral. It is alluded to as such in 1406, on the appointment of Nicholas Hacket to that office (3). In the Regal Visitation of 1615, the church of Lethmkevyg (or Lothmekeevy) belonged to the Treasurer. It was then not in use, and had no curate. Evidently the larger church is here referred to, as its architecture indicates a late restoration and consequent use; probably the smaller building was allowed to become derelict long before this, and indeed there seems to be no need for it to be kept up. The Regal Visitation of 1634 divides Liath into a rectory and vicarage, The former belonged to the Abbey Owney, and was worth £30—the latter to the Treasurer. Its connection with the great Cistercian house of Abbey Owney (or Abington) is curious, and we derive no assistance on this point from any documents dealing with that establishment. There was then a curate, Alexander Young, but this does not imply that Service was held there—quite the reverse. Young was at the same time vicar of Cahircalongh and other parishes in the Diocese of Emly, many miles away. So we fear that he must have held this and other neighbouring curacies solely for the sake of augmenting his income. At any rate it is very doubtful if there were any members of the Reformed Church at Liath.

In a Terrier of 1716 the following notice occurs:

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      A. R. P.
Leagh McKevoe ... 243 1 28
Part of same ...  87 2 24
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The above figures may refer to the corps of the Precentorship. On the same Terrier occurs what appears to be a most reliable sketch of the larger church. It represents it just as it is at the present day, except that the nave was roofed, probably with boards, while a cross surmounted the west gable. From this on Liath is only mentioned incidentally. The last Treasurer to hold it as part of his corps was Richard French Laurence, who was appointed in 1826. On his death in 1882 the corps was dissolved, the major portion of it going to form the present Union of Borris (Littleton). The dignity of Treasurer is, of course, still retained in Cashel Chapter.