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from: "Cooper's Ireland: Drawings & Notes from an Eighteenth Century Gentleman"
by Peter Harbison.

MUNGRET ABBEY, CO. LIMERICK

When Austin Cooper made this drawing of what he called the 'Abbey of Mungret' in 1781, the tower on the right probably stood out as the tallest building in the locality. Nowadays, it is dwarfed by the large cement works, half a mile away, which at least has the advantage of making the church easy to find from a distance.

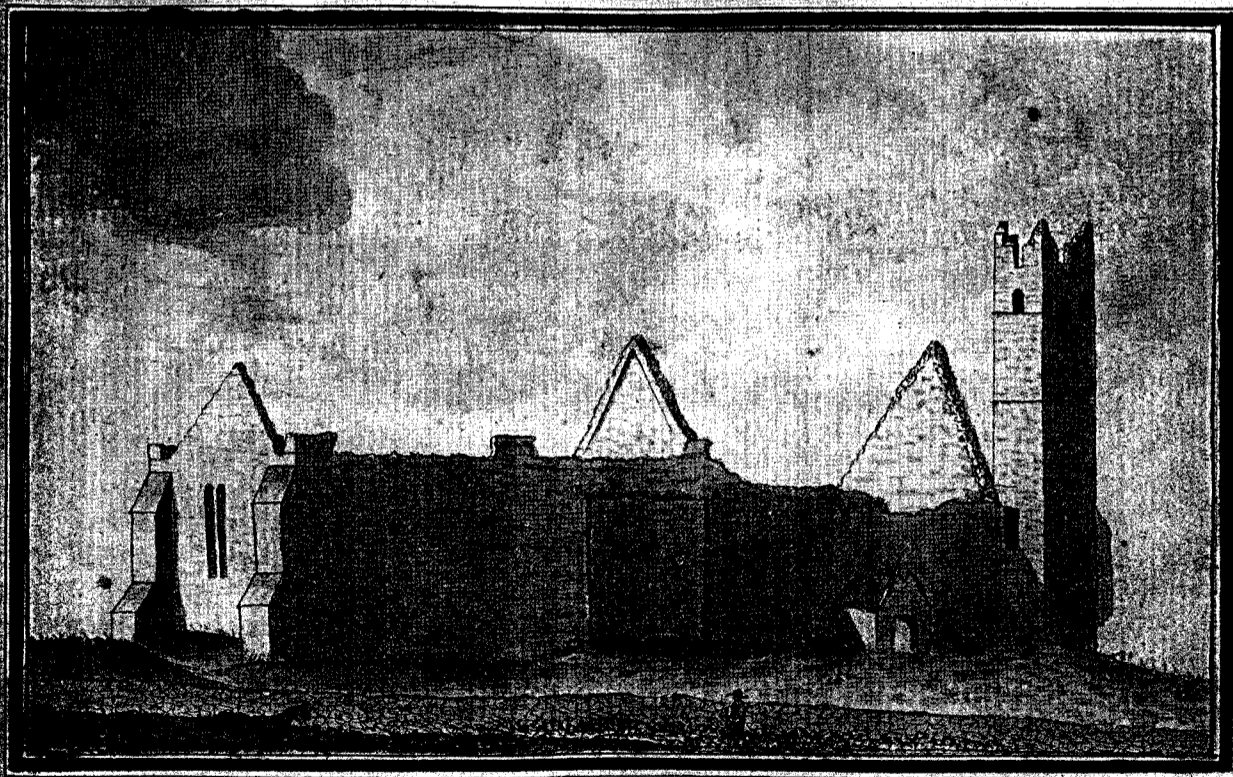
This church is one of a group of three on an ancient monastic site – one of the churches has a classic Irish lintel doorway, probably built before the twelfth century. The site upon which the churches stand was founded by a deacon named Nesson, who died in 551. Records show that one of the subsequent abbots of the monastery – possibly in the seventh century – was regarded as something of a human computer, as he was consulted by eminent authorities on the besetting problem of when the feast of Easter should be celebrated.

Located not far from the Shannon estuary, and being too close to the city of Limerick for its own safety, the monastery later found itself subject to raids from both Norse and Irish. Around the twelfth century the monastery began to decline on foot of the monastic reform sweeping Ireland, helped along by Gilbert, the Bishop of Limerick, among others.

The church (now locked) in the drawing is located in a stony churchyard about a hundred yards along a small road off the main thoroughfare. Since it was built after the decline of the monastery, it is more correctly described as a parish church, according to Canon Michael Moloney.

The tall gables in the right-hand part of the drawing may belong to the oldest part of the structure, which is unlikely to be earlier than 1200, while that part occupying much of the left-hand half of the picture has a core datable to around the thirteenth century. The buttresses of the gable and some of the nave walls belong to a later cladding added in the fifteenth century, which is probably the date of the unusual limestone tower with residence attached at the western end. This tower would have been the somewhat cramped abode of a curate, whose Dean would have lived in greater comfort closer to the ecclesiastical power centre in Limerick city.

Cooper noted in his diary of May 26th, 1781, that the tower had ruined battlements. He was careful to provide a small plan with measurements, and mentioned a large tomb in the east window, but he described the rest of the church as carrying 'very little marks of Antiquity on it's walls'.



Ab: del'd 26th May 1781 -

Engr'd 10th July -

Abbey of Mungret - Co. Limerick -