

# BUILDINGS AT RISK

# Manx churches and chapels – early buildings

Our Buildings at Risk series covers buildings and structures at risk, lost, and saved; and Manx churches and chapels are amongst those most at risk. This week **Frank Cowin** of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society starts looking at how the Church and its buildings evolved in Mann.

**T**hese Buildings at Risk articles have already made the point that churches and chapels in the island are currently among the buildings greatest at risk of change.

If as recent reports suggest, the island has more of them than it can support, then that will eventually lead to demolition or a major change of use.

This is then the first in a series of occasional articles looking at the history of these buildings and the importance of their present features.

It is suggested that the earliest remaining above ground Christian structure in the Isle of Man could be St Patrick's Chair, Marown, which takes the form of an Irish preaching station, a 'leacht'.



St Patrick's Chair, Marown



Lag-ny-Keillee Keeill, sitting at the foot of Cronk ny Irreee Laa

If this monument with its raised stone platform and standing stones, two carved with crosses of an early form is what it appears to be, it could well date to the time of St Patrick. However, the earliest description of it only dates from about 1820 and

suggests that it was constructed as a 'folly' by a former owner of the area some 70 years earlier.

To date, the area has never been fully examined by archaeologists. The structure does not relate to the field boundaries around it but these are probably no earlier than that first written record.

The first Church buildings, as such, were the keeills constructed of earth and stone and surrounded by their burial grounds within an earth boundary bank (see Buildings at Risk, IOM Examiner, August 15, 2017). None of the surviving above ground remains - of which there are some 29 out of a probable total of about 180 - would seem to be earlier than the 8th Century, although many of these are clearly rebuilds on earlier sites.

The 'Time Team' exploration of the Speke Keeill near Mount Murray in September 2007 gave a date of about 590AD for the plait of hair which had survived in one of the lintel graves.

The keeills are simple

rectangular structures with walls about one-metre thick but now only a few remain standing to one metre in height. They vary considerably in size but most are usually about 5m long x 3m wide with the door generally central in the west gable.

Windows were small with one central in the east gable and there is sometimes evidence for another near the east end of the south wall.

**T**he late 12th Century saw Parishes created with a small number of the existing keeill sites being selected for redevelopment as Parish Churches.

The choice seems to have been made either on the basis of its position near the centre of the parish, or more often because of its previous associations and sacredness.

This last is perhaps best seen in St Adamnan's which lies in the extreme southern corner of the parish, Lonan, and some considerable distance from most of the population. This distance from

the population however led to it being replaced in 1733 by a building on the site of the present Parish Church.

The large wheel-headed cross at St Adamnan's is now the only one of the carved cross slabs still standing in the place where it was originally erected.

The west end of the church is claimed to be the oldest part of the building, probably built before the Parish system came into being, but the building shows many phases of work.

At one stage, possibly in the early 14th Century, red sandstone dressings were used around the openings in the slate rubble of the walls. The sandstone that remains in place shows that the church was a 'cross passage' building with doors that face each other towards the west end of both north and south walls. This arrangement of doors also appears to have been used at Maughold.

The narrow deeply splayed round-headed window in the North wall can also be matched with Maughold, and also with St Trin-

ian's and Old Kirk Braddan.

The two windows at Maughold have lost their internal round heads during alterations whilst those at St Trinian's were rebuilt during a partial restoration in 1908-09 by the architect Armitage Rigby after a search of the surrounding area for pieces of carved stone.

At high level in St Adamnan's there are small roughly square holes through the walls which, where found in the island, have popularly been given a variety of names including that of 'Lepers' Squint'.

They are in fact 'put log holes'.

Scaffolding when these buildings were erected was not as now by two independent stands, one either side of the wall.

Then it was one structure of timber and the wall was built up through its middle.

When the wall reached a cross beam, it was simply built around and over it. When the scaffolding was removed, the beams would be removed or, more probably, just cut off. The wall face



St Adamnan's church, Lonan



Old Grammar School, Castletown

would be tidied up. With age, any filling has come out leaving tunnels through the wall.

These can be seen at St Adamnan's, St Trinian's, St Michael's Isle and St Patrick's Isle. Filled holes can - just - be seen at Old Kirk Braddan.

St Adamnan's, St Trinian's, Maughold and Old Kirk Braddan all share the long narrow plan form which is so much a feature of the older Manx Parish Churches.

**I**n time, lime began to be mixed with the earth, or with sand, to be used as mortar giving us stone buildings.

One of the earliest, St Patrick's Church on St Patrick's Isle, shows evidence of Irish influence in the way that the side walls originally projected beyond the gables - a style known as 'in antae' which can be dated to the first quarter of the 10th Century.

However, it also has stonework laid in a 'herring bone' pattern, a style more probably from England in the first half of the 12th Century. It has, like so many of our churches, been altered and extended many times.

The Round Tower associated with St Patrick's Church, both in its position and probable use, resembles the Irish Round Towers but, unlike most of them, is battlemented and does not taper.

These are features which can be found in East Anglian Church Towers of the same period, late 9th and early 10th Centuries, although there the Towers would normally be attached to the body of the church.

Whilst some few Irish

Round Towers are battlemented, a difference in the masonry of the top of the St Patrick's Isle tower suggests that it may have been altered to match the battlements added to the Cathedral at the end of the 14th Century.

St Michael's Chapel on Fort Island also gives us an early stone and mortar built structure although again much rebuilt with the bell cote being totally reconstructed in 1928.

In 1134, Rushen Abbey was founded on land given to



Herringbone at St Patrick's Church, St Patrick's Isle



Old Kirk Braddan

Abbot Ivo of Furness by Olaf I, King of Mann.

Rushen Abbey, as a daughter house of Furness, was part of the Order of Savigny which, by 1148, had been absorbed by the Cistercian Order. They were known as the White Monks because of their un-bleached, un-dyed wool clothing.

The following two centuries were a time of turmoil in the island with sporadic raids from both Scotland and Ireland.

The main invasions noted in the Chronicles of the Kings of Mann and the Isles kept by the monks at Rushen Abbey were Somerled in 1158, Fuco in 1210, Thomas Earl of Atholl in 1228 at which time the half brothers, Olaf and Reginald, were also fighting each other, resulting in the death of Reginald who was buried at Furness Abbey; John in 1250, King Alexander III of Scotland in 1275, Robert the Bruce in 1313 and Richard le Mandeville in 1316, at which point the Chronicles end with the statement: 'They plundered the land of all its more valuable produce and came upon much silver which had been hidden for a long time in many places throughout the country.'



Rushen Abbey model

'After this, they came to Rushen Abbey and plundered it so extensively of its furniture, cattle and sheep, that they left nothing at all. And, when they had spent a month at such activities, they loaded their ships up with the more valuable assets of the country and, in this way, returned home.'

Almost all the other descriptions of raids also noted the island, particularly the south, being 'laid waste', 'ravaged' or 'practically reduced to a desert'.

In 1192, the monks are recorded as having moved to Douglas for four years and in 1257, 'St Mary's Church at Rushen' was dedicated with great ceremony.

When Lord Robert, King of Scotland, landed at Ramsey in 1313 'he went to the monastery at Douglas where he spent the night' before going on to Castletown to lay siege to the Castle.

From the Chronicle, it is possible to see how the Abbey, and other Church buildings, have been successively damaged or destroyed and repaired or re-built.

After it closed in 1540, the buildings were largely taken apart to be used in building and repairing other build-

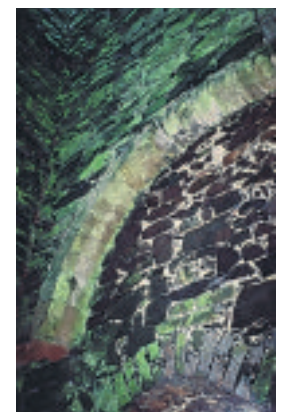
ings in the vicinity even at the Castle where some of the carved stone used for window heads facing into the inner courtyard probably came from this source.

The Chapel of St Mary at Castletown, later the Grammar School, was built in the first half of the 13th Century and the arches in the South side wall which would have opened into an aisle are said to have come from the Abbey; a time scale compatible with 'the dedication of St Mary's Church at Rushen' recorded in the Chronicles.

● Most of the churches and chapels examined in this article are in fact ancient monuments and therefore have a degree of protection.

However some of the very earliest are constructed of earth and stone and are situated in land used as pasture for sheep and cattle.

Where they have no physical barriers to stop them being trampled, this inevitably leads to a serious deterioration in their remains.



Rushen Abbey church tower arch