

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Our churches and chapels part two: pre-Reformation

Frank Cowin of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society continues his look at the evolution of the Church and its buildings in Mann.

In this second instalment of the occasional series on Manx churches and chapels we complete the story of the pre-Reformation buildings.

We consider what impact the Reformation had in the island and the neglect that occurred in and after the Commonwealth period, up to the arrival of Bishop Wilson.

The Douglas Priory – more usually referred to as The Nunnery – is claimed to have been founded between 1178 and 1228 and that it was a women's house following the Cistercian Order.

The earliest documentary evidence for it is the signature of 'Christina, Prioress of Douglas' on a document of 1408.

The prioress is also recorded as attending Tynwald along with the Bishop of Mann and the Abbott of Rushen in 1422. They had been called as barons to swear fealty to the Lord Sir John Stanley, King of Mann and the Isles, and to show by what claims they held their lands. The Abbots of Furness, Bangor and of Saball and the Priors of Whithorn and of 'St Beade in Copeland' who also held lands were recorded as not being present and ordered to appear within forty days.

In 1367, Franciscan friars obtained land at Ballabeg on which to build a church and accommodation for them-



Nunnery Chapel

selves. The land was granted to them by William de Montacute II, Earl of Salisbury, King of Mann.

Their building was much influenced by what was happening at Castle Rushen and, as a result, the window and

door openings use the same distinctive Caernarvon or shouldered arch used by the Earl's builders at the castle.

The only building to survive is their chapel and even this has been altered and extended and, in recent times, used as a barn. It forms the left hand end of the inner range of buildings facing the road at the Friary Farm, Ballabeg.

The Reformation created by Henry VIII's break with Rome affected the Church in the Isle of Man in so far as the island was part of the Archdiocese of York.

As a result, whether it was legally correct or not, all the lands, properties and income of the monastic establishments were confiscated by the King's Commissioner and

The Friary, The Nunnery and Rushen Abbey closed in 1540.

All Barony lands held by the monastic establishments were forfeit to the Crown including those that had been held by Bangor and Sabbal, St Bees and Whithorn.

The lands and the income generated by them were let out to rent but the island had lost all its barons except the bishop and it is in this capacity that the bishop continues to have a place in Tynwald.

With the Reformation, the Church of the Crown and the Kingdom – the Established Church – became the Church of England, not the Church of Rome.

In general on the continent, the power of Rome and the pope continued, although being increasingly

challenged.

In England those attempting to continue their allegiance, in Church matters, to Rome were heavily persecuted with many dying for their beliefs, usually being burned at the stake.

In the Isle of Man however, there seems to have been no general unrest or opposition and very little change was felt at parish level.

The sites of all the old parish churches predate the Reformation but the buildings have been greatly altered in the years since, whilst those church buildings which survive relatively unaltered are all roofless ruins.

One notable exception to

this is St Katherine's Chapel in Castle Rushen and even this is now the Clockroom and has lost all its fittings



Nunnery Chapel column head



Nunnery Chapel



St German's Cathedral looking across to the south



A re-enactment of St Katherine's Chapel in Castle Rushen

and decoration.

Re-enactment societies can bring it to life and give us a glimpse of how it may once have been.

Another glimpse of what Pre-Reformation churches and chapels were like was provided by the Nunnery chapel.

What was created by the restoration or rebuild of the 1880s recreated for just over a hundred years a building displaying, with a few anomalies, a chapel in which the last of the nuns may have felt at home.

This was altered internally to become part of the Isle of Man College – giving opportunity for archaeological examination but the raised floor level in the chancel and the rood screen have been lost.

Following the Dissolution in 1540, the original Nunnery estate was sold and became a home for the last abbess, Margaret Goodman, who had married the purchaser, Robert Calcott, and there

have been two replacement houses built on or near the original site since then.

Some carved stonework surviving at the Nunnery and other similar pieces at Rushen Abbey and Maughold suggest that the island once had much grander church buildings in contemporary international style than now remain except for St German's Cathedral on St Patrick's Isle.

The building of St German's is in the old records credited to Simon who was Bishop from 1225 until his death in 1247.

He was buried with his dog in the chancel of the cathedral in the position normally accorded to the founder of the church. This is immediately to the north of where the original free-standing altar would have been.

In the 15th Century, the floor of the sanctuary was raised and the altar repositioned against the east wall. These alterations increased

the height of the crypt and allowed for the removal of the central column which had supported the weight of the earlier stone altar.

The use of the crypt also changed from housing the relics associated with St German to that of ecclesiastical prison.

However, it is likely that Bishop Simon had not started the building of the cathedral and that that had been done in two stages by his predecessors but that he completed their work, including rebuilding the whole of the east end.



Portion of former Rood Screen in Kirk Malew

The junction of the columns and the arches which form what would have been the wall between the nave and the aisle – the arcade – show features normally only found in Irish church buildings, perhaps reflecting the influence of Affrica, daughter of Godred and wife of John de Courcy.

The way that the sandstone is used in the smaller window and door openings is more typical of the way timber would be used and is also found in the altered work at St Trinian's and away from the island, in buildings of a similar date with an Irish connection.

Following the severe damage caused during the Scottish incursions in the early 14th Century, the cathedral was extensively repaired. Repair and rebuilding continued through the century and included the provision of the battlemented parapet walls during the work carried out by the then Lord of Mann, William le Scoop, just after 1392.

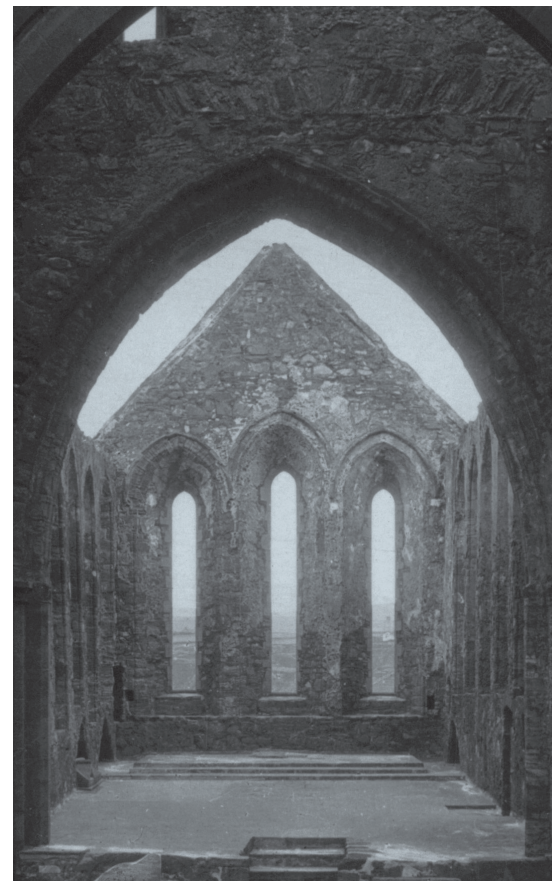
Throughout the previous 30 years, the bishops had been complaining that the fortification of St Patrick's Isle was interfering with the use of the cathedral.

The range of buildings to the North of the Cathedral appear to have been used at different times as quarters for the Vicars Choral and later as alternative accommodation to that at Castle Rushen for the Earls of Derby. Vicars Choral were, or are, a choir whose members are lay or clerical rather than monastic.

Because the cathedral was secular rather than monastic in its organisation, and also possibly because of the Roman Catholic sympathies of the then Earl of Derby, it was not troubled by the Dissolution.

However, lack of maintenance and being robbed of its lead caused it to decay and become a ruin.

Rood screens like that, until recently seen in The Nunnery chapel, divided the nave – the body of the church which housed the congregation – from the sanctuary from which the priests officiated, were in general stripped from churches following the Reformation.



St German's, looking east

Stone Altars were outlawed by the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559 and replaced by a wooden holy table set well forward in the sanctuary or even out in the nave. It was around this table that the holy communion was received on those few occasions the service was held.

Fragments of one or possibly two such rood screens survive in the island.

One at Arbory with a carved inscription probably originally from Rushen Abbey and a door head now set as a frame to the list of vicars at Malew.

This almost certainly dates from the visit of Thomas Stanley III, Lord of Mann, in 1507, a scene from which visit is depicted in the medieval hall at Castle Rushen.

The carvings match those on Door Heads at Rufford Old Hall in Lancashire and those on the choir stalls at Manchester cathedral.

Piscinas and Holy Water Stoups (basins) were largely destroyed and baptismal fonts thrown out into the church yard to become water troughs. Piscinas are the recessed stone basins with drains for the water used to rinse the chalice and are situated near the altar. Stoups usually have no drain and are situated near the entrance door.

About 100 years after Rushen Abbey was closed, St Mary de Ballure on the

outskirts of Ramsey seems to have been rebuilt and a little later in the century Andreas and then Malew were repaired but, other than these, there is little evidence for organised work on the church buildings until the arrival of Bishop Wilson in 1698.

The English Civil War and Manx Rebellion of the mid-17th Century had little effect on the Manx Church despite the island being without a bishop for some 17 years.

When Bishop Wilson came to the Isle of Man at the end

of the 17th Century, the See of Sodor and Mann had been vacant for half the century and only two bishops had made much impact on the diocese and both of them with particular regard to education – Bishop Phillips with his translations into Manx and his successor, Bishop Barrow, providing education in English and also establishing the Barrow Trust which was ultimately to become King William's College.

Indeed, there had only been one short visit by a bishop in the 10 years prior to Bishop Wilson's arrival and the See had been vacant for six years.

The diocese had been neglected and its buildings, including the Bishop's residence, Bishops court, were almost ruinous.