

Clare Island's Abbey

Clare Island Abbey located on an island in Clew Bay was established by the O Malley / Ó Máille Lords of Umhaill. During circa thirteenth century the rectangular nave was built by Diarmuid Bacach Ó Máille. He may have added the two-story tower to the east of the nave during the fifteenth century. The doorway in the east wall of that nave possibly was erected at the same time. From 1536-1541 at the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry 111 the abbey was a cell of the Knockboy Cistercian Abbey. The walls & ceilings of the vaulted chancel were decorated with medieval paintings: among the usual bestiary i.e. griffins or dragons were scenes that depicted hunts or cattle raids. Several conservation efforts have repaired those famous frescos. The church on the ground floor of the tower were used as a burial place for the O 'Malley chiefs. The O 'Malley Tomb (*reported to have been the official burial site of Grainne Uaile*) is in the centre of the north wall among the paintings, it had a canopied tomb with superb stone tracery. To the west of the tomb canopy is a wall plaque of the O 'Malley coat of arms. Longitude 95921W, latitude 534736N. Images feature on this site by Jim Dempsey. [\[vi\]](#)

Clare Island's Abbey dated to the mid thirteenth centuries was re-constructed during 1460. It was a cell of the Cistercian Abbey in Abbeyknockmoy in Co. Galway. The abbey consisted of a nave & chancel divided by an arch. The chancel was spanned by a fine barrel vault with a staircase in the south wall that in turn led to a domestic chamber above the vault. The church was lit by two slender ogee-headed windows (*with an arch over a window formed with reverse curves that gives an onion-shaped head*) Ceilings & walls are among the finest examples of medieval constructions within Ireland. These have been the subject of an extensive conservation programme by experienced European conservators. The theme of the paintings is mostly secular, they included a cattle raid, a knight dressed in chain-mail on horse-back (*page 54*), wolves attacking stags, musicians, dragons also griffins. A stone plaque within the abbey bears the O 'Malley coat of arms that features a stallion surmounting a helmet that is above a boar. This boar is surrounded by three bows with arrows pointing at it. Below the boar is an inscription with the O 'Máille's Latin Motto '*Terra Marique Patens*' i.e. people of the land & the sea. Clare Island Abbey has been restored by the Office of Public Works. (*page 53 /54*) This site features an image. [\[vii\]](#)

Cistercians from Knockmoy in Co. Galway are believed to have established a cell on Clare Island during 1220. The existing nave & chancel church were divided by an arch dated circa 1500. Its modest exterior did not bear a hint of the complex interior that had a fine barrel vault with a staircase that led to the domestic room overhead. The range & style of the frescos were more secular than religious with wolves attacking stags, hares, griffons & dragons, harp & lyre players, cattle raiders also wrestlers. The most particular painting is the medieval knight in chain mail, spear aloft on horseback. Beneath the paintings is a canopied tomb believed to have been the burial place of Grace O 'Malley. A stone wall plaque with an O 'Malley coat of arms bears an inscription '*Terra Marique Patens.*' [\[viii\]](#)

This unique medieval church may be dated from the twelfth century. It is known as The abbey & it was rebuilt during 1460. It is a national monument & underwent a major conservation project during the 1990's that revealed several new images. The building contains supposedly the grave of Gráinne O 'Malley. The paintings were undertaken during two separate O 'Malley chieftains reigns. The images depicted mythical, human & animal figures that included dragons, a cockerel, stags, men on foot plus on horseback, a cattle raid, a harper also scenes of birds & trees. [\[ix\]](#)

Clare Island Abbey was a cell of the Cistercian Abbey at Abbeyknockmoy in Co. Galway. It dated from the mid-thirteenth century then was rebuilt during 1460. The nave & chancel church was divided by an arch. The chancel is spanned by a fine barrel vault. A staircase in the south wall led to the domestic chamber above. The chancel was lit by two slender ogee-headed windows (*arch over the window formed with reverse curves that provided an onion shaped head*) The paintings on the ceilings & walls are among the finest examples of medieval paintings in Ireland. They have been the

subject of extensive conservation programmes that involved conservators from Europe. The themes of the painting are mostly secular & provided a glimpse of medieval life. They included a cattle raid, a knight dressed in chain-mail on horse-back, wolves attacking stags, dragons, griffins & musicians. The abbey has a plaque with the O 'Malley coat of arms. A canopied tomb is reputed to be the burial site of Grainne Uaile. [\[x\]](#)

Among the important cultural heritage of Clare Island are the ruins of the small abbey founded by the Cistercians during 1224. It was rebuilt during 1460. The complex contained a gray, canopied tomb which had originally been painted red, white & black & is reputed to be the burial place of Grainne O' Malley. An O 'Malley coat of arms inside the abbey features the motto of the clan: '*Terra Marique Patens.*' Clare Island Abbey included a nave & chancel divided by an arch. It is known for its famous paintings on walls & ceiling that provided a glimpse of medieval life. They depicted a cattle raid, wolves attacking stags, musicians, a knight dressed in chain-mail on horseback, dragons also griffins. [\[xi\]](#)

Clare Island's Tower House

Tower houses were constructed as castles during the fifteenth & sixteenth centuries in Ireland more as a fortified residence rather than a self-sufficient castle. They were rectangular, three stories in height with a vault over the ground floor. Those were topped by a pitched slate or thatched roof. The roof was protected by a battlement parapet also in several cases they featured an overhanging above the entrance to enable objects to be dropped on intruders or attackers. Within the thickness of the walls were staircases passages or garderholes. The main living-room was at first floor level, it was possibly to accommodate the bartizans. (*roofed, floor turrets & ganderobres*) This castle connects to the main Harbour constructed by O 'Malley's in the sixteenth century. It was constructed during 1826 as to that eras building style. Purple flashing was added to the two bartizans that projected opposite angles of the tower. To the left of the main entrance at present in the castle is a passage with stone stairs that begin at first floor level. This site includes an image. [\[xii\]](#)

Overlooking the Harbour is a three-story castle with side passages on the third floor. It was believed to have been built by Grace O 'Malley. Now in ruins it had been altered during the nineteenth century. [\[xiii\]](#)

The Tower House is a fine example built by an O 'Malley clan, designed to a standard plan of rectangular three-story building with a Vault over the ground floor, topped by a battlement over the entrance to enable the inhabitants to drop objects onto their attackers. Within the thickness of the walls were passages & other features. To the left of the main entrance was a mural passage with stone stairs that began at first floor level. Access to these stairs may have been via a wooden staircase from ground level. On the first floor the main living room had access to bartizans (*roofed, floorless turrets also garderobes*) During 1826 purple slate flashing was added to the two bartizans when the building was converted to a police barracks. [\[xiv\]](#)

Tower houses were erected by ruling Irish chieftains as fortified residences. They were rectangular shaped with three storeys over the ground floor. They had a pitched slate or thatched roof. Clare Island's Tower House dominates the Harbour. It was constructed by the O 'Malley's during the sixteenth century as a strategic fortress. Inside to the left of the main entrance are stone steps beginning at the first-floor level while wooden steps led up from the ground floor. The main living room at first-floor level had within the thick walls passages & lavatories. During 1826 the building was renovated into a police barracks. [\[xv\]](#)

Court Tomb Porteen Finoish

Porteen Finoish Megalithic Court Tomb is located on the east side of the island, between a lake or lochán. Constructed by Neolithic farmers as a burial site for their elite ancestors. Called a court tomb

because of the arrangement of stones that formed an open-air entrance to the interior. The existence of those tombs established that a farming community circa five thousand, five hundred years ago dwelt there. The walls & traces of an ancient forest may be seen in the cutaway bog north of this tomb. The ancient wall runs down to the nearby ground then disappears under the lake then it reappears on the opposite side: this indicated that the walls existed prior to the sediment of the lake. (page 57 features an image) [\[xvi\]](#)

Porteen Finoish Court Tombs discovery suggested that a Neolithic farming community may have inhabited the island by the middle of the third Millennium BC. [\[xvii\]](#)

Court tombs may be found near a small lake, so called because the arrangement of stones that formed an open-air entrance to the interior. They had an open-air court in front of the entrance where rituals or ceremonies were held. This megalithic tomb at Porteen Finoish was inhabited by a farming community five thousand, five hundred years ago. Excellent traces exist of the tomb on the east side of the Island. Early traces of field walls & traces of an ancient forest may be viewed in the nearby cutaway bog. Famine landscape with the raised potatoes drills may also be viewed in the area. [\[xviii\]](#)

Bronze Age Promontory Fort, Lecarrow

Lecarrow Fort was in use from the late Bronze Age up to medieval times as a defensive living area. They were built on top of cliffs or high land. A bank of earth or stones were built on the landward side that made attacks difficult. An image features at this site. [\[xix\]](#)

Promontory forts were in use from the Bronze Age up to the medieval era. There are at least five forts on Clare Island. They were defensive living areas built atop cliffs or headlands. Those strategic locations protected the inhabitants from sea invasions due to the steepness of the cliffs. A bank of earth or stones on the landward side made attacks difficult. [\[xx\]](#)

Signal Tower Tuar Mór

This tower is one of a line of towers along the west coast. It is located at the most western point of Clare Island at Toormore. It was built during 1804 in direct response to landings by the French during 1798 also as a defence against the threat of further landings. (page 56) An image features on this site. [\[xxi\]](#)

Signal towers were built in Ireland in response to a fear of French landings. They played a central role during the Napoleonic wars as stations of communication or alert systems along the coast. Built in remote locations with each station visible to its neighbouring tower. They were square shaped building with two storeys, a flat roof also fireplaces. The main door at first floor level was reached by a wooden ladder. Signals included a large rectangular flag, a smaller blue pendant also four black balls in various combinations. These towers were abandoned following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo during 1815. Clare Island's Signal Tower is now in ruins located on the most western part of Clare Island at Toormore. It was linked to a tower on the north side in Achill Island also on the south side at Inishturk. [\[xxii\]](#)

Signal towers such as the building on Clare Island (*erected in 1804*) were a direct response to the French landings of 1798 also a defensive measure against future threats of landings. Clare Island's Signal Tower was one of a line of towers interlinked along the coast. There were two towers nearby: Inishturk to the south with Achill Island to the north. [\[xxiii\]](#)

Fulagha Fiadh

Fifty-three identified fulagha fiadh were discovered on Clare Island. *Site 21* had a three-row horse-shoe shaped mounds with burnt stones adjacent to a small spring. Bronze-Age open-air cooking sites were used by inhabitants two thousand, five hundred years ago. A hole in the ground was filled with water, stones were heated on a fire, then dropped into the hole to bring it to boiling point. Meat was wrapped in straw then lowered into the boiled water. Heated stones were added continuously until the meat was cooked. An image features at this link. [\[xxiv\]](#)

Fifty-three fulagha fiadh on Clare Island were Bronze Age cooking sites in use by islanders over five thousand, five hundred years ago. They consisted of a hole in the ground filled with water. Stones were heated on a fire then dropped into the water to bring it up to boiling point. Then the meat (*usually wrapped in straw*) was lowered into the water. Hot stones were continually added to the water until the meat was cooked. The sites were identified as grass-covered horseshoe-shaped mounds located adjacent to a small spring. Often burnt stones were discovered nearby. [\[xxv\]](#)

Numerous fulagha fiadh or horseshoe-shaped mounds of burnt stones were discovered on Clare Island. Archaeologist Paul Gosling confirmed the existence of forty-nine with the possibility of four more mounds. Christiaan Corlett suggested a higher number perhaps one hundred & fifty. [\[xxvi\]](#)

Additional Information

The 1914 Survey *The Geology of Clare Island* may be viewed at this link: <http://www.geologicalmaps.net/IrishHistMapsDownload/B02137.pdf>

Gosling Paul 1990 *Archaeological Ireland Journal* vol 4 no 1 (pages 7-12) featured an article of the Clare Island archaeology. (*Wordwell Ltd*) [\[xxvii\]](#)

This site features several images with a map of the area. [\[xxviii\]](#)

Clare Island Abbey is referenced in the *National Monuments in State Care Ownership & Guardianship (in Mayo)* on this PDF dated 4th March 2009. [\[xxix\]](#)

Conleth Manning, Paul Gosling & John Waddell's *New Survey of Clare Island: vol 5: Archaeology* January 2007 (*Royal Irish Academy*) [\[xxx\]](#)

Footnotes

[\[vi\]](#) Clare Island Abbey (<http://www.megalithicireland.com/Clare%20Island%20Abbey,%20Mayo.html>) [Assessed 12th January 2021]

[\[vii\]](#) *Clew Bay Archaeological Trail: exploring 6,000 years of Mayo's Heritage* [Assessed 15th January 2021]

[\[viii\]](#) Clare Island Revisited (<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/clare-island-revisited-1.1054873>) [Assessed 14th January 2021]

[\[ix\]](#) The Abbey (<https://www.clareisland.ie/see/the-abbey>) [Assessed 13th January 2021]

[\[x\]](#) Clew Bay Archaeological trail (<http://www.clewbaytrail.com/show.php?SitesID=17>) [Assessed 14th January 2021]

[\[xi\]](#) Clew Bay Archaeological Trail (<https://www.mayo-ireland.ie/en/about-mayo/archaeology/clew-bay-archeological-trail/stage-4-clare-island.html>) [Assessed 15th January 2021]

[xii] *Clew Bay Archaeological Trail: exploring 6,000 years of Mayo's Heritage* [Assessed 15th January 2021]

[xiii] Clare Island Revisited (<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/clare-island-revisited-1.1054873>) [Assessed 14th January 2021]

[xiv] Clew Bay Archaeological trail (<http://www.clewbaytrail.com/show.php?SitesID=17>) [Assessed 14th January 2021]

[xv] Clew Bay Archaeological Trail (<https://www.mayo-ireland.ie/en/about-mayo/archaeology/clew-bay-archeological-trail/stage-4-clare-island.html>) [Assessed 15th January 2021]

[xvi] *Clew Bay Archaeological Trail: exploring 6,000 years of Mayo's Heritage* [Assessed 15th January 2021]

[xvii] Clare Island Revisited (<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/clare-island-revisited-1.1054873>) [Assessed 14th January 2021]

[xviii] Clew Bay Archaeological trail (<http://www.clewbaytrail.com/show.php?SitesID=17>) [Assessed 14th January 2021]

[xix] *Clew Bay Archaeological Trail: exploring 6,000 years of Mayo's Heritage* [Assessed 15th January 2021]

[xx] Clew Bay Archaeological trail (<http://www.clewbaytrail.com/show.php?SitesID=17>) [Assessed 14th January 2021]

[xxi] *Clew Bay Archaeological Trail: exploring 6,000 years of Mayo's Heritage* [Assessed 15th January 2021]

[xxii] Clew Bay Archaeological Trail (<https://www.mayo-ireland.ie/en/about-mayo/archaeology/clew-bay-archeological-trail/stage-4-clare-island.html>) [Assessed 15th January 2021]

[xxiii] Clew Bay Archaeological trail (<http://www.clewbaytrail.com/show.php?SitesID=17>) [Assessed 14th January 2021]

[xxiv] *Clew Bay Archaeological Trail: exploring 6,000 years of Mayo's Heritage* [Assessed 15th January 2021]

[xxv] Clew Bay Archaeological trail (<http://www.clewbaytrail.com/show.php?SitesID=17>) [Assessed 14th January 2021]

[xxvi] Clew Bay trail (<http://www.clewbaytrail.com/show.php?SitesID=22>) [Assessed 15th January 2021]

[xxvii] Archaeology of Clare Island (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20562027?seq=1>) [Assessed 15th January 2021]

[xxviii] Archaeological Trail (<https://www.westportheritage.com/archaeoligical-trail.html>) [Assessed 15th January 2021]

[xxix] Mayo (<https://www.archaeology.ie/sites/default/files/media/pdf/monuments-in-state-care-mayo.pdf>) [Assessed 15th January 2021]

[xxx] New Survey (<https://www.ria.ie/new-survey-clare-island-v5-archaeology>) [Assessed 15th January 2021]