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Church Island : a Description

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editor

The Island of St Patrick

Church and ruling dynasties in
Fingal and Meath, 400–1148



Church Island: a description

MICHAEL RYAN, KEVIN MOONEY,
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In truth Patrick came with Gauls to the islands of Moccu Chor (the Uí Chorra): to the eastern island known as Patrick's Island. With him there was a crowd of holy bishops, priests, deacons, exorcists, porters and lectors, as well as boys whom he ordained. Blessed by God, he came up from the sea at sunrise onto the Plain of Brega, with the true son of marvellous doctrine, bringing light to the darkness of ignorance ...

Tírechán (later seventh century AD)

The seventh-century writer, Bishop Tírechán, wrote that Inishpatrick (known to locals invariably as Church Island)¹ off Skerries was the first place on which St Patrick set foot on his return to Ireland as a missionary. Skerries lies on the east coast – on the edge of the plain known anciently as Brega. It was on that plain, somewhere near the mouth of the Delvin river, that Patrick allegedly converted his successor Benignus, regarded as the first native Irishman to become a bishop. Legend has it that Benignus (Benén in Irish) received some of his education on Inishpatrick. On the island are the ruins of a twelfth-century church and associated buildings, probably living quarters for monks and a tomb-shrine. At one time there had also been a cemetery there.

Tírechán wrote his account of Patrick's arrival in the later seventh century. We cannot be sure that he was relying on a firm historical tradition, as he was very interested in recording legends of churches which had entered into some form of alliance with Armagh then pressing its claims to be the chief church of Ireland. Tírechán was interested in establishing the claims of Armagh to superiority over a wide network of religious houses. The great rival to Armagh was the family of churches

¹ Townland: Townparks; parish: Holmpatrick; barony: Balrothery East; OS 6", Co. Dublin, no. 5. The site is a registered monument SMR No. 005 019.

associated with St Columba (Colmcille) of Iona, which was represented in the area by a foundation at Lambay (it seems that Swords was established later).

The next historical reference to Church Island is the record in the annals of the raid on it by Vikings in AD 798, when the shrine of Do-Chonna (probably the stone tomb-shrine of the saint) was broken. It is often said that Lambay was the first place in Ireland to be attacked by Norsemen in 795, but this is probably an error as it shares its ancient name (*Rechru*) with Rathlin Island, which lay in the path of Vikings sailing from the Hebrides. It is inconceivable that three years would have passed before nearby Church Island was attacked. The island is exposed to powerful sea gales and was probably then, as now, bare of trees and any settlement on it would have been openly visible and defenceless.

References to the island after AD 798 are few.² If the monastery went into rapid decline after the Norse raids it enjoyed a revival – if not a refoundation – in the ninth century when it is recorded that Mael-Finnia mac Flannacáin, a member of the royal house of Brega died on the island as abbot in 903 and, in 1124, there is a further record of the death of the learned priest Máel-Cholaim on Inishpatrick. Both were prominent figures, which seems to indicate that the church on the island was significant at least within the region. That it was important is signalled by the fact that a generation or so later, in 1148, a synod was convened on the island by a number of bishops and St Malachy.³ This assembly of over two hundred – priests and bishops – was summoned to nominate delegates to travel to Rome to obtain the *pallia* or insignia of archbishops signifying the re-integration of the Irish church with the Roman system of discipline and organization after centuries of diverging practices. The island was almost certainly chosen as the site of the synod for the symbolic reason that it was claimed by Tirechán as the first landfall of Patrick the missionary. It is very likely that the present church was built after the synod took place. Inishpatrick became a house of Augustinian monks before the Norman invasion of AD 1169, perhaps even by the time of the synod. In the early thirteenth century the

² The early medieval history of the church is discussed in detail by MacShamhráin below.

³ A. Gwynn and R.N. Hadcock *Medieval religious houses in Ireland* (repr. Dublin 1988), 193; see discussion below by M. Holland.

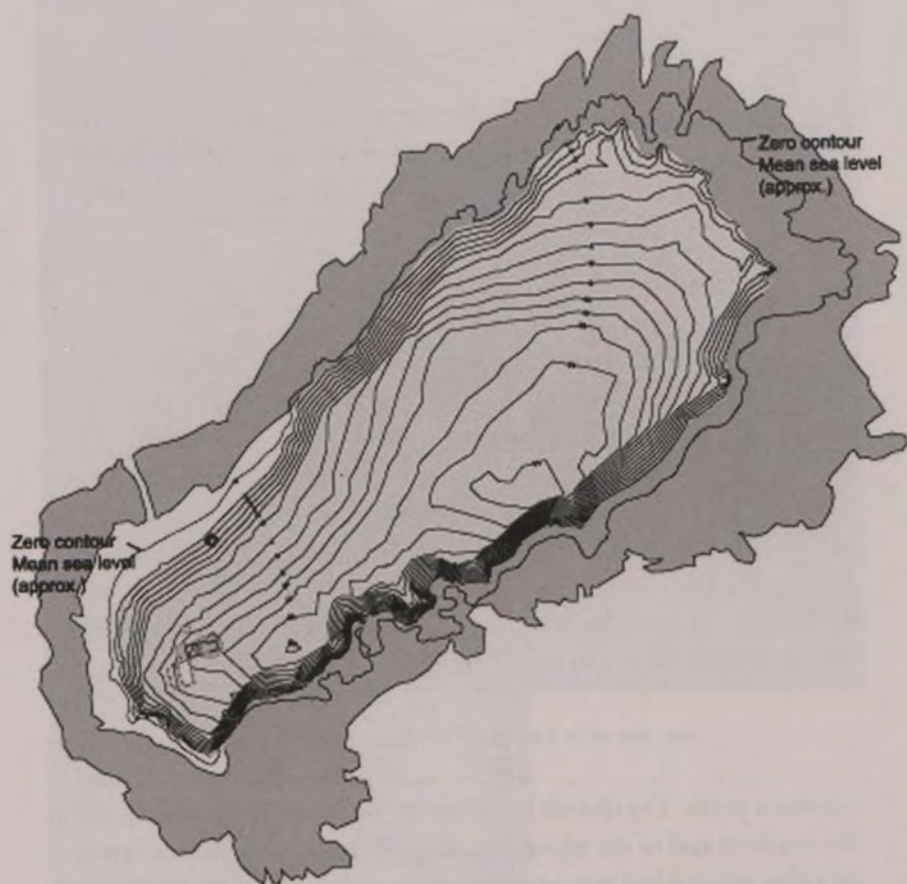
monastery was moved to the mainland at the instance of Henry of London, archbishop of Dublin.⁴ The site chosen was at Holmpatrick where the modern cemetery and Church of Ireland church now stand. Stones from the medieval monastery can be seen in the graveyard including the memorial of the last prior, Peter Mann. The name Holmpatrick combines the Scandinavian placename element *holm*, an islet, with the personal name Patrick. It is a variation of Inishpatrick.

THE ISLAND

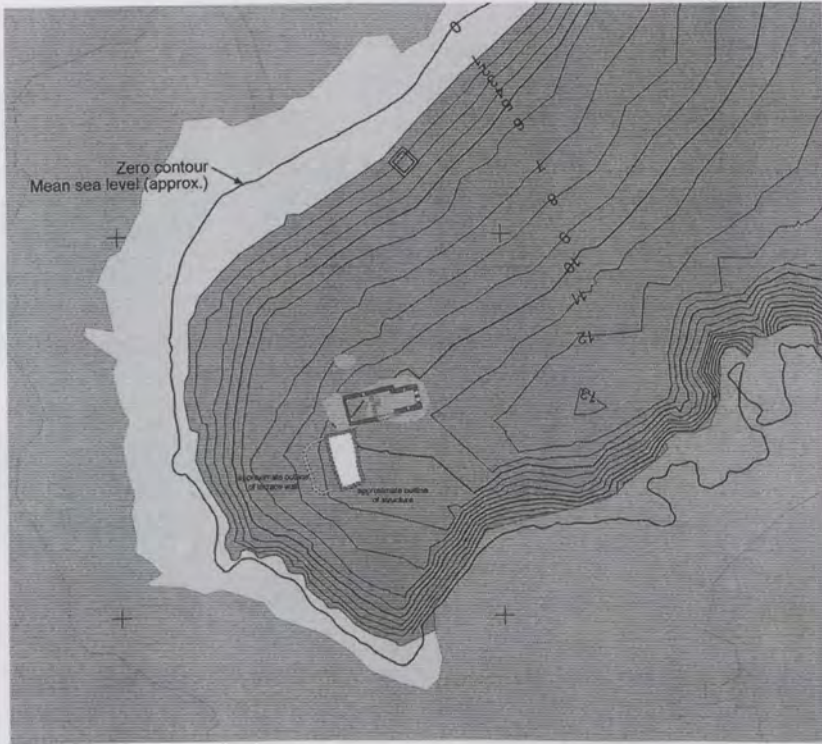
The island (fig. 7.1), excluding rocks and beach, is 6.33 hectares (15.65 acres) in extent. It is about twice that when the rocks and beach are added. It is 465m long and 187m wide. It stands 14.5m above sea level at the highest point at the south-eastern corner. The eastern side of the island, especially towards the southern end drops steeply towards the sea, which has a fringe of reefs. The underlying rocks are of carboniferous limestone and shale, quite sharply folded – the bedding planes of the rock at the highest point are steeply canted being just a few degrees off the vertical. The stone may be prised off in fairly neat tabular slabs suitable for building, and the church, with the exception of tufa ornamentation, appears to be constructed of stone from the island. The normal landing point is Church Lane – a narrow entrance cut through the rocks on the western side of the island. Also on the west side, along the beach south of Church Lane is an artificial terrace created by a wall of crude, drystone masonry containing what was probably a garden. Its age is unknown. Overgrown with mallows, food remains – animal bone, mollusc, crab and lobster shells – are mixed in the soil. Whether the garden is ancient and associated with the church cannot be asserted without independent dating evidence.

The faint traces of a bank, probably ancient, run around the greater part of the island along the crest of the slope. It is visible on aerial photographs. Whether it is very ancient and associated with the ecclesiastical foundation or constructed later, partly to protect livestock

⁴ See note 3 above. Also N. Donnelly, *Short histories of Dublin parishes* pt. xvi, *Parishes of Lusk, Rush, Skerries and Balbriggan*, 87 repr. as Carraig Chapbooks (Blackrock, Co. Dublin, 1977).



7.1 St Patrick's Island, Skerries, Co. Dublin
(Ryan, Mooney, Prendergast & Masterson)



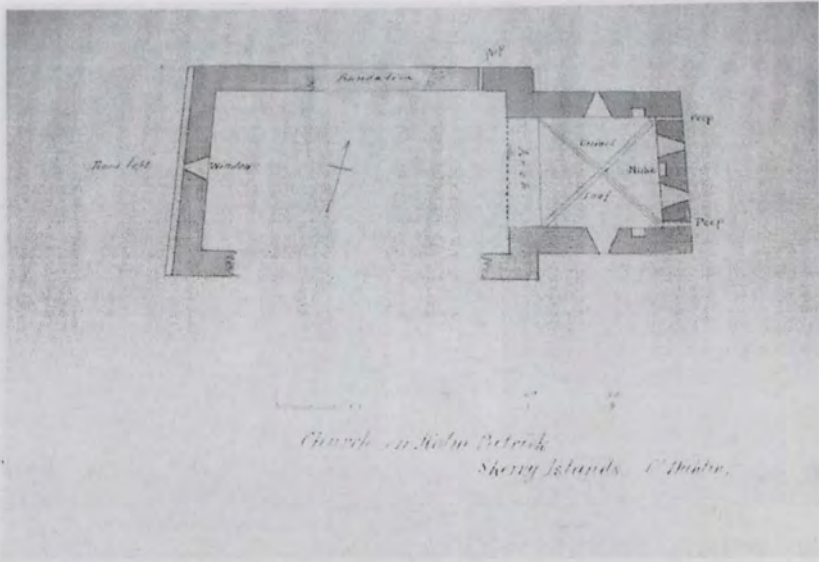
7.2 Site of St Patrick's Church, St Patrick's Island

is a moot point. The church buildings lie just below the highest point at the southern end of the island (fig. 7.2), partly sheltered from east winds by rising ground but exposed towards the other points of the compass. They were built on ground that had been artificially levelled by means of a terrace. Although inhabited in the nineteenth century by agricultural workers for at least part of the year, and once host to a substantial synod, the island has now no visible spring or other water source. It is likely that rainwater sumps exist but the dense growth of grass obscures many features.

THE CHURCH RUINS

The church is divided into two parts – a nave (the main part) for the congregation and a chancel where the altar was placed (fig. 7.6). The

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7.3 Du Noyer's plan of St Patrick's Church



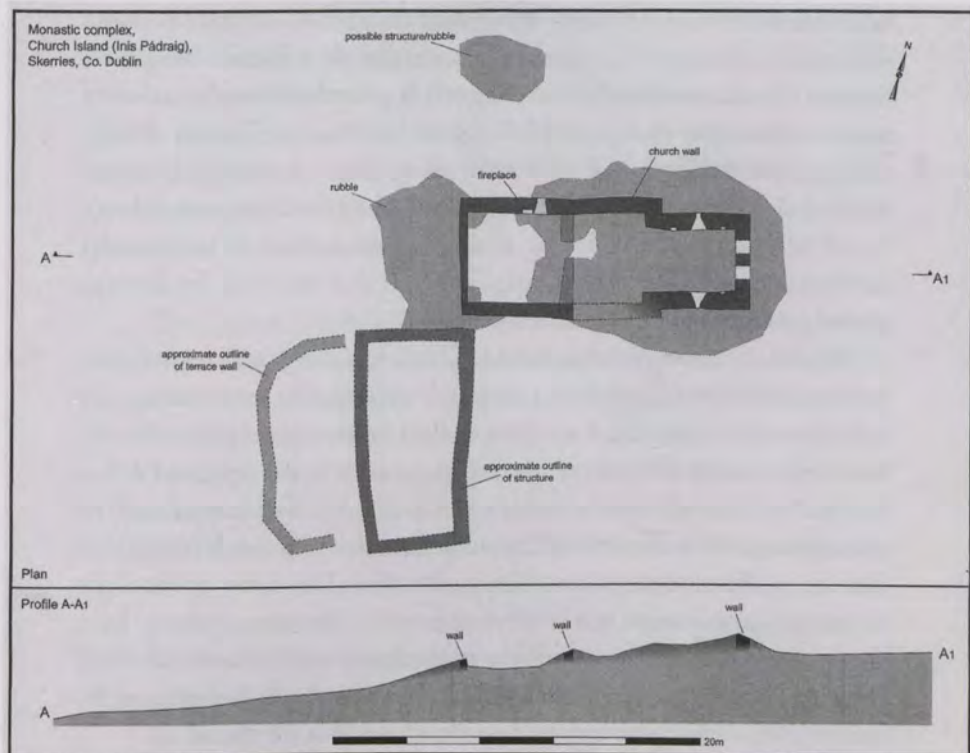
7.4 Du Noyer watercolour; north window of chancel – exterior



7.5 Du Noyer watercolour; east windows – interior

chancel had a stone roof supported on a groin vault. The nave was slated, or shingle-roofed. The nave is 14.3ms long (46.7 ft) and the chancel just over 6m (19.9 ft). The chancel vault appears to have collapsed some time in the eighteenth century, filling the area to a depth of over a metre with rubble. Its north wall is best preserved and there is evidence in its stonework that the usual arch separated the nave and chancel. There were two round-headed windows in the east wall of the chancel, one each in its north and south walls and one in the north wall of the nave. There is a small niche in the south wall of the chancel. A further niche between the two east windows recorded in Du Noyer's (1865) drawing (fig. 7.5) may be an error on the part of the artist as there is now no evidence for it (but see below). The east gable was pierced by a small window high up. The church door was probably on the south side, a feature of later twelfth-century buildings (fig. 7.6 – see also Du Noyer's plan, fig. 7.3). The stones of the north window arch and of the

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7.6 Plan of church site (Ryan, Mooney, Prendergast & Masterson)

roof were of calcareous tufa – an extremely light material, easy to shape (Du Noyer's watercolour, fig. 7.5, shows the interior of the east windows and fig. 7.4 shows the exterior of the north window of the chancel, with the tufa stones in place). Much of this was carried away in the last century for use in garden rockeries – and that, presumably, is when the east and south windows were robbed of their stones. One piece of tufa with a deep rebate cut in it was found during the survey of the church in 2000 at the nave-chancel junction. It probably formed part of the chancel arch. The stone is devoid of ornament and the chancel arch was probably therefore plain.

To the south of the church are the foundations of a narrow rectangular structure about 15 m in length, presumably a house for the monks (fig. 7.6 – prior to the survey carried out on the site, this feature had

never been drawn). It is heavily overgrown and difficult to trace in places although it shows well in aerial photographs. It is clearly built on a terrace. On the north side of the church is a marked concentration of stones, sometimes interpreted locally as the site of a filled-in well or cistern. However, a more likely explanation is that it was some form of tomb-shrine, as suggested by Wakeman's early account (see below). Aerial photography hints that there may have been a sub-circular earthwork around the church originally but this may only be demonstrated by archaeological excavation.

The nave of the church was divided in two by a rough wall constructed to convert the west end into a shelter – presumably for herdsmen or agricultural labourers who must have worked for protracted periods on the island when it was tilled in the nineteenth century. It was equipped with a fireplace and chimney on the north wall. Mr Cochrane of Seapark had the island ploughed in the first half of the nineteenth century. It is reported that the workers found graves and a stone coffin. The coffin was brought to the mainland for use as a horse trough while Cochrane is said to have kept a skull from the island on the mantelpiece of his house.⁵ A small house was built also in the nineteenth century, just above the beach on the western side. Animals were grazed on the island into the 1950s.

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE ISLAND

Isaac Butler's *Journal of 1744* provides the first useful information on the physical state of the church, when he notes that its roof had lately fallen in.⁶ There is no reason to disbelieve his account and we can conclude that the vault, at least, had stood until the first half of the eighteenth century.

The distinguished archaeologist, W.F. Wakeman, visited the island and its church sometime during his early career, and late in life provided

⁵ P.F. Moran in his edition of Mervyn Archdall's *Monasticon Hibernicum*, ii (Dublin 1876), 90, note 62 gives a somewhat sour account of this event: 'The remains of a very old church are still extant on the island, which, about fifty years ago was tilled by a Scotchman or Northern (sic) who settled in Skerries. The old cemetery was uprooted. And the tombstones etc. were thrown over the rocks into the sea: it is not unlikely that some ancient inscribed or sculptured memorials were irretrievably lost.' ⁶ *Isaac Butler's Journal 1744* Ms. Armagh Public Library (microfilm in National Library of Ireland) at p. 11 'Shipping; Holm Patrick next to it whereon

a note of it in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries*. He describes the square-headed doorway as indicating the great age of the building.⁷ However, there is something of a mystery here because there is no such door in the existing remains. In the *Dublin Saturday Magazine* the same author (initials erroneously given as W.W.F. instead of W.F.W.) had given an earlier account of the island in an article on Balrothery.⁸ It is worth quoting in full (the emphasis is ours):

The original establishment was in all probability upon Holmpatrick, or Inis Patrick, a small island lying at a short distance from the shore, nearly opposite the modern village. Upon this island St Patrick is said to have landed when on his voyage to the mouth of the Boyne. Tradition refers to the erection of a church *which still remains upon this island*, to the saint himself; and it is a very remarkable fact, whether the tradition be correct or not, that *the building referred to bears all the architectural characteristics of the oldest kind of sacred edifice erected in Ireland. The plan is a simple oblong of very small dimensions. Unfortunately the greater portion of the eastern gable, which no doubt carried a window, has fallen; the side walls are in moderately [] condition but contain no opening for the admission of light. In the centre of the western gable is a square-headed doorway so small that a full-sized man would have great difficulty in entering it. The sides have a considerable inclination from the ground upwards, and the walls which have a thickness unusual in buildings of the size of the church, appear to have been constructed without mortar.* We have examined in Kerry, Clare, Aran, and the other parts of Munster and Connaught, a number of early Christian edifices which have been declared on the authority of the late Drs. Petrie and O'Donovan to be as old at least as the 6th century and we have no hesitation in expressing our opinion that this little building, here for the first time noticed, must be regarded as belonging to the earliest period of Christianity in Ireland, and that in all probability it was erected under the immediate direction of St Patrick himself.

there is a large Abby now in Ruins, *the Roof lately fell in*' (emphasis added). ⁷ W.F. Wakeman, 'The ante-Norman churches of Dublin', *RSAI Jnl.*, 22 (1892), 104-5. ⁸ W.F. Wakeman, *Dublin Saturday Magazine*, ii, no. 58 (1876), 61-2.

Adjoining the earlier church, to the southward, are the ruins of a daim-liag or great stone church, which bears evidence of having been erected in the earlier part of the 12th century. Its eastern window is formed of *acutely-pointed lancets*, and as was not uncommon in churches of the time, the whole of the chancel was closed in and roofed with stone. A very unusual circumstance in connexion with this church may be here recorded. The late Dr Petrie has stated to the writer that some thirty-five years or so ago, when examining the ruin, he picked from the mortar or grouting of the interior of the wall two small and very perfect arrow-heads formed of flint, and exactly similar to many specimens usually found in connexion with pagan and prehistoric interments. We have seen these singular relics, which differ in no respect from the arrowheads found so frequently in almost every part of Ireland, and which are generally designated 'elf-stones' by our country people who sometimes apply them to superstitious purposes. It is difficult to believe that weapons tipped with flint were used in the warfare of the British Islands so late as the period of the erection of the church. Could these 'elf-stones' have been introduced by the masons or builders as a 'charm'? [*sic*] This church is said to have been erected by Sitric Mac Murchad in the 9th century, but no portion of the present building is older than the 12th.

This description by Wakeman is of great importance. It clearly records a different structure, remarked upon by no one else, to the *north* of the church ruins. This was church-like in shape, apparently constructed of drystone masonry with a small lintelled doorway. Sadly he gave us no measurements but the description could indicate the former existence of a small tomb-shrine structure such as still exist at Banagher, Co. Derry and Clooney, Inishowen, Co. Donegal. St Keiran's church at Clonmacnoise, the traditional burial place of the saint, is a diminutive church, although clearly somewhat larger than that described on Church Island. It is likely that the concentration of stones north of the church and marked on the plan (fig. 7.6) as 'possible structure/rubble' is the site of structure described by Wakeman. It is quite distinct from the

collapsed material from the church. It would repay archaeological investigation.

By the time G.V. Du Noyer planned the building in 1865 (figs. 7.3–5) and sketched the interior, the chancel area was filled almost up to the level of the windows with rubble from the collapsed vault. The state of the nave is unknown, but it is much less filled with rubble today. On Du Noyer's drawings⁹ the windows retain their round-headed shaped tufa arches. Although he incorporates a third feature – a pointed niche – between the two windows of the east windows – there is no evidence that they were of the lancet form mentioned by Wakeman. Perhaps Wakeman's memory was playing tricks and there really had been a niche where Du Noyer indicated, but one entirely made of stucco of which no trace survives. He may then have confused in his memory the pointed shape of that niche with the very different round-headed windows. This is all very frustrating as Wakeman was a fine artist and recorder of ancient sites – his survey of the monastery of Inishmurray, Co. Sligo, is an exemplary work.

In 1888, Robert Walsh in his book *Fingal and its Churches* published two woodcuts of the church (figs. 7.7 and 7.8), which show much of the dressed stone already robbed from the windows in the east gable. The drawings also show some flagstones of the roof surviving on the north side. Today only a couple of stones are *in situ* to testify to the slope of the roof. The pictures are based on two watercolours (by NH: Nathaniel Hone) in the archives of the Representative Church Body. However, the view of the interior of the nave is peculiar in that the artist seems to have turned the north wall inside out in order to show the carved tufa of the widow and the springers of the groin-vaulting, a view which is impossible. Apart from that caveat, the views show the church pretty much as it is today. Walsh was unaware of the small structure which Wakeman had described and makes no mention of it.

A contemporary description by Dix in 1892 contains no mention of the small structure, which seems to have been demolished by then either by the work of tillage undertaken by Cochrane or by the depredations of

⁹ Royal Irish Academy Library Du Noyer, vii, 45–47 reproduced here by kind permission of the Academy.



7.7 North-east view – exterior (Walsh)



7.8 South-west view – interior (Walsh)

the cattle grazing on the island. Amongst the other information he describes the condition of the tufa (honeycombed by erosion), the fact that cattle occasionally shelter in the church and the presence of the conventual building to the south.¹⁰ The description is also worth quoting in full:

I visited in company with another member of our Society, the island of Skerries, called Inispatrick (St Patrick's Island), or Church Island, on which are the remains of the undoubtedly ancient church belonging to the monastery at one time on this island. It is quite exposed and unprotected, not only to storm and rough weather, but also to the cattle which graze on the island and appear to herd or be herded in the nave of the church, greatly to its disadvantage as well as profanation. The tufa stone at the wall angles, edge of roof and remains of groined arches in the chancel, has become honeycombed like a sponge, but still holds good. A simple post and wire paling, strongly made, to keep out the cattle, and some steps taken to cleanse the inside of the church, and to replace fallen stones in the walls would not cost much, and would help to preserve this ancient church. The debris inside to be cleared out, down to the original floor. The nave has evidently, in later days, been built up for a cattle shed, though now roofless. The island belongs to the Hamiltons of Balbriggan, but is by them let to a local farmer or grazier. Adjoining the church on the south or south-west, is the clearly-marked site of buildings no doubt belonging to the original monastery. The island is well worthy of a visit also from the geological point of view. Traces of lead ore appear in the quartz rock. There are no graves inside the church and it is not easy to identify any outside it.

A number of photographs of the church in the records of the Old Skerries Society – undated, although clearly of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century date – show that from the time of the Hone drawings, relatively little change has taken place in the condition of the church except what may be accounted for by gradual attrition by the elements.

¹⁰ E.M. Dix, *RSAI Jnl.*, 22 (1892), 180–1.



7.9 Church of St Patrick, St Patrick's Island;
north wall of chancel (M. Ryan)

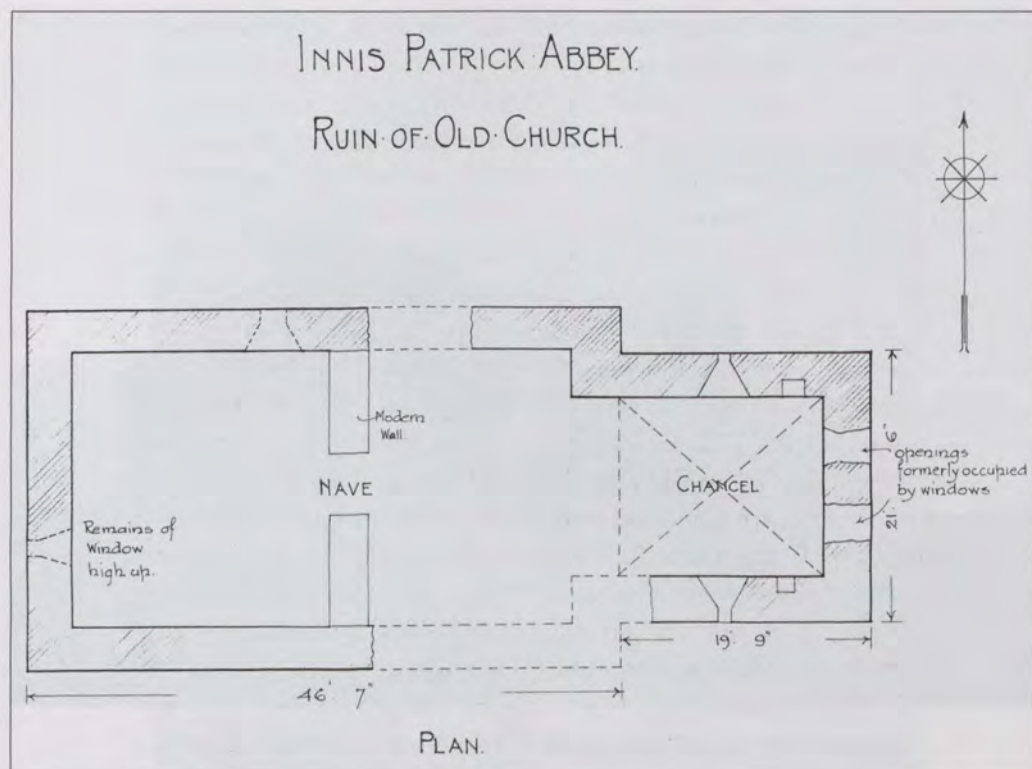
The National Museum files contain photographs (undated but probably of the 1920s or 30s) by T.H. Mason, which record conditions not much different to today's. These show the north window almost intact as it is today, the east windows robbed of their tufa, and the interior full of collapsed masonry almost to the base of the east windows and extensive undergrowth within the chancel.



7.10 Church of St Patrick, St Patrick's Island; east windows (M. Ryan)

In 1966, the late Percy Le Clerc (fig. 7.9), Inspector of National Monuments, visited the site and drew an accurate sketch plan of the church. He noted that all the carved stone was of calcareous tufa and that the remaining masonry was of calp (limestone) quarried on the island. He noted the construction of what he called a cattle shed from the material of the nave. His opinion was that the church:

... was a good example of French architecture of about 1100; but, allowing for a time-lag, it was probably built about 1130–1140. It is about the same date, or earlier, than the oldest parts of the abbey church of Mellifont (of which very little remains); it could be the first church to have been built in Ireland by French masons; it certainly is the best preserved early example of French building here and, so far as I know, it is the unique example of the style. It may of course have been built especially for the synod of 1143 (?) in



7.11 Sketch-plan of the church, 1966 (Le Clerc)

which case it would be almost exactly contemporary with the earliest parts of Mellifont; but, stylistically, it could be earlier than Cormac's Chapel at Cashel (1134) ... the church is exceptionally interesting in the history of the twelfth century Reformation and justifies exceptional measures for its preservation.¹¹

Mr Le Clerc's remarks about the date of the church would find general support amongst architectural historians. Without independent dating evidence, when in the twelfth century it was built is open to debate. A brief summary of the course of early medieval Irish church architecture may be helpful. In the first phase of their development in the ninth and

¹¹ File Office of Public Works. Report signed 'P. Le Clerc 1/9/66'.

tenth centuries, Irish stone churches were essentially simple unicameral rectangular structures with single, western, (usually) trabeate (that is lintelled) doorways of which we know little more.¹² They were often poorly lit by simple, sometimes single, windows and must therefore have been illuminated with lamps or candles. There is no surviving evidence that they were plastered and painted but it is possible that some of them were.¹³ We have no evidence of original altars. There is likewise no evidence of internal arrangements, and no features such as ambo/pulpit, font, or fixtures for chancel rails survive. In the twelfth century there is a tendency for chancels to be added to unicellular churches, or built en suite with naves,¹⁴ and southern doorways begin to make their appearance. At the cathedral of Kilmacduagh, for example, an older trabeate west door was blocked up and a southern entrance was created. The appearance of southern doorways may signal some liturgical change. The church on Inishpatrick/Church Island combined native tradition (the stone roof of the chancel) with fashionable new elements (the paired east windows, the en suite chancel, the groin vault and south doorway) when it was built, perhaps as a result of Augustinian influence. This may well as Le Clerc believed, have been a result of French influence, a natural consequence of the affiliations of the order. Whether the church was already standing at the time of the synod or whether it was built in commemoration of it is an open question.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The ecclesiastical settlement on Church Island, in its latest phase, consisted of a nave-and-chancel church built in the twelfth century, a conventual building, presumably quarters for the community, to the south of it and possibly a small tomb shrine in the form of a miniature church to the north. The presence of an earthwork around the church site is worthy of some further investigation as is the nature of the terrace

¹² The classic study is Harold Leask, *Irish churches and monastic buildings, i: the first phases and the Romanesque period* (Dundalk, 1955). ¹³ Maurice Craig, *The architecture of Ireland from the earliest times to 1880* (London and Dublin, 1989), 31. ¹⁴ Craig, *The architecture of Ireland*, 39–40; Tadhg O'Keefe, 'Architectural traditions of the early medieval church in Munster', in Michael A. Monk and John Sheahan (eds) *Early medieval Munster*, (Cork, 1998), 112–24 at 121.

feature on the shoreline, which may have been a garden for the settlement. Nineteenth-century agricultural activity on the site unearthed a number of graves and their markers were, it is said, thrown into the sea. Without carrying them across jagged rocks, this would have been impossible and so there is a chance that some of these may lie on the beach near the site but the writers have not found any. The early history of the site, as analysed below by the editor, holds out the possibility that three phases of church development may be represented on the island – an early foundation phase, a tenth-century period of revival followed by a final phase culminating in the building of the present church. These may be archaeologically detectable.

The church is in need of some conservation and consolidation work. It may also be wise to clear the debris from inside the structure. Wakeman's description of a smaller structure north of the church should be tested by excavation.

Thanks are due to Skerries Lifeboat, Paddy and Conor McNally, Inez Hagen, Roger Stalley, Tom Condit, Peter Harbison, Victor Reijis, Fr. Leo Quinlan and above all, Maree Baker for many references and even more patience. The Royal Irish Academy generously permitted the reproduction of the Du Noyer drawings in their Library and thanks are due to Petra Schnabel and the Librarian Siobhán Fitzpatrick for their kindness.