

Devenish Island Fact Sheet



Background

St. Molaise, death recorded, Annals of Ulster, in both 563 and 570 A.D., founded the monastery on Devenish Island in the sixth century.

He was one of the early missionaries in Fermanagh, converting the locals to the new Christian faith.

The monastery on Devenish was to become a place of great religious and spiritual importance for the next 1000 years.



Monastic Settlement

Monastic settlements also served as “towns” in Ireland at this time. In addition to the monastery, church, and refectory, monastic sites often had a guesthouse, school, mud huts and a dairy. Children were educated and fostered in monasteries.

Children went to school at the age of seven

Sacred and secular manuscripts were continually copied and illuminated in monasteries. The most important relic from Devenish is the Soiscel Molaise, or book shrine of St. Molaise.

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The Vikings: The Annals of Ulster record that in 836, “all the churches of Loch Erne, together with Cluain Eois and Daimhinis (Devenish Island) were destroyed by the gentiles.”

The monastery was rebuilt after these invasions. Its churches were burned in 1157. This event led to a new building programme, this time at least partly in stone.



Round Towers

Round towers were also symbols of prestige and reflected the wealth of the monastery.

Round Towers were generally built in the vicinity of a church or a monastery.

The Devenish tower is one of the finest in Ireland, reflecting the wealth of the monastery. The tower was either built soon after the 1157 fire or after 1176 when the tower was involved (unsuccessfully) in a local struggle.

The tower is beautifully built with closely jointed stones and carefully worked details like the door, raised for security. Inside are 5 floors each with a window, above an unlit basement, and projecting stone ‘hooks’, which may have held bags or leather satchels for special objects. It is the only tower in Ireland to have a decorated cornice at the base of the cap. Four heads are linked by bands of pellets and spirals. Traditionally the heads show Molaise with Patrick, Columba (Colum Cille) and Brigit.



Major reforms during the 12th century sought to bring Ireland into line with European practice. These changes brought about a new organisational structure; dioceses were fixed, parishes were created and new orders introduced.

By the 11th and 12th centuries Devenish was a large, busy community. By the 15th and 16th centuries there were two communities living on Devenish: The Canons Regular in St. Mary's Priory and the secular canons, called Culdees in the lower church. These Culdees lived their lives separately from the community on the island.



St Molaise's House is a small church dating from the twelfth century. The present stone building was built to replace a wooden church burned in the 1157 fire. The massive walls and the decoration at its angles, show that St Molaise's House was a very special building. The name, St Molaise's 'House', suggests that remains of the founding saint were buried in the church. The house is a tomb or shrine. The church would have been used for individual prayer by the monks of Devenish. Teampull Mór, or the lower church, dates from the early 13th century with a beautifully moulded south window. It was later extended to include a residential wing to the north and the Maguire Chapel to the south.

St Mary's Augustinian Priory or abbey is on the highest ground on the island and is built outside the original monastic settlement. It was begun by Augustinian Canons in the 12th century but the early abbey was destroyed by fire. Matthew O'Duggan reconstructed it in 1449. The priory was extended to include a refectory, cloister walk and other rooms, while the west doorway was rebuilt, the tower added and windows were replaced.



Devenish was an important burial place for at least 1,300 years, from the mid 6th century to the later 19th century. The lower graveyard's boundary wall was attached to Teampull Mor. The latest tombstone is dated 1867. There are at least two stones from the middle ages in the upper graveyard. There is a variety of gravestones from the 18th and 19th centuries. Two stones carved with the armorial bearings of the Maguire's of Tempo are built into the chapel on the south side of Teampull Mór which was the Maguire burial vault (until about 1865).

Devenish Island has been uninhabited since 1922.



