Abbeyknockmoy

Description
The early 13thc. cruciform church comprises chancel; nave, with N and S aisles; and N and S transepts, each with two chapels. The chapter house also survives from the 13thc. The remains of the domestic buildings are mainly 15thc. Romanesque sculpture is found in the transept chapels, the chancel, the Chapter House, on some of the nave piers and on a number of loose fragments currently in the Chapter House and in the S aisle.

The church has a long nave w. 8.74 m (Cochrane, 1904) x l. 61.87 m (Leask, 1960) of four bays separated by wide piers, with the remains of pointed clerestorey windows above, not symmetrically placed in relation to the bays. Only the lower courses of the first nave piers are still in situ. Some of the lower courses of N and S aisles survive. The chancel is rib-vaulted with a chamber above and has a triple E window. A later window has been inserted into the E end of the S wall. The crossing arches were blocked, probably in the 15thc., but small doorways allow access to the crossing and chancel from the nave and transepts. The transepts are entered from the nave aisles by a small doorway on the N and a larger archway on the S. Each transept has two E chapels, the chapels in the N transept are in a damaged state, although the entrance arches and some window mouldings survive. The chapels in the S transept have pointed barrel-vaults with moulded round-headed windows, mostly restored on the exterior (part of a continuous filleted roll survives on the exterior R window) and plain aumbries in their S walls. There is a walk-through between the chapels which has a finely-jointed, round-headed niche on the W side. The N transept has a large pointed window high in the N wall. The sacristy, which has a pointed barrel-vault and a square E window, adjoins the S transept and has an upper chamber now reached by stone steps from the S transept. The Chapter House has a triple E window with a single window of later date on either side. The Chapter House was divided into three, barrel-vaulted chambers in the 15thc. obscuring the E window.

History
Abbeyknockmoy was a Cistercian house, colonised from Boyle Abbey (Roscommon). It was founded 1189-90 by Cathal Crobderg Ua Conchobhair (O'Connor), King of Connaught, and dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Cathal later retired to the Abbey where he died on 28th May 1224 (Archdall, 266). Many other members of the O'Connor dynasty, including Cathal's wife, were interred in the Abbey.

Cathal also founded Ballintober Abbey in Mayo (1216).

Archdall records the plundering of the Abbey in 1202 by William de Burgo after Cathal was temporarily 'expelled his kingdom' in 1200.

The Abbey was dissolved in 1542.

Features
Exterior Features
Windows
Chancel
Triple, splayed round headed window, plain, apart from the label which has foliate stops. Above this is a pointed window and there is a further pointed window in the gable.

**Exterior**

L window: framed by a continuous angle roll, otherwise plain. The label is carved with lilies, alternating upright and inverted and joined to a common stem.

C window: framed by a continuous hollow chamfer, otherwise plain. The label is carved with a row of half-palmettes followed by a fillet. The half-palmettes on the R have a raised vein on each lobe. At the bottom L is a human mask with the stem of the first half-palmette issuing from the R corner of his mouth, on the bottom R is a grotesque mask with large sunken, tear-drop shaped eyes, a grimacing mouth and small pointed ears on the top of its head.

R window: framed by a continuous angle roll as L window. The label is carved with a series of cylinders, staggered on face and soffit, followed by a fillet. The first six discs on the L are carved with incised circles (Champneys describes these as 'flat pellets, cut into spirals').

The label continues plain between the windows.

**Interior**

Splayed, with shared jambs. Continuous, chamfered moulding along the bottom of the window. Continuous, chamfered label.
Exterior

Pointed, triple window, framed by two, coursed, continuous rolls separated by hollows and set within a continuous, chamfered outer order. There is a plain, pointed window to either side of the triple window.

Interior

Originally, slender detached shafts supported small capitals. Most of the shafts are now missing, but some of the bobbin-like shaft supports survive.

L capital: twisted, grooved stems with foliage.

LC capital: stiff-leaf type, with hollowed stems.

RC capital: stiff-leaf type, with convex stems.

R capital: missing.

L window: undercut directional chevron (L to R).

C window: undercut lozenges attached to a central roll on the L side of the arch. On the R, lozenges, each containing a wedge (or pyramid) which originally supported frontal chevron. The frontal chevron has a double groove along its surface.

R window: as C window.

A continuous undercut hollow followed by a filleted angle-roll frames the group.

Interior Features

Arches

Chancel arch/Apse arches

Chancel Arch
Pointed, of two orders.

**First order**
Attic-type bases, filleted shafts.

N capital: damaged, multi-scallop.

S capital: multi-scallop, with lilies in the shields.

**Second order, E**
N capital: multi-scallop with triskeles in the shield.

S capital: symmetrical half-palmettes with branching stems, very delicate.

**Second order, W**
N capital: multi-scallop with foliage in the shields, damaged.

S capital: multi-scallop with inverted lilies in the shields, damaged.

**Tower/Transept arches**

N Transept, Entrance to N chapel
Jambs chamfered on E and W angles, plain pointed arch.

On the E face there is a stop chamfer at the bottom of the jambs in the form of a leaf (damaged) on R, missing from L. The upper stop chamfers are voluted, damaged on R.

On the W face the jambs are chamfered with a volute stop-chamfer on the upper R, broken off on L, broken off on lower L and R.

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**N Transept, Entrance to S chapel**

Of two orders.

**First order**
No bases, hollow-chamfered responds, the R has the remains of an impost of the profile roll, hollow-chamfer, roll. There may have been volutes as in the N chapel but nothing survives now. The responds taper to a point in the arch.

**Second order**
Jambs chamfered on E and W angles, pointed arch.
Of two orders

First order

No bases on N, those on the S are very weathered but may have been attic. Triple-column respond with a filleted central column.

Foliate, composite (triple) capitals with collars above necking. The necking follows the line of the filleted respond.

N capital, E component: foliate collar, the face is carved with a series of half-palmettes growing from short, thick, twining stems.

N capital, central component: foliate collar, the face is carved with a pair of symmetrical half-palmettes below an inverted lily which nests between the half-palmettes. Above the lily are three short straight leaves, projecting forward.

N capital, W component: plain collar, the face is too damaged to read.

S capital, E component: plain collar, face similar to N capital, central component, with an upright lily to the L of the inverted lily.

S capital, central component: plain collar, face similar to N capital, central component, although the pair of half-palmettes are held by a square clasp. A spiralled leaf lies on the upper R, and a long stem topped by small half-palmettes lies on the R of the face.

S capital, W component: damaged on the face, although two symmetrical half-palmettes above crossed stems may be seen extending toward the angles.

The arch has a filleted angle roll followed by a fillet then a deep hollow on the face.

The soffit has a flat moulding flanked by a hollow, a fillet and a keeled angle roll.

The impost is hollow-chamfered with an incised line along the upright.

Second order

Plain, chamfered jambs, pointed arch.
The E face, of both N and S sides of the arch, has a voluted leaf stop-chamfer at the top of the jambs.

S Transept, Entrance to S chapel

No bases, chamfered jambs, pointed arch. S and N sides have volute stop-chamfers level with the springing of the arch and leaf stop-chamfers at the bottom of the jambs.

A hollow-chamfered label continues between the two chapels.

Arcades

Nave, N arcade

No E respond, a wall blocking the first bay incorporates the remains of Pier 1.

Pier 1: The ashlar of the lower part of the jambs of Pier 1, W face, is still visible.

Pier 2, E face: as S arcade, Pier 2, E face.

Pier 2, W face: the impost is of the profile, roll, flat, roll, keeled roll.

Pier 3, E face: as S arcade, W respond. The stop-chamfers have been broken off.

Pier 3, W face: As Pier 3, E face. Stop-chamfer on SE only.

W Respond: as pier 3, E face. The SE stop-chamfer has broken off. On the NE, at the top of the chamfer is a rounded beast head with bared teeth. Part of the muzzle is missing.

Nave, S arcade
Of four bays, with deep piers.

**E respond:** plain, chamfered. The impost has a long, hollow chamfer.

**Pier 1:** missing

**Pier 2, E face:** the impost is of the profile roll, flat, nook roll and overhanging lip.

**Pier 2, W face:** the impost is of the profile, long hollow chamfer, small flat, overhanging lip. Inverted stop-chamfers on the angles.

**Pier 3, E face:** the impost has a hollow chamfer, a row of cable moulding followed by a band of shallow-carved, clasped lozenges, a three-quarter roll then an overhanging roll with a fillet. A crowned head is carved on the NE angle. The head has delicate features, large eyes within carefully delineated lids and brow, a fine row of curls across his forehead, and longer curling hair extending onto the jambs. The nose, and the lower part of the face has broken away.

**Pier 3, W face:** the impost has a hollow chamfer, flat, small roll, hollow, faceted roll. At the top of the chamfer on the NW two beasts are carved with a shared head (very damaged) on the angle. The claws and tail of the beast on the W face may be seen. There is a large foliate stop-chamfer on the SW angle.

**W Respond:** as Pier 2, W face. The angles have inverted stop chamfers. There is a small foliate stop-chamfer on the SE angle.

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**Vaulting/Roof Supports**

**Chancel**
The ribs of the vaulting are square. The vaulting supports have abaci/capitals of the profile square, flat, square, hollow chamfer, beading (or nailhead, Leask, 1960, 37) between fillets, followed by an overhanging plain impost. The supports die into the wall with foliage terminals. In place of keystones the masonry at the apices is composed of a series of symmetrical blocks.

**Terminals at E end of chancel in NE and SE corners**

S capital: cornucopia-shaped corbels, covered with shallow-carved foliate ornament and terminating in a reeded curl.

N capital: as S capital.

**Terminals at W end of chancel**

N capital: reeded cornucopia type.

S capital: reeded cornucopia type.

**Terminals between first and second bays**

N capital: cornucopia type.

S capital: small volute.

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**Loose Sculpture**

**Capital (NE side of Chapter House)**

Round capital with twining stems and foliage terminals. Similar to those in the Chapter House E window. Dimensions not recorded.

**Voussoirs (S chamber of Chapter House and S aisle)**
Eight voussoirs (i-viii) carved with angled chevron flanked by a roll, with the points touching on a central roll. The fragments vary between 0.21 m—0.30 m in length.

Six voussoirs (ix-xiv) carved with angled chevron with a central roll and with the points touching on a flanking outer roll. The inverse of (i)–(viii). The fragments vary between 0.21 m and 0.28 m in length.

Three voussoirs (xv-xvii) carved with free-standing directional chevron (one numbered B7 and another, B38). The chevron carved on the third fragment appears to join the central roll rather than straddling it. Dimensions as above.

**Comments/Opinions**

As Abbeyknockmoy was colonised from Boyle it is not surprising to find similarities between the two Cistercian abbey churches in both architecture and decoration, along with many other features typical of the ‘School of the West’. The influence of the carved decoration of Boyle Abbey may be felt in details such as the scallop capitals with foliate shields in the chancel arch, although the Abbeyknockmoy examples are not as fine as those at Boyle of c.1170 which they seem to emulate. A further comparison may be made between the composite capitals in the N chapel of the S transept at Abbeyknockmoy, and similar work of c.1215-20 at Boyle. However, the Abbeyknockmoy examples are less frieze-like than those at Boyle and the half-palmettes are more sharply defined. The capitals at both Boyle and Abbeyknockmoy sit above triple colonnettes, although Abbeyknockmoy has filleted rather than keeled mouldings. The capitals at Abbeyknockmoy have inverted lilies as part of their decoration. These do not occur at Boyle.

Triple capitals occur at Boyle and Abbeyknockmoy, and triple colonnettes are found at Ballintober, Boyle and Abbeyknockmoy suggesting a possible path of influence from Boyle, to Abbeyknockmoy, to Ballintober, as triple colonnettes do not appear to be found elsewhere. Such features derive ultimately from West Country churches in England, Abbey Dore being the closest parallel. One of the Chapter House capitals (E window, L capital) is similar to capitals at Abbey Dore.

The structure of the chancel vaulting seems to derive via Mellifont from England, possibly from Lilleshall (Shropshire), one of numerous links between the English West Country and the ‘School of the West’ in Ireland which have been analysed in detail by Stalley (Stalley, 1987, 133). It is generally agreed that the mason who constructed the Abbeyknockmoy vault was also employed at Ballintober. The vaulting at Ballintober is more accomplished but uses the same unusual system of jointed masonry in place of a keystone, as at Abbeyknockmoy. Stalley dates the chancel vaulting to c.1210, using the foundation date of Ballintober (1216) as a yardstick. Abbeyknockmoy was the first Irish site to employ ribbed vaulting and this occurs at two other sites only; Corcumroe and Ballintober (Kalkreuter, 2001, 86).
In the Chapter House some distinctive chevron types are found, including undercut straddling directional chevron closely comparable to that found in the 12thc. Lady Chapel at Glastonbury (Stalley, 1987, 183). This chevron type may also be found at Corcomroe. Leask (39) likens the chevron generally to work at Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin.

Many other smaller comparisons and links may be made. Staggered discs such as those on the label of the exterior L chancel window may be seen in a more finely detailed form at Cong (Mayo), (Chapter House doorway, R label, c.1220) and a form similar to the spiralled leaf on the S capital, N chapel, S transept at Abbeyknockmoy occurs on the S doorway (first order, L capital) at Drumacoo (Galway). The highly mannered carving at Drumacoo must postdate the Abbeyknockmoy example. A further comparison with Drumacoo has been made by Tessa Garton (see Drumacoo, Galway CRSBI entry), who likens the beast head on the N arcade, W respond at Abbeyknockmoy with beast heads on the second order, R capital of the S doorway at Drumacoo. The rounded head and muzzle, bared teeth, bulging eyes and upright pointed ears of the beast heads have their roots in Hiberno-Romanesque animal sculpture.

Leask suggests 1202—16 as construction dates for Abbeyknockmoy (38), Stalley suggests 1210—30 (240).

A badly damaged, carved head was found during excavations of the cloister carried out in 1987 by Sweetman. The general shape of the head and its features, particularly the eyes and the row of curls along the forehead are very close to the king's head carved on the NE angle of Pier 3, S arcade. The excavated head has a coronet of half-palmettes. Stalley (1987, 188) suggests that the crowned head on the pier could be a representation of Cathal Crobderg.

**Bibliography**

- M. Archdall, *Monasticon Hibernicum, or, A history of the abbeys, priories, and other religious houses in Ireland: interspersed with memoirs of their several founders and benefactors, and of their abbots and other superiors, to the time of their final suppression*, Dublin, 1786, 266.


- J. A. Glynn, 'Knockmoy Abbey, County Galway', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 34, 1904, 239-42.


- R. Cochrane, 'Abbey Knockmoy, Co. Galway: notes on the building and frescoes', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 34, Dublin 1904, 244-253.


General view, from E.
General view, from SE.
General view, from N.

Location

Site Location

Abbeyknockmoy
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<th>National Grid Reference</th>
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