

IRELAND

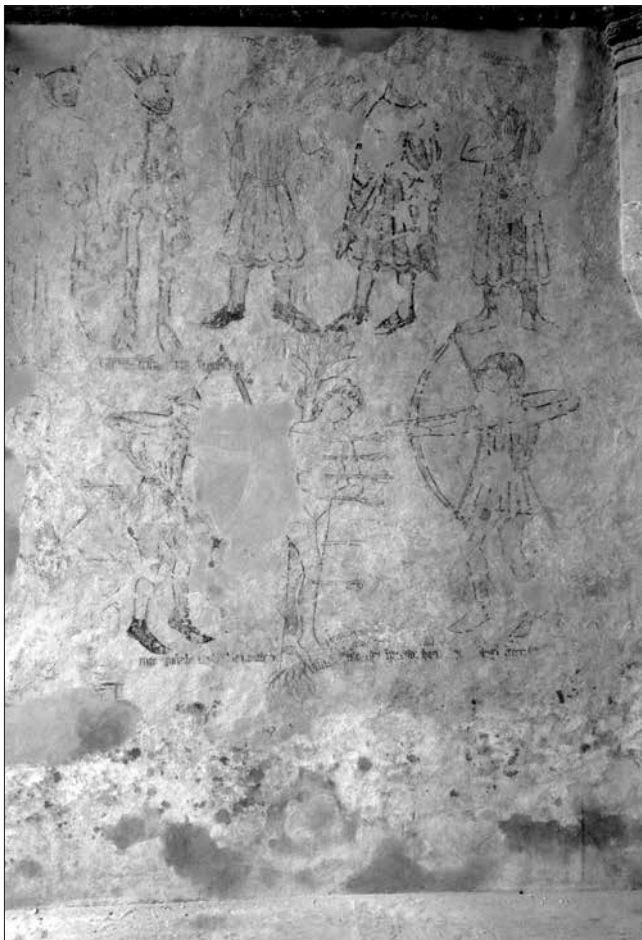
Wall-paintings in Ireland: Provisional Stocktaking of their Endangered Condition

Ireland is well-known for its many archaeological sites. For instance, the Stone Forts and alignments and Megalithic tombs at Newgrange, Croagh Patrick, in Fenagh Beg, at Knowth, at Dún Dúchathair on the island of Inishmore, or the Burren dolmens are all of international renown. In contrast, a series of artefacts that have generally been forgotten are to be found among the medieval wall-paintings still extant in a number of ancient churches throughout Ireland. It is also not well known that a number of home of the Irish ascendancy class still retain wall-paintings. Generally speaking, it can be argued that this lack of awareness has its roots in the Reformation of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. During that period, ecclesiastical wall-paintings were destroyed or forbidden in English churches. The only reproductions that were allowed were the Ten Commandments and the royal coat

of arms, and nothing else. In Ireland, it is not uncommon to find newer Anglican churches directly adjacent to an old church, a building that would often have been destroyed by Cromwell's troops. And, of course, this new church would have no wall-paintings.

The few wall-paintings I know of, or that I have worked on in Ireland, are to be found either in churches and monasteries from the Pre-Reformation period or in tower castles. The paintings found at these locations are usually said to date back to the 15th or 16th centuries, dates which, in my experience, have occasionally proven to be incorrect.

Throughout the period of the 1990s, the Republic of Ireland received generous funding from the European Union. However, throughout this decade it was not only the road network large infrastructural projects that received assistance. Extensive funding was also made available for specific national cultural heritage programmes. For instance, in 1989, on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the founding of an abbey by Cathal Crobhdearg Ua Conchobair, the King of Connacht, the Cistercian Order was successful in acquiring funds for the conservation of wall-paint-



Ardamullivan Castle with "climate-active" curtains

Wall-painting at Abbeyknockmoy



Ardamullivan Castle, with curtains rolled up the situation becomes visible as immediately after the conservation. The ceiling is new and unnecessary; the electric heating even dangerous. What is still missing, is at least a minimal presentation of the wall-paintings.

ings in Abbeyknockmoy. This turned out to be a starting point for the conservation of this particular element of Ireland's cultural heritage. Two years later, the Abbeyknockmoy initiative was followed by a project to conserve the wall paintings at Clare Island Abbey – once again, this was on the initiative of the Cistercian Order. This restoration and conservation project continued throughout the 1990s.

Throughout this period, wall paintings at castles and buildings as far apart as Ardamullivan (Galway), Askeaton (Limerick), Baryscourt (Cork), Ballyportry (Clare), Cashel (Tipperary), Cobh (Cork), Clonmacnoise (Offaly), Jerpoint Abbey (Kilkenny), Lisdonagh (Galway), and Dun Laoghaire (Dublin) were conserved. In most cases, I was involved as conservationist and/or as advisor.

The problem now is that since the European funding has been drastically reduced, the aftercare for these monuments has also, more or less, come to an end. In the case of the restoration of wall paintings at Clare Island Abbey, a proposal for its aftercare was phrased (2000) as follows: "The stabilisation phase has been completed; maintenance and restoration can now be taken into consideration." This was 16 years ago.

In 2000, any further conservation at Clare Island was interrupted so that the restoration remained incomplete. Since then, Clare Island Abbey has suffered considerably due to a lack of follow-up care. This is made all the more disappointing since the Abbey, historically, is an extremely important and interesting venue – not least because of its connections to Grace O'Malley and the O'Malley Clan. This lack of and pressing need for aftercare can

be applied to most of the various sites mentioned above. More examples could easily be added to the list.

Within the powers that be, of Irish National Monuments, and within the OPW (Office of Public Works) I have argued for, but have not been able to pave a way for a comprehensive conservation approach to these monuments. My aspiration to provide some form of advisory role, from which conservation of these objects might benefit, has fallen on deaf ears.

In general, decisions about what works ought to be done are left to the staff of regional "depots". While members of this staff are charged with taking care of daily maintenance, e.g. lawn-mowing, general maintenance, preservation of the fabric of buildings, they are, however, in their roles as general craftsmen, ill-equipped to deal with specific demands regarding the conservation of historic buildings. A consequence of this is that many decisions taken concerning follow-up care, particularly of wall-paintings, are based on a lack of specific information, or knowledge, and are often wrong. In regard to the wall-paintings, a need for action is either not recognised or is, unwittingly, ignored.

Thus, it took 14 years, and thanks to the advocacy of Michael Petzet, to recognise that conservation-based aftercare needed to be carried out at Clare Island. The inadequate measures that have already taken place include:

- Inadequate water drainage on the roof, thus causing large quantities of rainwater to remain in the masonry;
- Microbiological ingress, a consequence of the dampness, hav-



Clare Island Abbey

ing been treated with pesticides, including interior surfaces and around the wall paintings;

- Installation of thermostatically controlled electric heating, causing a serious increase in salt efflorescence, which is seriously dangerous for the painted plaster surfaces. If at all, any electric heating should be controlled only by a hygrometer;
- Erection of a largely useless and extensive barrier was to prevent visitors from entering the ruins of the sacristy;
- A lack of effective maintenance of the windows; and
- Inadequate disposal of refuse.

About the only measure that does make sense is a visitors' platform in the choir.

Money invested in restoration becomes superfluous, or at least misspent, when an adequate care-plan, with adequate, long-term funding is not included in a comprehensive conservation plan. A parallel can be drawn with a newly built suspension bridge. If there is no long term care, a bridge will easily become a hazard.

In Ardamullivan, for instance, a minimal conservation of the wall paintings was followed by the reconstruction of the original roof and two wooden ceilings. An electrical supply was drawn from over one kilometre away; a thermostat-controlled electric heating was installed; and the car park for visitors was enlarged. However, the site remains closed, because there is no one there to

open it to visitors. Most importantly of all, the fact that the conservation was limited to a minimum, without a continuing care-plan, means that, today, the paintings are barely visible anymore.

In Abbeyknockmoy, where some years after the restoration I documented the condition of the paintings, in order to prove the necessity of an aftercare plan, nothing has happened since 1990. For example, during my last visit, in 2014, the drainage around the choir, once again, was completely blocked. And, once again, the paintings are almost entirely invisible and are beginning to show new signs of damage. This is not withstanding the fact that only 20% of the potentially painted plaster surfaces in the choir were treated. Also, though small in surface area, some astonishingly clear fragments of original colouring can still be found.

The lesson is obvious. Those fragments of medieval wall paintings still extant in Ireland have been subjected to inadequate restoration and conservation plans. These wall paintings are not static objects. They are living artefacts, existing in continually threatening micro-environments. Any plan for restoration and conservation must include detailed costings for continuing programmes of maintenance and care. Aftercare plans must be drawn up by experts in the area of wall-painting conservation. Continuing follow-up care must only be undertaken by staff that have been educated and coached in suitable techniques, under the guidance of conservation experts.

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