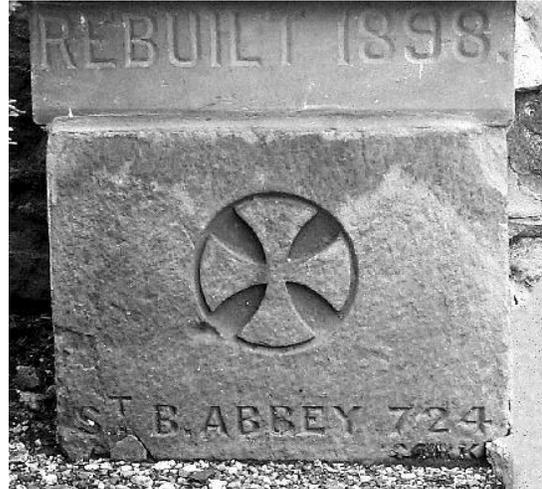


St. Brigid's Abbey

The following is a letter from my friend, Liam Boyle, of Clonmel, Ireland, whom I'd asked to research the roots of the cornerstone of our parish church. I'd asked Liam to search for the ruins of an abbey attributed to St. Brigid overlooking the River Bride in County Cork, Ireland. The story of our cornerstone was published in 1898 and told that it was removed from that abbey and sent to New Jersey by Dr. T. M. A' Heron, who was a 19th Century parishioner at St. Ann's Church, in Hampton, NJ. Dr. A' Heron had lived in Castle A' Heron, County Cork, Ireland.

Liam not only verified the existence of St. Brigid's Abbey and Castle A' Heron, but he provides us with a lot of information about "the Irish" roots for many of the relevant places and names.

Greg Boyle



December, 2004

Greg,

Now, firstly I could find no reference anywhere to castle A-HERON or Ahearne and I thought it might be Castle Hyde-the old one behind the later house owned now (I think) by Michael Flatley of Riverdance fame. So we went off castle and church hunting for the day. It was a beautiful winter's day, sunny and dry. Leaving Clonmel I wasn't concentrating and I took the road to Dungarvan, instead of the normal way to Cahir and main Cork road to Fermoy, and then turned off for Castlelyons. Either this was fortuitous or I was guided by St. Brigid, or Naomh Bride, in Irish pronounced Nave Bredeh! (All this is very relevant!) So I decided not to turn the car around, as it was such a beautiful day, and we would take the scenic drive over the Comeragh and Monavullagh mountains (the g is silent, not pronounced) through Capaquin, Lismore and Tallow.

After leaving Tallow we consulted the map to see where the best place to turn off for Britway was and it was just after a townland called AGHERN. It suddenly dawned on me that this would be pronounced AW-HERN in Irish, so we looked out for a castle. About 7 miles before Aghern we saw this beautiful castle ruin but unfortunately it was called CONNA Castle. We took some photos and also saw that it overlooked the River Bride (or Brigid's River) of which we also took some snaps.

As we drove on through Aghern we could not see any other castles but I saw a young lad fixing a motorbike and asked him, "How do you pronounce this place?" He said "Aw-Hern" so I said, "Is

there any ruins of an old castle around here?" He said not that he knew of, but there was an old church down a laneway by the river.

Down we went and found Aghern Bridge, Aghern Church, Aghern House (still occupied) and attached - the ruin remains of Aghern Castle. There is a National Heritage information board giving some history and you should be able to zoom in on the photo we took of the board. It was getting late and we will have to go down again to get better photos.

But it was a great discovery.

(Agha is an old Irish word for field, with the GH silent it's pronounced like a long AAW. The Hern is Anglicized Irish 'Cairn' meaning a collection of stones, but usually referring to a Neolithic or Bronze Age 'Court Tomb', Wedge Tomb' or Dolmen. So A'Hern is AGHA CHAIRN, the H after the C making the C silent or like a guttural CKH. This would explain and make sense of why Dr A' Heron spelt his name like that.)

We continued along to Britway which in Irish is Breac Mhaighe, pronounced Brack Wee (the H after the M in makes it like a W/V), anglicized as 'Britway'. Breac means speckled and Maighe is a plain (as in Maighe Eo or MAYO - the plain of yew trees). Breac Maighe probably refers to the colour of the plain in spring, though breac is also short for a rainbow or speckled trout. One book translates it as wolf plain but I can find no explanation for this and it might just be a printing error.

Britway is not even a village, just an area or "townsland". But many small, now isolated places, were ecclesiastically important in pre-Norman, Celtic Christian times, before the newly built Norman towns and the religious orders arrived to set up the roman diocesan system and bypass the old tuath/clan based monasteries, of which Britway church is probably one.

Coming round a bend into Britway we were delighted to see a beautiful restored well - St. Brigid's Well. As you know, water was sacred to the pagan Celts and the wells were places of pilgrimage where there was access to the Celtic otherworld at certain times of the year - especially Samhain (sough-hain, i.e., Halloween) at twilight where there was a division between the light half and the dark half of the day and the year, when this access was possible.

The wells, rivers, mountains, etc., were blessed and Christianized with the coming of Christianity and then continued to be worshipped and used as pilgrimage sites under Christian names of whoever had blessed them, e.g., St. Patrick's Well, St. Declan's Well, St. Brigid's Well etc. Though St. Brigid is an enigmatic figure having also been a pre-Christian triple goddess herself whose name means "exalted one" -goddess of fertility, justice and knowledge, whose attributes were transferred to the later abbess of Kildare (Cille Doire - the church of the oak tree which were also sacred).

This well is named "St. Brigid's" and with the River Bride nearby it would seem that the area had a monastery founded by a devotee of St. Brigid, and the people or monks of the area were followers of her.

This well is a few hundred yards northwest of Britway cemetery which contains the ruins of an old church. There is no name on the cemetery or church only (Britway). But it would make sense and be consistent that it was "St. Brigid's Church" (or abbey). The cemetery has a notice giving Julia O Sullivan, Castleyons as the Registrar of the cemetery and I will try and contact her. I will also go down again, as it was getting very dark and we didn't like to call at farm houses so late. I will make enquiries in Fermoy (Fear Maighe - men if the plain) and Castle Lyons. They may have a history society as many places now have.

At the church ruins, there is a long broken font or fonts in different pieces, just lying there like rubble in front of the doorway. But unfortunately we did not get this in the photo. There are many stones lying about so it was probably one of these that was used by Dr. A' Heron.

It is interesting that the Rev. Dean O'Mahoney had enabled the shipment of the stone to the States, as the Hyde castle is nearby 4 miles and the whole area was an O'Mahoney stronghold before the Cromwell invasion and settlement when the Hydes who were Cromwellian Planters took it over. A descendent of whom was Dr. Douglas Hyde, founder of the Gaelic League (Language and Sport Revival movement), who was professor of Irish at UCD and the first Protestant President of Ireland 1938 -1945. The A'Herons were possibly a sub-sept of the O'Mahoneys.

There is even a tenuous link between St. Brigid's stone and our own family, as the lands upon which the stone resided were controlled by the Duke of Devonshire. The Dukes of Devonshire who still inhabit Lismore castle are descendants of the Boyles who were Earls of Cork, the most famous of whom was Robert Boyle the scientist - of Boyle's Law. The Boyles were adventurers who bought the land from Sir Walter Raleigh who had been given extensive lands taken from the FitzGerald / FitzMaurice / McCarthys - Earls of Desmond (Deas Mumhan-west Munster) by Elisabeth 1st after the defeat of the Spanish armada. One of Boyle daughters married the Duke of Devonshire and they inherited the lands and castle of Lismore. One of their descendants married Fred Astaire and he used to stay their regularly when I was growing up. My aunt Theresa worked there as a maid at that time. Prince Charles visited it recently as guest of the son of the present Duke. The English Boyles originally came from Donegal where all the Boyles and O'Boyles originate, via Scotland to England where they became powerful merchants.

Liam Boyle, Clonmel