

# **Oaklands House: Mystery, Memories and Recycling**

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**Mystery: Where was the 7th Century Abbey of Inishloughnaught?**

**Memories: of an Apprentice Gardener**

**Recycling: Of Construction Materials**

Oaklands House sits hidden behind St. Patrick's Well in the townland of Inishlounaught to the west of Clonmel. The relationship between the well and the estate was recorded in 1850 when Colonel Phibbs who owned the property now known as Oaklands had the residence recorded as being in the townland of St. Patrick's Well on Griffith's Valuation. Oaklands appears to be a house name and not a townland. No real evidence of when or how the name originated exists. It is a house on an estate which has received little or no attention from historians or archaeologists.

For this reason, my recollections of the house, garden and surroundings need to be recorded. I began my gardening career at the age of 14 in the garden of Oaklands House. At that time the Head Gardener was Mr. James Kiernan, a Meath man. He was very strict and at times very aggressive. As an apprentice I was protected on a number of occasions by the Under Gardener, Mr. John Kirby. During my apprenticeship Mr. Kiernan was replaced by Mr. Phillip Mulcahy. Mr. Mulcahy had a totally different approach and was very interested in education. He gave me a pencil and notebook to record everything that happened in the garden and he advised me to study horticulture by correspondence course. I have to credit him with starting me on the path to a very interesting career in horticulture.

I left to become a journeyman gardener at 18 years of age. From there I went to work for Mrs. Smyth in Marlfield. Again, I was encouraged to educate myself and given the use of all her books to study. She valued education. This encouragement has led to my interest in horticulture but also in history. This interest has resulted in a curiosity regarding the history of Oaklands House and the possibility that it sits on the site of the Ancient Monastery of Inishloughnaught.

## **Recollections**

A hive of social activity, from the 1940s to the early 1970s Oaklands House was used as a high quality guest house. Guests included high court judges and American fox hunting parties. The Americans would hire the required number of horses from stables associated with the house. They hunted in the locality with the local Tipperary Foxhound group. In the evening it was a venue for glamorous hunt balls. During the fishing season regular visitors arrived to fish two local rivers, the River Suir and the River Nire. These visitors included renowned personalities one of whom was Lord Ashdown of Galway,

The Oakland estate consisted of the house, approximately 40 acres of farmland, woodland, a stream, the site of a ruined mill, the stables, the kitchen garden with a smaller garden attached. This smaller garden was used to grow raspberries in the centre while figs grew against the wall.

The glasshouse in the smaller garden was used to grow grapes. For some reason none of the garden staff liked to work in this small garden and found the area to be eerie and many expressed the notion that they were watched while working there although this space was fully walled.

The house itself was a beautiful building. A notable feature of the house was an Adams fireplace. Under the house was a wine cellar storing multiple bottles of wine, a separate room in the basement was a dairy for making butter, a third section of the basement was the kitchen of the house. The servants' tunnel led from the kitchen to the stable yard and was used for the delivery of crops and fuel to the house.

A second tunnel on the estate facilitated those travelling between the garden and the big house. The kitchen garden was approximately half a mile from the house and was connected to the manor house by a woodland walk.

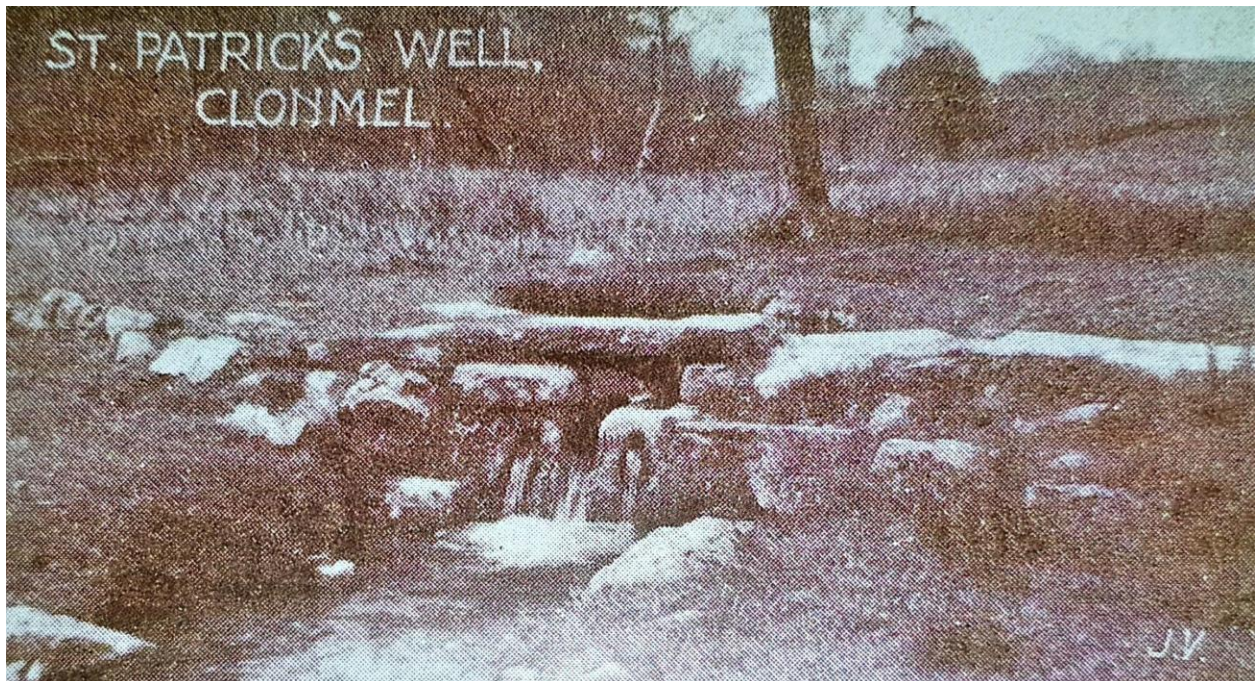


During the 1950s, the kitchen garden could be exited through a tunnel under the pilgrim road of St. Patrick ( L3218) into woodland. I enclose a map to demonstrate the location of this woodland path within the estate. On leaving the tunnel, the path travelled was planted on either side with a large quantity of spring flower bulbs including daffodils, narcissi, bluebells, crocuses and snowdrops. Exotic trees and shrubs including Lilac , Berberis, Viburnum and Dogwood flourished along the path. 100 metres from the tunnel the path passed over a stream by an ornamental bridge, similar to a bridge in Sheffield Park, Sussex.





After crossing the stream the path continued north at the edge of the stream toward St Patrick's Well, passing the remains of the ancient mill. The water spouts currently at the well were originally part of this mill.



The ruins and tail races of that mill remained there until the mid 1970s when they were removed in a drainage scheme.

About 200 metres from the house, the walk turned west after passing a wastewater treatment plant associated with the house. The wastewater tank was a square building full of charcoal. Water exiting the tank looked as clear as any spring water.

The path led into the grounds surrounding the house. These grounds consisted of a large alpine garden, a small sunken rose garden bordered by a yew hedge, a large shrubbery, a court used for tennis and croquet surrounded by a herbaceous border.

As a young gardener working at Oaklands, one of my jobs was to take vegetables to the Cook in the house on a daily basis. As an apprentice I could only bring the vegetables that I was given as I was not allowed to select the vegetables myself. The cook, Mrs. White was always critical of these vegetables, but if the Head Gardener came with me to deliver the vegetables, the quality of the vegetables was noted and praised, and we were invited to sit for scones and tea. Jim Kiernan, the Head Gardener usually praised the scones and Mrs. White gave him the recipe for his wife.

During the late 1940s and 50s, the Cleeves family owned the house. Three sisters managed the property. Vera and Margaret were involved in the running of the house, Edith, known as "ETH", involved herself in the running of the farm, garden and stables. At that time the staff included : a Housekeeper, a Butler, a Parlour maid, a Cook, a Kitchen maid, a Groom, a Stable Lad, a Cowman, a Head Gardener, an Under Gardener, an Apprentice Gardener and a Labourer.

The Cleeves ran the house until the 1970s when it was purchased by the Carrigan family, who specialised in the breeding of purebred jersey cows. The Victorian Garden was destroyed when they removed the peach house, the vine house, the stoke house, the pineapple pit and a number of ancillary buildings. During this period historic fruit trees were also removed and the orchard garden became a grazing area for cattle.

### **Curiosity and Suggestion**

When working in Oaklands I was given the following information by Mr. Thomas Hanrahan, employed as an under gardener in the estate. Mr. Rogers, who purchased Oaklands House during the early part of the last century, recognised that both the well and the church were neglected and he set about restoring them. Mr. Hanrahan and the garden staff were involved in the project. This included removing the ivy from the walls and the ruined church in addition to building a retaining wall around the well. Mr. Rogers had two spouts removed from the mill located approximately 200 metres downstream from the well and these were neatly placed in their present position at St. Patrick's Well.

The question could be asked "Was the present day Oaklands Estate and St. Patrick's Well the site of the original abbey of Inishlounaught, established by St. Mochoemoc, who died in 685AD.

Archaeology Ireland Spring 2021 notes that “Holy wells are a common feature of early monastic sites and are often the sole surviving above-ground element.” However the existence of a well in itself is not sufficient to investigate this theory, but a number of other factors add to my belief that this site may be that of the ancient monastery. I propose that the original stables at the house, the kitchen gardens of the house, a ruined mill that was in existence up to the 1970s and the well were part of this Abbey.

It is important to look at the characteristics of the abbeys of the 7th century. Abbeys were frequently situated on tribal boundaries. This area could be described as in the environs of the tribal boundary between the O Faoláins and the O'Briens.

A nearby breen, has been curiously named the Breen Glas, this has led to much speculation as to why one breen would be greener than any other. The Irish word “Glas” can be translated to mean green, or stream (glais) or woad. Woad (*Isatis tinctoria*) is a plant that yields a rich blue dye and was much in demand. There is a possibility that this dye was used by the monks from the Abbey of Inishlounaght in their manuscripts.

A typical 7th Century monastery might include a church, a water well, farmland, a kitchen garden, a mill, a cemetery, a forge, a writing room and an infirmary. Evidence of most of these features exist in the area in question. Therefore it is important to look closely at the house, the stables, the land, the mill, the walled garden and the well.

### **The House and Stables.**

According to Burke's History of Clonmel, Oaklands House was built circa 1778 by Simeon Sparrow, a Quaker, who owned a modest mill at Toberaheena. Although there is no recorded evidence of an older establishment here, folklore and the stories of older people from the locality would suggest otherwise claiming that Oaklands House was built on the site of an existing construction. Was this site that of the ancient monastery of Inishloughnaught? It is a possibility. It is recognised by historians and noted by the Tipperary History and Society that mansions were often built on the ruins of castles, tower houses and abbeys.

The servants' tunnel and stables were older than the house. In 1951 the stables were re-slatted and I was invited up onto the roof to witness something that the slater Paddy Mahon, from Galway, said I would never see again, there was not a single steel nail to be found anywhere in the roof. All the joists, rafters, slating lats and slates were kept in place by oak dowels. In addition, the slates on Oaklands House built in 1778 (according to Paddy) were kept in place by forge cut nails. Were the stables and tunnels part of the ancient monastery? The structure of the roof certainly confirms that the stables were part of an older structure.

### **The Kitchen Garden**

The size of the Kitchen Garden on this estate is surprising. One would expect to find a smaller garden attached to a private residence. The Kitchen Garden at Oaklands is described as the



largest of any known in this locality. The garden has an area of 4.5 acres and is surrounded by 15 foot walls. Local history suggests these were famine walls. This is questionable as the masonry seems to differ from other famine walls in the area and of other walls in the locality.

These walls are completely built from limestone, whereas archaeologists suggest that walls dating from the 12th Century and later in the Clonmel area comprised a mixture of limestone and yellow sandstone. This suggests that the walls date from an earlier period. Currently there are two gates entering the Kitchen Garden, these gates appear to be more modern than the walls. They were constructed using cut limestone which would suggest that



they were added to the garden during the 1840s/50s. The fact that prior to the addition of the gates the only apparent access to the garden was via a tunnel under the road (L216) further strengthens my belief that this may be the locality of the ancient Abbey of Inishloughnaught.

### **The Tunnels**

There were two tunnels. One tunnel allowed access to the kitchen garden.

The second tunnel known as the servants' tunnel had several storage spaces branching from the tunnel. During the 1940's and 50's these spaces were used to store coal, potatoes and root vegetables. Could these spaces have been the monks' cells?

### **The Well**

Oaklands stands in the Civil Parish of Inishloughnaught. Geoffrey Keating, an Irish scholar and one of the four masters, claimed that Inishleamhnacht meant the water column of the fresh and sweet milk.<sup>1</sup> This would describe St. Patrick's Well. Up to the early part of the 20th century the well was little more than a hole in the landscape from which water bubbled forth. Monasteries were built near a water supply. This well may have been the water supply for the monastery.

It is known that the abbey of Inishloughnaught possessed 326 acres of land in the townland of St. Patrick's Well. <sup>2</sup>



On the well grounds today the crudely carved cross in the centre of the pool is dated from the 7th Century, suggesting a religious structure in this area.





The Church ruins currently on the grounds are believed to be a 17th Century structure however some archaeologists have claimed that this structure was built on the site of a previous structure. Could this have been the monastery church?

Another feature of the typical ancient abbey was the mill. This area is associated with milling. The water spouts in the well were moved from a nearby mill to their current location.

Statements from a number of eminent historians allude to the fact that this may be the site of the ancient abbey. Historians Fr. Burke, Fr. Colmcille Conway and Colonel Sidney Watson all noted that during the 17th century suppression of the Abbey of Inishloughnaught, the monks returned to St. Patrick's Well. This suggests they had resided there previously.

### **A Cemetery**

Should it be a site of an establishment that existed for over 4 centuries, there must have been a cemetery on the site. Should a cemetery be discovered it could prove or disprove the theory.



## **The Second Abbey of Inishloughnaught**

The 12th century Abbey of Inishloughnaught was built by the O'Briens of Thomond and the O'Faoláins of the Northern Deise.

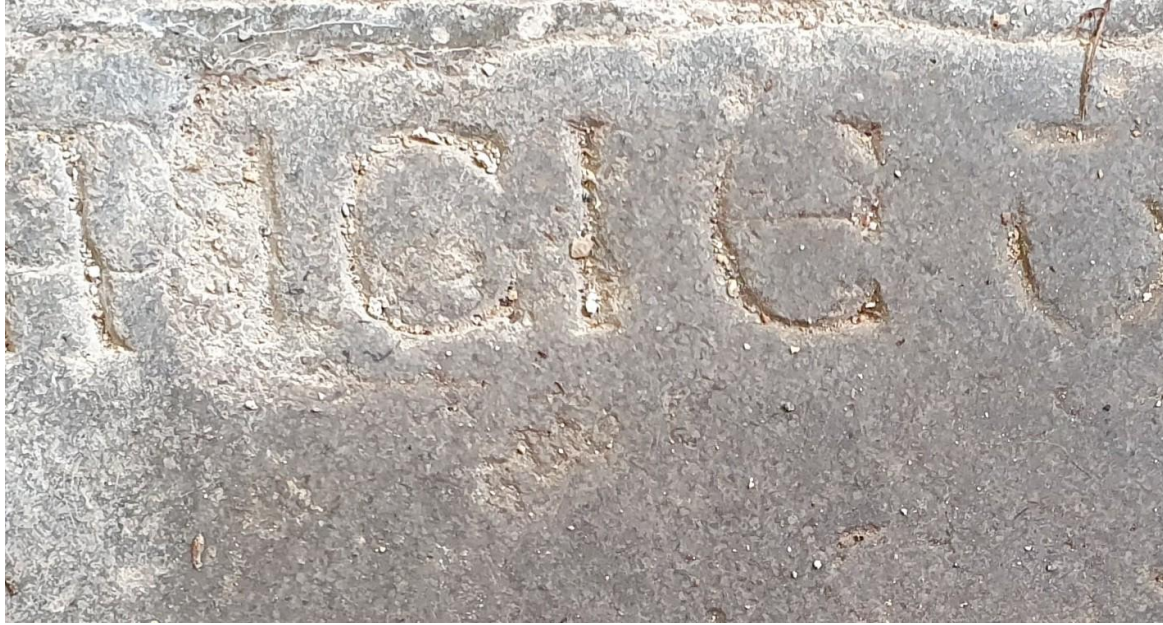
The abbey was built with golden sandstone that was quarried in Kilganey. The stone from this quarry was also used in the building of S.S. Peter and Paul's Church in Clonmel.

The stone was difficult to transport and had to be transported on the River Suir. The stone was moved by barge from the Kilganey quarry to a jetty at the Mill Stream in Marlfield. The remains of this jetty can be seen when the water level in the river is low. This jetty is located 200 yards from the site of the second abbey.

*"Though the abbot was not mitred after 1228, the monastic property was very extensive, comprising a minimum of 8,500 acres. On 6th April 1540, the abbey was surrendered to the Crown, and the last abbot was collated to the vicarage of St. Patrick's Well. The property around the abbey was leased successively to Thomas Butler (created Lord Caher 1543), William Crofton, Sir Cormac McDermot-MacCarthy, Mary Aylward and Edward Geogh. But it would appear from the Patent Rolls that, by 1582, the buildings had been "burned and otherwise destroyed" by "undutiful subjects". Thereafter, although there was a titular Abbot of Inishlounaught up to Cromwellian times, the site for the next 200 years remained in ruins, which no doubt provided material for local builders."*<sup>3</sup>

What became of the structure of the early abbey? Local folklore suggests that elements were recycled firstly into the second Abbey of Inisloughnaught and in later years into the chapel in the village. This chapel, a Church of Ireland chapel, named St. Patrick's Chapel is a multi-denominational chapel used by both Church of Ireland and Roman Catholic worshippers in the area.

It could be suggested that script engraved into the doorstep of the chapel originated in either the 7th or 12th Century abbey.



Stones from the 12th Century abbey have reportedly been incorporated into this chapel. A golden sandstone door-like shape on the western gable of this chapel, above the main entrance and visible from the interior, appears to be a remnant of the 12th Century abbey. This older (now false) door has the appearance of the style of door seen in ancient abbeys.



Following the Tudor dissolution of the abbey, the 12th Century building was dismantled by the Butlers of Ormond and the Bagwell family. The stones and structures of the abbey may have been recycled. It has been suggested that the romanesque arches are currently incorporated into the Main Guard in Clonmel. It also appears that some of the golden sandstone from the abbey was used to construct the entrance to the Bagwell Estate and in the construction of the Bagwell's Farmyard. (stores, sawmills, stables etc)











## Oaklands Today ( 2024)



Today Oaklands house stands abandoned and vandalised. In recent years the roof was damaged by fire, thought to be an arson attack.

However, drone footage of the property without a roof displays the architectural layout of the building. On first glance, it could be suggested that the layout resembles the layout of a church, the centre area giving the impression of a nave and altar area. As stated previously, although there is no recorded evidence of an older establishment here, folklore and the stories of older people from the locality would suggest otherwise claiming that Oaklands House was built on the site of an existing structure. Could that existing site have been the church attached to the Abbey of Inishloughnaught?







#### Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The World of Geoffrey Keating by Bernadette Cunningham p.19 ( footnote 14)

<sup>2</sup> Cistercian Abbeys of Tipperary by Colmcille Ó Conbhuidhe OCSO p. 159

<sup>3</sup> Clonmel An Architectural Guide by Elizabeth Shee and S.J.Watson