

SAINT PATRICK in County Down

English Translation



ST PATRICK

In

COUNTY DOWN

St Patrick is universally remembered and revered as the missionary who brought Christianity to Ireland in the 5th century. Remarkably, we know about his work from his own writings, his autobiographical Confession and his Letter to the Soldiers of Coroticus. These are in Latin, as are the two earliest accounts of Patrick's life, by Muirchú and Tírechán, in the 7th century. Later sources fill out and embellish the story, particularly the long Tripartite Life, written in Irish about 900.

It is difficult to summarise the complexities surrounding Patrick, but, briefly, this is the story. He was born (probably late in the 4th century) somewhere in the coastal area of western Britain. As a youth of sixteen he was captured by raiders and brought to Ireland as a slave. Already a Christian, his faith grew in captivity (near Slemish in mid Antrim). After six years he escaped by boat to France, and made his way home to Britain. Summoned by the angel, Victor, he returned to Ireland, despite opposition in Britain, and spent the rest of his life preaching the gospel in Ireland.

This outline is from Patrick himself, but he does not tell us where and when he worked. It was left to later writers to develop the 'where?' and to modern scholars to debate the 'when?'. There is still no agreed view on his dates, but the traditional picture is that he returned to Ireland in 432 and died in 461. Muirchú's account describes Patrick's work in Lecale, and the Tripartite Life refers to several other churches in Co. Down. This guide-card briefly covers the main sites in the county associated with Patrick in the early written sources or in local tradition.

Saul

Muirchú tells how Patrick landed at Inber Slane (identifiable with a river called the Slaney) and converted the local chief, Díchu, who lived 'where Patrick's barn is now'. After a visit to his old master near Slemish he returned to Mag Inis (Lecale), and 'he favoured and loved the district, and the faith began to spread there'. When close to death, he was told by the angel to 'return to the place from which you came, that is, to Sabul', where he died. Sabul is Old Irish for barn, and later sources fill out the story, explaining that Díchu gave Patrick his barn to use. Saul appears in some texts as the place of Patrick's burial. Indeed in 1293 the annals claim the finding of the burials of Patrick, Brigit and Columba at Saul, but this was probably a piece of 'Irish-party' propaganda against the claims of Downpatrick.

The ancient site is occupied by a graveyard and the Church of Ireland church, built in 1933 to mark the 1500th anniversary of Patrick's arrival. It occupies a level area on a steep hillside, with fine views N. to the Quoile estuary. There is no material from Patrick's time, but much evidence for early church activity at the site. Stone-built graves and a souterrain are reported. There is an important collection of at least ten cross-carved stones, ranging in date from the 8th to the 12th century, two still standing in the graveyard (one illustrated). In the NW. part of the graveyard are

two small, rubble-built, stone-roofed structures. One is used as a vault and rendered, but the other is clear. There is a tradition that Patrick used this tiny space as a cell, but it is unlikely to be earlier than the 11th or 12th century. It is one of a group of Ulster 'mortuary houses', small structures built to hold a revered burial or bones transferred from elsewhere. Similar 'houses' can be seen at Banagher and Bovevagh (Co. Londonderry) and, very like Saul, at Moville (Co. Donegal).

In the mid 12th century St Malachy introduced Augustinian Canons at Saul. From the medieval period there is a gable wall W. of the present church and a coffin-lid, built into one of the gateposts S. of the church. Saul's medieval history was stormy, but the abbey continued until the 1540s, when it was dissolved. The ancient site has continued in use for burial and Church of Ireland parish worship.

Raholp

Muirchú writes that when his hour of death was approaching, Patrick received the sacrament from bishop Tassach. Later sources add that Tassach was one of Patrick's craftsmen: 'he is the first that made a case for Jesu's staff, and Raholp to the east of Downpatrick is his church'. This refers to the enshrining of the precious crozier, the Bachall Ísu, one of Ireland's chief relics until its destruction in 1538. Calendars record Tassach's festival day as 14 April. Nothing more is known until the 1306 taxation in which 'the church of Rathcolpe' is listed. The church was reported to be ruined in 1622.

Raholp (Rath-colpa, fort of the heifer) lies 2 miles E. of Saul and 1 mile from the shore. The church, known locally as St Tassach's or Templemoyle, stands on a slight rise in gently hilly country. The eminence is artificially heightened, partly by burials, and its sides are revetted in places with dry-stone walling and large slabs.

The church is a simple rectangular structure of shale, originally bound with clay, not mortar. The ruin was heavily restored in 1915 by F. J. Bigger who did much reconstruction, including building up the gables, the S. wall and the altar. But in origins this is an Early Christian period structure, probably of the 10th or 11th century. It had a lintelled W. door, later replaced by N. and S. doors.

Though the E. window is partly restored, its lintel is original, with lightly incised crosses, and there are small cupboards on either side of the altar. Bigger found a grave under the altar and other burials in the church. East of the church is a large slab with a hole cut through it, the base for a cross, also a small plain pillar-stone. About ten slabs carved with simple crosses are recorded from Raholp, but most have disappeared in recent years. We would be grateful for news of them, especially for their return to the church. The holy well, a spring SE. of the church, has been largely obscured by cultivation.

Downpatrick

By the 7th century the whereabouts of Patrick's burial were disputed, and there are hints of rivalry for his remains between the men of Ulster and groups further west. Muirchú's account comes down firmly in favour of Downpatrick – 'Dú Lethglaisse, where Patrick lies buried'. On the other hand, additions to Tírechán's text give in one place 'Sabul Patricii, in the church near the sea' as the burial site, but in another admit 'where his bones are no man knows'. The conclusion is that we do not know if Downpatrick's claim to Patrick's burial really goes back to the 5th century, but it certainly goes back to the 7th, and was elaborated in later texts. A bishop of Down appears in 584, but only from the mid 8th century are there regular references to a church and clergy at Down. A round tower stood SW. of the cathedral until the late 18th century, and the cross E. of the cathedral and other fragments of crosses remain from the early church on the hilltop.

In the 12th century Down's claims to the burial again come into prominence. The visiting Welshman, Giraldus Cambrensis, describes how the bodies of Patrick, Brigit and Columba were found

(in 1185), 'through divine revelation', in Down, in a tomb with three sections. John de Courcy, Anglo-Norman conqueror of Ulster, had introduced Benedictine monks from Chester to Down in 1183, and it is fair to see the 1185 'discovery' as a political manoeuvre designed to attract ancient glory for the new regime.

The traditional site of Patrick's grave is in the graveyard S. of the cathedral, marked by a granite boulder, set there in 1900 by F.J. Bigger. It is carved with a cross (ironically of a type hardly ever found in Ulster) and the name PATRIC. St Patrick's Bell was believed to have been used by Patrick and placed in his grave. It is probably the bell reported to have been found by Columba in the grave in 553 and given to Armagh. It was one of Armagh's most precious relics, and in about 1100 it was enclosed in a magnificent shrine. The bell is of sheet iron, riveted and dipped in bronze. Bell and shrine are both in the National Museum in Dublin.

Struell Wells

Struell Wells is a remarkable complex of holy wells, set in a secluded rocky valley along the line of a SE.-flowing stream. Though known as St Patrick's Wells, the association is traditional rather than historical, arising from their nearness to Saul, 1½ miles away. We know that springs and streams were important in pre-Christian 'Celtic' religion, and wells are prominent in early accounts of Patrick's work.

Struell (from sruthair, stream) enters history in the 1306 taxation where the 'Chapel of Strohull' is listed, and some medieval cut stones survive on the site. It seems to have been a place of pilgrimage in the middle ages. In 1517 an Italian bishop reported a stream which 'gushed out from the mountain and fell far down into an open building', which could well be Struell. There is an account of the site by Father Edmund MacCana in about 1643 and another by Walter Harris in 1744. The pilgrim route included the wells, a series of stone cairns on the valley floor and rocks, including St Patrick's chair or bed, on the valley side. But by about 1800 Struell was becoming the scene of disturbances and by the mid 19th century the wells were less frequented. Pilgrims came especially on Midsummer Eve and the Friday before Lammas.

The church is a gaunt rectangular structure, started in the mid 18th century but apparently never finished. Opposite is the drinking well, a small circular well-house with a corbelled dome. Inside notice the marks of wicker centering: timbers supported wicker mats on which the freshly mortared stones dried and hardened. The stream continues underground to the eye well covered with a small rectangular well-house with a pyramidal roof of a large stone corbels (cover illustration).

The underground stream runs on to the men's bath-house, a rectangular stone-roofed building with three rooms. The two reached up steps were for men, the first, with stone benches, for dressing and the second for bathing, its large tank entered down steps and the water flow controlled by a moveable sluice. The third room, entered from E. at a lower level, was the women's dressing room. Opposite its door is the entrance to the women's bath-house, now roofless. There are several small cupboards in its walls and the water runs in from a high level, rather like a modern shower.

It is impossible to date these simple structures precisely. They are in the same tradition as corbelled well-houses and pig crews elsewhere in Lecale, and are likely to date from the post-medieval period (17th-century or later). Struell is a haunting place of strong atmosphere. It is not difficult to imagine it having been visited for centuries, even millennia!

Four other Co. Down sites appear in the Tripartite Life, indicating that by about 900 they had been drawn into the Patrick story, but not that there was any firm 5th-century link with the saint. Patrick

travelled S. from #Saul to preach to Ross, son of Trichem, who lived at Derlus. There writer adds 'there stands a small town (cathair) today, namely Bright, where is bishop Loairn'. The Church of Ireland parish church of Bright stands on a rocky height and is thought to occupy the early site. Immediately after this incident, the Life tells how Patrick met a youth herding swine, called Mochaoi. Patrick preached, baptised and tonsured him. This was Mochaoi of Nendrum, the island monastery in Strangford Lough, where there are extensive early remains. Among Patrick's household was Domongart, son of Echaid: 'he will raise Patrick's relics shortly before Doom. His church is Rath Murbuilc on the side of Sliabh Slánge'. This is Maghera, inland from Newcastle, where the stump of a round tower and a medieval church mark the early site. Slieve Donard, highest peak of the Mourne, takes its name from this saint. There is a brief reference to a church which can be identified as Comber: 'Conlae son of Coelbad received Patrick with humility and offered him Domnach Combair'. The annals report the burning of Cillcombair in 1031, but nothing more is known of the early foundation. Patrick traditionally planted the yew tree which gave Newry its name. St Patrick's Well is on the seashore at Sheepland Beg.

Raloph, Struell Wells, Nendrum and Maghera are in State Care and accessible at all times. The graveyards at Saul, Downpatrick and Bright are also accessible. The St Patrick Heritage Centre is in Down Museum in Downpatrick.

