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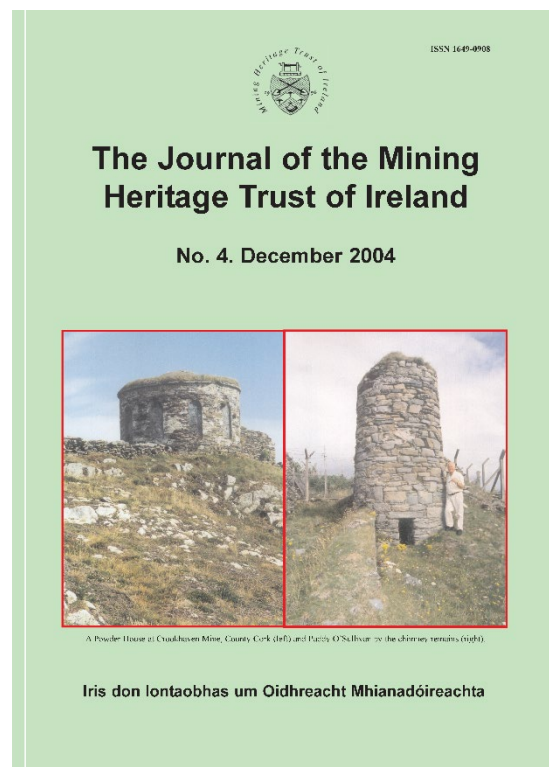
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# MELLIFONT - AN ABBEY IN A QUARRY

By Geraldine Carville

**Abstract:** The siting of the Abbey of Mellifont, County Louth, was influenced by local geological factors as well as by the original design and model derived from the Cistercian Order at Clairvaux in France. The evidence of these influences is discussed and illustrated. In effect the building is an Abbey in a quarry. *Journal of the Mining Heritage Trust of Ireland*, 4, 2004, 27-30.

On his return to Ireland from a visit to the Pope in 1139, Malachy, the Papal Legate to Ireland, was intending to bring the Cistercian Order to Ireland. He approached his friend Donnchad O'Cearbhail for a land grant. Malachy negotiated with him and moved the boundary line of the Armagh Diocese from Slieve Breagh (which was a mountain ridge which ran from Clogher Head to Collon) to the mid-water of the River Boyne. This made the southern boundary of the Diocese of Armagh co-terminous with the kingdom of Airghialla. In this newly acquired territory, O'Cearbhail gave the land grant for Mellifont Abbey (Figure 1). In due course Bernard sent a monk named Robert from his own Abbey of Clairvaux (France) to take charge of building the new abbey.

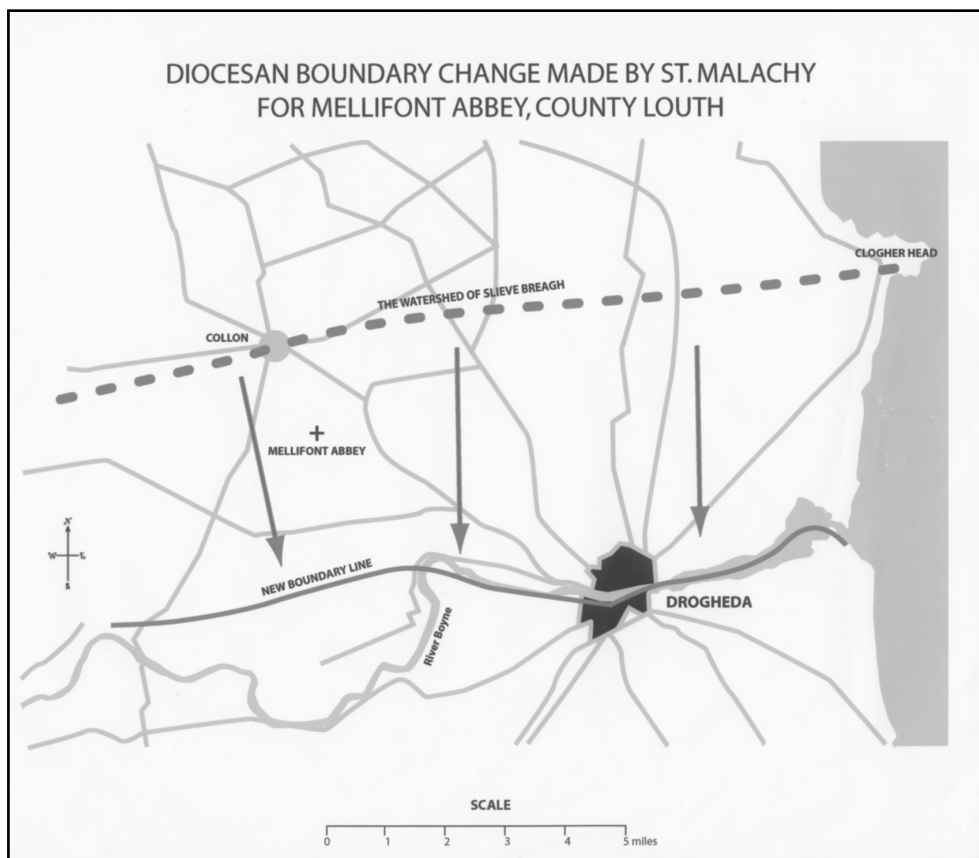
The question as to where the monks lived whilst the abbey was being built has never been raised nor debated. However, Monasterboice, one mile from the Mellifont site (as the crow flies) had been vacant from 1122 and perhaps with some temporary wooden buildings may have been used. It was part of Mellifont's possessions, and on the foundation land grant given by O'Cearbhail (Figure 2).

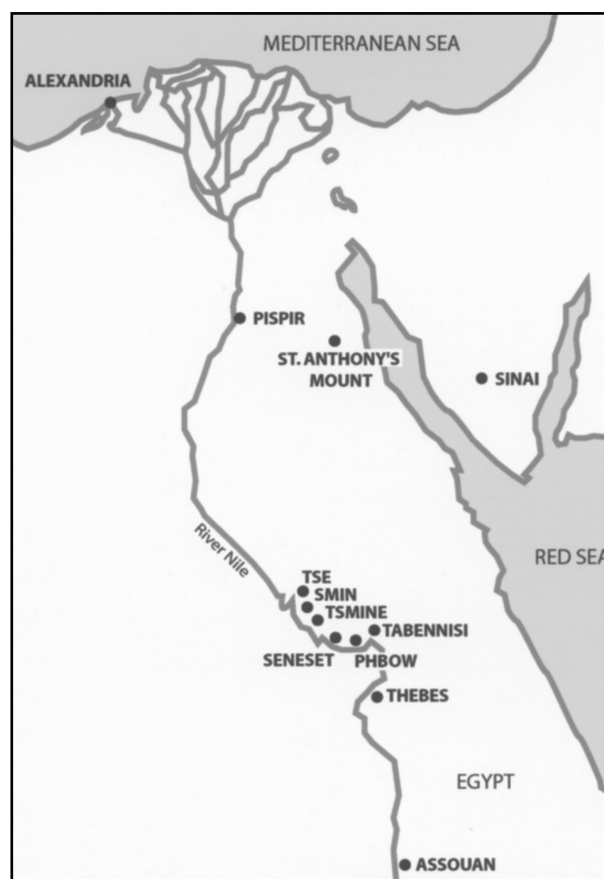
The site at Mellifont "far from the haunts of man", was very restricted, it was in a cul-de-sac on the River Mattock, a meandering tributary stream to the River Boyne. However the French architect monk from Clairvaux would have had knowledge of site problems, as the monastery of Clairvaux had experienced difficulties and had to move from their first choice site eastwards, thereby establishing Clairvaux II.

It was decided to build Mellifont Abbey on the left bank of the Mattock River, but the standard plan brought from Clairvaux was more suitable for a right bank site. Subsequently, twenty-five of the thirty-three Cistercian abbeys were sited on the right banks of rivers. The tendency to choose the right bank may have had its origin in early monastic sites in Egypt. It is known that in AD 285 Anthony, the father of monasticism, crossed the River Nile and walked to a place called Pispir on the right bank (Figure 4) where he established a hermitage. Three hundred miles south of Pispir and five hundred miles south of the Nitran desert Pachomius decided to build a cell for himself in a deserted village called Tabennisi on the east bank of the Nile. When that became too congested he built another monastery at Pebook three or four miles to the north and likewise on the right bank of the Nile (Figure 3).

Cistercian abbeys needed water for domestic purposes and for water power. The most desirable water power situation was one where a tributary stream with a relatively steep gradient joined a main stream, from which an artificial watercourse could be engineered, passing first of all along the southern side of the cloistral complex and if possible from west to east so as to pass the refectory and kitchen before reaching the rere dorter at the end of the monk's house. This was not possible at the site for Mellifont Abbey, since the Mattock follows a meandering course (Figure 4).

**Figure 1. A map illustrating the diocesan boundary change for Mellifont Abbey, County Louth**





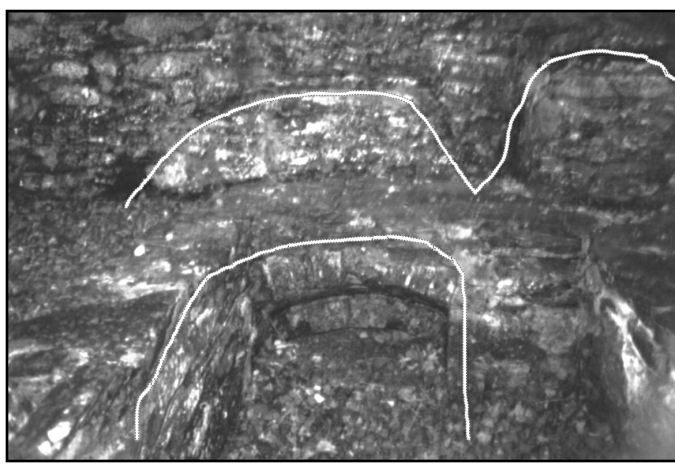
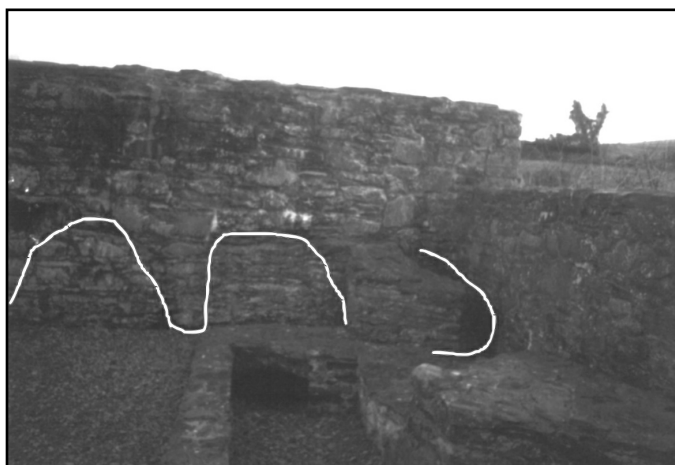
**Figure 2. Top left.** Map of the Charter lands of Mellifont Abbey in County Louth.

**Figure 3. Top right.** Monastic sites on the right bank of the River Nile.

**Figure 4. Left.** Aerial photograph of Mellifont Abbey, with the position of a conduit from the moat like structure leading to the Lavabo and another to the kitchens, highlighted, centre right.



**Figure 5. Top. and Figure 6. Above. Rock outcrops which show the challenge that the builders of Mellifont Abbey had to overcome to excavate this site. These outcrops were below floor level and were not cut away.**



**Figure 8. Top and Figure 9. Above. A close up of a conduit shown in the top picture. It is claimed that Mellifont Abbey made bricks as well as tiles.**



**Figure 7. East of the Chapter House is a modern farm dwelling owned by Mr Russel. In his garage is a part-covered conduit leading from the moat like structure which was engineered by the builders of Mellifont Abbey (c.1142) to supply water to the monastery.**

The right bank of the River Mattock is steep, with an overburden of fifty feet (approx.) of boulder clay. Furthermore it is in County Meath whilst the left bank is in County Louth. The left bank had an outcrop of Silurian grits (sandstones) and slates. This had to be excavated to a depth of approximately twenty feet. There is a slope extending for thirty-four and a half feet from the west end of the church towards the east of considerable depth and a crypt of twelve feet (approx.) had to be built under the west end of the church. During periods of very heavy rainfall, the Mattock has flooded the land on the left bank, including the crypt. Mellifont Abbey effectively occupies a quarry site; there are still surface rock exposures visible in the former day stairs area, and in the kitchen area (Figures 5, 6).

This type of rock, Silurian sandstone, in this region, has a low permeability, it does not allow large quantities of water to move through it and water wells are usually low yielding and it is classified as a poor aquifer. The Cistercian architect/engineers always cut the necessary watercourses before any building was undertaken. Here the nature of the bedrock does not allow water to move through it readily, with the result that seeps, rises and small springs are common, particularly at changes in slope. On the hillside overlooking the eastern range of buildings, watercourses devised by the early builders can be seen in the

form of shore drains and there is a 'moat-like structure/reservoir' whereby streams and springs were intercepted and engineered to flow into this 'reservoir' and thereafter via a conduit into the kitchen of the abbey. Another led to the Lavabo, after all 'cleanliness was inherent in Cistercian aesthetics'. The Lavabo would have had in the middle a circular basin from which water never ceased to flow (Figures 7, 8 and 9).

The perfect monastery was evolved in Clairvaux and rapidly became the norm. Abbots of other foreign monasteries came to send their architects to Clairvaux to take the precise measurements of their paradigm. During the building of Mellifont Abbey, the French architect/engineer monk Robert went back to his own monastery of Clairvaux. Perhaps he returned to study some aspect of its buildings but unfortunately this has led to conjecture that there was a clash of French/Irish temperament or that something went wrong relating to the work in progress that made him return. No doubt Bernard discussed the problems with him when he arrived at Clairvaux but there does not seem to have been acrimony, because when Bernard asked him to come back to Ireland to continue the work, he acceded to

Bernard's request "like an obedient son".

Robert must have been concerned about the limits of the site; there was no available passage or lane to the exterior of the east range. The presence of a high-rise bank, which would have required further rock cutting, was a physical obstacle to providing one.

The foundation of Mellifont Abbey was very successful and before Malachy's death in 1148, five daughter houses were founded, Bective 1147, Inishlounaght 1147, Boyle 1148, Monasternenagh 1148, Baltinglass 1148, but none of these were faced with the difficulty of excavating a quarry-like foundation as did Mellifont Abbey.

## REFERENCE

Braunfels, W. *Monasteries of Western Europe: the architecture of the Orders*. Thames and Hudson, London, 1972, p.103.