

MANISTER, or MONASTER-NENAGH:

A parish, partly in the baronies of Coshma and Pubblebrien, but chiefly in the barony of Small County, 2 miles (N.E.) from Croom, on the road from Limerick to Charleville, by way of Athlacca; containing, with the district of Grange, 2800 inhabitants. This place, called anciently Kilmargy, derives its present name from the foundation of a monastery by O'Brien, King of Munster, in 1151, in fulfilment of a vow previous to the battle in which he defeated the Danes, who, in 1148, had encamped round their strong fortress of Rathmore; and which took place on the plains of Kilmargy, the site of the present ruins. This establishment, which was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, and amply endowed by its founder with the advowson and tithes of Kilmargy and other parishes, was appropriated to Cistercian monks from the abbey of Mellifont, and became eminent for its sanctity and its wealth; its abbot obtained a mitre from the Pope and had a seat in the great councils of the kingdom. The abbey was frequently plundered by the Danes; and in 1307, Gerald, Earl of Desmond, with his sons and several nobles who were on a visit to the abbot, was suddenly surprised by O'Brien, of Thomond, who took the earl, his sons, and the noble prisoners, put his retainers to the sword, and destroyed a considerable portion of the monastery. In 1579, Sir John Fitzgerald, brother of the Earl of Desmond, assembled here a force of 2000 Irish and Spaniards, headed by Father Allen, legate of the Pope, and assisted by the abbot of the monastery, who were attacked on the plains of Nenagh by Sir William Malby, at the head of 150 cavalry and 600 infantry, and defeated with great slaughter. The Earl of Desmond, who had witnessed the battle from a hill about a mile distant, on perceiving the result of the conflict, retired into his strong castle of Askeaton; among the slain was found the body of the legate, with the consecrated banner grasped firmly in his hand. During this engagement the Irish and Spanish soldiers took shelter in the abbey, which was greatly injured by the fire of the English cannon; the refectory and cloisters were destroyed, and the surrounding walls were rased to the ground. The monastery, though it never recovered its original importance, existed till the dissolution, and with all its possessions was granted by Queen Elizabeth to Sir Henry Wallop, who fitted up the choir for a parochial church. During the various disturbances of more modern times, this place has been also the scene of much violent contention.

The parish, which is intersected by the River Commogue, comprises 5456 statute acres, as applotted under the tithe act; about one-third of the land is under tillage, and the remainder meadow and pasture, which being low ground is frequently overflowed by the river, and is sometimes, for several winter months, under water; the soil is fertile, and the system of agriculture improved. Near the extremity of the parish is a tract of bog of about 200 acres, mostly exhausted. The principal seats are Abbeyville, the residence of R. White, Esq.; Manister House, of J. Heffernan, Esq.; Fort Elizabeth, of the Rev. J. Croker; and Castle Ivers, of R. Ivers, Esq. The living is a vicarage, in the diocese of Limerick; Lord Southwell, in whom the rectory is impropriate, claims the patronage and the tithes of the vicarage also, and allows the incumbent a stipend of £14 late currency: the tithes amount to £138. The Protestant parishioners attend the church of Ballycahane. In the R.C. divisions the parish forms part of the unions or districts of Bruff and Fedamore; there are two chapels. About 140 children are taught in three private schools. The remains of the ancient monastery are situated on a flat limestone rock, on the eastern bank of the river,

and consist chiefly of the walls and gables of the church, which is 176 feet in length and divided near the centre by a stone screen separating the choir from the nave; the former was lighted by a triple lancet window of lofty dimensions at the east end, and above the ceiling, which was richly groined, is a chamber in the roof, of the same dimensions as the choir, to which was an ascent by a private staircase from the altar through the wall of the north aisle. The nave is separated from the aisles by ranges of square pillars, which appear to have been encased, and there are some small remains of the south transept, and a small chapel of very elegant design. The prevailing character is that of the very early English, but the present remains are inadequate to convey any just idea of the former grandeur of this once sumptuous and extensive monastery. About a mile to the south-east of the abbey are the ruins of the castle of Rathmore, built by the Earl of Desmond, in 1306, on the site of the ancient Danish fortress; it was garrisoned by the Irish and Spaniards at the battle of Manister, in 1579, but was abandoned on the retreat of Sir John Fitzgerald; on the retreat of Sir William Malby it was again taken possession of by the Earl of Desmond's forces, who were afterwards expelled by Sir George Carew; and soon after it was suffered to fall into ruin. The remains occupy a gentle eminence, commanding extensive views over a fertile country, and form a conspicuous and interesting object for many miles round.