

The Rock of Cashel

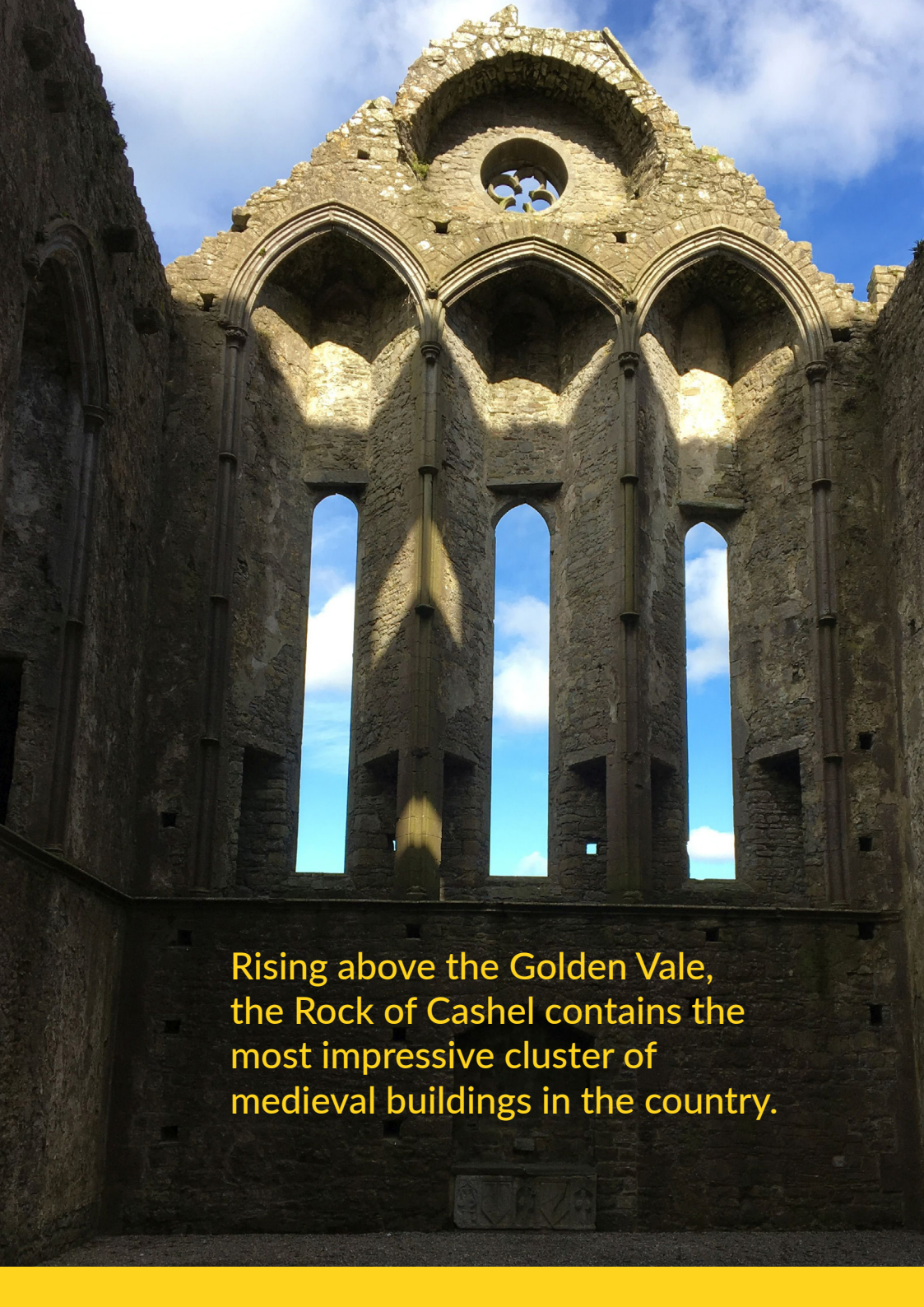
The High King of Irish Monuments



OPW

Oidhreacht Éireann
Heritage Ireland





Rising above the Golden Vale,
the Rock of Cashel contains the
most impressive cluster of
medieval buildings in the country.



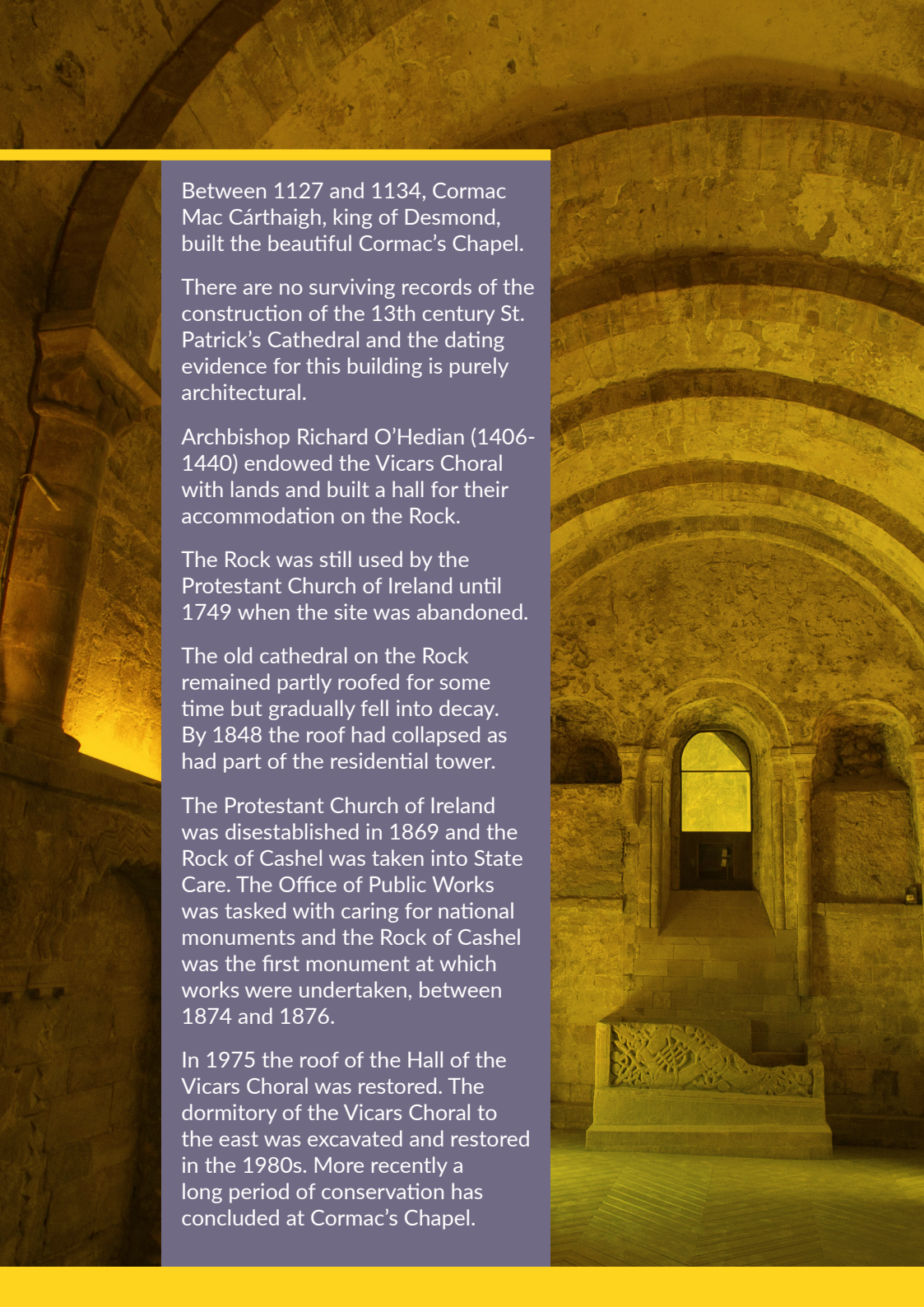
The Rock of Cashel first came to prominence as a centre of power in the late 4th or early 5th century AD when the Eóganacht clan emerged as the kings of Munster. One of their kings, Conall Corc, is considered the traditional founder of the Cashel kingship.

According to tradition, St. Patrick baptised the grandsons of Conall Corc at Cashel. During the baptism the saint's pointed crozier pierced the foot of the King, Óengus mac Nad Froích. Óengus, believing it to be an essential part of the ceremony, suffered in silence. An unusual feature of the Cashel Kingship was many of its kings were also ecclesiastics.

By the later 10th century the Dál Cais clan, centred around Killaloe in Co. Clare, ousted the Eóganacht from the Cashel kingship. Brian Boru of the Dál Cais succeeded his brother as king of Cashel in 978. He became the first Munster king to achieve the high kingship of Ireland, and died at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014.

In 1101, Brian Boru's great-grandson, Muircheartach Ua Briain, gave the Rock of Cashel to the clergy. By this master stroke he advanced his credentials as a church reformer and deprived his old enemies, the Eóganacht, of their ancient royal seat. The Rock of Cashel now became the centre of the Diocese of Cashel and was expanded over ensuing centuries.

Cashel would have had a large church or cathedral soon after 1101 and certainly by 1111. No trace of this earlier structure remains. This probably stood on the site of the east end of the 13th-century cathedral choir.



Between 1127 and 1134, Cormac Mac Cárthaigh, king of Desmond, built the beautiful Cormac's Chapel.

There are no surviving records of the construction of the 13th century St. Patrick's Cathedral and the dating evidence for this building is purely architectural.

Archbishop Richard O'Hedian (1406-1440) endowed the Vicars Choral with lands and built a hall for their accommodation on the Rock.

The Rock was still used by the Protestant Church of Ireland until 1749 when the site was abandoned.

The old cathedral on the Rock remained partly roofed for some time but gradually fell into decay. By 1848 the roof had collapsed as had part of the residential tower.

The Protestant Church of Ireland was disestablished in 1869 and the Rock of Cashel was taken into State Care. The Office of Public Works was tasked with caring for national monuments and the Rock of Cashel was the first monument at which works were undertaken, between 1874 and 1876.

In 1975 the roof of the Hall of the Vicars Choral was restored. The dormitory of the Vicars Choral to the east was excavated and restored in the 1980s. More recently a long period of conservation has concluded at Cormac's Chapel.



The Round Tower

The round tower is the oldest surviving building on the Rock and may date to 1101 when the site was handed over to the church.

Round towers were free-standing bell towers built between the late 10th and the mid-12th centuries and unique in their shape and form to Ireland.

The round tower at Cashel (28m high) is a particularly fine example and is complete right up to its conical stone roof. Its doorway is well above ground level, a common feature among round towers. It originally would have had wooden floors connected by ladders. The intermediate floors are lit by small lintelled windows. The top floor, which housed the bells, has four triangular-headed windows evenly spaced.

It was commonly believed that round towers were built for defence during the period of Viking raids in Ireland. However, they are poor defensive structures due to only having one doorway and the ease with which they could be set on fire.

In 1965 the tower was struck by lightning forming a large hole which was subsequently repaired by the Office of Public Works.

St. Patrick's Cross

Between the Hall of the Vicars Choral and the cathedral is a replica of the 12th-century St Patrick's cross. The original is housed in the undercroft of the Vicars Choral.

The cross is unusual among Irish high crosses in not having a ring around the cross head. Rather, the cross is carved in the Latin style and probably reflects the European influences of the early 12th century.

The cross had subsidiary support at each side of the shaft, but only one side survives. This has also be interpreted as a framing device for the figures depicted on the cross. There is a figure of the crucified Christ on one side clad in a full-length robe and a cleric on the other.

The base was originally ornately decorated with a possible depiction of a minotaur in a labyrinth on its north face.

Cormac's Chapel

This is one of the finest, most complete, and earliest Romanesque churches in Ireland.

The building consists of a nave and chancel with a projecting tower at the east end of the nave's north and south walls. The nave also has doorways in its north and south walls. Unusual features include the string courses and blind arcades on the internal and external walls.

Above both multi-ordered arched doorways is an animal carved on the tympanum (a stone filling the inner semi-circular head of the arch). The south tympanum possibly depicts an ox, while the north tympanum is carved with a small centaur (half man, half horse) hunting a large lion with a bow and arrow and a Norman-type helmet. Now hemmed in by the walls of the cathedral, the north entrance originally faced onto an open space.

Inside, the small doorway on the south wall of the nave leads to a spiral stairs within the tower, which gives access to the crofts above. The larger more ornate doorway in the north wall gives access to the ground-floor room of the north tower. This may have been a tiny subsidiary chapel or reliquary

The ornate stone sarcophagus at the west end of the nave is strongly influenced by the Scandinavian

Urnes style. Carved from a single block of stone, it features intertwined beasts and snakes on its damaged front panel and is thought to be the sarcophagus of Tadhg Mac Cárthaigh, the brother of Cormac. It is one of only 17 identified sarcophagi in Ireland, and the oldest surviving example. It is roughly contemporary with the chapel but was moved from the 13th-century cathedral in 1875.

A puzzling feature of the chapel is that the chancel is positioned off-centre to the nave.

The chancel arch, of four orders, has finely carved pillars and capitals. The second order from the outside has a remarkable series of stone heads on the pillars and arch. Human faces are mixed with more bizarre grotesque figures. These grotesque heads can be found throughout the chapel, both inside and out and are a blending of animal and human features. Their intended meaning is unclear. The arch retains a considerable amount of original 12th-century decorative paintwork.

The ceiling of the chancel is divided into four triangular areas. All have traces of fresco painting, likely depicting the story of the Magi from the infancy narrative of Christ taken from the New Testament. Extensive remains of paintwork on



the south wall show part of a scene depicting the baptism of Christ. Other haloed figures can be seen throughout the chancel.

Between 1986 and 1997 conservation work of the fresco paintings was undertaken. Layers of late-medieval calcified lime wash were removed from the frescoes with scalpels. Beginning in 2009 and continuing until 2017 conservation of the entire building began. UV germicidal treatments were used to remove mould growth, and a controlled ventilation system was installed to lower the moisture levels in the building. The high-pitched stone roof was repaired and restored and modern guttering installed to divert rainwater away from the façade of the building. As a result of this conservation work visitor access to the interior of the chapel is restricted in order to maintain low moisture levels. Access is now by guided tour only. This work was carried out by the OPW and The Perry Lithgow Partnership. The chapel is now continually monitored by Tobit Curteis Associates.



The Cathedral

The cathedral is a large cruciform Gothic church built between c.1230 and c.1270. A 15th century tower rises from the crossing between the church and the transepts. The cathedral was ingeniously fitted between the round tower, Cormac's Chapel and a rock-cut well. An extensive and varied collection of stone heads was used both inside and outside the building.

The Choir

The high altar was located at the east end of the choir and only the lower part of the east gable survives.

The series of tall lancet windows on the north and south walls are in keeping with a building of the 1230s. Between the tops of these windows are small quatrefoil windows.

The original carved stone in the choir is all of sandstone. This contrasts with the limestone used for fine carving in the remaining later part of the building.

In the south wall starting at the east end are the piscina (a niche with a stone basin and drain, where the sacred vessels were washed) and the damaged sedilia (where the celebrants sat at certain points during mass).

It also contains the wall tomb of the notorious Miler Magrath, Protestant archbishop of Cashel from 1570 to 1622.



Transepts and Crossing

The end walls of both transepts contain large three-light lancet windows, which were lowered in height in the 15th century.

Each transept contains two smaller side chapels. The chapels in the south transept are far shallower because of the pre-existing Cormac's Chapel.

There are significant remains of 15th Century wall paintings on the east wall of the south transept depicting a crucifixion scene.

The arches of the crossing are original 13th-century work and rise from clustered banded columns with ornate capitals. The plainly ribbed vault in the centre was mostly reconstructed in 1875.

The present tower and parapets at the tops of the walls date from the remodelling of the cathedral in the 15th century.

The Nave

The nave or west arm of the church is unusually short in comparison with the choir. The 13th-century plan probably envisaged a longer nave with the north and south doorways placed midway along it. The residential tower was built in the 15th century taking up the whole west end of the original nave and involved a total rebuilding of the walls.

The porch with its groin-vaulted ceiling is the main entrance to the building. A matching porch on the north side no longer survives.



The Hall of the Vicars Choral

This long two-storey building sits to the south of the cathedral. It was built in the early 15th century, the hall first and the dormitory to the east slightly later, by Archbishop O'Hedian to house the Vicars Choral. This group of men, both lay and cleric, was appointed to assist in chanting the cathedral services.

The upper level comprised the main living room of the Vicars Choral with a large fireplace in the south wall. This room has been restored with a timber gallery at its west end. This unique building is the only surviving choir's residence in Ireland.

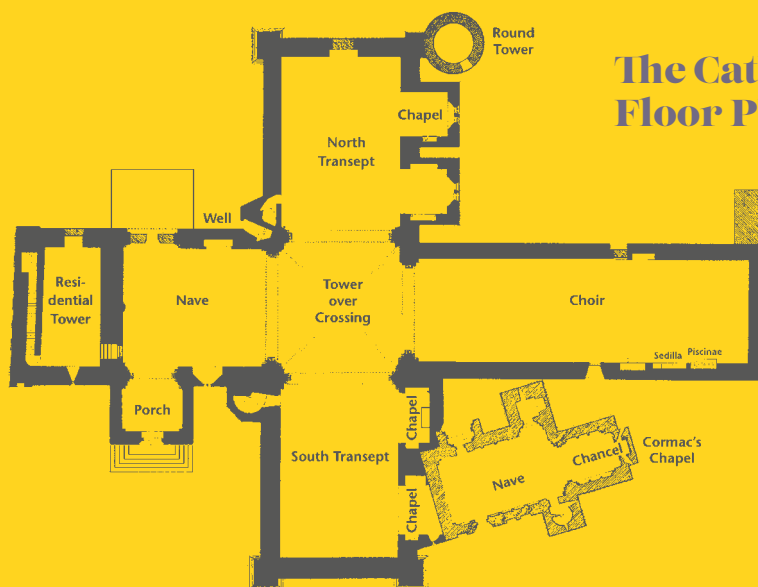
High up on the external east wall is an exhibitionist Sheela-na-gig figure on its side.

Residential Tower House

At roughly the same time that the Hall of the Vicars Choral was constructed, a residential tower house was added by Archbishop O'Hedian to the west end of St. Patrick's Cathedral. It contains five-storeys, and has a surviving barrel vault and is connected to the cathedral with a series of mural passages. It collapsed during a storm in 1848.

Site Map

- A** Entrance
- B** Hall of Vicars Choral
- C** Dormitory of Vicars Choral
- D** St Patrick's Cross (Replica)
- E** Cormac's Chapel
- F** Residential Tower House
- G** The Cathedral
- H** Round Tower
- I** Enclosing Walls & Corner Tower



The Cathedral Floor Plan

The Rock of Cashel today

Today, the Rock of Cashel attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors a year from around the world, and is still the setting for historic events. On 20th May 2011, the late HRM Queen Elizabeth II and the late Duke of Edinburgh visited the Rock of Cashel on the last day of their historic state visit to Ireland. Nearly 11 years later on 25th March 2022, the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall followed in their footsteps and toured the Rock of Cashel. Both visits highlight the ongoing role the Rock of Cashel plays in Irish society today.

Around Cashel

The Rock of Cashel was once part of a rich medieval landscape, many traces of which can still be seen today. In the field to the west sit the ruins of Hore Abbey, founded in the 13th century and dissolved in the mid-16th century. This abbey was the last Cistercian monastery to have been founded in Ireland. To the south are the remains of Dominic's Friary which was founded at the same time at St. Patrick's Cathedral on the Rock of Cashel. Further into the town can be seen Kearney's Castle, a late-15th century tower house later used as a hotel, and the Cashel Palace, an 18th century Palladian style house now operating as a hotel.

