



Left: **Fig. 9—Thirteenth-century sedilia within the chancel.**

Below left: **Fig. 10—View of the crossing arch of the south transept. In the background is the crossing arch of the north transept.**

Below right: **Fig. 11—The distinctive bulbous bases of the piers of the crossing arches.**

thereby preventing access from the nave directly into the southern aisle. Many of the features here have parallels at Jerpoint Abbey, Co. Kilkenny. Above each of the piers were the clerestory windows that provided light for the nave. Only the bottom portions of these windows survive, but more complete examples can also be found at Jerpoint. The placement of clerestory windows directly above the piers rather than the apex of the arches became a peculiar fashion of late medieval churches in Ireland and those at Baltinglass are among the earliest known examples.

The corresponding arcade that separated the northern side of the nave from the north aisle is entirely missing, except for the easternmost arch and the arch at the east end of this aisle where it meets the north transept (Fig. 6): the corresponding arch at the east end of the south aisle is missing. An interesting feature on this northern side of the nave are the remains of an ornate, three-ordered Romanesque doorway, positioned approximately midway along the north wall of the north aisle (Fig. 7). This may represent the original west door of the church that was moved here sometime after the closure of the abbey.



On the south side of the nave (towards the east end) are the remains of a Romanesque doorway (Fig. 8), which provided access between the church and the cloister garth. This is the oldest surviving example of this type of processional doorway in Ireland. There are no upstanding remains of the claustral ranges, and much of this area is now occupied by modern burial monuments. Short sections of the wall that enclosed the north-east corner of the cloister garth have been reconstructed, including a single arch of the cloister arcade supported on cement piers that are replicas based on surviving fragments. It is reputed that a nearby castle was demolished in the late nineteenth century. It is not clear whether this was perhaps part of the abbey refectory on the south side of the former cloister or a residential tower of the abbot.

At the east end of the nave is a tall neo-Gothic bell-tower, constructed in 1818. Once we move into this portion of the abbey church, we enter the area that was used as an Anglican church until 1883. This later use of the church is also obvious in the chancel, where we see three lancet windows with brick frames. In fact, the small chancel was built around 1150 and the internal embrasures of the windows date from this period. Slightly later is the fine triple sedilia on the south side, dating from the thirteenth century (Fig. 9).



Extending from either side of the chancel are the south and north transepts, each with a pair of square chapels. Only the lowermost walls of the transepts and the chapels survive, making it difficult to imagine the scale of these parts of the church. However, we do still



get an idea of this when we look up at the pair of crossing arches that divided the main body of the church from the north and south transepts. These elevated rounded arches (Fig. 10) are carried on tall, rounded columns that have distinctive bulbous bases (Fig. 11). It seems that these arches were retained and used to support a tower added in the fifteenth century (Fig. 12) that was removed around 1818. The demolition of this medieval tower seems to have resulted in the removal of the former chancel arch and perhaps a vaulted ceiling and chamber over the chancel.

Within the church is a well-preserved memorial stone (probably the top of an altar-tomb) commemorating

James Grace of Rathvilly (d. 1605), which features an ornate cross, a range of Passion motifs and an inscription (Fig. 13). The centrally placed cross is composed of interlace strapwork. Above this is what could be described as a decorative sunburst, comprising a central Tudor rose and five rays, each with a fleur-de-lis terminal. At various points around the cross are a wide range of symbols of the Passion of Christ. Nearby is another interesting burial monument, in the form of a pyramidal mausoleum built in 1832 by Benjamin O’Neale Stratford (1746–1833), Earl of Aldborough. It is located partly on top of one of the former chapels of the south transept.

Above: **Fig. 12—Late eighteenth-century engraving of Baltinglass Abbey, viewed from the north-west (Grose’s *Antiquities of Ireland*). Note the fifteenth-century crossing tower, which was demolished and replaced by the current bell-tower in 1815.**

Left: **Fig. 13—Memorial stone commemorating James Grace (d. 1605).**

Right: **Location map.**

Cover: **Fig. 1—Baltinglass Abbey and St Mary’s Church (right) viewed from the west, with Rathcoran Hill in the background.**



Credits and acknowledgements

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Design and layout © Archaeology Ireland

Circulation manager—Una MacConville

Layout—Wordwell Ltd

Date of publication—March 2026

Text © the author 2026

ISSN 0790-982X

This guide is supported by the Heritage Office of Wicklow County Council.

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BALTINGLASS ABBEY *in the* ‘VALLEY OF SALVATION’



Archaeology
IRELAND

Heritage Guide No. 112



Baltinglass Abbey in west Wicklow stands on the banks of the River Slaney at the foothills of Rathcoran Hill, also known as Baltinglass Hill. The Cistercian abbey, known as *Vallis Salutis* ('Valley of Salvation'), was founded in 1148 by the king of Leinster, Diarmaid Mac Murchadha (Diarmait MacMurrough), as the second daughter house of Mellifont Abbey, founded six years previously by St Malachy. Today the abbey is situated on the edge of a town which takes its name from the monastery, but this urban settlement only developed in more recent centuries. When the monks were originally gifted the land to build their new abbey, this was very much a rural location surrounded by farmland. However, it was located on an ancient routeway called *Belach Conglais*, from which we get the name Baltinglass today. In addition, the riverside setting of the abbey is a familiar feature of Cistercian monasteries, providing the monks with access to fresh water, fish (especially salmon) and power to run a mill. The original charter no longer survives, but it does exist in a later copy. This was made in 1185 when Prince John, lord of Ireland and future king of England, was staying at Lismore, Co. Waterford. At that time the abbot of Baltinglass was Ailbe Ua Máel Muaid (Albinus O'Mulloy) (d. 1223), who in 1186 was elected bishop of Ferns and was an influential figure at the royal court. John's document confirmed to the monks of Baltinglass the lands they had been gifted by Diarmaid Mac Murchadha. The names of various local patrons are not recorded, but together with Diarmaid they ensured that the abbey was well endowed with extensive estates in Wicklow, as well as neighbouring parts of Carlow and Kildare, including a salt-pan on the coast near Arklow.

Together with Jerpoint Abbey, Co. Kilkenny, and Monasteranenagh, Co. Limerick, Baltinglass was part of an affiliation of Cistercian abbeys that became deeply involved in what is known as the 'Mellifont

Conspiracy'. At the root of the so-called 'conspiracy' was the Irish Cistercians' resentment of foreign interference, in particular from the French mother house of Cîteaux. In 1227 a visitation of French abbots made Baltinglass subject to Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire. The Irish abbot at this time, whose name was Malachy (perhaps after the order's founder in Ireland), was replaced with an Englishman, who was duly ejected by the monks in protest. Abbot Malachy went to Cîteaux to complain to the head of the Cistercian order, but his appeal was unsuccessful. In 1302 the king granted the abbot a substantial loan of 278 marks owed to the Ricardi of Lucca, an Italian merchant family who traded across Europe in wool, which was a particularly lucrative trade at this time (the Ricardi had recently been declared bankrupt and their debts were assumed by the Crown, so in effect the abbot of Baltinglass was simply restructuring the repayment of his debt). It seems that the original debt to the Ricardi family had accrued from a practice of fore-selling wool, i.e. the abbot was



Above: **Fig. 2—View of the abbey church from the south-west.**

Right: **Fig. 3—West gable of the abbey church.**



paid in advance for the supply of wool but subsequently could not fulfil the order. The large sum that the abbot owed implies that the debt had accrued over a period of several years. This highlights the fact that sheep-farming and wool production were an important part of the abbey's economy, something that Baltinglass shared with other Cistercian monasteries in the region, including Jerpoint, Duiske and Dunbrody, which also found themselves in debt to Italian wool merchants.

Baltinglass was closed in May 1536, and John Galbally, the last abbot, surrendered the monastery and its estates to the Crown in May 1537. An inquisition in November 1540 recorded that within the precinct was a ruinous church, a castle, a hall with chamber, a ruinous kitchen and a dilapidated watermill, as well as c. 2,300 acres of land. The precinct was described as a stone-walled curtilage and was then used by the local community to keep their animals safe at night. There were also five gardens and an orchard within the precinct. An inquisition in May 1541 recorded a barn within the precinct and a small adjoining settlement comprising 23 houses. The implication is that the presence of the abbey had attracted the growth of a small village nearby. Despite the closure of the abbey, or perhaps because of it, this would become the town of Baltinglass that we know today.

Above: **Fig. 4—Examples of Romanesque capitals of the arcade within the nave.**

Right: **Fig. 5—Drum pier of the arcade. Note the square base with spurs facing into the south aisle.**

Far right: **Fig. 6—The arch terminating the north aisle, viewed from within the north transept. In the background is the only surviving arch of the north arcade.**



In June 1541 the site of the monastery and its former estates were granted to Thomas FitzEustace, lord of Kilcullen, who was created Viscount Baltinglass by Henry VIII. Many Cistercian abbeys that were closed at the Dissolution were converted into houses by new English government officials, but there is no evidence that this occurred at Baltinglass. It is said that FitzEustace provided shelter to the displaced monks, and it is possible that they continued to reside here for some years to come. However, during the seventeenth century the chancel, crossing tower and the western part of the nave were adapted for use as an Anglican church. This continued in use until 1883, when nearby St Mary's Church was constructed.



Left: **Fig. 7—Remains of the Romanesque doorway reset in the north wall of the nave.**

Below: **Fig. 8—Remains of Romanesque processional doorway between the church and the former cloister.**

Visitors today, as they did during the medieval period, approach the abbey from the west, where they are greeted by a large, rather austere gable with three truncated lancet windows (Fig. 3). This tells us immediately that we are missing the upper portions of what was once a tall church. Below this is a medieval-looking doorway, which dates from the early nineteenth century. At that time visitors to the Church of Ireland church at the east end of the abbey entered by this doorway into the unroofed nave, which acted like an open courtyard. Entering the door today, we

see the highlight of the abbey, namely an arcade of seven arches that divided the nave from the south aisle (Fig. 2). The piers supporting the arches alternate between square and round, though both forms have large square capitals decorated with distinctive scallop motifs featuring a wide variety of geometric designs (Fig. 4). The bottom of the round or drum piers have decorative spurs projecting over a square pad: notably, these only occur within the aisle. The pointed arches are among the earliest known in Ireland. An unusual feature at Baltinglass is a screen (perpyn) wall that extends between the arcade piers,

