

EASTER AND MAYO OF THE SAXONS

How a dispute over the date of
Easter led to the founding of the
village of Mayo Abbey



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EASTER AND MAYO OF THE SAXONS

Easter Sunday is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. But it wasn't always so easily calculated, and it was a subject of major controversy in the early history of the Church in Ireland and Britain. Mayo even had a role to play in this controversy.



In 663 and 664, at the monastery of Whitby on the northeastern coast of England, a synod was convened to tackle a raging dispute. Christianity had been in Britain for centuries by that point. On one side, there was the Church organised from Canterbury, in modern day Kent, sometimes casually referred to as the 'Roman' Church. On the other, there was the 'northern' or 'Celtic' Church, which had been founded by Irish missionaries.

How to calculate the date of Easter, the most important date in the Christian calendar, had changed several times in the preceding centuries. Both sides who sat at Whitby observed different dates for Easter. The aim of the synod was to come to a solution to this bitter dispute, and have one date for the Paschal feast across the island of Britain. The decision rested with the king of Northumbria, Oswiu, in whose kingdom Whitby was situated.¹



Oswiu opted for the Roman method of calculation, believing that Rome followed the teachings of St. Peter, and Peter held the keys to the kingdom of heaven. His decision led to the adaptation of the 'Roman' date for Easter, and brought the Church in Britain closer to the rest of continental Europe.

Of course, since the other side had Irish origins, there was a split. St. Colman, one of the leaders of the 'Irish' side at Whitby, refused to accept the decision. He left his monastery on the island of Lindisfarne (Holy Island) near the present day English-Scottish border, and took a community of monks, many of them English, first to Iona in Scotland, and then to Inishbofin, Co. Galway.

In the early 670s, following yet another split, Colman left Inishbofin and was invited by a local king to found a monastery in what we now know as Mayo Abbey,² but which was known by the title 'Mayo of the Saxons' because of the origins of many of the monks in the community there.

This grew to be an impressive monastic settlement, which gained a reputation for scholarship and forged links with Scotland, England, Germany and the Low Countries in the first three centuries of its existence. By about the year 1000, Mayo of the Saxons was a proto town, with a population estimated at 3,000. In 1400, it became an Augustinian Abbey, with 4,000 acres of land attached. The town of Mayo was a thriving centre until the 16th century, when like other towns of its size outside the Pale (the area surrounding Dublin), it went into decline.³ In 1570, it was still of enough significance for Sir Henry Sydney, in the act of dividing Connaught into counties, to name the western county of the province after the monastic settlement which would possibly never have existed if Colman of Lindisfarne had accepted the decision of Oswiu at Whitby 900 years earlier.

¹ Britannica.com

² Orschel, V. 2001. Maigh Eo na Sacsan. *History Ireland*, Issue no.2, vol.9

³ museumsomayo.com

The North Mayo
Heritage Centre
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Sunday
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Extract from Ordnance Survey Letters of 1838

Brief history of the townland of
KNOCKSOXON/KNOCKSAXON
(*Cnoc Sacsan*, hill of the Saxons).

In the south of the parish of Templemore, west of the Loughnamina River. It contains 551 acres, 2 roods, 1 perch. The property of Patrick Kirwan, Esq., Dalgan. Agent, Charles Henry Crummie, Esq., Annfield, Hollymount. It is held under a lease by Thomas Ormsby, Esq., and is sublet by him to 25 occupying tenants at will at the yearly rent of from 40 shillings to £6 a farm. County Cess is from 3 shillings to 8 shillings annually, each holding. It is rated in the Tithe Composition Book, Barony of Gallen, at £5 1 shilling 6½d. The Tithe is withheld by the tenantry. Soil, moory, producing oats, flax and potatoes. There is plenty of bog. The tenants are all Catholics. Prevailing family name – McEntire. Part of the Loughnamina River flows from south-east to north-west on the boundary of this townland.

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