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# William Ashford's drawings of Timoleague 'Abbey'

By PETER HARBISON

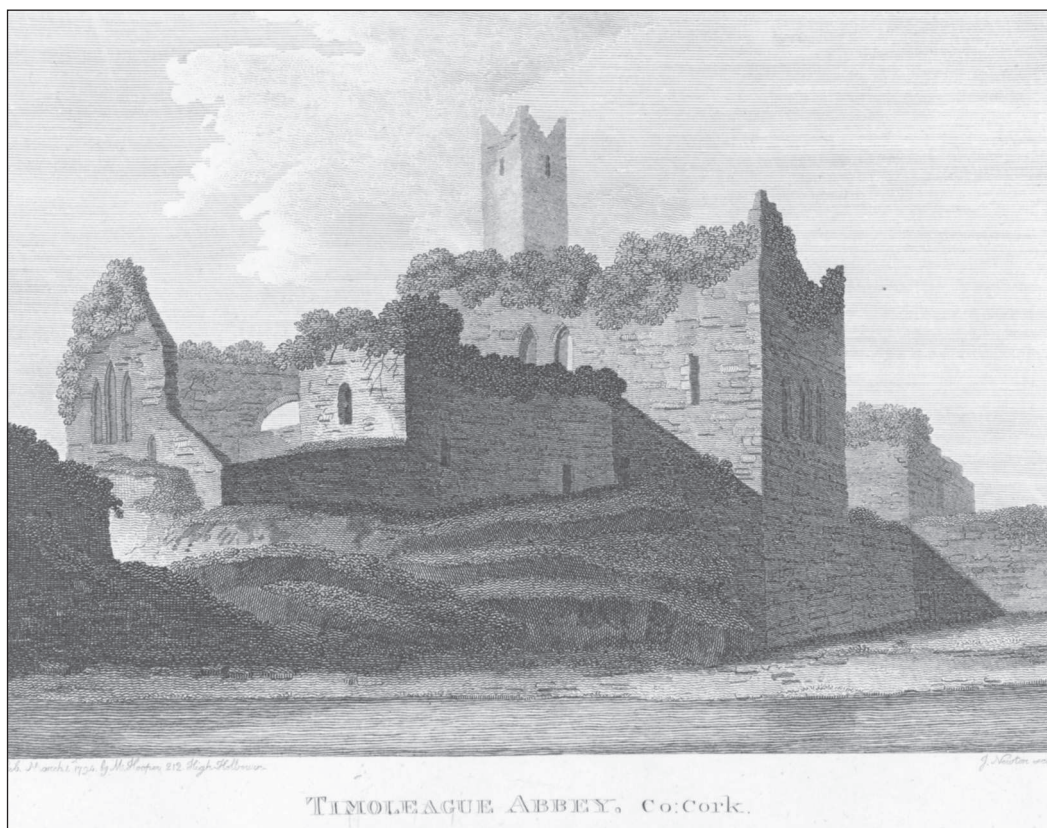


Fig. 1. Timoleague Abbey after a drawing by William Ashford as engraved on Plate 12 of Vol. 2 of Grose's *Antiquities of Ireland* (1794)

It is a curious fact that the two volumes of Grose's *Antiquities of Ireland* (1794-96) – the first country-wide assemblage of topographical engravings – only managed to include one monument from Ireland's largest county, namely Timoleague 'abbey'<sup>1</sup>. That at least was one

more than Offaly got, while items from many of the other counties were more profusely illustrated after drawings by various artists in the collection of William Burton Conyngham.<sup>2</sup> In 1779, while still William Burton before he adopted the name Conyngham on inheriting



Fig. 2. William Ashford's pencil drawing of Timoleague Abbey from the south-west, from a photograph preserved in the archive of the Irish Art Research Centre in Trinity College, Dublin

Slane Castle, he founded the Hibernian Antiquarian Society<sup>3</sup> with the intention of producing volumes of engravings showing off the beauty of Ireland's ancient monuments, as Grose had done earlier for England and Wales. In order to provide basic material for the engravers, he amassed a considerable portfolio of drawings either by acquiring some already in existence, or commissioning artists to go on sketching tours to areas or counties not represented among his collection. Sadly, the Society had not succeeded in achieving its goal before its activities came to an end in 1783 because of internal wrangling between two of its members, one of whom, Edward Ledwich, took on the publication of Grose's *Antiquities* in 1791, using many of the drawings which Burton Conyngham had collected a decade earlier.

The man who produced the drawing on which Grose's view of Timoleague (Fig. 1) was based was William Ashford (1746-1824), an Englishman who spent virtually all his working life in Ireland, and became the first President of the

Royal Hibernian Academy one year before his death. He is known mainly as an oil-painter, and a valuable catalogue of his paintings was compiled by Professor Anne Crookshank in 1995,<sup>4</sup> though some more have turned up in the intervening decade. The letterpress accompanying Grose's engraving of Timoleague tells us that it was 'taken from an original drawing, by W. Ashford, in the collection of the Right Honourable William Conyngham'. Because we can be fairly sure that there were drawings of other Cork antiquities in Burton Conyngham's possession – Drishane, Blarney, Carrigadrohid, Castlemore, Ballincollig, Carrigrohane and Castlemartyr by artists such as Jonathan Fisher and Thomas Ivory as well as the amateur Charles Vallancey – it is likely that Burton Conyngham acquired already existing drawings from the individual artists rather than commissioning a single artist to cover the whole of County Cork.

The intriguing possibility that there might be some more early views of Cork monuments out there somewhere waiting to be discovered

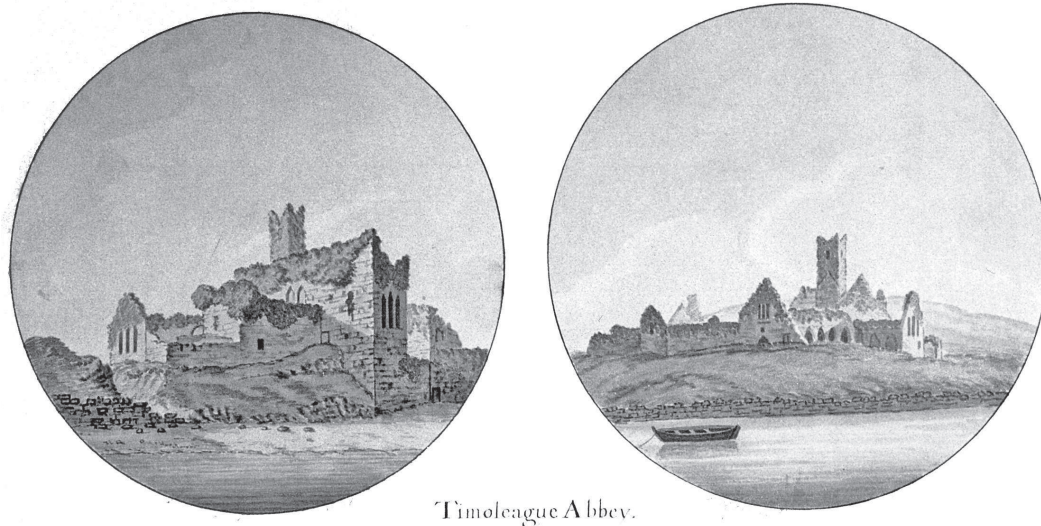


Fig. 3. Gabriel Beranger's watercolour copies of William Ashford's 1776 views of Timoleague, now preserved as Watercolours 4 in the Special Collections of the library at University College, Dublin

was raised some years ago by the appearance on the art market of some pencil drawings by Ashford of antiquities in County Limerick, as well as what was probably a field sketch of his which depicted Timoleague, but seen from a different angle from that engraved in Grose. Unfortunately, I know neither where the drawings came from nor where they are now, but photographs of them are preserved in the Irish Art Research Centre in Trinity College, Dublin, and it is thanks to this institution that I am permitted to reproduce the Timoleague pencil drawing here – in the hope that its present owner would have no objection to my doing so if I could but establish his, her or its identity.

The drawing (Fig. 2) is hastily but well done, bringing out the essential features of this fine complex of Franciscan architecture as seen from roughly where the present national school was built in 1955. The pencil sketch was probably later worked up into a watercolour drawing which was the version that became part of the Conyngham collection. We know this not

through the original, which is lost, but through a copy by Gabriel Beranger that is now preserved as Watercolour 4 in the Special Collections in the library of University College, Dublin (Fig. 3). It came from a collection of Beranger drawings owned by a Mrs Mossop of Terenure in Dublin, who sold most of them in 1965 and subsequent years.<sup>5</sup> It is part of a spectacle-like pair in circular frames, of which that on the right corresponds to the pencil drawing, with the addition of a boat in the foreground. The artist's name given to the left of the bottom of the circle does not mean that it was Ashford who actually did this particular watercolour, but rather that Beranger – who did all the other drawings in the album – was acknowledging that Ashford was the man who did the original drawing that he was copying. As Beranger's drawing was probably not done until at least the 1780s, the date 1776 to the right of the bottom of the circle presumably refers to the date when Ashford did his original drawing, thus making it likely that Conyngham had not commissioned



Fig. 4. William Ashford's drawing of Timoleague from the south-east as copied by an anonymous artist on page 38 of the 'Grose' album numbered 1976 TX in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the National Library of Ireland, Dublin (*reproduced courtesy of The National Library of Ireland*)

it on behalf of the Hibernian Antiquarian Society, but rather that he bought the sketch three years or so after its completion.

The other drawing of the pair is also an Ashford view of Timoleague, but seen from the south-east on the road to Courtmacsherry. This is the view that was chosen for engraving in Grose. But there is, interestingly, an intermediate stage between the lost original Ashford watercolour that Beranger copied and the engraving in Grose. This is a pen and wash drawing preserved as page 38 of the album of drawings numbered 1976 TX in the National Library in Dublin (Fig. 4). This was a collection of drawings prepared for the London engravers of Grose's *Antiquities* around 1791, and

among those chosen for illustration was this drawing by an unknown hand which also acknowledges William Ashford as the creator of the drawing on which it was based.

From the various illustrations presented here, we gain an interesting insight not only into the various things that could be done with original illustrations, but also what one of Cork's great medieval Franciscan friaries looked like when William Ashford sketched it 230 years ago.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks are due to Dr. Rachel Moss and the Irish Art Research Centre in Trinity College, Dublin, for permission to reproduce the Ashford pencil drawing, to UCD's Special

Collections and Catherine MacSharry for assistance in the reproduction of the Beranger watercolours (and to the late Brian Lynch for the transparencies), and finally to the National Library of Ireland and Joanna Finegan for permission to reproduce the anonymous copy of Ashford's drawing in the 'Grose' album.

NOTES

1 For details of the friary building, see Robert Cochrane, 'Notes on the structures in the County of Cork vested in the Board of Works for preservation as National Monuments', *JCHAS* 18, 1912, 14-25.

2 C.E.F. Trench, 'William Burton Conyngham (1733-1796)', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 115, 1985, 40-63.

3 Walter D. Love, 'The Hibernian Antiquarian Society. A forgotten predecessor to the Royal Irish Academy', *Studies* 51, No. 203, Autumn 1962, 419-31.

4 Anne Crookshank, 'A life devoted to landscape painting. William Ashford (c.1746-1824)', *Irish Arts Review Yearbook* 11, 1995, 119-30.

5 Compare Peter Harbison, 'It's funny how one thing leads to another . . . Discovering antiquarian drawings by Beranger', in Joe Fenwick (ed.), *Lost and found. Discovering Ireland's past*, Bray 2003, 302-03.