



Killoughternane Cill Uachtar Fhionán.

‘The upper church of St Finnian’.

J.M.Feeley & J.Sheehan

A monastery was founded here by St Forchern / *Fortiarnáb* bishop: one of the three smiths of St Patrick who choose this spot, at the foot of Mount Leinster ; for its isolation and beauty in the 5th century. His feast day is 11th October. His most renowned pupil was St Finnian who is said to have been a native of Myshall.

Finnian went on to found the famous monastery at Clonard, where three thousand monks are said to have been trained. So from the earliest time Killoughternane was famous as a centre of learning and remained so for almost a thousand years thereafter. The early monastery occupied the area each side of the present coach road and bordering three townlands.

The only ancient building now visible is the ruined 10th c Oratory or (***duirtheach**) known as the ‘White Chapel’, with internal dimensions 19’ x 12’ . It is marked with an OPW plaque. The oratory was built at the beginning of the 10th c and replaced an earlier timber church. (*This ruin is very similar to another of the period at Augha*). It remained in use for #300 years. Mass was celebrated within it for that period and occasionally again in the #17th c. Being roofed with shingles made this an expensive building. Within the church is a rectangular stone basin with a drain hole, of #11th c date.

In the field on opposite side of road may be seen the St Forchern’s Holy Well, with modern grotto and altar in front. Mass is celebrated here every year in July.

To the casual observer the only evidence of a monastic foundation ever having been at this site is the ruined ‘White Chapel’. *Several features of the present layout greatly puzzled the authors eg 1) why only one ruin remains of many?.*

2) why is the public road so close to the church ruin?. 3) why is there no graveyard nearby?.

Our view is that the present road from Ballinree Cross was constructed in relatively modern times and that access to the original monastic site was via the existing narrow lanes which converge at Killoughternane Crossroads. *The clues which led us to this conclusion were that a) #the original 5th c timber buildings were at same ground level as the ‘White Chapel’*

b) At a short distance further downhill the ground had been greatly disturbed indicating ‘cut & fill’ for roadworks.

On checking the Down Survey (1656-1658) we find that all of the land around The White Chapel was taken from the Kavanagh family and re-granted to various planter families following the failure of the Confederation of Kilkenny. The area encompassing the road from Ballinree Cross to Killoughternane Cross was granted to the Earl of Cork (*family name Boyle*). In our view this public road which split the original monastic site was probably constructed during his tenure.

Down Survey of Ireland 1656-1658			
Landowner in 1641		Landowner in 1670	Plantation Acres
1.Killoughternane	Murtagh Cavanagh	Earl o fCork	195
2.Seskinnamadra	Murtagh Cavanagh	Thomas.Stepford	243
3.Knocksquire or Knockscur	Walter.Bagenal	Dudley.Bagenal	260

It is important to keep in mind that this ancient seat of learning had ceased to function before the Down Survey due to the Penal Laws. All that remained were ruins.

Buildings of the period were constructed of field stones & lime mortar which rested on shallow foundations and consequently were easily demolished. The walls were presumably used in the construction of field and road boundary walls and/or broken up to build the new public road alongside.

A common feature of church sites around Ireland is that they were also used as graveyards for many centuries. Killoughternane is no exception, with many hundreds of #burials.

According to local people mass was said in Penal Law times in the woods which cloak nearby Knockscur Hill. During the 19th century a silver chalice and paten was discovered ,wrapped in a linen cloth (surplis?), embedded in the mud of the holy well. The inscription states that the chalice was made for a Fr John Lucar in 1595.

Fr.Lucar would have said Mass somewhere nearby. The sacred vessels were hidden because if found on his person it would have meant deportation or death under the Penal Laws..

Our site survey of 2001 found that building on the site continued up to the 14th c. However all buildings were gone by the late 17th c. The report (2001) can be viewed at;

<http://glasnost.itcarlow.ie/feeleyjm/monastery/killoughternane.pdf>

***Duirtheach** -. a chapel for penitential prayer. It signifies an oratory or private chapel. Oratories were, for the most part, composed of wood, though there is evidence to show that stone oratories existed even in the time of St Patrick. The size of these buildings varied, but their average may be stated to be about 15 feet in length, and 10 feet in breadth, interior measurement; we have an ancient evidence in a fragment of the Brehon Laws, preserved in the Library of T.C.D relating to the payment of artificers employed in their construction.

The following is a translation of the passage;--“If it be a *duirtheach* of fifteen feet , or less than that, ie fifteen feet in length and ten feet in its breadth, a heifer for every foot of it in breadth, or for every foot and a half in length; ie when the roof is of rushes ---but if the roof be of *slinn* (singles), it is a cow for every foot of breadth or for every foot and a half in length.

If it be more than fifteen feet, a heifer for every two thirds of a foot in breadth, or for every foot in length; this is when the roof is of rushes- if the roof be of shingles, a cow for (every) two-thirds of a foot of it in breadth, or for (every) foot in length.

From; *History of Diocese of Kildare & Leighlin. Fr. M. Comerford. pp89-92*

This information obtained by divining on site.

See also;

<http://downsurvey.tcd.ie/landowners.php#mc=52.629407,-6.849508&ro=1&z=14>

<http://www.megalithicireland.com/Killoughternane%20Church.html>

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