The history of this religious foundation is recorded from earliest times in the annals. St Gobanus is reputed to have founded the monastery and later yielded to St Laserian, apostolic delegate in the 7th c. St Gobanus then retired to the monastery of Killamery, (Co Kilkenny).

Present remains are the 13th c Church of Ireland Cathedral, and St Molaise’s Holy Well. St Laserian/Lazerian/Mo laise had studied in Rome and was ordained there. He wished that the Irish should conform to Roman custom in liturgical matters and particularly the time for observing Easter. Consequently he called a synod at Leighlin in 632 AD to discuss this question.

At that time Irish Christians followed a solar calendar while those of southern Europe and the middle East followed a lunar calendar. Eventually the universal church adopted the compromise method in use at present ie: Easter Sunday falls on the 1st Sunday after the full moon which follows the Spring Equinox.

Old Leighlin grew rapidly during his life-time and over the following centuries. The monastery is said to have had a community of 1500 at one time. During much of the 1st millenium Leighlin had a double monastery ie included a nunnery or convent. Because of its fame and proximity to the River Barrow, the monastery was burnt and pillaged by Vikings and native Irish alike on several occasion between the 9th and 11th centuries and even as late as the 14th century.

In 1111 AD a national church synod decided to change from a monastic to a diocesan structure, already the norm in Britain and on the continent. As a result of this decision Leighlin became a diocesan centre. The construction of the present cathedral began under Bishop Donatus in the 12th and continued into the 13th century. In the year 1400 AD it is recorded that the cathedral, a bishop’s palace, a monastery and 86 burgage tenements and other houses existed.

Following the Reformation the cathedral and lands were granted to the Church of Ireland. The cathedral was restored and extended in the 16th c by Bishop Saunders. Leighlin was granted several royal charters and returned three members to the Dublin parliament until the Act of Union in 1800.
Archaeology without digging:
During the autumn of 2001 and spring of 2002 the site was examined using non-intrusive survey methods (mainly divining) by the authors. A total of 44 buildings were located dating from the 5th to the 15th century.

Site 1: Field adjoining the River Madlin to the south.

Site 2: Cathedral grounds and churchyard.

Site 3: Fields currently owned by the Doran family across the public road to the north and north west.

No monastic remains were found in the field enclosed by a high wall to the east of the cathedral or in the present lower graveyard.

The church (5.1) shown above and two other buildings were located in the upper churchyard and dated to the 5th century ie two centuries before Sts Gabanus and Laserian.

The building shown was constructed with a timber frame, with clay/wattle walls and a roof of thatch. The entire building would have been white-washed internally and externally.

Dimensions: 22' long x 9' wide.

An unusual feature (for a church) is its orientation N/S. However the layout is typical of the period; ie vestry was immediately inside entrance door. A crude stone font (now located to the left of cathedral main entrance) may also date from this early period.

Above is a drawing of a 7th century church (7.1) dated to the time of St Laserian. Orientation is E/W (as shown). The vestry is immediately inside the main entrance door.

Dimensions: 38' long x 21' wide x 14' eves/28' ridge. East gable has three separate high & narrow windows. With a total of ten windows this church would be bright and airy.

Fittings: (In sanctuary area at E end), altar, seats or forms for the choir, baptismal font, a plain wooden cross attached to the gable wall to left of altar. Located about half way down the church were two statues ie at N side; a carved statue in elm of the Virgin, at S side; a carved oak statue of Christ. The baptismal font carved from a single stone was low and ‘basin like’.

The windows were unglazed but the opening was filled by a screen on the inside and shutters on the outside. It should also be remembered that the thatch outside extended several feet beyond the windows thus giving excellent weather protection.
List of Buildings;

Note that the first digit indicates the century, the second the building number for that century.
All of the earlier buildings were timber framed with clay & wattle walls and thatched roof, with an average life of 150 years.

Site 1. Lower Field along Madlin River

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Century</th>
<th>Building</th>
<th>Century</th>
<th>Building</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>church</td>
<td>*10.1</td>
<td>dormitory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>dormitory</td>
<td>*10.2</td>
<td>oratory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Abbot’s office</td>
<td>*10.3</td>
<td>refectory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>dwelling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>schoolhouse</td>
<td>*14.1</td>
<td>water mill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>scriptorium</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>dormitory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>garment shop</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>stone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sitemap shows the location of all 11 buildings found in Lower Field adjoining the Madlin River. The large group of 7th century timber buildings in this area correspond with the coming of St Laserian to Leighlin. The area at bottom of map is now dry ground but was once a large pond or small lake. Used in the 14th century to supply water to power a corn mill (14.1). This required the construction of a weir across the river, sluice gates and a mill-race. The mill was in use for about 80 years until the water supply failed.
Twenty buildings dating from the 5th to the 14th century located in this area. The 5th century group consisted of only three buildings with a round building added in the 6th century. A large timber framed church dated to the 8th century lay beneath the present cathedral foundations. Measurements were 50' long x 22' wide x 15' eves / 29' to ridge.

The area also includes six stone buildings. It is worth noting that no gravestones were erected over buildings 10.7, 10.6, 12.1 and 14.2. Reason may be that some remaining foundation stones have made life difficult for gravediggers over the years!

The Penitentiary

The stone building (10.7) is probably the most fascinating found. It is mentioned in the annals; that in the year 1060 that Leighlin was all burned in a raid except the "penitentiary". Of all the buildings found, number 10.7 is the most likely. Small slit windows in the gables provided limited daylight. The reason that this building survived a major fire locally was that it was built of stone and roofed with wooden shingles, whilst all others were of thatch.

Such places of penance and quiet meditation were common in medieval times. Although now quite close to the main church, the building was initially farther away. (from building 7.11 then the main church).
14th c Dwelling. (14.2)  
Bishop’s Palace.  

This building dates to the period when Leighlin was a bishopric. It is a dwelling, consisting of a refectory (foreground), with sleeping quarters overhead, and a kitchen (background). This is the only 2 storey building found on site. The building also has two fireplaces back to back. **Separate external door for kitchen not found!**

Site 3. Doran’s Field  
(to North West across main road)

Century  | Nunnery  
--- | ---  
6.1 | church  
6.2 | scriptorium  
6.3 | garment shop  
7.1, 2, 3 | sleeping huts  
8.1, 2 | unknown  
9.1, 2 | unknown  

Location: In field immediately across public road to North.  
**All of these buildings burnt down by raiding party in 9th century**  
8.4 | church  
8.5, 6, 7 | unknown use  
12.2 | oratory (stone)  
    | is post Nunnery

Group of 6th c buildings from south.
The Mill (14.1)

During the 14th c a mill and associated civil works were constructed in the Lower Field alongside the River Madlin. The mill has two floors with the transmission gearing on ground floor and the mill stones on the upper floor. The vertical mill wheel (under shod type) and transmission are made of wood. Metal (wrought iron or bronze) used to reinforce the wood where required.

To maintain a sufficient head to drive the wheel it would have been necessary to construct an earthen dam to raise the level of the mill pond located west of the cathedral. A weir of stonework across the river and sluice gates would have controlled the flow through the mill race to the wheel. The millrace would have been lined with stone to resist erosion by the fast flowing water. It is likely that sufficient water would only be available in season and only for several hours at a time.

The water wheel (A) drives the horizontal shaft (C and the bevel peg gears (D) & (F), which power the vertical shaft and thereby the top millstone (H). Gearing 3:1

Nine columns (K) were required to support the upper mill floor with its millstones, and grain storage area.

The building itself is constructed of stone with glazed windows on both levels and a thatched roof. Ground floor was stone flagged and lower then the local ground level.

Mill dimensions; (wall centre line) , 31 L x 18' B x 18'/27' H

Extract from The Archaeological Inventory of Co Carlow. Duchas

587 OLDLEIGHLIN (Oldleighlin Borough) OS 11:16:4 (703,27) ‘Cathedral’ OD 300 26589,16540

Cathedral Present remains consists of thirteenth-century long nave and chancel to which two transepts, low crossing tower and chapel were added in sixteenth century. Built of mixed rubble with dressed granite jambs, windows and sedilia. Nave may incorporate thirteenth-century stonework. Two fonts within cathedral: (1) thirteenth-century, Kilkenny limestone, large square bowl with rounded arcades, standing on possibly modern drum-shaped base; (2) large square undecorated limestone basin, on drum-shaped base, two mid-sixteenth-century limestone memorial slabs. Limestone tomb table and end stone of another in nave. (Bradley 1989, 46–50) 11:16(05)
Tunnel.
Local tradition maintains that a tunnel exists leading downhill from the cathedral. Many years ago it is said that when digging a grave in the lower churchyard that the diggers broke through its roof.
In fact the authors (& other diviners) located several stone lined culverts. The most likely explanation is that many natural underground streams were exposed when the cathedral foundations cut back into the higher ground above.

Sincere thanks to Rev. K. Sherwood for his assistance and encouragement during the survey.
Revised; 28/7/2011

Section N-S

Sitework for Cathedral 12th c
Prior to the construction of the present cathedral the ground beneath was levelled. This would explain the steep gradient on the north side. The original hill slope is shown dotted in the north/south cross section above.
To the right of the drawing is the present road to Castlecomer and the N boundary wall. This road has the appearance of 19th c construction and now splits the former monastic site.
An earlier roadway dating to the 1st millennium ran parallel to the present road but at a higher level.

References:
History of Diocese of Kildare & Leighlin. Rev M Comerford
Molaise. Colm Kenny. 1998
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