



# Medieval Monasteries.

## Parish of Bagenalstown

CARA DÉ

Volume 1, Issue 5

**Rathedan**

For much of the 1st millennium Rathedan was the seat of the lords of Idrone and an important administrative centre. The Ui Ceannsaillaig provided several kings of Leinster in the 8th and early 9th centuries. The remains of two raths can still be traced in the townland. The ridge east of the River Barrow on which Rathedan is largely situated once hosted many monastic settlements of the early Christian period.

At present the only visible traces of an ecclesiastical building is a low pile of stones in a grove of trees next to a deep gorge running East / West. This ruin is mentioned in the Ordnance Survey of 1839 as a church. At the time of the survey and until fairly recently a section of wall measuring about 6' long and 6' in height was still standing on the South side. The ruin is also recorded in the recently published *Archealogical Inventory of County Carlow* Site 594 (see foot of page). Of all the monastic sites visited in the Barrow valley Rathedan had the strongest spiritual ambience of all.

Unfortunately the historical record does not tell us who founded the monastery, or when or for long it flourished. A further difficulty is its proximity to Augha (1 Km to North) which is dealt with at length in the *History of the Dioceses of Kildare and Leighlin* by Fr .M.Comerford. Were both sites part of the same monastic foundation or separate entities? Rathedan was the subject of two articles in in *Carloviana*

viz *Rathedan Viking Gold bracelet* –M.Kearney 1986/97 edn, and *Rathedan Parish of Leighlin* by William Ellis

Another report of unknown provenance mentions a monastic cross base and an ancient graveyard.

Before starting the survey the present landowner Mrs McDonnell told the authors that church bells had once been cast here. She also mentioned that stones were once removed from around the church site to build farm buildings and field walls by the then landowner. All of the landowners horses used to cart away the stones subsequently took ill and died!. The spring which issues forth near the bottom of the 'Long Field ' known locally as Caipen's Well is said to never go dry.

The Archeological Survey. 2002.

Non intrusive methods (dowsing in particular ) were used to seek traces of monastic buildings, crosses and boundary walls in the fields adjoining the ruin.

### Phase I

The earliest buildings dating to the 7th and 8th centuries were located in the 'Long Field' along the north field boundary. This group consisted of two small churches, two sleeping huts a cookhouse and a school room. All were timber framed structures with clay/wattle walls and thatched roof.

### Phase II

The monastery then moved north in the 9th century to a site immediately North of the ruin.

Extract from Archaeological Inventory of Co Carlow. OPW

### **594 RATHEDAN**

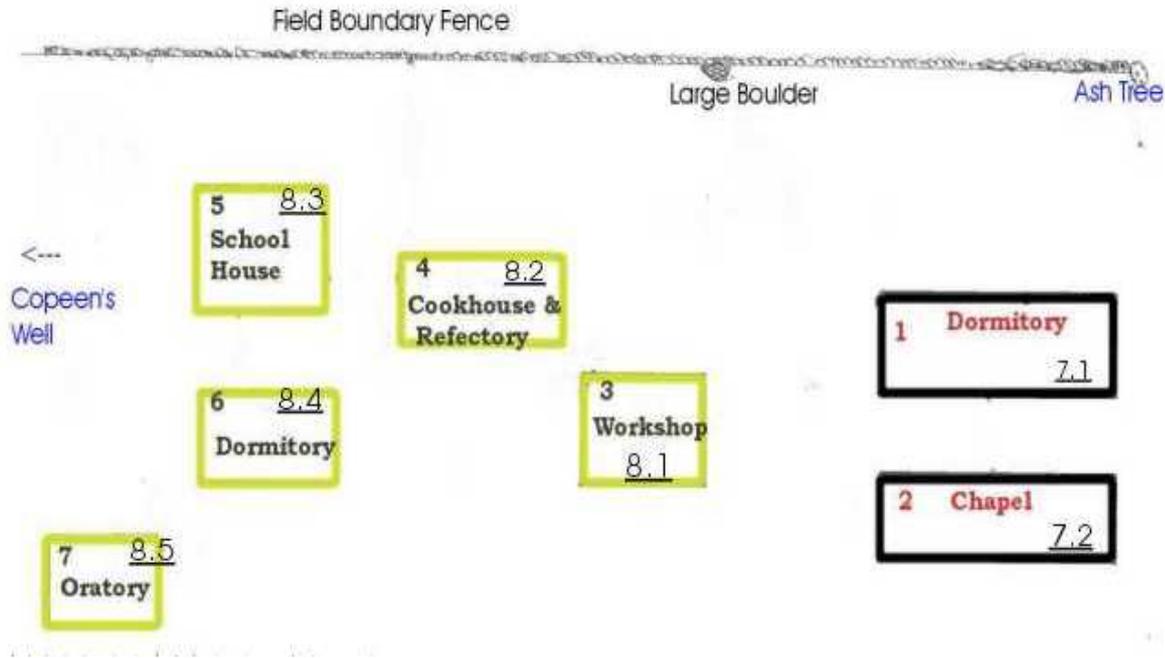
**OS 16:2:6 (391,528) 'Rathedan Church (in ruins)'**  
**OD 300 27238,16440**

**Church** Rectangular structure aligned E–W (c. 17m x c. 8.2m externally). Lower courses of mortared granite rubble visible. Traces of internal wall, 6m from E gable visible. No visible trace of graveyard.

**16:12**

**29-7-1987**

## Phase I. Group of 7th & 8th century buildings in the 'long field'



present ruin. and consisted of a large dormitory, two small huts of timber construction and a stone church.

Incidentally top and bottom window sections now in the 'church ruin' nearby actually belong to this early church. According to Mr Ellis's article cited above they have been expertly dated to the 11th century.

### Phase III

The final phase of the monastery moved to the area occupied by the present ash grove around the 'church ruin'. According to our readings a church was built here in the 12th c in the Romanesque style. In the following century a leanto building forming a long passage way was added to join the church to a two storey building (believed to be a library) in the 14th century.

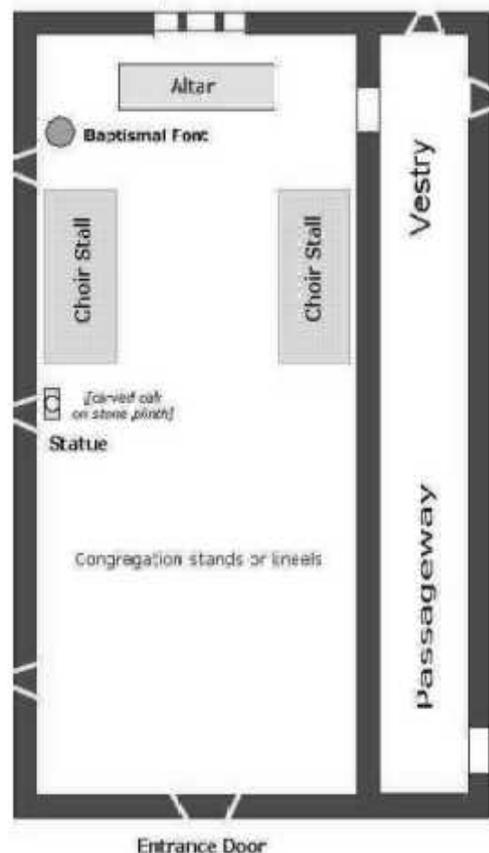
This building with a dividing wall is the church ruin referred to in the OS Survey and recorded as 594 in the Carlow Inventory by Duchas.

Also built in that century were the following buildings of which no visible trace remains; a two storey dwelling house consisting of dining room with dormitory overhead.

A foundry also built in the 14th century with a store room attached. The foundry was unroofed but the store had a leanto thatched roof. Both the library and dwelling had features recognisable today viz; chimneys and glazed windows with tilt back to open sashes.

A dug well in the space between church and dwelling provided water for the small community.

The monk's burial place was not found but interments of lay people occurred after the monastery ceased at the West gable of the Library.



Rathfriland 12th Cent Romanesque Chapel

12th century Romanesque Church

## Rathedan . List of timber framed buildings.

Note that in the left hand column ;the first figure indicates the century followed by the building number

- 7.1 Dormitory. 37' L x 13.5' W. Wall 12'. Apex 27'. Windows; 1E,4N. Doors 5S
- 7.2 Chapel. 37' L x 11' W. Wall 12'. Apex 29'. Windows; 1E,4S. Doors; 1W,2S.  
East window 4' x 5'
- 8.1 Workshop. 17.5' L x 15' w. Wall 19'. Apex 29'.Windows; 2S, 2E, 2N,2W. Doors; 1 S
- 8.2 Cooking/Eating. 28' L x 11.5' W. Wall 12'. Apex 22' . Windows; 4S,4N,1E,2W.
  - Doors; 1S. East window 3.5' x 4'.
- 8.3. Schoolhouse. 20' L x 17' W. Wall 12'. Apex 23'. Windows; 2S,2N,2W. Doors; 1S.
- 8.4 Dormitory. 21.5' L x 12' W. Wall 12' Apex 22'. Windows; 3S,2W,2E. Doors; 1E
- 8.5 Oratory. 17' L x 12.5' W. Wall 12' Apex 21. Windows; 3S, 1E. Doors; 1N.  
East window 4' x 5'
- 9.1 Refectory. 48' L x 21' W. Wall 16'. Apex 35. Windows; 2E,4S,1W. Doors; 1E,1S.
- 9.2 Unknown. 12' L x 10' W
- 9.3 Unknown. 12' L x 9.5' W.



## List of stone Buildings

- 10.1 Church. 39' L x 17' W. Wall 20'. Apex 27'. Windows; 3N,4S,1E. Main E window had 3 opes. Parts of windows from this church now in ruin.
- 10.2 Foundry. 24' L x 14' W . Wall 14'. Unroofed. Windows; none; Doors; 2W
- 10.3 Store. 11' L x 7' W. Wall 13 / 16. Leanto roof.
- 12.1 Church. 35' L x 16' W. Wall 18' Apex 26.Windows; 3N,1S,1E. Doors;2
- 13.1 Passageway. 35' L x 6'-4"W. Windows; 1S,1W. Between church & Library.
- 14.1 Library. 50' L x 28' W.Wall 1 8'. Apex 26'.Windows; 3N, 6S ,4W. Two storey building.  
Ruins still visible
- 14.2 House. 28' L x 21' W . Wall 19'. Apex 23' . Windows;10. Doors 2W. Two storey building.  
Kitchen and Dining room on ground floor, Sleeping overhead.
- 14.3 Foundry. 24' L x 14' W. Wall 19'. Unroofed. Doors; 2W. 1 to store
- 14.4 Stores. 24' L x 9' W. Wall 16/19'. Leanto roof.

### Historical Notes:

“ In the townland of Rathedan –marked Rathedin on Mercator’s Map there was an ancient church and burial place. The life of St Patrick mentions his three smiths of whom St Forchern was one. In those times it was regarded as one of the most honorable occupations to be engaged in the manufacture of the sacred vessels, reliquaries , bells &c –Colgan (AA, SS,634) relates that St Forchern devoted himself so diligently to this work, I the place called *Rath-Aidhne*, that he came to be known as the smith of St Patrick. Quoted from *Rathedan –Parish of Leighlin* , William Ellis. Carloviana

Author’s Note. The above extract is interesting but conflicts with our finding that the earliest trace of monastic buildings is dated to 7th c , ie two hundred years after Saints Patrick or Forchern. Likewise the 1st foundry found was dated to the 10th c. However in the 12th c church we did find the traces of a carved wooden statue dedicated to a local saint, but were unable to determine the subject.

# RATHEADAN MONASTERY

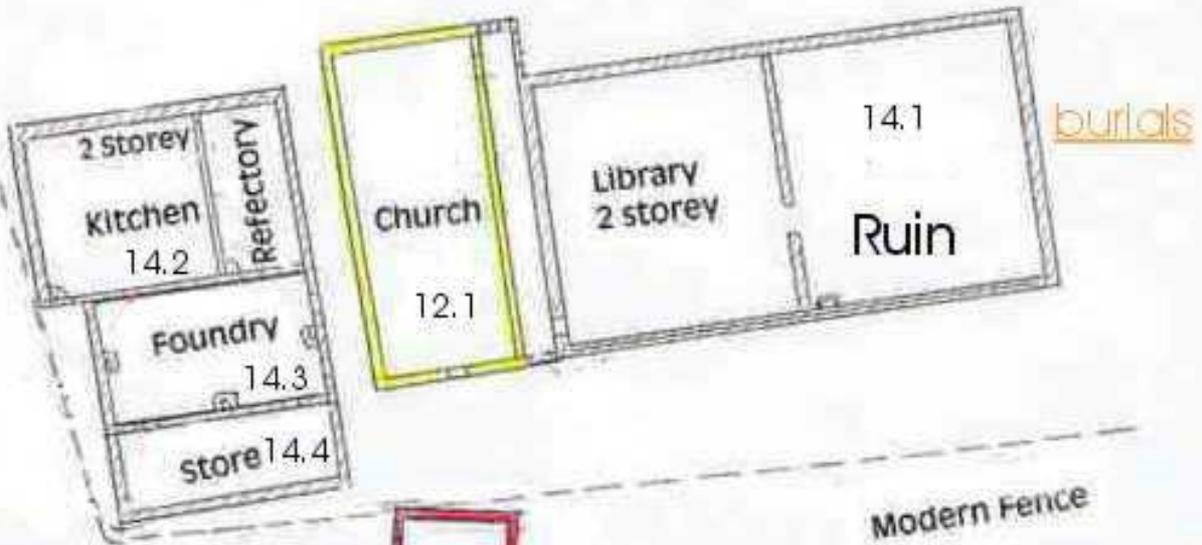
## Phase III

10th cent stone buildings: ■

12th cent stone building: ■

14th cent stone buildings: // // // //

9th & 10th cent timber buildings: \_



## Phase II

