



# Divining for Medieval Monasteries and Churches in Co Carlow.

An Archaeological Survey Conducted by

J.M.Feeley. & J.Sheehan  
Dunleckney, Bagenalstown

In the period 2001 – 2003

Part 1

Parish of Bagenalstown.  
Dunleckney, Kildrenagh, Nurney, Donore,  
Ratheadan, Killoughternane, Lorum, Augha.

Part 2

Old Leighlin, St Michaels, (Tinnahinch )  
St Mullins, Killeshin (Co Laois)



Adapted from Killeshin Doorway, using computer enhancement

## Introduction.

Archaeology can be called a “fuzzy” subject in the sense that nothing about the past can be stated with absolute certainty. Two archaeologists in conversation are likely to use more subjunctives and conditional clauses in ten minutes than most people would use in a year. Like chicken’s teeth, facts are a rare commodity, and archaeological interpretations are almost created in order to challenge thought and to provoke yet another round of archaeological inquiry.

(Tom Condit. Archaeology Ireland—Summer 2003)

The location of early monastic sites or sites of parish churches can have all or any combination of the following features.

- Placename; Kill----, Temple ---- Dysart —etc
- A ruined stone church or support buildings
- Stone Cross
- Holy Well
- Old graveyard
- Round tower

A monastic settlement would have some or all of the following features;

- A place to pray -(church)
- A place to sleep – (sleeping huts or later a dormitory).
- A place to cook and eat meals- ( kitchen / refectory)
- A place to work – (workshop , eg; scriptorium, dairy, garment making etc)
- A place to teach- (school )
- A house to keep guests.

An early monastery would be contained within an enclosure, which defined its consecrated ground, also effective for keeping out wild or stray animals. *Secular settlements( eg farming) before and during the Christian period were surrounded by at least one and often two secure circular fences consisting of a stockade atop a clay bank with post and wattle wall etc.*

### Medieval Sites & Location

- 5<sup>th</sup> c- Old Leighlin, Nurney, Killoughternane, Tinnahinch
- 6<sup>th</sup> c - St Mullins
- 7<sup>th</sup> c- Killogan, Ratheadan, Lorum.
- 8<sup>th</sup> c- Donore
- 9<sup>th</sup> c- Kildrenagh
- 10<sup>th</sup> c-Augha ( parish church)
- 15<sup>th</sup> c-Dunleckney ( parish church)

This survey presents the results of field work conducted between July 2001 and July 2003. It is largely concerned with the location, purpose and general dimensions of buildings found to have existed at twelve different sites. Unless otherwise noted the chief source of historical information is Rev. Comerford’s *Collections, Dioceses of Kildare & Leighlin (Vol 3 1885 )*

Other local sources are quoted in the data page for each site. Rev Comerford’s study is a valuable source of information on the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium period although less so for the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium.

Many early stone buildings survive both locally and nationally (from the 12th century in particular). Consequently a good deal is known of the techniques and technology employed then and for later periods. Less well known however are the earlier timber/clay & wattle buildings, as no visible traces remain. In this survey a considerable amount of information was acquired by divining/dowsing, which we trust will be use to readers interested in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium.

According to the Discovery Maps 61 and 68 (published by the Ordnance Survey Ireland)

Carlow has approximately 30 sites scattered throughout the county both great and small, which pre date the Reformation. Remains vary from; a) no visible remains to b) modern church on original site. Of the above total about 14 sites have some historical record.

Our approach to date has been to survey each site knowing initially as little as possible of its history. After several site visits using a combination of direct observation and divining/dowsing skills, a mental picture was formed of the buildings and other site features. Historical sources were then consulted where available.

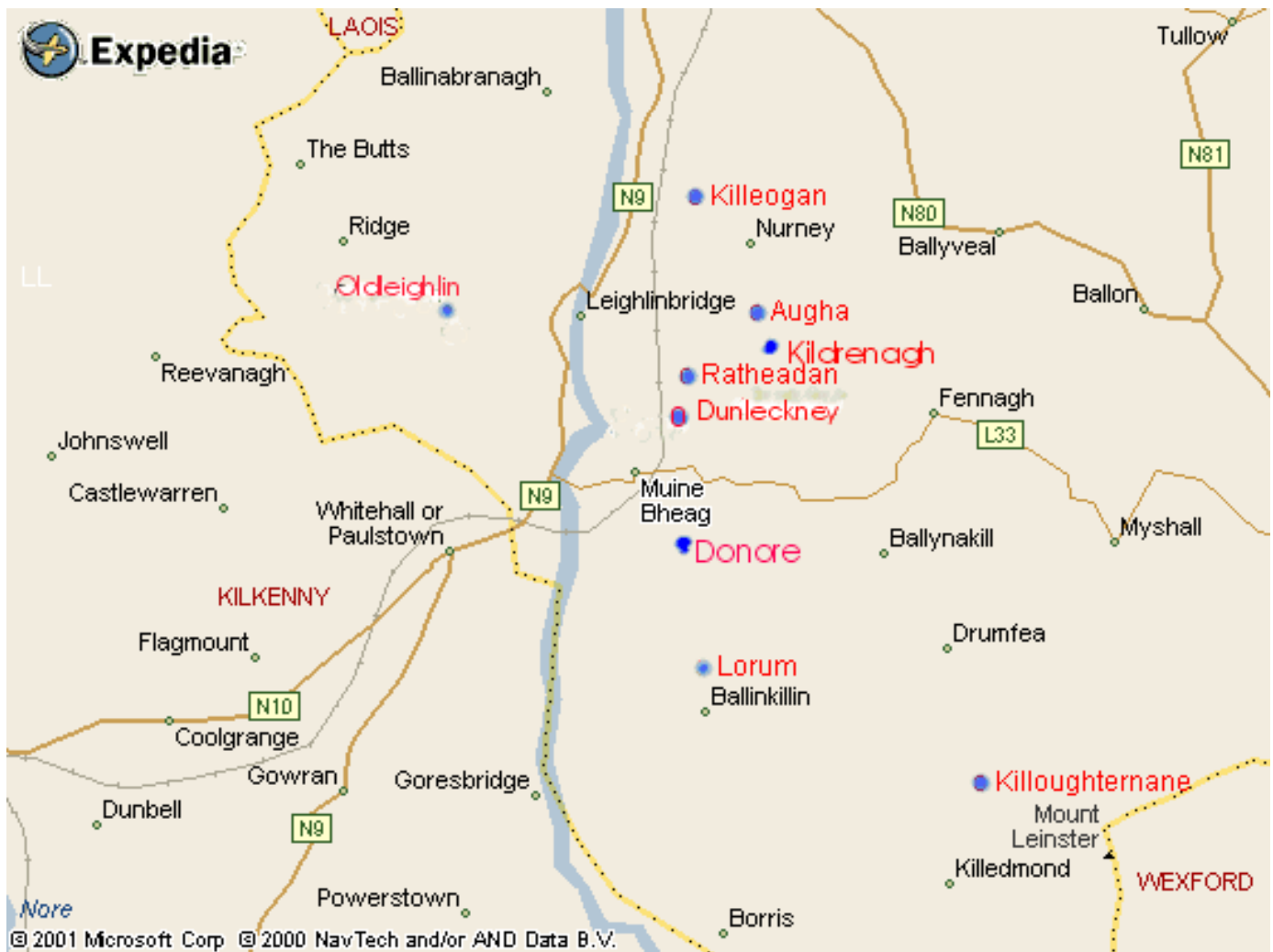
*Dowsing offers a quick and inexpensive method of finding the imprint of ancient buildings on a site. The site is not disturbed in any way, a major factor in graveyards or where existing buildings are present. However the results cannot be as good as a careful excavation.. We leave validation/authentication to future research by more qualified historians and/or archaeologists*

### Dowsing

Buildings and other permanent structures leave an after image, which can be traced many years or even centuries later by divining / dowsing. With this technique the following details can be ascertained;

- o Ground plan dimensions
- o Details of construction
- o When built (ie century )
- o Period of use
- o Reason for removal (sometimes)
- o Function (ie chapel, dormitory, refectory etc)
- o Internal furnishings (sometimes)
- o Décor (sometimes)
- o Roads & pathways

Site Num	Name of site	Present Features
2	Kildrenagh	Ruin of church, Carved cross
3	Nurney	Two crosses, parish church (C of I), graveyard
4	Donore	Ruin of church
5	Ratheadan	Ruin
6	Killoughternane	Ruin of Oratory, Holy well
7	Lorum	Cross bases, parish church (C of I), graveyard Holy well
8	Augha	Church ruin. graveyard
9	Kileogan	Cross , graveyard
10	Dunleckney	Two ruined parish churches



Example of post-and-rail fence





Round building framework

## Timber Framed Buildings

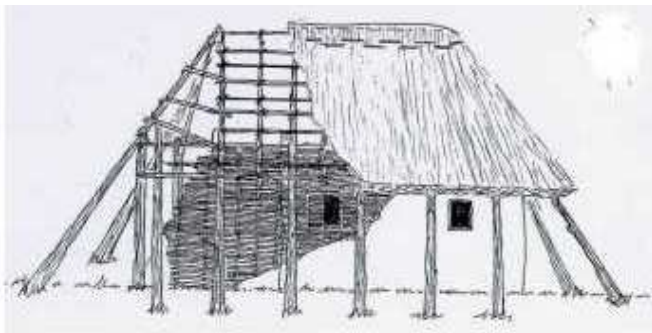
Buildings of the first millennium were either round or rectangular, timber framed, with walls of clay and wattle and a thatched roof. Builders used raw materials available locally, which were capable of being worked by hand tools such as broad axe and adze. (Similar buildings still remain the dominant type in 3rd world countries today.) The life of this type of building could hardly exceed 200 years. We found that 150 years was a more typical figure. Churches have always been of rectangular plan for liturgical reasons, support buildings on the other hand could be either circular or rectangular.

**Frame:** Posts of native hardwood were placed in previously dug holes, while the wood was still green. Rectangular buildings were constructed using corner posts at approximately 2 paces apart to form the sidewalls and to support the

Church buildings were always rectangular with high walls and steep gables. The example shown has extending rafters. Walls of mud plaster over wattle generally 10' to 12' high. Windows (without glazing) had external shutters with screen on inside. Overhang of thatch shelters the windows.



View from West



Extended rafter design used for several churches locally

roof trusses. Intermediate posts were inserted for door and window frames. Horizontal timbers were used to stiffen the framework and to form door lintels and window cills etc in the case of rectangular shaped buildings. Round buildings were constructed with vertical posts in a ring configuration and with rafters either resting on the posts and/or projecting directly into the ground.

**Wall construction;**

Wattle (willow, hazel or ash) was interlaced between thin vertical members. To this surface several coats of daub (red clay) was applied on both sides simultaneously, to a final overall thickness of about 4"-8" (10cm). The wall was finished by applying several coats of lime mixed with a plasticiser (typically fresh cowdung). The lime wash in addition to having a pleasant bright finish also repelled fungus growth and repelled moisture uptake. Internally the whitened surfaces reflected available light effectively. *This smooth internal wall was an ideal surface for murals* depicting biblical scenes or images of the saints.

Many of the timber frame churches included in this survey had a wall height of 14' (4.3 m) and height to apex of 28' (8.6 m). Other monastic buildings were generally lower with a wall height of between 8' (2.46 m) and 14' (4.3 m). Longest building was 50' (15.4 m) and widest at 24' (7.4 m) span. Many of the buildings found with wall height in excess of 8' were found to be lofted in part.

**Roof:** Since no wooden roofs survive for the exact details have to be conjectural. As sawn timber planks or laths are a product of mechanised sawing, it is likely that truss members and purlins were cut from long straight branches. Roofs were thatched with reeds or oaten straw depending on local availability.

<sup>3</sup> *Water reeds have a life of about 80 years compared with 20 years for wheaten or oaten straw.*

**Doors and windows:**

Native hardwoods then in plentiful supply used for window and door frames. Weather protection was provided by shutters on the outside and woven screen or heavy fabric curtains on the inside. All windows were unglazed. Every church had a large window at its east gable end to light the sanctuary area. This window could be quite large; eg Ratheadan 5' h x 4' w (1.5 m x 1.23). The East window could be a single window split by two or sometimes three vertical dividers to give the effect of three/four windows. However in one case the three windows were set well apart (eg 'St Lasarians church' 7<sup>th</sup> cent at Old Leighlin)

Other monastic buildings had narrower windows, 2' to 3' (0.6 - 0.9 m) wide being typical.

Where metal fittings were used ie handles, hinges etc bronze was the only metal found.

**Flooring:**

Prior to construction the sod was removed and the site covered with gravel overlaid with sand to a depth of several inches. Stone flags were then used

for flooring. This curtailed further growth of weeds and grass within the structure.

## Early Stone Buildings

While dry wall construction has been known since Neolithic times, stone did not begin to universally replace timber framed structures in Ireland until the 9 and certainly the 10<sup>th</sup> cent. A new method of building involved the use of bedded mortar. Internal walls were lime washed the better to reflect the available light.

### Walls

Typically 30-32" (70 -80cm) thickness, constructed of random field stones and lime mortar (Roman mortar) using horse hair and/or similar material as a binder. Cattle blood and/or fresh cow dung was used as a plasticising agent.

### Windows:

Early stone windows were high & narrow and without glazing in the Romanesque style with fine chiselled stonework. Excellent examples of 10<sup>th</sup> cent churches survive at Augha and Killoughternane Oratory. The introduction of glazing allowed the use of larger windows possible in later centuries. Stained glass was found to have been used for the main east window of 12<sup>th</sup> c churches at Lorum and Ratheadan

### Roof:

The width of the earliest 10<sup>th</sup> cent churches was limited by the span of the stone roof [typically 18' (5.54 m) ] and were in fact often narrower than the timber churches they replaced. For unknown reasons the stone roof design was soon replaced by wider spans supported by timber trusses and roofed with thatch or occasionally wooden shingles. The earliest use of slates was in 15<sup>th</sup> cent when Ratheadan building was re-roofed.

### Layout:

The earlier Celtic era churches had a simple rectangular layout with church and sacristy



separated by a partition wall. By the 12 cent a transept had been added to accommodate the sacristy. Churches so modified include;



Ratheadan, Killoughternane and Lorum

The last pre-Reformation church in the area surveyed was the ruined church in Dunleckney Churchyard, a parish church dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> cent

## Monastic Crosses.

County Carlow unlike neighbouring Kildare & Kilkenny have no surviving high crosses. In the area covered by this survey no evidence that this type of monument ever existed was found. However earlier smaller and simpler Celtic crosses can still be seen at Kileogan (shaft broken), Nurney, Old Leighlin and St Mullins all of which were cut from field boulders obtained locally, either granite or limestone. Typically these crosses stand on a low base with cross mounted on top, giving an overall height of approx' 6' (1.85 m).

The stone working tools available to the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium stonemason limited the design to simple shapes and were often without carving or inscription. All of the examples seen have blind holes where the circle intersects with the cross arms. The cross also increases in width from top to bottom when seen from the side. Likewise the shaft tapers out sharply downwards from cross arms to base. It is likely that all monasteries once had several crosses, initially of made of wood and later of stone.

At Lorum and Augha only the cross bases survive. By extrapolating from the base socket dimensions and dowsing both of these crosses were reconstructed. *See Data sheet for site*

By the 14<sup>th</sup> century the Celtic type cross was replaced by a Latin type cross with an inscription across the cross arms. The inscription took the form of an exhortation, eg *Gaudiamus Deo* /Let us rejoice in God (at Killoughternane), or *Ite in Nomine Christii*/Go in the Name of Christ (at Lorum). Both Lorum and Ratheadan had stone crosses of this type.

## Round Towers

Round towers in Co Carlow appear to be dated to about the 9/10<sup>th</sup> cent. However apart from the stub of a round tower at St Mullins the remainder are lost. According to the historical record there was once a tower at Lorum ( 76' ). A possible location for this tower is to NE of ruined church in the old graveyard. However according to Roger Stalley, *Irish Round Towers*, a tower is sited normally at NW or SW of the main church

Although there is no historical mention of a tower at Killoughternane, the trace of a 10<sup>th</sup> cent tower was found to NW of Oratory bordering the present public road. This tower ( 96' ) was severely damaged by lightning in 13<sup>th</sup> cent and presumably demolished subsequently.

Another tower is recorded at Killeshin, Co Laois. This tower is reputed to have stood at 105' high and was demolished by the local landowner in 1703 who claimed '*it was likely to fall on his cattle*'.

## Baptismal Fonts

The earliest baptismal fonts found locally are still visible at Killeshin (left of entrance door) and possibly at Old Leighlin (inside main gate along cemetery wall). Both examples were hewn from round field boulders and are quite plain. By the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium fonts displayed considerably more craftsmanship and were constructed of two or more separate sections. At Old Leighlin Cathedral a font of octagonal plan is dated to the 11 cent (beneath tower).

In 1st millenium churches the altar was located several paces out from the East gable (priest possibly faced the congregation), the baptismal font was located within the sanctuary area and the vestry located at west entrance of the church

At the beginning of the 2nd millenium the font was relegated to the back of church and vestry relocated to behind the altar or to one side of the altar often as a transept.

Interestingly enough these changes were reversed by Vatican Council II.

## Dairies.

The earliest dairies found in this survey coincided with the introduction of stone walled buildings. A typical dairy building had narrow windows facing to N only with one or two rooms. Dairies were found at Killoughternane (10th c) also in the 11th c at Tinnahinch, Kildrenagh & Donore.

## Burials;

No burials were found beneath the floors of churches in the 1st millenium. It is known that this practice was in fact discouraged by Canon Law. The burial of bishops, abbots and princes close to the altar seems to have been introduced after the Norman period. Lorum and Donore are examples in our survey group. Burials of local families in abandoned parish churches and grounds was practiced over the centuries until recently when local authorities became involved.

## References; General

1. Internet Site;-- florilegium.org/files/DWELLINGS/
2. Internet Site;--wonderful\_orgfiles\timber\_files\page2.html
3. Return of thatcher's Britain—Sunday Times, supplement Jan 6/2002
4. Early Irish Monasteries. – Conleth Manning. Country House. ISBN 0-946172-48-x
5. Archeology Ireland; Winter 2000
6. Dowsing and Church Archaeology—Richard. N. Bailey
7. Irish Churches & Monastic Buildings. Vols I,II,III, Harold.D.Leask. (1977)
8. Medieval Religious Houses in Ireland– A.Gwynn, R.N.Hancock. Irish Acedemic Press
9. Molaise by Colum Kenny. (1998)
10. Ireland of the Welcomes, Vol 49, Mar-Apr 2000
11. Dunleckney Cemetary by Andrew.J.Morris 1987

## References; Local

- Carloviana;
1. Augha—"Three Carlow Monasteries". E.F.Brophy
  2. Rathedan Viking Gold Bracelet. M.Kearney (1986/7)
  3. Rathedan, Parish of Leighlin.– William Ellis
  4. Archaeological Survey of Churches in Co Carlow, J.Feeley & J.Sheehan (2002)
  5. Old Leighlin Monastic Site.–J.Feeley & J.Sheehan,(2003)
  6. Carlovian No2 (1974); Dunleckney  
An t-Ath Peadar Mac Suibhne .

## Acknowledgements.

Landowners etc

J.Burgess, Kildrenagh  
J.O'Connell, Kilougharnan  
Church of Ireland Select Vestries at Lorum,  
Nurney, Old Leighlin.  
McDonnell, Fanning & Carroll families at Rathedan.  
Nolan family at Augha.

Mr.E.A.Moore and K.Wrightman, lecturers at the Institute of Technology ,Carlow for their technical advice