

# Rian na Manach



*A guided tour of  
Ecclesiastical Treasures  
in CO. CLARE*



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# Preface

This project was initiated by Clare County Council in association with The Heritage Council and Ennis Friary. It is with great anticipation that we welcome all who participate in exploring Clare's Ecclesiastical Heritage. The guide, titled *Rian na Manach*, gives the visitor an opportunity to follow in the 'pathway of the monks'. From the Early Christian period to the great Monastic Orders and through to the Medieval period there is a great variety of ecclesiastical sites to be visited. Each visit will be a memorable experience as many of the churches are sited in peaceful surroundings offering time for quiet reflection and spectacular views of Clare's rich landscape.

Thirty three ecclesiastical heritage sites are featured in the guide with a further twenty five listed on the individual trails. An introduction outlines the historical background to Clare's rich ecclesiastical heritage. Unfortunately it was necessary to omit some important sites owing to difficulty of access.

The back cover has a fold-out map showing all four trails presented: The Mid-Clare Trail, The North Clare Trail, The South-West and West Clare Trail and The South-East and East Clare Trail. Each individual trail has an accompanying map at the

beginning of each trail description. The trail invites you to enjoy a variety of ecclesiastical wonders. Some are located in towns where there is ample parking available and most have at least enough provision for a small number of cars. A few of the more isolated examples have no formal parking facilities and it is necessary to park on the roadside. While the quietness and remoteness can greatly enhance the enjoyment of your visit we ask you to exercise caution when parking your vehicles.

The trails offer a rich variety of interest to all visitors. The visitor is guided through each site featured in the booklet and various details are noted and described. The richness of the architectural features and stonework is highlighted.

We suggest that you use the Discovery Series maps produced by Ordnance Survey Ireland to accompany the guide. The relevant map numbers are: 51, 52, 57, 58, 59, 63, and 64.

We hope that your visit to each site will be a memorable experience and that you will have many memories to savour of the Ecclesiastical Treasures to be found in Clare.

**Olive Carey & Clodagh Lynch**  
**Clóibh Research**

# Réamhrá

**C**huir Comhairle Contae an Chláir i gcomhairle leis an Chomhairle Oidhreachta agus Mainistir na hInse tús leis an tionscadal seo. Is le croí mór a chuirimid fáilte roimh gach duine a mbeidh páirt acu i dtascálaíocht Oidhrecht Eaglasta an Chláir. Tugann an treoirleabhar darbh ainm *Rian na Manach*, deis don chuariteoir cosán na naoimh a leanúint. Ón Luathré Chríostaí go dtí na hOird Manachúla agus ar aghaidh go dtí Ré na Meánaoise, tá réimse maith suíomh eaglasta éagsúla ann chun chuairt a thabhairt orthu. Beidh gach cuairt mar eachtra nach ndéanfar dearmad uirthi mar tá líon maith de na séipéil i dtimpeallacht suaimhneach inar féidir machnamh ciúin a dhéanamh agus radharcanna iontacha de thírdhreach an Chláir a fheiceáil.

Sa treoirleabhar déantar cur síos ar tríocha trí suíomh eaglasta oidhreachta agus tá fiche cúig eile liostaithe ar na slite indibhidiúla. Léirítear sa réamhrá an cúlra stairiúil atá ag Oidhrecht eaglasta shaibhir an Chláir. Go mí-ábharach b'éigean dúinn limistéir thábhachtacha áirithe a fhágáil ar lár de bharr rochtain go dtí na limistéir seo.

Tá léarscáil infhillte ar an gclúdach a thaispeánann na ceithre slí atáthar á gcur i láthair: Meán-slí an Chláir; Slí Thuaiscirt an Chláir; Slí Iar-Dheiscirt agus Slí Iarthair an Chláir; Slí Oir-

dheiscirt agus Slí Oirthir an Chláir. Tá léarscáil ag dul le gach slí indibhidiúil a fhaightear ag tús tuairisc gach slí.

Fáiltíonn an cosán dúlra thú go dtí go leor limistéir álainn eaglasta. Tá cúpla acu lonnaithe sna bailte agus tá a lán áiteanna páirceála ar fáil agus tá áiteanna eile le spás iontu do chúpla carr. Nil áit pháirceála ag cúpla ceann de na limistéir agus tá sé riachtanach páirceáil ar thaobh an bhóthair. Fiú go bhfuil sé ciúin agus iargulta, tá sé tábhachtach go mbeidh tú airdeallach agus tú ag páirceáil.

Cuirtear ar fáil réimse saibhir sna slite a mbeadh spéis ag gach cuairteoir ann. Treoraítear an cuairteoir i ngach suíomh atá sa leabhrán agus tá sonraí éagsúla nótaíle agus tuairiscithe ann. Cuirtear an spotsolas ar shaibhreas na ngnéithe ailtireachta agus ar an obair chloiche.

Molaimid na léarscáileanna “Discovery” atá foilsithe ag Ordanáis Suirbhéireacht Éireann chun dul leis an treoirleabhar. Is iad uimhreacha na léarscáileanna cuí ná: 51, 52, 57, 58, 59, 63 agus 64.

Tá súil againn gur eachtra nach ndéanfaidh tú dearmad air a bheidh agat i ngach cuairt dá dtabharfaidh tú ar na suíomhanna agus go mbeidh líon maith cuimhní agat ó na Seoda Eaglasta atá ar fáil i gContae an Chláir.

**Olive Carey agus Clodagh Lynch  
Clóbh Research**

# Introduction by Dr. Peter Harbison

Churches new and old have their fascination for the mind, those roofed as they assist in fulfilling our need for prayer, and those ruined because they help us to a heightened appreciation of the past. County Clare can count itself fortunate and privileged in being well endowed with both varieties. T.J. Westropp did a brief historical survey of the medieval sites in the whole of Clare more than a century ago, augmented for the northern half of the county by Averil Swinfen's admirable 1992 book *Forgotten Stones* and other books on the Burren, as well as articles by John Sheehan and Sinéad Ní Ghabhláin, details of all of which are given in the Selected Reading List at the end of this volume. With the exception of Tom May's 2000 Galway - based book on Catholic churches which includes those in the diocese of Kilfenora, both Catholic and Protestant churches built during the last two centuries still await extensive coverage. It is all the more to be welcomed, therefore, that Olive Carey and Clodagh Lynch have now taken the initiative to present us with a selection of the best of both med-

ieval and modern throughout the whole county, thus providing us all with an educational backdrop to history, creating a source of pride for the people of the county and acting as a magnet to attract the tourist from far and wide. For a county that has stone in abundance, it comes as something of a surprise to realize that there is not a single surviving church that can be dated back to the time of the great monastic founders in the sixth and seventh centuries, who were obviously quite content to worship their God in small oratories made of wood, or even of earth comparable to the fragmentary example excavated by Liam De Paor on *Inis Cealtra* more than thirty years ago. Wood would probably have been a more widely-available building material at that time than it is now, which may have been a contributory reason as to why we find no stone churches in Clare that we could reliably date to any time within the first five centuries of Christianity in the country.

We have to wait until 964 for the first historical reference to both a church and a Round Tower in the

County, when the important annalistic source known as the *Chronicon Scotorum* tells of the death in that year of Cormac Ua Cillín, abbot of Roscommon, Clonmacnoise and Tuamgraney, who built the 'great church' at Tuamgraney and its *Cloigthech* (Round Tower). Though repaired by Brian Boru, the tower has long since disappeared, but the church remains in the form of the nave of the present church at Tuamgraney, a building which has one of the longest traditions of religious worship anywhere in these islands. It is a classic example of the oldest kind of Irish stone church, having a monumental doorway with in-sloping sides supporting a massive lintel, and using very large wall-stones in a style that is dubbed 'cyclopean'. This typical masonry is found in many of the smaller churches of Clare, probably up to and including the twelfth century, establishing a fine tradition of stonework which was to last – with interruptions – until the end of the Middle Ages.

In their simplicity, such early churches generally bore no

decorative sculpture, and recent research by Richard Gem has revealed that it was County Clare that introduced the first known instance of surviving architectural sculpture in Ireland. This was on the stone oratory of St. Flannan in Killaloe, which was built for the O'Brien kings of Thomond within a decade or so of the year 1100. This may also be among the first Irish churches to consist of both nave and narrower chancel, and to use the Romanesque style of decoration, which gets its name from its predilection for the rounded arch as practised by the ancient Romans. This style was to become very popular in Clare, as elsewhere in the country, and finds exuberant expression in the doorway at Dysert O'Dea. In buildings such as the Cathedrals of Kilfenora and Killaloe, it survives in a late variant known as 'The School of the West' around 1200 and later, at a time when the style had already been widely replaced by the pointed Gothic east of the Shannon. But it is worth noting that St. Flannan's oratory is dedicated to the favourite saint of the O'Brien kings of Munster, and scarcely a

coincidence that it was built at a time when the O'Briens were leading the Irish religious world in staging a Synod at Cashel in 1101. This ushered in Roman ways into the Irish ecclesiastical sphere, the effects of which during the course of the ensuing hundred years, were to toll the final knell of most of the old Irish monasteries which had contributed so much to retaining the history and culture of the whole country up till then. In these efforts at church reform, the O'Briens were assisted by St. Malachy of Armagh, whose introduction of Cistercians and Augustinians into Ireland during the 1140s was to revolutionise not only religious life but also monastic architecture. The simple older churches gradually made way for much larger building complexes with a church at one side of a cloister garth, which was otherwise flanked by domestic quarters for the monks. This we can see exemplified by the Cistercians at Corcomroe in the early thirteenth century, and two hundred years later by the Augustinians at Clare Abbey, as well as by the Franciscans in

their major foundations at Ennis and Quin. These latter two friaries in particular represent an architectural resurgence of Gaelic Ireland after a long interval of apparent inactivity which was largely the result of wars engendered by the encroaching Norman invaders in the second quarter of the thirteenth century.

Monasteries and friaries were, however, only one aspect of Irish religious life in the later medieval period, and they are relatively rare in comparison to the much more ubiquitous smaller churches that came to be built around or after 1200 to adapt to the new parochial system introduced by the religious reforms in the preceding century. Such parish churches, often just long rectangles in shape, served the rural population for generations until, with the advent of what I may call the 'Gaelic tiger' in the fifteenth century, sufficient affluence prevailed for many of them to get a new 'make-over', involving more elaborate doorways and sometimes larger – and more decorative – windows.

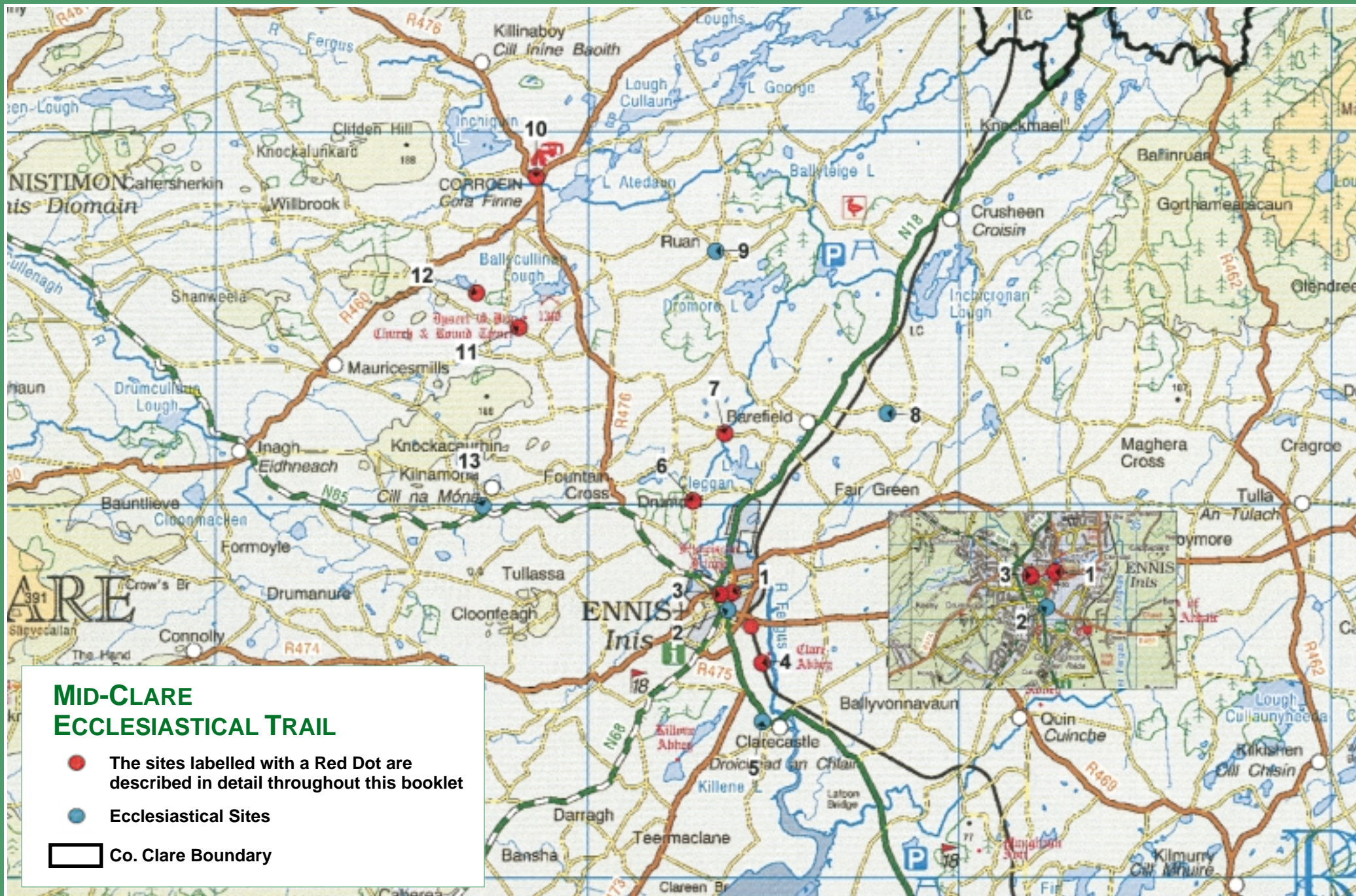


A notable feature of these Clare parish churches of the period is the prevalence of stone heads, possibly representing bishops or church founders. This tradition of ecclesiastical sculpture found its finest tradition in the county in the carvings in Ennis friary, probably associated with a masons' workshop which drew its inspiration from England and the European continent.

The Tudor period, with king Henry VIII suppressing monasteries and robbing them of their possessions, together with Queen Elizabeth forcing her armies on the unwilling Irish, meant that church building gradually ground to a halt in Clare and elsewhere as the sixteenth century progressed, Bunratty under O'Brien patronage being a rare exception. Again, it was really wars that drained money away from church construction, and it was really not until the nineteenth century that there was once more a widespread re-creation of church architecture in Clare, frequently copying decoration and the Gothic style from the older tradition of the later Middle Ages.

The prodigious building activity at the time filled so much of the needs of the parishes of both of the main religious denominations that there was very little need to build new churches in the last century, which is why Clare has comparatively few architecturally noteworthy churches of the twentieth century.

Clare can be proud of its remarkable tradition of church building going back a thousand years, assisted by the wide availability of local stone – limestone in the north, and laminated shale and sandstone in the south. But what more than anything makes the County's churches stand out during that millennium is the expertise of its master masons in building and decorating walls, and carving fine sculpture – a deep well of style and craftsmanship which, despite long gaps going underground, almost miraculously re-appears after centuries of hibernation to bring joy to anyone who will not be put off by visiting 'old ruins', but will see there the expression of pride in decorating the houses of God for all to pray in and enjoy.



# Ennis Friary



The Franciscan friary close to the river Fergus is the medieval jewel of the town of Ennis, with whose history it is inextricably linked. It was established in the thirteenth century by Donnchadh Cairbreach O'Brien, and richly endowed by him and subsequent members of his family throughout the late medieval period. A description in the early-fourteenth-century *Campaigns of Turlough* gives an impression of the glory of the Friary at that time:

*Turlough built this for the friars as his burial place and permanent memorial and had given them chalices, bells, crucifixes, embroidered cloths, a good library, glass windows, etc.*

The Friary became one of the most important religious centres in the area and was the site of a school of theology that at one time supported a

community of three hundred and fifty monks and six hundred pupils. This was, indeed, the last school of its kind in Ireland to survive the Reformation. In the sixteenth century the Friary became the centre of English government in Clare; courts were held here, there were apartments for royal officials on visits to the newly shired county and there was even a jail. In 1606 Ennis Friary was the scene of the formal abolition of the ancient Irish system of law known as the Brehon Laws.

There remain today the ruins of the church and south transept, with a cloister area surrounded by domestic buildings to the north. The chancel





with its elegant east window, once glazed with blue glass, is the main survivor of the earliest phase of building in the thirteenth century. The Gaelic Resurgence that took place in the fifteenth century with the decline of the Anglo-Norman colony is manifest at Ennis Friary in the additions to the building (cloister, tower, west window and the windows in the south transept), but particularly in the high-quality tombs and carvings. The Inchiquin tomb on the south wall of the chancel was the burial place of the O'Briens, while on the north wall the Creagh tomb (1843) incorporates sculpted panels from a McMahon tomb of the later fifteenth century. These show the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ and other figures representing the

Apostles. A woman shown on one of the panels may be a representation of More Ní Brien, the possible founder of the tomb. At the foot of the nave side of the tower is a figure of St. Francis showing his stigmata and, on an arch between the nave and transept, the image of *Ecce Homo*. The sculptures in Ennis Friary appear to be the work of a single workshop obviously working under the patronage of the O'Briens and other prominent Gaelic families of the locality.

The Friary is open to the public from April to October. There is a small admission charge and a guided tour is available. There is also a notice board with information.

**P** Coach and Cars

# St. Columba's Church



Situated in the town of Ennis and located beside the river Fergus, the Church of Ireland church of St. Columba has many works of art to offer the visitor. Designed by Frances Bindon, it was built in 1871 and has some very fine Neo-Gothic carving which can be seen on the capitals both inside and outside the church.

Unusual features within the church include the 24 reredos figures in ceramic tiling with mosaic finishing. These figures, which provide an array of colour, were executed in the 1930s by Catherine Amelia O'Brien, a very accomplished Clare artist who worked mainly in the medium of stained glass, and two of her windows can be seen in the porch.

The church also has other interesting stained glass, including that forming the east window, the two centre lights

of which are of German manufacture, the other four being English. The fine west window is dedicated to General Bindon Blood, while that in the south wall came from Killadysert when the church there ceased as a place of worship. The three large oil paintings over the stalls in the chancel illustrating Old Testament scenes are the work of Brigid O'Brien Ganly, who was a direct descendant of the famous king Brian Boru. As for the furnishings, the carved oak choir stalls were made in the 1920s and dedicated to those who served in the Great War, while the lectern and chairs came from the nearby Presbyterian church that is now the De Valera library. The decorative organ, now over 130 years old, is still in good working order.

## P Coach and Cars



# Clare Abbey



**T**he Canons Regular of St Augustine played a role in the setting up of the diocesan system in Clare that came about because of the church reform that was instituted during the twelfth century.

Clare Abbey was the first, largest and the most important of the Augustinian houses that were established in Clare. The Abbey, which was dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul, was founded in 1189 by Donal Mór O'Brien, King of Munster, who granted it large tracts of land, and also endowed the County with the abbeys of Killone, Inchicronan, and Canon Island. Though officially suppressed by King Henry VIII around 1540, it succeeded in remaining in existence (at least nominally) until the middle of the seventeenth century.

The building complex consists of a church, cloister and a range of domestic buildings, some of which date partly from the fifteenth century, when the tall central tower was inserted along with the fine east window with its simple mullions and attractive circular tracery. But the remnants of an earlier set of lancet windows, probably five in total, which are still visible on each side of that east window, show that considerable parts of the fabric of the church may date to the thirteenth century. Sculptural features worthy of note on the outside walls are the human head with prominent nose and wavy hair placed at the top of the east window, and the face which decorates the hood-moulding of the chancel's north window. Located south of the church are the domestic buildings, where the remains of a fireplace can still be seen, and the south-eastern corner of this block has a two-light transomed window with very fine curvilinear tracery and exterior moulded hood. The remains of the springing element of the diagonal rib of the former cloister vaulting can be found in all but one of the corners of the cloister. The base of an engaged column in the cloister garth once formed part of the cloister arcade, but is now used as a headstone.

[Notice board at the site.](#)

**P** Cars

## Drumcliff Church & Round Tower



Overlooking a bend in the River Fergus, Drumcliff has been the site of ecclesiastical settlement since Early Christian times. While the present church dates to the fifteenth century, some of its architectural features and the presence of the round tower suggest that this is the site of an older monastery, possibly founded by St. Connell.

The church follows the usual rectangular plan and has seen much refurbishment and re-building. The round-headed single light window in the west gable is a survivor from an earlier church of around 1200, and was inserted in this church in a fifteenth-century rebuild. The double-light, ogee-headed window in the east gable and the doorway in the southern wall are, however, an

original part of the fifteenth-century church. Visible low down on the inside jamb of the door is a fleur-de-lis decoration.

The Round Tower is much ruined, having been damaged by the ravages of time, and perhaps also by lightning strikes. The doorway and two windows described in 1809 have since disappeared. As with most Round Towers, the doorway was located at some distance from the ground and would have been reached by a ladder. Round towers served a variety of purposes including physical landmarks, security lookouts, places of refuge from attack, repositories for church treasures, as well as bell towers - as their Irish name *Cloigthech* or 'bell-house' implies.

To the south and west of the church are a number of nineteenth-century vaults belonging to the prominent families of Ennis town. Arranged in a stepped formation the vaults add a dramatic appearance to the hill on which Drumcliff is located. The site continues in use as the municipal graveyard for the town of Ennis, and has extended its boundaries across the road towards the river.

[There is a well-researched information panel available on site.](#)

**P** Cars

# Templemaley Church



Situated in lush farmland overlooking the river Fergus, this church offers time for quiet reflection. Very little is known about the founding saint, but it is thought that his name may have been ‘*Máille*’, as the church is known in Irish as *Teampall-Ua-Máille* (O’Malley’s Church). A possible alternative saint is St. Finghin of Quin whose feast-day was celebrated here. Mention of *Ecclesia Imaili* in the Papal Taxation of 1302-1306 probably provides us with the first historical reference to the existence of this church.

The church is in good condition and its attractive setting makes any visit memorable. In its present form it dates largely from the fifteenth century, though some parts may be older. The entrance

is located in the south wall, and is pointed on the outside and flat-headed with lintel on the inside.

There are two windows also situated in the south wall, one of which is of simple construction. The second window, which is located at the eastern end, is round-headed, and consists of large sub-rectangular blocks with a large sill stone forming the base of the window. Although one side of this window has broken away, there is some very interesting decoration to be seen near the top of it. Two incised lines on both sides of the arch and a plait-like motif are recognisable, and form part of an intricate decorative detail which, though now difficult to discern, may date back to the twelfth century.

The east window has a wide embrasure on the inside, and the outside is constructed with cut limestone, featuring a neatly recessed moulding that forms the long narrow light.

Two simply carved stone crosses of unknown age are to be found in the south-eastern end of the graveyard.

**P** Cars



# St. Catherine's Church Corofin



Originally a barn, this church was built by Catherine Keightley O'Brien between 1715 and 1720 and dedicated to the saint whose name she bore. Catherine and her husband Lucius O'Brien, grandson of Máire Rua of Lemanagh, lived in Corofin House between 1706 and 1717, and provided much of the impetus for the development of the modern village. In the 1820s, the church was in need of repair and the vestry and tower were added, with the aid of a grant from the Board of First Fruits. The renovation saw the insertion of the beautiful stained glass windows with the east window portraying the three virtues: faith, hope and charity. The church served as the Church of Ireland parish church until 1974 but now accommodates a folk museum and exhibition space, part of the Clare Heritage Centre and Genealogy complex - the brain-child

of the remarkable village school-master, Naoise Clery.

Most of the displays in the main building depict aspects of life in Ireland in the nineteenth century but, arguably, the most important artefact in the museum is the Tau or T-shaped cross, a twelfth-century monument which originally stood beside the road on Roughan Hill, a short distance from Killinaboy church. A replica now stands on the site, which may have marked the termon boundary or limit of sanctuary of the original church. The distinctive shape of the Tau cross is similar to a type of staff used by pilgrims who travelled overseas to various destinations in Europe in the twelfth century. Representations in stone are found at a number of locations in this area of north Clare, and one theory links these sites in a pilgrim route where a venerated T-shaped crozier, most likely fashioned in bronze, would have been brought on procession from place to place. The Tau cross may have marked a resting place en route where pilgrims could rest and pray.

The Clare Heritage Centre is open from May to October, and there is a charge for admission. The genealogy centre is nearby and is an invaluable resource for those wishing to trace their ancestry in Clare.

**P** Coach and Cars

## Dysert O’Dea



One of the most instantly recognisable features of early church architecture in Clare is the magnificent Romanesque doorway of Dysert O’Dea. The doorway would originally have been located in the west gable of the church and is probably an amalgam of at least two doorways of twelfth century date. It consists of four orders decorated with geometric motifs, foliate scrolls and animal interlacing, and is dominated by the outer arch of nineteen voussoirs containing twelve human and seven animal heads.

The church and round tower are located on the site of an Early Christian hermitage founded by St. Tola in the first half of the eighth century. The ruins are nestled in a quiet valley surrounded by rolling hills, and they still evoke that sense of peace and solitude encapsulated in the name ‘Dysert’, meaning ‘a quiet place’ or ‘place apart’. The ruins

of the church show evidence of successive periods of re-building and repair. A feature of early Irish church sites is the High Cross, located here in a field to the east of the church and possibly marking the termon boundary of the monastic settlement. The east face of the cross bears a figure of Christ on top with a representation of a bishop (possibly St. Tola) below. The missing right arm of the bishop, probably originally raised from the elbow and made of bronze, was movable for bestowing blessing or curing an illness, for carrying in procession, or perhaps even for use as a talisman in battle.

Dysert O’Dea was the scene of a decisive battle in 1318 when the Anglo-Normans suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of local chieftains, thus ensuring the continued dominance of Gaelic culture in Clare for a further two centuries. The O’Deas were the local ruling clan who built their tower-house nearby in the fifteenth century. They also provided many leading ecclesiastical figures throughout the medieval period, and the magnificent crozier and mitre, which were made for Cornelius O Dea, Bishop of Limerick from 1400 till 1426, still survive and are on display in the Hunt Museum in Limerick City.

The tower-house now contains an Archaeology Museum and information centre. There is a small charge for entry to the museum and refreshments are available.

Notice board at the site.

**P** Coach and Cans  
(Arch. Centre nearby)

# Rath Church



Enhanced by recent maintenance work, this church is prominently sited on a ridge north of Dysert O’Dea and affords the visitor spectacular views of the surrounding countryside. It is dedicated to St. Blathmaic, who is traditionally said to have been born in a nearby rath or ringfort that still bears his name.

The church, which had a nave and chancel, is in a ruinous state, but the wealth of its carved stonework more than compensates for its dilapidated state. The large blocks in the north wall are the oldest part of the church, which cannot be dated satisfactorily, but many of the decorated stones belong to the period around 1200, and these have been incorporated into the fabric of the later sections of the church built around the fifteenth or sixteenth century.



Entrance is gained on the south side through a round-headed doorway, which has a stoup inside which would once have contained holy water. The same side preserves the only surviving window, which has an ogee-shaped head typical of the later Middle Ages, though it uses a sill-stone from an earlier window. That



same position would have been occupied in a different window by another stone now set upside down in the wall between that sole-surviving window and the door. Boldly carved with foliate decoration and serpents' heads, it has on its right hand side (though now inverted) what has been taken to be Ireland's



earliest known Sheela-na-Gig. Beside it is a stone bearing floral decoration, perhaps belonging to a series of ornamental stones, a number of which survive in the wall surrounding the graveyard. Other items of interest inside the church are the wall-plates which served to hold up the wooden rafters, and the curious ornament on stones re-used to support the chancel arch.

Another, and even more fascinating, example of a carved stone re-used in the later medieval re-building of the church is one near the southern end of what little survives of the exterior east gable. Originally upright and carved on two adjoining faces, but now lying on its side with only one face visible, it shows a man crouching on a stool and framed by a kind of mandorla. Whatever he may have been meant to represent, it is likely that the carving was based on a continental, perhaps French, model. The mitred head of a bishop which has been inserted into the wall near the south doorway is a recent copy, the original having been removed some years ago to embellish the west gable of the Catholic Church in Corofin.

Notice board at the site.

**P** Cars

## NORTH CLARE ECCLESIASTICAL TRAIL

- The sites labelled with a Red Dot are described in detail throughout this booklet
- Ecclesiastical Sites
- Co. Clare Boundary



# Killinaboy Church



This ruined church is situated on an elevated site between the villages of Corofin and Kilfenora, and overlooks Lough Inchiquin and the river Fergus. Its name in Irish, *Cill Inghine Bhaoith*, means 'Church of the daughter of Baoth', a lady about whom nothing is known for certain. Much of the present building dates to the fifteenth or sixteenth century, but its decorative features and masonry styles indicate that parts of the north wall and the projecting anta at the north-western corner may be two or three centuries older. That anta is one of the two projecting ends of the west gable which overlooks the roadway. Standing out from this wall is a tall double-armed cross with Ionic-like capitals on the head and

arm-ends. Based on a Byzantine shape associated with reliquaries of the True Cross, it suggests that this church may once have possessed such a relic. The stone forming the base of the cross does not fit in comfortably with the rest of the carefully-hewn blocks, and this has led to the suggestion that the cross may have originally stood above a doorway of c.1200, but that when the lintel bearing the base of the cross snapped, much of the gable had to be rebuilt, and when the church was widened in the same process, the cross was re-installed but in an off-centre position. That extensive rebuilding took place in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, and involved changing the entrance from the western end to the south wall, where a Sheela-na-Gig is placed above the round-headed doorway. Crudely carved, it represents a woman



showing her *genitalia*, an almost grotesque figure of a kind found on rural churches throughout Ireland and Britain. However, heated debate over the last few decades has failed to find any general consensus about the function or significance of such carvings.

Inside the door, on the left, is the representation of an imaginary animal carved in the early thirteenth century on a stone that was probably upright originally, but placed horizontally when re-used in its present position. Both long walls of the church interior are lined with interesting monuments going back to the seventeenth century and beyond, most notable of which are those close to the eastern end of the church where the gable contains an unusually-shaped window. Some of the stone wall-plates which originally bore wooden rafters are carved with masons' marks to show which craftsmen did what.

To the north of the church is the stump of a Round Tower, probably built around the eleventh or twelfth century. On the other side of the church, near the south-western corner of the graveyard, is a flat slab bearing the image of a Tau or T-shaped crozier, similar in shape to that of the Tau Cross which stood

about a kilometer and a half to the north-west of the church before being removed to the Heritage Centre in St. Catherine's church in Corofin and replaced by a modern replica.

#### **P** Coach and Cars



# Kilfenora Cathedral



The village of Kilfenora, *Cill Fhionnúrach* or 'Church of the Fair Bow', plays host to one of Clare's important Cathedrals – and its largest collection of High Crosses. The Cathedral which we see today, however, stands on the site of a much earlier monastic settlement said to have been founded by St. Fachtnan in the late 6th century AD. Through the years the site was plundered and burned on a number of occasions, but what has remained for the visitor is an interesting combination of architecture and stone carving. The oldest part of the building is the large cyclopean masonry in the lower courses of the north wall, which may well be a thousand years old. At the Synod of Kells in 1152, Kilfenora was chosen to become the center of a new diocese, and the old church was

enlarged to befit its new-found status as Cathedral. Because it thereby became the largest and most imposing church in the area, Kilfenora attracted much patronage and served as the burial place for the most prestigious in society. The nave still serves as a place of worship for the Church of Ireland, and is entered by a round-headed doorway with the head of a mitred bishop above. Inside, a fluted baptismal font dating to c. 1200 resembles some of the decoration to be found on one of the capitals of the east window. Located within the porch are the tomb effigies of a bishop and a cleric/nobleman of around 1400AD.

The imposing east window of the chancel is beautifully proportioned, its stones fitted closely together in the style of the 'School of the West', which is commonly found west of the Shannon and is transitional between the Romanesque and the Gothic. Its three narrow lights, each with a wide embrasure, provided light for the cathedral, and are framed by a rolled moulding with a round arch, which ends with two birds pecking at a floral design. Similar mouldings also decorate the mullions, and the capitals are highly ornate with a floral design and figures of clerics carved in high relief, above which is a plain moulding surmounted by an egg motif. The quality of the carving here





is truly splendid and gives the visitor a sense of the importance of the site in its day. Added to this are the beautifully carved High Crosses which are now located in the recently-roofed north chapel, where details about them are presented on information panels. The only High Cross which is apparently still in its original position is that located in a field to the west of the Cathedral. Kilfenora is unique in having so many High Crosses at one site (and there is a further one that was taken away to Killaloe almost two centuries ago), all of them bearing testimony to the prominence of this place in the

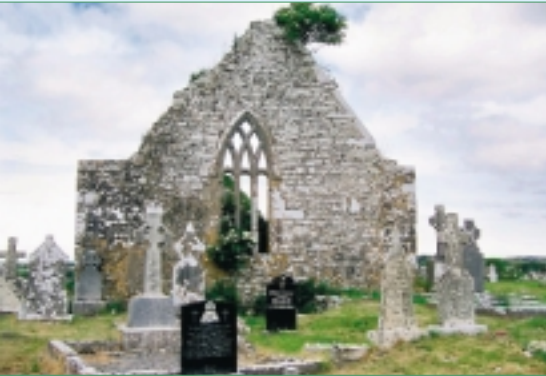
ecclesiastical history of Clare. St. Fachtnan's well is situated at the end of a laneway a short distance north of the church. A stone set into its side wall bears a Latin inscription which, in translation, reads:

Donald MacDonogh created this little work for God and Saint Fachtnan with the authority and Permission of the Bishop of Kilfenora in the year of our Lord 1687.

[Notice board at the site.](#)

**P** [Coach and Cars](#)

# Kilshanny



The Augustinians were foremost among the continental monastic orders to establish themselves in Clare during the twelfth century and they settled in Kilshanny on lands granted to them by Donal Mór O'Brien. Traditionally thought to be located on the site of an earlier establishment founded by St. Cuana the Canons dedicated their abbey to both the Virgin Mary and St. Augustine the patron saint of their order. His feast day August 28th is observed as a parish holiday in Kilshanny and St. Augustine's holy well, located close to the ruins of the abbey, is still frequented.

The constraints imposed by the siting of the church on a small hilltop no doubt contributed to the departure from the usual arrangement in medieval churches of locating the doorway along the south wall. At Kilshanny there are three entrances:

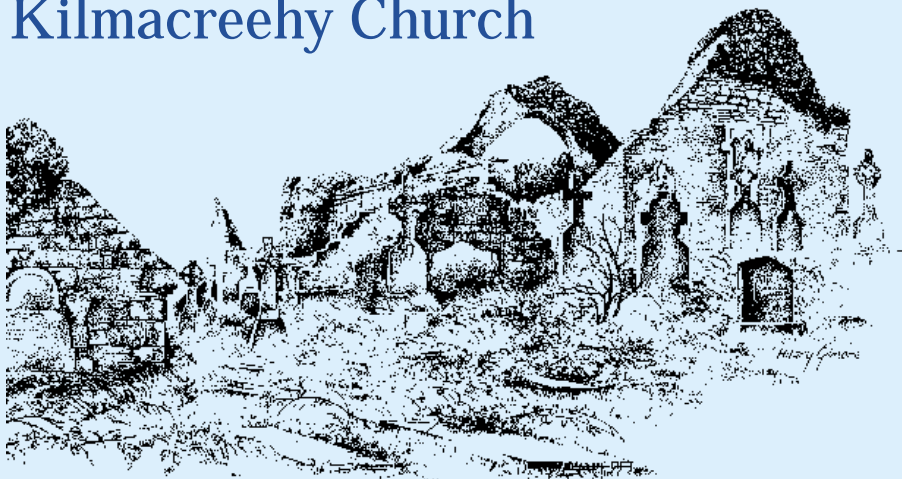
one in the west gable and two in the north wall. The finely constructed round-headed doorway closest to the east gable is probably original while the pointed doorway is a later insertion. One wonders why it was necessary to have so many entrances but this is a large church and there may have been internal divisions that have long since vanished. The small window above the door in the west gable and some projecting corbels suggest the possibility of an upper room at this end of the church perhaps serving as domestic quarters for the monks.

The east gable contains a lovely gothic, three light window with intersecting tracery under which is an altar covered with a large flagstone possibly a re-used grave slab. At the moment this is largely hidden under a shrub that has taken root inside the church. The window in the south wall close to the east gable has lost two mullions, described in 1839, which would have divided the window into three lights. Two further narrow slit windows, are located along the south wall.

A small, hemispherical bell known variously as the bell of St. Cuana, the bell of St. Augustine or the bell of Kilshanny was revered in the locality as a sacred relic. It is possibly the same bell that is depicted on the graveslab in Killinaboy together with a tau cross. The bell is now in the British Museum.

**P** Cars

# Kilmacreehy Church



**K**ilmacreehy church is situated on a slight elevation along the coast road between Lahinch and Liscannor, and offers a panoramic view of Liscannor Bay. Built with local flagstone, the church, in its present state, dates to the fifteenth century, but remnants of a much earlier church can be found in the lower courses of the masonry in the north wall.



The church is associated with St. Mac Creiche, who is credited with several church foundations, and is said to have been eighty years old when he founded this one.

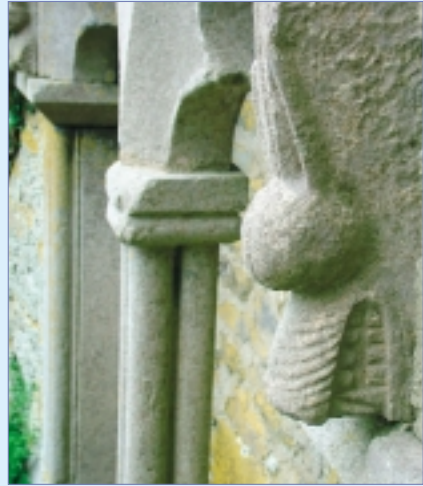
Although the details of his life are very uncertain, stories about his activities abound. One of the legends tells of his having killed a great eel which rose from the sea and desecrated the graveyard.

Monstrous animals are associated with other ecclesiastical sites in Clare, such as Scatterry Island, and tales about them may have encouraged the carving of imaginary beasts on some of the county's churches, including Kilmacreehy, where they are found on the remains of two canopied tombs on the interior long walls near the eastern gable of the church. The hood moulding of the north tomb ends in an animal with pointed ears, large eyes and huge



jaws, and which displays its ferocity by showing its pointed teeth. The animal on the south tomb is somewhat more subdued, with a long neck; it is shown merely biting a moulding. Two sculpted heads which once decorated these tombs were removed in 1992 and 1993; only one has so far been recovered and is now displayed in the Clare Museum, Ennis.

An unusual feature is the small south porch which provides access to the nave. The church consists of a nave and chancel separated by a pointed arch. Just inside the doorway is an attractive faceted stoup. The east window splays widely on the inside to allow maximum light into the church. Externally, a double ogee-headed window is decorated with a floral motif and interlace, surmounted by a hood moulding, exemplifying the



joy masons took in decorating church windows in Ireland towards the end of the Middle Ages.

The Saint's bed is located to the south of the church in a cluster of rocks on the strand. Sand from here is known locally to quell any storm or gale when thrown in its path and, today, many householders keep Mac Creiche's sand for this very purpose. His well, which was once much revered for its curative powers, has now fallen into disuse.

A saddle back quern stone, used for grinding corn, was found near the church in 1999 and is now in the Clare Museum in Ennis. The celebration of St. Mac Creiche's feast day, which falls on the 2nd August, has been revived in recent times.

**P** Cars

# Killilagh Church



**K**illilagh church stands on a height, flanked by a prehistoric barrow and an early medieval ringfort, and earns its apt alternative title of ‘Church of the Cliffs’ because of the views it provides of the Cliffs of Moher and the marine landscape around Doolin. Nothing is known of the founding saint, though it is possible that his name was Falie.

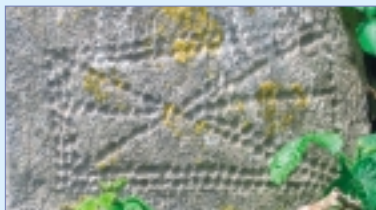
The church suffered greatly in 1903 when a ‘big wind’ demolished the east gable and destroyed its round-headed lancet window. The remains of a belfry can be seen on the west gable. Inside, there is a very fine round arch constructed of dressed and punched stonework which leads into a side chapel. One of the stones of note that forms the arch has a design consisting of diagonal lines within a sub-rectangular frame. The ogee-headed windows in the chapel are worthy of inspection for their

beautifully dressed stonework. Note the floral decoration on the top of one and how, on the double ogee-headed window, the ends of the hood-moulding step outwards.

The stone head of a cleric projecting from a large rectangular block and wearing a head-dress known as a biretta was uncovered some decades ago by two local men in the grounds of the church, and is now displayed in the Burren Centre in Kilfenora. Prof. Rynne dated the head to the second half of the 16th century.

Many of the tombstones that can be seen in the graveyard were quarried from *Trá Leathan* (Wide Strand) which is located on the nearby shore. The grave of a shoe-maker showing the tools of his trade is located to the north of the church. Here also are two inscribed stones, one in Latin. South of the church is the MacNamara vault which was used as a place of internment during ‘the Troubles’. No burials ever took place there.

## **P** Roadside



# Rathborney Church



The Rathborney river has given its name to a fine church that nestles in its valley. The location provides rewarding views within the Burren, the lush vegetation of the valley contrasting with the stark but beautiful bare limestone above it. To get to it, you have to travel about 2km along the road from Ballyvaughan to the Corkscrew Hill, and then branch off along the Burren Way.

The most unusual feature of this fifteenth-century church is that it is sited within a ringfort (*Rath Boirne* or Burren Fort), traces of which are still visible to the south and west of the church. This suggests origins in an earlier period and continuity in burial custom for many centuries down to our own day. The fabric of the church is largely intact, mainly due to its good-quality stonework. The visitor is immediately struck by the neatly-

carved east window consisting of a double pair of cusped ogee-headed lights with a hood-moulding – a design repeated in a window near the eastern end of the south wall.

Entrance to the church is through a pointed doorway in the south wall, which still preserves its finely-moulded arch even if its jamb-stones no longer survive. Its damaged double-oped stoop in the right-hand side of the doorway is a typical feature of many Clare churches of the Later Middle Ages. High up near the corner of the western end of the south wall there is a carved head which, despite its badly-worn features, forms one of the gallery of stone heads representing saints or bishops so often found on Clare churches dating from around the fifteenth century. Another feature worthy of note is the lovely rare vaulted roof of the font.

The graveyard outside has a number of simple stone crosses which may look ancient but are probably of more recent vintage. A short distance from the church is a *bulllaun* stone with a man-made depression, probably for holding water, suggesting that this may have been a site of pilgrimage many centuries ago.

**P** Cars

# Corcomroe Abbey *Sancta Maria de Petra Fertili*



The strikingly beautiful remains of Corcomroe Abbey situated in a fertile valley surrounded by bare limestone hills is one of the delightful surprises in the Burren landscape. Here the Cistercians found the essential ingredients for the location of their monastery: fertile soil, water and solitude. That most beneficent church builder Donal Mór O'Brien founded the abbey in the final decade of the twelfth century, although it is likely that building did not begin until early in the thirteenth.

Smaller than most Cistercian foundations, the abbey is unusual also for the quality of its decoration, much of it characteristic of the 'School of the West', the work of a group of masons working in the west of Ireland at the turn of the thirteenth century. Theirs was a transitional style that combined elements of the exuberant Romanes-

que and restrained Gothic in a fusion that gives visual expression to the paradox incorporated in the name of the abbey St. Mary of the Fertile Rock.

At Corcomroe the decoration is concentrated at the east end of the church, in the rib vaulting of the ceiling and in the flowers and human and animal heads that adorn the capitals of the chancel arch and the arches of the north and south chapels. An effigy of King Conor O'Brien, killed in a battle in 1268, is one of the very few representations of a Gaelic lord to survive from this period. Clearly, at the end of this first phase of building, a drastic change in fortune affected the foundation at Corcomroe and the unadorned nave area of the church stands in marked contrast to the elegant east end. The bell tower that shortens the internal length of the church and the west doorway are fifteenth century insertions. Of the domestic buildings, only the east range survives and it is possible that those of the west side of the cloister, normally reserved for the lay brothers, were never built or perhaps built of wood which has not survived.

The ruined gatehouse can be seen on the left side of the road as one enters the parking area. The fields in the immediate vicinity still follow the strip pattern laid out by the monks of Corcomroe.

[Notice board at the site.](#)

**P** [Coach and Cars](#)

# Kilcorney Church



This church is situated in a delightful setting within Kilcorney valley, which Westropp described as having ‘craggs sheeted with mountain avens and in places perpendicular cliffs’. This nave-and-chancel church has suffered greatly over time, but this should not deter the curious visitor from examining some of its details. Recent maintenance work has greatly enhanced this church’s appeal.



Little is known of St. Cóirne, the founding saint, but the former presence of one earlier church located to the west and another to the north, bears testimony to the ecclesiastical importance of the site, and the isolation of the church today belies the previous ecclesiastical activity in the area.

Lying on the ground to the south of the church is an exceptional stone of Romanesque date which once decorated the top of the east window.



The stone has a curious projecting head and floral decoration. A similar style of stone also decorates the east window of Inchicronan Abbey. Inside the church there is a pyramidal font with a narrow base standing on a similarly-shaped plinth.

**P** Roadside



# Noughaval Church



The contrast between ancient and modern is strikingly expressed in the middle of the Burren, where an old and a modern church stand side by side at Noughaval, which is known in Irish as *Nua Chongabháil*, 'New Ecclesiastical Place'. The site is dedicated to St. Mogua and a holy well dedicated to him is located to the east of the church. The lower masonry courses of the western end of the north wall may be the oldest part of the church, as they contain large limestone blocks of a kind used in a number of Clare churches in the first two centuries of the second millennium. Rebuilding in the early thirteenth century saw the addition of a chancel. Probably at the same time, a new doorway with undercut chevron was inserted in the south wall, its style being so similar to that found, for instance, in the chancel at Corcomroe that the same masons may have been employed in the construction of both buildings. Inside

the church, rounded mouldings decorate the impost and jambs of the chancel arch. Don't miss the small animal head at the north-eastern junction of the jamb and the impost; its ears are set back and its open mouth appears to be biting the moulding. The western end of the church is now completely destroyed. Located to the south of the church is a so-called *leacht*, surmounted by an early ringed cross, which may have functioned as an altar or special grave. Such monuments are indicators of an early Christian date. Also nearby is the O'Davoren mortuary chapel which contains the vault of a family which was associated with a famous law school at Cahermacnaghten, not far away, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The market cross which stands at the entrance to the old church and graveyard was used as a measure of length.

The modern church was originally located at Ballyvaughan, where it served the Church of Ireland community. In 1941, however, it was dismantled, stone by stone, and brought to Noughaval, where the stones were all re-assembled in their correct positions to replace an older and dilapidated church in which the local Catholic parishioners had prayed. The Stations of the Cross, the statues and the lectern were all saved from the old Catholic church for use in the 'new' one, which surely exemplifies ecumenism at its best.

**P** Cars

## SOUTH-WEST AND WEST CLARE ECCLESIASTICAL TRAIL

- The sites labelled with a Red Dot are described in detail throughout this booklet
- Ecclesiastical Sites
- Co. Clare Boundary



# Kilchreest Church



**K**ilchreest, the church of Christ, stands on a height near the village of Ballynacally about 12km south-west of Ennis and, for those wishing to deviate from the main road to visit it, it provides views of Coney and Deer Islands in the Fergus estuary. In the foundation charter of Clare Abbey, dating from 1189, Kilchreest is listed among the lands owned by the Augustinian Canons, and it was administered during the Later Middle Ages by their monastery on Canon Island in the Fergus estuary. Both Kilchreest and Canon Island were suppressed at the time of the Reformation, and their possessions were subsequently granted to the earl of Thomond in 1605.

The ruined, but nevertheless well-preserved, building dates from the fifteenth century, and is entered

through a pointed doorway with angular head in the south wall. The double-oped stoop or holy water font in the right-hand jamb of the doorway is a feature found in a number of late medieval churches in Clare, but is rare elsewhere. Unusually, there is a second doorway in the south wall. Some of the windows have fortunately avoided destruction, that in the west wall having three lights with switch-line tracery. An altar stone bearing a Maltese cross was discovered in the church in 1956. Of white marble, possibly of French origin and thought to have been carved in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, it is now far away in the Holy Name church at East Preston in Melbourne.

**P** Cars



# Scattery Island



Scattery Island is strategically sited near the mouth of the Shannon estuary, and is easily reachable by a short boat trip from Kilrush. Known in Irish as *Inis Cathaig*, 'the Island of Cathach', this is a magical and tranquil place, and a visit here will leave special memories in the minds of those who make the journey. The main focus of this unspoilt island is the old monastic settlement, dominated by a tall Round Tower which may have served to summon the monks to prayer, and which stands out like a beacon guarding the five surviving churches in its shadow. This attractive cluster of buildings owes its origins to St Senan, a popular and much travelled saint who died in the year 544. He is known to have visited Rome and, on his return journey, stayed with St. David in Wales. Other foundations are also

attributed to him, including *Inis Mór* (Canon Island) and *Inis Caorach* (Mutton Island). Myths and legends about him abound, which has added to his appeal and notoriety. Thomas Moore immortalized him in verse for his treatment of St. Conaire, a female saint whose abiding wish was to visit Scattery and be buried there - a wish that was finally granted.

The cathedral is the most impressive and largest of the churches, and bears all the hallmarks of a once beautifully ornate church. Several building phases can be detected through changes in its stonework, a feature





in Clare churches which, in this instance, was due to a desire to enlarge its capacity. The west gable has antae, which occur on early Irish churches. These are projections from the side walls beyond the gables, designed to provide support for the wooden barge-boards. Several heads decorate the window in the south wall. On the outside, the pointed east window has a hood moulding which ends in two animal heads and is surmounted by a bishop's head which is reputed to represent St. Senan.

Just north of the cathedral, and rather dwarfed by it, is a diminutive Oratory, which is a nave-and-chancel church where remnants of the Romanesque style can be seen in the highly ornamented stonework that once enhanced the chancel arch. The same features can be

found in St. Senan's church farther north, which is reputed to be the burial place of the saint, and where there is also an Ogham stone and cross-decorated slab. The highest point of the island is Knockanangel or 'Hill of the Angel', and that is where legend says the archangel Michael placed St. Senan to fight a monster who had been devouring anyone who wanted to occupy the island – and guess who won? On the hill is a church which may be as old as the eleventh or twelfth century, but is now much ruined. Better preserved, however, is *Teampall na Marbh*, or 'Church of the Dead', which is closer to the shore, and may date in part from the thirteenth century.

Notice board at the site.

**P** Coach and Cars - Boat trip

## The Little Ark – Kilbaha



**T**he Catholic church at Moneen, not far from Kilbaha, is the home of the 'Little Ark', a small wooden structure on four tall wheels which has a remarkable history attached to it, dating back to the time in the mid-nineteenth century when there was no church at the western end of the Loop Head peninsula. Fr. Michael Meehan, the local parish priest, had been dispossessed of the dwellings he had acquired, and was not allowed to say Mass in the large territory controlled by the tyrannical local landlord of the time. The only place where this bigot was powerless to prevent celebration of the Mass was on the strand between high and lower

watermark. So, in 1852, Fr. Meehan hit on the clever idea of constructing the Ark, placing an altar inside and a ladder outside for access, and then rolling it down to a place between high and lower water mark where he could say his Mass undisturbed. For four years, from 1853 to 1857, rather than 'leave the people on Sunday without the comfort of religion', Fr. Meehan celebrated Mass at low tide 'while a large congregation kneel around me in the puddle, bare-headed, under the open air'.

Fr. Meehan finally got his own church, which was dedicated on February 10th, 1858, and it is there, in a side-chapel to the left of the high altar, that the 'Little Ark' is preserved (minus its door) as a poignant reminder of the struggle for religious freedom in Clare a mere century and a half ago.

Fr. Meehan was given his final resting place in front of the altar rails in 1878, where his admiring and grateful parishioners erected a commemorative tablet bearing his unforgettable words:

'I have fought a good fight,  
I have finished my course,  
I have kept the faith'.

**P** Cars

# Kilballyowen



Although it is difficult to date Kilballyowen (the church of the town of Eoghan) it is likely to have been built in the fifteenth century. It probably occupies the site of an earlier church as there is a mention in the Papal Register of 1302 of *Killmolihegyn* but no part of an earlier building survives. The church appears not to have changed since *Mason's Parochial Survey* of 1816 mentioned that it was without a roof and that it probably had none for the previous century and a half. It is necessary to incline one's head as one enters through the pointed arch of the doorway, an indication that the present ground level is considerably higher than it was originally, a consequence of repeated burials both within and outside the church. The graveyard is still in use as a burial ground for the local community. Although no carved stone was used

in its construction, this is an attractive church built of the thin flagstones so characteristic of traditional buildings in this part of west Clare. With its bell cote atop the west gable one can almost visualise the local congregation being called to worship from the windswept surroundings.

A mid to late fifteenth century limestone baptismal font depicting the figure of Saint John the Baptist was found during renovations to the floor of the church early in the nineteenth century. It is undoubtedly the work of masons who worked on the monumental tomb sculpture and other carvings in Ennis Friary. The Kilballyowen font falls into a small group of apostle fonts from Ireland dating from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It is currently undergoing restoration and will be available for viewing in the Clare Museum, Ennis at a future date.

**P** Roadside



# Killard



The original builders of this little church could hardly have selected a more dramatic site to locate their edifice, as it is situated on a height (*Cill Árd* – High Church) overlooking Doonbeg bay to the east with Mutton Island a short distance out in the wild Atlantic Ocean to the north.

At first sight the remains of the church at Killard are less than imposing but closer examination will reward the visitor with a glimpse into the complex story written in its ancient walls. That this is a two-period construction is evident from the two very different building styles at either end of the church. The east and west gables remain standing, though not perfectly preserved, with short lengths of the side walls adhering to both, whereas the central portion which would have contained the doorway in the south wall has long since succumbed to the

elements. The most interesting and oldest part of the church is to be found at the east end, which is scarcely much earlier than the year 1200. Built of irregular courses of limestone masonry, the east gable contains a small, early window which, externally, is surmounted by a semi-circular top cut from a single block, while on the inside the top of the window is formed of two thin slabs laid one against the other to form a triangle. An unusual carving of a bearded head is found built into the gable to the right of the east window as one looks at it from the inside. A heavy growth of lichen obscures the details, so it is necessary to really examine the stones carefully in order to discern the carving. It is probable that this eastern portion is what remains of the church mentioned in the Papal Taxation list of 1302. The western end of the church is obviously an extension added on when the building style had changed a few centuries after the eastern end was built. It is constructed of closely-fitted thin flagstones and contains a narrow, flat-headed window in the west gable. In 1900, the gable still retained its plain bell-cote but this has since disintegrated. The large burial ground surrounding this church is still in use and the field to the west contains a holy well dedicated to the Creator of the World (*Craithaitheoir an domhain*), where rounds are performed on Good Friday.

Please close the gate at the entrance to the track way that leads to the church.

**P** Cars



## Kilmurry/Ibrickane



Located on the western seaboard, the ruins of this large parish church stand sentinel to a time when the population of this part of the county was much greater than it is today. Its east gable had already fallen by the time O'Donovan and Curry visited it in 1839, and a change in masonry styles along the north wall indicates that this church, built of west Clare slate, was enlarged or rebuilt. It does not appear to be earlier than the fifteenth century and is not mentioned in the papal taxation lists of 1302. There is a broken bell chamber over the west gable, while a window and corbels indicate that there may have been a gallery or living quarters for the priest at this end of the church. The south wall contains a fifteenth-century cut limestone doorway and is abutted externally by three nineteenth-century tomb vaults. The vaults are replicated in the extensive cemetery, which occupies both sides of the road and almost takes on the appearance of a village.

Inside the church, a niche in the south wall contains the fragmentary remains of a medieval statue. This is the lower portion of a Pietà, which is one of two such representations to survive in County Clare, the other larger fragment being preserved in the friary in Ennis. Not many examples of such freestanding stone sculpture survive from medieval Ireland, so these two, unfortunately, fragmentary Pietà carvings are invaluable indicators of the types of statuary that adorned Irish churches during the Later Middle Ages. Both sculptures show the seated virgin with the dead Christ draped across her lap, and her left hand grasping his right arm, just above the elbow in Ennis and below the shoulder at Kilmurry. The closest parallels for this particular positioning of the virgin's left hand come from examples carved in alabaster known from the Rhineland. Pietàs were developed in Germany around the year 1300 to evoke contemplation and meditation on the suffering of Jesus and the redemptive power of his sacrifice, but they appear not to have become popular in Ireland until the fifteenth century. Both Clare examples probably date to the second half of the century and stylistically show affinities with the monumental carving on the McMahon tomb in Ennis Friary. It is highly probable that they are the product of a single workshop based in Ennis.

**P** Roadside

# Kilfarboy Church



**K**ilfarboy nestles comfortably in the valley of the Carrowkeel river north-east of Miltown Malbay. The church offers panoramic views of the hills around about and westwards towards the coast, while at the same time inviting the visitor to enjoy the peaceful setting.

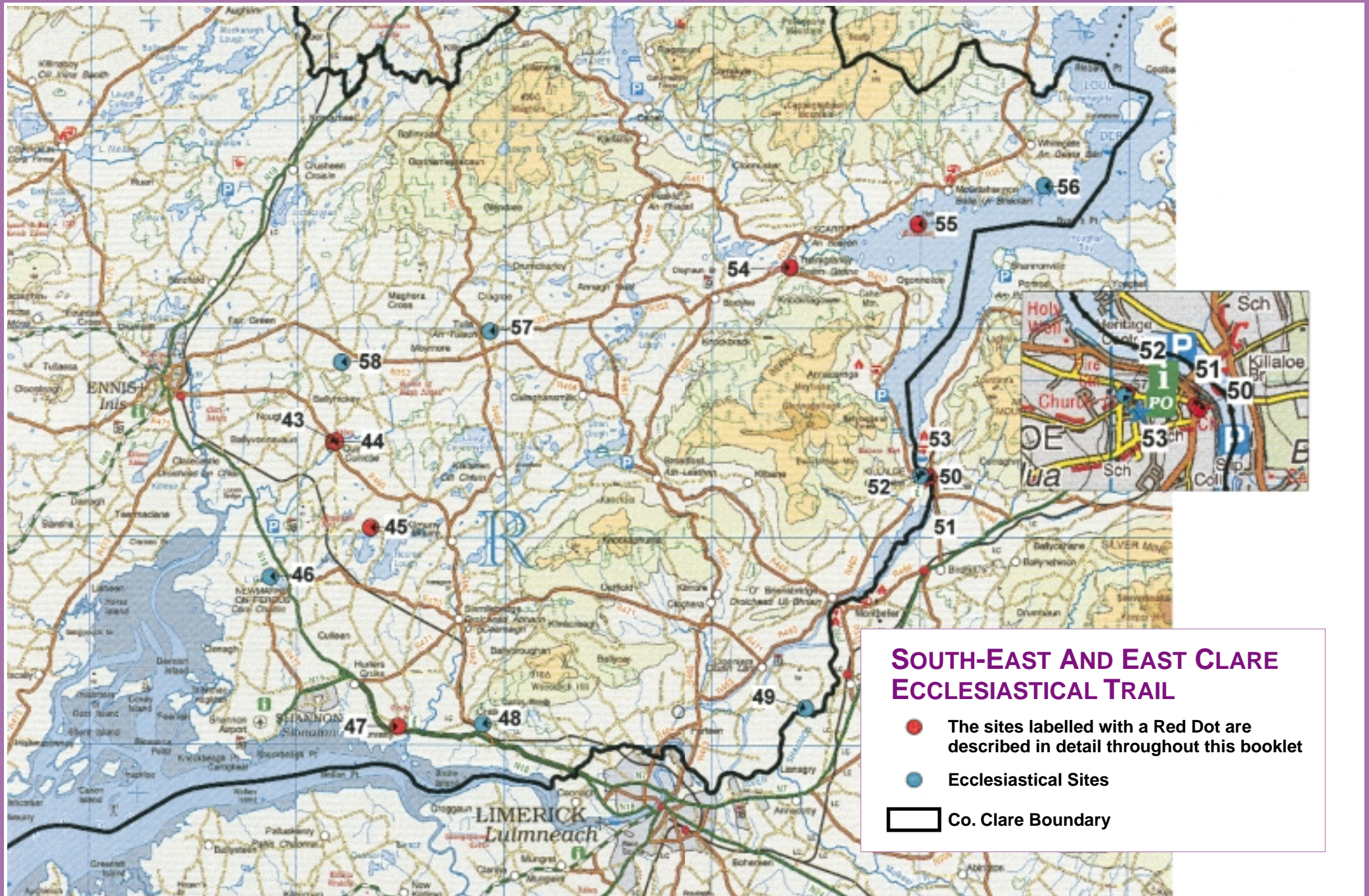
In the Papal Taxation of 1302-7, the church is recorded as Kellinfearbreygy. In Irish its name is *Cell Fearbaigh*, the church of St. Fearbach, about whom nothing is known. Unusually, however, it is also associated with a second saint, Lachtain, who has connections with Cork and Kilkenny, and whose arm reliquary is preserved in the National Museum in Dublin. On his feastday, March 19th, his well in the south-west corner of the churchyard was the focus of a popular local 'pattern' or pilgrimage. Typical of the west coast of Munster are the well-built

house-shaped tombs in the churchyard, those of the FitzGerald and Shannon families having on a wall between them a slab on which coffins would have been placed prior to burial.

What survives of the church dates largely from the fifteenth century, though large stones in the lower masonry courses suggest that it incorporates parts of an older structure. Time and the weather have inexorably taken their toll on the fabric of the church, which has long lost its west gable. A well-constructed pointed limestone doorway in the south wall is separated from the relieving arch by a single course of local flagstones, and built into the right-hand jamb of the doorway is a fine double-oped stoop or water font. There are some attractive ogee-headed windows in the east and south walls, the former ornamented with a trefoil design in the spandrel. The north and south walls preserve some of the wall-plates which held the rafters, and other interesting features include nineteenth-century grave-slabs carved with the Crucifixion and related symbols.

There is a colourful, but probably erroneous, local tradition that sailors from the Spanish Armada were buried in the churchyard, but one who certainly was interred here, though in an unmarked grave, was Aindrias Mac Cruitín, the hereditary bard of Clare, who died in 1738.

**P** Cars



### SOUTH-EAST AND EAST CLARE ECCLESIASTICAL TRAIL

- The sites labelled with a Red Dot are described in detail throughout this booklet
- Ecclesiastical Sites
- Co. Clare Boundary

## Quin Abbey



Quin Abbey consists of a striking and impressive complex of buildings that form the focal point of the attractive village that bears its name. The Abbey stands proudly above the ruins of a Norman castle that was built by Richard de Clare to assert his power in Munster. But its success as a fortification was short-lived because, only six years later, the castle was razed by the Macnamaras.

Uncertainty exists about suggestions that the Abbey, or more correctly Friary, was founded in 1402, or even before 1350, but we can be certain, through a Bull of Pope Eugene IV, that it was given to the Franciscans of the Regular Observance in 1433 by Maccon Macnamara, who is probably also responsible for having built the Abbey on the castle's foundations. The Abbey, which is one of the best

preserved of its kind in Ireland, has fine stonework which entices us to study the architectural features as our path follows the footsteps of the friars who lived and prayed here in the Later Middle Ages until it was suppressed by king Henry VIII around 1540.

The entrance to the Abbey is at the western end of the church through a round-headed doorway with graduated hood-moulding and a pair of lancet-windows above. Once inside, one is struck by the size of the nave and chancel arch, topped by its central tower. Inserted into the south wall of the nave is a water font which replicates the vaulting underneath the roof of the tower. A large arch in the south wall of the nave leads to a transept which must have added greatly to the brightness in the church through its four windows. That in the south wall is similar in design to the east window of the chancel, which has trefoil heads above the three lights, and switch-line tracery which was easy and economical to construct. Beneath the south window is a piscina which was used for washing communion vessels, its mouldings echoing those of the doorway and the cloister arcades.

Two original stone altars flank the arch of the tower at the eastern end of the nave, and within the south wall of the arch is a space which was part of



the doorway of the original castle, and may have had a further altar in it. The main altar is naturally beneath the east window, which is striking for the height and width of the embrasure. There are several notable wall tombs within the church, that of the founding Macnamaras in the north wall of the choir being beautifully carved in replicating some of the designs of the east window and the cloister arcade. From the choir, access to the sacristy is gained through a door with notable detail at the bottom of the jamb-stones.

The cloister is entered from the north side of the tower, and its calm atmosphere invites a mood of reflection. It consists of a series of double arcades separated by buttresses, with columns (sometimes twisted) bearing heavily-moulded capitals of a kind unique to Quin. Close examination of the columns will reveal a variety of mason's marks,

one with a leaf and geometric design, bringing us closer to the men whose carvings and designs give added pleasure to today's visitors. The friars' domestic quarters are accessible from the cloister, though it is no longer possible to assign former functions to each of the rooms. Before completing the tour, it is worth walking around the outside of the Abbey to appreciate its scale and stonework. The west wall has a remarkable pair of windows, with cusped ogee-shaped heads, and hood-mouldings ending in floral designs. For such a large and imposing building, it is surprising that not more is known about the history of the Abbey, which must be counted among the stars of Clare's medieval ecclesiastical foundations.

The Abbey is open to the public from May to September.

Notice board at the site.

**P** Coach and Cars

# St. Finghin's Church



**T**his large parish church was built between 1278 and 1287 by Richard de Clare and probably replaced an earlier church on the site. It is dedicated to St. Finghin, a long forgotten saint of the early Irish Church.

The church is situated across the Rine River from Quin Friary, which is built on the site of an earlier Norman castle, also built by Richard de Clare. A recently constructed footbridge provides access between the two monuments.

The church has a simple rectangular plan with an adjoining bell tower at the south-western corner that was added in the fifteenth century. The most striking feature of the church is the triple lancet east window separated by piers. Two niches on either side of the east window may

have contained statues. The remains of a richly moulded window may still be seen in the south wall and a broken pointed doorway is located close to the tower at its west end. A wooden screen probably divided the interior of the church into a large nave and a smaller chancel.

[Interpretive sign on site.](#)

**P** Coach and Cars



## Fenloe ('Tomfinlough)



**S**t. Luchtighern, son of Cutrito, lived during the early sixth century A.D. and is believed to be the founder of a monastery here. He certainly chose well, for this site is beautifully situated overlooking Fenloe lake (Finlough). The church shows evidence of building and refurbishment over three separate phases. Large blocks of masonry around the door area represent the earliest phase, and may date to between the tenth and the twelfth century. During the Anglo-Norman occupation of this area in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the church was restored and some fine cut sandstone windows were inserted into the south wall and east gable. One can still appreciate the quality of the workmanship of the stonemasons who carved the windows, particularly in the richly-moulded double-light

south window. Finally, in the fifteenth century, the triple light east window was blocked up and a double light trefoil-pointed limestone window was inserted. The doorway was also inserted in the fifteenth century. A buttress has been erected against the southeast corner to support the leaning east gable.

A walk in the graveyard will reveal three Romanesque carved heads, one in limestone and two of sandstone, inserted into the south-eastern corner of the perimeter wall. These heads were originally placed over the lintel of a trabeate doorway in a small oratory, which survived into the nineteenth century. A stone, known locally as the 'Plague stone', can be found built into the outside of the perimeter wall in the south-western corner of the graveyard. The stone has curious markings and, with the heads, is referred to in a legend associated with St. Luchtighern which can be read on a plaque located at the holy well beside the road.

Unfortunately, during high winds on the 10th January 2007, the east gable fell. This unfortunate occurrence highlights the extreme vulnerability of these ancient buildings and the need to be mindful of personal safety when visiting them.

**P** Cars

# Bunratty Church



The documented history of Bunratty begins in 1199 when the surrounding area of Tradraighe was granted to Arnold Keating. In 1248 the land was granted to Robert de Muscegros who began to fortify the place. Apart from some medieval fish-traps which have been located in the mouth of the Owenogarney River and the Shannon Estuary, there is little visible archaeological evidence for the short-lived Anglo-Norman borough which occupied the site of Bunratty in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. From documentary evidence we can estimate that, in its hey-day, the settlement was home to 1,000 people, had a weekly market and an annual fair. The earliest evidence for a church on this site dates to 1256 when *'a priest Peter was appointed perpetual vicar'*.

All visible remains of the thirteenth century church have vanished and the present church ruins date to late in the sixteenth century when the fourth Earl of Thomond, Donough O'Brien, re-edified the building.

One of the hidden gems of the complex of late medieval Gaelic buildings at Bunratty, the church is situated on the high ground to the south-west of Bunratty castle and is accessed via the service road behind Bunratty House Hotel. Its situation affords spectacular views over the Shannon Estuary. It is a large, rectangular building with a pointed door, a triple light window close to the west gable and two ogee-headed single light windows with decoration in the spandrels in the south wall. Its original east window has been partially blocked up. In his will written on November 28th, 1617, Donough *'leaves sufficient glass, out the store of that commodity in the castle to glaze the windows'*. There is no saint associated with the church. The number of fine tombs and vaults within the church and graveyard indicate that this was the main burial place for the prominent landowning families of the locality.

**P** Coach and Cars



# St. Flannan's Cathedral

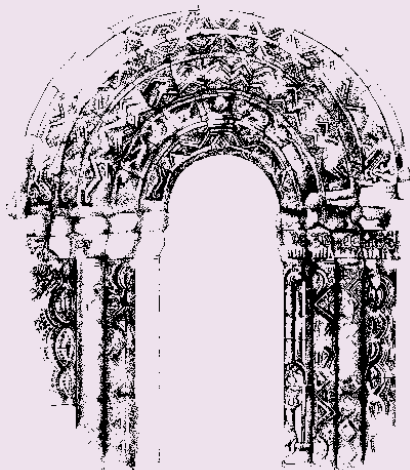


River crossing points were important centres for monastic settlement and, as such, Killaloe was ideally located. Situated on the river Shannon just below Lough Derg, a major waterway artery, St. Flannan's Cathedral is an imposing structure. Built around the early-thirteenth century, it is dedicated to St. Flannan who was installed as first bishop of Killaloe in 639 AD. It is well worthwhile taking time to wonder at the splendour of the decoration to be found here.

The cathedral is cruciform in plan with a central tower but without aisles. The north transept was closed off around 1880 and used as a Chapter Room; it now functions as a vestry. The south transept served as a court until the nineteenth century, and is used today as a side chapel for weekday services.

On entering the church, one is immediately drawn to the east window. This triple light with a decorated hood moulding dominates the interior of the cathedral. The piers between the lights rise upwards and have decorated capitals. These are unusual as they are purely decorative and have no other function. Corbels along the north and south walls have decorated capitals of varying designs and, like those of the east window, are worth examining for their intricate detail. They display an array of decoration which is characteristic of the 'School of the West'. This style, found frequently in the west of Ireland as its name implies, features ornamental and figurative designs in the architectural decoration of buildings.

Located in the south-western corner is an elaborate Romanesque doorway. It is exuberant in its decorative detail



and for the many motifs that are displayed. It is one of the best-preserved examples of Romanesque sculpture in the country and may have decorated an earlier church on the same site.

A twelfth-century High Cross which once stood at Kilfenora is now located within the cathedral and demonstrates the art of the sculptor. The fragmentary shaft of another

High Cross with runic and ogham inscriptions is nearby. A thirteenth-century water font is another of the treasures to be seen in this fine cathedral. The organ is in regular use, having recently undergone major refurbishment and enlargement. A chime of eight bells reverberates throughout the town announcing services.

**P** Coach and Cars

## St. Flannan's Oratory



**S**t Flannan's Oratory, a small structure dating to around the year 1100, is located on the north side of the cathedral. It is one of a small number of Irish churches with stone roofs and is important as possibly the oldest surviving church in Ireland built in the Romanesque style. The entrance is through a doorway in the west

gable which is relatively plain except for the moulding and the capitals of the columns, one of which is carved with two animals sharing a single head, and the other bearing foliate decoration. The best parallels for this doorway are to be found in England.

**P** Coach and Cars

# St. Molua's Oratory



The Church of St. Molua originally stood on Friar's Island in the River Shannon about a mile downstream from Killaloe, but was dismantled when that part of the valley was flooded as part of the Shannon Hydro-Electric Scheme in 1929. It was re-erected in the grounds of St. Flannan's Catholic Church in Killaloe in 1930. The Church is dedicated to a seventh century saint Molua, from whom the district of the town derives its name (*Cill Molua* – The Church of Lua).

The church is a two-celled structure and is important as a rare example in Early Christian Ireland of a pitched stone roof covering its chancel. The narrow dimension of the east end of the church and the use of mortar permitted the construction of the straight-sided roof but it is probable that some

timber crossbeams were used as supports internally. It is likely that the nave was roofed with wood or thatch and is undoubtedly the earliest part of the building, but perhaps not much earlier than the chancel which was added in the twelfth century. The chancel may have been built to house a relic of St. Molua, and its construction was no doubt influenced by the stone-roofed oratory of St. Flannan which was erected in Killaloe a short time before.

The eighteenth century saw a rise in interest and pride among the Irish learned classes in Ireland's past and St. Molua's was the object of exceptional interest as an example of early Irish church architecture. We are fortunate that a number of drawings and engravings of it survive from that period. One of those engravings, which appeared in Grose's *Antiquities of Ireland* of 1791, was prepared from a drawing by James Gandon, the famous architect who designed the Custom House in Dublin. Today, the little oratory continues to draw our interest and fascination at the building techniques that allowed the stone roof to survive for almost a thousand years.

**P** Coach and Cars

# Tuamgraney



**T**he church at Tuamgraney is notable for a number of reasons, not least for the fact that it has been in continuous use as a place of worship since before its most famous patron Brian Boru repaired the church and the long-vanished round tower about the year 1000.

A monastery was founded here by St. Cronan in the early part of the sixth century AD, and was noted as a centre of learning. Plundered by the Vikings in 886 and again in 949, the monastery continued to flourish. Cormac Ua Cillín, an abbot of Tuamgraney built the church here sometime between 949 and 964 AD, the year of his death (*Cronicum Scotorium*). The church was repaired

by Brian Boru and forms the nave of the present church which currently functions as the East Clare Heritage Centre. This western part of the church has many features characteristic of early Irish church architecture - the projecting antae at the corners of the gable, cyclopean masonry and the doorway with inclined jambs and massive lintel.

The introduction of the diocesan system in the twelfth century provided the impetus for the embellishment of many churches, and this process can be seen at Tuamgraney in the addition of the slightly narrower chancel in contrasting ashlar masonry that is now used for divine service by the Church of Ireland. In its south and north walls it has windows made up of assorted Romanesque fragments, not all of which would necessarily have been used originally in this church, and it has been suggested that some of them may have been brought here from Killaloe. Noteworthy is the expansive east window, now filled with fine stained glass by the English artist A.E. Childe, who helped with the establishment of the famous An Túr Gloine glass studio in 1903. This window was only recently installed here, having been brought from the Church of Ireland church in Sixmilebridge, for which it was originally made.

[There is a charge for entry into the heritage centre and information and booking for trips to Inis Cealtra may be made here.](#)

**P** Cars

## Inis Cealtra



The important island monastery of *Inis Cealtra* (Holy Island) lies near the western shore of Lough Derg close to the village of Mountshannon, from where one can book a boat trip to the island. This island has been the focus of ecclesiastical activity since the earliest centuries of Christianity in Ireland. St. Colum, who died in 548 A.D., is reputed to have founded a monastery here, but it is St. Caimin who is most strongly associated with the early monastic establishment on the island in the middle of the seventh century. The monastery was plundered by the Vikings on two occasions, once in 836 AD and again in 922. Both the documentary and the archaeological evidence for this early period of the monastery's existence is slight but persistent, and the overall picture is one of a small but continuous occupation until the tenth century

when the rise to power of the local *Dál Cais* tribe resulted in an increase in patronage for *Inis Cealtra* and the first churches built of stone on the island. There is no doubt that the monastery grew in size and importance from this period onwards.

St. Caimin's, the earliest stone church on the island, replaced an earlier wooden building. It was originally a single-celled building with a simple trabeate west doorway and was reputedly built by Brian Boru who died in 1014 AD. It is likely that the round tower was built at the same time.

The main focus of building activity however, was in the twelfth century, when the chancel was added to the east end of St. Caimin's and the decorated west doorway inserted in place of the original. The Romanesque church of St. Brigid's was constructed as well as the building known as *Teampall na Bhfear nGonta* or the Church of the Wounded men. The original purpose of this small building is not clear but in later times it appears to have served as a mortuary chapel for the O'Grady family. It was during the twelfth century also that the Saints' Graveyard was laid out and walled in for the first time. Finally St. Mary's church was built in the thirteenth century and functioned as a parish church after the monastic system had given way to a diocesan one.

The curious building known as the 'Confessional' lies just outside the north wall of the Saints' Graveyard. It is possible that this structure housed sacred relics and thus became the focus of pilgrimage activity on the island. Indeed an increase in pilgrimage activity would account for the number of churches built in the twelfth century and there are a few tantalising pieces of evidence that suggest that *Inis Cealtra* was visited by pilgrims at that time. The *Annals of Innisfallen* record the death of *Cathasach* in 1111 while on 'his pilgrimage' to *Inis Cealtra*. It is tempting to link this entry to an inscription on one of the crosses now housed inside the nave of St. Caimin's which reads *OR DO ARDSE[N]JOIR ERENN I DO CATH[ASACH]* - 'a prayer for the chief elder of Ireland, that is, for Cathasach'.

*Inis Cealtra* is unique for the number of recumbent grave slabs that remain in their original position in the Saints' Graveyard. Of eighty or more carved stones twenty-two are inscribed in Irish and most follow the formula of asking for a prayer for the person commemorated. They are laid out in rows, orientated in most cases with the head to the west. A curious feature of some of the inscribed slabs is the inverted inscription relative to the cross. The inscription is placed so



that a person kneeling at the head of the stone to pray could read the text. A few of the crosses and slabs have been placed inside the nave of St. Caimin's including the head of a ninth century cross whose shaft may be seen outside close to the round tower.





*Bullaun* stones are usually associated with early monastic sites in Ireland although their function is not certain. They consist of hollowed out stones and some possibilities for their use include receptacles for grinding herbs for use in ritual or medicinal purposes, as holy water fonts for pilgrims, or for grinding wheat into flour. There is a total of seven *bullaun* stones on the island, two of which may be seen in the field between the round tower and St. Brigid's church. By the waters edge on the south eastern shore there is a stone with a hole locally called 'the bargaining stone'. It was customary in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to seal an agreement by shaking hands through the hole.

Excavations in the 1970s revealed that the series of low earthworks, which may be seen within the monastic precinct, were re-constructed at intervals from the

thirteenth century onwards. Although their original purpose was probably to define specific areas of activity they later became part of the 'rounds' whereby pilgrims to the island would walk, often barefoot, from one 'station' to another praying and doing penance. This was a phase of pilgrimage activity that grew up after the churches had gone out of use in the sixteenth century. St. Michael's Garden, an enclosure on the crest of the island, was one of those 'stations' that also served as a *cillin* or unbaptised children's' burial ground. The pilgrimages, which were conducted annually over four days around Whitsunday, were extremely popular from the seventeenth century onwards and there is a report of fifteen thousand people visiting the island on one occasion. The opportunity for moral mis-conduct at such gatherings was all too prevalent and the church eventually suppressed the pilgrimage in the nineteenth century.

The island is uninhabited now except for the cattle which graze there and burials continue in two graveyards, one to the south of St. Caimin's church and the other at St. Mary's. The main features of the ecclesiastical site are outlined on a series of storyboards located at strategic points around the island.

**P** Coach and Cars - Boat

## Acknowledgements

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**Design & Layout:** Intype Ltd., Limerick

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**Administrative Support:** Congella McGuire, Heritage Officer, Clare County Council

**Steering Committee:** Donal de Barra, Risteárd Ua Cróinín, (Conservation Officer, Clare County Council), Dr. Peter Harbison, Mary Kearns, Tomás MacConmara, Congella McGuire, Frances O’Gorman, John Rattigan, Sonia Schorman.

## Useful Contacts

Riches of Clare Museum,  
Ennis • 065 6823383  
Clare Heritage & Geneological Centre,  
Corofin • 065 6837955  
Burren Display Centre,  
Kilfenora • 065 7088030  
De Valera Public Library,  
Ennis • 065 6846353  
Dysert O’Dea Castle Museum  
• 065 6837401  
East Clare Heritage Centre,  
Tuamgraney • 061 921351  
Ennis Tourist Office  
• 065 6828366

## Admhálacha:

COMHAIRLE CONTAE AN CHLÁIR  
AN CHOMHAIRLE OIDHREACHTA  
AN ROINN COMHSHAOIL, OIDHREACHTA  
AGUS RIALTAIS ÁITIÚIL

**Eagarthóir agus Réamhrá:** Dr. Peter Harbison

**Grianghrafadóireacht:** Gerard Leddin, Olive Carey agus Clodagh Lynch

**Léaráidí:** Hilary Gilmore

**Dearadh agus Leagan Amach:** Intype Teo., Luimneach

**Léarscáileanna:** Pádraig Mc Manus, Comhairle Contae an Chláir

**Tacaíocht Riaracháin:** Congella McGuire, Oifigeach Oidhreachta, Comhairle Contae an Chláir

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## Teagmhálaithe Úsáideacha:

Músaem an Chláir,  
Inis • 065 6823383  
Ionad Oidhreachta agus Ginealacha an Chláir, Cora Finne • 065 6837955  
Ionad na Boirinne,  
Cill Fhionnúrach • 065 7088030  
Leabharlann an Chláir,  
Inis • 065 6846353  
Caisleán – Iarsmalann Disirt Uí Dheá  
• 065 6837401  
Ionad Oidhreachta Oirthir an Chláir,  
Tuam Gréine • 061 921351



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- The bibliographies for each individual site may be found by consulting the Clare County Library Local Studies website at [www.clarelibrary.ie](http://www.clarelibrary.ie)

# Ecclesiastical Sites Of County Clare

## Mid-Clare Trail

- 1 Ennis Franciscan Friary
- 2 Ennis – SS Peter & Paul Catholic Cathedral
- 3 Ennis – St. Columba's Church of Ireland Church – Stained Glass by Catherine Amelia O'Brien
- 4 Clareabbey Augustinian Abbey
- 5 Clarecastle Catholic Church – Stained Glass by Michael Healy
- 6 Drumcliff Church and Round Tower
- 7 Templemaly
- 8 Kilraghtis
- 9 Ruan
- 10 Corofin – S. Catherine's Church – Clare Heritage Museum - Stained Glass
- 11 Dysert O'Dea Romanesque Church
- 12 Rath
- 13 Kilnamona

## North Clare Trail

- 14 Killinaboy
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- 22 Ballyvaughan – St. John the Baptist Catholic Church – Stained Glass
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- 24 New Quay – St. Patrick's Catholic Church – Stained Glass by Gerard Walsh – Stations of the Cross by Sean O'Sullivan RHA
- 25 Corcomroe Cistercian Abbey
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- 39 Killard
- 40 Kilmihil
- 41 Kilmurry/Ibrickane
- 42 Kilfarboy

## South-East and East Clare Trail

- 43 Quin Franciscan Friary
- 44 St. Finghin's
- 45 Fenloe
- 46 Kilnasoolagh Church of Ireland Church
- 47 Bunratty
- 48 Cratloe – St. John's Catholic Church – Pre-Penal Barn Church
- 49 Kiltenanlea
- 50 Killaloe – St. Flannan's Church of Ireland Cathedral
- 51 Killaloe – St. Flannan's Oratory
- 52 Killaloe – St. Molua's Oratory
- 53 Killaloe – St. Flannan's Catholic Church – Stained Glass by Harry Clarke, Joshua Clarke and Harry Clarke Studios
- 54 Tuamgraney – East Clare Heritage Centre and Church of Ireland Church – Stained Glass by A.E. Childe
- 55 Inis Cealtra Monastic Island
- 56 Clonrush
- 57 Tulla
- 58 Clooney

