

The Graveyard at Killeely



As one of its next projects Limerick Civic Trust hopes to begin the essential work of clearing the overgrown foliage from the Killeely graveyard and restoring the grave stones and burial vaults. The Civic Trust has already done much work on historical sites in the city, including clearing and restoring other graveyards, such as St. Michael's and the Quakers'. As part of the restoration project in Killeely, the director of the Trust, Dennis Leonard, asked that the history of the graveyard be looked in to and the following article is the product of that research.

The origins of Killeely graveyard are shrouded in the mists of time, for though there is source evidence that it may be at least eight hundred years old, there is no surviving physical evidence from before the first half of the eighteenth century. Moreover, there may well have been a round tower associated with the church at Killeely and such a structure, combined with the old Gaelic word for church (*cill*), suggests an establishment that pre-dates the English invasion and that may have been of some importance, though the evidence is sketchy at best.

In past times at least, where there was a cemetery there was a church and vice versa and a medieval origin for the Killeely

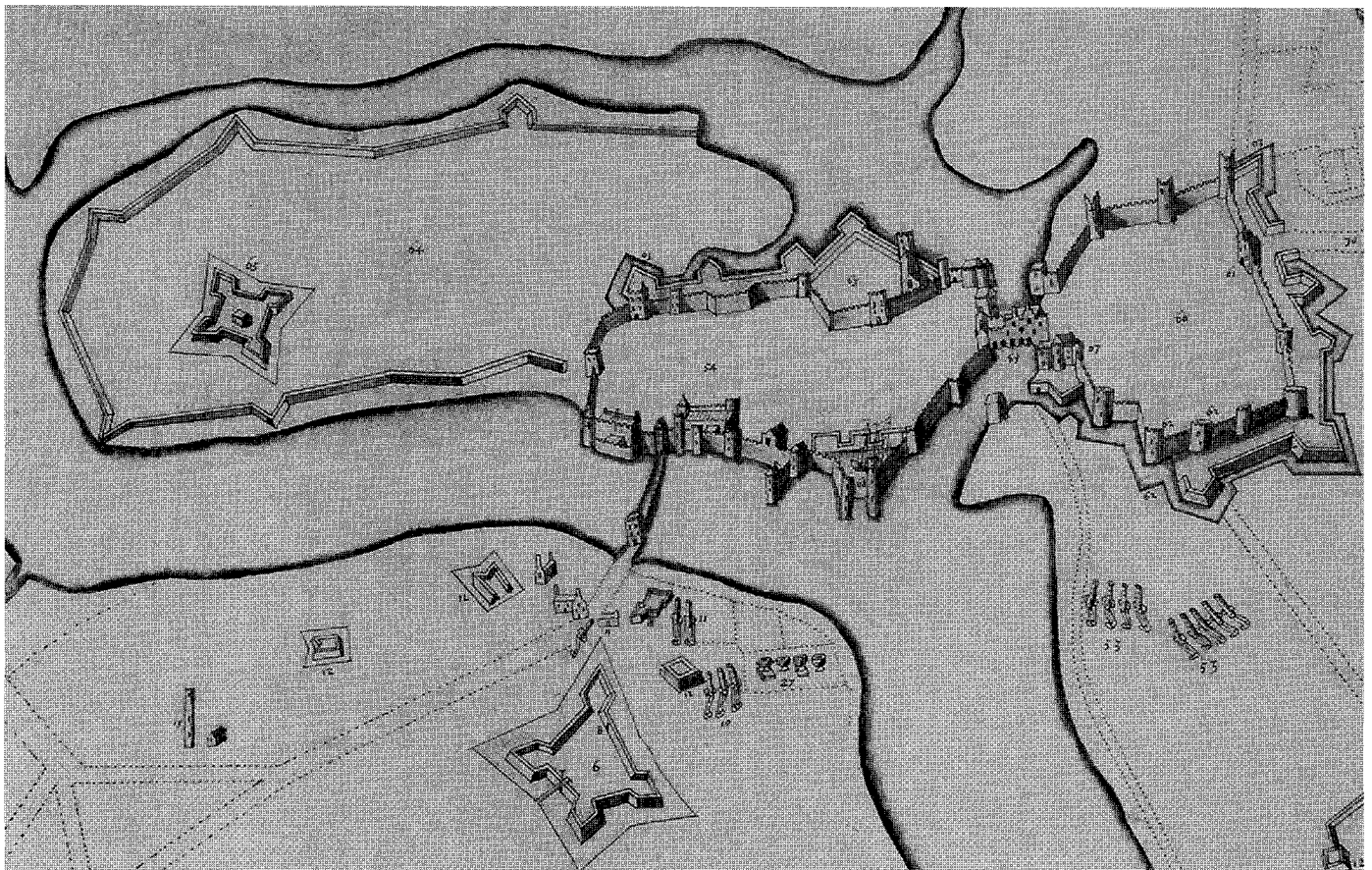
by Noel Quirke BA

graveyard is possibly hinted at in The Black Book of Limerick, where there may be an early thirteenth century reference to a church at Kelliedun.¹ According to work done at Maynooth, Kelliedun may be read as Kelliedini or the church of Liadhain.² Liadhain was reputedly a saint of Dalcassian origin and is more familiarly known to us today as St. Lelia. According to Sean Spellissy, she is said to have been the great granddaughter of Cairtheann, who in turn is said to have been baptised by St. Patrick himself, though none of the foregoing traditions are referenced.³ Moreover, the fact that even at that time the church was referred to as Kil- suggests it dated from before c.1172, since churches built after that time tended to fit into the parish system introduced by the English and used their naming conventions.⁴ The early date is further backed up by the possible existence of a round tower associated with the church.

According to William Webb's 1651 map of Limerick City and the siege works around it, there is a round tower shown in approximately the correct position for Killeely and described as a watchtower.⁵ The drawing at first would seem to fit

one's expectations of a round tower and exactly mirrors that of another tower by St. Patrick's Church in Singland, where the existence of a round tower is confirmed by later drawings. Therefore we can be reasonably certain that there *was* a round tower in the vicinity of Killeely and that it would have been associated with the church there (as would be the norm) and thus, by extension, the graveyard, making an earlier medieval date credible.

So what significance, if any, can the existence of a round tower have for the graveyard and the long lost church of Killeely? Firstly it suggests a monastic settlement of some standing, for as Brian Lalor put it, "the enormous investment of resources required by a rural church or civil community... in order to create these monuments, defines them as not merely functional bell-towers but essentially buildings of prestige and local aristocratic patronage".⁶ Given the time frame within which round towers were built, the founding may even have been the result of patronage from a local ruling family, such as the O'Briens, though in the absence of evidence, this must remain speculation. The first annalistic mention of a round tower is given in 950 when the tower at Slane in County Meath was burned by Vikings.⁷ The same records show that round towers were being built as late as



Map of Limerick, 1651, showing a round tower at Killeely

(Worcester College)



Dr. Sylvester O'Halloran

(Limerick Museum)

1238 and the Romanesque features found on many suggest that they were built in the eleventh century.⁸ Returning to the cost of building such a structure, the tower could merely be a symbol of the wealth of the secular living there but it probably shows that there was a thriving monastic community at Killeely⁹ and the landmark would have stood out and been visible for miles. Since such landmarks would have been used for navigation (turn left when you see the tower of Killeely etc.) I believe it is reasonable to suggest that the name of Killeely could have been known over a widespread area.

As mentioned above, the 1651 map calls the round tower a watchtower and ordinarily this would probably be incorrect. Though round towers could have up to eight windows at the top or bell floor, they more usually had just four¹⁰ (supported by the picture on the map) and these were set facing north, south, east and west, closed in by a conical roof at the top.¹¹ Consequently, they would not neces-

sarily have been particularly effective as watch towers, from a military perspective, which is not surprising given their alleged primary function as bell towers (*cloithech* in Gaelic).¹² However, examples of where round towers have been converted into watchtowers can be seen at Castledermot, Kilkenny and Kildare, where the conical caps of the towers have been removed and each replaced with a parapeted flat roof.¹³ The picture on Webb's map is ambiguous, since though it is drawn without a conical cap this may only show that the tower was already in ruin, as was the church itself.¹⁴ Yet, there are clues that the tower may have been converted to a watchtower, as were those above. Firstly, there is a suggestion in the picture of the tower that the edges at the top are slightly higher than the rest, perhaps indicating a parapet or even a crenellated battlement. Secondly, the tower at Killeely is described in the map key as "The Watch tower where wee had Gaurds [sic]" and is mirrored by a similar design in the tower at St. Patrick's

Church, described as "The watch tower and Chapple neere [sic] Singland". If they had been converted, then one can only wonder when this might have been done and by whom, but as intriguing as that is and whatever the case may be, the size of the monastic community at Killeely, when the round tower was built there and by whom, will all remain historical mysteries unless currently unknown evidence is unearthed in the future.

Papal letters offer another glimpse at the medieval church and indeed, confirm its existence. In October of 1402, a clerk named James Oflannira was assigned "the vicarage, of clerical patronage, and value not exceeding three marks, of Killhrele".¹⁵ Killeely suffers all sorts of misspellings in these letters, including Kyllieli (1487),¹⁶ Rylfyelle (1496)¹⁷ and Kyllfiele (1445).¹⁸ It is also worth noting that, according to Westropp, it was also spelled Kilheil in 1302, though he gives no reference.¹⁹ The entry for 1455 is particularly interesting: a certain Matthew Macconmara had, in March of that year, been made a canon of the diocese of Limerick, with St. Munchin's as his prebend²⁰ (basically an allowance paid to canons from the funds of a cathedral). In July of that year he was ordered to investigate the priest at Killeely, named as Laurence Ocumiyn, who was accused of being "a public and notorious fornicator [who had] incurred perjury and infamy".²¹ The accuser was a clerk at St. Mary's Cathedral who, should his accusations be found to be true, stood to be installed at Killeely himself: his name was Cornelius Macconmara.²² Remembering that it was another Macconmara that was to do the investigating, one wonders at what their relationship was and at what chance Ocumiyn had of being found innocent. It is definitely worth noting that in 1463, the said Cornelius was binding himself to the parish church of Killeely in a fashion that gave the papacy a year's worth of his income,²³ suggesting either that he had taken eight years to get what he was after or that he had already got it but was entering into a new contract, either in order to keep it or because the papacy had just caught up with the situation. This latter possibility will be seen again.

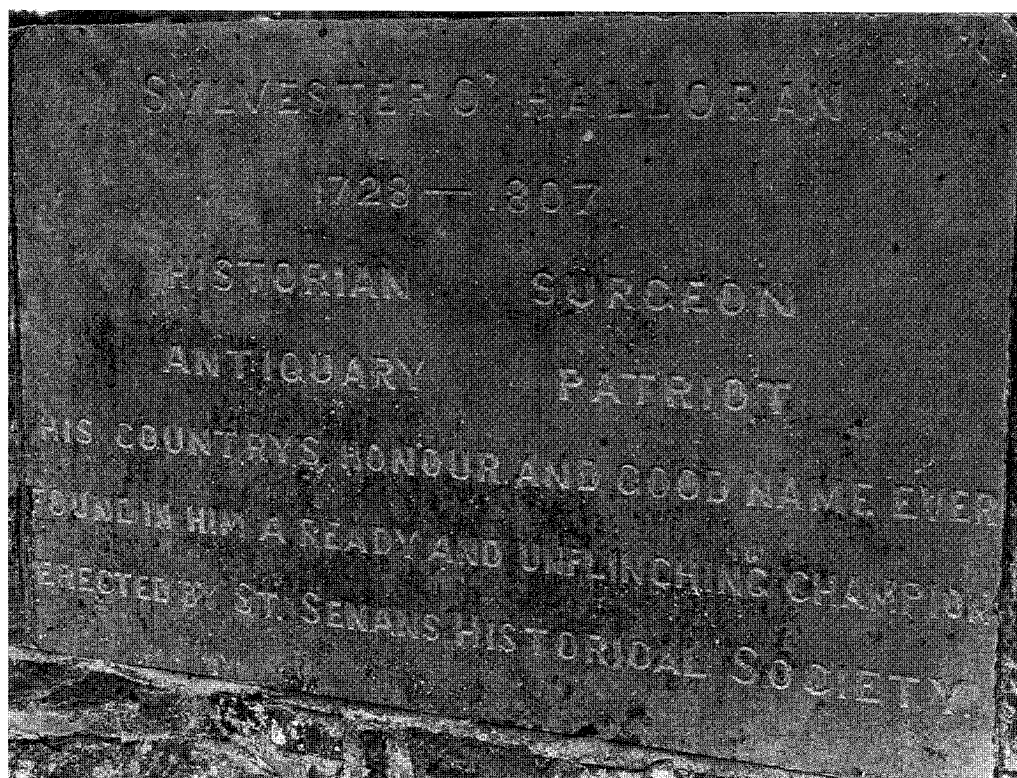
Nor do possible family connections end there: two men with the surname of Artur are also to be found. In March 1487, it was noted that the vicarage of the church of Killeely was vacant and had been for so long that "by the Lateran statutes [Killeely's] collation has lawfully devolved on the apostolic see".²⁴ Nevertheless, Geoffrey Artur was still receiving the proceeds of the church and would still be doing so in June 1496, when the church is again noted as being empty and the same language as above used to describe it.²⁵ Another Artur, this one named Roger, was similarly enjoying the proceeds of St. Munchin's in February of 1497, despite this church too being found to be as vacant and as devolved as Killeely.²⁶ Thus, keeping St. Munchin's and Killeely in the family may have been a favourite clerical pastime in the fifteenth century, which is

all the more ironic given the supposed familial connection between Munchin and Lelia. Though this article will not explore further family connections in any depth, the interested reader is heartily recommended to look up the appropriate books (see bibliography and also appendix) and discover the ongoing shenanigans of the Maccomara family.

As is often the case with medieval records, a mystery arises here concerning the dates, the sort of mystery that keeps such study interesting. According to one source - and remembering that the church at Killeely was supposed to be vacant from 1487 until at least 1496 - one Thetrico Obreyne became the priest for Killeely in 1487.²⁷ Why, then, should the Pope believe the church to be vacant? Perhaps it had been until that time and was so again very shortly afterwards: the connotations of such are left to the reader to explore further (for example, 1487 marked the end of the War of the Roses). This mystery is further deepened because a Johannes Macysog was apparently appointed to Killeely in 1494!²⁸ Given the sheer volume of petitions the pope must have received in any given year and the delay in replying and delivery of the reply, it is not unnatural that cases may have been dealt with at a local level, such judgements perhaps or perhaps not being overturned upon receipt of papal letters.

Apart from a passing reference to there being a rector at Killeely in 1615²⁹ and the possible mention on the map, Killeely's church and graveyard then apparently fade from history until the nineteenth century, by the middle of which time, the care of the graveyard was falling aside, possibly as a result of its overuse. This led to the opening of a new cemetery not far away in 1849 which is now called St. Brigid's Graveyard but which is colloquially known as 'the pauper's grave' or 'the yellow hole'.³⁰ Only a wooden cross now marks this graveyard which would otherwise be unknown, though thousands were buried there during the cholera epidemic of the time, which persisted into the 1850s.³¹

Killeely was so overused that in 1839 the people of Thomondgate were complaining of the "dreadful effluvia from Killeely where the festering corpses were covered only with a sprinkling of earth, and of dogs carrying pieces of human flesh around the countryside".³² Nor had things changed by 1875, when the dogs were still making nightly visits, an awful stench emanated from the graveyard and the whole was generally recognised as bad for the health of the locals!³³ From the 1850s onwards the residents of the surrounding areas were encouraged to bury their dead in the new cemetery at Mount St. Lawrence, but since that place



Plaque commemorating Sylvester O'Halloran at Killeely graveyard

was so far away, many continued to use Killeely as they always had. This behaviour continued even after the graveyard had been closed in the early twentieth century and there is one story where an old lady was to be buried there, as per her wishes: since the burial there was illegal, it was taking place at night and as the bearers balanced the coffin on the wall before they could leap over and pull it across from the other side, the offer of "I'll give a hand!" came from inside the graveyard and the result was "consternation and panic".³⁴

There was also some confusion in the nineteenth century as to who was buried at Killeely, as evidenced by a report in the *Munster News*, dated 30th July 1873. The article details the visit to Limerick of a gentleman from New Zealand - possibly in 1848 - who may have been a member of Sylvester O'Halloran's family and who came to see the great man's grave. The gentleman "visited Killeely special and consulted local archaeologists ... but he could not get one particle of information about it, only that there was no such grave at Killeely, and that O'Halloran must have been buried in Donougamore".³⁵ The mass deaths resulting from the potato blight (there was *never* a general famine at that time) and the various diseases running rampant as a result of it may have contributed to this confusion, perhaps through a lack of interest or feeling of relevance or perhaps because those who would have known had already died. However, it is also likely that the explanation is more mundane, as it would appear that O'Halloran's grave was unmarked, or more accurately, that his being there was not noted.³⁶

From my own general research I must conclude that Sylvester O'Halloran was

one of Limerick's most accomplished sons and yet until recent times, there was nothing to mark his life or his death in that city. The visitor from New Zealand was not the only person to be disappointed by the lack of grave marker in 1848 as a certain Dr. Kill (!) bemoaned the fact that "no friendly hand has added a line to record the labours and genius of this most distinguished Irishman".³⁷ In 1910 it was said that "Dr. O'Halloran is believed to be buried at Killeely in the grave of his wife and children", the lack of certainty be explained by the fact that "the great historian ... never used his surname ... [claiming] to be the head of the Clan O'Halloran".³⁸ The state of the graveyard in modern times is reflected in further observations of the doctor's grave, as "somewhere among nettles and waist high grasses, quite forgotten ... lie the mortal remains"³⁹ and "the O'Halloran vault was completely hidden for years in a rich profusion of briars and nettles".⁴⁰ Only in 1976 was the situation rectified, when the St. Senan's Historical Society "hastened to refurbish the tomb"⁴¹ and set a plaque on his burial vault that reads "Sylvester O'Halloran, Historian, Surgeon, Antiquary, Patriot. His country's honour and good name ever found in him a ready and unflinching champion".⁴²

A caretaker was appointed for the cemetery in 1879⁴³ but as stated above, it was closed in the early 1900s by the Local Government Board and the building of 360 new houses around it was announced in 1939.⁴⁴ The graveyard was soon surrounded by the new houses, the gardens of some of which may have encroached on the burial ground⁴⁵ and only an easily missed gateway now marks the existence of the place to passers-by. Killeely was briefly used as a *cillin* (children's grave-

yard) in the 1960s but is now only used by a very few families who have established their right to do so, by virtue of old family plots. One such plot apparently dates back to 1720 and now contains one John Meany who died at the age of eighty in 1982, having famously fathered at least one child per year of his life!⁴⁶

Thus, the graveyard at Killeely, which may well have been there for over eight hundred years, today is almost lost beneath the overgrowth and the trees that grow out from the very burial vaults and lies all but forgotten. I once worked as a nurse in the eye department of a famous London hospital and there was commemorated the famous ophthalmic surgeon Sylvester O'Halloran, who had in his time pioneered a revolutionary cataract operation and done much work on glaucoma too. How odd then it was for me, having made my way through the veritable jungle of vegetation that covers the old cemetery, to find that the grave of the man had only been recognised thirty odd years ago and that his name only appears to be perpetuated by virtue of a footbridge erected by the Limerick Civic Trust in 1987 and more recently, the post-graduate research centre at the Regional Hospital. Yet, to my great regret, this is indicative of the general historical apathy that afflicts our nation, the depths of which I have only truly come to know in the months since I returned to Eire. It is therefore to be hoped that the work of the Civic Trust in Limerick to rectify such short falls will be emulated throughout the land and with sufficient publicity to make a difference.

APPENDIX

Below is a list of known and possible priests at Killeely from 1402 to 1514 and also those claiming the monetary benefits whilst not actually in residence, that is, not performing regular priestly functions. Spellings are given as they appear in the sources (see bibliography for papal registers relating to Ireland and *Archivum Hibernicum*) and thus may vary wildly.

Pre-1402 Charles ?Macmolassa.

1402 James Offlannira.

1445 Nicholas MacCrauan resigned.

Sometime between 1455 and 1463 Cornelius Macconmara.

1470 or 1471 Rory Okalli (also known as Rorico Okali) upon the death of Cornelius Macconmara and still there in 1474.

Pre-1480 Donald MacRavan, who resigns from the post.

1480 Ricardo Stakapol.

1482 Geoffrey Artur, also made treasurer of Limerick this year, in about his twenty-third year of life.

1487 Thetrico Obreyn.

? Pre-1487-1496+ ?church vacant but Geoffrey Artur receiving the proceeds.

1494 Johannes Macysog upon the resignation of Gaufridy Artur.

1502 Cornelius (or Cunca) Maccomara to take the church and all proceeds, from John Macomara (possibly a canon of Killaloe), who had been claiming the

benefits though the church was vacant.

1514 Donat Macnamara may have replaced Cornelius Nacuamara, who had left the church vacant whilst retaining the proceeds.

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