ST. FIACRE'S WELL

An t-Ar Micheál, O.F.M. Cap.

T. FIACRE, a most retiring man, has left his impression on many districts. Here we are in the barony of Shillelogher, i.e. Siol Fhaelchair. This means the seed or descendants of Faelchar who was a descendant of Aengus Ossarui and King of Ossory killed at Bealach Eile. Here in this spot we have St. Fiacre's Well and bed and churchyard as objects revered by tradition.

Kilteragh, the name of the townland, gives some trouble to interpreters. The popular translation is Church of Fiacre, but Canon Carrigan objects to that and thinks the word is not Flarach but "feithreach," which would mean "abounding in bogstreams." According to the well known corruption in Kilkenny this should give us "Féiseach" as bóithrin gives us bosheen. Carrigan was always careful to note that solecism. However, the genitive of Fiacre is Fiachrach and this form is used in the neighbouring diocese at Ullard where the people speak of the well there as St. Fiarach's. So we may hold the name means Fiacre's Cell or Church. So much for nomenclature.

ST. FIACRE OF MEAUX

Through his worship at Meaux on the Marne, Fiacre is one of our most documented saints. You will find him in the Bollandists' collection, in the history of the Benedictine Order and in many French breviaries. Nearly all agree he was born in Ireland, but some do claim him as son of Eugenius IV., King of Scotland.

MacFirbis traces his descent from Con of the Hundred Battles, but, however that may be, it seems he was at school with St. Cuanna on the shores of Lough Corrib, Galway. When he was ordained priest on Lough Corrib, he felt the desire to seek for greater solitude, and so like many another, he left this familiar country to seek a hermitage hidden away from all who knew him. As he was born in 590 this journey would have taken place well into the seventh century when both Kieran and Canice were dead. And so he came here beside the Nore in one of the loveliest spots within easy reach of the city.
Probably, he was soon found and crowds came about him again, so that it seems he travelled around. At any rate, the same name is known at Ullard and also at Clontubrid where there is a holy well called Tobaradrooch (Well of the Hermit) and a cross. Regarding Ullard (Irard of the manuscripts) Fiacre is mentioned as abbot of this place in the Martyrology of Donegal and the Feilire of Aengus. The date for Fiacre's worship in Ullard and Clontubrid is 8th February, while the pattern day here is 30th August. There are two sentences that seem to identify as one the saint of Kilferagh, Clontubrid, Ullard and Meaux. Yet there is confusion in a gloss in the Feilire of Aengus which makes him come from Congabhail Tyrconnell and mentions the dates 4th March and 2nd May as days for his worship. However, the two sentences are interesting. The first summary is this: "Fiachra Dithreabhach agus do bheannuigh fos an Fhrainc." And that means: "Fiacre was a hermit and he brought his blessing into France." The other sentence reads: "Fiacre ba fer ferrda abb Irarda amra." And that may be rendered: "Fiacre was a most manly man Abbot of noble Irard (Ullard)."

It seems then he would have been nearly forty years of age when he decided to travel further for solitude and so left for France. From this point we are on much more solid ground in Fiacre's history though we need not disparage tradition. And the tradition of Fiacre's sanctity and power is strong here.

It was when St. Faro was Bishop of Meaux that Fiacre came seeking for land for his hermitage. Faro had been minister at the royal court of Clothair before he was selected to rule the diocese. He was evidently a man of large mind because he settled the stranger from Ireland on a patrimony of his own eleven miles east of Meaux. The place is called La Brie. There he made a "duirteach" or hermit's cell in the Irish way and he erected a chapel in honour of the Blessed Virgin. But still the attraction he exercised in Ireland followed him amongst our Celtic cousins. He is said to have been visited by his kinsman St. Kilian and his sister Syra, who afterwards founded a convent near by. His name passed into the French language as the name of a cab, the "fiacre" probably only indirectly through a hospital called after him which afterwards became a hostelry. It was in the hostelry or inn that was still called by the name Fiacre that the cab originated. St. Fiacre died at La Brie in the year 670.

Besides becoming the patron of cabmen he also became the patron of gardeners, because his herb garden was famous. He is pictured at the shrine of La Brie with a spade. It was Ann of Austria and Louis XIII who erected this shrine as they considered they had got great favours through Fiacre's intercession. Fiacre's hermitage has continued down the centuries to be a great place of Pilgrimage and the Irish soldiers in the French army never neglected to visit the shrine.
It is interesting to note that there is a mystery play based on his life dating from the 15th century: "Mystere de M. St. Fiacre," to be found in the "Mysteres inedits du dixquinzieme siecle." by Mons. Jubinal.

**KILFERAGH**

Kilferagh and the present Sheestown formed the ancient parish of Kilferagh or St. Fiacre but it was dedicated to St. Patrick as well. Previous to the Reformation the rectory or parish belonged to St. Augustine's Abbey, Bristol, as is noted in the Red Book of Ossory. King John when Lord of Ireland confirmed a grant of Killfechra in Ossory made between 1181 and 1185 by Domhnall King of Ossory to John Comyn Archbishop of Dublin.

**FIACRA'S CHURCHYARD.**

This is beside the well and seems to belong to the 7th or 8th century. It is small in extent and has no trace of fosse or rampart or enclosing wall. There are three monuments, the one to Kenny Purcell within the recently made wall and the others to Powers. Outside the Kenny Purcell grave wall is the supposed decapitated statue of St. Fiacre in limestone and of the style of the effigy of Ledrede in St. Canice's Cathedral. O'Curry noted here in 1839 the "duirteach" of Fiacre or hermit's cell where the Kenny Purcell tomb is now. O'Curry measured it and found it was 16 feet long and 9 feet wide but Carrigan chronicles the tradition that it was 8 feet by three or four. Ward in the Life of St. Rumold refers to St. Fiacre's hermitage "the place of his residence in Ireland near Kilkenny and the little dwelling he constructed there and called by himself Cill Fiachrá i.e. the cell or church of Fiacra." Its remains were destroyed in 1869 to make room for this monument now seen here. There are no remains of a church here.

**SITE OF ANOTHER CHURCH.**

There are to the west of this area an enclosed area and remains of a church that would seem to go back to the 9th or 10th century. There is a perfect circle here 65 yards in diameter. The earth rampart around conceals a wall of stone usually called a "caiseal." The entrance is on the east and here we have an arch which must be one of the oldest arches in Ireland. It is round-headed with the inclination of the sides strongly marked which is characteristic of the oldest Irish buildings. The sides are five feet high, the arch adds two feet, the width above is four feet four inches and at the ground four feet eleven inches. It is about five feet thick. The remains of the church in the centre, lying east and west measure 30 by 15 feet. The only grave is that of Ryan of Kilfera House. Nothing is known about this church or its name.
FORESTAL CASTLE

The old castle of Kilferagh is incorporated in Kilferagh House where Captain Stopford lives now. This is the castle of the Forestalls. Robert Forestall, who died in 1540 or '41 is buried in Sheestown Church. James Forestall was Constable of the Barony of Shillelogher in 1609 and his monument is also there.

By inquisition at the Sessions House, Kilkenny, 24th May, 1621, James Forestall, late of Kilferagh, had the manor, town and lands of Kilferagh, one watermill and two weirs on the Nore and 10/- yearly from the town and lands of Washes Haies. Also of Castle-garden otherwise New Grange and Carraman of Kilmanahine, otherwise Balliregan of Killcoursie Cowleshill otherwise Raithma Rostch and of land in Corstown otherwise Gurtinemuck which is held of the manor of Tullaroan. Robert Forestall as a Catholic, forfeited all the family possessions in 1653. Michael Forestall of KIlfane, outlawed by the Williamites in 1691 and '96 was probably of the same family.

SHEESTOWN

The Norman name was Wasseshayes or Washeshayes from a Norman Was. Sheestown as a name dates only from the 17th century. In Irish it was called Baile an Fhasaigh—the town of Was. The old parish church is beautifully situated here over the Nore, but it has no protection as a building and the graveyard is still used for burials. The church was dedicated to St. Patrick as well as St. Fiacre. It is crumbling and needs care. The west gable of the nave is nearly gone. Nave and chancel are Celtic, and of about 11th or 12th century. There is a round east window about 8 feet in height. Flatheaded windows light each side of the chancel. The choir arch and the arches of door and windows in the nave are of sawn grit stone. The chancel arch is held up by insert wall. The walls are turreted like those in Tullaherin. The antae at east end of chancel outside are probably relics of the wooden style of building before the stone building came in.

MONUMENTS

1.—In the sidewall left . . . Robert Forestall, Lord of Kilferagh and Ballyfrunk chief of his nation d. March 16th, 1540 and Patrick Forestall April 18th and his wife Ellen Comerford June 25th 1568. On whose souls may God have mercy.

2.—Large altar tomb on ground left with beautiful interlaced cross is difficult to decipher. Robert Forestall d. Sept. 14 1585 and wife Catherine 1583. James Forestall and wife Ellis Shortall 1597 and Ellen Comerford. James Conney maker 1608.
3.—Slab in South wall arms of Sir Richard Shee. It does not belong to this church. There were two other slabs not now to be found.

4.—On the ground Major Arnold O Shee 1813.

5.—On East wall and broken Here lies the body of Miss O Shee High St. Kilkenny d. 18th January 1821 aged 88 years. Catherine—Palm Sunday 1819 aged 77 years.

The Shees are first mentioned in Kilkenny in the 14th century and are included in the doggerel vers naming the old families of the city:

Archdekin Archer Cowley Langton Lee,
Knaresboro Lawless Ragget Rothe and Shee.

It has the distinction of being the only Gaelic name in that list. The O Sheas were all descended from Séagha of Ivragh in Kerry, whose reputed divine ancestor was Segomo the war god of South East France and South West Ireland. It merely means “hawk” man a good name for a god of battle.

The Garden Morris family monuments are outside the church. The old house of the Shees was thrown down about 1883.

Colonel John Shee fought and fled at Bunker’s Hill in 1775. He, unlike the family, was a Protestant, and built the Protestant church of Bennettsbridge in 1795. His son John Shee of Ballyreddin gave the site for the Catholic Chapel at Bennettsbridge in 1822. He left no issue and was succeeded by his brother Richard, whose son and successor, signing himself James O Shea, died in Australia 1890.

Marcus who was son and heir of Sir Richard Shee was the builder of the first house in Sheestown. Another Marcus son of another Richard who died in 1748 was the father of John O Shea who married Elizabeth, daughter and heiress of Richard Power of Garden Morris, Waterford, and they became Power O Sheas. These are the present owners and the landlords of the ground of St. Fiacre’s Well. We should not forget Captain Cuffe who lived here and was a pioneer in Irish industry and the Gaelic League in the city. Nor should we forget Fr. Ambrose Coleman, the Dominican, who had the Calvary erected.

Owing to pressure of space it has been necessary to hold over till our next issue two papers of special interest, Mr. W. Pilsworth’s “The Merino Factory of Annamult,” and Mrs. Murphy’s “Maddoxtown Marble Works.”