THE NAME Ceannanus, Kenlis, or Kells in Ossory has the same origin as Kells in County Meath, that is, a head or Royal residence. O'Donovan thought that at one time Kells was the principal seat of the Kings of Ossory. The site of this ancient residence can be seen near the modern Catholic Church in the village, on the right-hand side of the road from Kilkenny—a large circular dune or fort. Tradition says that this mound has a chamber within it. The Normans, as was often their custom, made use of this earthwork. They replaced the ancient residence, probably a wooden one by a stone castle which was only taken down in 1864. Local tradition also speaks of a “city” of Kells of great extent and importance. Hence the well-known Kilkenny saying:

_Kells was, Kilkenny is and Callan will be_  
The finest City of the three.

As a Kilkenny person I am glad to say that the city is still holding its own, but in this age of atom bombs the prophesy might be fulfilled only too quickly.

There was undoubtedly a town of some type associated with the ancient Royal residence.

**THE BARONY OF KELLS**

Now, at the time of the Norman invasion the Barony of Kells was granted by William, Earl Marshall senior, to one Geoffrey Fitzrobert De Monte Maurisco. This man was the founder, both of the Priory and of the mediæval town of Kells. In 1193, on the advice of Strongbow, he founded the Priory in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary for the Canons Regular of Saint Augustine. As there were then no English Augustinian Canons in Ireland, Geoffrey sent to the Monastery of Bodmin in Cornwall for four monks, namely, Reginald de Aclond, Huge de Rous, Alured and Algard. These
four monks were to organise and carry on the Monastery of Kells. The Prior was created a Lord of Parliament and the Priory was richly endowed, receiving tithes from many parishes in the neighbourhood, as well as having possessions as far away as County Tipperary.

Geoffrey de Maurisco, the founder, married Eva de Bermingham and this marriage was to have some effect on the subsequent history of Kells. On the death of Eva he is supposed to have married Basilia de Clare, sister of Strongbow, and widow of Raymond le Gros. Some authorities, however, dispute this second marriage.

Geoffrey seems to have been of a crafty and intriguing disposition as was also his son, who eventually had to flee the country and become a robber and outlaw at the mouth of the River Severn. After the fall of the Maurisco family Kells was granted to Arnold le Poer, who was famous for his connection with the well-known Kyteler witch-craft case in Kilkenny. The de Berminghams through their connection with Geoffrey de Maurisco, evidently considered that they still had a claim to Kells. Backed by the powerful Geraldines they carried on a campaign against the le Poers for the next century and a half. The quarrel with the Geraldines was supposed to have been caused by Arnold le Poer having contemptuously referred to the Poet—Earl of Desmond as a "rhymer." By such trifles is the course of history determined. Needless to say Kells suffered many burnings and depredations during this protracted quarrel.

Arnold le Poer was subsequently excommunicated by Richard de Ledrede, Bishop of Ossory, as a result of his part in the Kyteler case and died in prison in 1329. But his family got their own back on the Bishop, for when he came on a visitation of Kells in 1333 he was promptly arrested by the le Poers and thrown into prison in Kilkenny. The de Berminghams, finally triumphed in the struggle. The barony of Kells was granted to Walter de Bermingham in 1346.

MANOR PASSED TO BUTLER FAMILY

At some later date, not known, the manor passed to the Butler family in whose possession it remained until the Cromwellian confiscations in 1653. These con-
Monumental Sculptures at Kells
fiscations accelerated the decline of the town which had already begun in 1540 with the dissolution of the Priory until we have now only an obscure village where once there was a thriving town.

The first prior of the Monastery was Reginald de Aclond, one of the four monks brought over by Geoffreyy the Founder from Cornwall. The last official Prior was Philip Howleghan or O'Holohan, who surrendered the Priory to the representatives of Henry VIII in 1540. He must have surrendered only under severe pressure for the agents of the Crown, being evidently displeased with him, made no provision for his future, though they granted pensions to some of his monks. Even after the dissolution Priors continued to be elected to Kells for 100 years. In 1650 Patrick Comerford the very last and, apparently, the most distinguished Prior of all, was banished by Cromwell. He died in France in 1652 and was buried in Nantes Cathedral.

After the dissolution, in 1540, Kells was granted to James, Earl of Ormond, and then began the slow disintegration of this once great, fortified monastery, until we find to-day very little of its original glory except the stout walls and a few carved tombstones.

The ancient Parish Church of Kells which was in existence before the Priory was founded, is generally supposed to have been on the site of the Protestant Church of Kells, that is to the south of the Priory near the road.

It was dedicated to St. Kieran of Saigher until the coming of the Normans, who dropped the Irish Saint and placed the Church under the patronage of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. The baptismal font belonging to this church has a curious history. It is mentioned first by Paris Anderson in 1848 as lying in the farmyard of the Reverend Mr. Darby, near the Church. In 1864 it was described by Graves, who considered that it dated from the end of the 12th century. Strangely enough only one corner of the font was then carved. Graves was of the opinion that it was made by one of the original four monks introduced by Geoffrey from Cornwall. Possibly they were so busy organising their new monastery that they did not find time to finish the carving or they may have placed the font in
an angle of the church where only one corner showed. Graves had the three other corners carved to match and removed the font to St. Canice’s Cathedral in Kilkenny, where it was used until 1896. In that year it was presented to Inistioge Church and I don’t know if it is still there. It is a strange co-incidence that the font should have finally come to rest in Inistioge, a town about 15 miles to the east of Kells, which also boasted an Augustinian Priory. The first Prior of Inistioge was none other than Alured, one of our four monks from Cornwall. In later years relations between Kells and Inistioge were not so friendly; in 1355 Stephen Carlion, Prior of Kells, was committed to prison on a charge of having feloniously robbed the Prior of Inistioge. Prior Stephen had also stolen from another man a scythe valued 20d.

THE RUINS

As to the ruins themselves they consist of an area of about ten acres surrounded by stout parapetted curtain walls and fortified towers, bounded on the north by the King’s River (named by the way after an Irish King, not an English one). They are the most extensive monastic ruins in the county and present the appearance of a military stronghold rather than a religious establishment. The large oblong area thus enclosed is divided into two large courts. The northern court, in which we stand, contains the church and conventual buildings; the southern court, near the road, is called the Burgess or Burgher’s Court. This latter does not appear to have ever contained any stone buildings and most writers conclude that it was used for storing the produce of the Priory and for protecting the cattle in time of danger. I don’t think it has ever been examined for remains of wooden buildings, post holes, etc. It seems to me that such a large and well fortified area might have been used for sheltering more than animals. No doubt the townspeople of Kells also counted on it for protection in time of danger.

Now for the Northern Court in which we stand and which contains the Priory proper. The Church was originally planned to consist of a nave and chancel, with north and south transepts, and Lady Chapel. For some reason the south transept was never completed so we have a nave, a large chancel, a north transept, the remains of an aisle, and the Lady Chapel.
There is a small chapel where the south transept arch was built up many centuries ago and a door constructed into this chapel. Beyond the chapel to the south are the chapter room with three round-headed arches leading on to the cloister, the refectory, dormitories, store-room, etc. The Belfry tower was added later, about 1500, and was placed entirely within the original chancel.

The Prior's Castle, which we shall see opening off the chancel, was also a later addition. The ground floor was probably used for storing the sacred vessels and the upper storey served as the Prior's residence. This castle, which is in quite good repair, is known as Phillip na Maoin's Castle. Philip na Maoin or Phillip of the Soles, was a mysterious, emaciated and eccentric cobbler, who arrived in Kells from no one knew where about 1790. He took up his residence in the Castle and lived a strange lonely existence there for many years. He was feared by the local inhabitants as he was known to converse with the moon and was suspected of having truck with fairies. They brought him their shoes to repair but were firmly convinced that he merely left them out at night for the leprechauns to do the job. John Banim made the life of this recluse the basis of his tale "Peter of the Castle."

The Priory Graveyard is outside the enclosing wall to the west and there is an old road from it to Kells known by the rather gruesome name of Botairin na gCorp—the little road of the corpses.

THE CHANCEL

The Chancel has been used as a ball-alley for over 100 years and all its features have been built up and plastered over. There has been some talk recently of providing an alternative ball-alley and so ending this vandalism. Some 13th century inscribed tombstones in the floor are almost worn away by the feet of the players. These coffin slabs, three in number, bear incised floriated crosses and in each case the name in the inscription is le Clerc. There is a fourth slab near the North Wall very badly defaced, but fortunately described by Canon Carrigan 60 years ago. It bears a coat of arms with three chevrons which is either le Clerc "or three chevrons gules" or Archdeacon "Argent three chevrons sable."
The Lady-Chapel which is connected with the chancel by a small doorway, shows the remains of four lancet windows connected by an ornamental string course. It has also a single sedilia and credence. The sides of the credence were decorated with fleur-de-lys painted in vermilion. Some very slight remains of the red paint can still be seen.

There is one other monument well worth examining. It is under the cut-stone window of the North Transept, a huge uninscribed slab with heads in high relief of a man and woman. The labour of reducing the rest of the slab to give relief of nearly four inches must have been tremendous. Graves was of the opinion that the heads may be portraits—certainly the detail of features was very carefully carved. He also claims that the arrangements of the hair would justify dating the slab to the last quarter of the 13th century or not long afterwards, but this would obviously be more or less guess-work.

There is also an inscribed slab of a later date outside the south wall of the nave. The inscription runs Hic jacet Dns Thomas Lahe quondam istius loci obiit (here lies “Sir” Thomas Lahe sometime prior of this Priory who died . . .)—the rest of the inscription is under the wall. Thomas Lahy was Prior for several years between 1490 and 1510.

Two brass seal rings were found at different times in the early part of the last century in Kells. No doubt there are many more interesting relics of the past beneath the ground on which we stand.