Fertagh---Parish of Johnstown

BY. T. P. LYNG

We are sitting beside the outstanding landmark of this locality. It stands in the north-east corner of the present townland of Grangefertagh (1). It occupies an exposed position overlooking the valley of the river Goul (2), and has been known for generations as the STEEPLE OF FARTAGH. The barony in which we are takes its name GALMOY (3) from the river GOUL. Galmoy barony occupies the north-east corner of Co. Kilkenny. Its shape resembles that of an old boot, whose cocked toe points at Durrow (4) in the east. Urlingford (5) is behind the heel and the sole treads on Freshford (6). The 1156 ft. peak of Clomanta (7) thrusts up the arch of the sole.

NAME

The old Irish name of Fertagh was FERTAE CAERACH (O.), which could translate “Circular Grave,” and in this sense would conform to the “Fossa Rotunda” in which, according to the Book of Armagh, the Scotic people buried their dead. The old name is substantially retained down through the centuries. Archdall, quoting the date 1251 A.D., writes FERTAKERAGH. The Red Book of Ossory, under date 1396, has FEERTKERACH. The 15th century renderings FEART REAECH and FORTHARAGH (C.) suggest an elision into the eventual form FARTAGH of the Down Survey and the form by which the vicinity of the priory site is now locally known. Speed writes M.FERT on his map to indicate the Monastery site. The explanatory rendering FEART NA gCAORACH translated The Burial Trench of the Sheep has led O’Donovan to discover a tradition of carcases of sheep which died of distemper! (J.).

PAGAN HAZE

The usual haze of myth clouds the origins of the older relics in this locality, a haze which is a blend of Pagan and...
early Christian. The tower, they say, was built by that pagan totem and factotum the GOBAN SAOR. Near us, to the north-west, is TOBAR A' PHUICIN—The Fairy Well (T.7), where St. Kieran watered his cow. To the east, at TUB-LA-SUNE (8) bridge in RATHLOGAN (9), is the BLEST WELL (T.9) of “ST. ELEGAN” alias “ST. ULEKAN” (10), at which you may cure a sore eye if you visit the well, before breakfast, on three consecutive mornings. You may tie a piece of rag on the nearby sceach to complete the ritual. The cure and the ritual were at some period transferred from TOBAR-NA-SUL (T.10), which is at the other side of the road in the adjoining townland of Monenamuck (11). BADESWELL (T.11) is locally said to derive its name from association with “bades,” i.e., beads. This was a much frequented holy well.

The accompanying sketch map shows round about us on the higher ground a great number of raths. Of particular interest are RATHOSHEEN (12), RATH OSCAR (13) and SUIFI NN (14), in the west, east and south, respectively. The haze has even been wrapped around the modern JOHNSTOWN (15)—the village that gives its name to the parish in which Fertagh lies—for the Post Office guide designates it CIURT A' PHUCO, which could translate THE HAUNTED COURT, instead of the prosaic BAILE SHEAIN, which the town is. The “Pooka” originally hailed from a misinterpretation of the Gaelic CIURT PHUCO, i.e., Foulks-court, which, in any case, is not “Johnstown.”

KIERAN

Down through the ages this locality has been dedicated to Kieran, the Patron of Ossory. Kieran settled awhile in this locality (C.). The name Kieran was a favourite in the district (O.S.) A pattern used to be held there on Kieran's Day, March 5, the day being observed as a Holy Day. BOTHAR CIARAIN, i.e., Kieran’s Road, ran from Fertagh Church via the old churches at Borrismore (16) and at Rathealy (17) to Callan. The early Celtic Church and the mediaeval priory at Fertagh (M.2) were both dedicated to Kieran. You will be told that the tower (M.1) and the

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original church were built by Kieran. The recently built school at Johnstown is named SCOIL NAOMH CIARAIN. In Gaelic tradition he was plain CIARAN.

CELTIC CHURCH

An ancient wall, not now apparent, existed at the date of the ordnance survey, 120 years ago. It was approximately parallel to the present north and west wall of the graveyard and would have enclosed the site of the present “Kilpatrick Church.” As the door of the tower faces in this direction, i.e., north-east, this location would be correct (L.). The tower and this old wall were tenth century (O.S.).

The tower is of limestone. It is 100 ft. high and 50 ft. in diameter at base. The walls are 3 ft. 8 ins. thick. It had five floors, none of which remain. Part of the conical cap is gone. Before being repaired (B.W. 1881), the tower had a crack from top to bottom passing through the doorway. Some explain the crack as being the result of a burning in 1136 A.D. At that time MUIRCEARTACH O LOUGHLIN, of the Northern Ui Neill, plundered and burned the churches of LIATH OSRAIGHE (Upper Ossory) which included FEARTA. The chief master of FEARTA, EOCHAIDH O CUINN, fled to the tower with the community and church valuables, but the door was forced and the occupants and contents of the tower were destroyed by fire. The O.S. letters suggest that the tower was struck by lightning, thus causing the crack.

NORMAN RE-FORMATION

In the thirteenth century the Blanchfield family founded at Fertagh a priory, dedicated to St. Kieran, for the Regular Canons of St. Augustine. In 1251 the Prior and Canons of FERTAKERAGH and ACKIDMACARTH (Agh-macart) in Ireland had royal letters of simple and unlimited protection (C.). The ancient rectories of FARTAGH and DONOUGHMORE (18) were appropriated to this priory. Its temporal possessions at Fartagh are shaded on the map and included Grangefertagh and Mustards Garden (19), approximately 1,000 acres.
The grange, or farm house of the priory, was situated by the river Goul (M.A.). The site is now known as the "Moat of Fartagh." Another farm house was traditionally located at a ruin called SEANCHLOCH (M.3). This is now a field name. A well at this place was called TOBAR NA bhFEADAN (T.8)—The Well of the Pipes. Perhaps they had water laid on in those days.

ENGLISH RE-FORMATION

Norman-English officially ended with the suppression of the monasteries in 1540. Robert Shortall (21), prior of Fertagh, got a pension of five marks, and the monastery lands were granted to proved Englishmen. In 1567, these temporalities were granted to a branch of the Ormond Butlers. Occasional Protestant service was held in the church of Fertagh from the time of Elizabeth to 1731. In 1731, the church was repaired and was used as a parish church.

In the periodic re-shuffle of loyalties, we may include the spa cult that became fashionable about this time but that did not outlive the "blest well" or the Kieran "pattern." The inns and hotels that sprang up in connection with Ballyspellan (21) spa must have left in the shade the "Beggars Inn," whose site is now considered a traffic obstruction at Beggar Cross.

RELICS

In 1780, the roof of Fertagh Church collapsed and the church was abandoned. In 1799 the ornamental entrance doorway of the west gable and the perpendicular style tracery window of the east gable of the present ball-alley building were removed to Johnstown Protestant church. A small flamboyant style tracery window from the north wall of this building was removed to Johnstown Catholic church in 1832. These windows and the door are fifteenth century. The carved polygonal baptismal font of the priory is now also in Johnstown Catholic church. Here, also, set in the wall of the graveyard, is a carved limestone crucifixion, which is older than the other Fertagh relics. It was brought from "Kilpatrick's Chapel." The escalop shell at its base was presented from Foulkscourt.
KILPATRICK'S CHAPEL

Apart from the round tower, the most interesting antiquity at Fertagh is KILPATRICK'S CHAPEL. It is fifteenth century and was founded by the MAC GIOLLA PADRAIG alias FITZPATRICK alias KILPATRICK, of Upper Ossory, to house the "Kilpatrick Tomb." The tomb, facing east-west, occupies the centre of the chapel. On top are effigies of a male clad chief and his lady, who is dressed in the costume and extravagant "horned" head-dress of the 15th century. The inscriptions around the effigies have long been illegible, but are described in detail in Carrigan's history. They translate:—

"Here lies the good Lords of Ossory, John Mac Gillapatrick and Brian his son. On whose soul may God have mercy. Pray for Honora, wife of Brian. Here lies Katherine Mulloy the Lord Brian's mother who erected this tomb."

The north and east side panels are decorated with carved foliage. The south panel carving is inspired by architectural designs of windows and roof groining. The window is said to represent that at Johnstown C. Church. The groining is a representation of groining in St. Canice's Cathedral. This motif is found at Old Leighlin, Kilcooley and elsewhere. The monument was carved by O Tunny (L).

SOURCES

The sketch map notes many other objects of antiquarian interest in Johnstown neighbourhood. The district can also claim to be the home of the recorders of the sources of much information. John O'Donovan traces his ancestors to the Codys of Galmoy. Canon Healy, author of the History and Antiquities of Co. Kilkenny, spent much of his life as P.P. of Johnstown; and Canon Moore of Johnstown was one of the three founder-members of the present Royal Society of Antiquities and was author of the first paper, entitled "Giants Graves," which was published by the founders in 1849.
NOTES

(1) GRAINSEACH FEARTA i.e. Grange of Fertagh.

(2) GABHAL i.e A Fork. The unusual branching of this river, to which O'Curry's O.S. letter refers, may be noted in the map above.

(3) GABHAL MAIGHE i.e. Branching River of The Plain.

(4) DARMHAGH ON DUACH i.e. The Oak Plain of the Tribe Land of Dui or Duach.

(5) ATH NA nURLAINN i.e. Ford of the Lawns.

(6) ACHADH UR i.e. Fresh Field.

(7) CLOCH MHANTACH i.e Gapped Stone. The cairn that was raised over burial urns here was removed for fencing material (C).

(8) This is the current corruption of TOBAR NA SUL i.e. The Well of the Eyes i.e. for the cure of sore eyes.

(9) RATH A' LOGAIN i.e. Rath of the Hollow. There is a deep hollow here, at the source of the Glashare river. A fine hill fort overlooks the hollow from the north and "Rathlogan" overlooks from the south beside the "blest well." A third rath near RATH-OSCAR is said by Carrigan to be the origin of RATHLOGAN, but this is not the local tradition, and Carrigan had no knowledge of the rath beside the "blest well."

(10) These names are still extant locally. Canon Moore found Tubber-Ullacawn (1). TOBAR A' LOCHAIN. "ELEGAN" gives us TOBAR A' LOGAIN. Hence "the well of the pond" or "the well of the hollow" and hence also the alternative RATH LOCHAIN or RATH LOGAIN. "Pond" or "hollow" suit the locality.
(11) MOIN NA MUC i.e. Pigs’ Bog—local rendering.

(12) RATH OISIN. Oisin, Oscar, and Fionn were noted heroes of the Fianna.

(13) RATH OSCAIR.

(14) SUI FINN i.e. Fionn’s Seat.

(15) Named from John Hely of Foulkscourt, who built Johnstown in 1770.

(16) BUIRIGHIAS MOR i.e. Great Burgage.

(17) RATH AOL-MHAIGHE i.e. Rath of Limestone Plain (C).

(18) DOMHNACH MOR i.e. Great Sunday on which ancient churches of this name were founded by St. Patrick.

(19) “Chimney House,” now STEEPLE VIEW at Fertagh, was in Mustards Garden in 1655.

(20) Locally BUNDRICHEEN, i.e., BUN DAIREACHIN? i.e. The End of the Grove. O.S. BAUNRICKEEN i.e. BAN RUICIN: Th.e Rut Field or Dick’s Field.

REFERENCES

O=Onomasticon; O.S.=Ordnance Survey; C=Carri-gan’s History of Ossory; J=Joyce. Irish place names; L=Dr. Leask; B.W.=Board of Works; M and T refer to numbers on the map, e.g., T.1=Tiobar or Well No. 1.