

# The Ancient Parish of Kilmacahill

By Sean O'Brien, N.T.

**T**HE ancient parish of Kilmacahill is at present a constituent of the modern parish of Paulstown. As appears from the Down Survey, rural parishes were surprisingly small prior to the Cromwellian period, most of them being about the size of our present townlands. The scarcity of priests consequent on the Cromwellian regime made a consolidation of these smaller parishes necessary. In a Return of 1731 we find Kilmacahill, Wells and Shankill being administered as part of Leighlin parish. In 1822, during the episcopate of Dr. Doyle (J.K.L.), Goresbridge was detached from Graignamanagh, and Wells, Shankill and Kilmacahill from Leighlin. From the amalgamation of these the joint parishes of Paulstown and Goresbridge emerged, the present Church of Paulstown, which was erected in 1796, becoming the parochial church. A Parliamentary Return of 1766 signed Manley Gore, Rector of Powerstown, and Curate of Grange Sylvia and Kilmacahill gives the number of families in Kilmacahill as 113, of which six were Protestant and 107 Catholic. Paul Cullen is named as Parish Priest, and also of Wells, Leighlin and Shankill.

## GILBERT DE BORARD

In the reign of King John, Gilbert de Borard founded a Preceptory for Knights Templars at Killerig in Co. Carlow, and Kilmacahill was one of the rectories appropriated to it. The general suppression of the Knights Templars took place in 1308. The property of the Order was conveyed to the Knights Hospitallers in whose possession it remained until the Dissolution of the Monasteries. An Inquisition, taken 33rd Henry VIII (1542) finds among the possessions of Killerig "the rectory of Kylemakill, which extended into Kylennakill, Carydogh, Castlecoyle, Polestown, Ballyshordan and Ballinwally, annual value £7." The rectory then passed into lay hands and we find a Patent Roll 5

Edward VI (1552) granting licence to Robert Shee, merchant, of Kilkenny, "to alienate to Joseph Walsh of Waterford, merchant, a moiety of the rectory or chapel of Kilmacahill, in the possession of John Langton, with half of the tithes and alterages." Joseph Walsh did not continue long in possession. An undated Patent Roll of Philip and Mary grants him licence to alienate to Patrick (Walsh) Bishop of Waterford and Lismore, a moiety of the rectory of Kilmacahill to hold for ever by the services due and of right accustomed.

### CHURCH PULLED DOWN

The old church was pulled down to build the Protestant Church on the site and no part of it remains. This latter, in consequence of the Disestablishment Act, 1869, became disused and was subsequently demolished.

The ancient monastery of Kilmacahill was not on the site of the present graveyard but further north by the bank of a stream on the slope of Kellymount. This monastery was an important centre of Christian culture in the 6th century. The Martyrology of Donegal at 12 January records two saints as connected with it: "Enda and Lochan of Cill-na-managh in Dunchadha, or of Cill-mac-Cathail in Ui Barrchi; and of Bealach Gabhran; Lochan was of the race of Daithi, son of Fiakra." According to the genealogist, McFirbis, these saints were kinsmen and contemporaries of St. Kevin of Glendalough. Lochan was son of Cathal, who was grandson of Ailill Molt (Ard-Ri 463-483). Another notable association of Kilmacahill is that with St. Finbarr, who received his training there. The Burgundian Life of the Saint relates that when Enda, Lochan and St. Brendan of Birr were travelling in Munster, Aimirgin, the father of Finbarr, confided the boy to their care. On the return journey to Leinster the four travelled together to Sliabh Muincille where Brendan separated from them. The others continued towards the Leinster territory until they came to Cill-mac-Cathail on the Gabhran road, where they built a cell and Barra read his psalms. He remained here until his

ordination and then proceeded to Aghabo where he spent some time before returning to his native Cork.

### DISUSED GRAVEYARD

A few mounds of rubbish and an old disused graveyard are all that remain on the site. The adjoining stream has worn a deep channel and was encroaching on the graves until 1872 when the people of the district provided means by which a wall enclosing the burial ground and protecting it from further erosion was built. To prevent undermining of this wall the bed of the stream was paved at a later date. Mr. James Griffin, on whose land the site is, informs me that the exposed coffins were at the level of the river-bed, and that some years ago it was not uncommon to have heavy beams of wood, apparently door frames, roughly mortised and dowelled, washed out of the bank during heavy floods. When Dr. Comerford was writing the history of the Dioceses of Kildare and Leighlin in 1886, the foundations of a very ancient building were visible on the left bank. The walls were about four feet thick and formed of field stones without cement or mortar.

### SITE OF THE ABBEY

The traditional site of the Abbey is on the left bank, and up to a few years previously, much of the walls remained. Traces of an ancient mill were found in the adjoining rivers. According to local tradition the stones from the monastic buildings were used to build a bridge further upstream. The derivation of Kilmacahill is Cill Mac Cathal, or the Church of the sons of Cathal, the significance of which is apparent from the genealogy of the founders. It is a matter for regret that this historic name is disappearing from popular usage and that of the neighbouring townland, Garryduff replacing it. This is not an isolated instance of this tendency. At least three other place-names in the area are now in use only among the older inhabitants.

Our ancient place-names enshrine facts of topographical, historical or linguistic interest, and their disappearance entails a loss of an irreplaceable portion of our cultural heritage.