

## Kylebeg

### The Church of St. Nicholas

By Mrs. Drennan

**T**HE old parish of Blanchvilles-Kill comprises the townlands of Abbey Grove, Blanchville Demesne, Blanchvillestown, Grove, Rathcass, and Roughfield, and has an area of 854 statute acres. The Church of St. Nicholas in Kyle-Beg is the parish church of the old townland, though it might have stood here long before the district was known by that name.

In 1320 the Bishop of Ossory, Richard de Ledred, received from the Pope faculties enabling him to allow the Abbey of Jerpoint to appropriate the Rectory of Blanchvilles-Kill, and Canon Carrigan states in his account of the parish of Thomastown, that in the year 1396, the Abbot of Jerpoint acquired the parish of Blanchvillestown. It remained in the possession of the Abbey till 1540. After the Decree for Suppression of Religious Houses had gone forth, the then Abbot (Oliver Grace) surrendered Jerpoint and all its possessions to the King's Commissioner. This church was only served by members of the community of the Abbey and the Abbot had only spiritual jurisdiction over the Rectory, as is shown in the wording of the Document of Surrender, which lists it in the possessions, from which the Abbey received no temporal advantages. Later in Penal times this parish became part of the parish of Gowran, and in 1852 when Gowran and Claragh became separate parishes, it became part of the parish of Claragh.

Canon Carrigan says that the church was dedicated to St. Nicholas of Myra, whose feast day is on the 6th day of December. The saint died around A.D. 350. He was a native of Patara in Lycia, and was a child and youth of eminent sanctity. He became a religious at an early age and was made Abbot of his House and later appointed to the Archiepiscopal See. St. Paul had planted the seed of

faith in Myra, and it was at that time such an important religious stronghold that 16 suffragan bishoprics were subject to it.

St. Nicholas was present at the Council of Nice, and condemned Arianism. During his lifetime he performed an incredible number of miracles. He suffered imprisonment for his faith, and persecution and death under Dioclesian. No saint who has lived since the time of the Apostles has been more universally acknowledged by all Christian nations than St. Nicholas. After his death altars and churches were everywhere erected to his memory.

He became the patron saint of children, and in some countries he brings them gifts on December the 6th and in others on December the 25th (Santa Claus).

He was buried in his own Abbey, but after the Turks had taken Myra in 1281, three Italian sailors secretly opened the tomb and took the body of St. Nicholas away for fear of desecration. His relics were translated to Bari, in Italy, and given to the Archbishop of the Church of St. Stephen, and numerous miracles have since been worked at his shrine.

Canon Carrigan says that this church was built before the Norman Invasion. Every feature of it is characteristic of that period. Most of the church is built of rubble or unworked fragments of stone. Dressed stones are only found in the quoins, long and short work, of the west wall, the doorways, windows, and facing stones of the choir arch. All the ashlar masonry is of fireproof grit-stone, and the arches in both doors and windows are semi-circular and without ornament. There is a rough, coarse cutting which looks like a moulding on the outside of the window on the south side of the nave. It is a kind of semi-cylindrical ornament, and can be seen distinctly, though the stone is very weathered. The windows are narrow, with wide splays on the inside, but no two are exactly alike. Most of them slope slightly inwards. Windows in odd positions—none matched,

The lights in the east wall come from two separate windows, the splays of which meet in the middle on the inside, whilst outside they are feet apart. Window space is very small in proportion to the size of the building, and when roofed the church must have been very dark inside, particularly in the nave, though there is a small window high up in the west gable. There are no pillars and there is no tracery, and the absence shows that the church is of very early date. The nave is forty-five and a half feet long and twenty-two feet wide. The chancel is twenty-three and three-quarter feet long and sixteen feet wide. The walls are two or three feet thick, and, considering that the church has stood unroofed for hundreds of years, are in a wonderful state of preservation. The entrances are in the south and north walls opposite each other, and are of different dimensions. Both slope slightly inwards. This is often found in pre-Norman structures. The entrances had wooden doors, possibly, divided in the middle, that were closed by a wooden bar, the sockets for which can be seen distinctly.

A solid wall divides the chancel from the nave. The chancel arch must have had a narrow span, and, like the top, was probably faced by pinkish grit-stone slabs. It must have looked very lofty when the church was in use long ago, as the interior has risen two or three feet since it has been used as a burial ground. On each side of the choir arch, in the wall of this church (Canon Carrigan says in his account of the church in Kilmodimogue) were loop-holes and a kind of open recess through which the altar could be seen. These recesses occur in only four churches in Ossory — Templemartin, Aghavillar, Kilmodimogue and Kyle-Beg.

There are several wall receptacles, and there is a beautiful little Piscina on the south side of the altar. The baptismal font is at the back of the nave. It was found outside the church and put there for safety. The font has a central runnel.

The window nearest the sacarium has circular holes cut in the top, bottom and sides. It is rumoured to have had an upright and cross iron bars, and a wooden shutter.

Probably these hollows were added later than when the church was built. Old people in the district say that the windows were never glazed.

Mr. John O'Neill, who farms some of the old Abbey lands, and lives in Abbey Grove, farther up the road, says that his forebears came down after the signing of the Treaty of Limerick, some of them having fought against the army in the siege. They are living in the same house for about two hundred years, and he says he often heard the old folks talking of going to Mass in the Penal times in the church, and says that the chancel and part of the church was thatched, and that somebody used to keep watch whilst Mass was being offered. Possibly the window near the altar was shuttered then, so as not to show the lighted Mass candles.

The old bronze cross recently shown in the Exhibitions in Kilkenny was found high up on the right hand side of the wall dividing the chancel from the nave, about thirty years ago. Miss Catriona McLeod, the authority on medieval crosses in the National Museum, gave it as her opinion that the bronze casting is of good seventeenth century workmanship, or that it may be an earlier date. It is French, and probably Burgundian. The beautifully draped loin-cloth and the symmetry and beauty of the figure give clues to its date, as later, when a knowledge of anatomy became more general, the loin-cloth became more scanty and the bony framework of the body more evident. She said it had probably been used as the Mass cross, and might have been stored in a tomb. Other features which helped in the dating were the inscriptions, being written in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. Our Lord having no crown of thorns, no wound in the side, and the feet each being attached to the wooden support by a separate nail. A Mr. Paddy Knox found the cross and gave it to his nephew, Mr. Tom O'Neill, who kept it in his cottage for some time. It was so heavy that it was difficult to keep it in position on the wall, so his wife offered it to Fr. Comerford, who was then P.P. of Claragh, to hang out of doors in his open-air calvary (one of the plaster figures had melted away in the

bad weather), but Fr. Comerford didn't take it, so her husband brought the crucifix to Mr. Carrigan's father, on the Parade in Kilkenny, who sent it to Fr. Carrigan, and Canon Hunt got it from him.

The auxiliary army (Inistioge branch) raided the church in 1921, searching the churchyard for guns which they heard the Volunteers had hidden there (there was a strong contingent of Volunteers in this area). They prised up the Blanchville tomb floor slab, and the local people say that it was they who split the side off it. There may be a possibility that the cross was beneath it, and either belonged to Miss Ellis Blanchville, or was stored there.

There is no Holy Well here, but there is a well near called, in Irish, Tober Cosh, and this feeds a small stream called the "Drigin." The Blanchville tomb slab on the right hand side of the altar says: "Here lies Ellis, daughter of Leonard Blanchville, who died December 6th, 1581" (incidentally, this was the feast of St. Nicholas, the patron of the church). It has an eight-pointed cross down the centre. The table tomb on the left side is the Anderson tomb, and reads: "Died deeply and deservedly regretted on the 1st day of April, 1839. John Anderson of Prospect, parish of Dunbell, aged 87 years." Near him are laid the ashes of Jane, his beloved wife, "who exchanged time for eternity on the 18th June, 1836, aged 69 years."

Underneath, in italics, it says: "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright, for the end of that man is peace.' Psalm 37." These were the parents of Paris Anderson, who published "Nooks and Corners of County Kilkenny" in 1848.

In a grave outside the doorway in the north wall is a curious flag, inscribed "D.M.G." At the back of the nave there is the lower half of a coffin-shaped flag, with an incised cross. There was a small wood near the church till a few years ago, and there is a large district between here and Gowran known as Kyle, and the road out is known as the Kyle road, so probably in the past the district was very well wooded. The hamlet Kyle may have been Kylemon.