

The Churches of Powerstown, Grange Sylvae and Goresbridge

Bettina Grattan-Belleir

POWERSTOWN Church according to James Roberston, Architect, in the Journal of the Royal Historical and Archaeological Society of Ireland is very ancient although this does not readily appear as the old masonry is covered by restorations and plastering. This is borne out by the annual observance of a Patron Day which was held at Powerstown up to quite recent years. Inside the church was an early fluted font similar to those in St. Canice's Cathedral and St. Mary's Church, Kilkenny. The font was removed to the new Protestant church at Goresbridge circa 1812. The earliest reference I can find to the Parish of Powerstown according to Comerford is in a manuscript in Trinity College, Dublin, entitled "A note of the names of such Priests, Commissioners, Friars and Jesuits together with their Relievers and Maintainers in the City and County of Kilkenny." This list dates from 1618. In it is found item "Sir John Brenan Priest keepeth for the most part with Mr. Edward Butler of the Old Abbey, gentleman, and again item: Sir Richard Marub priest keepeth with Mr. James Butler, gentleman brother to Lord Mountgarret, also he maintaineth one Father Matthew Roche, priest, who goeth once every year into Spain."

The Edward Butler mentioned was afterwards created Lord Galmoy and is said to have resided at the Old Abbey which was Killenny near Barrowmount but he resided at Duiske Abbey after his marriage.

There is an old road leading from Killenny along the Powerstown river directly to Powerstown church, it is now a narrow lane. Father Matthew Roche referred to was Vicar Apostolic of Leighlin. One of the three priests above named and probably John Brenan was Pastor of Graiguenamanagh in 1618. Anthony Forstall is the next pastor we find mentioned, he is named in the Register of 1704 as residing at Pollagh (which is at the back of Mount Lotfus), aged 48, Parish Priest of Graigue, Duiske, Grange Sylvae, Powerstown and Ullard; ordained in 1676 in Spain by Thomas Rocabertie, Archbishop of Valencia, and his sureties were William Butler of Bramblestown

Gentleman and Patrick Purcell of Cloghlea, Gentleman."

1731 : Robert Rossiter is named P.P. of this parish.

6th Nov., 1731 : From a Parliamentary return of the State of Popery made in that year it appears that in Graigue there was one Mass House built in 1728, that Robert Rossiter was papist parish priest, that in Powerstown there was a Mass House built in 1731 and that Robert Rossiter was also parish priest here.

1766 : In a similar return in (1766) it is stated that in Powerstown there were two Protestant families, 130 Papist families and two priests, Robert Rossiter and Lawrence Cooney.

I also have a list of Protestant Clergy from Mr. Edward Vigors' notes on Powerstown church, kindly lent me by Miss Faith O'Grady, grand'daughter of Lt.-Col. P. D. Vigors of Holloden, Bagenalstown.

From the Vestry Book :—

1769 : Manly Gore signed as Minister;

1770 : Edward Vigors ditto;

1774 : Thomas Crawford, curate;

1775 : John Moore ditto;

1776 : Henry Baggs, Minister;

1776 : Newburgh Burroughs, curate;

1779 : William Latta, curate;

Latta's last signature is as vicar of Kilmacahill and of Grange Sylvae;

1787 : These parishes were united to Powerstown before 1807. Robert Latta appears as curate of Powerstown;

1813 : William Bayly signs as curate of Powerstown;

1817 : The first entry recorded by Rev. Thomas Mercer Vigors is on the 26th May of that year.

A new vellum register appears to have come into use in 1822. The old Vestry Book was in the library at Burghage, near Leighlin Bridge in 1902, the residence of Mr. T. Vigors. From Lt.-Col. Vigors notes "This Parish Church was unroofed since 1871." The walls are still standing and the base of the pulpit, but the font was removed to the new Protestant church called Grange Sylvae, Goresbridge, where it is presently in use.

1819 : Thomas Mercer Vigors signs as Rector. He was the last Rector of Powerstown. Died in 1850. In 1811-1815 Sir Edward Loftus of Mount Loftus signs as Church warden.

The fine Kilkenny Marble altar which is also at present in Grange Sylvae (Goresbridge) church was presented to Powerstown church by Ralph Gore of Barrowmount in 1766.

There is an interesting inscription on a slab on the outside of the west wall of Powerstown church which reads :

“ Here lies the body of James Maher of Mount Loftus who departed this life on 31st. December 1815 aged 56 years I.H.S. This stone was erected by his landlord Sir Edward Loftus Bart. as a mark of respect to the memory of the deceased whose fidelity and good conduct while alive entitled him to his regard and the good wishes of his neighbours. R.I.P. Amen.”

The Loftus vault is in the S.W. corner. In it are buried Sir Edward Loftus, 1st Bart. His sons, Sir Nicholas Loftus and Sir Francis Loftus. The last of that family to be buried there was Marie Loftus Murphy in 1916, after which the vault was sealed up. The Eatons, former owners of Mount Loftus (then Mount Eaton) also had a vault near the church.

The Glebe House stands on a hill opposite Powerstown Church but is presently in ruins.

The old parish church of Grange Sylvae (old spelling) stands in the parish of Upper Grange. It contains an interesting sandstone font. Upper and Lower Grange formed part of the Abbey Lands of Duiske granted to James Butler in 1567.

The new Protestant church at Goresbridge was built about 1812. It has a fine Francis Johnson tower.

Goresbridge was separated from the parish of Graiguenamanagh in 1822 and amalgamated with Paulstown and Kilmacahill.

The Catholic chapel of Skeoghvosteen was built about 1840.

