

Enniskeen Church and Graveyard

The old graveyard of Enniskeen surrounds the site of an ancient church founded by St. Ernan in or about the 7th century. The name of the place is derived from the ancient name of that locality – Innis Caoin. The exact meaning of the name is not certain as the Irish word ‘caoin’ has different translations, but the widely accepted English translation would seem to be ‘the Lovely Island’. Be as it may, the site of the church, like many of many such ancient churches or hermitages, is in a secluded valley, surrounded by land difficult to traverse, and having a good supply of drinking water. There is no evidence of other buildings which would indicate the presence of a school or a large monastery such as those at Clonard or Clonmacnoise. It would seem that the church in Enniskeen was a place of worship of a hermit who would be visited by people in search of spiritual renewal and counselling.

A map of 1609 shows the ruin of a church on the site, but at a later date the church was restored as a place for Protestant worship during the eighteenth century. The outline of this church may still be traced in the cemetery, but the materials from which it was built are no longer there. The stones of the church were removed as the building material for the present Protestant church of Kingscourt, which was constructed in 1780.

There are over 100 documented headstones in Enniskeen graveyard. People of both Catholic and Protestant religion are buried there. The graveyard covers about an acre of ground and is separated from surrounding fields by a stone wall. The entrance gate is at the bottom of Sheenan’s Lane and there is a stone stile to the left of the gate. The old stone cottage situated beside graveyard was inhabited up to the 1970s. Some of the headstones are upright but the older ones consist of flat memorial slabs measuring eight feet (2.4metres) by four feet (1.2metres) by four inches (30cms) high, four inches thick and four inches wide support each slab. Simple stone markers indicate other graves.

Many of the names on the headstones are familiar to us i.e. Armstrong, Brady, Caffrey, Carolan, Callan, Clarke, Cassidy, Coleman, Connell, Cooney, Daly, Duff, Farrelly, Finigan, Gilsenan, Green, Greenan, Hamill, Jackson, Kelly, McElroy, Markey, McEntee, McMahon, McCormack, Maguire, Monaghan, O’Reilly, Owens, Rooney, Shankey, Shannon, Shekleton, Shields, Smiths, Tinley, Tinelly, Ward and White.

Other surnames on headstones, which are uncommon in the parish nowadays include: Aikin, Allen, Ball, Brien, Charters, Corbett, Cowan, Donegan, Donnelly, Gore, Kindlon, Meehan, Mitchell, Moran, Skelly, Vincent, Nicholl, Pratt, Magurk, Learey, Loughran, Geartey, Prior, Connor, Reaburn Robey, Clifford, McHenry, McLearey, Graham, McClure, Weldon and Dyas.

The date on the oldest headstone is 1671 and it is a flat headstone, elaborately carved, dedicated to an O'Reilly family; no townland is mentioned. The O'Reilly coat of arms is also carved on the headstone.

Townlands mentioned include: Aughafarnan, Aughamore, Birragh, Borlea, Cabra, Carrickleck, Corglass, Cortubber, Corrakeerin, Edenagora, Enniskeen, Ervey, Kilnalun, Lisanisk, Mournagh, Rath, Rathlogan and Taghert

The best known headstone in the cemetery is a large flat flag in the memory of Bryan Reilly of Enniskeen son to Henry Bane Reilly. Unfortunately there is no date on it, but a similar headstone on a nearby bears the date 1727, so we can assume that the headstone without a date could also have been carved around the same time. The carving on the Reilly headstone is of a man and woman lying side by side and holding hands. She is wearing high-heeled shoes and a long skirt. Her hair is gathered in two bunches on either side of her head. The man is wearing boots, breeches to his knees and a tunic; his hair is neatly curled. They make a very elegant pair and the stone mason was clearly talented. The Pratt memorial is in the centre of the graveyard. A plaque on the wall reads, 'In the memory of all Pratt family who died prior to 1848'. The stone plaque was erected in 1957 as the monument had fallen into despair.

On several horizontal memorials there are carvings which symbolise man's life and death. Illustrated in the photograph is a coffin, a skull and crossbones, a heart, a bell which tolls when the man's life on earth is over, the hourglass which symbolises that the man has a short time on this earth the crossed spades symbolises man's toil here on earth.

On the west side of the cemetery there is a small enclosure or cloister in which a large boulder which was probably the base of an ancient High Cross can be seen. This was later used as base for a memorial to the parents of a David Jackson. The holy well of St. Ernan – known as Tobar Airne – springs up near the graveyard, on land belonging to Josie Rooney. Like many such holy wells, it became a location for pilgrimages and prayer and was the place of an annual pattern or patron day right down to the nineteenth century. Abuses of various kinds grew up around these holy wells, and superstitious practices gradually replaced acts of genuine worship at these festivals.

In 1830, many of these pilgrimages were suppressed by the Irish hierarchy, which was becoming more powerful in its influence on religious practices. Many ancient Irish customs gave way to more acceptable devotions, but the genuine religious customs and practices of Enniskeen deserve a better fate than to be consigned to oblivion.