Summary of Kilskeagh Church and Graveyard, Rathfee, Co. Galway

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Introduction

In 2023, Kilskeagh Heritage Committee began work to uncover the remains of the old Kilskeagh church and graveyard (GA071-076003), a site which lived in community memory, but which had been completely obscured and inaccessible by natural overgrowth for well over fifty years. In 2023, John Tarpey set up Kilskeagh Heritage Committee with the intention of beginning work to uncover the lost remains of the old Kilskeagh church and graveyard (GA071-076003). Through John's direct efforts, enthusiasm, and passion, the site has now been rediscovered and made accessible to the public. His work has also uncovered a previously unrecorded and very significant wider archaeological and historical complex dating from the medieval period, which shines a new light on the important local history of the area.

With the assistance of the Heritage Council Community Heritage grant, the Committee commissioned archaeological and ecological reports of the site ahead of their planned uncovering of the church and graveyard. Donna Gilligan from Scéal Heritage Consultancy (SHC) was commissioned by the Kilskeagh Heritage Committee to work as the project archaeologist and to complete the Archaeological Impact Assessment, and John Lusby (John Lusby Consulting) completed the Ecological Assessment.

Following the completion of the archaeological and ecological reports, permission to tidy the site was received from National Monuments, and the committee and a team of community volunteers received a Toolbox Talk from SHC to advise them on best practice and regulations around the clearing of overgrowth from the site. Under continuous professional supervision from SHC (ongoing since 2023), the group then carried out many hundreds of hours of voluntary work in the clearance of the thick scrub which completely covered the site. In the years following the beginning of the work, this significant clearance work has uncovered an important multi-period archaeological site, which includes the ruins of a medieval church, a community graveyard and cillín (in use from at least the eighteenth century up until 1960), and a large number of remains of previously unrecorded structures associated with either the medieval church or the early modern market town which previously existed in the area.

Site Detail

A large number of simple stone-lined graves of varying sizes are placed closely together throughout the site, with only one inscribed grave slab present with a date of 1797. The stonework and layout of the surviving church structure likely date it as a significantly sized example (16m x 9m) of a parish church from the 15th or 16th century. It is proposed that the West wall remains of the church foundations would likely have formed part of a vaulted room for a priest's living quarters. Very few records for the church have yet been found to place its context and background with certainty. An earlier version of the church (likely a simpler

wooden building) would very likely have been in place on the site centuries prior to the surviving stone example.

Structural foundations of differing sizes are present to the East, West, North and South of the main site – while one of these (to the South of the church) was previously recorded in the archaeological record, many more unrecorded examples are present in the wider vicinity. Several significantly sized buildings are present throughout the site. A large circular structure, measuring approx. 18m in diameter, is present to the back of the West gable wall of the church. This is currently completely overgrown with brush, and as such, visibility is very poor. The remains of a further large rectangular structure are present further S-W of the church, with approximate dimensions of 6m x 12m, and walls approximately 1m in width.

Another rectangular structure is visible to the East of the church, with dimensions of 7m x 13m approximately, and walls with a width of 1m. Yet another smaller structure is visible to the North of the church walls, measuring 5m 60cm x 4m 60cm, with a wall width of approximately 1m. None of the walls survive to a height higher than 0.5m. Overall, the remains of approximately thirty buildings appear to be present on the site within close proximity of the church, and future survey and recording will be required to properly record the site layout and structure styles. The site buildings include a number of unusual examples of rectangular structures with a circular projection at one end, suggestive of corn-drying kilns in shape. Former Galway community archaeologist Dr. Christy Cunniffe has proposed that these may be unusual examples of barn kilns, a kiln type seen in Scottish contexts such as on the island of Orkney.

Kilskeagh is recorded in oral history as having been the location of a busy market for many years, and it is possible that some of the many building remains in the area relate to the site's use as a market town. The earliest maps showing the ruins of the Kilskeagh Church also note the presence of a wooden market cross. The area of the Kilskeagh site corresponding to the area of the map marking the cross has evidence of four small to medium sized grass-covered stone cairns in relatively close proximity to each other. It can be suggested that at least one of these cairns may have originally formed the placement base for the original wooden cross (no longer extant). It is currently unclear what function the other cairns may have served. The complex concentration of features and activity (as well as associated folklore and oral history) on the Kilskeagh site may also potentially suggest that the site may represent the remains of a deserted village.

Excavations in the Area

Relatively recent commercial archaeological excavations in the area by Rubicon Archaeology for the M17 Galway to Tuam and N17 Tuam Bypass Schemes uncovered a small Neolithic penannular enclosure at Kilskeagh 3 with evidence of a stone-lined cereal drying kiln constructed in the internal mound of the enclosure in the later part of the early medieval period. Excavations at Kilskeagh 2, 4, 5 & 6 also uncovered the remains of a post-medieval/early modern vernacular structure, three cobbled trackways, and two metalled surfaces, possibly linked to the 'Old Kilskeagh' village recorded in oral history. Excavator Brian MacDomhnall

suggests that the early modern remains found at the Kilskeagh sites (as well as at nearby Annagh) suggests abandonment of the settlements during or shortly after the Great Famine.

Research and Potential Origins

Consultation with Dr Breda Lynch, a historian specialising in the Cistercian Order in medieval Ireland, initially raised the possibility that the Kilskeagh church site might have been the location of a grange belonging to Abbeyknockmoy. Further research has led Dr Lynch to revise that interpretation. The available evidence suggests that the church site formed a distinct pocket of land within, but apparently separate from, the surrounding holdings of Abbeyknockmoy. This makes it less likely that the church site itself was the location of a Cistercian grange, although the possibility cannot yet be ruled out.

What is clearer is the extent to which Cistercian landholding and agricultural practices shaped the surrounding landscape. Kilskeagh should therefore be considered in the context of the agricultural and wider monastic culture of Abbeyknockmoy's estate, even if the church site itself lay outside the abbey's holdings. A connection between Kilskeagh and the medieval diocese of Annaghdown has been established. The nature of that connection and its implications for the history of the church remain the subject of ongoing research by Dr Lynch.

Lidar Survey

In 2025, Kilskeagh Heritage Committee commissioned an aerial survey of the Kilskeagh site by Dr. Paul Naessens of Western Aerial Survey (with support from the Heritage Council Community Heritage Grant Scheme 2025). This survey work uncovered several previously unrecorded archaeological features within the landscape, which were suggested by Dr. Naessens to tie the site's origins to the early medieval period. The survey results showed the clear presence of a substantial round or oval enclosing bank surrounding the core of the site. The enclosure appears to measure c.125m (N-S) and c.125m (E-W), with its bank surviving intact for c.75% of its extent. The average height of the bank is estimated at c. 0.4m, with a width of c. 2-3m. This circular enclosure may potentially propose an early medieval origin for the site. It could be suggested that the enclosure may have formed part of the three enclosures associated with medieval monasteries (the Sanctissimus, the Sanctior, and the Sanctus) and could potentially hint at an early medieval date for the overall site. There also exists the possibility that the ecclesiastical site may be located within upon the reused location of an earlier ringfort, with the townland name of Rathfee suggested to have a translation of 'rath faoi', or 'under the rath'.

The Lidar survey further identified the remains of significant earthworks around the nearby hall-house (known as the Witch's Castle) to its North, North-West, and West, and displayed the potential remains of a connecting trackway or path from the hall-house to an enclosure to its North. A further complex of enclosures and banks were also visible on the survey to the south of the hall-house, suggesting evidence for associated settlement surrounding the building. Dr. Naessens has suggested that the uncovered evidence suggests a possible contemporary connection and possible pathway between the hall-house, the surrounding enclosures, and an earlier version of the church.

Oral History

Since 2023, local oral history has been an extremely important means to help uncover and understand this archaeological complex, with local people providing information that has aligned with the physical findings, most of which were previously unrecorded in the historical record. Oral history is particularly important in the understanding of the site's graveyard, which buried people from the community for well over two centuries, and was reused again in later years as a cillín. During work close to this area in 2011, archaeologists with the Rubicon Archaeology company noted the value of local oral history in helping to identify newly uncovered vernacular remains, which included houses and pathways which had not been noted in the archaeological record but had been known in local knowledge as a former village site.

Conclusion

The entire Kilskeagh site requires continued research and investigation to fully ascertain the scale and complexity of what is an important multi-period landscape. It is hoped that further planning, recording, Lidar, and photography will be carried out as the site clearance continues to develop in order to track the development and assist in the broader research of the site’s role in local and national history.