

Pilgrimage In Medieval Ireland

pilgrim roads, rituals & destinations



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TAG ARCHIVES: ST COLMCILLE'S HOLYWELL

The Pattern day at Durrow Co Offaly

Jun 15

Last Monday the 9th of June I attended the pattern day celebrations in the parish of Durrow Co Offaly.



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Banner of St Colmcille/Columba.

Durrow is a small village about 5-7 km outside of Tullamore town. St Colmcille/Columba is the patron saint of the parish and the local community celebrate his feast day on the 9th of June each year. Tradition holds the saint founded a monastery here in the 6th century close to the holy well. Durrow was an ecclesiastical settlement of great importance and part of the early medieval Columban federation of churches. I will discuss the history, the archaeological remains at Durrow and the medieval evidence for pilgrimage in more detail in a later date. This post will focus only on this years pilgrimage.

Modern pilgrimage

Each year the people of Durrow continuing on a centuries old tradition, commemorate the feast day of St. Colmcille. It is also the traditional day that the children from the parish make their first communion.

This year the communion mass was held at 10 am and a second mass in honor of Colmcille was held at 12am. Following mass the community walk in procession to St. Colmcille's holy well and after all the religious celebrations a sports day was held in the afternoon .



Processional route from Durrow Roman Catholic Church to St Colmcille's holy well
(map taken google maps)

When I arrived in Durrow it was about 12.20 and mass was underway. The church was decorated in bunting and flags.



Roman Catholic Church at Durrow.

Following mass everyone assembled at the church gates and fell into line behind a banner with an image of the saint. The parish priest and other clergy from the diocese and two musicians walked in front with the rest of the pilgrims following.



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Pilgrims beginning to assemble outside the church gates for the procession.



Musicians John Buttivant and Dick relaxing before the procession. There are normally joined by a piper who was unfortunately not able to attend this year due to illness.



The procession as it leaves the church and turns south down the N52.

The procession heads from the church gates south along the N52 road . The event literally stops traffic as the community walk along this busy road. St Colmcille's day is very important to the local community and one lady told me that many people will take the day off work to attend.

Everyone was in good spirits as they walked along oblivious to the lorries and cars behind them, thankfully the an Garda Síochána were also present to regulate the traffic.



The procession as it heads down the N52.

After walking for approximately 0.5 km the procession leaves the N52 road and heads into Durrow Abbey Demesne.



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The procession as it enters the N52.

The next stage of the procession, which is about 0.6km in length, could not be more different from the first section of the walk. The pilgrims proceeded down a leafy driveway that leads to the St Colmcille's Church of Ireland and Durrow Abbey House.



Pilgrims walking along the road within Durrow Demesne.

The procession continued past St Colmcille's Church of Ireland



St Colmcille's Church of Ireland at Durrow.

and along a small trackway which leads to a D shaped , tree covered marshy area known as the island.



Pilgrims walking down the trackway leading to St Colmcille's holy well.

St Colmcille's holy well is located at the center of this area.



St Colmcille's holy well at Durrow.

Everyone congregated around the well and tried to avoid the more marshy areas. Some boards had been placed towards the entrance to make access easier. Once everyone had arrived a number of prayers were recited blessing the well and those present.



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Prayer being said at St Colmcille's holy well.

Following prayers many people went to the holy well to take home water in plastic bottles and milk cartons. A young man and woman stood by the well and filled bottles with water for the pilgrims .



Pilgrims taking water from St Colmcille's holy well at Durrow.

Durrow was certainly one of the most stylish pilgrimages I have attended, probably because it coincides with communion day and everyone looked great in their suits and dresses. This event has such a great community feel and its really a great social occasion too.



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Pilgrims chatting at St Colmcille's holy well.

As I headed back up the trackway towards the church, which houses the 9th century high cross (will discuss in another post), I could hear singing and when I went to investigate further I found a fantastic choir who were singing within the church.



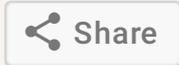
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The choir singing within the church at Durrow.

I really enjoyed my time at Durrow and it was really lovely to attend such a vibrant pilgrimage.

<http://www.tullamoreparish.ie/durrow-mainmenu-177%5B/embed%5D>

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St Colmcille's well Disert Donegal

Jun 9

Today is the feast day of St Colmcille who along with St Patrick and St Brigit he is one of the three patron saints of Ireland. In 2008 my good friend Fiona Beglane brought me to see a holy well associated with the saint. The well in question is located in the townland of Disert, in the parish of Inver, in Co Donegal. Over the last few years I have been to a lot of pilgrim sites but this is one of the most beautiful place that I have spent time.

Location

St Colmcille's well is situated in rough pasture at the foothill of the Carnaween hill and the Bluestack mountains close to the banks of the Eanybeg river. As you can see from the photo below this is the most glorious of locations.



The site consists of a holy well located close to a small graveyard that is surrounded by a stone wall and the remains of megalith and associated enclosure. All three monuments are points in the pilgrim landscape of the site.



The Eanybeg river

The townland name Disert (Dísert in Irish) comes from the Latin word *desertum* meaning desert. During the 4th century there was a movement of hermits in the East (Syria and Egypt) retreating into the desert to live a life of isolation and prayer. It is probable that the idea of living as a hermit came to Ireland from the East via Gaul and Britain. The Irish placename 'Dísert,' and its variants 'Dysert,' and placenames of which 'Dísert' is a component, for example, Dísert Diarmata, Castledermot, bear witness to the existence of hermits and hermitages in Ireland. There is no visible evidence of an early or late church here but according to tradition St Colmcille blessed the well here which was already of local importance.

History of the Site

The earliest references to Disert dates to the 17th century. *The History of the Diocese of Raphoe* mentions that Hugh Roe O'Donnell, chief of Tir Chonaill gave an estate at Disert to the Franciscans around the year 1460. Yet according to Meehan (1997, 14) the Franciscans have no record of their order in the parish of Inver. Local tradition held that the Franciscans who fled their monastery at Donegal after the Plantation of Ulster lived east of Disert in the townland of Friary and made their way between Killymard and Glenfinn along Casan na mBrathar. Local tradition does states seven monks were buried in the 'garden' or enclosure at Disert (ibid).

According to the Ordnance Survey letters for 1835 & the *Annals of the Four Masters* in the year 1611

Niall O'Boyle Bishop of Raphoe died at Gleann Eidhnighe on the 6th of February and was interred at Inis Caoil (Inish Keel).

Meehan(1994, 14) and the notice board at the site state it was at Disert that the bishop died and was carried out of the hills to his Kiltoorish for burial.

St Colmcille's Well



St Columcille's well is located within the enclosing fence

The holy well is fenced off by wire railing. The well covered by a trap door which need to be opened to access the water. The well shaft/hole is lined with roughly coursed stones and the well very little water when I visited it in the summer of 2008. There are two cairns beside the well which have kind of merged together and are covered with vegetation.



St Columcille's well

The graveyard

Close to the well is a wedge shaped graveyard which is defined by a stone wall. The graveyard was used for the burial of adults until the 1840's and for unbaptised babies until the 1930. Within the enclosure is a stone altar with a metal cross beside an old tree.



Interior of graveyard with holy well in the background

Sitting on the altar are a number of holy stones one of which is a quern stone. There are a number of low stones in the grass which act as graves marker and four low stone mounds or penitential cairns scattered about the graveyard. According to [Walking Ireland Website](#) the site was used during penal times as a safe place to say mass.

The priest was said to travel up and down the river Eany between the Alt in Ardagey saying mass in each, on alternate Sundays. The bullaun stones were said to have been used as candle holders. Fr. Dominic Cannon was parish priest of Inver from the 1770s until his death in 1801.



Altar within the graveyard

St Colmcille's Arch

St Colmcille's Arch is another part of the pilgrim landscape. The arch is what appears to be the remains of a 'Megalith' it consists of two orthostats (upright stones) approximately 1m high with a lintel stone resting on them. Piled on the lintel stone are small stones which form a pyramid.



St Colmcille's arch

When you pass through the arch you enter a sub oval enclosure roughly 5m by 6m.

The Turas at Disert was noted for its cures. East of the megalith is a large slab or concave stone. The penitents lay on this flag and pressed their back into the cavity. This was a noted cure for backache. The well water was said to cure toothache. The water in the bullaun stone was said to cure warts. It was also used to cure eye complaints. In those days people came to the Turas at Dysert on June 9th – the Feast of Colmcille – from far and wide. (Meehan 1997)

Modern pilgrimage

According to the notice board at the site in former times people came here on the 9th of June the feast of the saint. In modern times mass is said in the graveyard on the first Sunday of July followed by the traditional climb of the nearby Carnawee Mountain. In the past at the top people meet those from the Glenties side of the mountain for an afternoon & evening of dancing and singing. Fiona Beglane carried out a detailed survey of the site called *Disert: St Colmcille's Well and Megalith*, which states

pilgrims traditionally start at the well with prayers as they walk around the stones barefoot whilst praying. They then walk to the altar, over the hill whilst saying the rosary. At the altar they circumnavigate the stones found there before mass is said. 15 decats of the rosary are said whilst walking around the well. (Unpublished project by Fiona Beglane)

Meehan (1997, 14-15) states

As well as prayers being said at the well the Rosary was recited and Paters and Aves were said as the pilgrim made his or her way round the heaps or cairns walking on the right hand or deiseal and placing a pebble on top of the cairn as the prayers were said.

Disert is renowned for cures, and I have already mentioned the healing stone east of the megalith where penitents lay on the flag and pressed their back into the cavity, to cure backache. The stone reminded me of St Kevin's chair at Hollywood. Penitents would also crawl through the megalith (St Colmcille's arch) and rub the affected part of the body against the stone. The water of the well was a cure for tooth ache. The water in the bullaun stone was a cure for warts. The quern stone was used to cure eye complaints, the pilgrim would hold the stone up to their eye and look through the hole at its centre.



Quern stone known as the "Cure".

Local tradition has it that a test of male virility was to carry two stones from the altar in the graveyard to the well and back three times, whilst holding them from the top.



On the left of the photo are the stones carried to the holy well and back.

The soil from Disert is reputed to be holy and to have certain powers. Like other Columban sites in Donegal, such as Gartan and Tory, the clay at Disert is said to banish rats. The clay must be lifted from the right hand side of the altar and in former times great stress was laid on it being asked for and received with great reverence. Newspaper reports have suggested that uranium in the clay caused it to banish rats but these reports haven't lessened the belief in its power. Until recently Disert clay was often put in the foundation when houses were being built (Meehan 1997, 17)

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The Disert Circular Walk http://www.walkingireland.ie/section-2.aspx?item_id=140

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