

The 2018 annual excursion took place in July starting with morning refreshments at the Headfort Arms Hotel in Kells and meeting up with the Society's guide for the day Lucy O'Reilly. Afterwards, the group made the short journey to Clonmellon in Co Westmeath for a private visit to Killua Castle by kind invitation of its current owners Allen and Lorena Krause. Allen and Lorena were on hand to greet the members and soon the story emerged about how the Castle, which had until recent years been a gaunt ivy cladded ruin, however, following an ambitious restoration project, had been transformed into a magnificent home. Allen described this transformation of the ruin as 'the project of my life', however, he had promised his wife that he would only proceed as they can afford and it could yet take a lifetime so vast is the challenge posed by Killua.



Killua Castle from ruin to a home again

The Castle is described in the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage appraisal as; 'an interesting and imposing Gothic-style castle which forms the focal point of an important collection of demesne-related structures'. Built around 1780, the Inventory describes the castle as:

a detached multi-bay three-storey over basement castellated Gothic Revival castle on complex plan, built c.1780. Originally constructed as a regular seven-bay three-storey over basement Georgian house with a full-height three-bay canted bay window to centre of entrance façade (northwest) and three-bay bow to centre of rear façade (southeast). It was enlarged on a number of occasions between c.1820 and c.1860 with the addition of various towers on square and polygonal plans, various two-storey extensions to the north-eastern end and by the addition of battlements to the parapets to create a Gothic castle on irregular plan.

It was once the ancestral home of the Chapman Family who were rewarded in 1667 for their services to Oliver Cromwell's army during its ruthless campaign in Ireland with the grant of the fertile lands around Clonmellon. The Chapmans had many important historical connections such as Sir Walter Raleigh who the family commemorated in 1834 with the erection of an obelisk to Raleigh that still stands a short distance from the Castle. Perhaps the most famous is the illegitimate son of Sir Thomas Chapman, the seventh and final baronet, who left his wife and daughters to live with another woman. One of the five sons from this latter union was T. E. Lawrence, better known as Lawrence of Arabia.

The restoration works carried out were in the main carried out by Powderly Construction, all of which are too extensive to include in this account. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that they include: a major overhaul of the basement, underfloor heating on all floors, new windows, all timber works including studded timber double doors, skirting, new lime plastering internally, new mechanical and electrical fittings and a cobbled basement. Pride of place is the Great Hall which is newly constructed consisting

of European green oak timber, traditional Gothic style hand-made wood carvings on a limestone wall finish and a splendid Hammerbeam roof, all of which is an impressive example of craftsmanship. The Great Hall is exquisitely furnished and the walls are adorned with a magnificent tapestry and paintings. Outside work is continuing on the majestic medieval gardens, wrought iron railings and foot bridge. The deer park has been restored, lake walks are being put down and extensive native tree planting is also taking place.



The invitation for the visit by the Society arose from a recce last October by the Society's President and the guide for the day Lucy O'Reilly following up on communication received from Allen and Lorena. Having been made so welcome and having had a spectacular tour of the Castle arrangements were put in place for the current visit by the members. At the conclusion of the tour of the Castle, fittingly in the Great Hall, the President made a presentation on behalf of the members to Allen and Lorena for their kind welcome and tour of the Castle both during the recce and to the large number of members taking part on this historic visit. He also wished Lorena and Allen every success for the future of their transformation project at Killua.



Afterwards the members enjoyed the traditional picnic on the grounds adjoining the Castle followed by a tour of the grounds and lake.



The hospitality, peace and tranquillity made it difficult to leave Killua, however, Kells and its monastic site had still to be explored. In Kells or Ceanannas Mór, our guide, Lucy enthusiastically welcomed the members making no apologies for describing the town as Ireland's leading heritage town pointing out that many historians/archaeologists refer to Kells as one of Ireland's greatest Christian monastic settlements. Lucy gave a brief outline of how Kells came into prominence as a monastic settlement and its proud connection with St Colmcille or to use his Latin name St Columba (521-597) who set up a monastery on lands granted to him by the then High King. Later things went wrong for Colmcille when a 'breach of copyright' judgement by the High King over a copy he made of a manuscript went against him. The High King's famous judgment; 'To every cow her calf, and to every book its copy', a term that is used in law to this day. Colmcille felt the judgement was unfair and the battle of Cúl Dreimhne followed resulting in serious loss of life. Did he punish himself by being a missionary to spread the gospel to Britain or was he banished into exile to Iona? In any case he left Ireland with great sadness. Those members who participated in the excursion to Donegal in 2011 will recall the story told on their visit to Colmcille's home place at Gartan where how he spent his last night in Ireland on the 'flagstone of loneliness' or (Leac na Cumha). The development of Kells and its association with Colmcille and Iona continued into later centuries with the Stone Crosses, the Round Tower, Colmcille's House and the Book of Kells. It was no surprise that many of the Colmcille tales were discussed and debated with the members, especially, the copyright issue which had led to his exile to Iona.



The first stop was at Colmcille's House (while a glitch prevented a visit) a solid stone structure with a steeply pointed or high pitch stone roof dating from the 9 century. It is the oldest surviving structure in the town and a classic example of an early Irish church and believed to have been used as a Scriptorium where the scribes worked on many productions. It is from here that Kells became the home to one of the world's greatest manuscripts and also gives it name to the Book of Kells. While it is suggested that work on the Book of Kells may have begun in Iona but due to the violent Viking raids the scribes there were relocated to the re-established monastery in Kells where they completed the book. It is suggested that this building takes its name from the Iona connection and the place where relics of Colmcille were once kept.

On entry to St Columba's Church grounds and the monastic site, the guide pointed out the unique gate piers which together with the spire on the bell tower were constructed under the patronage of Thomas Taylour, the 1st Earl of Bective in 1783. The Taylour family like the Chapman family came to Ireland during the Cromwellian period and acquired major land holdings in the Kells area and in county Cavan. The family acquiring the title of the Marquess of Headfort coinciding with the passing of the Act of Union. Nothing remains now of the original ruins of the monastery and in the case of the mediaeval Church only the bell tower remains. The present Church was built in 1778 with modifications taking place in 1811, 1858 and in 1965.



In the photograph above the guide is seen in the graveyard outlining and explaining the biblical meanings on the extraordinary carved panels on the West or Broken cross. The damage to the cross is credited to the violence of the Reformation and Cromwellian periods. Nearby is the South cross or the cross of St Patrick and Colmcille which is equally adorned with carved panels. Both crosses are dated between 9 – 10 century.



The third cross found in the graveyard is the East or Unfinished cross dated to the 12 century. While the panels on the cross have been etched out for carving nevertheless little work has been completed

other than a crucifixion scene and it would appear that work was interrupted by some event or other. Also within the graveyard there are a number of other surviving pieces of worked stone including grave slabs.



The round tower minus its top, also within the graveyard, is 26 metres high and is believed to date to the 10 century. The doorway originally stood about 3.6 m above ground level and was reached by wooden steps or a ladder. Most round towers have four windows on the top level, one for each cardinal direction, however, in the case of Kells round tower, it has five, one facing each road into the town and each town gate.



The 9 century Market Cross or the Cross of the Gate is the best known of the high crosses in Kells which was originally located at the eastern gate of the ecclesiastical enclosure, a point where a fugitive could claim sanctuary within. It was re-erected in 1688 at the junction of Market and Castle Street and again moved, following a traffic accident in 1996, to its current location under a protective roof outside the Courthouse/Heritage Centre on the Dublin road entrance to the town. Again, our guide, Lucy, pointed out the biblical meanings carved on this magnificent cross including the 'Crucifixion, the 'Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes, and the 'Fall of Man'. Incidentally, the Courthouse was originally designed by the architect, Francis Johnson in 1801, who also designed the GPO in Dublin.

Time and energy did not permit further sites visits on the extensive Kells heritage trail such as the Spire of Lloyd and Headfort House. Most of the members then retired to the Headfort Arms hotel to relax and enjoy the traditional meal served by the hotel staff. The President in formally bringing the day to a close thanked Lucy for her support to him during the various recces in the planning for the excursion and for a most enthusiastic, humorous and informative guidance during the day. Lucy in reply expressed her delight in her involvement and paid a warm tribute to the members for their

engagement and their interest in the heritage of the Kells area. The President thanked the Secretary, Bernadette Doyle for her efficiency in the management of the difficult arrangements arising with the excursion and also the Treasurer, Darina McCarthy for her handling of the financial matters. Finally the President thanked the staff of the Headfort Arms for their hospitality, efficiency and quality food.

A special word of thanks to Lorena, Lucy, Charlotte, Tom and Oliver for forwarding some wonderful photographs capturing the atmosphere of a most successful excursion.

Hugh Crawford

President.