



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL
1988**

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ISSN 0791-0665

SOME PRELIMINARY NOTES ON THE EXCAVATION OF DOLLA CHURCH, KILBOY, CO. TIPPERARY

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During the last week of August and the first few weeks of September 1987 minor investigatory excavations were carried out in the old, ruined church in the townland of Kilboy, parish of Dolla, Co. Tipperary (O.S. 6-inch scale sheet 26; 5.1cm. from the eastern margin and 25.4cm. from the southern margin). In the grounds of Kilboy House and attractively sited across a small artificial lake to the east of the house, the ruin (Fig. 1), was being cleaned, conserved and partially reconstructed by the land-owner, Dr. Tony Ryan, under the direction of Mr. William Hayes, the present Administrator of the Roscrea Heritage Centre.

The church, sited in the local graveyard, consisted of a long, narrow rectangular building aligned East-West, with a sizeable transept-like but independently built rectangular annex attached to its south-eastern end (Fig. 2). The northern wall of the church proper and the upper part of the western gable wall were mostly missing and what remained was in a very ruinous state. The interior and northern side of the church had, furthermore, been much disturbed by burials within the present and last century (Fig. 3), thus limiting excavations somewhat; the graves to the south of the church and in the southern annex were of 19th century date and related to the former residents of Kilboy House, mainly the Dunallys and Pritties, for whom the area served as a private cemetery.

The church measured 24.75m. by 6.10m. internally and 26.60m. by 7.85m. externally, the additional annex measuring 8.76m. by 5.90m. internally and 9.88m. by 7.76m. externally; the only existing entrance to the latter structure was through a 3.05m. wide gap in its western wall, well-faced and clearly secondary, as excavation subsequently confirmed.

While it was clear that the long rectangular church building dated most probably from the late 15th century and that the southern addition at its south-eastern end was built against it (but not bonded into it) in the late 16th century, it was also very evident that various rebuilding, repairs, alterations and modifications had been undertaken during the last century or two. At some stage the upper part of the eastern gable seemed to have been repaired and perhaps heightened (one could almost make a case that the whole church may have been widened at the same time, though this seems somewhat unlikely and could not convincingly be confirmed by the excavations). This probably took place in the late 18th or, more probably, in the 19th century when a window in it was repaired and a strong buttress was built against its northern corner where the northern wall had already largely collapsed. The uppermost metre of the southern wall of the church was clearly the result of 19th century rebuilding, and most of the wall's external facing seemed equally to be 19th century work, having much the appearance of a kitchen-garden wall of the period — indeed, it was clear from the presence of staples and nails in it, and a metal label reading "*Polyantha* Queen Alexandra" still hanging on to one of them, that it was used to support climbing roses. While there was evidence in the inner northern face of the wall for an 87cm. wide doorway leading into the southern annex there was no evidence for it in the southern face, indicating how efficiently the 19th century re-facing had been carried out. There was also evidence that the external corners of the west wall of the church and of the south wall of the additional annex had been largely rebuilt with new quoins, probably to replace 'robbed' ones; the present mortaring and quoinstones resemble that in the older parts of Kilboy House.





Fig. 1 Dolla Church from East, as seen from the gateway entrance to the graveyard.

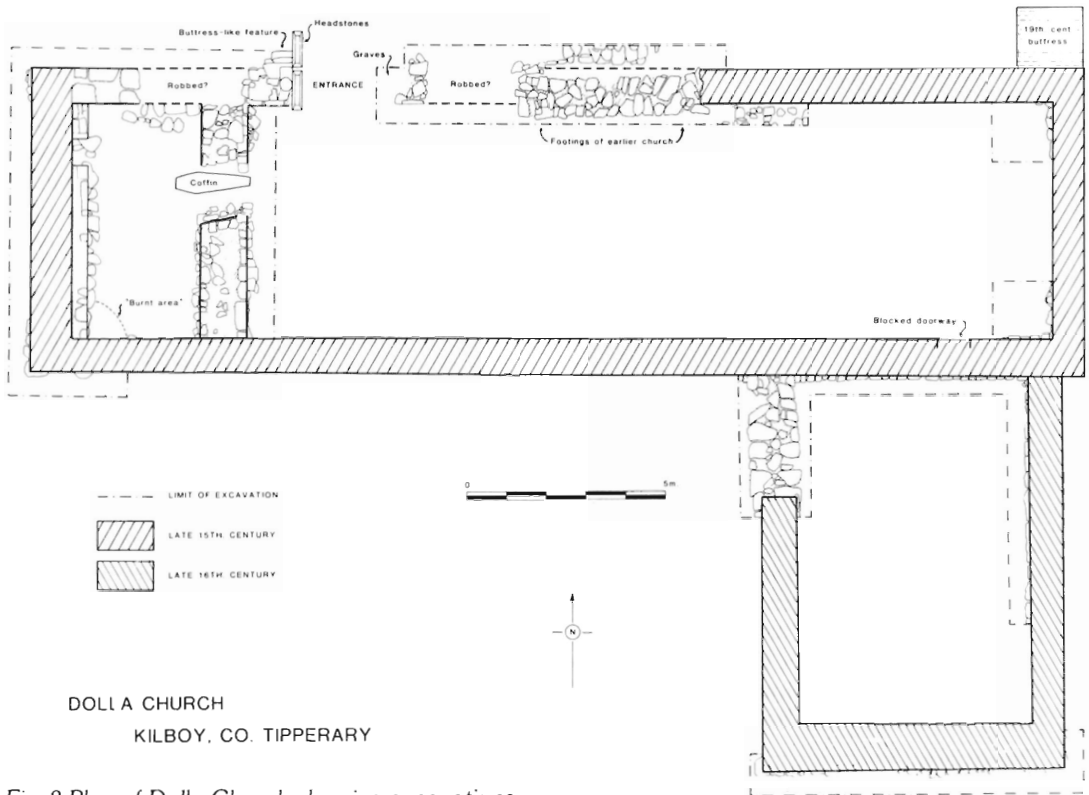


Fig. 2 Plan of Dolla Church showing excavations.



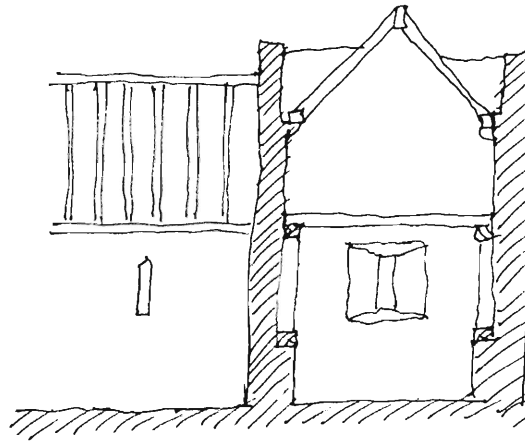


Fig. 3 Dolla Church from North-West before cleaning and reconstruction.

At a point along the northern (inner) face of the south wall, 3.20m. from its southern-western corner, there was a rough bit about 1m. wide suggesting that there may formerly have been a wall built against it across the end of the church. While excavation revealed that such a partition wall had existed, there was no evidence that it ever had been bonded into the southern wall — the rough bit seemed equally likely to be the result of the building/rebuilding of the southern church wall *against* the southern end of the partition wall.

The partition wall discovered during the excavation cut off the rear western portion of the church and can be interpreted as creating separate but combined residential quarters for the church's priest, an arrangement known from elsewhere, particularly perhaps in the west of Ireland. A gap in the partition wall showed where the doorway into the Priest's House had been — unfortunately a 19th/20th century burial there had destroyed the northern part of the doorway. Against the inner face of the western wall of the building a 30cm. wide ledge-like lining, about 1.20m high, was uncovered. Its purpose is unclear, but the width of the partition-wall (1.15m. as opposed to c.85-90cm. elsewhere) suggests that it may also have had such a ledge-like feature, in which case one might surmise their purpose as being sleepers for post-and-beam frames to support an upper floor (Fig. 4). There was a gap just over 68cm. in width near the northern end of the possible sleeper against the west gable, and it could just possibly have served as a flue for a fire-place though no evidence of burning nearby was discovered; an area of burnt lime/mortar, mixed with charcoal fragments and some small stones, found in the south-western corner of the building in no way represented a formal hearth and may have been where mortar was mixed.

The original entrance to the church was not discovered with certainty. A clean 2.30m. wide gap in the north wall, where neither wall nor footings were found, occurred 4.50m. from the junction with the partition wall. Though some bones and coffin-handles were found in this



*Fig. 4 Sketch (L. de Paor)
to show possible use of
ledges in Priest's House
as sleepers to
support the upper floor.*

area, the gap did not seem entirely due to burials; it may be due to 'robbing' of the stones for building material elsewhere or, just possibly but rather unlikely, because it was where the original entrance may have been. The wall at the southern end of this gap continued for only about 50cm. when it was interrupted by fairly recent burials and, therefore, could not be investigated; it continued, however, immediately behind the headstones associated with those burials. It would appear that the most likely place for the original doorway to have been would be where these graves are: if the original doorway had been there then the consequent absence of wallstones would have facilitated burials — these burials are the only ones anywhere on the line of the church walls. Dressed arch-stones were found among the loose stones in the north-eastern corner of the graveyard and when reassembled they formed an arch of suitable size for a doorway at this spot; a doorway using them has consequently been reconstructed there (Fig. 5). Support for building a door at this point may be the buttress-like arrangement of stones against the outer face of the wall behind the headstone: it may have served to fortify the wall there which would have been structurally a weaker point due to the presence of a doorway and possible pressure against it from the inside because of the nearby junction of the partition wall.

The most puzzling and unexpected discovery made during the excavation was a 4.80m. length of footing-stones found extending almost, but not quite, in line with the surviving part of the northern wall which terminated at a distance of 9.75m. from the north-east corner, 9m. from the inner corner. These footing-stones were about the same width as the adjoining surviving wall but ran in a line about 20cm. south of it, and, furthermore, they only overlapped for 25-30cm. with the surviving wall — it is almost as if the surviving wall had 'jumped' 20cm. to the North! There is one possible explanation, though it would hardly explain why there should be no wall surviving above them nor, apparently, any footings to the portion that does survive (excavation showed that the other walls, for the most part, all have such footings). The possible explanation is that they might be evidence for an even earlier church, one which may

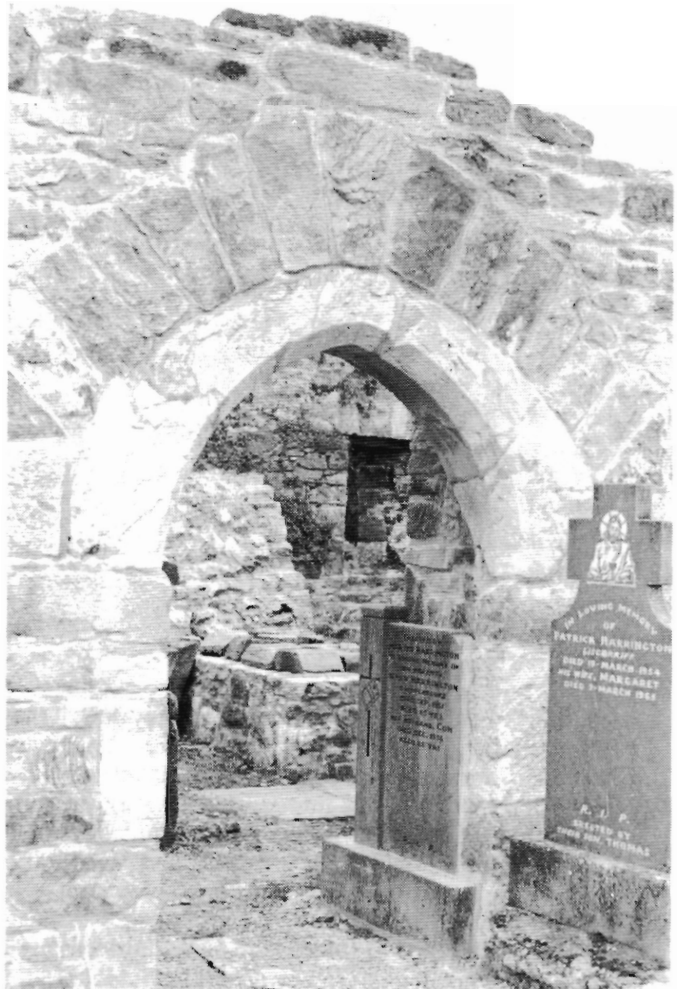


Fig. 5
Reconstructed doorway
in northern church wall.

have been removed to be replaced by the late 15th century building — other apparent evidence for this are some stones which have diagonal axe-dressing characteristic of the 12th and 13th centuries which were found loose in the graveyard or incorporated with the present buildings. Also found was a similarly dressed and finely carved stone (Fig. 6) which had the appearance of an abacus or impost from a late 12th or early 13th century doorway — an apparently similar but somewhat damaged stone is to be seen in the rebuilt (19th century) uppermost portion of the south-eastern corner of the church.

Apart from some bones, iron nails and portions of wood and mountings from old coffins, several roof-slates, some with nail-holes, were discovered. Fig. 7 illustrates a good specimen: roughly square in shape, it measures 18cm. in length by 16cm. in width and is up to 2cm. in thickness, the perforation being 8mm. in diameter. It has been inspected by Dr. Michael Williams of the Department of Geology, University College, Galway, who believes that it is “Not ‘slate’ since cleavage planes are too poorly defined. Interbedded sandstone/siltstone possibly from the turbidite facies of local Silurian sequence of the Slieve Bernagh, or hills to the South of Nenagh”.



Fig. 6 Two views (from the under side) of carved stone of probable late 12th or early 13th century date.

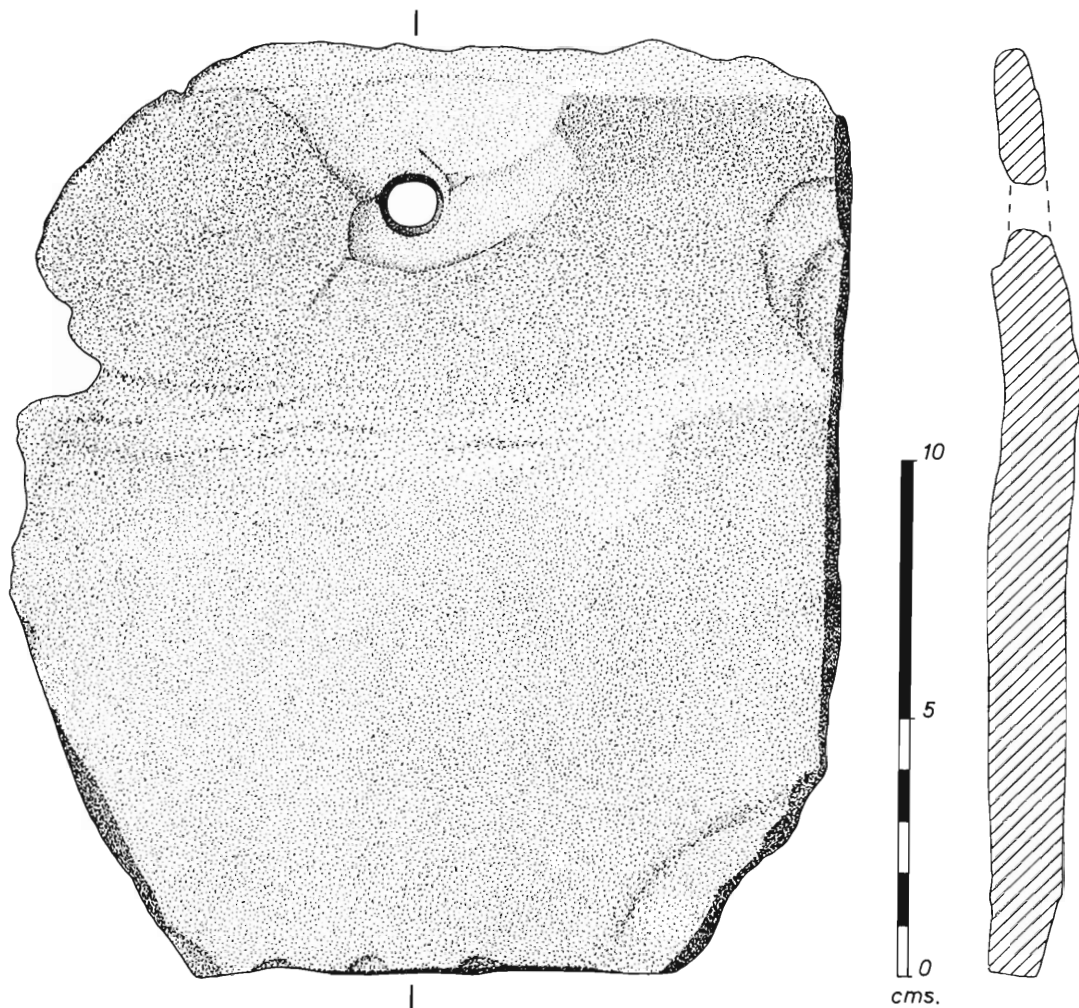


Fig. 7 Roof-slate from Dolla Church.

Only two small artifacts of archaeological interest were found. One is a small stone spindle-whorl (Fig. 8), found among the collapsed stones of the north wall. It measures 4.5cm. in diameter, is 8mm. in maximum thickness, and its central perforation is 9mm. in diameter. Dr. Williams believes it to be of "Medium-fine grained sandstone. Not recrystallised so possible post-Silurian. Probably Old Red Sandstone of local provenance". A Late Medieval or Post-Medieval date, *i.e.* one associated with the church's building and use, would be acceptable, though its significance is not apparent.

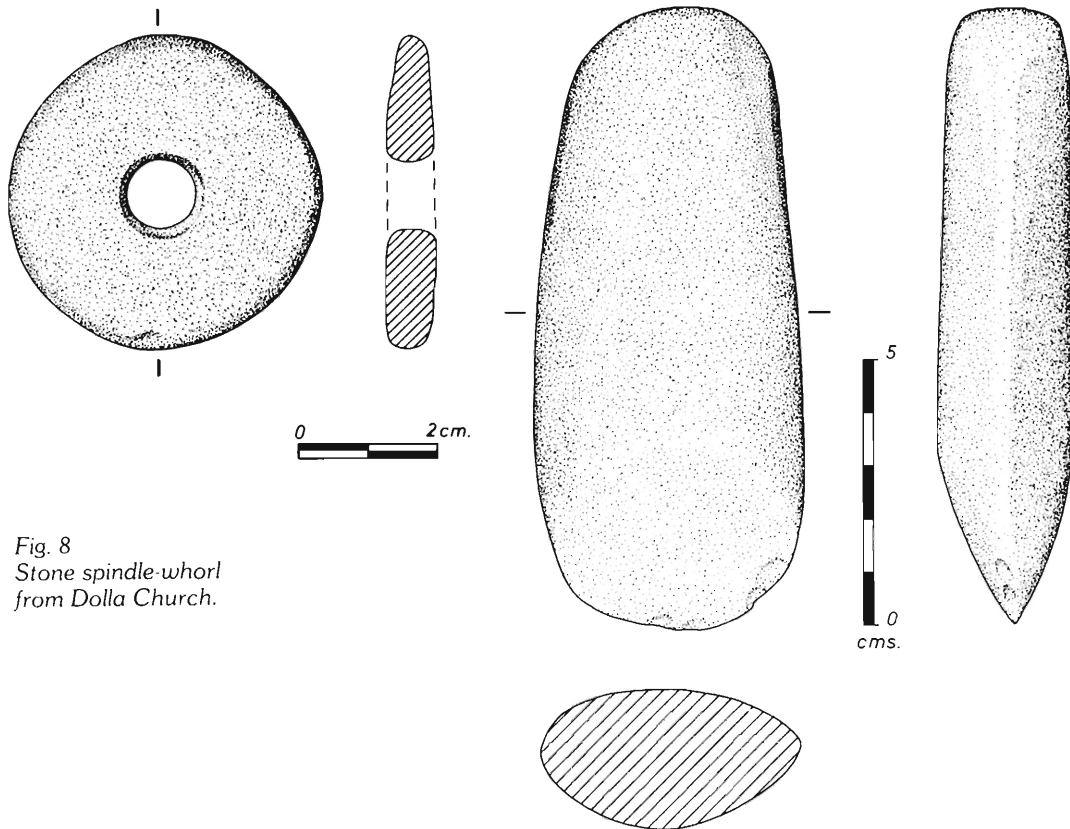


Fig. 8
Stone spindle-whorl
from Dolla Church.

Fig. 9 Polished stone adze-head from Dolla Church.

The other artifact found has even less apparent relevance to the site. It is a small stone thick-butted adze-head (Fig. 9), found in the north-eastern corner of the church, in disturbed soil well above the level of the lowest wallstones. It measures 11.6cm. in length, 5.1cm. in maximum width and 2.7cm. in maximum thickness. Dr. Williams believes it to be "Too fine grained to be recognizable without sectioning. Not limestone. Probably not a basalt. Possibly local provenance (too soft to be worth anything in terms of transport)". Such objects ought normally be dated to the Neolithic or Earlier Bronze Age, and it would therefore seem that it must either have been lost in the actual area some three or four thousand years before any church was built on the site or that it had been found in relatively recent times, kept as a curio, and subsequently lost, hidden or otherwise deposited in the north-eastern corner of the church.

Several quernstone fragments were also found in the graveyard, but none from the actual excavations.

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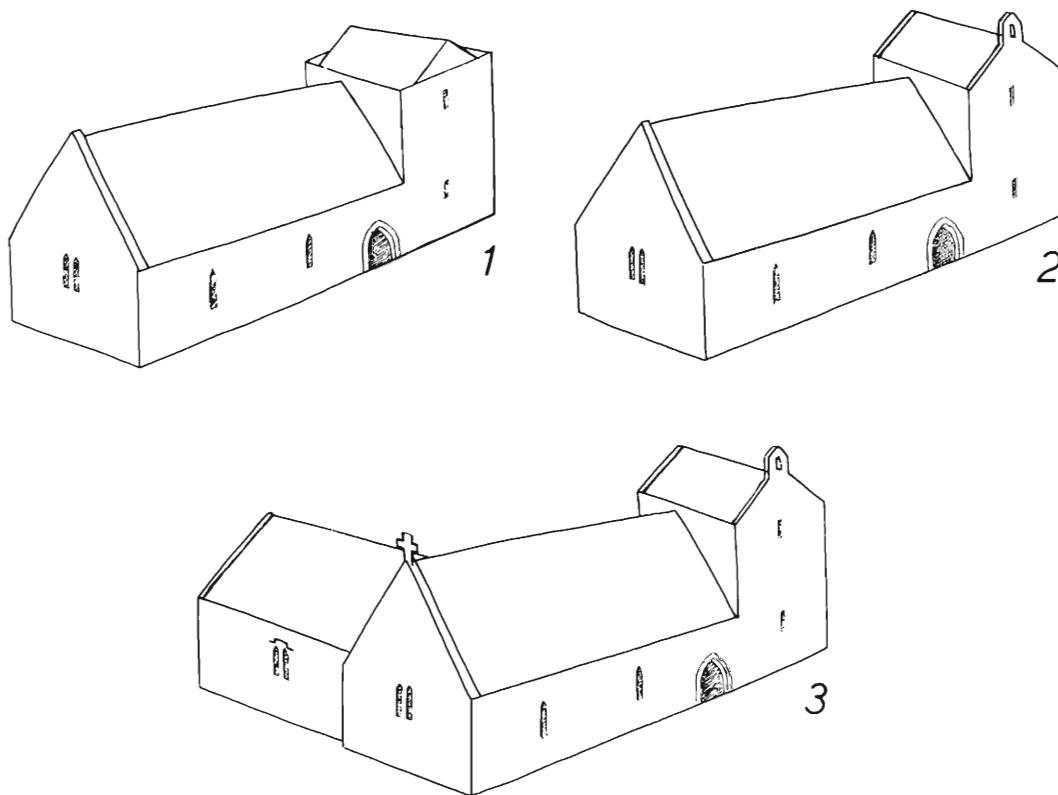


Fig. 10 Possible appearance of Dolla Church in late 15th century (nos. 1 and 2) and in late 16th century (no. 3).

While it is difficult to be in any way certain about the original appearance of Dolla Church, Fig. 10 shows some suggestions — I am particularly grateful to my friend and colleague Liam de Paor for help with these reconstructions and for much invaluable discussion concerning the architectural history of the site; I am also grateful to Professor Barry Cunliffe, of Oxford University, Thomas Fanning, of University College, Galway, and Willie Hayes, Director of the reconstruction work on the site, for similar useful discussion. I wish also to acknowledge thanks to Pádraig O Flannabhra, Photographer, Nenagh, for Figs. 1, 2 and 5, to Redmonds, Roscrea for Fig. 6 and to Angela Gallagher, Artist-Draughtsman in the Department of Archaeology, University College, Galway, for re-drawing Figs. 2 and 10 and drawing Figs. 7-9.

A detailed description of Dolla Church will be published elsewhere, with the full excavation report.

The Tipperary Historical Society is very grateful to University College, Galway, for a generous grant-in-aid towards the publication of the article on the excavations of Dolla Church by Professor Etienne Rynne.