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# The Benedictine Priory of Kilcommon

## By Richard O'Brien

This article arises from work carried out in 1996 for the creation of the now well-known 'Prayer Garden' in Kilcommon, north Tipperary. During archaeological monitoring of remedial works in the parochial grounds two dressed doorjamb stones were found.[1] This discovery prompted an inquiry into the cartographic discrepancy between the 1st and 2nd Edition OS Maps of the depiction of Kilcommon Benedictine Priory (site of).

Kilcommon is in north Tipperary amidst the picturesque mountainous terrain of the Slieve Felims. The village itself is situated in the townland of Churchquarter, the parish of Templebeg and the barony of Kilnamanagh Upper. Churchquarter is surrounded by the following townlands: on the south by Kilcommon and Loughbrack, on the north by Knocknakill, on the east by Knocknabansha and on the west by Laghile. The townland of Kilcommon neither contains the village nor the graveyard of the same name. The graveyard and Roman Catholic Church are sited east of the village, and the newly created 'Prayer Garden' is located east of the graveyard. A tributary of the River Bilboa forms the northern boundary of the 'Prayer Garden'. Although shallow for most of the year this stream can be fast flowing after heavy rains, explaining the wet nature of the site around the well.
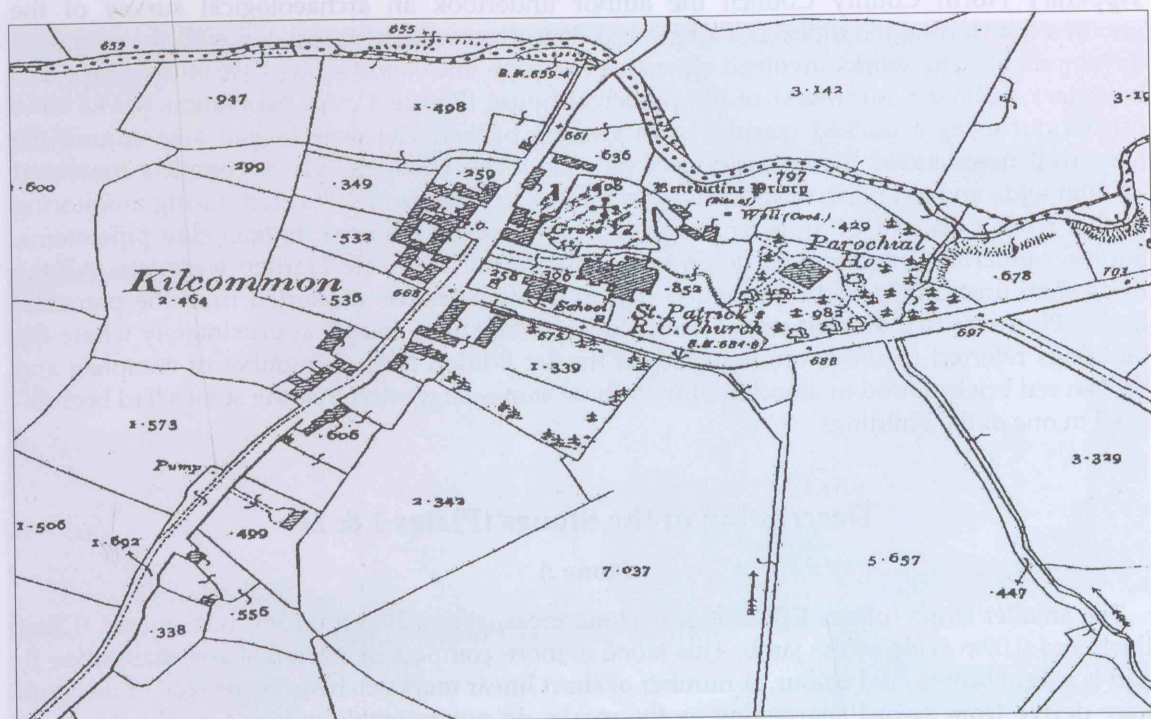


Figure 1: The 2nd Edition Ordnance Survey Map of Kilcommon north Tipperary(1905).

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## Cartographic Information

The earliest representation of a church in Kilcommon is depicted on the mid seventeenth century Down Survey Map and the name is spelt *Kiltomyne* in Petty's Survey.[2] The Ordnance Survey namebooks and letters compiled in the 1830s record the names of the following local places in Irish: Kilcommon, *Cill Chuimín* Saint Cummins church: Templebeg, *Teampull Beag* the small church: Churchquarter, *Ceatramad an Teampuill* quarter of the church (O'Donovan, c.1840: 186-87; O'Flanagan, 1930: 186-87). On the first edition Ordnance Survey six inch map a Roman Catholic Church and graveyard are shown, along with two buildings east of the graveyard.[3] The road to the village from the southeast (Loughbrack crossroads) led almost to the bank of the stream, and continued north west of the village. However by the 2nd Edition OS Map of 1905 the impact of preceding changes is evident. The road referred to above is gone and the Parochial House shown in its present location. A well (covered), three buildings and a Benedictine Priory (*site of*) are depicted east of the graveyard. However these buildings were entirely demolished during remedial works carried out in the 1980s (Father Dan Woods, pers comm).[4] This is the first cartographic representation of a *Benedictine* association with Kilcommon.[5]

## Archaeological Monitoring

In September 1996 landscape works commenced on the area of the church grounds east of the graveyard and north of the parochial house. The works were undertaken for the creation of a Prayer Garden under the auspices of Father Dan Woods, PP, Kilcommon. On behalf of Tipperary North County Council the author undertook an archaeological survey of the graveyard including monitoring of all ground disturbance works associated with the proposed development.[6] The works involved extensive drainage and landscaping east of the graveyard boundary wall, and northwest of the parochial house (Figure 1). All excavation works were carried out using a tracked machine with grading bucket. The waterlogged area around the holy well necessitated the excavation of new drainage channels. These channels measured c.0.50m wide and led north from the well to the stream. Artefacts recovered during monitoring of this work consisted of an assemblage of post medieval material: broken clay pipe stems, bottles, numerous fragments of delph and a number of complete Hartley ware jars. All the finds were unstratified and represented typical domestic refuse discarded from the parochial house. However two dressed stones from a doorjamb(s) were found, approximately where the buildings referred to above are depicted on the 1st Edition Map. A number of complete and broken red bricks found in association with these stones suggested that the stones had been re-used in one of the buildings.

## Description of the Stones (Plates 1 & 2)[7]

### Stone A

The smaller stone (plates 1 & 2) is sandstone measuring 0.29m x 0.35m in diameter, 0.20m thick and 0.09m wide at the jamb. This stone is more compact in overall shape than Stone B, and is a light brown/red colour. A number of short linear marks etched on one side of the jamb may derive from sword sharpening as the marks do not resemble mason's marks (Dr. Ann Lynch, pers comm).

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*Plate 1: View of Stones A & B (Latin-inscribed stone at right).*



*Plate 2: Close up view of Stones A & B.*

## Stone B

The larger stone (plates 1 & 2) is sandstone measuring 0.24m x 0.51m in diameter, 0.19m thick and 0.08m wide at the jamb. The stone is rectangular with slanted rear side and is a light brown/red colour. Traces of a lime mortar adhering to the stone were not original.

The stones have no actual dating significance themselves nor are there any diagnostic features to provenance them. Their re-use in the later buildings probably destroyed any original render. During the subsequent construction of the Prayer Garden these stones were used as part of the Prayer House, as can be seen in the plates. Although not the best repository, the stones will always remain in Kilcommon. As it is most unlikely the stones were brought into the area, their discovery confirms the Down Survey representation of a church in Kilcommon. Further evidence for this church is found in a series of articles on Kilcommon Parish Priests that appeared in the *Tipperary Star* of 1914. This is the first reference I have found to a 'ruined priory' in Kilcommon. A synopsis of the articles reads:

> Stones of the ruined priory were used to mark graves in the burying ground . . . stone was used in the building of the first parochial church of Kilcommon in 1805 by Father Hogan, who rediscovered the well. A portion of a gable was standing at the northern side of the priory premises until between 1825 and 1831 . . . other stones of the priory, including the gable, were used in an extension made to the parochial church . . . A considerable part of a gable with a large upper window was also standing at the southern end. A portion of another wall in a north and south direction, with loose stones lying at its eastern end remained at the western side of the precincts . . . in another extension of the parochial church between 1847 and 1850 all the available stones were used . . . Foundation stones of the priory are still visible level with the surface at the south-west corner of the priory buildings, and may be traced in an east and west direction . . . One stone bearing an inscription relative to the priory is built into the southern wall (of the present church) . . . entirely concealed. Another quantity of the stones was utilised in building walls in the church premises

These articles describe the ruined 'priory' as having two gables with a large upper window surviving in the southern gable until c.1850 when the final demolition occurred. Before 1805 there was no parish church in Kilcommon so the 'Down Survey' church obviously had not been in use for sometime. Similarly, the area around the graveyard must have been unkempt as the well had been 'lost'. By c.1850 only foundation stones were visible and whether or not these were incorporated into the third building as shown on the 2nd Edition OS Map is impossible to verify. Evidence for foundations for the priory was removed during the first remedial works in the 1980s as none were found during the most recent work.

As the articles appeared nine years after the publication of the 2nd Edition OS Map (of 1905) it was the authors' belief that references they found to a medieval church in Kilcommon equated with the Benedictine Priory (site of) as depicted on this OS Map. However the above description could fit any medieval church and there are no references to other buildings, as one would expect in a priory. This led me to question the veracity of the Benedictine association with Kilcommon in north Tipperary.

## Benedictine Kilcommon

References of a Benedictine association with Kilcommon are dated to the beginning of the thirteenth century (Brooks, 1954: 288). In the *Chronicle of John of Glastonbury*, it is recorded that Philip of Worcester founded a daughter house of the Benedictine abbey of Glastonbury in

*Kilcumin*, soon after King John had granted Philip his Irish lands (Worcester arrived in Ireland about 1185 in the king's entourage).[8] A synopsis of the first two charters reads:

> Philip of Worcester, constable of Ireland, gave to Glastonbury the vill of Kilcumin, with its church and 100 carucates of land, with chapels, churches and a variety of appurtenances (specified) in lands, rivers, fisheries, etc., and minerals of gold, silver and all metals, for founding and building a priory of monks in honour of the apostles Philip and James and of St. Cumin. This was done, and there was sent to the priory from Glastonbury a certain James, with other monks of the same place, and James was made the first prior. Many others also conferred on this new church lands, with tenements, meadows, moors, etc (ibid: 288).[9]

Aside from these charters very little is known of the Priory's history. In the early thirteenth century Kilcommon became embroiled in the controversies between Glastonbury and Bishop Savaric of Bath but still functioned up to the 1270s (ibid: 294). However, there is no evidence of the Priory surviving beyond 1332, and indeed it may have ceased to exist sometime before this (ibid). The reason given for its demise is: 'they have lost a large part of their Irish property though strife and upheaval and the malice of the Irish.'[10] Apart from this single reference to 1332 the Benedictine Priory of Kilcommon could have ceased as early as the 1270s. In the *Extents of Irish Monastic Possessions, 1540-1541*, Kilcommon does not appear (White, 1943). Thus, at best, Kilcommon Priory existed for 130 years, at worst less than 70 years. Why did the Priory fail? Perhaps it was a Glastonbury-led decision to terminate the Priory following deterioration in the political environment? But this brings us to the question of the Priory's location.

Archdall identified *Kilcumin* situated in the barony of Kilnelongurty, nine miles west of Holy Cross as it is recorded on the Down Survey (Archdall, 1786: 664). This is the earliest accurate information as to the whereabouts of *Kilcumin* itself, locating it in north Tipperary, and, consequently, equating Philip of Worcester's *Kilcumin* with Kilcommon in north Tipperary.[11] This identification remained unchallenged until Orpen, and later Brooks showed that the lands of Philip of Worcester were exclusively in south Tipperary (Orpen, 1911; Brooks, 1954). These lands consisted of five cantreds comprising of the baronies of Slievardagh, Compsy, Middlethird, Iffa and Offa and Clanwilliam.[12] Although one could question Orpen's assertion that the Tipperary lands of Philip of Worcester were *exclusively* in south Tipperary, the weight of scholarly evidence supports them (Empey, 1981 & 1985: 77; Frame, 1998: 35). Orpen identified Philip of Worcester's *Kilcumin* with Kilcommon in the parish of Cahir, in the barony of Iffa and Offa, therefore, part of Worcester's fiefdom (Orpen , 1911: 153).[13]

What of this Kilcommon south of Cahir? A church (site of) is located in Kilcommon More North townland on the banks of the River Suir.[14] The townland is also recorded as *Kilcommon* in the Grand Jury Presentments (O'Donovan, c.1840: 123). Rev. Patrick Power describes the site as:

> The site of the early church is within the Glengall demesne and quite close to the Swiss Cottage. On the erection of the latter and the laying out of the ornamental grounds which surround it the ancient graveyard was disturbed and the bones of the dead, in many cases, removed (1907: 310).[15]

In a later publication Power identifies the place name *Corbally* as this Kilcommon, valued at £40 in Pope Nicholas IV's Taxation List of 1291 (Power, 1937, Appendix III: 343). However, as Power based this identification purely on Corbally being located between Ballydrinan and Cahir in the above Taxation List, I find his identification tenuous at best.[16] This church south of Cahir is then the likeliest location of Worcester's *Kilcumin*, and, paradoxically, it suffered a fate similar to the medieval church of Kilcommon in north Tipperary during the nineteenth century.[17]

# Conclusion

In tracing the confusion about the Priory's location the initial error was made by Archdall in equating the church shown on the Down Survey with that of Worcester's *Kilcumin*. The error was later repeated in the 2nd Edition OS of 1905.[18] The writer(s) of the *Tipperary Star* articles subsequently adopted the error nine years later conveniently using the term 'Priory' to describe the old church in Kilcommon. It was to take the work of Orpen and later Brooks to rectify the problem. Perhaps the next edition of the OS Map will adopt the change!

But verifying the location of Worcester's *Kilcumin* south of Cahir poses a number of questions. How did *Kilcumin* interact with nearby Benedictine communities (Cashel), and further afield (the Priory of St. John the Evangelist in Waterford)?[19] How did *Kilcumin* interact with the nearer Augustinian Friary at Cahir itself? From an archaeological viewpoint are traces of the Priory still to be found around the known archaeological site TI081-059. Indeed, the question may be asked – should the existing zone of potential of this site be extended? I do not propose to attempt an answer to these questions here.

Returning to the roots of this article one can conclude that there was no Benedictine Priory in Kilcommon, north Tipperary but some form of medieval, or earlier church did exist here. By the mid nineteenth century the ruinous church was destroyed to make way for the existing church. In creating Kilcommon Prayer Garden in the mid 1990s we have been able to glimpse once again traces of its original foundation.

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**Footnotes**

1. The recently published Inventory of north Tipperary has confused my reporting of these finds with those from Park townland (Killea Church). The ogee-head fragment was found in Killea Church and not Churchquarter as recorded in the Inventory. See my report in *Tipperary Historical Journal* 2000, 192.

2. Kilcommon (*Kilcomyne*) is located in Kilnelongurty barony on the Down Survey Map.

3. Neither the *Ordnance Survey Namebooks* nor *Letters* contain any information relating to the graveyard or a Benedictine Priory.

4. None of this previous remedial work had been archaeologically monitored.

5. The *Record of Monuments & Places* (RMP) records a Benedictine Priory (site of), the graveyard and the church (possible site), Monument Nos. TI039-006, TI039-00601 / TI039-00602, respectively.

6. Archaeological reports on the graveyard clean up were lodged with Dúchas, and North Tipperary County Council.

7. The Latin-inscribed stone was found lying in the graveyard and reads "*Donn Beatae Exlrui August*". The stone (of slate) may have been used as a grave marker.

8. The sources are: Hearne, T. (1726), *Johannes…Glastoniensis Chronica…* (Cotton MS, British Museum); Dodsworth & Dugdale 1673, 1023, 1126 & 1128. A second daughter house was founded at Ardaneer, Co Limerick under the auspices of William de Burgo.

9. Brooks records further information from the Great Chartulary of Glastonbury, where Charters refer to Kilcumin, Marquis of Bath's *MS, f. 54*, (Brooks, 1954, 290-91).

10. Brooks cites a petition of Glastonbury in a letter from Pope John XXII to Ralph of Shrewsbury, Bishop of Bath and Wells dated 4th November 1332.

11. See *Medieval Religious Houses Ireland*. Reference is made to 'the (parish) of' Kilnelongurty when the reference should read barony of Kilnelongurty (1970, 107).

12. The source is found in *CDI 1171-1251*, No. 601, dated July 6th 1215, Sweetman (ed) (1875, 95), from the original [*Patent 17 John, m. 20*].

13. Brooks identified St. Cumin as Saint Cuimine Fota (Brooks 1954, 289). A north Tipperary Kilcumin would have been under the ambit of the de Burgos; Empey, (1981, Fig 1, 7).

14. See *Cahir: A Guide to Heritage Town and District*. At the beginning of the nineteenth century Kilcommon More North became demesne lands of the 12th Earl of Glengall, Richard Lord Cahir (1999, 7).

15. The *Record of Monuments & Places* (RMP) records a church site and graveyard in the townland of Kilcommon More (North), Monument No. TI081-059.

16. In the list of Diocesan Ecclesiastical Taxation of Ireland 1302-6, the church of Corbally is valued at £4. In the same list the Priory of Catherdunesque [Cahirdenesque, i.e., *fort of the fishes*] is valued at £50 (*CDI 1302-1307*, 306-7). Both are listed in the Diocese of Lismore.

17. See de Varebeke, 'The Benedictines in Medieval Ireland', in *JRSAI*, Vol. lxxx Part 1, 1950, 92 - 97. In his paper on the Benedictine Foundations, Dom H. J. de Varebeke was vague as to where in Tipperary Kilcumin was located but his accompanying map clearly locates the Priory in *north Tipperary* (1950, 95). However by 1961 Kilcommon is rightly depicted **back** in south Tipperary, located south of Cahir (Léarscáilíocht Éireann 1961 *Map of Monastic Ireland*).

18. A Benedictine Priory (site of) recorded from Lorrha, Co Tipperary mentioned in *Monasticon Hibernicum*, Alemand 1722, 71-2 is believed to be an error, *Medieval Religious Houses: Ireland* (1970, 109). No traces of this foundation, dedicated to St. Deicola have been found.

19. See J. Bradley & A. Halpin 'The Topographical Development of Scandinavian and Anglo-Norman Waterford', in *Waterford History & Society*. (eds) W. Nolan & T. P. Power (1992, 121). Could the unification of St. John's with Bath circa 1204 be significant regarding the wider relations between Bath and Glastonbury, and in the local sense with Kilcommon?

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