

Title: Skeam Island Church

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Skeam Island Church

By E. M. FAHY

The Skeam Islands, East and West, lie on the southern side of Roaringwater Bay and close to the mainland at Fasagh, near Aghadown, Co. Cork. The church ruin, which was first brought to my notice by Mr P. O'Keeffe of Bantry, stands on a seven foot high cliff of boulder clay on the eastern end of Skeam West. High water of Spring tides reaches the foot of the cliff and the eastern gable of the church has long since fallen into the sea. The ends of the long walls overhang the cliff edge and are steadily collapsing as the cliff is eroded away. However, about three-quarters of the building, including the western gable, remains.

The principal architectural features of the building are a well built doorway with square head and splayed jambs, bold antae which project $20\frac{1}{2}$ " beyond the western gable, a 9" wide offset on the south wall and a similar offset across the western gable at a point 3' 6" above the door lintel. An unusual feature is a rectangular opening, now built up, measuring 3' 6" wide by 3' high, above the offset in the western gable. It is partially obscured by ivy and other vegetation and without clearance it is not possible to say with any certainty what its purpose was. It may be an insertion done when a building was added to the western gable—a building which has now collapsed to the ground. A hamlet which lay to the south of the church is also in ruins for some time.

The interior of the church is 12' 7" wide and its maximum existing length is 17' 6". The long walls are 3' 2" and 3' 4" thick on north and south respectively. The west gable is 3' 3" thick. The doorway is 2' 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ " wide at its base and narrows to 2' 0 $\frac{1}{2}$ "; at the lintel. The gable stands to a height of 11' 10" and where well preserved on its southern side shows the usual 'upturned boat' profile springing from the level of the offset. The northern wall has an inward batter of 2" in 7' 6" and has a patch of plaster on its inner face. At foundation level the bases of the walls expand to a thickness of 5' 2", of which the footing, to the outside of the building, measures 1' 10" wide and 1' 7" deep.

Details of the foundations are, of course, visible in the cliff face which provides a section from north to south across the site. Inhumed burials are visible in the cliff for a distance of almost thirty feet to the north and south as well as within the church itself where they are overlain by some soil and 18" of collapse from the walls. The burials extend downwards to foundation level of the building and appear to post date it. The density of burials is not high and the skeletons are laid parallel to the axis of the church with their feet to the east. One grave is slab-lined but the rest are simple inhumations.

The architectural features of the church, drystone building, simple doorway with inclined jambs and without architrave, the antae and the estimated length/breadth ratio of the interior suggest a ninth century date for the structure. It is to be regretted that this, the only church of its date in the area is to be allowed to crumble into the sea.

This brief survey of the church was made in August, 1962.

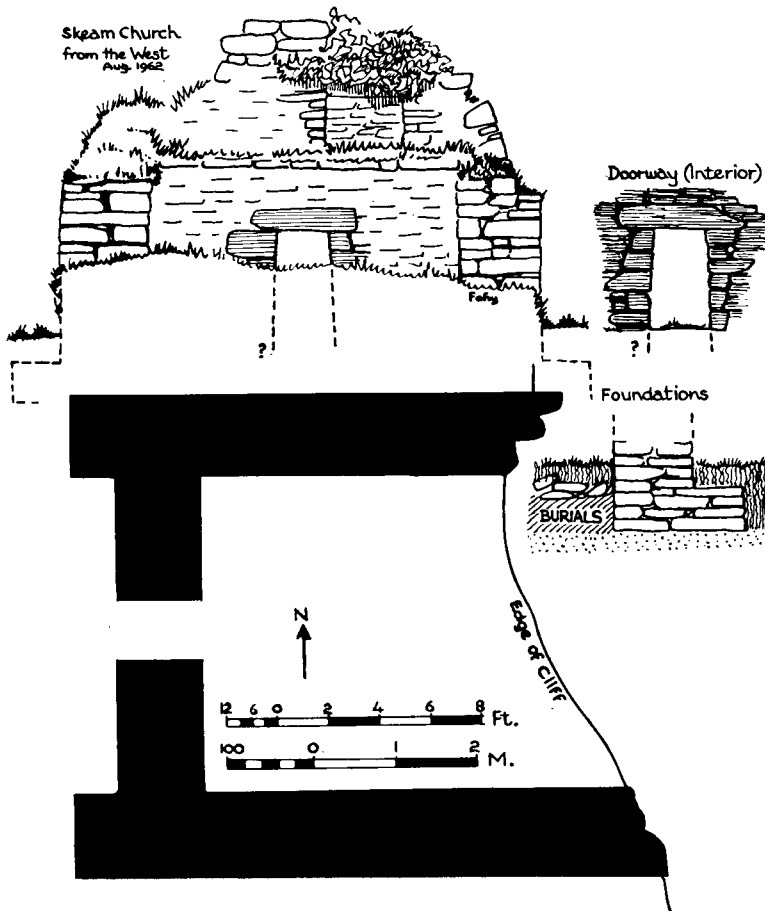
I am indebted to Messrs P. O'Keeffe, B. O'Regan and J. E. O'Donovan who made all arrangements and provided transport for our visit to the Island.



(a) Skeam West church seen from the north-west



(b) Skeam West church—view from the eastern beach showing the low boulder clay cliff on which the ruin stands



Skeam West church—western elevation, plan and details.