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Six Board of First Fruits churches in southwest Cork

By BERNARD O'MAHONY

The early 19th century witnessed an escalation in Church of Ireland building activity, which has left a visible mark on the landscape of Ireland. As a result, the early 19th-century Church of Ireland church has become an accepted component in the make-up of most towns and villages throughout the country. This extensive church building programme was a physical manifestation of the reformation of the Church of Ireland, which, as was perceived at the time, had been in spiritual and temporal decline in the previous century. 'First Fruits' is a term that has come to define the architectural style and form of these churches, which were built with the funding of the Church of Ireland's Board of First Fruits in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Ireland. These churches, best described as 'restrained gothic' in architectural detail, are almost invariably portrayed as simple and/or standard in form and layout. A survey of a selection of Board of First Fruits churches in southwest County Cork provides the impetus for a reassessment of these generally held views on simplicity and standardization in form and layout.

THE BOARD OF FIRST FRUITS

The Board of First Fruits had its origin in the 'annates' of pre-Reformation times. The annates was the first year's revenue of a benefice, dignitary or bishopric, which was remitted to Rome. After the Reformation, the annates went to the crown, the monarch now being the head of the established church. In 1711, the collection and spending of the

annates came under the control of the newly created Board of First Fruits. The Board lacked resources and, in 1777, the Irish Parliament took over the funding of the Board. The Irish Parliament granted funds only for the repair or construction of churches in parishes, which were without a church for at least twenty years. A grant of £500 each, from 1791 to 1803, was made for the building of eighty-eight churches.

The 1800 Act of Union was to have a profound effect on the activities of the Board of First Fruits. The British government took control of the Board of First Fruits and provided funding for a renewed intensification in church construction and repair. Of the large amount spent by the Board, approximately £1m from 1801 to 1832, for the construction and repair of churches and glebe houses and the purchase of glebe lands, £149,269 was given in gift and £281,148 was given in non-interest loans for the construction of churches. By 1829, 697 churches had been built, repaired or enlarged throughout Ireland. The Board of First Fruits was finally terminated in 1834 with the establishment of and the acquisition of control of funding by the Board of Ecclesiastical Commissioners (Akenson 1971, 115–21). It was not until 1813 that an official Board of First Fruits architect was appointed. John Bowden supervised the building of churches throughout the country until his death in 1822. At this time each of the four ecclesiastical provinces appointed its own official architect. James Pain became architect for the province of Cashel, William Farrell for

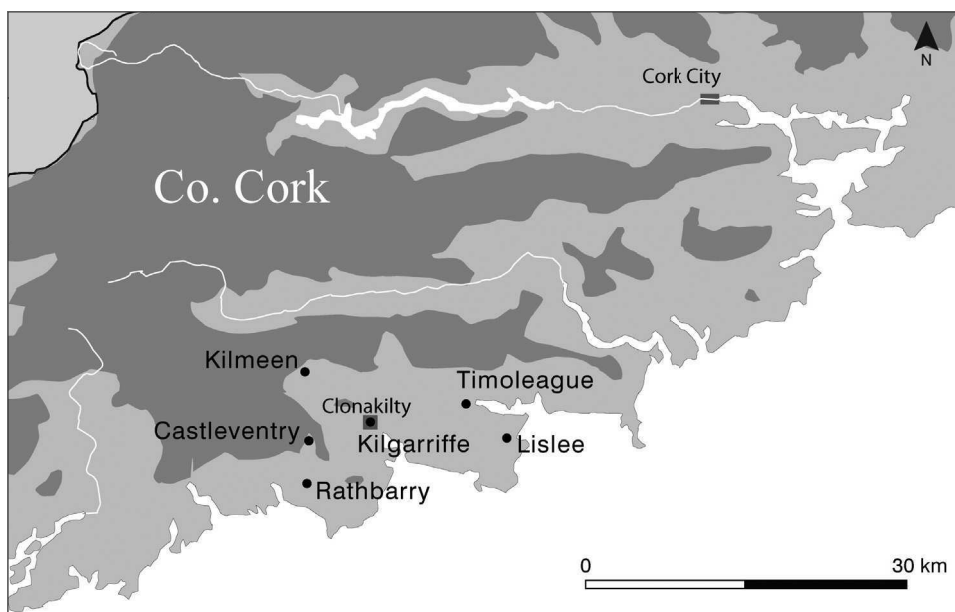


Fig. 1. Location map of surveyed churches

Armagh, John Semple for Dublin and Joseph Welland for Tuam (Lee 2005, 133). Nothing is known of the builders of Board of First Fruits churches before the appointment of official Board architects. It is likely that architects or builders were appointed locally.

THE STANDARD BOARD OF FIRST FRUITS CHURCH

The accepted generalization regarding the form of Board of First Fruits churches is possibly the result of a lack of any detailed appraisal of these churches. Though they are numerous, no serious study focusing solely on Board of First Fruits churches exists to date. Almost all existing works, exclusively in the context of architectural history, only consider the introductory role of Board of First Fruits churches in the development of mid-19th century Victorian neo-Gothic cathedral and church design.

It is a noticeable trend throughout studies to date that Board of First Fruits churches are portrayed with a degree of consistency. There appears to be a repetitive nature to the terms

used to describe these churches – ‘standard’, ‘typical’, ‘consistent’, ‘conservative’ and ‘uniform’. It would appear that this consistency has been translated to the presentation of the form and layout of the ‘standard’ or ‘typical’ Board of First Fruits church. In all cases, they are presented as uncomplicated buildings and all commentators agree on the standard as being a simple hall with attached tower. Though the possibility of some variation, in the form of an attached shallow chancel, transept, vestry or porch is indicated, any addition is considered more a possibility than a certainty (Craig 1982, 216; Dolan 1999, 52–62; Hutchison 2003; Lee 2005; McCullough & Mulvin 1987, 75; O’Reilly 1997, 160–161; Sheehy 1978, 196).

The potential for a high degree of variation on the standard form, amongst the numerous Board of First Fruits constructed, has not yet been considered in the literature. The assumption of uniformity presented does not appear to have been tested. It is not known to what degree each particular church or any group of churches might have varied from the ‘standard’

or 'typical' plan and how this variation might subsequently provide information on early 19th-century Anglican attitudes to worship.

SIX BOARD OF FIRST FRUITS CHURCHES IN SOUTHWEST CORK

Some of the issues and assumptions highlighted by the review of studies of Board of First Fruits churches to date can only be confirmed by testing the theme of uniformity in the form and

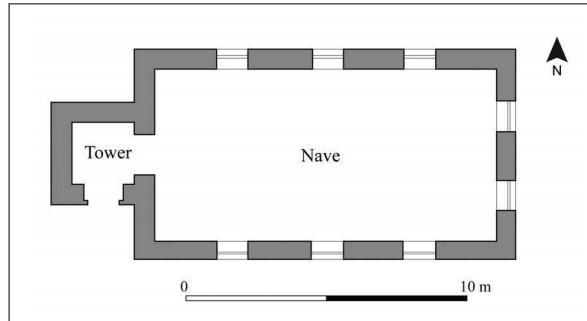


Fig. 2. Ground plan of Timoleague church as originally constructed



Pl. 1. Timoleague church, west elevation

layout of Board of First Fruits churches. While the survey of all extant Board of First Fruits churches was beyond the scope of this study, this investigation involved a survey of a selection of churches within a limited geographical area, to determine if the theory of standardized form and layout in a group of churches could be sustained. The selected churches were built in the locality of the town of Clonakilty in southwest Cork. The churches were located in the parishes of Timoleague, Kilmeen, Kilgarraffe, Castleventry, Rathbarry and Lislec. The layout of each church as constructed was analysed and the results compared.

Timoleague (Fig. 2): This church was built in 1810 with a £461 loan, granted by the Board of First Fruits (Brady 1864, vol. 2, 558). This church, when constructed, conformed to the accepted standard form for a Board of First Fruits church. The building was simple in plan, consisting of a rectangular hall or nave with a tower at the west end.

Kilmeen (Fig. 3): Kilmeen church was built in 1810 at a cost of £766. A total of £424 was granted in the form of a loan by the Board of First Fruits

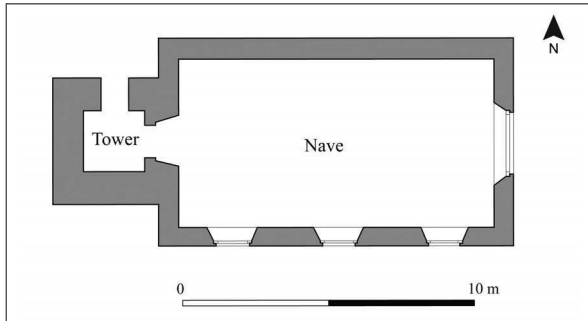


Fig. 3. Ground plan of Kilmeen church as originally constructed

and the remaining £342 was raised by parochial assessment (Brady 1864, vol. 2, 525). The church was constructed according to the generally accepted plan for a simple Board of First Fruits church. It consisted of a rectangular nave with a tower at the west end.

Kilgarriffe (Fig. 4): The church was built in 1818 in the town of Clonakilty, at the cost of £1,439. The Board of First Fruits granted a loan of £461 and the remainder of £978 obtained by parochial subscription (Brady 1864, vol. 2, 488). The church when constructed varied from the simple plan of hall and tower with the addition of a shallow chancel at the east end with a vestry attached and extending to the

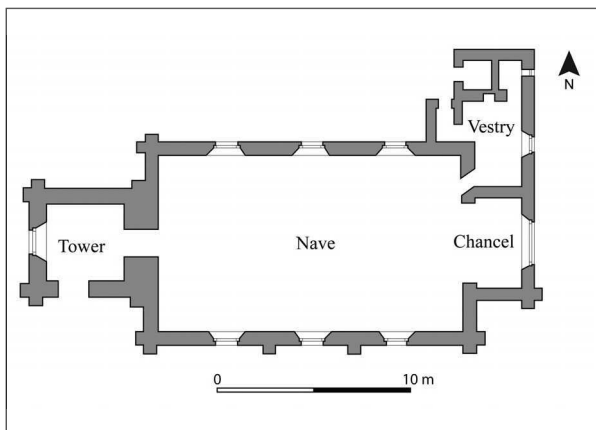


Fig. 4. Ground plan of Kilgarriffe church as originally constructed

north of the chancel, filling the corner between the chancel and the north side of the nave.

Castleventry (Fig. 5): 1824 is the date of construction of Castleventry parish church. It was paid for by means of a gift of £830, granted by the Board of First Fruits (Brady 1864, vol. 2, 501). This church was of similar design to Kilgarriffe. It was built as a hall and tower church with an added shallow chancel at the east end with a vestry attached, which filled the corner between the chancel and the north

side of the nave.

Rathbarr (Fig. 6): Rathbarr church was built in 1825, by means of a gift of £830, granted by the Board of First Fruits. A further contribution to the building cost was provided by Lord Carbery (Brady 1864, vol. 2, 540). Rathbarr was a complex church. It had the ubiquitous hall and tower, though the tower in this case was erected at the northwest corner rather than the usual centre of the west end location. A transept, on the north side of the nave, contained the private pew of the Carbery family. A chancel extended from the east end and a vestry was attached to the east end of the south wall of the nave. A porch entrance, extending south and west from the southwest corner of the nave, gave access to a roofed walkway or ambulatory. This walkway provided further access to the centre of the west end of the nave and the tower on the northwest corner.

Lislee (Fig. 7): This parish church was constructed in 1830, at a cost of £830, which was granted as a loan by the Board of First Fruits (Brady 1864, vol. 2, 534). Lislee church, again constructed with the rectangular hall and western tower, had a vestry attached to the east end of the north side of the nave and a shallow chancel extending from the east end.

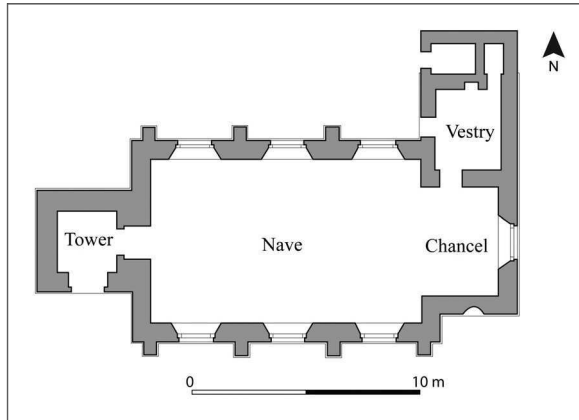


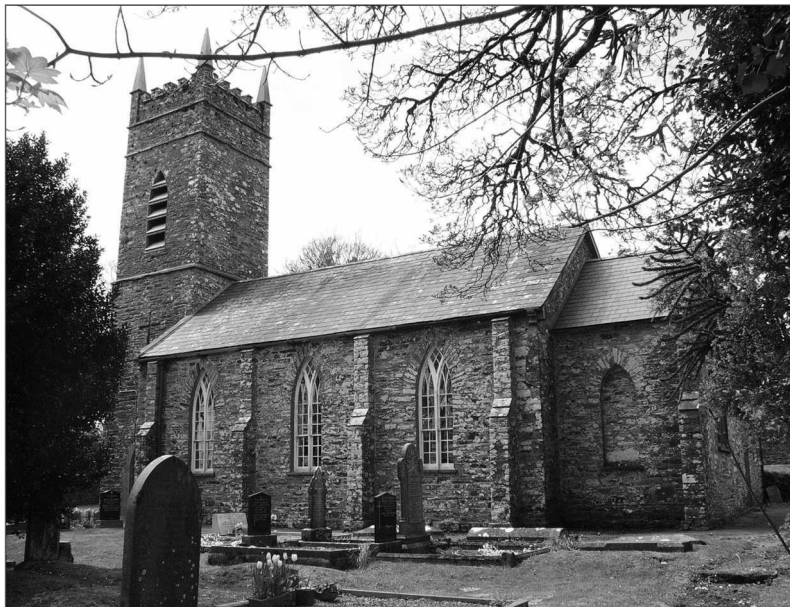
Fig. 5. Ground plan of Castleventry church as originally constructed

DISCUSSION

It is apparent from the survey that the concept of a simple standard form as the general rule clearly does not apply to the selected group of Board of First Fruits churches. Of the six churches surveyed, only two, Timoleague and Kilmeen, conformed to the description of a standard or typical hall and tower Board of First

Fruits church. All other churches were constructed with combinations of added features that altered their layouts, beyond that of the simple hall and tower. Kilgarriffe and Castleventry were almost identical in plan, with the vestry in each case attached to both the east end of the nave and the north side of the chancel. Rathbarry church was a complex building with additions on all sides and the atypical positioning of the tower, the result of the erection of a distinctive walkway along the west end. Lislee church had a similar combination, of attached vestry and chancel, as that at Kilgarriffe or Castleventry, with a slight difference in the location of the vestry.

It is interesting to note the date of construction of the two churches that conformed to the description of a standard Board of First Fruits church. Both Timoleague and Kilmeen were built in 1810. These churches were built at a time for which there is no evidence that the Board of First Fruits had an official or preferred architect. The other more complex churches



Pl. 2. Castleventry church, south elevation

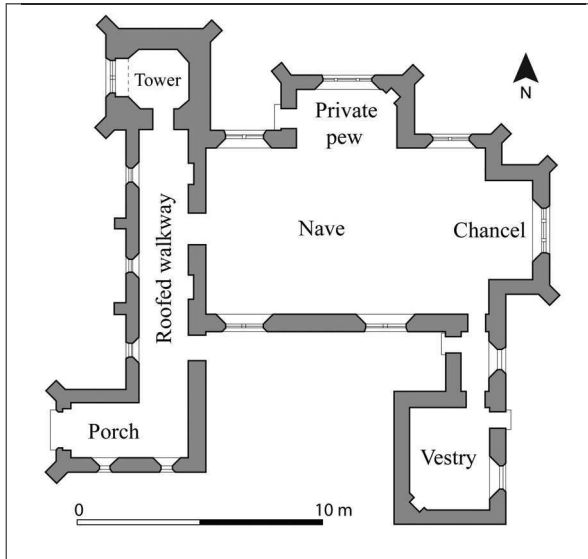


Fig. 6. Ground plan of Rathbarry church as originally constructed

date to 1818 and later and coincide with the period when a Board-appointed architect was active. It is therefore tempting to suggest that the builders of earlier churches may have been working to a standard plan as provided by the Board of First Fruits and that the degree of variation in form witnessed in the later churches, those built after 1818, was due to the input and

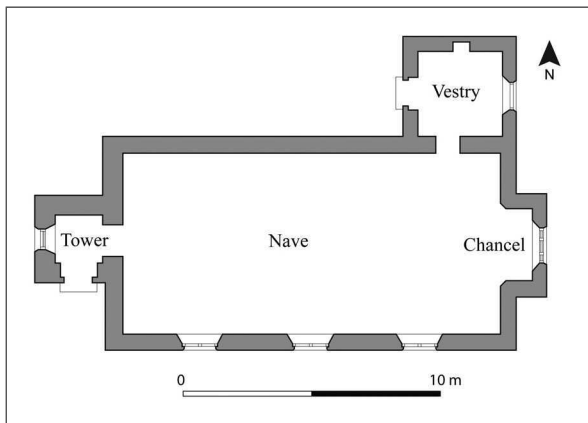


Fig. 7. Ground plan of Lislee church as originally constructed

possibly the personal preferences of the permanent Board-appointed architect. It could also be argued that the change in direction regarding the form and layout of churches may have been encouraged by the Board itself. Local parishes may also have participated in the design process. The degree of input of each and all interested parties is difficult to determine. However, what can be established is that the surveyed churches built after 1818 mark a different approach to form. This departure signals a change in what was perceived to be a church to meet the requirements of an Anglican congregation.

The form of the two earlier churches, Timoleague and Kilmeen, suited the needs of a church where preaching was the imperative of worship. The aisleless rectangular nave was an ideal

form for an auditory hall where the pulpit was the focus of attention. At such churches a single structural unit was considered appropriate for all elements of Anglican worship – preaching and sacrament. The construction of chancels at the four later churches of Kilgariffe, Castleventry, Rathbarry and Lislee suggests a re-adjustment of attitudes on the nature

of worship. These chancels were shallow, the one at Lislee measuring less than 2m in depth, and were constructed exclusively to contain an altar, fixed or movable, according to the original drawn plans of the churches (RCBL MS 138). Though it must be stressed that the importance of preaching to the Anglican liturgy may not have diminished, all churches still retaining the aisleless hall core, the addition of a chancel as a distinct unit at the east end of these churches would have signified an added emphasis on a liturgical east-west orientation and, as a sanctuary, a relatively increased

reverence for the altar and associated sacrament.

The inclusions of vestries at the four later churches, not present on the earlier churches of Timoleague and Kilmeen, would indicate a new attitude towards the executive affairs of the Anglican Church. The vestry was a place for the hanging of vestments, the keeping of parish records and the holding of vestry meetings. The construction of vestries, as attached units to churches, would have signified an increased awareness of the need to define the administration of the parish as a distinct function of the church and yet, also to create a clear differentiation between a place for the temporal affairs of the church and the nave as a place exclusively for worship.

It is not as yet known to what degree funding levels may have had an effect on the form and layout of individual churches, but the impact of a contribution by Lord Carbery was evident in the erection of a north transept at Rathbarry, to contain the family's private pew. This transept was a direct result of the necessity to create a division of worship space based on social status. Though it is known that private pew boxes were paid for within the naves of certain churches up to the mid to late 19th century, the construction of a transept at Rathbarry was a substantial and tangible expression of partition from the main congregation contained within the nave. It is apparent that the maintenance of social division within worship space was most likely a contributing factor to the design of certain Board of First Fruits churches.

CONCLUSION

Based on the survey of churches within the study area near Clonakilty, a simplified and standardised portrayal of the form and layout of Board of First Fruits churches cannot be sustained. It has been established that factors such as changing attitudes to the liturgy and an increased emphasis on the temporal needs of

the church have impacted upon the designs of four of six Board of First Fruits churches in the selected study area. One of the churches had been constructed to accommodate the maintenance of social distinction amongst the congregation, thus indicating the effect of differential sources of funding on the design of churches. It must also be acknowledged that any degree of complexity in form may have been a consequence of the construction date as any degree of variation from the 'standard' form is apparent only in the four later churches, all built after 1818. However, what is most obvious is that to accept without question general assumptions on the simplicity of these churches tends to disguise a hitherto unknown and most interesting complexity in form that may provide numerous points of discussion on early 19th-century Anglican approaches to worship and church design in Ireland.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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RCBL, Dublin. Representative Church Body Library, MS 138, Six volumes of architectural drawings by James Pain (c.1779–1877) architect of the Board of First Fruits and, from 1833, of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners for the province of Cashel, of churches in the dioceses of Cashel and Emly; Cloyne, Cork and Ross; Killaloe and Kilfenora; Limerick and Ardfert; Waterford and Lismore. 1820s–1840s.