St Fachtnan, Kilfenora

Feature Sets (4)
• Exterior Features
• Interior Features
• Furnishings

Description
The building has a roofless chancel, with a triple window in the E gable. The sacristy, N of the chancel, is also roofless although the nave is still in use. The nave has traces of pointed arches suggesting the original presence of side aisles (Harbison, 1996). There is an internal staircase in the W gable, which may date partly from the early 13thc. building. The stepped gable with a short pyramidal tower is a later construction, incorporating reused Romanesque capitals at the corners. A number of stone crosses are situated in the chancel, graveyard and a field W of the church.

History
The church is said to have been founded by St Fachnan, possibly identifiable with St Fachtnan who founded the church of Ross Carbery (Cork) in the 6thc. The place name, derived from St Fionnabrach's Church or the Church of the White Meadow, is first mentioned in historical sources in 1055, when its stone church was burned (AI). A bishopric was established in 1152 at the synod of Kells (Gwynn and Hadcock, 1970, 83-84). The boundaries of the diocese corresponded with the territory of the Corcu Modruad, which may already have formed an administrative unit in ecclesiastical affairs (de Paor, 1955/56, 62). Little is known about the organisation of the diocese or the identity of the bishops in the 12thc. An unnamed bishop of Kilfenora did fealty to Henry II in 1172, and the 13thc. bishops are known only by their Christian name (Harbison, 1996). The see was united to Limerick in 1606-7, to Tuam in 1617-42, to Clonfert in 1742-52, and to Killaloe in 1752 (Swinfen).

Features
Exterior Features
Windows
E gable, triple window

[Images of windows and gables]
Between the windows are triple colonettes, coursed with the jambs. These have hollow chamfered bases, above a central conical support. The thicker central colonette has a hollow vertical groove along its length. Atop each colonette is a capital.

N capital: Square, set diagonally, multi-scalloped and sheathed, with ball mouldings between the cones. Impost as string course.

S capital: Square, set diagonally. Carved with busts of four robed figures, one on NW face, one on angle and two on SW face. Crocket-like upright stems terminating in ball mouldings occur on the NW face on either side of the figure and on the SW face next to the figure on the angle. Impost as N capital.

**Exterior**

Continuous keeled mouldings around each round-headed window. The keeled label continues over the three windows.

S label stop: small scallop capital.

N label stop: lost.

**Interior**

The three windows lie within a widely splayed round-headed opening framed by two coursed orders of mouldings.

First order: Keel moulding flanked by hollows and beaked mouldings, around reveals and sill. At the springing of the arch is a string course, consisting of a row of small upright leaves above a roll moulding. This spans the reveal and continues to the outer order of mouldings. In the arch the keel moulding with hollows continues without the flanking beaked mouldings, but with a chamfer on the outer side. On the N springer, two ball mouldings lie one above the other in the internal hollow.

Second order: Filleted roll moulding around reveals and sill. The label has a keel moulding. N label stop: Bird with outspread wings eating a cluster of berries which sprouts on a wavy stem from the end of the label. S label stop: Bird in profile eating a cluster of berries sprouting from the label (as on L label stop).

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**Exterior Decoration**

**String courses**

E gable

See III.2.(i) above.

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**Miscellaneous**

W tower, reused capitals on top of W corners
Two square multi-scallop, sheathed capitals with ball mouldings between the cones (similar to E window, N capital).

**Doorty Cross**

In graveyard, to W of cathedral. The cross was originally monolithic, with a tapered shaft, but is broken at two-thirds of the height of the shaft. The lower part of the shaft, formerly reused as a tombstone on the Doorty tomb, was discovered in 1946 and re-united in 1955 with the upper part of the cross, formerly lying in the chancel (Kaftanikoff, 1946, 33). Ringed cross with unpierced head. Shaft decorated on all four faces. Limestone.

**Dimensions**

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<td>w.</td>
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<td>w. of shaft</td>
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**E face**

In the centre of the shaft are two ecclesiastics wearing hooded robes, standing with arms linked, one holding a drop-headed crozier, the other a tau crozier. The base of croziers rest on a bird or winged beast, which stands on the heads of two human torsos. It is not clear whether the bottom figures were originally complete. On the upper section of the shaft and the
head is a standing bishop or abbot wearing a conical mitre, with right hand pointing downwards and holding a volute headed crozier in his left hand. Angels (or birds?) perch diagonally on his shoulders, in the arms of the cross. Incised lines imitate roll mouldings around the cross head.

N face
The lower part of the shaft is plain; the central section has a panel of irregular interlace ending in a snake head; at the top is a chequerboard pattern.

S face
The lower part of the shaft is plain, with a crudely carved bearded head near the bottom; above is a standing figure holding a book in the left hand; at the top of the shaft is a panel of interlaced snakes. The end of the cross arm is plain.

W face
At the bottom of the shaft is the shingled roof of a building (or shrine?), surmounted by a horse and rider, above which rises an elaborate pattern of Viking style interlace, incorporating figure-of-eight loops and snakes. On the upper section of the shaft (badly weathered) is a crucified Christ, with a bird in each hollow of the cross head. He appears to be wearing a long robe, but the lower part of the figure is damaged and only one leg is visible, with the foot in profile.

North Cross
In NW corner of graveyard. Head and shaft carved in one piece, with hollows in armpits and no ring. Plain shaft, not tapered. Limestone.

E face: Plain central boss. Groove outlines edges, forming flattened roll moulding around cross-head and ending in spirals at top of shaft.

W face: Only the head is decorated, with large square panels of interlace on the top and bottom arms, flanked by double spirals at the top of the shaft. The top arm has meander designs to R and below the interlace. The S and N arms and central area of the head are decorated with band of knotted interlace (Stafford knots).

Dimensions

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South cross

In graveyard S of nave, near S door of cathedral; re-erected near where it was found in 1954. Lower section of tapered cross shaft, broken at the top. Decorated on the upper part of the broad faces, with roll mouldings at the angles, curling into spirals at the bottom of each face. Limestone.

E face: Two horizontal panels of interlace at the top; plain below.

W face: Two circular panels of interlace at top; plain below.

Dimensions

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West Cross

In a field approx. 200 m to W of cathedral. Tall cross with a shaft tapering towards the top and an open ringed head, with Greek cross arms and half-circles inside the ring. Roll mouldings around edges. Carved from a single slab of limestone.

Dimensions

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**E face**

**Shaft:** Raised triangular panel at the base, from the point of which rise two rope mouldings to support and frame Christ's foot-rest, formed by an inverted triangle enclosing a knot of interlace. The upper section of the shaft is decorated with panels of geometric ornament, interlace and fretwork in shallow relief. The designs differ on each side of the rope mouldings.

**Head:** Crucified Christ in long robe, with a square panel hanging from his neck on crossed straps (a satchel or reliquary?). The arms of the cross are decorated with interlace below Christ's arms, and with meander above; on the top arm is a beast in profile, with its tail weaving through its legs and terminating in its mouth.

**N face**

Plain, with interlace on the end of the cross arm.

**S face**

Plain.

**W face**

**Shaft:** inverted triangle with triquetra knot at base of shaft, with plain surfaces around it. Upper part of shaft decorated with three panels of low-relief decoration; from bottom to top - interlocking pelta, circular knotwork, and rectangular interlaced knotwork. This is framed with a groove forming a roll moulding at the angles and top of the shaft.

**Head:** A circle of geometric ornament in the centre, surrounded by a cable moulding; interlace in arms, also surrounded by cable moulding. On the upper s. section of ring is pelta ornament, and interlace on the other sections.

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**Interior Features**

**Interior Decoration**

**Miscellaneous**

**Cross fragment in chancel, re-set**

Fragment of shaft, broken at top and bottom, and tapering towards the top - reset in concrete. Decorated on two broad faces. Limestone.

**E face:** Upper part has small interlaced designs in a grid of four square panels; below are two large circular interlace patterns. Roll mouldings on the angle.

**W face:** Six large circles of interlace (similar to lower section of E face) in a grid of diamond-shaped panels. The bottom S circle is partly missing. At the top is a segment of a circle of interlace, possibly part of the decoration of the ring (Harbison, 1992, 116).

**Dimensions**

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**Fragment**
Another smaller fragment formerly in the chancel, now lost, may have formed part of the same cross (de Paor, 1955/6, 59; Harbison, 1992, 116 #138).

Furnishings
Fonts

SW corner of nave, against S wall. Square bowl with central drain hole. Multi-scallop on front and sides; rear plain. Original supports lost, now resting on four crude square piers.

Dimensions

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Other

Sedilia, S side of chancel

Niche with two unmoulded pointed arches and a central colonnette with a chamfered capital.

Comments/Opinions

The original structure of the nave and chancel appears to date from the early 13thc. The scalloped capitals and font could date from the late 12th or early 13thc., but the design of the E window clearly belongs to the 'School of the West' which flourished in the first third of the 13thc. (Leask, 1966, 54).

The presence of six or seven high crosses is the largest known number from any site in Ireland and implies that Kilfenora was the centre of a major workshop in the production of stone crosses. The limited use of figurative scenes, consisting principally of the crucified Christ and a standing ecclesiastic, is characteristic of other Irish high crosses of the 11th and 12thc. (Cashel, Dysert O'Dea, Glendalough, Roscrea, Tuam). The use of local limestone and the limited repertoire of geometric ornament, fretwork and interlace patterns is related to a group of crosses in Clare and Aran which have been dated to the late 11th and first half of the 12thc. and appear to be the product of a single workshop (de Paor, 1955/6; Cronin, 1998). The zoomorphic interlace on the Doorty cross, with Ringerike and Irish Urnes elements, is related to that on the Killeany cross (Inishmore, Galway) which is generally dated late 11th or early 12thc. and considered to be an early product of the workshop. The cross of Cathasach at Inishcaaltra has an inscription suggesting a late 11th or early 12thc. date. The Kilfenora crosses also share some features with the cross shaft in Tuam cathedral, dated by inscription to 1126-52. The erection of a series of high crosses at Kilfenora in the late 11th and early 12thc. was probably connected with the Church reform movement, although it appears to have pre-dated the establishment of a diocese at Kilfenora.

The iconography of the Doorty cross is difficult to interpret. Three different types of crozier are depicted; the drop-headed form is commonly found in Irish reliquary croziers, but only one Irish Tau crozier has survived (from Co. Kilkenny, now in Dublin, NMI). Both Tau and drop-headed croziers are depicted on the base of the Dysert O'Dea cross, and there are images of Tau croziers at Killinaboy (Clare) (one is now in Corofin Heritage Centre). Harbison (2000) has suggested a reference to a hypothetical crozier reliquary. Spiral or volute croziers appear on other late Irish high crosses (including nearby Dysert O'Dea) and may be connected with the 12thc. reform movement and the idea of episcopal authority. The image of clerics ramming a bird with a crozier is similar to a scene on the cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice, possibly representing St.
Paul and St Anthony (Harbison, 1981). The horseman and gabled roof also occur on Muiredach's cross, and may represent an Apocalyptic image (de Paor, 1955/6; Cronin, 1998). (Most descriptions of the Doorty cross have interpreted the image below the two ecclesiastics on the E face as a bird; however, Harbison (1992) recently interpreted it as a winged beast).

O'Farrell (1984) suggested that the unworked gable-like feature on the cross-shaft of the W cross may have been concealed by a stone house-shaped reliquary. He suggests that the shingled roof depicted at the base of the W face of the Doorty cross may be another reference to a house-shaped shrine.

Another small cross fragment (found in the graveyard in 1955 and formerly displayed in the cathedral chancel, but now lost) was decorated with a panel of fretwork and probably interlace (de Paor, 1955-6, 59; Harbison, 1992, 116, #138). It could have come from the same cross as the larger fragment in the chancel.

A further cross from Kilfenora was moved in the 18thc. to Clarisford and in 1820 to Killaloe, where it is displayed in the cathedral.

Bibliography


de Paor, L., 'The Limestone Crosses of Clare and Aran' JGAHS, 26, (1955/6), 53-71.


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P. Harbison, 'An Ancient Pilgrimage 'Relic-Road' in North Clare?' The Other Clare, 24 (2000), 55-59.


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Sacristy, E wall, windows.

**Location**

**Site Location**

Kilfenora

**National Grid Reference**
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