

# The 18th century Penal Chapel in Ballinora



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# Introduction

A genuine and deep oral tradition has long prevailed in the townland of Ballinora regarding the site of a penal chapel in the locality. The oral tradition on this subject transcended through the generations, especially in the memory of one particular family, on whose farm the chapel was believed to be located. Oral and written tradition do not always make comfortable historical alliances and the former can often be delegated a subservient role in local history.

This article will seek to examine the two traditions in an effort to sift through the various threads of evidence, written and oral, and arrive at a likely site or this chapel.

In pre-Reformation times, three churches and an Augustinian nunnery flourished in the area, encompassing the present Ballincollig and Ballinora parishes viz. Corbally, Kilnaglory, Inniskenny and Ballymacadane respectively.

The Reformation utterly changed the religious landscape, deeming it incumbent upon the priests to adopt a wide range of peripatetic ministries which helped it to adapt to the changed circumstances. This also entailed the creation of a new parish structure and the building of new churches in difficult and hostile times, which culminated in the implementation of the infamous penal laws (1691 to 1760).

# Penal laws

The 18th century persecutions and the varying periods of severity of the penal laws present a much more sombre picture of an outlawed church. The opening in 1808 of the parish chapel in the village of Ballincollig is perhaps the first documented evidence of a public place of Catholic worship in the Ballincollig and Ballinora area since the penal laws were enacted in 1691. By the mid 18th century, the laws had outlived their effectiveness and failed in their primary objective, the eradication of the Catholic religion; nevertheless they hung suspended like the sword of Damocles over the heads of the Catholic clergy, who were thus reminded that they must tread warily.<sup>1</sup>

Little written evidence was preserved on the state of Catholicism in the local area during the 18th century. The implementation and intensity with which the various segments of the penal laws were applied is not known, but in general, the local magistrates were not anxious to stir up trouble in their own localities. There was a deep seated fear during the 18th century of arousing the ire of ‘the mob’; Catholics being the majority of the population in the greater part of the country.<sup>2</sup>

Catholics in the 18th century found that the ecclesiastical landscape had utterly changed in post-Reformation times. The old churches and graveyards were taken for Protestant use, leaving the adherents of the Catholic faith bereft of the parish network of church, graveyard, glebe land and rectories for their priests. The Catholic Church became an “outcast, rootless church without material resources”.<sup>3</sup>

The infamous penal laws had darkened the religious divide and forced the people to hear mass in remote places far from the prying eyes of the authorities. Due to the harassed conditions of the clergy little written documentation of local church history is available for this century.

We have occasional lists of priest's appointment but little written evidence of the location of any public place of worship. We are dependent for information on an important state report.

## Parish Structure and History

Ballincollig was created as a new parish during the episcopate of Richard Walsh (1748-1763) under The Roman Decrees - which recommended the creation of new parishes to which suitable assistant priests should be appointed.

Prior to 1742, Ballincollig was one of a union of ancient medieval parishes which included Carrigrohane, Kilnaglory, Inniskenny and Ballinaboy, all of whom formed the parochial union of Ballincollig.

It did not become a formal parish until 1817 when it formed a union with Ballinora, which lasted until 1986.<sup>4</sup>

Denis Denis Dawley (c.1749 to 1766) was the first parish priest appointed to the new parish of Ballincollig (Inniskenny). The name 'Dawley' is most likely a phonetic rendition of the Irish version 'Ó Dálaigh' (Daly).<sup>5</sup>

The Parish of Ballinora was approved by Bishop Michael Murphy and founded at midnight 1 September 1986; it comprised of thirteen townlands formerly in Ballincollig. Prior to this, it was united in union with Ballincollig as noted above.<sup>6</sup>

# The state of Popery in the Ballincollig area

This report, relevant to our neighbouring parishes, viz. "The State of Popery in the Dioceses of Cork, Cloyne and Ross" provides us with some information on local Catholic parochial activity. A committee the Irish House of Lords drew up this report on 6th November 1731 and it was directed to county High Sheriffs and Chief Magistrates of towns. Their findings were then submitted to the Public Records Office Dublin. Ultimately it fell to the local magistrate or rector in country parishes to furnish the details as required. The report contains some interesting comments such as this intemperate outburst from the Protestant Bishop Henry Maule of Cloyne in December 1731:

'The strolling vagabond friars from the abbey of Kilcrea near Cork creep into the houses of the weak and ignorant people, they confirm Papists in their superstition and errors; they marry Protestant to Papist contrary to the law and they haunt the sickbeds, even of the Protestant and they endeavour to pervert them from our holy religion'

The following are some of the more orderly reports relating to our district:

**Aglish:** one popish school, no mass house, one popish priest who also serves the parish of Desertmore and Ovens. The popish inhabitants in these several parishes are very numerous.

**Carrigrohane (Ballincollig):** no popish priest nor friar resident.

**Inniskenny (Ballincollig):** Denis Dawley a popish priest; no chapel in parish.

**Kilnaglory (Ballincollig):** According to the order directed to me, I have made the best inquiry I was able in the particulars contained in it and my return stands as follows:

"Fa. Kirby, one popish priest, one public place of mass, one popish school and master". Report signed by John Kenny rector.<sup>7</sup>



Mass rock at Ballyhegarty Ballinora: mass was celebrated on this rock during penal times.

# Further report 1766

A further report of 1766 for Kilnaglory contains copies of documents, relating to the earlier report of 1731, hitherto unpublished and preserved in the Bermingham Tower, Dublin Castle.

It states that there are two old mass houses, two priests and several itinerant priests, one popish chapel and one popish school. The mass houses date from the reign of William III (1688-1702). The reports do not give any details on location of mass houses or school, or the Christian name of Fr. Kirby.

There is, however, a monument on the south wall of Kilmurry church dedicated to a Rev. Nicholas Kirby who died on February 1770, aged 67 years. The dates would indicate that Fr. Kirby was twenty seven years of age in 1731. Nicholas Kirby, parish priest of Kilbrogan, 1725 to 1728, was one of the appointments made during the episcopate of Bishop Donough McCarthy (1712 to 1726). This evidence would suggest that Nicholas Kirby ministered at Kilnaglory in 1731, having been transferred from Kilbrogan and moved to Kilmurry later, where he died in 1770.<sup>8</sup>

**Carrigrohanebeg (Inniscarra Parish):** No priest mentioned.

**Kilmorragh (Kilmurry):** One mass house built in the first year of the reign of King George 1 (1714 to 1727) with a spacious yard to it and enclosed with trees. It is said they have met on solemn occasions every two or three years. Many priests in a body sometimes seven and sometimes more than twenty. Rev. John Fryer, Licensed Curate.

**Macroom:** ‘Reputed popish priests resident in the parish of Macrompe: Denis Dawley, Paul McKenna’. The willingness of priests to adopt a peripatetic (travelling) role in the preservation of the old faith is illustrated by the example of Denis Dawley who is also listed as the popish priest of Inniskenny, moving between Macroom and Inniskenny without the comfort of either a permanent church or presbytery and depending on the generosity of the people to provide him with food and lodging.

# Location of the penal chapel



Location of the chapel during penal times



Boithrin an tSeipeil looking north

It is interesting to note that in the parish of Kilnaglory, the rector discovered, or was most likely, informed of the whereabouts of a public place or places where mass was being celebrated. But he does not elaborate as to the exact location of the sites or that of the popish school. However, schools were often set up in or besides Catholic chapels under the supervision of the local clergy.

This report appears to be the only documentary evidence, albeit from a government source, of the presence of a chapel or some form of mass house or houses in the parish area.

The rector at Inniskenny reported no chapel in his parish area, nor is there any mention of a chapel or mass house in the townland of Ballincollig.

We can safely assume that some type of mass house existed south of the village, this being a rural area, remote from any government agency of information. In earlier times mass was also celebrated in the houses of the locality, as the occasion demanded, and indeed that legacy of penal times is still a feature of Ballincollig and Ballinora church life, in the form of The Stations'

## **Boithrin an tSeipeil**

An old place name in the townland of Ballinora is still known by the original Irish form "Boithrin an tSeipeil (Chapel Lane), or Boithrin Seipeil as it is known locally. This name strongly suggests the location of a chapel or mass house in the vicinity.

Boithrin Seipeil is a steep hill running south to Ballinora, located half way between Maglin Bridge and Curaheen. The place name would have its origin in a century when the Irish language was the vernacular of the country people and the presence of some type of mass house would have been assimilated into local usage as a place name, which has remained unchanged to the present day.

The matter of place names is crucial in our quest for the site of a penal chapel. Taking a similar example from Griffith's valuation of Ballincollig of 1853, we learn that Chapel Road and Chapel Lane are indicated as two village addresses. They have since been changed to the present 'Station Road' and 'The Square' respectively. It indicates that the village chapel was recognised as a prominent landmark and both the addresses were named in relation to it. Similarly Boithrin Seipeil indicates the presence of a chapel in the immediate vicinity of this country lane.

1721 is the date attributed to this chapel which occurred during the episcopate of Bishop Donough McCarthy (1712 to 1726) and it served parishioners of Kilnaglory until the church of St. James, Ballinora, was built further to the south of this penal chapel in 1831.

## Influences on location

The period 1697 to 1747 is generally accepted by historians as the period which sporadically saw the most rigorous application of the penal laws. Catholics were suffering particularly harsh treatment after the accession of George II in 1727 and churches were often closed by proclamation in the years from 1708 to 1744.<sup>9</sup>

This chapel was built, notwithstanding the ferocity of the time, and we can surmise that local circumstances bore some influence in allowing the building to proceed.

The most comprehensive array of anti-Catholic legislation was on the statute book by the 1720s that provided magistrates and corporations with abundant ammunition to punish assertive Catholic clergy from engaging in any public activity, but the magistrate (often the local rector) interfered very little except when a particular priest courted trouble by securing conversions or preaching publicly'.<sup>10</sup>

In general, the penal chapel was rarely located at the ancient parish holy sites. Usually it would be built on a new site, with no previous church connections. The ideal site would be a location at a cross roads to facilitate access by parishioners. In most cases the chapel would be built on the land of a prominent catholic farmer with consent forthcoming from the local landlord.

A hostile landlord would have ensured that the chapel site was removed to the most remote part of the parish. We can surmise that local land ownership was conducive to the toleration afforded to Catholics, and indeed according to 18th century newspaper sources, Protestants were invariably generous in their contributions to erections of chapels.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, as late as 1774, legislation demanded that priests must not assume ecclesiastical rank or title, nor appear in ecclesiastical dress outside the place of worship, which was not to have bell or steeple. The old chapel on Station Road, Ballincollig possesses neither bell nor steeple, which indicates that even in 1808, the year of opening, remnants of the old penal law still influenced church authorities. The clergy dressed the same as the laity and it was only at the end of the century that priests began to dress in black.<sup>12</sup>

# Penal chapels

Documentary evidence (the 1731 state of property report) proves that a mass house or houses or place of worship existed in Kilnaglory parish prior to 1730. Thus we can distinguish several distinct phases in the growth of places of Catholic worship in the Ballincollig and Ballinora area.

Penal chapels can be divided into a number of stages:

## The Open Air Phase

This occurred mainly in the 17th century, when mass was held in remote areas and a suitable rock or large stone acted as an altar.

The open air phase of the 17th century is documented in our area with two sites proposed as a location for a mass rock.

- (A) The townland of Ballinora - Sources Liam O'Callaghan, Ballinora and Terry Radley, Ballinora. The Bridge Field in Lynch's farm in Inniskenny. A large tree is said to mark the spot
- (B) The townland of Ballinvelting - source proposed by George D. Kelleher, Iniscarra<sup>13</sup>

## The Mass House

By 1731 the country was well served with rudimentary chapels or mass houses in the second phase of Catholic public worship. The mass house was usually a small, mud-walled, thatched structure with a clay floor; it contained no internal decorations. They were sometimes open at the end of the structure.

The second phase of public place of worship saw rudimentary mass houses or indeed private houses in the late 17th century and early part of the 18th century in Kilnaglory parish. Diocesan records indicate that the first mass house adjacent to the village of Ballincollig was located on the left hand side of the Carriganarra road near Clash Cross in the post-penal phase 18th century (the latter half of the century) to facilitate the Catholics of Carrigrohane.

Oral tradition indicates that it was a small thatched structure, unlike the solid stone building at Boithrin Seipeil, which might account for the lack of any tangible evidence recovered at the Clash Cross site. Two agricultural labourer's cottages were subsequently built by the neighbouring Catholic farmer (Richardson) at this location.

The Richardson family were deep rooted in Ballincollig and the 1829 Tithe Appplotment records for Carrigrohane show that George Richardson farmed 44 acres in the area.

This mass house served the parishioners of Carrigrohane until the Ballincollig village chapel was built in 1808.

## Barn Chapel

The early 18th century (1703-1745) saw a change in the design structures. The barn chapels were built by local craftsmen, mostly without any architectural qualifications. Exceptions to this were rule were Bandon chapel designed in 1796 by a Mr. Shanahan and our neighbouring parish of Ovens where Tim Riordan was the contract architect in the building of Ovens church in 1832.<sup>14</sup>

Rev Wm. O'Brien RR Athnowen thanks John Hawkes esq. Sirmount for the large chapel and yard near Ovens Bridge.

A donation of £20 was received from Lord Carbery.<sup>15</sup>

The Barn Chapel was bigger than the old mass house and normally built of stone or rubble with a slated roof.

They had a flagged or tiled floor and a gallery, to cater for a larger congregation. As with the mass house, they were devoid of internal decoration or pews. Perhaps a wooden cross stuck in the ground to indicate its purpose without attracting attention. The Barn Chapel stage saw the building of the stone chapel in Boithrin Seipeil with 1721 suggested as a likely date.

## The post-Penal Chapel

The modern chapel evolved from the Bam structure and were most prevalent in the period 1800-1840. These chapels adopted the cmciformplan. They were still sparing in internal decoration with the exception of the altar area.<sup>16</sup>

Local models of this design include Ovens 1796, replaced 1831; Ballincollig 1808; Ballinora 1831. This chapel was the highly visible building, without belfry or steeple, on Chapel Road, Ballincollig built in 1808. St. James in Ballinora (1831) was the first church built in Ballinora inpost-Emancipation times.

The culmination of this epoch of church building was the erection of St. Mary & St. John, Ballincollig in 1865.

# Ballinora penal chapel

The Ballinora penal chapel would fall into the barn chapel type most likely built by local craftsmen; it would be bigger in size than the mass house and comprising a slated roof and stone or rubble structure.

The floor would normally be covered with flagged or tilled stone and there would be a gallery to allow for more accommodation. It would be devoid of decoration or kneeling pews. Some chapels may have the Stations of the Cross and a holy water font.

The priest's house would normally be located close to the chapel. The dimensions of the normal chapel varied but generally they were 50 to 60 feet in length and 20 to 30 feet in width.<sup>17</sup>

## Priests

**We know the names of the priests who served the people in this era, so we can assume that they ministered from this farmyard close to their chapel. They were:**

- **Nicholas Kirby 1731**
- **Denis Dawley ( 6 Dalaigh) 1749-1766)**
- **James M McMahon (1778-1779)**
- **John Kelly (1780-1804)**

**The Hibernian Magazine (1804) recorded the death of the latter: 'died suddenly Rev. John O'Kelly PP. Ballynora Cork'.**

**Denis Dawley is mentioned in the 1731 'state of popery' report as the popish priest of Inniskenny (Ballincollig).**

# The oral tradition

Whether Ballinora chapel aspired to some or all of the above criteria is not known as they were many variables throughout the country with no standard dimension in size or accommodation. However, it has some common features consistent with penal chapels of that era. These include location (adjacent to crossroads), east-west orientation, located on catholic farmer's holding and residence of priest or school house nearby. In our case study the priests lived in a house in Horgan's farmyard and a stable in the farmyard provided accommodation for the priest's horse.<sup>18</sup>

According to oral tradition, prevalent among the older generation of Ballinora people, the site of the penal chapel was located at the top of Boithrin Seipeil where O'Mahony's (Horgan's) farmhouse now stands. 'The Horgan family connection with Ballinora can be traced back to the mid 1800's when Daniel Horgan moved to the area from Castlewhite. By the time of the 1901 census Daniel's land had been divided between two of his sons, Cornelius, who is listed as resident at house number 9 and Jeremiah, who is listed as resident at house number 10. Interestingly the two brothers married two sisters, Hannah and Kate Forrester from the neighbouring townland of Kilnaglory. While the farm owned by Cornelius is still owned and farmed by his direct descendants, Jeremiah's land was subsequently sold'.<sup>19</sup>

The oral tradition relating to the location of a penal chapel is buttressed by the genuine family folklore tradition of the Horgan family. The oral tradition handed down through the generations related that a penal chapel was built in the farmyard close to the cross roads. Furthermore the present dwelling house, built in 1967, lies on the site of this old chapel. An orchard was located on the site, prior to its construction.<sup>20</sup> The main farm house, no longer standing, was located to the north of the present house.<sup>21</sup>

Pursuing this evidence further we learn that the ground rent continued to be paid to trustees of the Hassett estate in England.

Griffith Valuation 1852 shows Patrick Hassett as the leasor of various tracts of land in Ballinora. The occupants (tenant farmers) included Denis Bradley 87 acres, Mary Connell 78 acres and 130 acres held in fee by Tim Sheehan and Denis Murphy.

Mrs. Mary O'Mahony (nee Horgan) remembers her mother telling her the story of the chapel that she heard from the older generation. Her mother also heard the tradition of an old cemetery lying to the east of the chapel. The entrance to the cemetery lay down a small lane near Twomey's cottage.

During the laying of foundations for the present dwelling house in 1967, a large flagstone with some smaller portions was unearthed, some form of inscription may have been written on it. Unfortunately, they were not preserved but were laid in the foundation trench along with some smaller pieces of similar stone. Lack of archaeological evidence, which the flagstone would have provided, does not alter the weight of written and oral evidence. The conjecture is that these flag stones may have formed part of the chapel porch.

Another oral anecdote from the era, as recalled by Mary O'Mahony, was the operation of a quern stone in the porch of the chapel which was used by neighbouring farmers to grind their sustenance of corn. The chapel would be the normal meeting place for this communal custom. This item of folk lore is given credibility by the documentary evidence of a Catholic chapel in Monasterevan, Co. Kildare (1729-1788). This chapel was used between Sundays by the local farmers as a threshing floor.<sup>22</sup>

However there is another interesting facet to the relevance of place names. Michael O'Connor, local historian, of Ballinora remembers his grandfather, Paddy O'Callaghan, referring to a stretch of land lying across the brow of the hill to the east of Horgan's cross on Hobb's land, as 'ar n-anam or ar n-anama' (our soul(s)). The pronunciation, which he heard from the older generation, poses an intriguing question as to the existence of such a name of overtly religious association placed in close proximity to a penal chapel and indeed to the reputed site of an old cemetery.



Part of the wall of the original  
farmhouse



The 1811 grand jury map of the  
county of Cork

The 1811 grand jury map of the county of Cork provides conclusive evidence that a penal chapel existed at the right hand side of Boithrin Seipeil leading south, before Horgan's cross. A circle marks the location of the chapel indicated by the letters 'CHA'.

# Conclusion

The likely site of the Boithrin Seipeil penal chapel remains part of the hidden church history of the 18th century in our area. No external sign indicates the location of this chapel. There is no written reference in church records to consolidate the oral history, neither relic nor artefact exists to record its existence or disappearance. We have no documentary evidence to commemorate its service to the people of Ballinora, yet it served them for nigh on a century until its closure in 1831, at which stage the ‘new neat church’ of St. James stood ready to continue ministering to a people recently emancipated from dark times.

## Thanks

I wish to record my appreciation to Mrs. Mary O’Mahony, son John and his wife, Eleanor, for their hospitality, generosity and cooperation in the writing of this article. They were, at all times, willing to share family memories and documents. I can only hope that this article will provide them with some satisfaction that the site of the penal chapel on their land will have passed from the realm of folk lore to an established fact and some appropriate plaque will mark the site for future generations.

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The 18th Century Penal Chapel  
in Ballinora (09.2021)



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