



An introduction to the history of Kilfenora – From the beginning

The village of Kilfenora is situated in a parish of the same name and in the barony of Corcomroe. The name Kilfenora “is thought to be in Irish *Cill Fhionnúrach*, meaning ‘Church of the White brow’, though ‘Church of the Fertile hillside’, *Cill Fionnabrach*, has also been suggested. This may relate to its situation at the foot of the....Burren....the limestone region of North Clare.” (R. Power, *Kilfenora: a guide for pilgrims*) The name also appears in various other forms such as Cathair Fhionnabhrach in the Book of Rights (450-902) Fenabor in 1189 and Fenaborens in 1302.

Kilfenora has a deep-rooted history with a number of important phases which left their mark on the landscape that has survived up to the present day. Its surrounding landscape of the Burren has over 2,700 recorded monuments. This has led to the Burren being described as “one vast memorial to bygone cultures.” (The Burren. Naturally Yours)

- **Neolithic Period (4000-2400BC)**

The Neolithic period is associated with the introduction of farming to Ireland. The people of this time built magnificent monuments to their dead. The Burren has a dense concentration of Megalithic tombs including a type known as a Portal Dolmen. One of the finest examples in the country of a Portal Dolmen, the table-like megalithic tomb, is found six miles North East of Kilfenora. It is the famous Portal Dolmen of Poul nabrone (Poll na Bron) where excavations revealed the remains of 33 people were buried here with associated artefacts.





Not far from this the 22 carat Gleeninsheen collar of gold was found in 1932. It is housed in the National Museum in Dublin but a replica can be seen in the Burren Centre. It has been voted one of the 100 objects of Ireland. “The Gleninsheen gorget is a technical and artistic achievement at the apex of goldworking in the Europe of its time.This kind of work can only have come from a highly evolved society with a population dense enough to support specialist artists, sufficiently settled to develop its own sophisticated traditions.” (<http://www.100objects.ie/portfolio-items/glenisheen-gorget>)



<http://www.100objects.ie/portfolio-items/glenisheen-gorget>

- **Bronze Age**

The discovery of the metal alloy bronze and the skill to make tools, weapons and ornaments brought new development in society and wealth. This development is also seen in the magnificent megalithic tombs they created including the Wedge shaped tomb. There is evidence of the remains of a wedge tomb in Caherminnane near Ballykinvarga.

- **Iron Age**

The Iron Age is associated with the Celts who arrived in Ireland about 500B.C. They had better weapons and tools and spoke a language that was to become the basis of Gaelic. Their society was hierarchical with a chieftain/king or Ri who governed a people or Tuath. The Celts worshipped pagan gods and recognised the changing seasons.



The settlement form associated with Celtic society is the ring fort. Ring forts were built as farmsteads, defensive structures to protect the inhabitants from invaders, raiders from neighbouring tribes and wild animals. Other sites, such as hill forts, were ceremonial centres. The settlements of the Iron Age are evident in the townland names with Dun, Caher, Lios, Rath or Doon. Most ring forts are earthen but in the Burren there is a profusion of stone forts known as cashels. Examples in the Kilfenora area include the following:

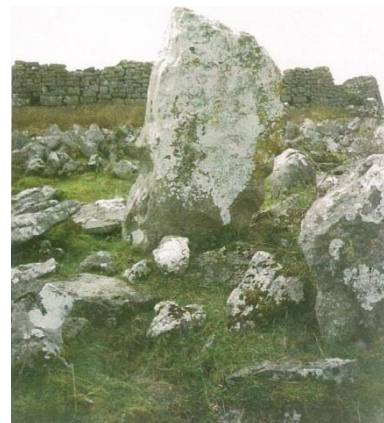
- **Doon Fort**

Situated on a hill south west of Kilfenora, Doon Hill Fort has a strategic position situated 450 feet above sea level. It is of pear shaped plan surrounded by a fosse cut into the shale. To the east there is a flight of steps cut into the shale. "The entire circuit of the rampart is about 970 feet". "Much ruined today, whoever held it in the past would have possessed a decisive strategic advantage over an enemy" (A ramblers guide and Map) it measures 300 feet across and rising 12 feet in height.



- **Ballykinvarga (Cathair bhaile cinn Mhargaidh-fort of the chief market)**

The Ballykinvarga Fort, one mile east of Kilfenora has a similar in structure to Dun Aengus Fort on Inishmore on the Aran Islands, both having a distinctive 'chevaux de Frise', a circle of upright stones encircling the fort to impede access. This arrangement of slabs of stones of different size and length standing on end are set into the ground in a complete circle around the fort and about 29 yards in depth. Some of the slabs are up to 5 feet in length.





It is constructed of large blocks averaging 3-5 feet long, its walls at their highest measure 15 feet and measures 135 feet by 155 feet. The gate is in the southeast part of the wall and from it a sunken passage leads through the Chevaux de Frise. The whole complex can be dated to the early Iron Age c.200BC. It was probably a ceremonial site. It is possibly the Cathair Fhionnabhrach, reserved to the King of Cashel in in the Book of Rights. Two coins that were discovered here are on display at the Burren Centre.

- **Cahercommaun**

The Burren Display Centre has a model of the Cathair Comain Fort as it would have looked with its early inhabitants. After excavations in the 1930s it was concluded that it would be home to an extended family of up to forty people.

(<http://www.burrenforts.ie/main/burren/cahercommaun>)



<http://www.burrenforts.ie/main/burren/Cahercommaun>

<http://www.theburrencentre.ie/the-centre/exhibition.html>

- **Tullagha Fort**

A large earthen ring fort on the road to Corofin, is 220 feet over all and is a mass of beautiful green sward, rising 15 feet over its fosse which is 6 feet deep and 15 feet wide with no outer ring.





- **Cist and Pitt Grave**

This sees a move away from the communal burial associated with the prehistoric era to individual inhumations. With this type of burial a burial pith is lined with stones and a body placed usually in a crouching position with associated funerary artefacts. An example of this type of Iron Age burial, was found in a field in Ballykeal near Kilfenora. It was accidentally discovered in 1988 when a flat stone was unearthed, thus revealing a skeleton. The remains were of an adult male aged between 25-35 years. The skeleton lay with its head to the west and the feet to the east. It had a full set of teeth with an unusual pattern of abrasion. It was excavated by officers of the Office of Public Works and the radio-carbon date for the skeleton contents was given as approximately 400 A.D. (http://heritagecouncil.ie/unpublished_excavations/section9.html)

The present village of Kilfenora evolved from the monastic site founded by Saint Fachtna in 560. (other versions of the saint's name include Fachnan, Finnabrach, Fechin) His feast day August 14th was observed in Kilfenora which would suggest that he was patron of this parish. It is presently celebrated in Kilfenora on 20th December. People pray for his intercession as it is associated with a cure for eyes.

Many early monastic sites attracted large populations. They served as farms, hospitals, schools, places of pilgrimage as well as religious centres. There is no tradition of towns in Ireland before the arrival of the Anglo-Normans. The native Irish lived in dispersed rural settlements such as the many raths or cashels found in the Burren. Many monasteries attracted settlement and became very wealthy and powerful. There is little knowledge of the early church at Kilfenora. The first record of it is in 1055 when the grandson of Brian Boru burned the Cathedral. Brian Boru was king of Munster and High King of Ireland, one of the most influential positions in the country. He was based in Co. Clare and controlled many strategic locations such as the city of Limerick. He placed levies or tributes on his tribes, hence his name in Irish is translated Brian of the Tributes. In 1002 these levies were placing the people of Kilfenora under financial pressure. These tributes were mainly paid in cattle. Cattle were used as currency during this time period and were seen as symbols of wealth.



Irish folklore is full of stories of cattle raids such as An Tain Bo Cuailgne. The early annals record many cattle raids such as the raid of Corcomroe in 570.

According to the Annals in 1055 the Cathedral of Kilfenora was burned and 100 killed by Murrough O'Brien, grandson of Brian Boru. In 1056 renovation of the Cathedral commenced and in 1058 the renovation of the Cathedral was complete and it was considered one of the finest in Ireland. Monasteries could become very wealthy and so were often the target for attack and plundering by local Irish. The record of the death in 1128 of the Confessor would suggest that the Cathedral and its associated monastery was fully functioning at the time. The confessor or in Irish 'Anam Chara', soul friend would be a confessor and advisor to the monks and so would be of great importance to the monastery.

The monastic model of the Irish Christian Church remained until the reforming synods of Rath Bressail in 1111 and Kells-Mellifont in 1152. In 1111 the Synod of Rathbreasail established the diocesan structure; however, Kilfenora was ignored at this time. In 1152 the Synod of Kells redefined the diocesan structure and at this stage Kilfenora achieved diocesan status. It is thought that the building of the Cathedral and the high crosses being carved and erected in the vicinity helped with this success. Kilfenora was then listed as one of the thirteen dioceses in the Province of Cashel.

The present Diocese of Kilfenora covers the original tribal lands of the Corcu Modruad. These lands were divided into two Baronies, the Barony of the Burren and the Barony of Corcomroe. The district of Corcomroe had been divided into two parts between the rival chiefs, O'Connor and O'Loughlen. The Eastern division obtained the name of Burren and was under the O'Loughlens. O'Loughlen retained all his portion of until the time of Cromwell. The remainder of the district was under O'Connor.

The Protestant Diocese of Kilfenora, or Fenabore is confined to the Baronies of Corcomroe and Burren and is one of the smallest dioceses as it covers only twenty-three statute miles by eleven. The Protestant Diocese of Kilfenora was united to that of Clonfert in 1741, and subsequently to Killaloe in 1752 and is united now with the Diocese of Limerick.



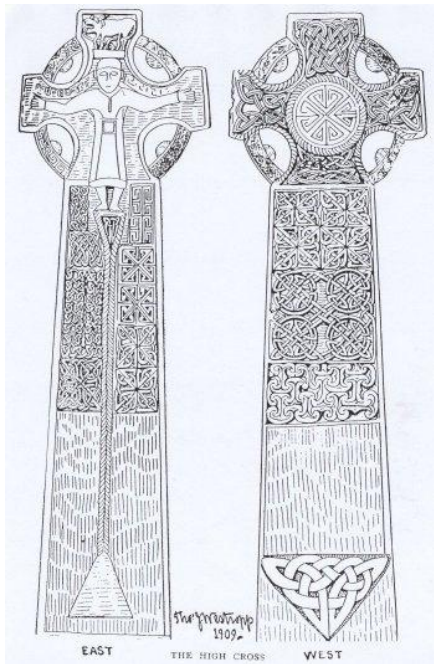
Kilfenora, is known as “The City of Crosses”. It would be considered a city as it has a cathedral. In ancient times Brehon laws recognized boundary marks of upright blocks of stone. In monastic establishments the inner enclosures known as Termon lands were marked by Christian crosses. The crosses associated with Kilfenora are from the twelfth century and differ from earlier High Crosses found in Ireland that date from the eighth to tenth centuries. The carvings have large figures, often the effigy of the local bishop or founder saint, in high relief. Some accounts claim that the high crosses may have been carved at about the same time as the cathedral was being built and to mark Kilfenora's independence as a diocese. Seven stone crosses of which six survive are associated with Kilfenora (See side chapel for details on the High Crosses). The seven crosses associated with Kilfenora appear to mark the ecclesiastical boundaries.

1. The High Cross/Field Cross/West Cross

This cross is the tallest and best preserved of the Kilfenora group. It measures 4.5 meters in height and is formed out of one solid stone. It stands in a field west of the Cathedral, immediately adjoining the town. Flanagan describes the High Cross as follows. The main features of the east face are a figure of Christ standing on a foot rest, from which descends a double rope-like moulding down the centre of the cross joining onto an unworked triangular panel at the base. Some refer to this figure as the Crucified and some as the risen triumphant Christ standing erect with arms fully extended. It is vested in a long robe reaching to below the knees. The head is tonsured in the Roman style and on the breast is a square blank panel. The feet that rest on the small support are turned outwards, so the tip of the feet connect to the double strand moulding running down the centre, connecting to the triangle at base. On the upper arm of the cross stands a four-legged fierce looking animal, its tail forms a loop under its body, and leads to its mouth. The ring of the cross is decorated with light plait-work of different patterns, then below the support for the figure there are on either side of the rope-like plait, six different panels of lightly carved ornaments, extending only half way down the shaft.

Flanagan describes the west face as follows. The cross head and arms are outlined by the rope-like moulding, while on each of the arms are similar knot-work bands. The outer ring of

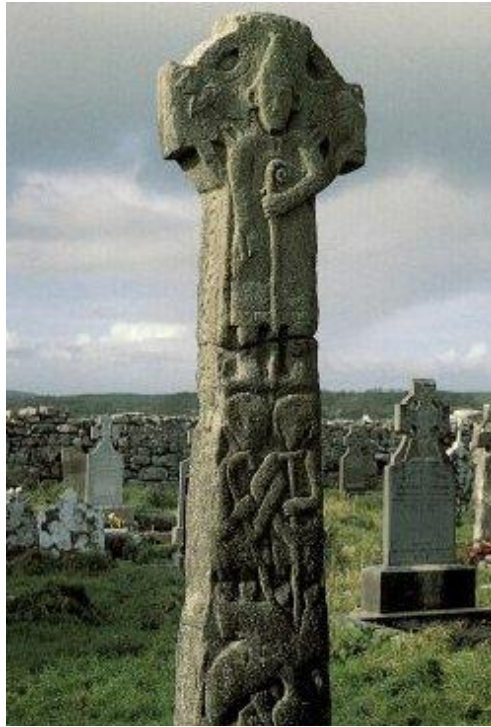
the arms is also decorated. The centre of the cross head has a circular panel, patterned and outlined again by a rope-like moulding. This circular panel is sometimes compared to the sun disc. Below the ring of the cross are three separate panels of square, circular, and rectangular panels of knot-work and below a blank space is a large triangular interface.



The High Cross, 1910

Photo: George Unthank Macnamara

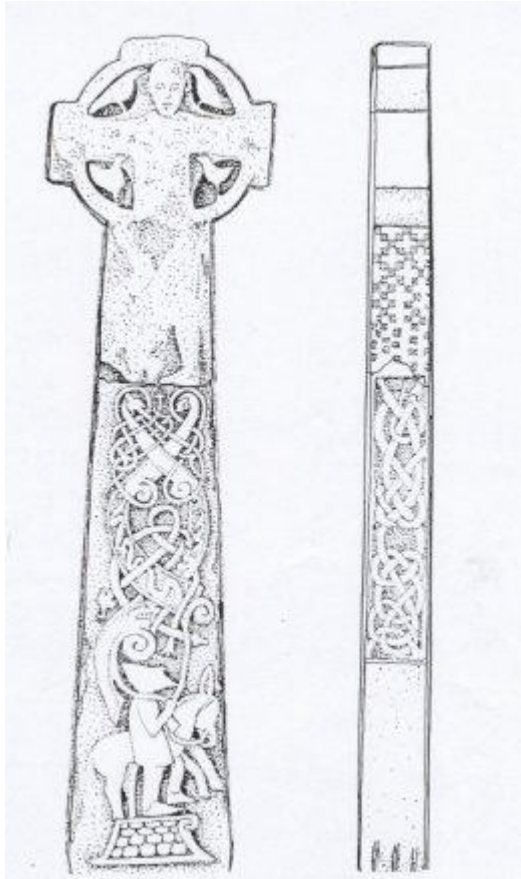
2. The Doorty Cross



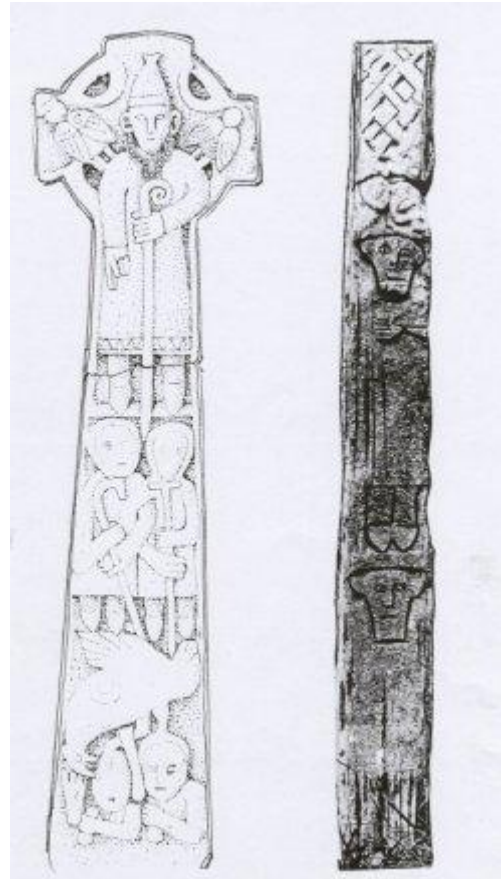
The Doorty Cross, prior to being moved in 2003

This cross lay in fragments until observations discovered that the fragments located in different sections of the grounds belonged to the one cross. In the 1950s the Office of the Public works joined the head of the cross located in the sacristy to the shaft of a cross in the graveyard. The designs on the cross are described by Flanagan. Its design includes the carvings of what is thought to be the original bishop of Kilfenora, Saint Fachtnan. On each shoulder stands a birdlike creature or angel with pointed wings, and humanlike faces reclining into the arms of the cross. The figure is in long attire with a tall conical cap, as was worn by the eleventh and twelfth century Popes. He holds a rolled headed crook in his left hand turned outwards, which is a sign of jurisdiction. His right hand has two outstretched fingers pointing downwards, imparting a direction to the two figures underneath. The two figures of what are thought to be clerics are linked arm-in-arm, the figure on one's left holds, with his two hands, a crook-headed crozier of Irish type, while the other cleric, again with his two hands, holds a tua-crozier. The croziers held by these two clerics are driven into a large bird beneath their feet. This bird is standing on two distressed-looking heads and

picking with his beak one of the heads. These figures seem to be fighting off the bird. (Jack Flanagan, The Stone Crosses of Kilfenora)



West Face and North Face



East Face and South Face

The west face is very faint and worn, making it difficult to see the detail. On the upper part of the cross is the figure of Christ in a walking pose. On each shoulder stands a bird their bills resting on the side of the head above the ears, where the crown of thorns was, then under the arms are two more birds, their bills resting at the joint of the arms and the body, those shoulder joints that suffered great agony during the three hours hanging on the cross. Near the base of the shaft is a depiction of a shingled roof. Standing on the roof is a horse or donkey and a rider sitting sideways. The rider is wearing a tunic and pointed shoes. The hand of the figure holds a band which expands to form a very elaborate interlace. (Jack Flanagan, The Stone Crosses of Kilfenora)

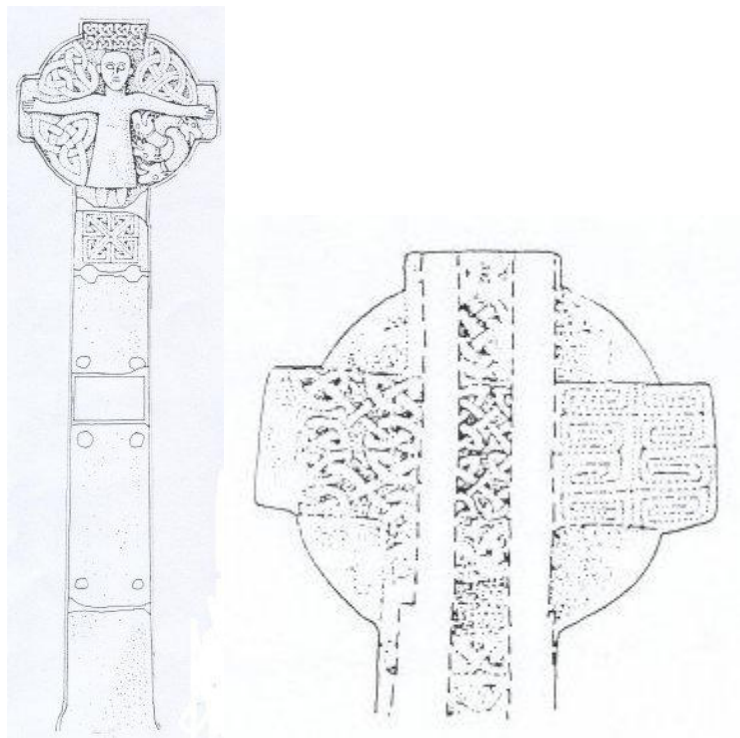


In the south edge of the shaft is an interlace forming a plait. Beneath this panel is a human figure in long garment, the figures left arm is bent across the body and holds a book-like object, while the right arm is by his side resting on a crooked staff. The feet point downwards. Separated from this figure is a carved head in low relief with protruding ears.

On the north edge of the shaft are two very faint panels of interlace, the top is said to be a pattern of interlocking Greek crosses, the second panel is of large interlace. (Jack Flanagan, The Stone Crosses of Kilfenora)

3. The Cross on the Hill/The South Cross/The Killaloe Cross

This cross may have stood on the hill, which is the high point, south of the village. This cross lay broken in Kilfenora and was sent to Killaloe in 1821 at the desire of the Bishop of Killaloe.



Kilfenora Cross in Killaloe Cathedral Concealed face of the Cross on the Hill (Jack Flanagan, The Stone Crosses of Kilfenora)

This cross in Killaloe is a solid-ringed type of cross being over four metres in height. It was broken in three places, so holes were drilled through the shaft to repair and fix it to the wall. The exposed figure of Christ is the main feature of the cross. It is dressed in a long robe with

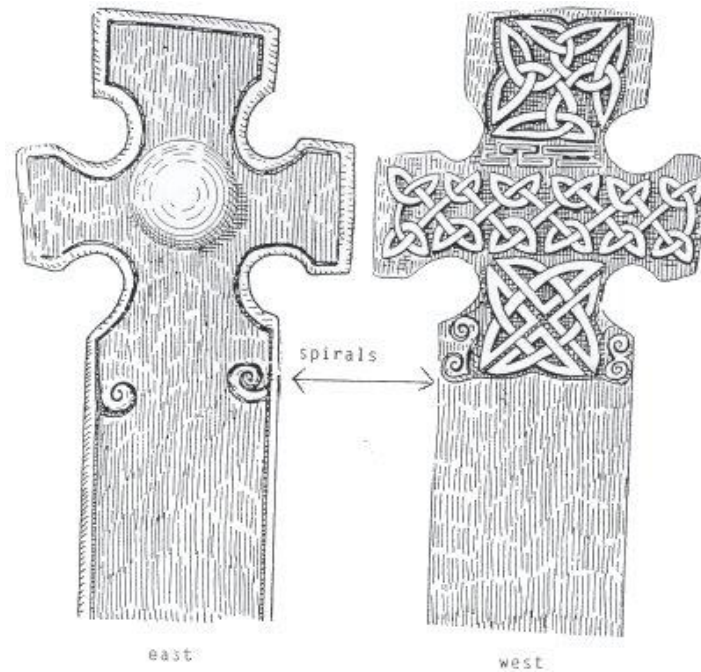
long sleeves and around the figure are three triangular knot patterns, while the fourth is a motif ending in beasts' heads. In the area over the figures' heads is a rectangular area of knot work, while beneath Christ's feet is a square panel of fretwork. The remainder of the shaft is blank. (Jack Flanagan, *The Stone Crosses of Kilfenora*)



Detail on front of cross

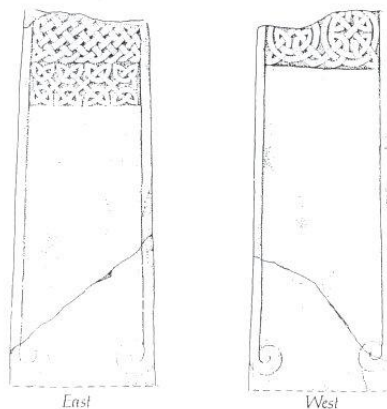
4. The North Cross

Near the north western corner of the Cathedral graveyard stands the North Cross. Up to about 1955 it was buried deeply at the head of a grave of a family in the parish. The two main face are described by Flanagan. On the east face there is a boss in the centre of the head. Below this, along the edge of the shaft, is a line ending in reversing spirals. On the west face are three large knotwork panels of different design, while yet again there are two small pairs of spirals.



5. The South Cross

The south cross stands within the graveyard near the south wall with only a portion of the shaft surviving. It stands near the entrance door to the nave of the Cathedral but no trace of the upper part. Decorations in plaitwork and knotwork are visible on the east and west faces, at the point where it broke. The side edges show flat mouldings which end in spirals near the base, spirals similar to those on the north cross. (Jack Flanagan, *The Stone Crosses of Kilfenora*)





- **Development of the Cathedral**

The effigial grave slab of a cleric and baptismal font appear to date from the thirteenth century as does the east window. The figure on the slab appears to represent a bishop as it is wearing a mitre and it is most probably one of the earliest Bishops of the diocese. According to tradition it marks the resting place of Saint Fachtna the founder of Kilfenora Cathedral.



There is also a fourteenth century effigial grave slab of a cleric or nobleman. The east window is in the style of the 'School of the West', which is commonly found west of the Shannon and is transitional between the Romanesque and the Gothic.

In 1169 the Normans came to Ireland to aid Dermot McMurrough, King of Leinster in regaining his kingdom and within a few years they had conquered much of the east and south-east of the country. The Norman advance into Thomond was delayed for a long time, however, by a strong O'Brien opposition and they did not begin to have a major impact upon Clare until the middle of the thirteenth century. The intrusion of the Normans into Thomond was partly due to some of the O'Brien princes, who invited them into the territory to assist them in their own dynastic struggles. King Henry II arrived in September 1171, in order to keep his adventurers in check, to assert his rule over Ireland and to receive the submission of Irish Bishops and Chieftains. In 1172 the Bishop of Kilfenora swore oath of loyalty to King Henry II.



The Anglo-Normans introduced the construction of stone fortifications on a wider scale and the Irish lords soon copied this method of construction. Many of the stone castles and tower houses in the Burren are associated with Gaelic lords. There are only two castles intact in this area, Lemeneagh castle and Smithstown castle. Lemeneagh castle was built c.1480 by Turlough Donn, one of the last O'Brien kings. Initially it was a five storey tower house but was later updated in the style of the time, a mansion house. This was not just a sign of wealth but a move away from the defensive style of the tower houses. Part of the original tower house was demolished in this reconstruction but part of it remains today incorporated into the mansion house on the right hand side. It is distinguishable from the older building style of narrow windows. The new mansion has large mullioned windows and a bartizan (defensive turret on the southwest corner) indicates there was still some defensive qualities needed at the time. The demesne attached to the castle was extensive and on the present landscape there is evidence of a medieval fishpond, a medieval road, a ruined turret and a brick summer house and the walls of the demesne can still be seen.



The most famous resident of Lemeneagh castle was Maire O'Brien or Maire Rua (red hair). She accompanied her husband on many raids against the English settlers. According to legend she had several husbands and her notoriety included hanging her servants from the castle walls.



The other castle in the area is Smithstown Castle also known as Ballynagowan Castle from where Maire Rua was from. Honoria O'Brien became heir of Smithstown castle in 1584. She later married and her son Sir Edward Wingfield became the ancestor of Lord Powerscourt.

- **Development of the Cathedral**

The belfry and internal arcade of Cathedral date from the Fourteenth/Fifteenth Century. The south elevation of the chancel has three openings including a doorway which appear to be fifteenth century insertions. The Chancel's tomb niche appears to date from this time in which there is an ornamented tomb, having pierced mullions after the fashion of a Gothic window. It is surmounted by a figure representing a Bishop's head and although a tomb, is commonly called the Abbots Chair. There are many monumental inscriptions in the Cathedral. There is a small table-altar tomb dating from the seventeenth century and was the family vault of the MacEncarigs. On leaving the cathedral the visitor enters the O'Brien Chapel. Here are interred several members of the Ennistymon family. Further indication of Kilfenora continued importance is the appointment as Bishop by Pope Innocent VIII in 1491 of Maurice O'Brien, a canon of the church of Limerick and a member of the royal House of Thomond.

In 1538 the Reformation in England and consequently Ireland, resulted in the closure of churches and monasteries. This was as a result of the separation of King Henry VIII from the Roman Catholic Church and declaring himself head of the English church. In Kilfenora the reformed church retained the cathedral as a place of worship.

As Kilfenora was the centre of the diocese it would have attracted much patronage and become the resting place for many important families. In 1539 Conor, the last King of Thomond (area representing an area of north Munster that today covers mainly counties Limerick and Clare) was buried in Kilfenora graveyard.

In 1543 Thomond was surrendered to the English crown by Murrough O'Brien who was then given the title, Earl of Thomond. This resulted in wars with other chieftains. Red Hugh O'Donnell sought revenge on the Earl for his alliance with the English and in 1599 he plundered the area and camped at Kilfenora.



After the raid in 1599 the English sent a garrison of troops from Galway and they levelled Caherminane castle outside Kilfenora. Again O'Donnell attacked the Earl of Thomond and returned to Clare, arriving at Ballygowan (Smithstown) castle where his troops rested overnight and from here returned north through the Burren.

- **The Diocese of Kilfenora**

The Diocese of Kilfenora is one of the smallest in the country and has been amalgamated on a number of occasions with larger dioceses. In 1606 Kilfenora Diocese amalgamated with Limerick for a year and in 1617-1742 Kilfenora Diocese amalgamated with Tuam. The Cathedral is repaired in 1647 by the Catholic bishop and the church is shared by both denominations. In 1660 the Protestant diocese is listed with the See of Tuam and in 1661 Bishop Sibthorpe, the last bishop of a separate diocese of Kilfenora, died. Kilfenora has been amalgamated with other dioceses since.

The prominence and wealth of Kilfenora is indicated by the granting in 1618 to John Sterne to hold a Thursday market and two fairs a year at Kilfenora. Sterne became the Protestant bishop of Kilfenora in 1617. Kilfenora was one of the two places in Co. Clare to be awarded a market charter prior to 1650, the other taking place in the county town of Ennis.

During the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Kilfenora went into decline. The area was impacted by Cromwell's army, most especially by General Ludlow. (Cromwell was Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland whose campaign in Ireland is associated mainly with the dispossession of Catholic landowners and an end to the Gaelic order.) In 1649 Oliver Cromwell's troops including his general Ludlow spread terror across the area. He established a garrison at Lemenagh, six miles outside Kilfenora. His stay lasted ten years. General Ludlow is said to have commented on the Burren that there is not water to drown a man, wood enough to hang one, nor earth enough to bury him.

The area of the Burren is notorious for Cromwell's exclamation "to hell or to Connaught". His plantations led to the transplantation of many Gaelic leaders, their families and servants to areas of Clare. The Books of Survey and Distribution were compiled by the English government at the end of the seventeenth century to establish a reliable record of



landowners in Ireland. The Books detail the names of proprietors who forfeited their land under the Cromwellian Settlement of 1641 and the amount and quality of land they held. The names of those to whom this land was granted, under various Acts between 1662 and 1703, is also given. The land of county Clare was reserved for 'Innocent Papists', i.e. Catholics from other counties who had not taken arms against Cromwell but were transplanted to make room for new English settlers and as payment to his soldiers and those who funded his campaigns.

The eighteenth century was a time when there were many restrictions put in place against the majority Catholic population. These restrictions were known as the Penal Laws. They included prohibiting Catholics from voting, from owning a horse valued at more than £5, leasing land for more than thirty-one years and if the eldest son converted to Protestantism he could inherit all the land. It also restricted religious and educational activities of Catholics and Protestant Dissenters. This included compiling a list of all the priests in the country in 1704. This list included Rev William O'Daly priest of Kilfenora, Kiltobaraght, and Nooghavaile. The Penal times in Ireland are also associated with the Mass-rock or saying the Mass in secret. Near Ballykeal is a limestone flag with the carving of a hand. According to tradition when the sun shone on the thumb it pointed to where the Mass vessels were hidden. In 1731 a report stated that there were 13 mass-houses and eight priests in the parish and that Mass was often said in private houses. With the death in 1766 of the 'Old Pretender', the last surviving son of James II, the threat of a Catholic monarchy abated and the Penal laws were gradually relaxed with a series of Appeals and a campaign for Catholic Emancipation.

- **Diocese of Kilfenora**

From 1742-1752 the Protestant diocese of Kilfenora amalgamated with Clonfert and in 1752 it was united with the See of Killaloe, a connection which still exists. The last Catholic bishop died in France in 1750 and the Diocese of Kilfenora was annexed to Kilmacduagh. (Many priests and bishops went abroad in the eighteenth century as a result of the restrictions of the Penal Laws) By local tradition, the Pope is regarded as the bishop of Kilfenora in perpetuity. This reflects a degree of disagreement with the decision to merge the Kilfenora



diocese with another bishopric (currently Galway & Kilmacduagh). Today the Bishop of Galway administers the diocese on his behalf.

- **The Development of Education**

In 1808 there were two schools in Kilfenora according to Dutton's Survey with 80 pupils in one and 50 pupils in the other. There is no record of girls being taught. The pupils were taught Arithmetic and Book-keeping and the schools were fee-paying. In 1831 the National Board of Education established schools and the school in Kilfenora became the first in north Clare to come within the remit of the Board of Education in 1836, under the direction of Fr. Quinn, Parish Priest. The Principal was James O'Grady. In 1841 two new schools opened in Kilfenora; one for boys (James O'Grady Principal) and one for girls (Bridget O'Neill Principal). These schools were built by John O'Brien, landlord of Kilfenora and Member of Parliament for Limerick city, on a site provided by him. The building is since demolished and is now the site of the Burren Display Centre.

- **Development of the Cathedral**

In 1821 the Cross on the Hill was sent to Killaloe at the request of the Bishop of Killaloe and re-erected there as it lay broken in Kilfenora. James Pain, architect for the Boards of First Fruits for the Ecclesiastical Province of Cashel, surveyed Kilfenora Cathedral in 1835. At this time the East window of the Cathedral was inserted, the aisle was undergoing repair and also the vestry and porch were added by Pain. In 1869 the Irish Church Act reduced Kilfenora to the status of a parish church. The Act of Disestablishment in 1871 allowed churches still in use by the Church of Ireland to remain in its possession. The stone crosses and the transept and ruins of the chancel of the Cathedral were preserved as National Monuments in 1880 and in 1883 the Cathedral was designated a National Monument.

- **Kilfenora in the Nineteenth century**

In 1837 Samuel Lewis described Kilfenora in his Topographical Dictionary of Ireland as a decayed market town with a population of 558 people. He also noted that a new road linking Kilfenora with Ennistymon had been completed and Kilfenora's decline was hastened by its neighbours' growth. This was especially the case when Ennistymon was linked to the



rail network in 1887 with the opening of the West Clare Railway. In 1840 the population of Kilfenora parish was 4,360.

- **1845-1848 - The Famine**

The nineteenth century is associated with great hardships including evictions, famine and emigration. From 1815-1835 there were 59 evictions recorded from lands in Kilfenora parish.

The main factor of the Great Hunger or the Irish Famine of 1845-48 was the successive failure of the potato crop due to blight. Potato was the staple diet of the majority of the population at the time so its failure in successive years reduced the population to starvation, emigration or the workhouse and public relief schemes for help. Soup kitchens were often set up by charitable organisations or local relief committees in a locality to help the hungry. Workhouses and their auxiliaries such as at Ballykeale were overwhelmed by the numbers of destitute. The workhouse was the last resort for people as they were designed to deter people and only to be used as a last resort. This included the separation of families as they male and females were separated. In Ballykeale there were over 500 women held there.



A new industry developed in the area when the first phosphate was quarried in Noughavil. The Clare Phosphate was discovered at Noughaval by Judge Comyn in 1924 and he established the Clare Phosphate Company. The mine's most successful period was during 1939-1943 when there was a shortage of phosphate. Prior to the war Ireland got its supply



of phosphate from North Africa which ceased during the War years. From 1939-1945 there were over 100 people working in the phosphate mines at Noughaval. The standard wage in the mines was two pounds a week which was good when compared to a Farmers wage of ten shillings a week. Noughaval Church was being built while the mines were in operation. Due to the higher wages in the mines the Church found it hard to find workers which resulted in them having to raise the wages offered by ten shillings.

In 1941 the state minerals company, Mianrai Teoranta, started underground mining at Doolin. Between 1940 and 1947 total output at Doolin was 75,000 tons, of which 35,000 were quarried and 40,000 mined underground by Mianrai Teoranta. A further 28,000 tons were quarried at Noughaval bringing total production of phosphate ore during this period to 103,000 tons.

In 1942, it began open cast operations at Noughaval. Mining ceased at Noughaval in 1946 and at Doolin in 1947. The mines closed in 1946 resulting in emigration in the region. (www.clarememories.ie archive Interview with Sean O Halloran from Noughavil) A further programme in the mid-1970s failed to establish a large-scale reserve capable of economic mining.

The 1940s brought more change to the area with the introduction of electricity to the village with 'Windchaser' supplying electricity to some houses and by 1959 the Kilfenora area was expected to be connected thanks to rural electrification. Up to the 1950s Kilfenora was a thriving village with a variety of services including a post office, drapery, milliner, tailor, two dressmakers, three bakers, two butchers, two blacksmiths, carpenter, hardware shop, sweet shops, petrol pumps and a garda station. The subsequent devastating downturn and resulting emigration among other factor led to the decline of the village and the closure of many services.

A major boost to the economic and social life of the region was the opening of the Burren Centre by President O Dalaigh on 15th of September, 1975. In 2001 it reopened after undergoing major renovation by the Minister. 'What is certain is that the new centre in Kilfenora will play a major part in increasing public appreciation of the National Park and the wider Burren which of course extends far beyond the park itself the display designed by



Keith Payne is as good as you will see anywhere and a great deal of imagination and creativity has gone into this work' Sile De Valera Minister for Arts Culture and the Gaeltacht. Development work has continued in the village with the restoration of the Cathedral in 2006.



<http://www.theburrencentre.ie>

More development came in 1984 with the opening, by President Patrick Hillery, of the new Hall and Sport Complex costing £250,000. The first Parish Hall was built in 1954 by Tommie Hogan and the Kilfenora Football club members dug out the foundation in return for 'free dances.' Entertainment has always been important to the community and in the 1950s 'showband era' well known Show bands regularly performed in the Hall and in September 1953 the Inchovea Players were formed by Carmel and Tom Honan. In 1960 Canon Horan purchased the Hall from him for the parish, hall transferred to the Community council. The amateur drama group Kilfenora Players formed in 1994.

Community groups formed in the locality include the ICA Guild set up in Kilfenora in 1970 and which has had a major role in community revival including promoting an interesting programme of lectures and demonstrations on subjects ranging from alcohol to drugs, rugmaking and crochet' (Clare champion 27/2/1971) In 1954 with the combined efforts of the parishioners a Grotto to Our Lady was erected to commemorate the Marian Year.

Education in the area is provided by St Attracta's National School which opened on the 22nd April 1958. The old school was demolished in 1971. Nearby Inchovea School was demolished in 1950. In 2001 School closed and amalgamated with Kilfenora National School.



Sport is very strong in the area and Michael Cusack, one of the founders of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in 1884 was born in nearby Carran. The GAA was founded to maintain and develop the traditional sports of hurling, football, camogie and handball. His cottage is maintained as it was after the famine. In 1998 the lands and Deanery at Fanta Glebe was bought by a number of people on behalf of the community.



In '1940 and 1950 there was a very strong tennis club in Kilfenora with nearly 100 members. The court was located on the Lisdoonvarna road not far from the site of the old football field. In 1992, the Kilfenora Boxing Club was established by Mickey McCormack and now run by his son Patrick. It was recognised as the best club in Ireland, an amazing feat for a small community. It remains highly active and successful in 2012 winning at Munster and national level.

The village is probably best remembered for its Kilfenora Ceili Band which has won a number of All Ireland Senior Band Competitions, Irish Open Competitions, Oireachtas titles, Munster championships, County Clare championships and three All-Ireland Fleadh Cheoil titles in a row. The first group of ceili musicians played in Kilfenora in 1907. A group of musicians had come together in 1907 with the intention of raising funds for the local church and to play at local houses or cross road dances. They went on to become a household name in Ireland and beyond. The members of the band changed over the years but their



special brand of traditional dance music was extremely popular. In the 1990s the village become famous for another reason with the success of 'Fr. Ted' television series.



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