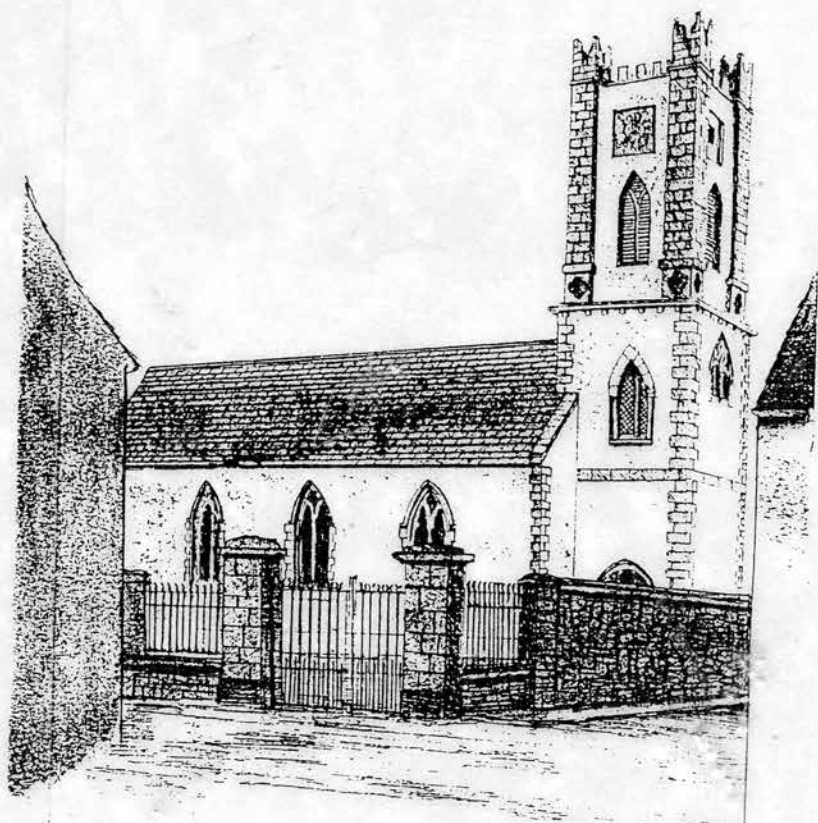


The History of



St. Coman's Church

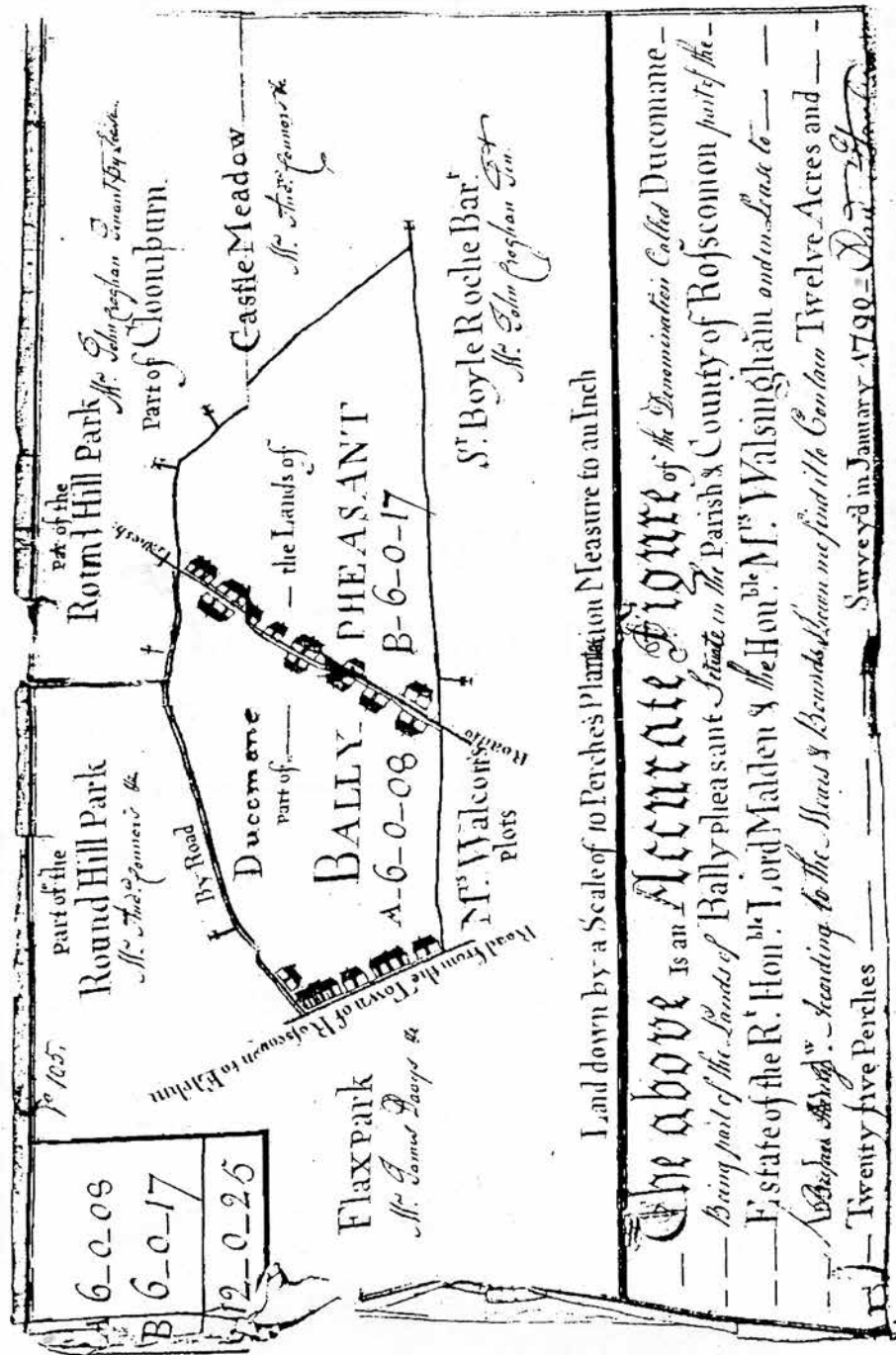


The History of
St. Coman's Church,
Roscommon Town.

Written by: John Kerrigan

Illustrated by: Albert Siggins

My thanks to the Staff at Keenan Printing.



St. Coman's Church of Ireland

St. Coman's, Church of Ireland, marks the first permanent church site dedicated to St. Coman, the saint who gave his name to town and county. The incoming visitor to town will notice the name on all major access roads in both English and Irish, Roscommon, Ros Comáin. The two words that make up the latter translate as, Ros, meaning a wooded plateau, and Comáin, pronounced, Comawn, hence the wood of Coman. The name Coman is an integral part of the name of town and county.

A few hundred yards from St. Comans, to the East on the Circular Road, just beyond the Cattle Mart is a field still known locally, to older residents, as the Hummawn Field. The word Hummawn is phonetically, the English equivalent of the possessive case of Coman, in the Irish language, the field therefore is Coman's field the birthplace of the town and county.

In this field is the well of St. Coman, marked by an ancient hawthorn bush. It is called Dubach Chomain, which translates as Coman's Vat, clearly marked as such on survey maps. The area is measured precisely on a late eighteenth map, as containing twelve acres and twenty five perches, giving as its denomination Ducomane (1), an anglicised version of its name, designated as part of the townland of Ballypheason.

This was, undoubtedly, the site of St. Comans temporary settlement when he first brought Christianity to our town and county. The earliest reference to St. Coman is that he was a disciple of St. Finnian and to have died about the year 550 (4). He was the first Bishop of the See of Roscommon, which was an independent diocese up to the year 1152.

To return to the present site. One does not have far to look for tangible evidence of a church site that dates back to the latter centuries of the first millennium. The doorway, with its pointed arch, is post Norman, attributed to the 14th Century. However, the blocked up doorway on the opposite side, facing south has been attributed to the 8th Century. The window in the middle section of the belfry, facing north, is of a similar style of architecture. The varying styles, extending over many centuries, bears testimony to the turbulent history of Roscommon

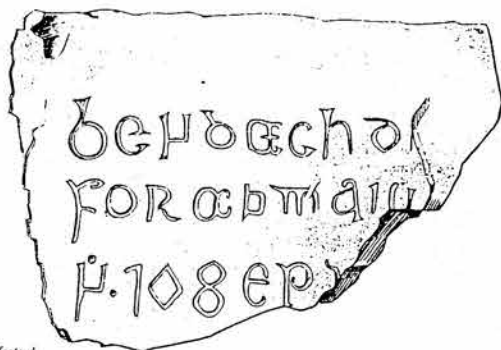
Abbey. Its first recorded sacking was by the Danes in 802 AD. Through the ages, this was followed by countless others, which are recorded in the Annals.

To add further evidence to the fact that this was an early Christian Monastic Site was the rediscovery some years ago of an ancient grave slab. It originally came to the attention of an eminent mid nineteenth century archaeologist, George Petrie, in 1863. He made a drawing of the grave slab and his reading was as follows: "Bendachd for Anmain Joseph" which translates as "a blessing on the soul of Joseph". Petrie dated the stone as 9th Century AD. This date is almost similar to the date attributed by separate assessment, to the aforementioned, south facing blocked up doorway. This grave slab can be viewed in the County Museum, The Square, Roscommon.

It would be opportune, at this stage, to link in the Augustinian connection. St. Coman's Abbey was founded on the Rule of St. Augustine hence the monks attached to the Abbey of Roscommon were known as Canons Regular of the Order of St. Augustine. St. Coman's Abbey can be confused with the Dominican Abbey, still standing, a few hundred yards away, to the south, at the bottom of Henry Street. This Abbey was founded in the year 1253 by Phelim O'Connor, King of Connaught.

Although St. Coman's Abbey predated the latter by many centuries it must be borne in mind that both Abbeys co-existed for almost four hundred years. In the late 13th Century a grant was made to St. Coman's Augustinian Abbey which ran as follows: "A weekly free market on Saturdays in this "Irish Vill" between their house and that of the Dominicans in the same Vill". That market used to be held where Henry Street now stands.

A grant was further made to the Prior and Convent, and their successors, that they may water forever all their animals in the lake under the King's Castle at Roscommon. The area where the lake was, on the west side of the Castle, is designated as a townland, still bearing the name with which it was known for countless centuries, Loughnaneane, The Lake of the Birds. The land where this lake was situated has been filled in recently, 1998, to make a public park, not further comment is required!



Scale 1

BENDACHD FOR
ANMAIN N JOSEPH

P

*George Petrie's drawing
and his reading of the inscription
in 1863:*

BENDACHD FOR ANMAIN
JOSEPH

A BLESSING ON THE SOUL OF
JOSEPH

*The name Joseph is very rare on
Early Christian inscriptions*

Dating of stone:

9th century A.D.

George Petrie's Drawing of Grave Slab

The co-existence of the Abbeys continued up the early 17th Century. During the reign of James I both were dissolved, the Dominican Abbey was let to stand as a ruin, material from St. Coman's Abbey was used in the construction of the first Protestant Church on the ancient site, as evidenced by the use of the aforementioned doorways and windows. The Dominican Order still continued to administer to the spiritual needs of Roscommon, however, this period marked the demise of the Augustinian influence. The contribution of the latter to the town's history was never quite forgotten. Two and a half centuries afterwards, in the early 1900's, Church Street was known, for a brief period as St. Augustine Street. Memorial Plaques, bearing this street name, can be viewed in the Sacred Heart Church, a few hundred yards to the west of St. Comans.

The present Protestant Church was built in 1775. Within the church itself, however, there is tangible evidence of an earlier Protestant Church. On the west wall, on either side of the doorway are two memorial plaques which predate the present building. One is to a John Fleming who departed this life on March 10th 1696, the other is to a Mrs. Elizabeth Lovelace, born 1648, died 1723. The church is sited in the traditional Christian manner with the altar at the east end. Beside the alter is a pulpit of acclaimed artistic beauty, donated to the church by the Crofton children, to the memory of their parents, the 5th Sir Edward and his wife Lady Georgina. In the 1850's, Sir Edward was the popular people's champion of county Roscommon (5), the man who, successfully, spearheaded the campaign to bring the railway to Roscommon Town. In doing so, he had to contend with diverse opposing interest among rival railway companies and politicians from outside the county.



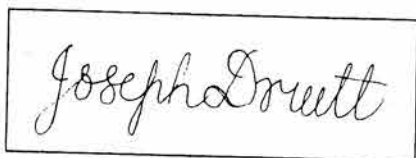
*Reproduced
from
'The Crofton
Memoirs'*

Potraits of Sir Edward Crofton &
Lady Georgiana

The conclusion of this article will deal exclusively with the adjoining graveyard. This is an inter denominational cemetery, in centuries past Catholic and Protestant were interred within its boundary walls, to lie at rest, side by side.

All strata of society are represented here, the once powerful and influential to the low and humble. The contrasting evidence is there, from the impressive Goff Mausoleum, just behind the church, to simple grave markers, in some cases, merely a rock to serve as headstone. All are interwoven into the fabric of the rich tapestry of Roscommon Towns social history.

There is the headstone of Joseph Druitt, almost in line with the west gable, about ten yards in from it, just beyond a yew tree. He was a Doctor attached to the Old Infirmary in the late 19th Century, the latter now serves as County Library in Abbeytown. The story goes, that the good Doctor formed a romantic attachment to a married woman in the locality. When the liaison ended, he was unable to cope with the trauma. In an agitated state he etched his name, with a diamond ring which he wore, onto a pane of glass set in one of the the windows of the Old Infirmary. It was his second last act on earth. His last act was to dash out of the building where he shot himself in the head, on the steps. His story (2) was first published by the County Librarian, Mrs. Helen Kilcline. His signature, on the pane of glass, has been preserved and reset into the window, as a remembrance to Dr. Druitt, and there it will remain as a memorial to him and a reminder to us of the fragility of the human mind.



The signature of Joseph Druitt inscribed with a diamond ring on the pane of a window at the Roscommon Co. Library, formerly the Co. Library.

Joseph Druitt
Died 10th September 1876
"Watch therefore for ye
know not what hour your
Lord doth come."
Matthew

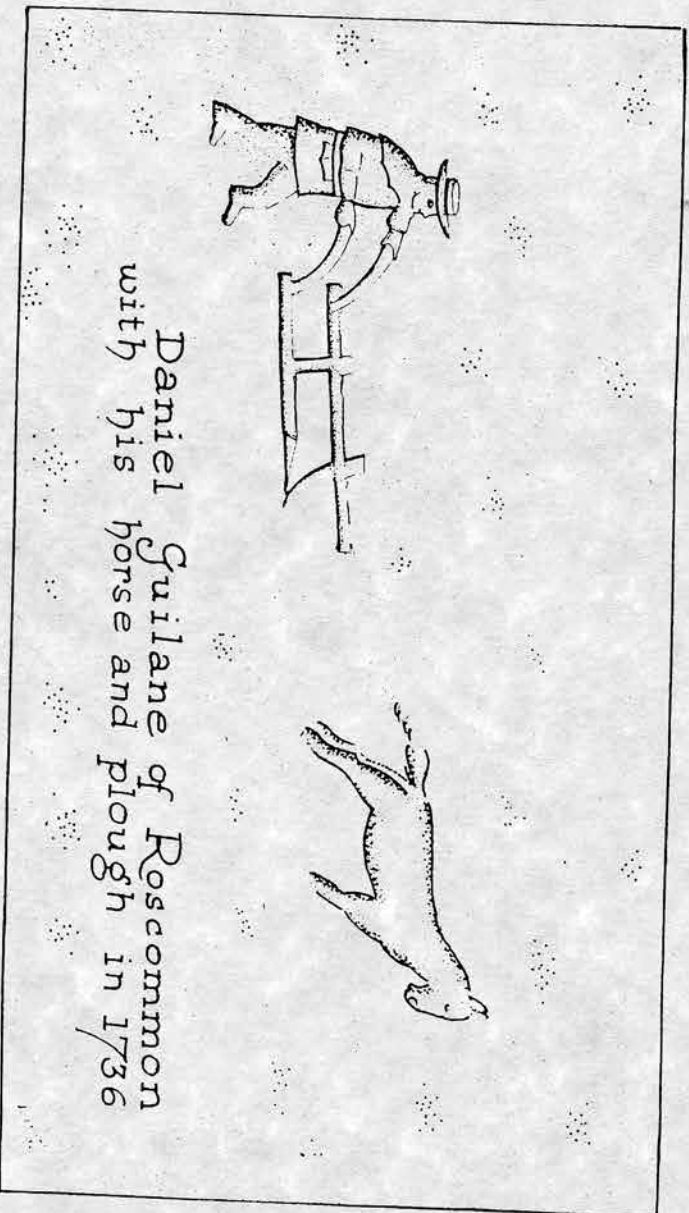
Fellow local historian, Albert Siggins, with his in depth knowledge of this graveyard, has conducted tours of it, in the recent past, which proved fascinating to the this writer. Modest headstones which normally, would hardly rate a second glance, on closer scrutiny presents us with a glimpse of social history when the symbolism engraved on them

is brought to ones notice and fully explained.

A perfect example of this is that of Daniel Guilane of Roscommon with his horse and plough dated 1736. The detail is remarkable, the ploughman's attire in fine detail, the horse straining with no visible harness! Apparently the method used was "ploughing by the tail", a common practice in the 18th Century. We are indebted to Albert Siggins for his illustration (3) of same and instructive text, on the back cover of a journal. A register of headstones, in the graveyard, is held in the County Library. Unfortunately, there is no corresponding sketch map, which makes the task of location extremely difficult, a matter that needs to be addressed. Of greater urgency, however, is the maintenance of the graveyard itself. It is to be hoped that the present difficulties concerning same can be resolved and that this early Christian site, with its fully documented illustrious past, be accorded the respect and attention that is its due.

Material Source:

1. Co. Roscommon Historical & Arch Journal; Vol 7 1998
Back Cover.
2. Co. Roscommon Historical & Arch Journal; Vol 5 1994
The Memory of a Shattered Life, Helen Kilcline.
3. Co. Roscommon Historical & Arch Journal; Vol 5 1994
Back Cover, Albert Siggins.
4. A Souvenir of the Sacred Heart Church;
Originally published 1903, Chapter 1.
5. Roscommon Messenger; 25th July 1857.



This scene of a ploughman with horse and plough is a very unusual one and is carved on a stone at St. Conan's Churchyard, Roscommon town. While ploughs by themselves are common as stones and are widespread throughout the country, the example complete with the ploughman in very detailed clothing with his hands, wielding a native wooden plough pulled by a straining horse is a very powerful image of the importance of the preparation of the ground for the sowing of the crop. They are usually regarded as tradesmen's symbols, for example, the smith and the smithy, the cooper and the cooper's shop, the shoemaker and the shoemaker's shop, and so on. Some regard the plough scene as a variation on the Resurrection symbols, where the old seed, after planting dies so that new life can begin.

As the horse shows no teeth or collar or traces it would possibly indicate "ploughing by the tail" which appears to have been common in Ireland up until the 18th century and was frowned upon by travellers who were not closely acquainted with Irish conditions where shallow ploughing was often the norm and on well used ground would not have been as severe on the horse as one would think. The horse's tail has a number of knots in it and it is difficult to interpret what the knots held in mind. Laws were even passed in those days to stamp out the practice of "ploughing by the tail". The scene is probably commemorating the subject of the stone, David Guilane, who was either a good tillage man or a ploughmaker and is dated 1736. Another good example is at Screen, Co. Sligo commemorating Alexander Black, but is from the mid 1800s.

Daniel Guilane of Roscommon