

Ecological Report on Kilbarron Church - County Donegal

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Ruth Cleary

BSc Botany - University of Reading 1975

MSc Plant Taxonomy - University of Reading 1976

Location of Kilbarron Church

The ruins of Kilbarron Church are situated in farmland about a 100m from the Ballyshannon to Rossnowlagh Road (R231) in the townland of Kilbarron. (Irish Grid Reference 185100 365050). It can be accessed from the road via a kissing gate and a grassy path over the field.

Brief description of the proposed works.

The proposal is to conserve the ruins of Kilbarron Church in a way that minimises the impact on the site and its vegetation. Also to ensure the access to the church by maintaining the path to the church.

The Church Site

The church is situated in a rich meadow. The church is at the field boundary and there is a dry stone wall on each side. Behind the church is a field sometimes used for grazing sheep. The old CDR rail track runs

through this field. There are then a series of fields with rough pasture



leading down to Kilbarron Castle and the sea.

In the field next to the church is a children's graveyard (cillin), for the burial of unbaptised people who weren't permitted to be buried in consecrated ground. Although this would be primarily stillbirths it could also include suicides, strangers and sometimes women who died in childbirth without being churched. There is a plaque next to the church to commemorate the children buried there.



Bluebells growing in the children's graveyard.

The children's graveyard was first recorded on the OSI map circa 1905 so may be 19th Century.

The church is a small unroofed rectangular stone building with a window aperture on the west gable end. At the east end there is a mound of rubble which was probably the alter. There is also a niche in the wall next to the 'alter'. The east facing gable wall is no longer complete. There are sockets on the walls at the western end of the church. Socket in the west end of the internal north wall.

The current church is medieval in origin although it is almost certainly on



the site of a much older church. The church is accessed via a dressed stone door on the south side. There is another similar door on the north side that leads into an area bounded by a dry stone wall.

Vegetation growing on the walls of the Church - both inside and out:-

Hedera helix - ivy - Eidhneán

Cochlearia officianalis - common scurvy-grass - biolar trá

Urtica dioica - stinging nettle - Neantóg

Rubus agg. - blackberry - Dris

Taraxacum officinale - dandelion - Caisearbhán

Leucanthemum vulgare - ox-eye daisy - Noínín mór

Cardamine hirsuta - hairy bittercress - Searbh- bhiolar giobach

Geranium robertianum - herb robert - Ruithéal rí

Veronica arvensis - wall speedwell - Lus cre balla

Prunus Spinoza - blackthorn - Draighean
Senecio vulgaris - groundsel - Grúnlas
Dryopteris fern sp.
Asplenium scolopendrium - harts tongue fern
Spleenwort sp.
Holcus lanatus - Yorkshire fog
Dactylis glomerata - cocksfoot
Festuca sp.
Grass sp.
Moss sp.
Lichen sp.

Common scurvy-grass growing on a wall inside the church.



On the northern external wall there are fan shapes in the lichen where ivy has been removed in the past



Vegetation growing within the Church building:-

Taraxacum officinale - dandelion - Caisearbhán

Rumex sp

Heracleum sphondylium - hogweed - Feabhrán

Vicia septium - bush vetch - Peasair fhiáin

Cochlearia officinalis - common scurvy-grass - biolar trá

Ranunculus ficaria - lesser celandine - Grán arcáin

Leucanthemum vulgare - ox eye daisy - Noínín mór

Bellis perennis - daisy - Noínín

Urtica dioica - stinging nettle - Neantóg

Geranium robertianum - herb robert - Ruithéal ri

Plantago lanceolata - ribwort plantain - Slánlus

Euphorbia peplus - petty spurge - Gearr nimhe

Cirsium sp. Thistle

Chrysosplenium oppositifolium - opposite leaved golden saxifrage

Ranunculus acris - meadow buttercup - Fearbán féir

Ranunculus repens - creeping buttercup - Fearbán reatha

Galium aparine - cleavers - Garbhlus

Holcus lanatus - Yorkshire fog

Dactylis glomerata - cocksfoot

Festuca sp

Grass sp.

The walled area outside the church

This is a rectangular area, attached to the church and bounded on one side by the church and the other 3 sides by a low dry stone wall.



The area is bisected by a line of rough cut gravestone like stones. There is no inscriptions on the stones.

Victorian plans suggest that the side door gave onto a simple hut for a priest. However no trace of this remains.

The area contains rough grassland with mainly plants of wasteland. There is a single ash tree growing out of a damp area about 5m from the side door. The tree is not tall, maybe about 10m. However it has been cut down several times in the past and there are a large number of shoots growing from the base. In essence it has been coppiced, but I think accidentally rather than intentionally.

In the past (less than 5 years ago) there were bluebells growing between the church door and the tree. However they are no longer present. They are still present in the meadow outside the stone wall, and also in the children's graveyard.

Bluebells - *hyacinthoides non-scripta* - are an indicator of ancient woodland, usually pre 1600. However on their westerly limits (as here) they also grow in open coastal meadows. Although bluebells are fairly common in Ireland, the population in Great Britain and Ireland represents half the global population.

And the following flowering plants:

***Cirsium arvense* - creeping thistle - Feochadán deathas**

***Urtica dioica* - stinging nettle - Neantóg**

***Rumex* sp. - Dock - Copóg**

***Rubus* agg. blackberry - Dris**

***Hypochaeris radicata* - cat's ear - Claus chair**

***Trifolium pratense* - red clover - Seamair dhearg**

***Trifolium repens* - white clover - Seamair bhán**

***Bellis perennis* - daisy - Nóinin**

***Vicia sepium* - bush vetch - Peasair fhiáin**

***Plantago lanceolata* - ribwort plantain - Siánlus**

***Senecio jacobson* - ragwort - Buachalán liath**

***Plantago lanceolata* - ribwort plantain**

***Heracleum sphondylium* - hogweed Feabhrán**

***Taraxacum officinale* - dandelion - Caisearbhán**

***Cochlearia officinalis* - common scurvy-grass - Biolar trá**

***Ranunculus acris* - meadow buttercup - Fearbán féir**

***Ranunculus repens* - creeping buttercup - Fearbán reatha**

***Fraxinus excelsior* - ash - Fuinseog**



Community of lichen growing on the west internal wall.

Lichens

These produced by a symbiotic relationship between an algae and a fungus. They generally grow on rocks and are a feature of old stone walls and gravestones. Although they are also to be found growing on trees and bushes and also in short turf.

Lichens are often used as an indicator of the lack of pollution. They are only to be found in clean air.

Although an expert in lichens would be needed to identify the species of lichen I think it is unlikely that there are any species rare to the area. The church is built of local stone. Often it is in graveyards where non local stone has been used that species rare to the area are found. The species of lichen tends to depend on the substrate.

However where the walls are not shaded or covered by ivy, the stones are covered by a mass of lichen which gives the stone walls much of their character. Lichen is slow growing and there is little that can be done to help colonisation. The use of yogurt or sour milk does not seem to increased the rate of colonisation although it was long thought to do so. However with such a thriving local colony of lichens, and weathered rocks providing the perfect substrate I would hope that recolonisation would quickly occur. The use of natural products in any restoration or consolidation of the walls - such as lime mortar - will not inhibit the recolonisation of the wall with lichen.

Lichens like sunlight - mosses tend to grow in the damper and shadier parts of the wall.

Where the walls are covered by ivy, lichens will be unable to grow. Ivy in itself tends to be destructive of old walls.

Conclusions:-

The area appears to have no rare species.

The area would benefit from more active management.

The lichen ecosystems are probably the most fragile.

Recommendations

1. The re-instatement of the mown path from the kissing gate to the church. This will discourage people from wandering onto the beautiful surrounding meadow and invite visitors in.
2. Strimming the area within the church and also the area outside within the stone wall. The cuttings **MUST** be removed for composting elsewhere so that the soil becomes poorer. This will encourage wild flowers rather than the weeds of waste ground which dominate at the moment. The meadow surrounding should be an excellent source of seed!
3. The management of the ash tree. I think this was probably self seeded and has been chopped down many times in the past and regrown from the base. Left to itself the tree may grow to 20 metres or so and undermine the church walls - although it may of course be stunted by the environment. If it is decided to remove the tree rather than coppice it it could be replaced by a smaller native tree eg a wild cherry or crab apple tree.
4. The removal of the ivy on the church walls under the instruction of an archaeologist so that the walls aren't damaged further.
5. A working party in the late spring to hand weed plants like stinging nettles, brambles and thistles so they don't choke out other species.
6. The use of a lime mortar in any consolidation of the church walls. This is lichen friendly and should encourage the recolonisation of the walls by lichen.

References

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