

## KILBOGHT FRIARY

### An explanation to accompany two final colour reconstruction drawings

Situated in Kilboght Graveyard near Kilreekil in east Co Galway are the remains of a late medieval Franciscan friary of the Regular Third Order. Little now remain of the friary complex that must have been here except for about 75 per cent of the friary church, more-or-less ruined. There is no evidence whatsoever for any cloister or associated domestic ranges.



*Figure 1. An aerial photograph of Kilboght Graveyard with the friary church centre-right.*

There is little documentary evidence for the friary or its foundation. Gwynne and Hadcock attribute its foundation to one Hugo de Wall (alternatively Waley or Wales). The foundation date must be sometime before 1507, when the then bishop of Clonfert, Matthew Macraith, died here. The friary, then, is assumed here to have been founded sometime around 1500. Whether the bishop came to Kilboght to end his days there or died there by chance in the course of a journey is not known.

Recent examination in connection with conservation works indicates that the church is a multiphase structure: an early core that was successively extended to the west, to the south and to the east. The second phase extended the nave westwards, to which a large south chapel or transept was added in the third phase. Finally the chancel of the church was extended eastwards, with an adjoining structure to the north, presumably a sacristy, of which only the barest impression on the ground is visible today.

The most complete remains are of the nave and the large south chapel, which survive to their wall tops. These have almost the only notable architectural features: a simple gothic-arched west door, offset slightly to the north of the west gable wall, above which is a tall, centred, round-headed single light window. Inside there is a lovely carved holy water stoup set in the angle of the south jamb of the doorway. The south chapel features a pointed two light window with quatrefoil. This window shows some fine carving but it is eccentrically incomplete. Other than these features, there is a pointed, trefoil-headed piscina preserved at the east end of the fragmentary remains of the south wall of the chancel. Nothing remains of the east and north walls of the chancel.

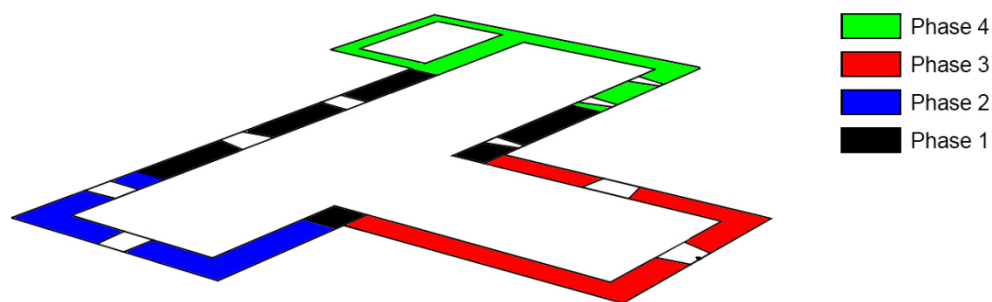


Figure 2. Phased plan of Kilboght friary church, distorted to match the accompanying reconstructions.

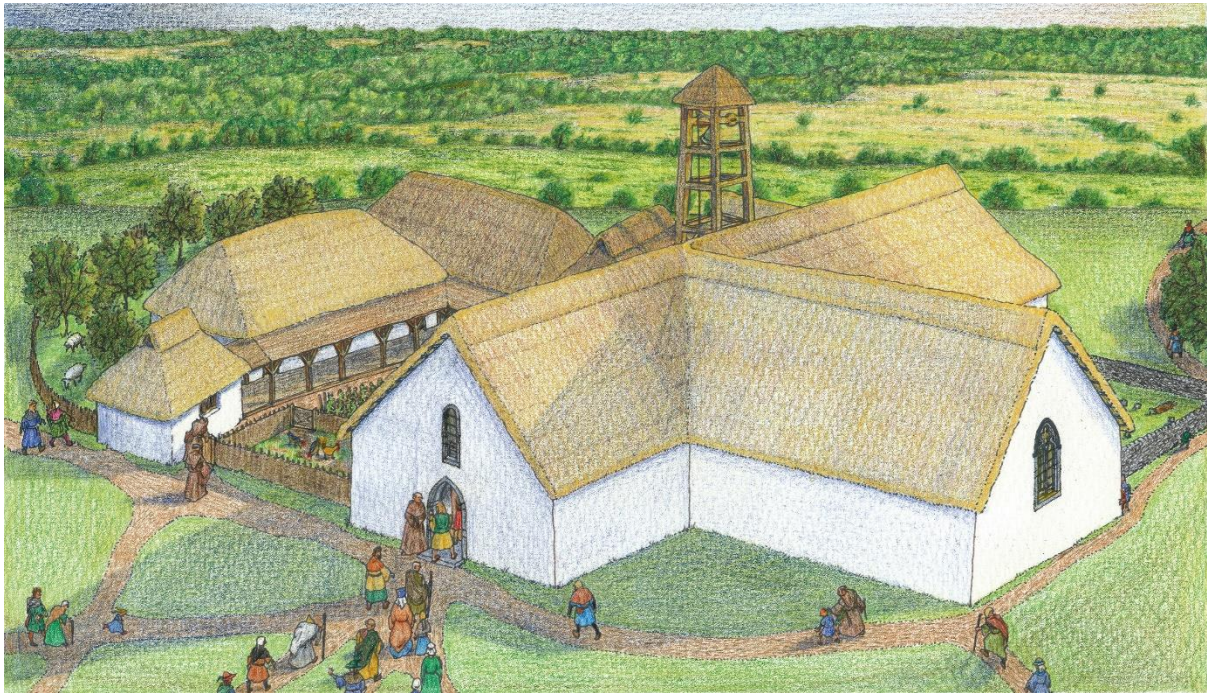
Despite there being no evidence of a cloister or associated domestic ranges: nothing on the ground (unlike where the possible sacristy was), and nothing to show where enclosing ranges might have been attached to the surviving north wall of the nave, there must have been some form of accommodation for the friars since regular third order Franciscan friars lived in communities. This would suggest a group of buildings that would have included at least a chapter house (the community meeting room), a dormitory, a refectory and a kitchen. Since the Bishop of Clonfert died in the friary, there must also have been some provision in these buildings for an infirmary. It seems most likely that the community lived and operated in a cluster of individual buildings constructed out of ephemeral materials that would decay over time and disappear.

The nature of the surviving remains together with the lack of evidence for any other friary buildings suggested that the site might be best reconstructed in two separate drawings. The first to be an overview of the friary illustrating a possible arrangement of domestic buildings. The second, then, would be a cut-away drawing of the church only to show the possible use and arrangement of the upstanding remains.

### **Drawing 1: The Friary Complex**

For the first drawing, I have chosen a low-angle aerial view from the southwest that is best suited to show the most complete surviving elements of the church. It shows both the west end with its door and the window above, and the south window of the south chapel. It does its best to conceal the poorly-preserved chancel and the sacristy which survives mostly only

as its footprint. It also reduces to a secondary position my interpretation of the friars' accommodation, which would probably have been located on the north side of the church.



*Figure 3. A reconstruction drawing of Kilboght friary as it might have looked around 1500.*

The church at Kilboght is quite small and appears to be very simple. There is almost no ornament in the few remaining architectural features. The west door and the single light window above are both very plain, as is the holy water stoup beside the door. Only the south window in the south transept or chapel has any decoration and that is oddly unfinished. This suggests that the friary was a humble establishment, either without much in the way of resources, or perhaps shunning them for the sake of its vow of poverty.

Because of this and because the surviving gables on the church seem to be quite low and without any evidence for capping on them, I suggest that the church had a thatched roof. This sort of thing was not uncommon and has been suggested elsewhere, for example on the early phase of Cork's Dominican priory. The church appears to have been rendered inside and out, so is shown as such with a coat of whitewash. This was common, and would have made it easily visible from the surrounding countryside.

The friary church as it survives is relatively small and lacks significant decoration, suggesting a small and relatively poor establishment. Although there is no evidence of a cloister at all: nothing on the ground (unlike where the possible sacristy was), and nothing to show where enclosing ranges might have been attached to the surviving north wall of the nave, there must have been some form of accommodation for the friars and it must have been arranged in a useful manner.

What I propose in the first reconstruction drawing is a cluster of individual buildings constructed out of ephemeral materials that would easily be lost to history. Though I have

rejected the idea of a cloister as we generally know it, I assume that the friars would still have been influenced by the traditional cloister, which some or all must have seen at some time, but which relative poverty would have made impossible to build. Thus, I have grouped the buildings around a small courtyard on the north side of the church, so that they are close to each other for the friars to go easily between them, and close to the church for their regular daily religious offices.

The building on the east side of the yard, closest to the church, would have contained the chapter house where the friars met daily to discuss their business. It was also likely to be the only warm and comfortable building in the friary, and so the roof is shown with vents for smoke emanating from a hearth inside. Just beyond the chapter house was the friars' dormitory, also close to the church for easy access for the night offices. It could have had a space partitioned off as an infirmary, where the bishop of Clonfert perhaps died.

The friary required a bell to summon the surrounding population to services. With no tower on the church, and no sign of a bellcote on the west gable, a simple, separate, timber-framed belfry tower, capped with a thatched roof, is depicted. This would have been situated close to the church and the dormitory, so a location between the church chancel, the chapter house and the sacristy (just visible behind the belfry) is suggested.

At right angles to the eastern buildings, facing the church, is a single-storey building in the traditional location for a refectory. Alongside that, I have separated off a third, small building as a kitchen (kept separate because of the risks of fire) with simple openings in the roof for smoke to escape. I have angled it relative to the refectory to reinforce the idea that this is not a formal, regularly ordered cloister complex. I have chosen to reflect the phasing of the church and associated buildings by showing the thatch on the central, first phase of the church as more weathered, and similarly on the early chapter house and dormitory.

Since the church was rendered and whitewashed, I suggest that the accommodation was probably timber framed, with wattle or mud infill, all rendered and limewashed. In the absence of any evidence for roofing material, thatch was most likely. Considering Ireland's often wet and windy weather, and in the absence of a formal cloister, I suggest there may have been a simple covered timber veranda connecting all the clustered buildings and a north door into the church (see below).

Finally, I have closed off the friars' courtyard with a simple wattle fence and suggested within a division into a small pen for chickens or other livestock and a small vegetable garden. A small orchard is similarly fenced-in behind the refectory and kitchen, the fence to keep in any grazing livestock, such as the couple of sheep shown here. A small walled cemetery is depicted in the angle between the church chancel and the south transept or chapel.

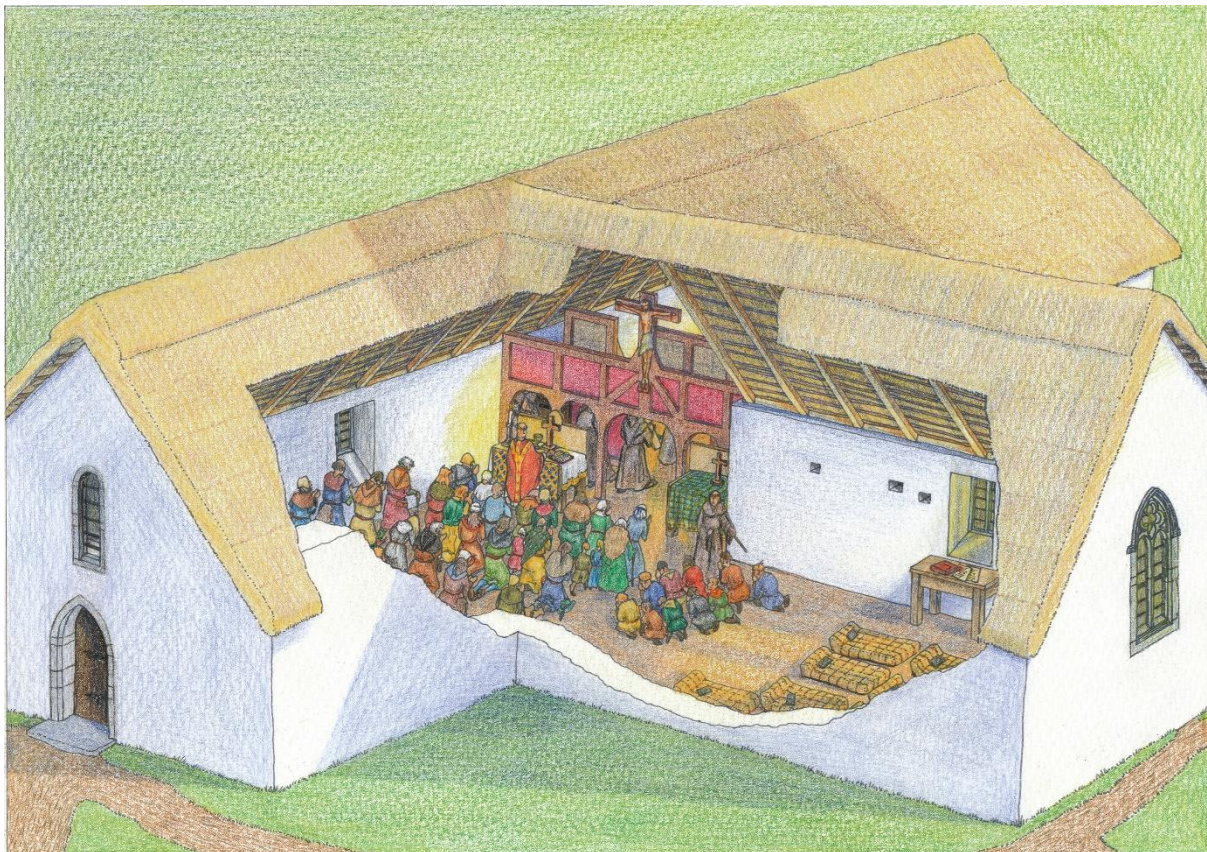
Since the second drawing shows the lay community worshipping at a Mass in the friary church, I thought I would show the same community coming to the church in the first drawing. A Mass for the public in the medieval church usually took place between dawn and

late morning, between the liturgical offices of Prime, celebrated by the friars around dawn, and sext, celebrated around midday. The setting for the first drawing is thus not long after dawn, the church bell ringing and long shadows cast by the church and other buildings, as the congregation makes its way into the church. A friar greets people at the west door, while two more are returning to the friary close from a preaching mission, in time for the Mass.

## **Drawing 2: Inside the Friary Church**

The second reconstruction drawing is cut away to show the interiors of the best-preserved nave and south chapel of the church. Interior architectural details shown include: the north window opposite the south transept or chapel; a north door, suggested by a wide gap in the ruined north wall of the church, roughly where the nave would meet the chancel; the east window in the south chapel; and a string of potlug holes in the chapel (only in the east wall and so of no clear purpose).

As an alternative to the interpretation in the first drawing, no buildings are shown on the north side of the church. It is quite possible that the friars were accommodated in scattered buildings away from the church, and not concentrated in just one location.



*Figure 4. A cut-away reconstruction drawing of the friary showing activities in the nave and south chapel.*

The drawing attempts to illustrate the layout and possible activity in the church around 1500. The congregation is in place and the west door shut. It is slightly later in the morning than in the first drawing, so the shadows have shortened and the morning sun is filtering in through the windows of the church.

The church is divided into the western public nave and the eastern chancel that is reserved to the friars by a timber-screened passage extending across the church from either side of the north door. Both are shown as simple timber-frame structures. The nave-side screen is envisaged as an open rood screen made up of posts supporting the east side of a rood loft, above which is a large, centrally-placed crucifix (the rood) overlooking the nave. The chancel-side screen is timber-panelled but with a broad central opening into the chancel, which permitted the lay congregation to see the high altar at the east end of the chancel.

The friars are entering the church through the north door and processing between the screens and through the central opening into the chancel. Altars are placed on either side of the central opening in the rood screen to serve the lay congregation. The high altar in the chancel was reserved to the friars. In the drawing, a friar in full vestments is preparing the mass at the north altar for the kneeling congregation. The rood loft above and between the screens, with its red-painted panels is accessed by a steep stair in the chancel, as was common, and would have served as a pulpit. A simple east-facing table beneath the east window of the south chapel altar could also serve as an additional altar.

One of the functions of the Franciscan friars was to educate young men. This may have taken place in a separate building, but it has been suggested that the over-large south chapel at Kilboght might have acted also as a schoolhouse. This is taken to be the case in the cut-away drawing. A rare account of a Gaelic Irish schoolroom in 1571 describes ten young men lying prostrate on couches of straw, books at their noses, reciting their lessons together. In the drawing, I have taken a rare medieval illustration of a straw bed or couch as a model for these couches of straw, placed between the east and south windows of the chapel for maximum illumination, but with writing slates instead of books on them. A book and papers lie on the table beneath the east window.

The friar in charge of the school is watching over the students, who have abandoned their learning and are kneeling facing the altar in the nave in preparation for the Mass. In the earlier overview drawing, this or another friar can be seen leading a reluctant student by his ear towards the church, while two more truants are hiding behind far corner of the chapel and a third is running away past the cemetery.

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