



BANAGHER

BANAGHER and BOVEVAGH CHURCHES

English Translation

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County Londonderry

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The Site

Many early churches were prominently sited on hilltops and Banagher stands on a glacial hill, partly now quarried away for sand and gravel. The level falls NW. to the Owenrigh river valley whilst to SE. and S. the higher mountain masses of Magheramore and the Sperrins are within view. Although the site may now seem remote, like many churches it occupied an important position within the early network of routes, near the N.-S. valley routes of the Owenrigh and Owenbeg rivers and only 2 miles S. of the major E.-W. route through Dungiven.

History

Banagher's recorded history begins violently with an annual entry in 1121: the 'king of Ciannacht was killed by his own kinsmen in the centre of the cemetery of Bennchar'. We do not know whether the church was recently founded then or long established. Local tradition sees it as one of St Patrick's foundations in the area of the river Faughan, and the mason who carved the inscription on the W. door in the 1730s – 'This church was built in ye year of God 474' – clearly thought it was founded by St Patrick.

Local tradition also ascribes its foundation to St Muiredach O'Heney (Ó hEanaigh), but he does not appear in any early source and even the date of his festival is not recorded. In the absence of other evidence it is probably best to regard Banagher as a late 11th- or early 12th-century foundation, perhaps under the patronage of the powerful MacLochlainn kings. Traditionally St Muiredach was led to the site by a stag from another church, now a slight ruin in Templemoyle, 1/2 mile NW., perhaps an earlier church site.

Bencarre appears as a parish church in a 1306 taxation roll and in 1397 it was chosen as one of Archbishop Colton's bases during his visitation of Derry diocese. He is recorded as sitting before the high altar hearing cases there, and from Banagher he travelled to Dungiven to reconsecrate the cemetery, polluted by bloodshed. It is uncertain exactly when the church went out of use, but it was ruined by 1622, when a survey of churches was made, to re-emerge as a subject of antiquarian interest in the 19th century, when Bishop Reeves claimed it as the most interesting of all the ecclesiastical ruins which remain in the diocese'. The ruin passed into State Care from the Church Temporalities Commissioners in 1880. During the 1970s the church was excavated and underwent a full conservation programme.

The Residence

Just outside the graveyard gate is the lower part of a small rectangular building, known from 19th-century views to have been a 3-storey tower with narrow windows and a door at first floor level (the present ground floor opening is not original). Traditionally known as the Residence or the Abbey, it was believed to be the place from where St Muiredach appeared to the people or, more prosaically, a dwelling. The most likely explanation is that this was a strong-house, secure accommodation for the rector and church possessions, rather like the pele towers of Northumberland, but there is no clear evidence for its date. The drawing above shows that the Residence looked like in 1838.

The Church

The earliest part is the nave, a simple rectangle $35\frac{1}{2}$ by 20 feet internally, which originally stood alone, without a chancel. It is built of sandstone, carefully fitted but markedly different from the squared and coursed stone of the added chancel. The path from the graveyard gate leads to the W. door, externally flat-headed, with inclining jambs, the opening surrounded by a large projecting frame with carefully worked edge mouldings. Internally the back of the massive lintel is exposed with a surrounding semicircular arch. Archaic in general appearance but accomplished in execution, this door dates probably from the first half of the 12th century, which must be the date of the whole nave. There are only two close parallels to the door, at Maghera only 12 miles away and at Aghowle in Co. Wicklow.

The small S. window is round-headed, externally framed by a distinctive flat moulding (closely paralleled at nearby Dungiven), internally deeply splayed with a steeply sloping sill. Both door and window show several cavities, some structural, some connected with fastenings, but the purpose of the projection on the inside of the door lintel remains a puzzle. The nave would originally have had an E. window, but when the chancel was added the E. wall was broken through and a chancel arch inserted in the breach. The bases of the arch remain.

The chancel measures internally $20\frac{3}{4}$ by $14-16\frac{1}{4}$ feet and it had three windows to E., N. and S. One jamb survives of the N. window, loose stones from the E., and the S. is intact, surrounded inside and out with elegant continuous roll mouldings. These are characteristic of the transitional phase from Romanesque to Gothic architecture and the Banagher window is datable from its detail to 1210-1225. East of the window is a blocked recess, framed with similar mouldings and clearly an original feature of the chancel, doubtless a sedile, a seat for the officiating priest. Externally the E. angles of the chancel are decorated with attached shafts with carved capitals, badly weathered but with plant and animal decoration consistent with an early 13th-century date.

The blocking of the sedile resulted from extensive remodelling of the E. end of the chancel in the 15th century, unsuspected from written sources but revealed by excavation in the 1970s. The features appear on our plan but are covered because the sandstone is exceptionally soft and friable and would not survive long exposure. A small narrow room was divided off at E. end to serve as a sacristy, for robbing and storing service equipment. The altar stood against the sacristy wall with the door to the sacristy on its S. side. In the back of the altar, open to the sacristy, was a cavity for relics (St Muiredach's?) and there is another cupboard, still visible, in the E. wall. Our architectural knowledge of late medieval liturgical arrangements in parish churches is very sparse and this evidence is valuable in filling out the picture. Outside the church, especially to S. and W., note what a great depth of soil has built up since its building, mainly the result of generations of burials.

Other Features

In and around the graveyard are some finely carved gravestones and slabs, a small rough cross E. of the church and a second across the road to the NW., on the townland boundary. Traditionally these are the remaining two of five which once marked the borders of church land. They could also have marked the edge of termon land, in which sanctuary could be claimed. Just outside the graveyard wall, ENE. of the church, is a boulder with a deep hollow, usually water-filled. This is a

bullau stone (like one at Dungiven), hollowed out by long use as a mortar for pounding food or fodder.

Mortuary Houses

SE. of the church is a small structure which must contain or cover the most illustrious of Banagher's burials – traditionally St Muiredach O'Heney (cover illustration). It is of the same date as the chancel and may have been built to receive remains disturbed by the addition of the chancel. The structure resembles a miniature church or house, of carefully dressed stone, with a framed panel on the W. gable showing an ecclesiastic, damaged but probably with a crozier and hand raised in blessing. A saint's relics were a valuable asset to a church, attracting pilgrims and revenue, and the importance of the Banagher relics is perpetuated in the still-living tradition of 'Banagher sand'. Sand from under the tomb has always been held to bring good fortune to members of the O'Heney family; in the early 19th century every family kept a store of the sand in the house. Its value is claimed even in the world of horse-racing!

The Banagher 'house' is the most sophisticated of a small Ulster group of mortuary houses, extending from Down to Donegal. The example at BOVEVAGH is prominently sited, near the SW. corner of the church. More ruined than the Banagher 'house', its internal arrangements are

clearer. At the E. end a small hand-hole gives access to the head end of a body-shaped cavity, now broken open but originally probably entirely enclosed except for the hand-hole. It was a common practice in the early church to leave access to relics so that people could benefit by direct contact or indirectly through pieces of cloth which had touched the remains. The Bovevagh 'house' is of rubble with a stone flagged roof and lacks datable features but a 12th-century date is possible.



BOVEVAGH

Ten miles N. of Banagher and 6 miles N. of Dungiven, Bovevagh church is set on a strong promontory above the Bovevagh river, a tributary of the Roe, within sight of the mountains of Ben Bradagh and Craiggore. The name is derived from Both Maeve, the house or church of Maeve. This must be an early monastic site, but the first written reference occurs in 1100 when its wooden church (dertech) was burned. Even its patron is uncertain: locally it is associated with an otherwise unknown St Ringan, but connections have also been claimed with Patrick, Columba, Adamnan and Aidan son of Fintan. In medieval times this was the parish church, ruined by 1622 but refurbished and probably in use until the early 19th century, when a move was made to a more convenient site to the east.

The earliest feature is the mortuary house, illustrated here and already described. The church is

a rectangular shell with rough gaps for windows, and it lacks the mouldings and other details by which buildings can be dated. Its long use is clear in the much patched and altered fabric: the remains of the east window could be as early as the 13th century and the west as late as the 18th. Features include the pair of small cupboards in the E. wall, on either side of where the altar once stood, and the marked external base batter of the walls, to give stability, especially where the level falls most steeply to the river.

Further Reading D. M. Waterman in *Ulster J. Archaeol.* 23 (1960) on mortuary houses and on Banagher in *Ulster J. Archaeol.* 39 (1976).

Other Churches in State Care in Co. Londonderry are Dungiven and Maghera. Other mortuary houses can be seen at Saul, Co. Down, Tamlaghtard, Co. Londonderry and Merville, Co. Donegal.

Access Banagher at grid ref. C6750666 is easily approached by road from N. or SW.; Bovevagh at grid ref. C667141 is approached by turning W. off B192 (Limavady-Dungiven) road. Easily combined with a visit to Dungiven Priory at C692083.