

Change and Continuity in an Irish Country Town: Kells, 1600–1820

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Introduction

KELLS IS AN IRISH COUNTRY TOWN WITH A DIFFERENCE because of its association with the early ninth-century Columban monastery and its magnificently illuminated gospel book known as the Book of Kells.¹ The town is located some thirty miles (50 km) north-west of Dublin. Its origins are reflected in its street-pattern, which shows the circular enclosure of the Early Christian monastery. In the twelfth century the Anglo-Normans granted the town borough status, extended the settlement along its major approaches and enclosed it by a town wall. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the activities of an improving landlord created the pleasant avenue of Headfort Place (Figure 6.1).² But it is not to the period of the Columban monastery (to which we owe the impressive round tower and the most important collection of high crosses in the country) that we will turn our attention. Instead we will explore the factors which led to changes in the social and physical fabric of the town in the early modern period. It was within this period that Kells shared with the rest of the country the trauma of devastation by war and social discontinuity as the consequence of land confiscation.

After the dispossession of the ‘papist’ families in the 1650s and after all previous franchises and privileges of the inhabitants had, by a judgment of the court of exchequer in Ireland, been seized in the 1660s, the town was granted to a Cromwellian soldier. Thereafter, at the very start of the eighteenth century, Kells was acquired by an ascendancy landlord, who established the town as the focal point of his estate. In the eighteenth century therefore, Kells experienced the effects of an improving landlord as significant

¹ The gospel book survived being stolen in AD 1007, when it was found in the fields outside the town after 80 days. It remained in the parish church in Kells until 1653, when it was presented to the library in Trinity College Dublin. A. Gwynn, ‘Some notes on the history of the Book of Kells’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 9 (1954), 131–61.

² For a topographical discussion of the early origins of the town see: A. Simms with K. Simms, ‘Kells’, in J.H. Andrews and A. Simms, eds, *Irish Historic Towns Atlas*, IV (Dublin, 1990).

changes were made to the fabric of the town under the influence of neo-classical architectural principles.³ The discussion of Kells in these contrasting centuries will be based on the evidence of seventeenth-century surveys, which were by-products of the Cromwellian settlement. These include the Down Survey (1655), the Civil Survey (1654–5) and the Valuation of Kells (1663), the last two of which have been published by the Irish Manuscripts Commission.⁴ The major documentary evidence for the eighteenth century is the (unpublished) Headfort estate papers and the Headfort estate maps, which are held in the National Library in Dublin.⁵

³ The interpretation of who was responsible for this type of neo-classical transformation by an improving landlord has shifted over the last ten years from the claim that landlords were all-powerful in this period to the affirmation that the town tenants played an active role. See L. Proudfoot and B. Graham, 'The nature and extent of urban and village foundation and improvement in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland', *Planning Perspectives*, 8 (1993), 259–81. For further readings on Irish country towns see: R.A. Butlin, 'Irish towns in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', in R.A. Butlin, ed., *The Development of the Irish Town* (London, 1977), pp. 61–100; L. Cullen, *Irish Towns and Villages* (Dublin, 1979); J.H. Andrews, 'The study of Irish country towns', in A. Simms and J.H. Andrews, eds, *More Irish Country Towns* (Cork, 1995), pp. 9–19; T.W. Freeman, 'The Irish country town', *Irish Geography*, 3 (1954), 5–14; R. Gillespie, 'Small towns in early modern Ireland', in P. Clark, ed., *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 148–65; B.J. Graham and L.J. Proudfoot, 'Landlords, planning and urban growth in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Ireland', *Journal of Urban History*, 18 (1992), 308–29; B.J. Graham and L.J. Proudfoot, 'Urban improvement in provincial Ireland, 1700–1840', *Irish Settlement Studies*, Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement, 4 (Athlone, 1994); B. Graham, 'The process of urban improvement in provincial Ireland', in F.E. Eliassen and G.A. Erstland, eds, *Power, Profit and Urban Land Landownership in Medieval and Early Modern Northern European Towns* (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 218–43; P.H. Gulliver and M. Silverman, *Merchants and Shopkeepers: A Historical Anthropology of an Irish Market Town, 1200–1991* (Toronto and London, 1995); W. Nolan and A. Simms, *Irish Towns: Guide to Sources* (Dublin, 1998); P. O'Flanagan, 'Markets and fairs in Ireland, 1600–1800: index of economic development and regional growth', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 11 (1985), 352–63; L.J. Proudfoot, 'Spatial transformation and social agency: property, society and improvement, c.1700 to 1900', in B.J. Graham and L.J. Proudfoot, eds, *Historical Geography of Ireland* (London, 1993), pp. 185–218; L.J. Proudfoot and B.J. Graham, 'The nature and extent of urban and village foundation and improvement in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland', *Planning Perspectives*, 8 (1993), 259–81; L.J. Proudfoot, 'Property ownership and urban and village improvement in provincial Ireland, 1700–1845', *Historical Geography Research Series*, 23 (Edinburgh, 1997); A. Shehan, 'Irish towns in a period of change, 1558–1641', in C. Brady and R. Gillespie, eds, *Natives and Newcomers* (Dublin, 1986), pp. 93–119; J.W. Smyth, 'Ireland a colony: settlement implications of the revolution in military-administrative, urban and ecclesiastical structures, c.1550 to c.1730', in T. Barry, ed., *A History of Settlement in Ireland* (London and New York, 2000), pp. 158–86; K. Whelan, 'The regional impact of Irish Catholicism, 1700–1850', in W.J. Smyth and K. Whelan, eds, *Common Ground: Essays on the Historical Geography of Ireland* (Cork, 1988), pp. 253–77; K. Whelan, 'Settlement and society in eighteenth-century Ireland', in G. Dawe and J.W. Foster, eds, *The Poet's Place: Ulster Literature and Society* (Institute of Irish Studies, Belfast, 1991), pp. 45–62.

⁴ The 1655 document took its name from the fact that the record compiled for the Civil Survey was put 'down' on maps. Down Survey, 1655, parish and barony maps of Kells. Reeves collection, National Library of Ireland, MS 723. Headfort Collection, National Archives, Dublin. R.C. Simington, ed., *Civil Survey, County Meath, 1654–5*. Dublin (1940), vol. v. The Kells Valuation constitutes part of the Headfort Collection of Civil Survey MSS of which certified copies are now in the National Archives. The Valuation has been published by R.C. Simington as 'Valuation of Kells (1663), with note on map drawn by Robert Johnson', in *Analecta Hibernica*, 22 (1960), 231–68. Abbreviated as Kells Val. from here on.

⁵ NLI, Headfort estate papers, MSS 25300–25453, 26679–26739. Headfort estate maps: Town and lands of Kells by John O'Brien, 1762, scale ten Irish perches (70 yds) to one inch (1:2520); Town and lands of Kells (maps 1–4, 7, 8 and terriers) by Sherrard, Brassington and Greene, 1817, scale four Irish perches (28 yds) to one inch (1:1008). NLI, Headfort papers.

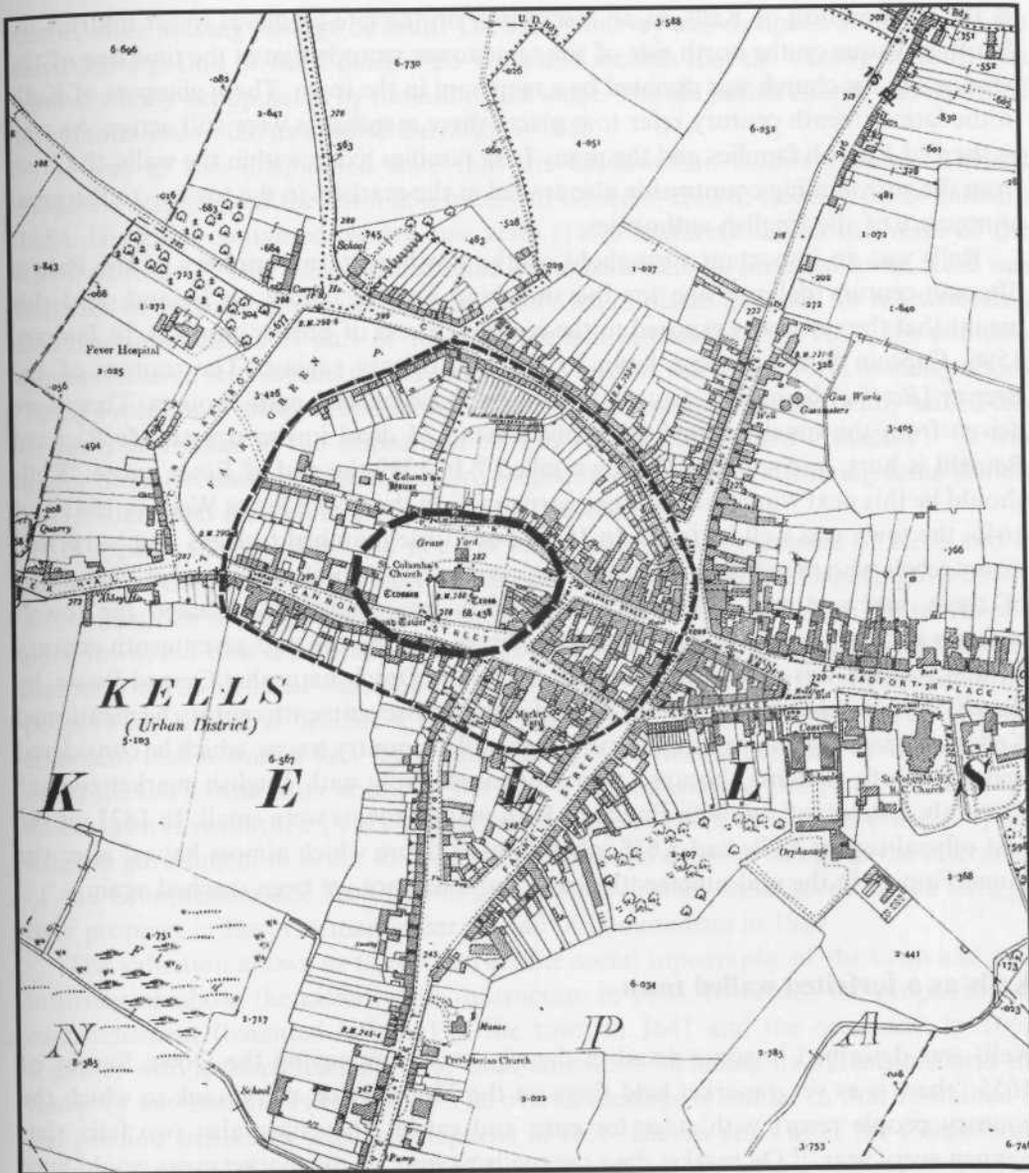


Figure 6.1. Kells: The black lines mark the enclosure of the Early Christian monastery (extract from 25" to the mile OS sheet 17, published 1908–11, with acknowledgements to OSI).

In the early seventeenth century, Kells was still essentially a medieval town under the influence of a number of leading Old English families. The medieval parish church, by then in the possession of the newly reformed Church of Ireland, had been rebuilt in 1578 by Hugh Brady, bishop of Meath as well as archdeacon of Meath and sovereign

of the Corporation of Kells, as an inscription on the late-medieval tower informs us. Another plaque on the north side of the same tower records that at the time one of the windows in the church was donated by a merchant in the town. These glimpses of Kells in the late sixteenth century refer to a place where merchants were still active. As well as the Old English families and the many Irish families living within the walls, the Irish from the surrounding countryside also traded at the markets in the town—to the great annoyance of the English authorities.

Kells was an important stronghold on the north-western periphery of the Pale, a fifteenth-century defence line for the shrinking English colony in Ireland, and this meant that the town was exposed to the constant stress of border conflicts. In January 1596, Captain Street wrote a letter to the lord deputy saying: ‘The traitors of the Brenny [*Breifne*] being 800 foot and 80 horse, have burned many houses. They were driven from the town by [my] company, leaving 35 dead in the streets. Mr Richard Betaght is hurt, and some of the town killed.’⁶ In 1599 the earl of Essex wrote: ‘Kells should be this next winter our frontier garrison’.⁷ In the Confederate Wars, in 1641 and 1646, the town was well battered. In 1642, Lord Lisle marched to Kells and ‘surprised divers rebels who then held in that place an open market, spoilt their market, slew many of them, and scattered the rest’.⁸ These skirmishes doubtlessly drained the town’s energies and as a result Kells declined in stature, and by the mid-seventeenth century all that was left was its market function. When the Dutch naturalist Gerard Boate, by then living in England, wrote about Ireland in the mid-seventeenth century he mentioned Kells in the same breath as a number of other walled country towns, which he considered scarcely worth noticing, because they compared badly with English market towns.⁹ Certainly, in comparison with England, Irish market towns were small. In 1821, at the first official census Kells had 3,618 inhabitants, a figure which almost halved after the Great Famine in the mid-nineteenth century and has not yet been reached again.

Kells as a forfeited walled town

Kells was described in some detail in the report accompanying the Down Survey of 1655: ‘there is as yet a market held there on the Thursday of every week to which the country people resort with store for corn and cattle. They have also two fairs that happen every year.’¹⁰ On market days the roads passing by the market cross would have been busy with stalls full of goods for sale and the streets would have been blocked by

⁶ *Calendar of the State Papers relating to Ireland, 1596–97*, HMSO (London, 1893), p. 222.

⁷ *Calendar of the Carew Manuscripts preserved in the Archiepiscopal Library at Lambeth*, 6 vols (London, 1867–73): 1589–1600, p. 128; 26 Jan 1597, p. 255; 9 Sep 1599, p. 322.

⁸ J.T. Gilbert, ed., *History of the Irish Confederation*, Preface (Dublin, 1882), vol. 1, p. lviii.

⁹ G. Boate, *Ireland’s Naturall History* (London, 1652), p. 9.

¹⁰ C. MacNeill, ‘Copies of Down Survey maps in private keeping’, *Analecta Hibernica*, 8 (1938), 419–27.

cattle, often making passage difficult. The Down Survey was compiled at the end of the destructive period of the Confederate Wars and records that the barony of Kells was almost wholly depopulated by these and laid waste. The old parish church was recorded as ruinous and in use as a horse barracks in 1655.

It was in this dilapidated state that the Cromwellian soldier Lt Col. Richard Stephens was granted the town at a lottery in Grocers' Hall in London on 24 January 1654. His grant contained twenty-nine acres (11.75 hectares) 'within the Walls of the Town of Kells'.¹¹ This bizarre event came about because, as a forfeited town, Kells was included in the commonwealth commissioners' list of places intended for redistribution to Protestant settlers as part of the Cromwellian settlement.¹² In 1657, the commissioners received instructions to grant leases for a term of thirty-one years to such persons 'being Protestants', who were desirous of becoming tenants of houses in any walled city or town of Ireland in the disposition of 'His Highness the Lord Protector'.¹³ It was under those circumstances that Richard Stephens succeeded in attracting some Protestant settlers who assisted him in rebuilding the town.

It appears that Stephens did not feel very secure in his possession of Kells and in 1658, four years after he had received his grant, he petitioned the English government to confirm him in his possessions in Kells. He wrote: 'This was before the rebellion a poor town, but now it is totally in ruins and left as a heap of rubbish. It was surveyed and returned as forfeited waste lands and allotted to the petitioner and by his and other people's industry it is become a hopeful plantation.'¹⁴ Stephens adds the interesting comment that it was in fact the county gentry who during the time of the rebellion saved the town from utter decay for the sake of its antiquities. The picture of a dilapidated town is confirmed by the Valuation of Kells in 1663, which was ordered by the English government in order to cope with claims and counter-claims in the aftermath of the Cromwellian and Restoration settlements—rather reminiscent of the struggle over property in East Germany after the fall of communism in 1989.

The valuation allows us to reconstruct the social topography of the town and gain information about the extent of its destruction in 1663. It records the proprietors of each tenement (tenanted holding) in the town in 1641 and the occupants in 1663, together with a short description of each tenement, including its dimensions and the fabric of any buildings (Table 6.1). The overall message is similar to that contained in the petition written by Richard Stephens in 1658. Eleven years after the Confederate Wars had ended, the town was still suffering the effects of the war and reconstruction was only piecemeal. Out of a total of 130 tenements only eight were substantial stone houses with thatched roofs and the rest were hovels or cabins. Fifty-three plots were described as waste. Again reminiscent of the war-damaged towns in central Europe

¹¹ *Cal. S. P. Ire., 1647–60*, p. 681.

¹² *Kells Val., 1663*, p. 237.

¹³ R. Dunlop, ed., *Ireland under the Commonwealth* (Manchester, 1913), vol. II, p. 666.

¹⁴ *Cal. S. P. Ire., 1647–60*, p. 681.

Table 6.1. Valuation of Kells, 1663: extract (presented by C. Simington, *Analecta Hibernica*, 22 (1960), 260).

Proprietors' names	Denominations	Length in feet	Breadth in feet	Rooms	Present tenants/ possessors 1663	Rent per annum	Eight years' value
						£ s. d.	£ s. d.
BEGIN AT THE SOUTH END OF THE EAST SIDE OF MAUDLIN STREETE							
<i>Henry Betagh</i>	A stone and clay walled strong house lately built the backside contains the garden contains	56	16	4	Gabriell Proctor	6 0 0	48 0 0
<i>One Ball of Dublin</i> <i>One Betagh's lease</i>	A wast tenement or homestead The backside contains The garden contains	36 36 48	56 56	— —	Gabriell Proctor	5 0	2 0 0
<i>Henry Betagh</i>	The like with some parte good stone and clay walls with a hovell The backside contains The garden contains	52 36 60	20 52 52	0 0 —	Shane O Gowne	2 0 0	16 0 0
<i>Garrett Fleming</i>	The like old stone and clay walls with a thatched hovell The backside contains The garden contains	46 36 60	20 46 46	— — —	Daniell Leyney	1 0 0	8 0 0
<i>Lord of Castlelaugh</i>	The like walls of a tenement and hovell The backside contains The garden contains	76 24 284	16 76 76	— 0 —	Patt. Geirty	1 10 0	12 0 0
						10 15 0	86 0 0

Table 6.1. (*contd.*)

Proprietors' names	Denominations	Length in feet	Breadth in feet	Rooms	Present tenants/ possessors 1663	Rent per	
						annum	Eight years' value
						£ s. d.	£ s. d.
BEGIN AT THE SOUTH END OF THE EAST SIDE OF MAUDLIN STREETE							
<i>Patt. Fagan</i>	The like	34	18	—	Wast	15 0	6 0 0
	The garden contains	176	34	—			
	The like	34	18	—	Wast	15 0	6 0 0
	The garden contains	176	34	—			
<i>Edward Betagh</i>	The like wast tenement	28	20	—	Wast	15 0	6 0 0
	The garden contains	200	28	—			
<i>Rood Land</i>	The like wast	52	20	—	Wast	15 0	6 0 0
<i>Nicho. Plunkett</i>	The garden contains	188	52	—			
<i>Rich. Ledwick</i>	The wast walls of a tenement with a cabbinn	44	20	—	Teigh Murry	1 10 0	12 0 0
	The garden contains	424	44	—			
BEGIN ON THE WEST SIDE OF THE SAID STREETE ON THE NORTH END NEXT THE GATE							
<i>Henry Betagh</i>	The stone and clay walls within which is thatched cabbinn	48	20	—	Nicho. Cullin	1 10 0	12 0 0
	The backside contains	32	48	—			
	The garden contains	68	48	—			
						6 0 0	48 0 0

after the Second World War the inhabitants built themselves makeshift buildings within the ruins of former houses. In the entry for Maudlin Street, the valuation makes repeated reference to 'old stone and clay walls with a thatched hovel' (Table 6.1). Most of the stone and clay houses were located in Market Street and Cross Street, with valuations ranging from £20 to £40, while for the small cabins in ruined homesteads on the periphery of the town the valuation went as low as £1.

Despite problems of identification,¹⁵ when the 1663 valuation figures are mapped two issues become apparent. First, the topographical features described in the valuation reflect the layout of the medieval town, with its walls and gates, and the semicircular street pattern of Carrick Street and Cross Street followed the alignment of the former Columban monastery. Second, it appears that the worst war damage was done in the streets leading from the west and south-west into the town, in Cannon Street and Shafolk Street—earlier known as Shefhogge Lane, later Suffolk Street (Figure 6.2). Why should that be so? Kells did not feature in Cromwell's campaigns, but there is evidence that Colonel O'Neill—with a large force, approaching from the west in 1646–7—raided and probably burnt the town, an easy task because of the thatched roofs.¹⁶

In 1641, at the start of the Confederate Wars, Kells had thirty-two proprietors. We can establish their identity by referring to the contemporary Civil Survey, the companion of the Down Survey, both of which were compiled as a preliminary to the Cromwellian land confiscation. Here we find that, of those thirty-two proprietors, twenty-three were mentioned as 'proprietors of Kells and Irish papists'. Among these proprietors we find names of families who would once have held lands in the barony of Kells, for example the Plunketts and Dunsanys. There were also five proprietors with the name of Betagh, who most likely would have been of ancient Gaelic descent, since this name is widely used in manorial extents, where it describes dependent Irish tenants. Most of the proprietors in Kells in 1641 were of Norman stock, however. There were seven different members of the Plunkett family, holding between them a large proportion of the town. If we look at the 1663 ownership pattern of tenements in Kells in tabulated form, we realise that in the medieval streets ownership was fragmented. But in Farrell Street on the south-eastern periphery of the town, which was more recently built up, R. Ledwich held ten tenements and was the dominant proprietor (Table 6.2).

The new Protestant population recorded in the 1663 valuation lived in the centre of Kells. For example, in Cross Street all names were indicative of tenants of English, Welsh or Scottish origin (Figure 6.3). One tenant had assembled two adjacent plots, two of them had three adjacent plots, and McGavelin had four—a pair on each side of the street. This prepared the way for later amalgamations of property. According to the

¹⁵ The problems of identification inherent in the Valuation are discussed in Simms, 'Kells', in Andrews and Simms, *Irish Historic Towns Atlas*, IV, notes 33 and 44, on p. 6.

¹⁶ See Friar O Meallan's diary, *Analecta Hibernica*, 3/22 (1968), p. 49.

valuation all houses had thatched roofs and the walls were built of either stone or mud. The better houses were always associated with Cromwellian settlers, as indicated by the names of their proprietors in the 1663 valuation. For example in Maudlin Street, Gabriell Proctor, a Protestant, lived in 'a stone and clay walled strong house lately

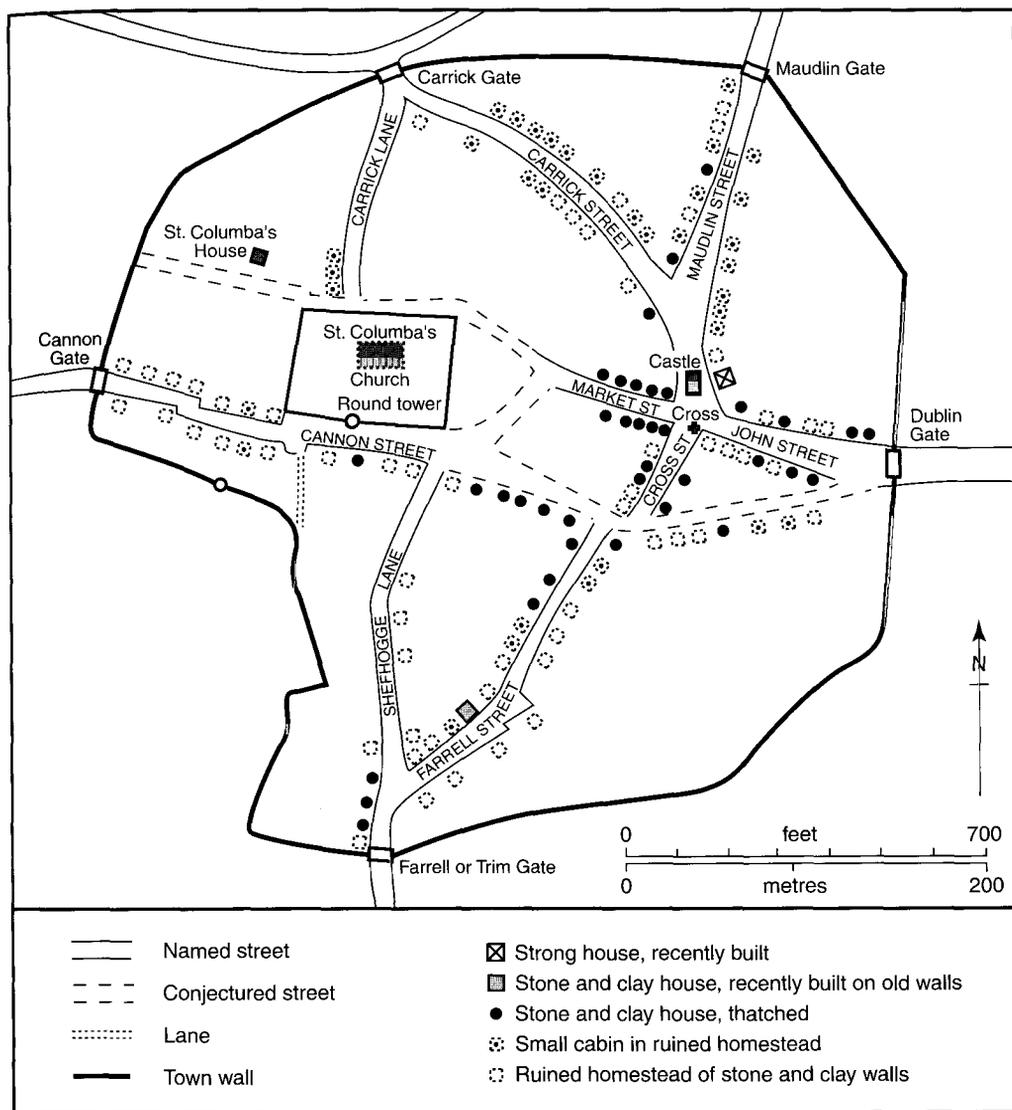


Figure 6.2. Kells c.1663, based on Kells Valuation 1663 (*Analecta Hibernica*, 1960) and Crown grant of Kells issued to Colonel Richard Stephens in 1669 (see Appendix to chapter 6) (*repr. from A. Simms with K. Simms, 'Kells', Irish Historic Towns Atlas, fasc. 4, Dublin, 1990, p. 3*).

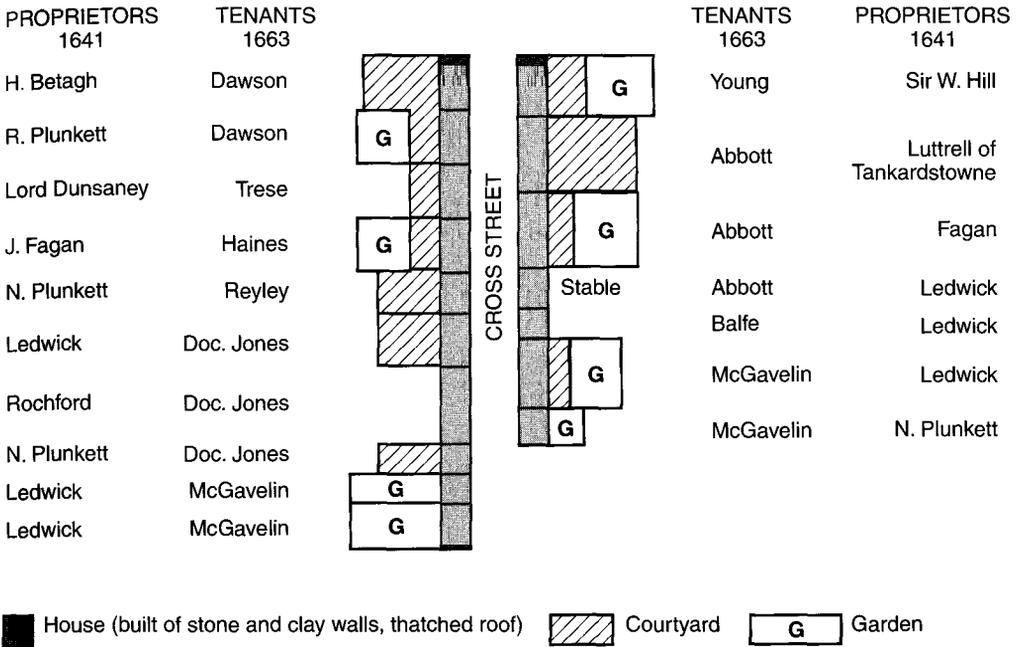


Figure 6.3. Proprietors and tenants in Cross Street, Kells, 1641 and 1663 (compiled by A. Simms, based on *Kells Valuation 1663, Analecta Hibernica, 1960, 253–5*).

thatched, with the roof-ridges running parallel to the street. There was no evidence of half-timbered houses, though they are known for that period from English towns and larger Irish towns. One possible explanation may lie in the fact that most houses in small Irish market towns were one-storey structures, while half-timbered houses are usually two- or three-storey buildings. It is also possible that there was a real lack of suitable wood for the construction of half-timbered houses.¹⁷

Arguably, the mud derived from glacially deposited soils in Ireland was ideally suited for the construction of single-storey houses, and so became the dominant tradition of building until stone-built houses came to the fore. They represented another deeply-rooted vernacular tradition in Irish society. In the centre of the town, the street frontages of houses were about 40 feet (12 m), while the depth of the houses was about 20 feet (6 m), implying that the longer sides of the individual houses ran parallel to the street, as they do today. A comparison of plot patterns recorded in the 1663 valuation with the 1836 Ordnance Survey map of Kells shows that in the intervening period plots

¹⁷ See the map of woodland distribution about 1600, in M. Mac Curtain, *Tudor and Stuart Ireland* (Dublin, 1972), p. 91.



Figure 6.4. Early nineteenth-century view of the castle and part of John Street, Kells (*inscribed E.B. 1874, repr. by courtesy of Mr Oliver Usher, Kells*).

had been amalgamated in the centre of the town, where merchants established their commercial activities.

It was only in 1669, after the Restoration, that Colonel Stephens was confirmed in his possession of Kells by a Crown grant (see Appendix). This grant certainly supports Colonel Stephens' earlier statement that his town had been devastated by war. The grant is of interest to us because of its topographical information, which once more confirms the layout of the medieval town. The reference to the 'new parlour and kitchen, with the bawn or court, where the well is next ye cross' refers to the modernisation of the medieval castle. Of a total of 134 tenements mentioned in the Crown grant, only fourteen were classified as houses, seventy were recorded as cabins with garden, four as small gardens and thirty-seven plots were wasted. The small number of stone houses—in contrast to the large number of thatched cabins—certainly underlines the fact that in 1669 Kells was a modest town.

The picture we gain of Kells in the second half of the seventeenth century is that of a shattered town where new immigrant settlers were living in stone houses among the cabins and hovels of the original population, some of whom had presumably stayed on. The Crown grant refers to the castle as: 'A stone and lime walled castle called the

Thouless three storeys high and a vault ill-roofed'. It was found in good repair in *Pigot's Directory* in 1824 but was demolished by 1836, when the first Ordnance Survey map of Kells was published (Figure 6.4).

Colonel Stephens would have found the task of rebuilding the town very daunting. Yet, he must have had some success, because it appears that while Kells was in ruins in 1654 it had been largely rebuilt by its new proprietor at the end of the decade. Weekly markets were held for corn and cattle and there were two annual fairs.¹⁸ But Richard Stephens himself cannot have felt optimistic about his town. Although he also held agricultural land in County Meath he probably suffered from lack of capital, which would have restricted the scope of his initiatives in the town. In 1706 he sold his interest, 29 acres, 1 rood and 36 perches (12 hectares) within the walls of Kells, to Thomas Taylor.¹⁹

Grant of a new charter in 1689

In 1689, James II granted a charter to Kells, making it once more a free borough with one sovereign, twenty-four burgesses and a commonalty.²⁰ However, by the eighteenth century the head of the local landlord family invariably held the office of sovereign. Consequently it is not surprising that the earliest set of town council minutes, spanning approximately one hundred years from 1685 to 1787, are part of the Headfort estate papers.²¹ Thus the reality of a free borough was constrained by landlord control and also by the further penal laws passed in the period 1695–1728. These ensured that the new council maintained a Protestant hegemony, which in the event lasted into the middle of the nineteenth century. A memorandum, in the records of the Corporation of Kells from 1696, mentions the residents who were to pay quarterly dues. These were ranked, with merchants at the top of the list, then bakers, dyers, glovers, smiths, weavers, tanners, tailors, brogue makers, butchers, carpenters, cooper, masons and millers.²²

The minutes bear witness to the council's efforts to improve the standard of urban life in Kells. The regular corporation assemblies were held in the old castle, referred to as the tholsel. In the late seventeenth century Kells Corporation had the following officials: a sovereign, two portreeves, a deputy sovereign, a registrar and two sergeants.

¹⁸ Markets in Kells were granted in 1607, 1663, 1679, 1688 and 1776, HC 1835, xxvii, 1836, xxiv, p. 185, *The Municipal Corporations (Ireland) Report, appendices to the first report of the commissioners*. Fairs in Kells were granted in 1607 and 1688; additional patents granted to Thomas Taylor, Friday before Shrove Tuesday and next three days and 15, 16 August, in 1680; and to the first earl of Bective, one fair on 9 September (formerly 26 August) in 1776. HC 1852–3 [1674], xli, *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the State of the Fairs and Markets in Ireland*, p. 100.

¹⁹ National Archives, Dublin, Headfort estate papers, Misc. Papers, 2A/12/43/Nr. 4, Survey of Parish of Kells.

²⁰ HC 1835, xxvii, xxviii, 1836, xxiv, *Municipal Corporations (Ireland), appendices to the first report of the commissioners*, p. 182.

²¹ NLI, Headfort estate papers, MS 25446 (I–VIII), Records of the Corporation of Kells, 1685–1787 (Abbreviated as KTCM). Spelling modernised in quotations.

²² KTCM, 15 Oct 1696.

In addition, the corporation also appointed annually the overseers for the fairs and markets, a pound-keeper and two constables.²³ The town sent two members to parliament.²⁴ The corporation was determined to modernise life in the town, as witnessed in their petition written in 1696, in which they ask the sovereign to pay 'for a good clock for the use of the corporation of Kells'.²⁵ A decree issued in 1697 by the court and clerk of market courts illustrates how the clock was used: 'That the market begins not before eight of the clock in the morning and that such persons as sell or buy before be prosecuted according to former ordinances.'²⁶

Equally interesting in the context of modernisation is the corporation's decision in 1685 to use part of their revenue to pay 'the present schoolmaster of Kells towards his encouragement.'²⁷ In 1694 the town council appealed to Thomas Taylor, as sovereign, to make money available to the corporation 'to alter and model the castle of Kells by making such conveniences therein as a market place, court place, office, prison, staircase, etc., as may be commodious, decent and necessary for the town of Kells'.²⁸ In short, the castle was to be converted into a courthouse and markethouse.²⁹ In compliance with an act of parliament a weighmaster was appointed in 1705 in order to control the transactions in the market.³⁰ The supervisory power of the court was important for the success of the market in the town. In 1721 it was ordered that the millers should bring their toll measures to the courthouse to be examined and sealed, and that scales and weights for measuring bread were also to be checked there.³¹ All the same, seven years later, in 1728, the corporation ordered 'that all the false weights taken up shall be melted down and made weights for the corporation grain.'³² This entry confirms that grain was an important commodity in the market at that time.

Being an inhabitant of the town brought with it serious obligations, as we learn from a decision taken in the court of assemblies in 1698:

That it was agreed on by the said Assembly and accordingly ordered as touching the yearly putting in of the six days work by the inhabitants of the said Corporation. That such as are not able to find a horse and car for the work and shall fail to bring or send a good one shall in view thereof pay one shilling for hiring of one on pain of being destroyed for the same upon every failing. And that every person that sends an insufficient labourer to the said work shall in view thereof pay six pence for the hiring of a good able person on pain of being destroyed for the same as aforesaid.³³

²³ KTCM, 15 Oct 1685.

²⁴ KTCM, 14 Sep 1662.

²⁵ KTCM, 15 Oct 1696.

²⁶ KTCM, 20 May 1697.

²⁷ KTCM, Michaelmas Day, 1685.

²⁸ KTCM, 26 Mar 1694.

²⁹ KTCM, 15 Oct 1695.

³⁰ KTCM, 29 Oct 1705.

³¹ KTCM, 27 Apr 1721; 12 Oct 1721.

³² KTCM, 22 Oct 1728.

³³ KTCM, 1 Oct 1698.

There was also a definite attempt to maintain law and order within Kells. We know that there were night watchmen (from 10 o'clock in the evening to 4 o'clock in the morning) to guard the town. In 1690 the minutes record that the night watchmen were to be supplied with candlelight and fire.³⁴ In 1717 the minutes record: 'that five men, two Protestants and three Papists and one of the Protestants to be Captain, shall be the nightly standing watch'.³⁵ This entry is interesting for the light it sheds on the co-operation of the two religious groups within the town.

Apart from security the minutes dwell on four other main issues: cleanliness, water-supply, removal of human waste and fire-hazard. One of the great problems in the town was how to keep the streets free of dung. This was of course particularly difficult in relation to the market. Therefore the corporation decided in 1698 'that twenty shillings yearly be allowed of the customs of the said Corporation to the custom-gatherer for the taking away of the dirt and dung of the Market Street and about the Castle'.³⁶ It appears that people were inclined to use the streets as their backyard. In 1703 the inhabitants of Cross Street were fined 'for not carrying away their dung and ashes'.³⁷ In 1705 James Fitzgerald stood accused 'for annoying the street with the rubbish of his garden'.³⁸ In 1706 winnowing of corn in the market, in front of or on either side of the castle, was forbidden and offenders were to be fined.³⁹ In the same year the corporation announced 'That no person or persons hereafter shall dry or beat any flax in any house within the town of Kells'.⁴⁰ We also learn that on occasions cattle were killed in the market-place, for in 1741 we read: 'that any butcher or killer of cattle be fined one shilling for every beast, cow, sheep and lamb that shall be killed in the Market Street of Kells'.⁴¹ These instances demonstrate the rural character of the town at the time.

There was a considerable fear of fire in the town, because the thatched cabins without chimneys would go up in flames easily. The corporation tried to deal with this problem by the following court order issued in 1702: 'cabins and furstacks are to be removed by the end of the same month and chimneys are to be built in the following month'.⁴² But even then, all was not well. In 1719 John Murphy was fined in the market court because 'the chimney . . . wherein he boils his soap . . . is of great nuisance by reason of a crack in the said chimney whence the fire is subject to come out'.⁴³ In the same court hearing, James Grumley stood accused 'for making an oven under the thatch of widow Gold's house which may endanger the town by fire.' Brewing and

³⁴ KTCM, 29 Oct 1691.

³⁵ KTCM, 14 Oct 1717.

³⁶ KTCM, 1 Oct 1698.

³⁷ KTCM, 29 Apr 1703.

³⁸ KTCM, 7 Jun 1705.

³⁹ KTCM, 10 Oct 1706.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ KTCM, 16 Oct 1741.

⁴² KTCM, 4 Apr 1702.

⁴³ KTCM, 2 Oct 1719.

dyeing were two activities in early eighteenth-century Kells for which chimneys were essential, and if people did without them they were fined. In 1733 the corporation appointed overseers of fire places in the town.⁴⁴ So, step by step, the fabric of the town was improved.

Cleanliness was a major issue since horses and donkeys were used for transport and cattle were sold in the market, all of whom left behind a large quantity of dung. The problem was made worse by people dumping their rubbish into the streets. In 1687 the minutes record that the inhabitants of Market Street paid a scavenger to carry away the dung.⁴⁵ In 1716 we hear that Mr Nicholas Daly was fined 'for keeping a dunghill near Cannon Gate'.⁴⁶ A desperate attempt to keep the streets clean and preserve the urban image was made by banning all livestock from the streets: 'No geese and ducks be suffered to be kept in the streets of Kells on forfeiture of twelve pounds sterling for every such offence',⁴⁷ there should not be any 'keeping of unlawful swine', and that any person should be fined who made a 'Hoggy Sty in the Street'.⁴⁸ These entries indicate that the lifestyle of people living in Kells must have been greatly influenced by the rural hinterland.

Another major issue was the water supply. The early nineteenth-century estate maps show a number of pumps in the town erected over wells, which supplied watercourses that needed to be kept unobstructed, particularly by dung. Therefore orders to attend to a watercourse in front of one's premises were frequent. In 1704 'Mr Joseph Williams was presented for a nuisance in not opening the watercourse near the Maudlin Gate'.⁴⁹

The repair of the streets was a constant concern and the town council succeeded in providing some paving by ordering the inhabitants to do it themselves. Market Street was the focus of special attention. The inhabitants were obliged to pave three yards (2.8m) in breadth in front of their doors and to keep the water channel clean and in repair, in return for which they were allowed to put up stalls on the pavement in front of their houses.⁵⁰ In 1724 the corporation obviously decided to complete the job of paving Market Street, and they went about it in the following way: 'We present that every respective inhabitant of Market Street shall find six loads of stones towards paving the said street, and that the same be paved out of the public money of the Corporation'.⁵¹ The massive wall around St Columba's churchyard was built with a subsidy from the corporation in 1714.⁵² Street lighting came to Kells in 1717, when it is recorded: 'There shall be four lamps bought for the use of the said corporation and

⁴⁴ KTCM, 18 May 1733.

⁴⁵ KTCM, 20 Oct 1687.

⁴⁶ KTCM, 11 Oct 1716.

⁴⁷ KTCM, 10 Oct 1706.

⁴⁸ KTCM, 2 Oct 1719.

⁴⁹ KTCM, 18 May 1704.

⁵⁰ KTCM, 6 Jul 1693.

⁵¹ KTCM, 26 Oct 1724.

⁵² KTCM, 12 Apr 1714; 3 Oct 1726.

placed where the governor and burgesses thereof shall think fit.⁵³ And in 1735 it was decided 'That three lamps more shall be bought and placed in such places as are wanting'.⁵⁴ In 1742 it is mentioned that John Nelson is to be paid for 'lighting the lamps in the said Corporation and taking care of them'.⁵⁵

The corporation minutes offer further glimpses of the quality of life in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Kells. In 1694 they record the following: 'Ordered that the sergeants give notice to the Roman Catholics of Kells. That if they have a mind to preserve the cross that they remove it into another place for that the judgement of the said Assembly was that the said cross now blocks up the way, where it stands in the market street and thereupon resolved that it should be removed from thence.'⁵⁶ This entry suggests that, in spite of discrimination, the Catholics were inhabitants whose interests were taken note of by the corporation. In 1715 the corporation decided that 'the Popish inhabitants of the Corporation shall find sufficient fire and candlelight for the town watch during its continuance.'⁵⁷ In 1727 the clerk of the market court decided, 'That James Betagh shall be the Popish constable and Hugh Reilly continued as the Protestant constable of the said corporation.'⁵⁸ In 1714 it is recorded that 'Patrick Plunket constable should be presented for suffering vagabond persons to profane the Lord's Day and refusing to put them in stocks'.⁵⁹ In 1706 the Council decided 'to fine the carmen of Kells who refused to transport the baggage of the horsemen of the Army to Kells'.⁶⁰ Again, the inhabitants of Kells had refused to co-operate with authority. In 1703, the Corporation of Kells stood accused in court 'for not having a pair of stocks and a whipping post'.⁶¹ Puritan values were upheld. In 1711 one unfortunate father 'was presented for encouraging and suffering his daughter Elisabeth to play music on Sundays and entertaining idlers, and Patrick Plunkett was presented for playing cards on Sunday, and Wm Lynchy for keeping a Bawdy house, and Mary Valentine, Margret Coleman and Margret Armstrong to be turned out of town as whores'.⁶² Surprisingly there was a problem for pedestrians in the early eighteenth century, as the minutes record: 'That several cars in the streets in the night time are very troublesome to the inhabitants so that they are hindered from walking and doing their business.'⁶³

⁵³ KTCM, 14 Oct 1717.

⁵⁴ KTCM, 2 Oct 1735.

⁵⁵ KTCM, 4 Oct 1742.

⁵⁶ KTCM, 26 Mar 1694.

⁵⁷ KTCM, 7 Oct 1715.

⁵⁸ KTCM, 10 Oct 1727.

⁵⁹ KTCM, 12 Apr 1714.

⁶⁰ KTCM, 5 Dec 1706.

⁶¹ KTCM, 29 Apr 1703.

⁶² KTCM, 11 Oct 1711.

⁶³ KTCM, 2 Oct 1733.

Kells under landlord patronage

Thomas Taylor had come to Ireland in 1652 with his friend William Petty, with whom he co-operated on the Down Survey, from which we may conclude that he was a man of considerable administrative talent. In 1660 Taylor had purchased land in County Meath, including the town of Kells, which provided his estate with a focal point. The first three generations of Taylors lived in the street (then unnamed) that became Headfort Place, recalling the fact that in 1760 the head of the family was elevated to the Irish peerage as Baron Headfort.⁶⁴ The first reference to Taylor's house comes from the corporation minutes in 1713, which note that a 'scavenger' had to clean the access roads leading to the church, on both sides of the castle and down to Sir Thomas Taylor's house.⁶⁵ In 1740 Isaac Butler wrote glowingly about Kells and made the following reference to Taylor's house: 'Sir Thomas Taylor has a noble dwelling on the left entering the town but makes no figure being blinded by walls and trees.'⁶⁶ In 1770 the family left the town and moved into Headfort House, a Palladian mansion built for them by the architect George Semple outside the town. Over the next fifty years or so the Taylor family took an active interest in the development of Kells.

The growth of Anglo-Irish patriotism provoked a spirit that was determined to improve the outward signs of civilisation in Ireland. Thus in the late eighteenth century, when Viscount Headfort had been advanced to the earldom of Bective, he succeeded in giving Kells some of the attributes of an attractive estate town. The road entering from the direction of Dublin and from Headfort House was made spacious and tree-lined, 'pleasing to the eye' as a mid-nineteenth-century handbook for travellers described it.⁶⁷ The 1817 estate map shows on the northern side of Headfort Place substantial houses with passageways that provided access from the street to the coach houses and the formally laid-out gardens. These typically Georgian houses have survived to the present day.

A watercolour of Kells, c.1800 (Figure 6.5), shows the contrast between a house on Headfort Place, a large three-storey slated Georgian building with a panelled front door with fanlight, and the adjoining two-storey traditional town houses, some of which had thatched roofs. One of the houses shows a bow-windowed street front. On the opposite side of the street, the painting shows a two-storey Georgian house, which was used as an inn. As Kells was located on the intersection of the mail-coach road from Dublin to Enniskillen with the Kingscourt to Mullingar route, it was a resting-point for travellers. The painting also shows that at the market cross, which is barely suggested, stood a house with a Dutch gable, probably built of brick. Beyond this house at the top of the

⁶⁴ In 1762 Baron Headfort was created Viscount Headfort; in 1766 he was advanced to an earldom as earl of Bective and in 1800 his eldest son was made marquess of Headfort.

⁶⁵ KTCM, 1713, vol. II, p. 103.

⁶⁶ I. Butler, 'A journey to Lough Derg' [1740] (transcribed by Austin Cooper), *JRSAI*, 22 (1892), 129–31.

⁶⁷ J. Fraser, *Handbook for Travellers in Ireland* (Dublin, 1844), p. 495.



Figure 6.5. Watercolour view of Kells from the east (*inscribed L.E.W., July 1803 [?], repr. by courtesy of private owner in Kells*).

slope stands a tower, the only remnant of the former medieval parish church. The main focus of the picture was the modernised late medieval castle with stepped crenellations, a wooden belfry and a clock. As we already know from the late seventeenth-century corporation minutes, the castle had been converted into a market house, court and prison by 1694, and was where the corporation meetings were held. Finally, the picture shows that the streets were not paved despite the corporation's orders from the early eighteenth century onwards. This would hardly have worried those who moved around on horseback. Gentlemen, who may have been merchants, well dressed ladies, soldiers and beggars are all depicted as part of an urban scene that gives absolutely no hint of the commercial side of the town.

In 1778 the earl of Bective undertook to have the old semi-ruined medieval parish church, in the graveyard in the centre of the town, pulled down save for the old tower. He replaced this with a new structure in plain classical style, by the architect Thomas Cooley.⁶⁸ Twenty years later the second earl donated the site for a Catholic church on the south side of Headfort Place, in the heart of the landlord quarter. He also helped

⁶⁸ NLI, Headfort estate papers, MS 25304.

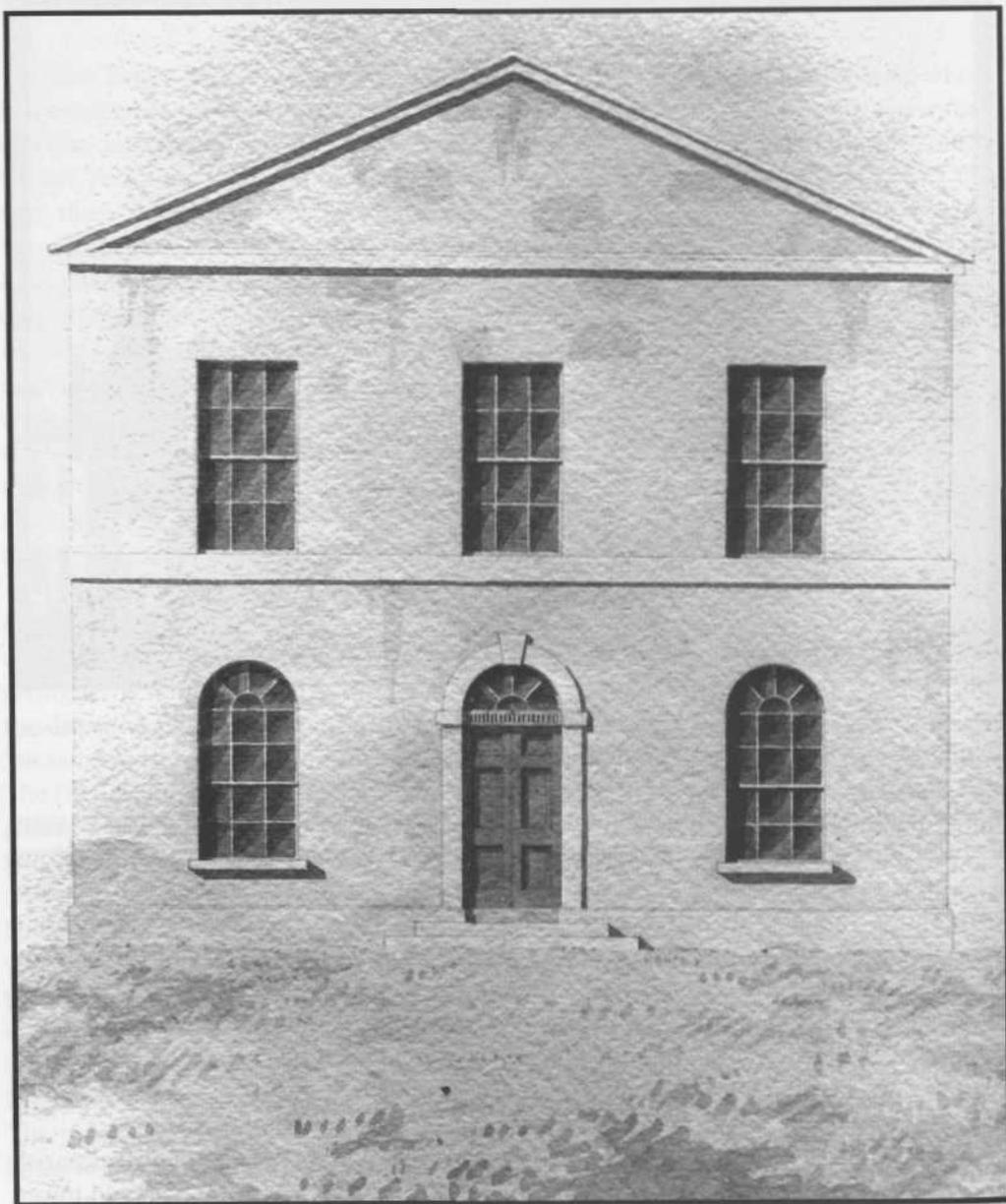


Figure 6.6. Kells Session House, rear elevation: designed by Francis Johnston in 1802 (*Murray Collection, The Irish Architectural Archive*).

to fund the building, which was designed by Francis Johnston,⁶⁹ and laid its foundation stone in April 1798. A contemporary wrote to a friend in Dublin about the event:

The sensations of delight which burst forth among those who were present on this occasion are more easily conceived than described. Rapid as lightening, the magic infection of Earl Bective's benevolence and liberality flew from breast to breast, and glowed in every face I saw. How could a scene in every respect unusual here be contemplated with ordinary feelings?⁷⁰

The Catholic chapel was completed in the late 1820s. *Pigot's Directory* of 1824 described it as 'of the Gothic style and when finished will be a handsome building'. Within a few years after the opening of the chapel the *Freeman's Journal* reported: 'some evil disposed persons broke into the chapel in Kells and injured the valuable altar piece by tearing a large hole in the lower part of it. . . . There was a meeting of the Orangemen of the Kells Lodge the same night.'⁷¹ Unfortunately, this fine church was replaced by a new structure in 1960.⁷²

In 1802 Lord Headfort erected an elegant court house designed by Francis Johnston at the east end of Headfort Place (Figure 6.6).⁷³ At much the same time, in order to alleviate congestion in the centre of the town, and probably also to gain better control over the market, he transferred most market activities into the newly built shambles in New Market Street (Figure 6.9). It is likely that at this stage the old market house in the former castle was closed down and its functions were transferred to the spacious new building. Another step towards modernisation was the establishment of a fair green on the western periphery of the town, so that cattle and sheep would no longer spoil the streets (Figure 6.9). Patents to hold fairs were granted to Thomas Taylor for the Friday before Shrove Tuesday and the next three days, and also for the 15th and 16th of August in 1680, and one fair was granted to the first earl of Bective for the 29th of September in 1776.⁷⁴ Earlier in the eighteenth century, Sir Thomas Taylor had chaired the turnpike trust, established in 1734, for carrying out road improvements between Navan and Kells.⁷⁵ In the second marquess's day there were ambitious plans for a new road to be cut through the town, as the 1817 estate map shows (Figure 6.7). Fortunately

⁶⁹ S. Lewis, *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (London, 1837), vol. II, p. 37.

⁷⁰ A. Cogan, *The Diocese of Meath, ancient and modern* (Dublin, 1862–70), vol. III, p. 224. The bishop of Meath was missing from the event because eight years earlier, in 1790, Lord Bective had written on behalf of his Catholic tenants to the bishop of Meath recommending a particular candidate for the position of parish priest. The bishop ignored him and Lord Bective replied on 12 August 1790: 'but since you are of a different opinion, it is perfectly indifferent to me who is appointed. I have but one wish, and that is the prosperity, happiness, and well being of every description of men amongst whom I live' (Cogan, *Diocese of Meath*, pp. 148–9).

⁷¹ 'Orange outrage on a Roman Catholic chapel', *Freeman's Journal*, 14 May 1836.

⁷² Kells Urban District Council Minutes, 7 Nov 1960.

⁷³ S. Lewis, *Topographical Dictionary* (London, 1837), vol. II, p. 36.

⁷⁴ HC 1852–3 [1674], XLI, *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the State of the Fairs and Markets in Ireland*, p. 100.

⁷⁵ Kells turnpike journal, 1734–6; Account of Kells and Navan turnpikes, 1738–58; in Headfort estate papers, NLI MS 25450. See Kells turnpike journal, 3 May 1734.

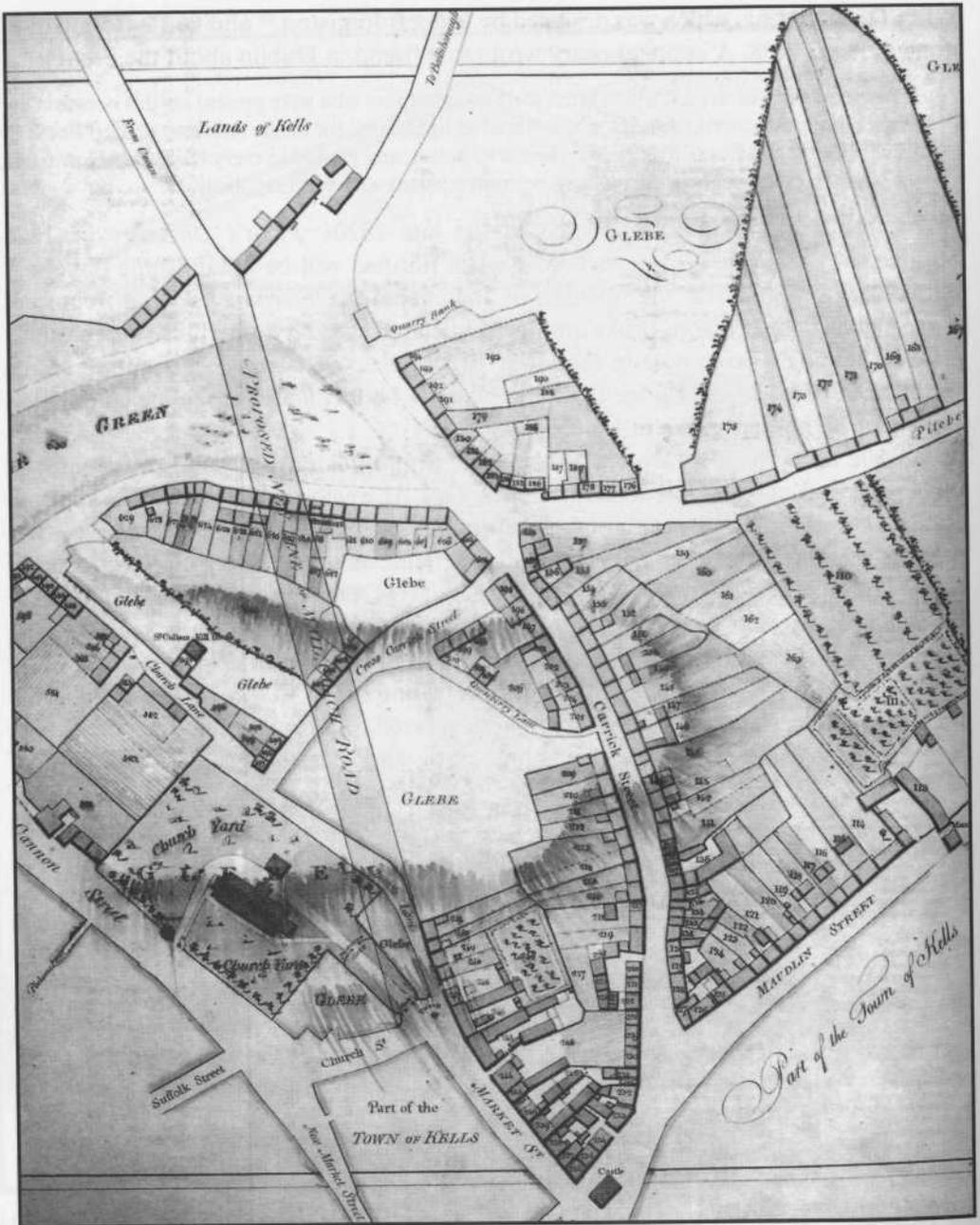


Figure 6.7. Kells estate map: west division, 1817, by Sherrard, Brassington and Greene (*Headfort Papers, National Library of Ireland*).

there was not enough money to carry out these plans, which would have destroyed the town's historic centre.

By the late eighteenth century, many merchants lived in substantial 'polite' town houses. Market Street was rebuilt in the Georgian style, and it is to be assumed that this reflected the gradual penetration of metropolitan cultural values into provincial urban communities like Kells. It has been suggested that it was the Wide Street Commissioners, established in Dublin in 1757, who set the tone.⁷⁶ They may well have influenced the wide layout of Headfort Place. A property advertisement in a Dublin newspaper described a house in Kells in 1769 as 'a new slated well-finished dwelling house, two storeys high, with an attic story, convenient offices, and a good garden'.⁷⁷ The uniformity of these houses is most probably the result of stipulations in the building leases issued by the landlord and also the general acceptance by the tenants of the neo-classical language of architecture, even for modest buildings. Architectural historians believe that the classical language of the big country houses influenced the architecture of the smaller dwellings in towns, 'where the elegance of the large mansions was reflected in the simple rhythms and proportions of the Irish streetscapes'.⁷⁸

Arguably, therefore, the new styles of architecture were a response by the emerging urban middle classes to the example provided by the big classical houses in the countryside. Unfortunately there appear to be no examples of leases in the Headfort estate papers to demonstrate the extent to which this new uniformity was also conditioned by landlord stipulation in Kells.⁷⁹ Elsewhere, however, there are widespread examples from other estates which allow some insight into how this relationship might have worked. On the Brownlow estate in Ulster, for example, a leasebook from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (1667–1711) contains precise instruction how new houses should be built.⁸⁰ A 1666 lease from this collection specified for Lurgan (Co. Armagh) that a house was to be built 20 feet (6 m) long, 16 feet (4.9 m) broad and 9 feet (2.75 m) high. It was to be rough casted with lime and have a brick or stone chimney.⁸¹ A 1687 lease for the same estate prescribed that the 'frontstead . . . range even with Gill's freehold'.⁸² A 1703 lease is even more specific: 'to build a house in one

⁷⁶ J.H. Andrews, 'Land and people, c.1780', in T.W. Moody and W.E. Vaughan, eds., *A New History of Ireland* (Oxford, 1986), vol. iv, p. 263.

⁷⁷ *Faulkner's Dublin Journal*, 11 Apr 1769.

⁷⁸ S. Rothery, *The Buildings of Ireland* (Dublin, 1997), p. 69.

⁷⁹ This lack of surviving leases is surprising as there are over 200 numbered manuscripts in the National Library of Ireland Headfort collection (see note 5) and when it was so important, legally, for the terms of leases to be preserved. There is a possibility that memorials of Headfort leases may lie in the Registry of Deeds, Henrietta Street, Dublin, but none has yet been located.

⁸⁰ R. Gillespie, ed., *The Brownlow Leasebook, 1667–1711: Settlement and Survival on an Ulster Estate* (Belfast, 1988).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

year equal in all dimensions to Jo. Pattersons best house, and in five years more raise the rest of the house he now lives in and make them uniform'.⁸³ From the evidence on the ground a similar process must have been at work in Kells. An attempt was certainly made to establish a streetline, to ensure uniformity between houses by keeping to certain dimensions, and in a piecemeal fashion to raise former one-storey houses to two- or three-storey houses.

The 1817 estate maps reflect the medieval form of the town but they also show some extramural growth. Humble cottages had sprung up around the Fair Green, ribbon development had occurred along Maudlin Street. One contemporary who visited the town in 1818, just a year after the estate maps were compiled, remarked: 'The cabins bear painful testimony of the poverty of the inhabitants, which is here increased by the scarcity and consequent price of fuel' (Figure 6.8).⁸⁴ At the other end of the social scale an 'ascendancy quarter' had grown up at Headfort Place. A number of new street names appeared on the 1817 estate maps. The increase of population is also reflected in the subdivision of existing house plots. The 1663 valuation of Kells had recorded eleven

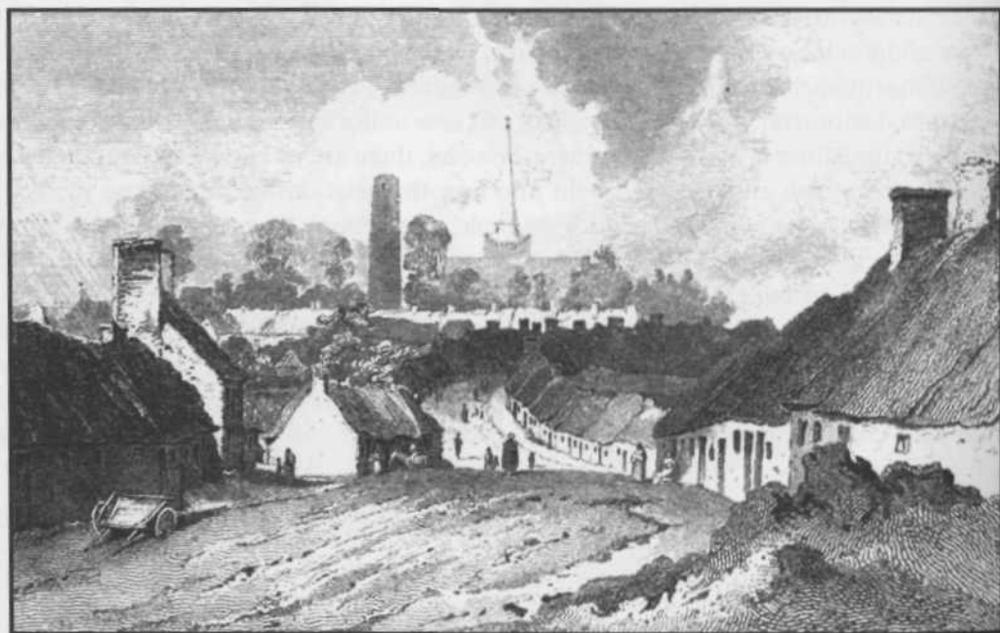


Figure 6.8. View of Kells from the south, engraved by George Petrie (*repr. from Thomas Cromwell's Excursions through Ireland, London, 1820*).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁸⁴ J.C. Curwen, *Observations on the State of Ireland* (London, 1818), p. 185.

house plots on the south side of Cannon Street; the 1817 estate map shows eighteen.⁸⁵ In the market area, by contrast, plots appear to have been amalgamated in the same period to allow for bigger commercial premises.

The proprietorial geography of Kells in the early nineteenth century is well reflected in the terrier accompanying the 1817 estate maps. The terrier records 203 lessees holding 630 separate plots in the town. Among these lessees were a small number of bigger lessees (middlemen), who held—and sub-let—whole sections of a street on the periphery of the town. In contrast, Market Street, in the centre of the town, contained twenty separate plots held by twelve lessees, six of whom were resident, making for a much more fragmented ownership pattern. On the basis of family names it appears from the terrier that the dominant families in Kells in 1817 with multi-plot properties were all Protestants. When the information from this terrier is superimposed on the estate map, the housing fabric of Kells in 1817 shows considerable contrasts (Figure 6.9). The well established areas in the centre of the town and extending into Headfort Place, for which substantial houses are recorded with slated roofs, stables and gardens, differed markedly from the more peripheral sections of the town around the Fair Green and adjoining streets, where thatched cabins straggled along the roads in ribbons. Commercially the most prominent sites were breweries in John Street and Headfort Place, a malt house in Farrell Street, a tannery in Back Street and another in New Market Street. These industries were clearly based on the agricultural productivity of the surrounding countryside.

Conclusion

The 1817 estate maps show Kells at a high point in its history, before it succumbed to the widespread social, economic and demographic problems of the nineteenth century. By 1851, when Kells reached its demographic peak of 4,326 inhabitants—many of whom were unemployed farm labourers—the economic situation in the town had begun to degenerate. In the second half of the nineteenth century, after the Great Famine, the population steadily declined, mainly as a result of emigration, until it had practically halved by 1900. Mid-nineteenth-century street directories show that shopkeepers were now the dominant business force, with premises on Market Street and Cross Street. Manufacturing had ceased and landlord influence was diminishing. From the mid-nineteenth century, any impetus for modernisation in the areas of health, education, policing, and the provision of essential services—such as gas, water and a sewage system—came from central government. The newly emancipated Catholic Church became involved in education, and by the second half of the nineteenth century

⁸⁵ Kells Val., pp. 249–51; NLI, Headfort estate maps, see note 5.

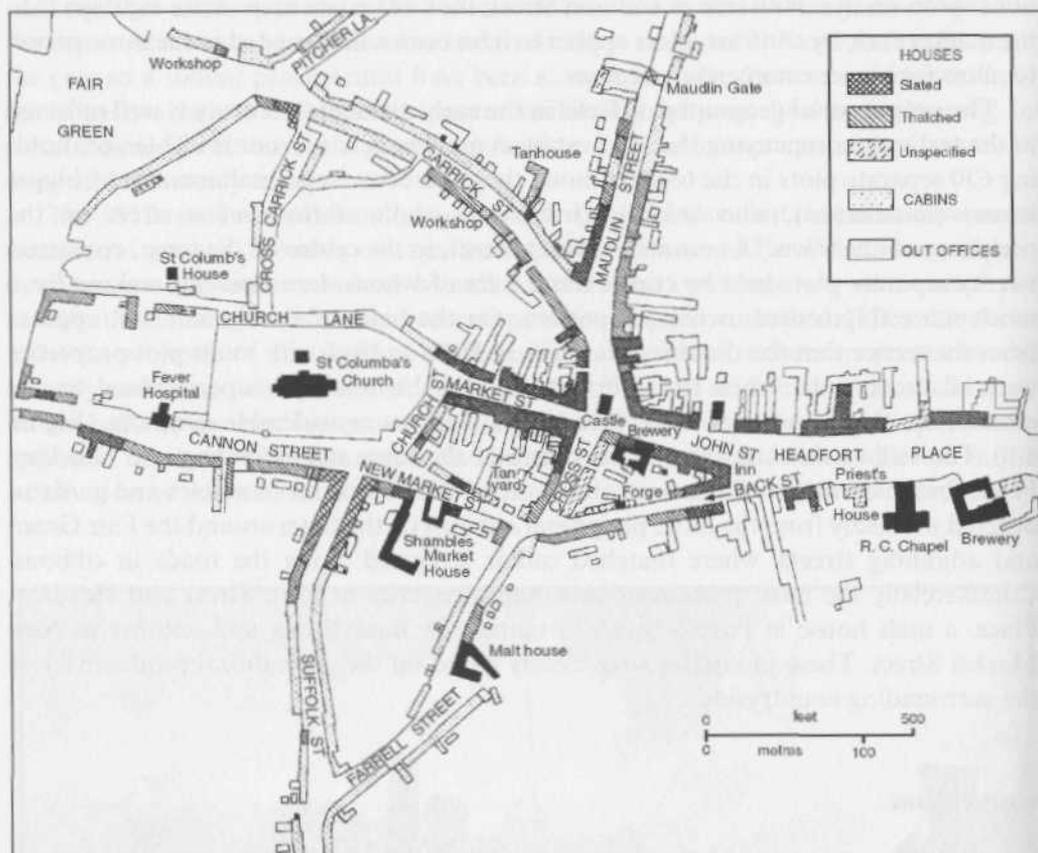


Figure 6.9. House types in Kells, 1817: based on the rental list attached to the estate maps produced in 1813 by Sherrard, Brassington and Greene (*Headfort Papers, National Library of Ireland*; repr. from A. Simms with K. Simms, 'Kells', *Irish Historic Towns Atlas*, fasc. 4, Dublin, 1990, p. 5).

the Catholic middle class had begun to assert itself and economic status was to become the key social indicator.

When we look at the topographical development of Kells in the early modern period, it is striking that the morphological framework of the early medieval monastic town and the medieval borough had been preserved, together with the old street names. On the other hand, important elements of the physical fabric of the medieval town—such as walls, gates and monastic institutions—had been removed completely. The most striking example of this is St Mary's Abbey, an influential Augustinian house in medieval Ireland. It stood outside the Cannon Gate, named after the religious of this foundation, but no physical evidence of its former presence has survived. This example is a powerful reminder of the dramatic changes which affected Irish society in the early modern period.

Our analysis of Kells in this period has shown that changes were associated with a number of different factors. In the mid-seventeenth century the Confederate Wars caused widespread physical destruction in the town. The Cromwellian land confiscation made possible the grant of Kells to a 'New English' soldier and entrepreneur, Lt Col. Stephens, and facilitated rapid social change, with an influx of Protestant settlers, the demise of Old English families and the marginalisation of Gaelic families. Within this framework Stephens struggled to rebuild the town, but eventually sold out to Thomas Taylor. The Taylor family's ownership ushered in a new era for Kells as they had the necessary capital and will to carry out modernisation. They built a number of public buildings according to the spirit of the time in neo-classical style. These included new churches, for the Church of Ireland community as well as for the Catholics in the town, and a court house. They laid out Headfort Place in the Georgian idiom.

All over Ireland, landlords granted favourable leases by allowing long terms of years and low ground-rents. In this way they succeeded in spreading the cost of rebuilding their towns. By the use of stipulating leases they had some influence on the houses built by their tenants in towns. The tenants in turn accepted the lead given by the landlords. It was the tenants who decided on the detailed architectural features of the houses they built. Their acceptance of a simplified classical style was the key to the uniform appearance of Irish towns from the late eighteenth century onwards. By using architectural features such as ornamental quoining, classical door-surrounds and fanlights, tenants shared in a modest way in the conspicuous consumption displayed by the bigger country houses. Proudfoot put it succinctly, when he wrote: 'It was this element of property delegation that enabled property-using rather than property-owning groups in Irish society to participate in urban and village improvement.'⁸⁶ These tenants were craftsmen, shopkeepers or merchants, as well as—in the later nineteenth century—petty industrialists.

A specific feature of Irish towns is the large number of sub-lessors (middlemen) in the late eighteenth century and particularly in the nineteenth century, whose emergence can only be explained with reference to the landlord who was forced by financial difficulties to sell more and longer leases to wealthy middlemen in order to raise money for his own concern.⁸⁷ The middlemen thereby acquired an increasing influence in the town, to the detriment of the landlord. The terriers of the 1817 Headfort estate papers confirm the emergence of a group of urban middlemen, who each controlled a number of different plots in the town.⁸⁸ They were associated with an increasingly strong commercial interest. These wealthier tenants had a strong influence on the form of the town

⁸⁶ L.J. Proudfoot, *Urban Patronage and Social Authority: The Management of the Duke of Devonshire's Towns in Ireland, 1764–1891* (Washington, 1995), p. 54.

⁸⁷ See also S. Hood, 'The landlord influence in the development of an Irish estate town: Strokestown, Co. Roscommon', *Irish Geography*, 28/2 (1995), 118–30.

⁸⁸ The Headfort terriers of the 1817 Survey are reprinted in Simms with Simms, 'Kells', in Andrews and Simms, *Irish Historic Towns Atlas*, iv.

in the late eighteenth century by building to a particular pattern. They put up two-storey stone houses with a slate roof, a simple façade with a central door, and windows on both sides. It is only if we realise the importance of the town tenants, both at the level of the middlemen and the individual tenant, that we can hope to explain the widespread uniformity of the architectural style in Irish market towns, whose main characteristic is its simplicity.

Finally, the state provided the institutional framework for the town by issuing charters, which eventually in the late nineteenth century paved the way towards fully fledged municipal government. From the early nineteenth century onwards, state intervention also improved public health, policing and organised social relief. In the eighteenth century the Church of Ireland in Kells was closely linked to the landlord's sphere of influence. The Catholic Church made a relatively early comeback, as County Meath, part of the Dublin hinterland, constituted one of the early areas for Catholic re-emergence. With the rise of the Catholic middle classes, relations between the landlord and tenants deteriorated, as conflicting interests clashed over the control of the town. It is important to be aware of these different strands if we wish to understand the special identity of the Irish market town, which was shaped by politically and culturally contesting forces, both borrowing from local traditions and larger European influences. The impact of spatial transformation and modernisation of Irish towns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was made all the more complex, because it occurred against the background of political and social transformations in society as the result of English colonisation in Ireland. In short, a diversity of traditions has moulded the characteristic personality of Irish towns, which went through a formative phase in the early modern period.

Appendix

Crown grant of Kells to Colonel Richard Stephens, 1669 (*Fifteenth annual report of the Irish record commission*, HC 1825 (428), xvi, pp. 197–8). Spelling and punctuation modernised. At the end, areas are given in (Plantation or Irish) acres, roods and perches, in one case converted to English statute measures.

53. Richard Stephens, Esq. One cabin and garden next Dublin Gate; a waste plot whereon a cabin stood; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; two cabins and gardens; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; on a waste piece of ground.

On the south side of St John's Street in Kells: a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; a waste piece of ground and garden, rood land, in the heart of said street, next Cross Street; a cabin and garden next Dublin Gate; a waste piece of ground; a small cabin; a large home-stead, court and garden; a waste garden; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden.

On the north side of said street: a cabin and garden next Maudlin Gate, a little garden waste and three ridges; a waste plot of ground and garden; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden next Carrickwell; a waste plot of ground and garden; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; a house, garden and kill; a plot of ground whereon is a lane to [the] west and a garden; a cabin and garden called Martin's castle; a cabin and garden; a waste plot of ground and garden; the like; the like; a cabin and garden, rood land; a cabin and garden.

On the east side next the castle of Magdalen *alias* Maudlin Street, a cabin and garden next the e[arl] of Kildare's tenement; a cabin and garden; a waste plot [of] ground and a garden; a cabin and garden, rood land; the like next Carrick Gate.

On the N.E. side of Carrick Street, a cabin and garden next the gate on W. side; a cabin and garden on the west side of Carrick Street; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; a waste plot of ground and garden; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden next to Carrickwell on the S. side of Carrick Street; a waste plot of ground and garden, rood land, next the steeple; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; a waste plot of ground and garden; a cabin and garden; a waste plot of ground and garden next the gate.

On the N. side of Cannon Street: a cabin and garden next Cannon Gate; a waste plot of ground and garden; the like; a cabin and garden; a waste plot and garden with the tower; a waste plot and garden; a waste plot and garden with the tower; a waste plot and garden; a cabin and garden with a waste plot; a waste plot and garden; a house and garden on the S. side of Cannon Street; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden on the W. side of Farrell Lane or Shefhogge Lane; a cabin and garden; a waste plot of ground and garden; a cabin and garden; a house and garden; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden.

On the E. side of said lane: a waste plot and garden; a small cabin; a house and garden; a cabin and garden; a waste or canteshade into the house next Sir Robert Forth's, and the corner house; a piece of ground whereon stand the walls of the corner house on the N. side of said lane; a cabin and garden: a waste plot and garden; a house now a barn and garden; part of the same, rood land; the chimney gable and rood land; a house with one chimney in the parlour.

In Cross Street: a cabin and garden on the backside of Browne's; a hut and garden waste; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; a waste plot and garden; the like nearing upon the New River; the like on the S. side of the New River; the like; the like between the river, the two highways and Farrell's Gate; the like near the town walls, the river running through it; a house and garden; a waste plot and garden, next the gate and walls on the N. side of Farrell's Street; a waste plot and garden next to Farrell *alias* Trim Gate; a waste plot and garden; the like; the like; a waste plot of ground; the like and 3 little parks between the town wall and the river, on the S. side of said street; a waste plot of ground; a cabin and garden; the like, rood land; a cabin and garden on

the E. side of the river; a plot of ground wherein is built the new parlour and kitchen, with the bawn or court, where the well is next the cross; a cabin and garden, rood land; a house and garden; a cabin and garden, a house with 5 chimneys and backside with the garden; a cabin and backside; a long skirt of ground waste from the end of Betagh's cabin by the street side and along on the outside of Plunkett's garden, and so by the waste in Shefhogge's Lane, on the S. side of Market Street; a cabin and garden; a cabin and garden; a house with 2 chimneys; a cabin and garden; a house and garden; a cabin; a cabin; a house with 2 chimneys next the castle, siding in Magdalen Street, on the N. side of said street, said town of Kells, Dandlestowne 267A. 2R; all the premises in bar[ony of] Kells, co. Meath. Total lands in Meath 360A. 1R. 13P. plant[ation] (583A. 2R. 28P. stat[ute]). Rent £7.5s.11d. Total rent for all the houses and cabins in Kells, being of the yearly value of £52.1s., the sum of £3.18s.1d.

ANNGRET SIMMS

Change and Continuity in an Irish Country Town: Kells, 1600–1820

This paper explores the factors which led to changes in the social and physical fabric of the town of Kells in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There were major dynamics at work. Kells' physical framework was destroyed during the Confederate Wars and, as part of the Cromwellian settlement, Lt Col. Richard Stephens was confirmed as the owner of the town in 1654. On the basis of a Valuation of Kells compiled in 1663 it is possible to reconstruct the social topography of the town at that time. The valuation indicates that new English and Scottish settlers took the place of the former merchants in the town. The charter granted by James II in 1689 establishing Kells as a free borough set the scene for the recovery of the town, where a new corporation maintained a Protestant hegemony, which lasted into the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1706 Stephens sold Kells to Thomas Taylor. In the late eighteenth century the Earl of Bective, a successor to Thomas Taylor, succeeded in giving Kells the attributes of an attractive estate town. The tenants took an active role in redeveloping individual properties within the town. The 1817 estate maps show substantial houses with formally laid-out gardens. The proprietorial geography of Kells in 1817 is well reflected in the terrier accompanying the estate maps and emphasises the importance of the urban middlemen.

PETER BORSAY

A County Town in Transition: The Great Fire of Warwick, 1694

In 1694 Warwick was devastated by a dreadful fire, one of the most damaging urban conflagrations of the Stuart period. The shock of the crisis, the way the town responded and the rich documentary and physical evidence generated provide a special insight into the basic features of county towns, and the character and trajectory of their long-term development. The first part of the paper provides a 'narrative' of the Fire and the administrative responses to it. In the second part the way in which the rebuilding and the associated replanning transformed the appearance of the central area of the town, from a vernacular to a classical landscape, is explored. The third part examines the socio-economic context of the reconstruction, in particular the way it reflected and reinforced Warwick's social structure and its economic role as a regional capital. The final part explores the manner in which the rebuilding reveals the pattern of power in the town, highlighting the influence of the county gentry and of Lord Brooke at the castle. The paper seeks to show that though Warwick may have been exceptional in terms of the short-term crisis which it faced in the 1690s, it was not unique in terms of the broad forces which shaped its reconstruction, and which can tell us much about the position of county capitals at the time.

Abbreviations

BL	British Library
<i>Cal. S. P. Ire</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers, Ireland</i>
HC	House of Commons
JCHAS	<i>Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society</i>
JRSAI	<i>Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland</i>
KTCM	Records of the Corporation of Kells, 1685–1787: NLI MS 25446, 8 vols
LPK	C. McNeill, ed., <i>Liber primus Kilkenniensis</i> (Dublin, 1931)
NA	National Archives [Dublin]
NHist.	<i>Northern History</i>
NLI	National Library Ireland
<i>Parl. Gaz.</i>	<i>The Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland</i>
PP	Parliamentary Papers
PRIA	<i>Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy</i>
PRO	Public Record Office
PRONI	Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
RO	Record Office
TCD	Trinity College, Dublin
UH	<i>Urban History</i>
UHY	<i>Urban History Yearbook</i>
VCH	<i>Victoria County History</i>