

BELLAGHY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



CHURCH ISLAND

Situated in Lough Beg – 1.5 miles from Bellaghy

This church (Iris Toide) was a monastic settlement mentioned as far back as the Annals of Inis Fallon in 1112. Dominican and Augustinian religious orders were associated with the island. People rowed out to them to worship and for cures. Traces of herbs and rare mints grown by the monks for cures are still found today.

In the graveyard at the church (now simply a shell) one of the groves is that of Master Builder Michael Keenan, commissioned in 1788 by the Earl Bristol, Bishop of Derry to add a spire to improve the view from his mansion at Ballyscullion. Plans for this house, resembling those for Downhill, which he also built, show a crescent shaped house with 365 windows. Spending most of his time abroad, the Bishop never lived in the house and when he died in Italy, his heir Sir Henry Hervey Bruce found the financial upkeep impossible because of the Window Tax and demolished the building whose portico now fronts St George's Church in Belfast. The ruins of that original building are in the grounds of the present country house built to replace it.

The fields surrounding Church Island are famous Wetlands where many species of geese, ducks and swans are to be found. Botanists from all over the world also come to see the rare orchid 'My Lady's Tresses', which blooms there in August. Legend says St Patrick visited the island leaving in imprint of his foot on a stone. Close to this is a tree on which pilgrims, having prayed or made a wish, hang a piece of cloth. For Catholics, the Church was a focal point of worship in its early days and some continued to bury their dead there until the middle of the last century. A pilgrimage to the island takes place annually in September.