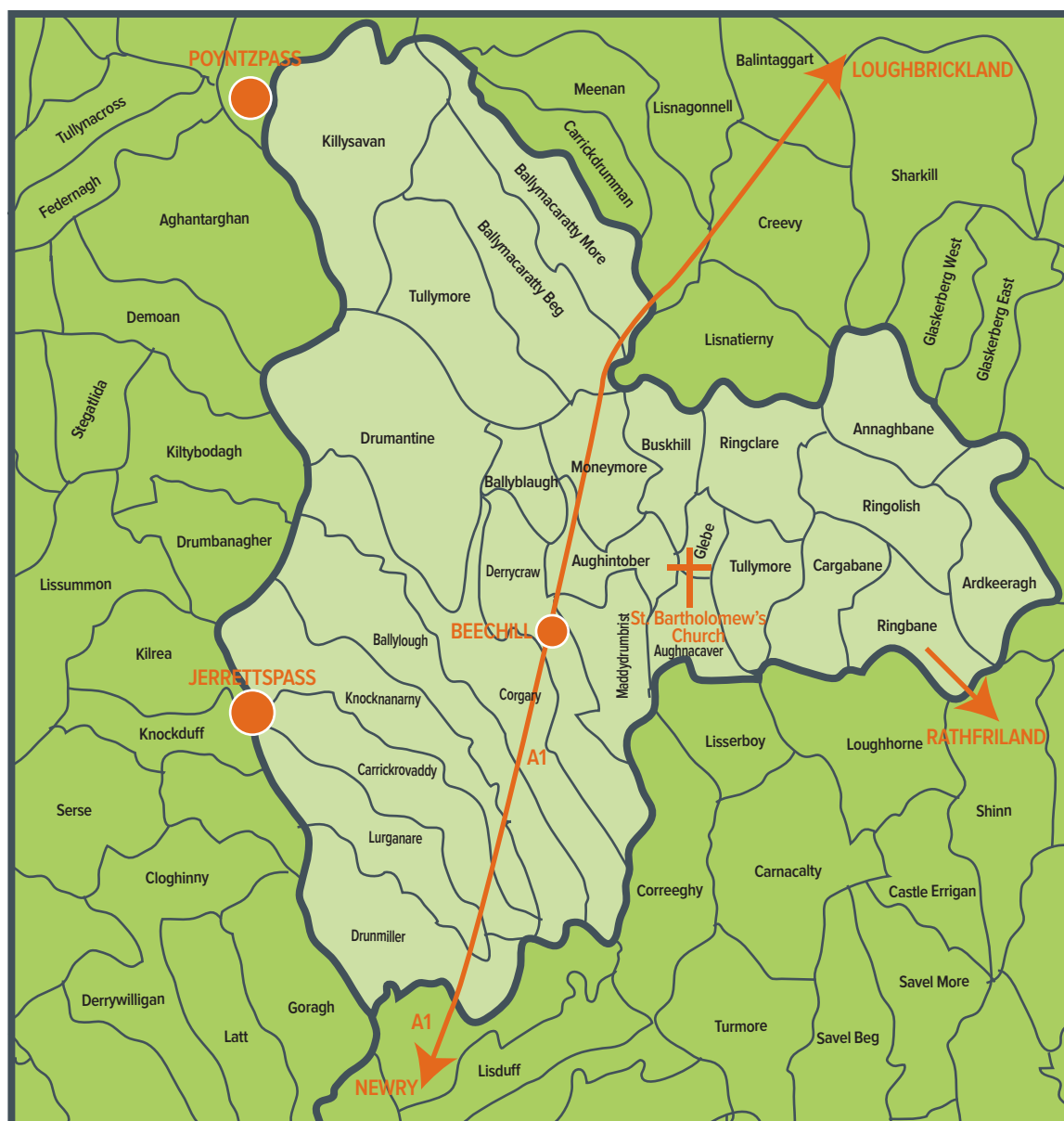


# DONAGHMORE PARISH CHURCH

BY JOANNE CUMMINS



*Town lands of the Parish of Donaghmore (Courtesy of Department of Celtic Q.U.B.)*

In the rolling countryside of Donaghmore, the Parish Church sits on a hill steeped in layers of history, with links back to the Early Christian period, not long after St. Patrick's arrival in Ireland over fifteen hundred years ago. A time when raths, souterrains and ecclesiastical sites were built and from which it is thought townlands originated.

The site was originally a rath or ring fort; a protective enclosure likely built to house a farming family and some livestock. They were so numerous in the Irish landscape that every town land may have had at least one. In the 1834 Ordnance Survey map, around twenty-eight forts are marked in Donaghmore. The townland of Ringolish, meaning "the point of the fort", has three.

Positioned on the side of a hill, the ground falls away from the church on the south, east and west sides, with a stream running around the base of the hill. This later formed the mill pond and mill race which was used to power the nearby flax mill.

Beneath the hill lies a series of underground tunnels,



***An Aerial View of the Church and Graveyard - Courtesy of Michael Ackers***

known as souterrains, the centre of which lies under the churchyard. They are often found in ring forts and in Early Christian ecclesiastical enclosures. It is thought that they were primarily used for the safe storage of farm produce and as a temporary refuge in times of unrest.

The tunnels were sealed in the 1930s due to safety concerns and descriptions of them come from sources over a century old. Built of unworked field stone, they were uncovered in August 1837 when workmen lowering the hill on the road beside the Church cut through a section of the souterrain. Deemed to be of great interest to antiquarians it was explored by several people, including Isaac Glenny Esq., of Glenville. It was described in the ‘Newry Telegraph’ dated Saturday

18th July 1837, “From the extent of it, size of cover-stones, etc. etc., it must have been the work of great labour, and, when made, considered of great importance. It extends eight or ten perches so far as explored – is about six feet deep, where opened, and from four to five in width, but varies considerably; there are also side apartments in it, and at different intervals the passage is so narrowed and constructed that there is not room for more than one person of a moderate size, to pass through – so that by stopping any of these, which could be very easily done, anything deposited farther on would be quite safe”.

The Rev. J.D. Cowan, Rector of Donaghmore for forty years goes further in his book “An Ancient Irish Parish



Past and Present”, published in 1914, to say that the entrance to the central chamber is underneath the High Cross, which is said to have been set up on the lintel stones of the souterrain. Running north – south, the chamber “is sixty-two feet long, three feet wide and upwards of four feet high - with branches in the form of transepts about thirty feet in length”. From the transepts, several sections extend into the churchyard. “These branches vary in size, from upwards of five feet high by five feet wide, tapering to equal dimensions in height and width – viz. three feet – when the entrance to another chamber is found”. He goes on to say, “the section running south-east . . . suggests a formation resembling a tradesman’s compass – while the branch in the south-western direction . . . consists of three chambers which are zigzag , and resemble a staircase laid on its side”. The longest section, 200 yards in length, runs north and ends at the Glebe House. It was this entrance that was reopened in September 1893 for a visit by the Belfast Naturalist’s Field Club and is recorded in their Annual Report and Proceedings, “The rector had with some trouble got the entrance to one of the souterrains cleared out, and so enabled many of the members to investigate the primitive residence of the cave-men”. Cowan also adds that “The Donaghmore Churchyard caves are. . . perfectly flat, and somewhat oblong in form, the outlines of which are very faintly visible”.



*The east face of the Cross.*



*Present day photograph of the west face of the Cross, illuminated by the early afternoon sun. The pierced ring of the Cross is unique amongst the High Crosses of County Down.*

The name Donaghmore comes from the Irish Domhnach Mór, meaning “great church”. Place names with Domhnach are traditionally associated with St. Patrick’s mission in the 5th century. There are many Donaghmore place names in Ireland and to distinguish it from the others it was known as Donaghmore of Magh Cobha, “the great plain”, which stretched from Drumiller in the south to Dromore in the north. St. Mac Erc is said to have founded the first church and was the first bishop of Donaghmore in the mid-5th century. No trace of his church remains, and the earliest archaeological evidence of an ecclesiastical site is the High Cross, which gave the townland of Tullynacross, “the mound of the Cross” its name.

According to Cowan, the cross is, “held on the highest authority to be the most ancient perfect Christian monument in the county of Down”. It has long been an attraction to tourists, described in The Open Window 1901-1902 edition as “the far-famed Donaghmore Cross”. Known as St. Mac Erc’s Cross, it is carved from Newry granite and dates from the late 9th or early 10th century. It is believed to be a composite of two crosses, one clue being that the head of the cross is narrower than the shaft. This points to the possibility that there

may have originally been two crosses on the site. Tradition says it was overthrown in the 17th century, possibly by Cromwellian or Williamite forces, and the shaft broken into two pieces. Although the original site is unknown, it was re-erected in 1891 by the Rev. Cowan, with help from the Belfast Naturalist's Field Club.

The Rev. H. W. Lett, Rector of Aghaderg Parish presented a paper on the topic of St. Mac Erc's Cross to the Belfast Field Naturalist's Club's members, which in part detailed the restoration of the cross. In addition to local subscriptions, the Club had contributed £2 towards the cost of the restoration, prior to which, according to Lett, "the head of the cross had been displaced and partly buried at the head of a grave close by, and the shaft, though resting on its base, was broken across about the middle". He goes on to say that under the supervision of the Rev. Cowan and himself the parts of the cross were, "carefully set together with cement, and a stout iron dowel put into the broken shaft". A search was also undertaken for a fragment broken off the top of the cross, which according to local legend was in a well on the east slope of the churchyard. However, after two days of excavation there was no trace of it.



***The Commonwealth War Grave of Sapper Harry Marshall.***

A scheduled monument, the cross is known as a scriptural cross, which contains Biblical characters and scenes. They were thought to be a means of transmitting the Bible and became common from the tenth century.

Around a third of High Crosses in Ireland are scriptural crosses. The Donaghmore Cross is notable for the number of carvings, especially in terms of Old Testament images, of which there are believed to be seven, plus two New Testament images, which both appear on the head of the cross. Only the Market Cross at Kells and the Tall Cross at Monasterboice have more Old Testament images.

The difficulty of carving figures from hard granite along with centuries of weathering mean that it is difficult to interpret and identify with certainty the images on the cross and various options have been offered as possibilities over the years. According to Peter Harbison in "High Crosses and Round Towers of County Down" (2014), some of the figures on the east face of the shaft denote Moses Smiting Water from the Rock (Numbers), David with the Head of Goliath and David Slaying the Lion (1st Samuel). Although there are a number of other figures on this side of the cross, they are difficult to identify.

On the west face of the shaft are scenes from the book of Genesis, including the figures of Adam and Eve clearly identifiable with the Tree of Life. Above the tree are four fish above which is Noah's Ark. The top panel which features two figures, one holding a large sword could possibly be Cain slaying Abel.

The north and south faces both contain raised panels of interlaced animals, with each having one panel with human figures which are unidentifiable.

On the head of the cross, Christ appears on both faces. The east face, which is heavily weathered is believed to be Christ at the Last Judgement (Matthew). Visible on the west face is the Crucifixion of Christ (Matthew), somewhat weathered, but in good light the figures of Christ and the thieves can be seen. The top of the cross, which is broken and weathered represents the roof of a church.

The churchyard has been used for burials since early Christian times. In 1838 a local paper reported that some antique remains in the form of a cremated burial were found in the churchyard by workmen building a fence. Around one and a half acres in size, the Rev. Cowan notes that, "There is not a space in this sacred spot which has not been used as a burial place for the dead. In God's Acre lie side by side Roman Catholics, Presbyterian, Methodist and Church of Ireland". Prior to relaxation of the Penal Laws in the latter part of the 18th century, Catholics and non-Conformists were prevented



from having their own burial grounds and were not allowed to perform burials unless a Church of Ireland rector was present.

Although graveyards grew up around the first churches, it was not until the end of the 17th century that graves began to be marked with headstones. Some examples of early headstones, dating from the early 1700s can be seen throughout the churchyard and although difficult to decipher, their inscriptions are listed in Cowan's book, such as Andrew Murdoch... "here lieth the remains of Andrew Murdoch who departed this life ye 27th of May in ye year of our Lord 1717, aged 69 years". Born in 1648, he may have been able to shed light on who was responsible for knocking down the cross! In 1914 most of the graves were still unmarked or only marked by rude stones.

Wealthier families had created enclosures to mark family plots and railings around graves were popular throughout the 19th century. Some were removed for scrap metal during the Second World War, such as the grave of the family of the Rev. Johnston (Tremont), first minister of Donaghmore Presbyterian Church and fifty-nine years minister of the congregation; all that remains are the small stumps where they were cut off. Sadly, the large sarcophagus with flat stone has also long since gone. The Second World War was also the reason the Innes family vault, which originally had a large metal door was bricked up, ostensibly to prevent thieves from stealing the lead from the coffins within. The small, stone-built edifice was erected in 1819 by Arthur Innes, Esq of Dromantine. He died on the 15th November 1820, aged 65. Nine members of the family are in coffins which rest on ledges inside the vault. In the front space, enclosed by a wall (whose railings were also removed) lies Louisa Letitia Henrietta Innes d. 1886 who chose to be buried in the ground outside the vault.

Within some of the enclosures and scattered around the graveyard, ledgers; a large flat stone laid over the grave, can be found. These record information on family members, sometimes over generations, revealing aspects of social and economic life in Donaghmore and its links to events and places around the world. The Marshall family enclosure contains a memorial to Hugh Marshall, who died at sea on his passage from Hong Kong in China on the 12th December 1845, aged 27 years – Hong Kong had only been established as a Crown colony in 1843, after the First Opium War with China. His brother George died aged 38 on the 22nd September 1865, in New Orleans, not long after the end of the American Civil War.

It was said that the sun never set on the British Empire and the Victorian era came with the capability to travel around the world, whether in the employment of the government, missionary work, or with the military. Emigration to North America and Australia also rose during this time, especially with the advent of various famines that occurred during the 1800s, as families left in search of a better life.



*The churchyard showing the Innes family vault.*

The headstone, erected by William Kingon of Loughorne, is in memory to his son John, who died at Cape Coast Castle, West of Africa on the 19th July 1863, aged 24. Dating back to 1652 the castle, in modern day Ghana, served as a trading post (throughout the 18th century it was part of the transatlantic slave trade network) and headquarters of British Colonial administration for the Gold Coast Colony. Also commemorated are his daughter Nancy, who died 21st January 1851, aged 15 years and his granddaughter Mary J. Briars, who died 17th November 1856, aged 3 weeks. A reminder that surviving childhood was a trial in an age before the advent of modern medicines and vaccines. Wealth and status were no barrier, as can be seen on the obelisk of the Rev. Moses Finlay, minister of Donaghmore Presbyterian Church from 1804 – 1837, whose daughter Euphemia died in infancy.

The churchyard also contains the First World War Commonwealth War Grave of Sapper Harry Marshall, a carpenter who joined the Royal Engineers in November 1915. He was sent to Bedford for training and after getting "wet through" he became unwell and was admitted to hospital on the 27th February 1916, dying nine days later, on the 7th March from cerebrospinal fever. His remains were brought back, via Greenore to Edward Street Station in Newry. His funeral was carried out with full military honours. The coffin was met at the railway station by a firing party, drums and pipers of the

4th Battalion Royal Irish Fusiliers, stationed in Newry Barracks. The cortege made its way through Newry to the Downshire Road, where a fleet of cars lent by prominent Newry businessmen were waiting to take them to Donaghmore. At the graveside, three volleys were fired over the grave and the Last Post was sounded. Photographs of the funeral were published by the Newry Telegraph.



**John Martin** (*Courtesy of Newry and Mourne Museum*)

Perhaps the most well-known resident is ‘Honest’ John Martin, a prominent figure in 19th century politics. Born in 1812 in Loughorne, he was educated at Dr Henderson’s school in Newry (where he met John Mitchel who was to become his lifelong friend and future brother in law) and Trinity College, Dublin. In 1835 he quit studying when he inherited his uncle John’s estate at Loughorne.

Along with Mitchel, he joined Daniel O’Connell’s Repeal Association in 1844 which advocated the independence of Ireland and repeal of the Act of Union. After withdrawing from the Association, they became part of the Irish Confederation in 1847.

Against the backdrop of the Famine, during which Martin’s mother Jane had died in July 1847 from a fever caught while attending to the sick, Mitchel published the first edition of the *United Irishman* in 1848, with contributions from Martin. A weekly radical paper, it openly advocated a spontaneous revolution in Ireland. Mitchel was found guilty of treason felony in May 1848

and was transported to Van Diemen’s Land (modern day Tasmania) for fourteen years. Martin went on to establish the *Irish Felon*, which lasted for five issues before he was convicted of the same offence and transported for ten years.

In 1854 he received a conditional pardon in which he was forbidden to return to Ireland and settled in Paris. After receiving a full pardon, he returned to Ireland in 1858 to care for his brother’s orphaned children. He joined the Home Government Association for Ireland in 1870 and a year later was elected M.P. for Meath, holding his seat until his death.

After attending the funeral of Mitchel in Newry on the 23rd March 1875, he became ill and died on Easter Monday, 29th March, aged 62. The *Newry Reporter*, dated 3rd April 1875, described the cortege that followed his remains from Dromalane House (home of Hill Irvine, where both Mitchel and Martin died) as, “perhaps one of the largest that has ever been seen in Ulster, and could not number less than fifteen thousand persons. It embraced clergymen of all denominations, and laymen of every shade of political belief”. Mourners came from all over Ireland, Scotland, and England.

The inscription on his gravestone reads;

“He lived for his country, suffered in her cause, pleaded for her wrongs, and died beloved and lamented by every true-hearted Irishman”.

Although the graveyard has been used for burials for centuries, it is not the only graveyard in the area. A short distance away, on the site of a rath in the townland of Lisserboy, lies another burying ground, known as Tremont Forth. The land was given by the family of James Johnston, the first minister of Donaghmore Presbyterian Church, possibly his son or grandson, whose own son was the first interred in it, around the 1770s. It is marked on the Ordnance Survey map of 1834 and is mentioned numerous times in James Harshaw’s diaries and was in regular use during the mid-1800s. A few headstones are all that remains.

The church was believed to be founded by St. Mac Erc in the mid-5th century. The original church stood approximately 60 feet south of the present church, roughly where the High Cross is now. It would probably have been a small rectangular timber structure with a high-pitched, thatched roof built in an east – west axis. Despite being part of the Diocese of Dromore, the church was associated with the See of Armagh, which

had a special claim to St. Patrick's churches and their properties all over Ireland.

The present church was built by the encouragement and bounty of Archbishop Boulter, Primate of All Ireland. It was consecrated in 1741. It was at this point that the church became known as Saint Bartholomew's (also known as Nathaniel, one of the twelve apostles). According to Vestry minutes in 1776, the building was whitewashed inside and out. The Vestry was built in 1826 and the square tower (which houses a bell which is rung before service) in 1829. In 1839, the Newry Telegraph, dated Thursday 10th January, during what was described as "The Hurricane" describes damage to the church, which, "underwent a general repair and was newly roofed. . . has suffered great damage; some of the stone pinnacles on its tower were broken off and precipitated through the roof".



***Donaghmore Glebe School, built in 1818.***

Extensive improvements were carried out in 1879, including the addition of the Chancel, a stained-glass east window, and new pews. The church was renovated, and new choir stalls added in 1887. In 1905 renovations included the addition of heating with hot water and a new bell. Older than the church itself, is a marble font which stands in the aisle, engraved with the date 1726.

Within fifty years of the building of the church, the Glebe House was built for the rector. The Parliamentary Return of 1768 notes, "Donaghmore . . . has a small Glebe, no house on it, and a church in tolerable condition". The Glebe, the land that was used to support the Clergyman, comprised of just over 56 acres.

The Glebe House was built in 1786, during the last year of the Rev. Francis Johnston's incumbency (grandson of the Rev. James Johnston, the first Presbyterian Minister of Donaghmore), along with out-offices and other improvements at a cost of £538 19s. ½d. The study was added in 1826.

After the Act of Disestablishment, all ecclesiastical

property except Church buildings and graveyards was confiscated and the Glebe land was sold in 1880. The Representative Church Body purchased for the Parish 13 acres, 3 rods and 6 perches of the original Glebe, together with the Glebe House and offices at a cost of £460 17s. 7d. In 1898 an effort was made to pay off this debt and a bazaar was held, raising £200, but it wasn't until July 1909 that the debt was finally paid. After the death of the Rev. Cowan in 1922, the Glebe House and remaining lands were sold as the Church joined with that of St. Mary's Parish in Newry. It later joined with Aghaderg in 1950.

Across the road from the church gate stands the Glebe School. There has been a parish school on the site since at least 1725. In the vestry minutes of October 1773, just over £1 was levied to repair the schoolhouse. In September 1784, a half penny an acre was levied to build a new school. Realising that this was insufficient, at the vestry meeting in October a further sum of one farthing per acre was added. The vestry minutes of March 1785 record that the inhabitants refused to pay, and it was decided not to proceed. The new schoolhouse was finally built in 1818 at a cost of £81 and 10 shillings. It opened in 1820 with school master William Robinson and 67 pupils, of whom 29 were Presbyterian, 26 Roman Catholic and 12 Church of Ireland. In the 1821 Census it was recorded that the school contained 30 boys and 23 girls as "day scholars".



***Donaghmore Glebe School from the garden. The school room occupied the first floor, while the teacher's accommodation was two rooms on the ground floor.***

The teacher's salary was £30 for one year, with the sum of two shillings and six pence rent charged for the accommodation on the ground floor, which comprised of two rooms: a kitchen and pantry on the right and bedroom on the left, and garden of three roods and five perches. The classroom, which had a large open fire was



on the upper floor and a trapdoor and ladder in the corner gave access to the kitchen below.

Supported at various times by the Hibernian Sunday School Society and the Church Education Society the school closed for a period of time in the middle of the 19th century. It reopened as Donaghmore Glebe National School in the 1880s and became an Erasmus Smith "English School" in 1906, after the Office of National Education withdrew its funding on the basis of falling numbers and the presence of another National School at McGaffin's Corner, less than a mile away. The Erasmus Smith Schools educational charity was established by Royal Charter in 1669 after its initial foundation under Oliver Cromwell. Smith was an English merchant adventurer who helped fund Cromwell's campaign in Ireland and supplied food to his troops. In the Settlement of Ireland, he received confiscated land, which with further dealing, resulted in his acquisition of over 46,000 acres of land in several counties. Income from rentals was used to educate tenants and fund other charitable causes. Donaghmore Glebe School benefitted from its Aid to Small Schools Scheme, which provided a yearly grant of £25 and a gratuity of £5 (dependant of the Inspector's Report). Local subscription provided a further £15. The teacher received an annual salary of £40, paid quarterly.

Children attended from 9.30am to 3pm Monday to Friday. There were three holidays a year: a week at Easter and Christmas and four weeks in the autumn. The Inspector's Reports show that subjects tested included Reading, Spelling, Writing, Arithmetic, Dictation or Composition, Drawing, English History, English Grammar, Geography, Sewing, Secular Knowledge, Holy Scripture, Catechism and Repetition, and Religious Knowledge.

Due to dwindling numbers, the school closed its doors to pupils in 1911, the remaining pupils transferring to the school at McGaffin's Corner. One of the conditions of the amalgamation was the nomination of the assistant teacher by the Rector. The first assistant teacher was Gertie McGaffin who had attended both schools. Since it closed, the building has had various uses, most notably as a Sunday School.

Dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, the church, school and Glebe House form part of a historical grouping of buildings which together with the High Cross and churchyard represent over fifteen hundred years of the history of Donaghmore. Much research on the area was carried out by the Rev. Joseph Davison Cowan for his book "An Ancient Irish Parish Past and

Present" (1914). Educated at the Newry School and Queens College, Belfast, he gained a law degree at Trinity College, Dublin. He travelled to America, to oversee a protracted lawsuit in connection with the estate of his late uncle. While there, with the consent of the Bishop of Down, he was admitted to Holy Orders in 1879 by the Bishop of Illinois and was appointed Rector of St. Stephen's Church in Chicago. On his return home he became Curate of Dromore, before being appointed Rector of Donaghmore on the 24th November 1882, where he remained until his death in August 1922.



*View of Donaghmore Church in the late 19th/early 20th century.*

His book charts the history of Donaghmore from its earliest days. As well as drawing on records held in Trinity College Library, the National Library of Ireland, Marsh's Library, Linen Hall Library and Armagh Public Library, he accessed records in the Public Record Office in Dublin, many of which were destroyed by the Four Courts fire during the Civil War in June 1922. He regularly refers to the diaries of James Harshaw, which had been taken to America in the 1860s (where they remained until they were donated to PRONI in 1996), suggesting that he travelled to America for his research. Vestry records dating back to the 1770s and church records of baptisms, weddings and burials all worked towards building a comprehensive picture of Donaghmore and its inhabitants from which we still draw on today.

Not far off the busy A1, the churchyard provides a place of peace and reflection. A place that has drawn visitors for over fifteen hundred years, whether worshippers, mourners, archaeologists, genealogists or historical enthusiasts. Take a walk around its paths and discover the history for yourself.