

The Clog Ban or The Bell of Ballinabeck

By Ross Chapman

About three miles north of Poyntzpass, on the left-hand side of the road leading to Tandragee are the two old burial grounds of Ballinabeck. It was in the second one, called Relicarn, that in 1725 an interesting discovery was made. The long-lost Bell of Ballinabeck was unearthed.

This bell is one example, of which at least seventy still exist. In the earliest years of Irish Celtic Christianity the isolated monastic settlement was the pattern. The monks lived in wattle cells and spent their days in study, transcribing texts, prayer and working the land. The call to worship was made by the ringing of

a handbell and those precious metal instruments are one of the few items that have survived to remind us of those far-off days. At first, around AD 600, these bells were made of iron but by AD 900 bronze was the favoured material. It took a skilful metalworker to mix the alloy of copper, tin and lead, melt the ingredients and pour them into a mould. Bronze gave a better tone than iron, did not rust and had a better appearance. Most of the bronze bells, which have survived, were of Ulster origin, and the one of special interest to us, the Bell of Ballinabeck, sometimes referred to as the Bell of Armagh, is a fine example.



The Bell of Ballinabeck



Relicarn Graveyard with Ballinabeck in background

As the illustration shows there is a clearly legible inscription in Irish, which reads: "*Oroit ar Chumascach m Allello*". There is fairly general agreement that this means:

"Pray for Cumascach son of Ailill".

This inscription allows a date to be reckoned, because the Annals of Ulster makes reference to the above named, Ailill, as dying in AD 908. Cumascach, or Cumiskey as we say nowadays, was a steward of Armagh Cathedral and a member of an important family linked to the O'Neills.

The span of years from AD 900 - 1200 saw many changes in church organisation. Primitive isolated monastic settlements gave way to a more centralised diocesan pattern. The church became wealthy and powerful and the natural outcome was to make it secular and worldly. Along with that there was a move towards enshrining objects that had historic significance. Supernatural powers were attributed to the old bells, which had lost their original purpose. They became objects of veneration and some were embellished by ornamental covers in gold, silver and precious stones. During those hidden

centuries the care of the bell was entrusted to a local family. It was passed down over generations and was probably safer in private hands than had it been stored in a church building where Viking or other intruders would have made off with it as loot.

The present parish of Ballymore, stretching roughly from Tandragee to Poyntzpass, was at one time known as '*Muntir Heaney*' - the territory of the Heaney family. They were the custodians of the Bell of Ballinabeck. Although that surname is now rare in the area, one of the name was listed in the Hearth Money Rolls of 1664 for the townland of Federnagh, just west of present day Poyntzpass.

The 1600's were a time of turmoil, forced migration, resettlement and sacrilege. It was a time when people went to ground and their precious, revered objects went to ground too, quite literally.

About 1725 a burial was taking place at Relicarn when a hidden bell came to light. It would seem that it had been purposely deposited there, perhaps along with the remains of one of the Heaney family. In those unsettled times it



Entrance to Ballinabeck Graveyard



Ballinabeck Graveyard

might be thought best returned to the earth, than to fall into the hands of those who would not treasure or respect it. By that time the Heaney family had been dispossessed and resettled near the shores of Lough Neagh in the townland of Aghacommon, a couple of miles from Lurgan. Their name had altered slightly to Hennon but it seems clearly to have been the same family.

The first documented information on the bell appeared in the "Newry Literary and Political Register" in 1815 when, the appropriately named, John Bell of Dungannon shared his findings.

"It is now (1815) in the possession of Paul Hennon, a cottager. Persons frequently repair to Hennon's to declare, in presence of the bell, their innocence of crimes of which they have been accused. This is not a modern custom. In ancient times these bells were sworn upon, and for this purpose one was kept by each of the chief judges in their respective circuits."

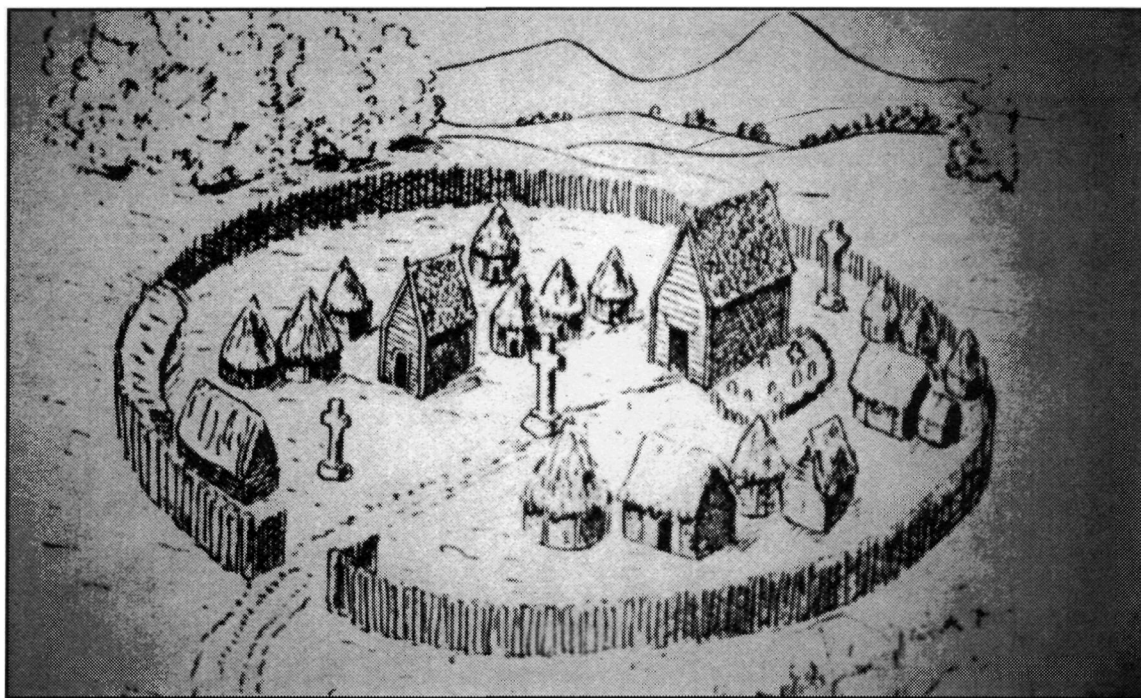
John Bell went on to give it the old name, Clog Ban, short for 'Clog Beannighte', the blessed or holy bell, from its consecration to sacred and solemn uses. He described how some aged

parishioners could remember the use of the Clog Ban at funeral processions to the old graveyard of Seagoe. It was carried behind the coffin by one of the Hennon family and in front of the 'namna guel' - the keeners who sang wild hymns and bewailed the dead.

John Bell writing again in 1838 about a later visit says:

"It was an ancient custom to place the bell near any of the Hennons who were dangerously ill. I visited Mrs. Hennon the widow of Paul Hennon, on her deathbed. She lay in a large, badly lighted apartment, crowded with people. The bell, which had remained several days near her head, seemed to be regarded by those present with much interest. The vapour of the heated chamber was so condensed on the cold metal of the bell, that occasionally small streams trickled down its sides. This 'heavy sweating' of the bell, as it was termed, was regarded by everyone present with peculiar horror, and deemed a certain prognostication of the death of the sick woman, who departed this life a few hours after I left the room.

The agonised bell, I was told, had on many



A typical early Christian Monastic Site

previous occasions given similar tokens as proof of its sympathy on the approaching demise of its guardians."

Bernard Hennon, her son, remained as keeper of the bell for only a short time. However, he committed a breach of the Excise Laws regulating the sale of spirituous liquors and, as it was his second offence, a heavy fine was inflicted upon him. Being unable to pay the fine he was committed to Armagh jail. Archdeacon Saurin, the then rector of Seagoe, took much interest in Hennon's case and visited him in jail. Eventually by his exertions and representations he got the fine almost entirely remitted, and procured Hennon's discharge from imprisonment.

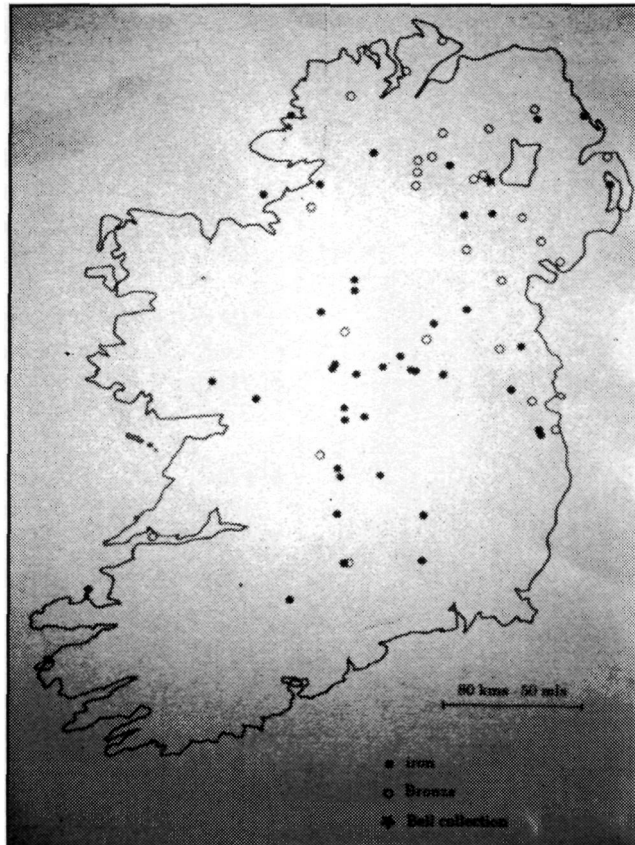
Hennon and his family were very grateful to Archdeacon Saurin for his kind interposition; and as the most convincing proof of their gratitude, as well as that which was most acceptable to the Archdeacon, the sacred bell was presented to him, with the concurrence of

the parish priest. About the year 1840 the bell passed to the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin and on his death went to the Royal Irish Academy.

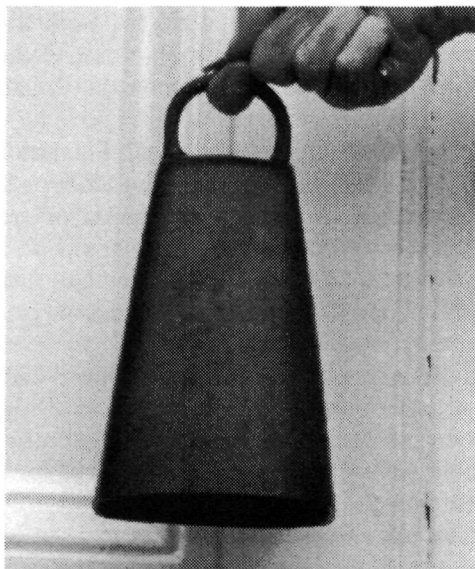
At the present it is again buried, this time in the vaults of the National Museum, Kildare Street, Dublin. How or when it will be unearthed is a difficult question but one that should be asked from time to time. I have been told that there are thirty such bells in the Museum and only two on display.

An interesting half-size replica of the bell can be seen in the Senate in Leinster House, Dublin. It is carried in at the commencement of every Senate session and placed on the table of the Chairman.

For many of the other ancient iron or bronze bells there are equally good stories to be told. In Rostrevor, St. Bronach's bell was missing for many years and only when an old tree was blown down did it come to light, jammed into a cleft in the trunk. It now is available to be seen



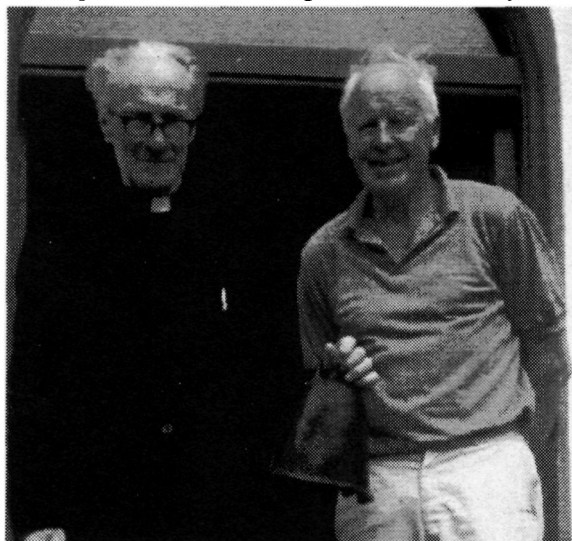
Distribution of Iron and Bronze Bells in Ireland



St. Buadan's Bell

and touched in St. Mary's, Rostrevor. The bell of Bangor is on display in the town Heritage Centre. In Culdaff, Co. Donegal the bell of St. Buadan is kept by the parish priest, while in Omagh there is a similar arrangement.

A history like this leaves one with many puzzling questions. Maybe local people can engage in research or come up with inspired guesses. Why did the custodian families give up their precious bells to the collectors in the 1800-1850 period after holding them for 1000 years,



The Author with the Parish Priest of Culdaff who is holding St. Buadan's Bell

through thick and thin? That was a time of cultural dislocation, disillusionment after the Act of Union and the 1798 disaster but was that enough to break the mould? What can be learned of the Heaney or O'Heaney family in the 17th century parish of Ballymore?

Why were there two burial sites, or maybe early monastic sites, placed nearly together at Ballinabeck? Was there an early church building at each site?

Is it only a dream that someday there will be a ringing of the Clog Ban in Ballinabeck calling all who have ears to hear to assemble again for prayer and to repeat a Psalm together?

The bell remains a symbol of the monastic life and of the Celtic Christianity which has wide appeal in these time of scepticism. These final words, translated from the early Irish, give a feel for the timeless message intoned by those ancient bells, now well over one thousand years old:

*The clear-voiced bell, on chill wild night,
God's hours doth tell.*

*Rather in it I'll put my trust
Than in a wanton woman's lust.*

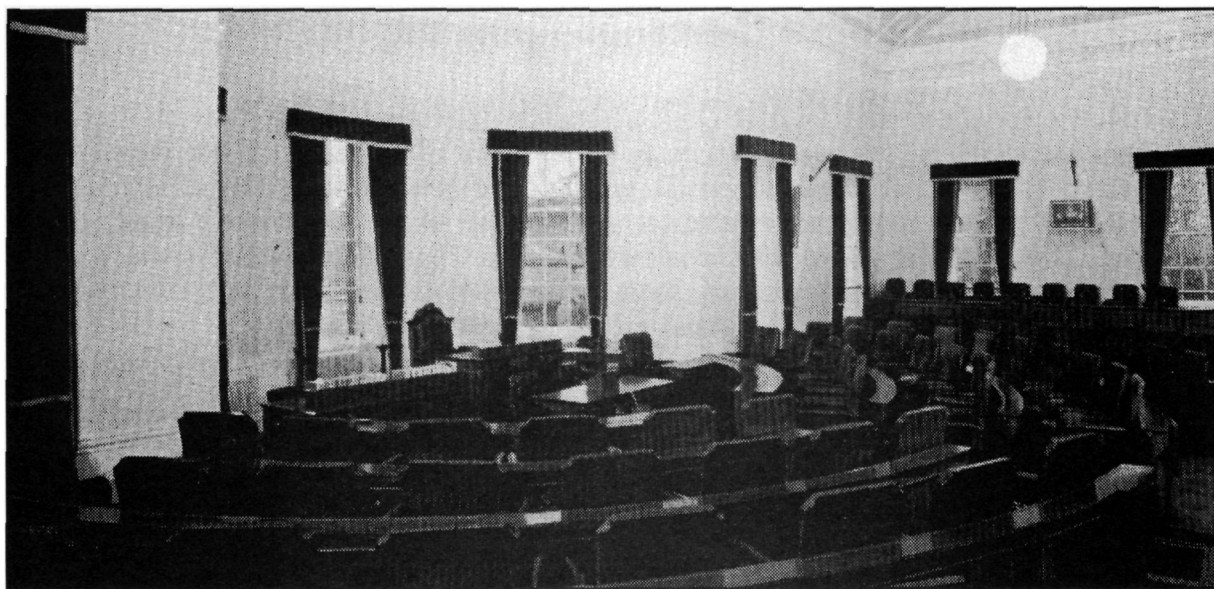
*Thou strikest the bell that calls to prayer,
The mist dispels that casts us round
Sad cleric! Thou art weary there
But many listen for that sound.*

*At its chaste cry the devil flies
And hides his sorrow in the sea:
Strike then for God's sake slow and clear
That all the land may come and hear.*

*My love to thee, O smooth melodious bell
Many shall be the kings who will treasure it.
Woe to the person who hides it,
Woe to the house, woe to the tribe.*

Colmcille.

Since this article was written I have been told that the Clog Ban has been recently on show in the National Museum. Perhaps now with approved facilities for storage locally, there is a case for the return of the bell to a place nearer to Ballinabeck



Chamber of Senate Eireann



*St. Patrick's
Bell Shrine*