



Further information on the sites highlighted within this booklet may be found at [www.thebraid.com/museum](http://www.thebraid.com/museum)

# BALLYMENA CHURCHYARD TRAILS



Exploring the heritage of rural churchyards

# INTRODUCTION

## Step into Ballymena's past with self-guided Churchyard Trails

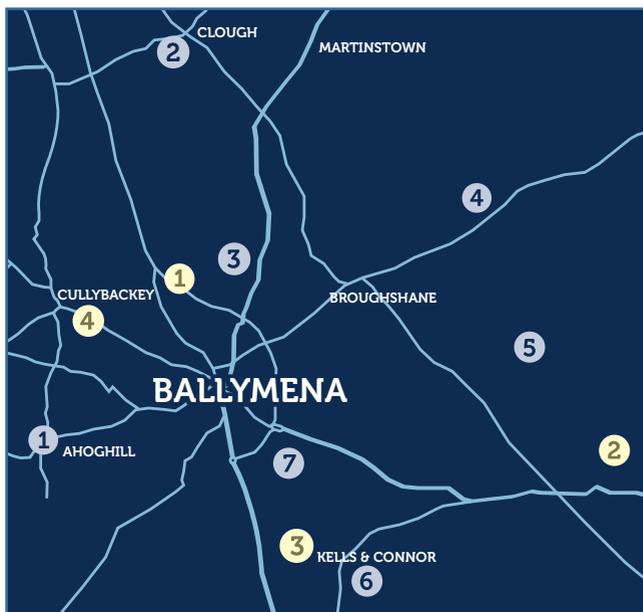
The Ballymena area is dotted with a diverse range of churchyards reflecting the fluid and constantly evolving nature of religious sites from the late 400s onwards. Each site offers a different experience and has its own unique story to tell within the wider history of the area. This booklet features two distinct trails.

### Pre-Reformation Trail

The *Pre-Reformation Trail* explores the history of some of the oldest remaining traces of built heritage in the area. It highlights sites that have been used for Christian worship from the time of St Patrick and before the formation of the Protestant faith in the early 1500s.

### Covenanter Trail

The *Covenanter Trail* delves into the distinctive history and associated sites of the 'Covenanters', or Reformed Presbyterian Church, in the local area. Covenanters were named after the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant signed in Scotland in the mid 1600s. In 1644 the Solemn League and Covenant was brought to Ireland and signed in 26 places across Ulster, including Ballymena. These documents declared Presbyterianism to be the only true form of church government and insisted that the King should have no authority over the church.



#### PRE-REFORMATION TRAIL

- 1 Ahoghill
- 2 Dunaghy
- 3 Kirkinriola
- 4 Skerry
- 5 Racavan
- 6 St Saviour's, Connor
- 7 Ballyclug

#### COVENANTER TRAIL

- 1 Laymore Conventicle Site
- 2 Alexander Peden Memorial
- 3 Kellswater Reformed Presbyterian Church
- 4 Cullybackey Reformed Presbyterian Church

Please note that some of the sites are physically difficult to access. Access details and Ordnance Survey grid references are noted with each site.

# AHOGHILL

*Fourth oldest church in County Antrim*

## Pre-Reformation Trail



### Access details:

The churchyard is located on the Church Road in the village of Ahoghill. The key for the churchyard may be obtained from Logan's Funeral Services, the Diamond, Ahoghill, Monday – Friday, 10am – 5pm.

**Grid Reference:** D049014

**The old churchyard in Ahoghill was the location of a very early church. Today it contains church ruins dating from medieval and post Reformation times. Ahoghill was the largest parish in the diocese of Connor and included the neighbouring parishes of Craigs and Portglenone until their separation in the early 1800s.**

### Early history of the church

A religious site is believed to have been founded here in the late 500s by Colmanell, a nephew of Columba. Tradition has it that this was the fourth oldest church in County Antrim. Around 1375 the rector of Ahoghill was promoted to Bishop of Connor, suggesting that this was an important parish.

### Post Reformation history of the church

As the 1600s progressed, the church was described as decayed, not in repair and finally, ruined. It is possible that the church was burnt in the 1641 Rebellion. It is likely that a new church was built on top of the medieval church around 1700. The rebuilding utilised the lower parts of the medieval walls which had survived. In 1768, the church was still in good repair and it was reroofed in 1828. Increasing attendances as a result of the Ulster Religious Revival of 1859 led to the building of a larger church nearby (St Colmanell's Church of Ireland).

### The graveyard

Most of the memorials with visible inscriptions date to the 1800s. The O'Rorke memorial proclaims the family's roots in Connacht, as 'lineal descendants of the O'Rorkes (Breffni) of Dromahaire Castle, County Leitrim'. Eliza O'Rorke married Dr James Lawson Drummond, who died in 1853 and is also buried here. He served as a surgeon in the Royal Navy, practised as a doctor in Belfast and was one of the founders of the Belfast Natural History Society.

The gravestone for Rose Hannah who died in 1758 features a large carving of a winged cherub. The gravestone to Peter Leetch who died in 1831 displays carvings associated with freemasonry including the arch and tools. It also includes a skull and crossbones. The monument to the Dickey family, one of the prominent linen families in the area, features a coat of arms.



# DUNAGHY

*A great number of sepulchral monuments*

## Pre-Reformation Trail



### Access details:

The churchyard is accessed by a lane off the B64 (Springmount Road), near the village of Clough.

Grid Reference: D093142

**This churchyard contains ruins of a post medieval church. The extensive graveyard contains skilfully crafted memorials. Due to these memorials it was commented, 'the vanity of mortals is nowhere more remarkable than in the graveyard of Dunaghy'.**

### The church

The present ruins are likely to have replaced a medieval church. By 1622 the church was ruined but was later repaired, probably by Randal MacDonnell, 1st Earl of Antrim. This area was within his estate and he had a castle at Clough, the ruins of which are still standing. Although MacDonnell was Roman Catholic he repaired and built Protestant churches on his estate to attract Scottish settlers.

Andrew Rowan was minister here from the late 1650s until his death in 1717. He was one of only a handful of Scottish ministers in Ireland to conform to the Established Church and renounce the Covenants in 1661. During his time many minor repairs were carried out. In 1814, the church was described as 'cove ceiled and neatly seated... There is no belfry, but two small columns with a circular top erected on the western gable, wherein is placed the bell...'

In 1835, the church was described as a 'very plain, old building in bad order and badly roofed...'. At this time the church could hold 110 people. Shortly after this, a new church was built in the village of Clough and the church at Dunaghy was abandoned.

### The graveyard

This is one of the largest graveyards in the Ballymena area. It was extended, probably in the late 1800s and is still in use today. The graveyard contains over 500 memorials, mostly connected with the 1900s. Around 20 memorials date prior to 1800.

The most elaborate tombstone in the graveyard is the large memorial to Samuel Cupples which includes a panel displaying the mortality symbols of skull and crossbones, and bell. Identical monuments can be found in Glenarn and the parish of Ramoan, suggesting the work of the same stonemason.



# KIRKINRIOLA

*It appears probable that on the site...  
a much older church once stood*

## Pre-Reformation Trail



### Access details:

The churchyard is located approximately 3 miles from Ballymena, and is best accessed from the Bally Road where there is space for parking.

**Grid Reference:** D113068

**This churchyard contains the remains of a medieval church and gravestones of families with strong historical connections to the area. There have been important archaeological finds from the early Christian period in the immediate area.**

**The common use of the Scottish prefix 'Kirk' rather than the Irish 'Kil' (both meaning church) shows the influence of Scottish immigration to the area.**

### The church

The present ruined church of Kirkinriola (or Kilconriola as it is also known) may have replaced a much earlier church on this site. In 1622 the parish church was decayed and by 1657 it was out of repair. By 1658, alternative arrangements for public worship were made by the rebuilding of a preaching house at Ballymena. There are burials and gravestones inside the church whilst some gravestones have been built into the east gable.

### The carved stone and bell

In 1868, an carved basalt stone was discovered in the graveyard. It featured a carving of a Celtic cross with the words *Ort do Degen* (a prayer for Degen). The stone is now located in the interior porch wall of St Patrick's Church in Ballymena. The name 'Degen' is thought to refer to an early Irish bishop, Degan, who died in AD 639. In 1870, a large bronze bell was discovered in the Kirkinriola parish. The bell is thought to date from the 900s and indicates early Christian monastic settlement in the area. On loan from National Museums Northern Ireland, it is on display in Mid-Antrim Museum, Ballymena.

### The graveyard

In the 1880s a souterrain (man-made underground chamber) was found in the graveyard. It consisted of three chambers, one of which may have led to the early church. It cannot now be traced. The graveyard contains memorials of several prominent local families. The largest monument commemorates members of the Raphael family of Galgorm. John and Margaret Eaton are buried here with several of their children. Their son Timothy emigrated to Canada in 1854 and eventually established Eaton's, a highly successful and innovative chain of department stores.



# SKERRY

*All the learning in the world will never dissociate Saint Patrick's memory from the Braid valley*

## Pre-Reformation Trail



**Access details:** Access to this site is challenging due to its hilltop location. There is no clear path to the churchyard gate. The ruins can also be viewed at a distance from the Loughloughan Road and can be seen from Slemish Mountain.

**Grid Reference:** D189089

**This churchyard is steeped in history, myths and legend. It enjoys marvellous views of the Braid Valley. Allegedly founded by St Patrick, the church fell into ruin after the Reformation. It remained a destination for pilgrims into the 1800s.**

### Founding by St Patrick

There is a strong tradition that this church was founded by St Patrick. According to the *Book of Armagh*, while he was Milchu's slave, St Patrick '...saw an angel ascend to heaven in his sight, leaving his footprint impressed on the rock of the other mountain (the Hill of Skerry)'.

It is believed by some that the Hill of Skerry was Milchu's stronghold and that a church was built on the site following his demise. An indented stone is located in the ground near the churchyard gate and is still associated with this story. Pilgrims in the 1800s are said to have knelt at this stone as part of their religious observances on St Patrick's Eve.

### The church

The present ruin dates to the late medieval period. In 1622, the church was noted as decayed and 50 years later it was a ruin. It was believed that there were once a range of monastic buildings though no traces have survived. According to local tradition, William III's soldiers were stationed in the church. The story goes that the locals took their horse's saddles and in revenge, the soldiers wrecked the church and burnt its roof.

### The graveyard

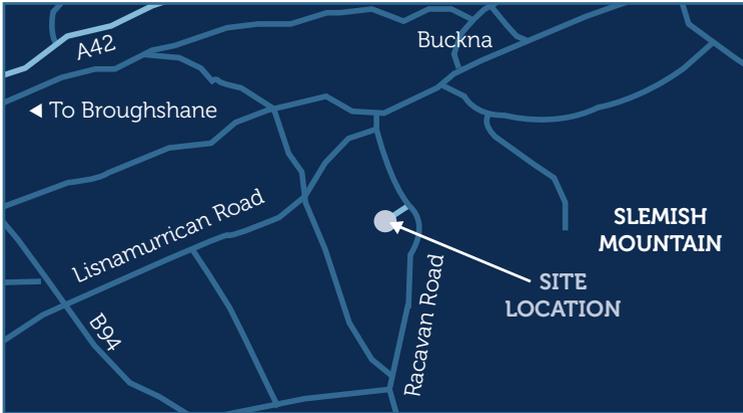
The graveyard was mainly used by Catholic families and some continue to have burial rights here. The wall was rebuilt in 1819. There are gravestones within the church ruins and at the east end of the church is the vault used by the O'Neills of Clandeboye. It contains the remains of Shane O'Neill, last Lord of Clandeboye, on whom James I of England finally settled the O'Neill estate. The nearby village of Broughshane (Shane's fort) takes its name from him.



# RACAVAN

*Rath Cabhain - 'the fort of the hollow'*

Pre-Reformation Trail



**Access details:** Access is via an unsurfaced lane off the Racavan Road, approximately 4 miles from the village of Broughshane. Extreme care must be taken when exiting the lane as it is located on a corner of the road.

**Grid Reference:** D199053

**A church in this area first appeared in records around 1300. However, little is known about the early history of this site. The graveyard was heavily used by early Scottish settlers and their descendants. The site benefits from excellent views along the Braid Valley.**

## The church

In 1622 the church was noted as decayed and by 1657 it was not in repair. By 1832, there was no physical trace of a church and no local memory of a church being on the site. However, in 1837, the Ordnance Survey recorded that there were visible foundations in the graveyard of a wall but it was unclear if this was the gable of a church or a wall erected for placing headstones. The foundations of the church are no longer visible.

## The graveyard

In 1832, it was recorded that the graveyard had been enclosed by a wall. At this time it was thought that the burial ground must have been much bigger in the past as bones and fragments of coffins had been found in neighbouring fields.

In 1837 it was noted that four paved roads had once led from the graveyard in the directions of the four points of the compass but they had been destroyed around 1800. Two bullaun stones were also associated with this site - one has been built into the graveyard wall while the other was taken to St Patrick's Catholic Church, Braid. A bullaun is a stone with a depression on its surface. According to folklore, water that gathers in one is thought to have healing powers.

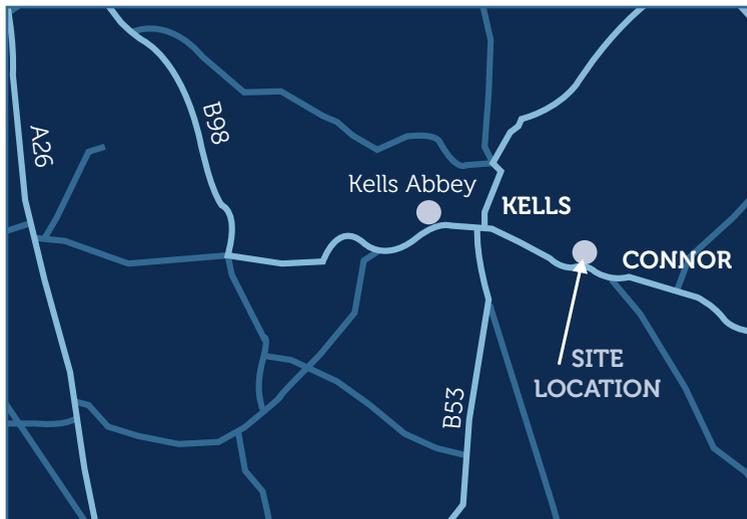
The graveyard was known in the 1830s to be used only by Presbyterians. This is reflected by the high number of Scottish names that were recorded in the graveyard.



# ST SAVIOUR'S, CONNOR

*All the other churches yielded in importance to Connor*

Pre-Reformation Trail



## Access details:

St Saviour's churchyard is located off Church Road, Kells. The churchyard is accessible during the hours of daylight. The ruins of Kells Abbey are not publicly accessible as they are located on private ground. However, they can be viewed from the Greenfield Road, Kells.

## Grid Reference:

J149969 (St Saviour's)

**This was the site of an early Christian monastery of major importance. Together with the related abbey at Kells, Connor monastery heavily contributed to the 'former greatness of this district'. The site later included a medieval cathedral which was replaced by the present Church of St Saviour.**

## The founding of the monastery

Aengus, or 'Mac Nissi' as he was known, founded the monastery of Connor around AD 480. Mac Nissi, it has been claimed, was baptised by St Patrick and joined him in the singing of the Psalms.

## Early history

The importance of the monastery of Connor is such that Diarmaid, son of the King of Ireland was buried there. In 612 the monastery was burned and in 832 it was plundered by Vikings. The Viking attack on the monastery points to its ecclesiastical and civic importance. A souterrain (underground man-made chamber) was discovered at Connor. They were used as a place of refuge and hiding during attack. Connor also at one time had a round tower.

A fragment of Connor's high cross dating to around the 800s survives in the present church. A tomb stone with a Latin inscription, now in the Ulster Museum, is thought to relate to the monastery of Connor or the abbey at Kells. Two bullaun stones are located at the entrance to the present church.

By the early 1100s, the authority of the Bishop of Connor stretched as far as Coleraine and included the present dioceses of Down and Dromore. This was a time of major reform in the Irish church. Restructuring took place to bring the Irish church into the Roman church system. Due to these reforms, the offices of bishop and abbot of Connor which had previously been held by the same person, were separated.

## Edward Bruce and the Battle of Connor

In 1315 the Anglo-Norman army of Richard de Burgh was drawn into battle at Connor with the invading Scottish army of Edward Bruce. Following the battle, the settlement of Connor never recovered its previous status as a prominent centre in mid Antrim. Bruce's victory left him as the effective master of Ulster until his death in battle in 1318.

## The 1600s

The church at Connor was constituted as a cathedral of the Church of Ireland by James I in the early 1600s. However, by 1622 the church was in a state of decay. It was damaged in the 1641 rising and was no longer in repair by 1657. In 1662 the church at Lisburn was designated the Cathedral of Connor Diocese as it remains today. Connor was then reduced to being a parish church.

## Modern times

By 1768, the church at Connor was in a very bad condition. In the 1810s, a new church was built on the site of the old and it is still in use today. The grounds of the churchyard contain a 'corpse house' that was used in the 1800s for the safekeeping of bodies before burial.

During the late 1800s there were concerns about overcrowding of the graveyard. Despite much local resistance the graveyard was eventually closed.



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## Kells Abbey

After he founded the monastery at Connor, Mac Nissi is said to have chosen the site at Kells as his retreat, where he could withdraw from the world to meditate. The religious settlements at Kells and Connor were closely associated.

Around 1100 the abbey at Kells became an Augustinian establishment. In 1415, it was granted resources to repair the church and other buildings. With the dissolution of the monasteries, the abbey was surrendered in 1542. In 1605, James I granted the former abbey to Sir James Hamilton. It was later granted to Sir Arthur Chichester. A survey in the 1650s recorded that the church at Kells was out of repair.

The western gable and portions of the walls of the abbey are still standing. The O'Hara family of Crebilly built a vault next to the ruins, probably in the 1700s.

The site is locally known as 'Templemoyle', meaning 'the bald or ruined church'. In the past, the church was also known as 'Blessed Virgin Mary of the Desert' and 'Templemurry' meaning 'the church of Mary'.



# BALLYCLUG

*Ballyclug - Townland of the bell*

Pre-Reformation Trail



## Access details:

The graveyard is easily accessed off the Liminary Road, where there is a layby for parking.

The site is located on the outskirts of Ballymena, approximately 2 miles from the town centre.

**Grid Reference:** D125010

**The first church on this site predates 1164. Following the Reformation the church came under the control of the Church of Ireland. By the early 1600s the church was decayed and out of repair.**

Ballyclug means 'townland of the bell'. Bells were of important religious significance in the early Irish church. They were used to call the religious to their duties and accompanied excommunications or other offences or attacks against the church. Distinguished members of the clergy often carried bells with them.

## The church

A church on this site was destroyed around 1164. There are records of a church here after this so it must have been repaired or rebuilt. However, by the 1600s the church was in a state of disrepair and there is no evidence that it was ever repaired or rebuilt.

In 1837, the foundations of the church could still be seen. The stones from the foundations were taken to build the adjacent school house. The church was replaced by a new Church of Ireland built in 1844 in the townland of Ballymarlagh.

## The graveyard

The wall surrounding the graveyard was rebuilt in 1824. At this time the graveyard was enlarged slightly and the entrance changed to the south east corner, where it remains today. When the work on the entrance was carried out the 'ancient paved road' from the original entrance was destroyed.

Some of the inscriptions recorded in the 1800s are no longer identifiable. They may have been removed or their inscriptions become illegible. The monument to the Montgomery family features a coat of arms and motto, 'Honneur Sans Repos'.



# LAYMORE CONVENTICLE SITE

*This natural amphitheatre was an ideal venue for open air services*

Covenanter Trail



#### Access details:

The site is marked by a plaque off the Old Ballymoney Road from Ballymena.

Grid Reference: D090064

**This site, known as 'the Round Hole', was one of the most important meeting places of Covenanters in County Antrim. It hosted gatherings before the building of a Reformed Presbyterian meeting house at Cullybackey in 1789.**

#### The Covenanters

Covenanters are named after the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant signed in Scotland in the mid 1600s. They believed Presbyterianism to be the only true form of church government. They stated that the King should have no authority over the church. Covenanters are also called Reformed Presbyterians.

In 1644 the Solemn League and Covenant was brought to Ireland and signed in 26 places across Ulster, including Ballymena. By the time this occurred, the area had been heavily settled with Scots.

#### The Round Hole

The 1660s to 1680s was a time of persecution for Covenanters. During these times and for a long period after, Covenanters formed themselves into societies which were composed of local family groups. They were so successful that they continued for over 60 years without a resident minister or meeting house. It is thought that the Round Hole was used as a local meeting place for these societies from the 1670s.

#### David Houston

One Covenanter who may have preached here is David Houston. Houston, a Scot, moved to Antrim in 1667 and became a popular preacher. He made regular trips to Scotland to preach to Covenanters. In 1679, he fought for the Covenanters against the forces of the Crown at the Battle of Bothwell Brig, Scotland. Following the battle, he is believed to have fled to the Glenwherry area near Ballymena. He is said to have raised men to defend the River Bann from Jacobites.

Houston was described as having 'a congregation of 500 resolute fellows that adhere to him'. When he died in 1696, he was buried in Connor graveyard. His tombstone inscription is recorded on a tablet on the lecture hall beside Kellswater Reformed Presbyterian Church.



# THE ALEXANDER PEDEN MEMORIAL

*Alexander Peden, Prophet of the Covenanters,  
lived here, 1682-5*

Covenanter Trail



#### Access details:

The memorial is located off the Douglas Road, on the townland of Mistyburn.

Grid Reference: D233009

Alexander Peden was one of the key figures in the story of the Covenanters in Ireland in the late 1600s. He took refuge from persecution by the Scottish authorities with the Steel Family at Mistyburn, in the Glenwherry area near Ballymena. He is one of many Covenanters who fled to this area to seek refuge at that time. In 1972, a memorial was unveiled on the site where he lived.

## Alexander Peden

Ayrshire-born Alexander Peden refused to accept the King's authority over the Church. For this, he was wanted by the government and on several occasions fled to Ireland for refuge. He was eventually arrested in Scotland, imprisoned and later sentenced to exile in Virginia. He escaped exile when the ship's captain refused to assist with the exile of a man on account of his beliefs. Following this he continued to visit Ireland occasionally.

In 1686, when Peden died in Scotland (of natural causes), government troops exhumed his body with the intention of hanging it on the gallows. Lady Dumfries intervened to prevent this and instead his body was reburied on the gallows hill. He was held in such high regard that locals started to bury their dead there also and it became a graveyard. From the early 1700s many books were published about him. This included an edition of *Some remarkable passages of the life and death of Alexander Peden* published in Belfast in 1755.

## The memorial

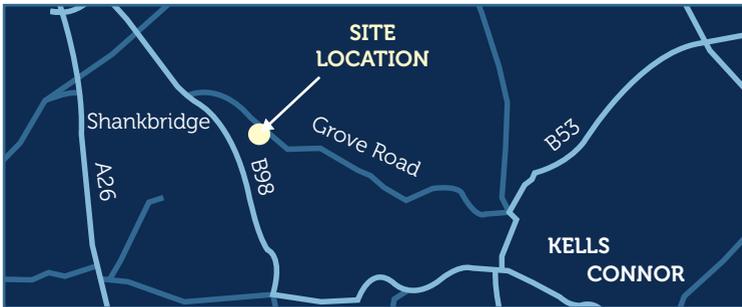
In 1969, a conventicle (open-air meeting) was held at Mistyburn to commemorate Peden's ministry in the area. Nearly 1000 people attended. This success led to the erection of the memorial to Peden on the site where he had lived in refuge. Until 1995 an annual conventicle was held at this site. Today conventicles are held here every five years.



# KELLSWATER REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

*The first Reformed Presbyterian Church in Ireland*

## Covenanter Trail



### Access details:

The churchyard is located off the Grove Road, Shankbridge, near the village of Kells, and is accessible during the hours of daylight.

**Grid Reference:** J129979

**Around 1760, an old mill on this site was transformed into the first Covenanter meeting house in Ireland. The present church was built on the same site. Covenanting was so strong in the area that Kellswater has been described as 'the capital of Covenanting'.**

### The early congregation

Covenanting societies had been operating in the Kells and Connor area from the late 1600s. Before the provision of a meeting house, they met on Ferniskey Hill, south of Kells. David Houston, an important figure in the Irish Covenanting movement in the late 1600s, preached, administered communion and baptised children at Ferniskey. His death in 1696 left Covenanters in Ulster without a pastor for over 60 years. The church hall at Kellswater was built in memorial of him.

### The church

The present church was built in 1806 and situated at the banks of the Kells Water. A stone on the church records the stonemason, Robert Darragh and the joiner, John Orr. The building has kept many of its original fittings and in 1988 was designated a listed building. The church is still in use today.

A renovated mill served as a meeting house before the present church was built. At this time, the congregation was ministered by William Martin, who was ordained the first Reformed Presbyterian minister in Ireland in 1757. Due to increasing unrest in the north of Ireland, Martin led many local Covenanter families to emigrate to South Carolina in 1772. Martin later won fame for his courage in the American War of Independence.

### The graveyard

The small graveyard contains over 40 memorials. The earliest surviving gravestones date to the first half of the 1900s. Several Reformed Presbyterian ministers are buried here, including Rev. William Stavelly, James Dick, S.M. Calderwood and Archibald Holmes.

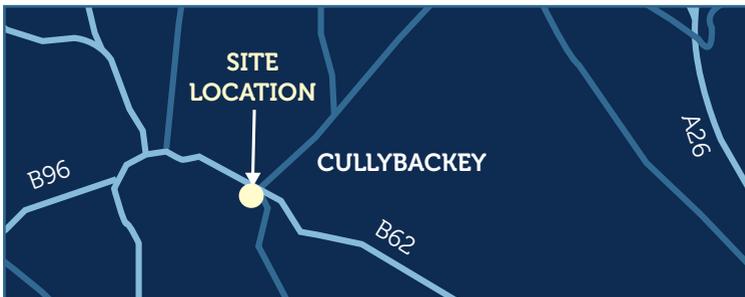
The memorial to William Stavelly stands against the front wall of the church. Stavelly was a key figure in the Reformed Presbyterian Church in the late 1700s. He ministered over a vast area and was heavily involved in the reorganisation of the Irish Reformed Presbytery. Many Covenanters became United Irishmen or supported their cause and Stavelly himself became a figure of suspicion to the authorities around the time of the 1798 rebellion. In 1800, Stavelly moved to the joint congregation of Cullybackey and Kellswater. He later concentrated his ministry at Kellswater where he ministered for 25 years.



# CULLYBACKEY REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

*A stroll through the churchyard will well repay the visitor of contemplative habit...*

## Covenanter Trail



### Access details:

The churchyard is located off the main Ballymena Road, Cullybackey, and is accessible during the hours of daylight.

**Grid Reference:** D060056

**Long before the building of a meeting house, Covenanters met at 'the Round Hole' at Laymore. This society evolved into the congregation of Cullybackey Reformed Presbyterian Church. By 1824, there were 1120 people associated with the congregation.**

### The early congregation

It is thought that Covenanters had been meeting at the Round Hole, Laymore from as early as the 1670s. Cullybackey was part of the Antrim Congregation that was created in 1760, with William Martin as their first ordained minister.

When Martin emigrated to America in 1772, the congregation had no ordained minister for 15 years. In 1787, William Gibson took over the ministry of the congregation and two years later, a meeting house was built at Cullybackey. Gibson was suspected of being sympathetic to the United Irishmen and refused to take the oath of allegiance. He then fled to America where he and others constituted the Reformed Presbytery of America, at Philadelphia in 1798.

### The church

The church that was built in 1789 was sometimes called the 'Pound Meeting House' due to its proximity to a cattle pound. The building was rectangular with a gallery at each end. In 1887, due to an increasing congregation, it was refurbished and extended. In 1929, a new lecture hall was built. The church and lecture hall were demolished in 2007 and the present church was built on the same site.

### The first Synod

The early 1800s had been a time of real growth for the Irish Reformed Presbyterian Church. In 1810 it was decided to divide the Church into four presbyteries - Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western. A Synod (council) would be formed to oversee them. Cullybackey was the venue for the inaugural meeting of the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Ireland in 1811.

### The graveyard

Some of the earliest gravestones in this graveyard can be linked to families who still belong to the congregation. A number of ministers are buried here. The memorial to Rev. Clarke Houston was erected by the congregation 'in testimony of their gratitude for his many affectionate services'. James Wilson dedicated a memorial to the Rev. Hugh Austin 'his beloved pastor'. It records that Austin was 'a kind friend and a talented, faithful minister of the Gospel'.

