

St Mary's Church, Comber

www.comber.down.anglican.org

The Church of Ireland

✠ Protestant & Reformed ✠ Catholic & Apostolic

A GUIDE TO ST MARY'S FOR VISITORS



*St Mary's Parish Church on 12th September 2008
the day the construction of the South Transept was completed*

INTRODUCTION

The Christian Church at the heart of the Parish of Comber possibly began life in the days of St Patrick in the 4th century, became part of the Roman expansion in medieval times, before experiencing the reformation period. We know St Mary's was founded by the Cistercians as one of their Abbeys in the late 12th century, in or around 1190AD. That century saw vigorous evangelism across Europe by the Cistercian Order, the more fervent and simple expression of the Benedictine Order founded by St Benedict. He wrote his Rule for monastic living in the mid-6th century for his new monastery of Monte Cassino in Italy.

The first Cistercian abbey was founded by Robert of Molesme in 1098, at Citeaux Abbey near Dijon in France. The Latin name is Cistercium, hence our word Cistercian. The emphasis of Cistercian life is on manual labour and self-sufficiency, and many abbeys have traditionally supported themselves through activities such as agriculture, brewing and distilling.

It is therefore no surprise that Comber, from its beginning, has always been associated with the cultivation of the fertile land in this part of Co Down, and also with distilling. In the 19th century there were two distilleries in the town and the last distillery, of Old Comber fame in Killinchy Street, only ceased distilling as recently as the 1950s.

The Cistercians came here to the *comar*, the Irish word for a confluence between two rivers, from which the modern name of Comber is derived. If you walk down the church car park and across the Glebe Field, you will soon hear the sound of the Glen River. Barely 200 hundred metres away from St Mary's it runs into the River Enler, which flows just out of sight beyond the houses at the end of the graveyard. From there it becomes the Comber River as it runs into Strangford Lough.

Proximity to Strangford Lough for fishing and thence to the Irish Sea for travel made this place an ideal site for a Cistercian Abbey. The monks knew about basic hygiene, taking their drinking and cooking water from upstream and sending their waste and refuse downstream!

The Cistercians dedicated their churches to the Blessed Virgin, hence the origin of our name - St Mary's. This modern Church of Ireland Parish Church carries the name of the mother of Our Lord simply because this is the dedication that each church here has borne since the Cistercians planted their new church.

There have been at least three churches on this site. But there may have been four. There is an old Irish oral tradition that St Patrick preached in the *comar* and founded a small wooden church. Of that church nothing remains.

The first church we definitely know about is the 12th century Cistercian Abbey, suppressed in 1543 by Henry VIII in his Dissolution of the Monasteries. Perhaps the Cistercians were attracted here because of the earlier association with Ireland's Saint.

But only 60 years later, it was the time of the Ulster Plantation. By 1610 the Scottish Planters were settling in Comber, presumably attracted by the fertile ground and the pattern of agriculture already in place. They built a small, barn-like structure in the Protestant Meeting House style within the walls of the Abbey. This church lasted until 1838 when it was demolished to allow the construction of the present nave and tower.

THE STORY IN STONE



Entering St Mary's through the entrance porch in the tower, dating from 1840, you come to the narrow doors set in a six feet-thick wall. Standing in the nave - Latin *navis*, a boat or ship - think of a fishing boat upside down on a beach and the disciples sheltering underneath it for the night. The Church offers sanctuary to those seeking shelter from the storms of life.

Immediately on your left is the font where we baptise. By baptism we enter into the Church of Faith. The font is to the faith as the door is to the church building. Therefore, according to tradition you often find the font near the main door, just as it is in St Mary's.

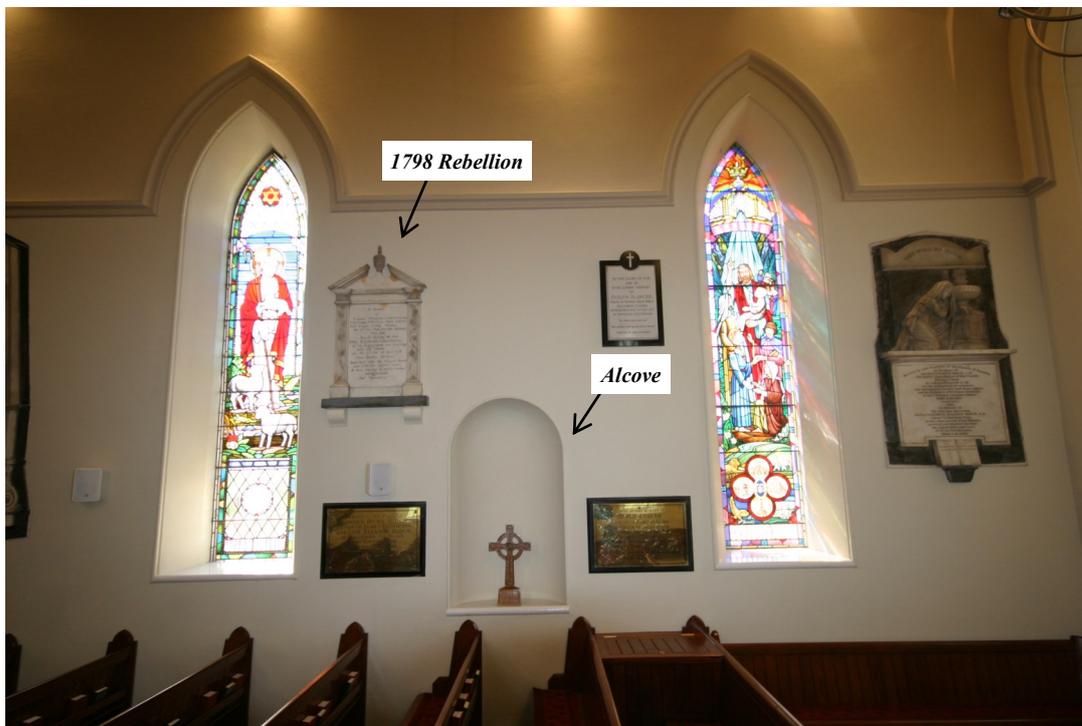
The font design is interesting. Of polished red limestone, some find it quite Byzantine, its appearance indicating a provenance of the middle ages, possibly originating in or around Constantinople. It has been surmised that it may have been brought back to Western Europe at the time of one of the Crusades, when Christians actively sought to save Christian artefacts from destruction. It is therefore possible that the Cistercian mother house in England or Wales, from whom the first monks

came in the 12th century, may have gifted something to the daughter foundation in Ireland. Traditionally Christians make a gift of something to a daughter church that is of Christian significance. To this day a typical gift would be an altar, a bell or indeed, a font. If the Cistercian mother house had a font, saved from elsewhere in Europe, there would have been no better gift for their new Abbey in Ireland.

Going towards the east window, note the memorials and what they have to say about our heritage and tradition. On the left there is the Brett family and their connection with the Connaught Rangers, a famous old Irish Regiment.

On the right, high on the south Nave wall is a memorial to the 1798 Rebellion and the Battle of Saintfield 9th June 1798. The Royalist forces camped the night before the battle in Comber Square. After conducting a Service in St Mary's, the Rector of St Mary's, a Mr Mortimer, guided them to Saintfield, where he was killed. It is ironic he has no memorial in the church.

Below the Rebellion memorial is an alcove, reminiscent of the hole in our Lord's side on the Cross after the centurion thrust in his spear. Such a feature was familiar to the Cistercians.





When you come to the Crossing between the two Transepts, on the left is the North Transept, built in 1912 and dedicated in January 1913. A year later, the Rector who had led the construction of the North Transept, the Revd Canon C C Manning, volunteered as a Padre and served with the Ulstermen in the First World War of 1914-18, being awarded the MC. Whereas the North Transept was dedicated just before the First War, its window was dedicated just before the outbreak of the Second World War.

In the Chancel and Sanctuary, built in 1896, there are two poignant memorials. Behind the pulpit is one to Edmund De Wind. His father was organist here; and in the 1930s so too was his sister, Alice. Edmund died in action at the Race Course Redoubt, near Grugies, Saint-Quentin on 21st March 1918 and was awarded the VC. On the other side is a memorial to George Bruce DSO, MC - Brigade Major, 109th Brigade, killed near Dadizeele in Flanders. Note that he fell in action on 2nd October 1918, merely a few weeks before the Armistice. His father owned the Comber Distillery; George was the manager.

The South Transept to your right was built in 2008 and dedicated on the Eve of Candlemas, 1st February 2009. Note the magnificent stained glass in the Dorcas Window of 1895 and in the Cistercian and Quarry Windows of 2008.

In the autumn of 2007, taking down part of the nave wall to allow for the construction of the new Transept, the workmen carefully removed a large memorial (the Birch Memorial) for repositioning at the west end above the door. The memorial was placed in the wall in 1840 when the nave was built. Behind it they discovered a carefully hidden glass bottle containing very old parchment. What tale does it tell? Will it tell us about the 1610 church? Will there be a drawing showing us what it was like? Will it tell us about the people of that time? It is now with the Public Records

Office in the hope that conservators will be able to unravel and decipher our very own Message in a Bottle.



In March 2008, when that large memorial was repositioned on the west wall, above the entrance doors, the workmen discovered that the wall in this area, forming the base of the tower, was not as thick as expected, indeed it was hollow. Investigation revealed a blocked up window pre-dating the 1840 tower. We can assume that this window had been above the doors in the west wall of the 1610 church, for that was the custom. But that church will not have been a substantial construction. Why the thickness up to just beyond head height in our church?

The Cistercians made a feature of the west wall and the entrance to their churches. This can be seen in many medieval English and continental cathedrals and churches to this day. The entrance - the door into the building - is made grand to symbolise that this is indeed the entry into the Church of Faith.

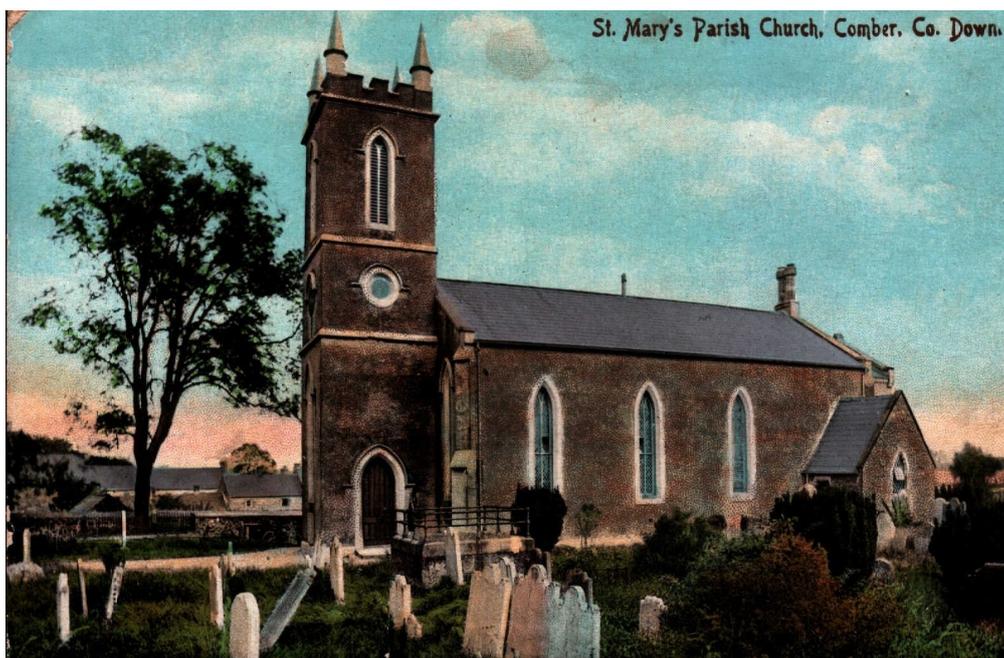
The old people of Comber in 1610 would have been anxious to incorporate into their new church the remains of something they knew to be significant in the old one. It is not unreasonable to suggest that there were people in Comber in 1610 who remembered very well the "old" church and the liturgical practices of the monks. It is a natural wish on the part of Christians everywhere, when embarking on the new, to bring with them reminders of some of the good things in their recent past. It is therefore safe to assume that in our west wall of the 1840 Nave are some of the stones, not just of the 1610 church, but of the twelfth century Abbey itself. The old speaks through the new.



Above is St Mary's in a postcard from the early 1900s. Note the candelabra, decorated for the Harvest Thanksgiving. In 1841 three candelabra were given to the "new" St Mary's by the family of Lord Londonderry. The picture above is the only impression we have of those candelabra. Our three modern chandeliers, the gift in 2008 of a parishioner, are deliberately reminiscent of the earlier candelabra. Again, the old design informs the new.

Note the window beside the pulpit, so the picture was taken before the North Transept was built in 1912. Len Ball - Comber's contemporary historian with Desmond Rainey - informs us these postcards would have been hand-tinted individually from black and white prints, providing us with the earliest forms of colour pictures. Colour photographs eventually became practical around the 1930s. So the card above is certainly around 100 years old.

The postcard below, supplied by Len Ball, is St Mary's in the 1930s.



THE STORY CONTINUES

In June 2009 the Built Heritage Section of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency undertook the installation of some stones around the inside of the South Transept door. Identified as 12th or 13th century ecclesiastical stones and clearly belonging to a door frame, they were discovered by Erskine Willis in his garden across The Square from St Mary's some years ago. They are almost certainly stones from Comber's Cistercian Abbey.



Pictured here is a keystone that would have gone above a door, a position of honour it now holds again, this time in the South Transept of St Mary's. Len Ball writes, "Early Cistercian architecture excluded the use of fancy or frivolous design, but in later years this attitude softened and carving and elaboration became permissible. While the majority of the stones may well be 12th century, it must be assumed - according to Dr Marion Meeke - that the Monk's Head (the keystone) is later, perhaps 15th century."

AND THE STORY TEACHES

What we learn today from St Mary's Parish Church at the heart of the town of Comber is that the Church is ever-changing. It is always being renewed. No generation can ever rest on its laurels, nor allow itself to fall asleep and accept its Christian heritage without thought for the generations to come. The old comes alive again in the new.

Hundreds of years ago - perhaps over 1500 years ago! - people came here to evangelise, to sow the seed of the Gospel of Christ. Those who have come to the faith here over the generations since have travelled in turn to places and lands unknown and unimagined to those early founders of Comber.

Traveller! Drink freely here from this ancient well of faith; and rest awhile.

In the Name of the Lord we wish you a safe journey

© Jonathan Barry ~ First edition June 2009, revised May 2010,
gratefully acknowledging assistance received from Len Ball and Don Johnston.

Further reading ~ For the definitive modern history of Comber see "A Taste of Old Comber" by Len Ball and Desmond Rainey, White Row Press, ISBN 1 870132 06 8 Paperback 128 pages, 90 illustrations £9.95; also COMBER ST MARY by Fred Rankin in Part I of "Clergy of Down and Dromore", The Ulster Historical Foundation and The Library Committee of the Dioceses of Down & Dromore and Connor, 1996, pp 97-98.

OUR MONTHLY SERVICES

SUNDAYS	9.00AM	HOLY COMMUNION
	11.00AM	FAMILY WORSHIP PARISH COMMUNION ON THE FIRST SUNDAY
	6.30pm	EVENING PRAYER COMPLINE & COMMUNION ON THE THIRD SUNDAY
WEDNESDAYS	10.00am	HOLY COMMUNION <i>except in July & August</i>

We have weekday organisations for children of all ages and on Sundays we have The Young Seekers (Sunday School) at 11.00am and Genesis St Mary's for teenagers at 6.30pm.

Rector: The Revd Canon Dr Jonathan Barry Tel: 028 9187 2283

Curate: The Revd Mervyn Jamison Tel: 028 9187 1881



THE CISTERCIAN WINDOW

in the South Transept was designed and made by David Esler
of Leadlines Stained Glass Studio, Belfast.

Dedicated on the Eve of Candlemas 1st February 2009, it is the gift of many parishioners.

Photograph by Penrhyn Photography, Bridge Street, Comber.