

New report finds no evidence of medieval manse on Vicar Street

Preliminary findings of an archaeological investigation into houses at Vicar Street due to be demolished to make way for the Kilkenny Central Access Scheme show no evidence of a medieval manse.

The survey, from architectural and historical buildings specialist Rob Goodbody, says there is insufficient evidence that nos. 20 to 22 Vicar Street contain the remains of a manse house (residence of a clergyman).

Mr Goodbody says previous writings claiming that a manse house was located at no 22 Vicar Street were not based on sound historical fact.

His investigation, which is ongoing, is being carried out under licence and supervision of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht.

In his preliminary report Mr Goodbody says a manse house belonging to the Prebendary (a cleric) of Tascoffin, (a district in County Kilkenny) is known to have been somewhere in the vicinity of the Vicar Street houses.

He examined historical writings about the site over the past two centuries as part of his investigation and found that:

- Irish historian Edward Ledwich wrote in 1786 that a visitation carried out by Bishop Otway in 1672 placed the manse house on a street called King Street, somewhere in the vicinity of the present site in Vicar Street.
- Another historian, John Hogan, wrote in 1884 that a map from 1758 shows the manse house running from Mill Lane to the Breaghagh. He said that the pub at the corner, now 22 Vicar Street, was a remnant of this. But he gave no sources for his information.
- The map of 1758 Hogan referred to does not show the property as being a manse house. Such church houses were shown in different shading to buildings in general on the map.
- In 1905 Rev William Carrigan quoted Ledwich's writings and concluded that King Street ran from the corner of Vicar Street in a straight line to the Breaghagh. He agreed with Hogan that the manse was on the site of number 22 Vicar Street, stating that

Hogan had made the identification “with every show of reason”. However Mr Goodbody says that Hogan had shown no reason at all.

- In 1953 historians Dr W J Phelan and J S Gibb gave the location of the manse as 22 Vicar Street, giving Carrigan and Hogan as the sources of their information.

According to Rob Goodbody’s preliminary report Edward Ledwich made a number of significant errors, the first being the date of the visitation of Bishop Otway, which was actually 1679, not 1672.

He said the bishop’s survey does not mention a street called King Street, but “the king’s street”, which is an urban equivalent of “the king’s highway” – a description and not a name. It is notable that no other source has suggested that there was a street in that location called King Street.

Mr Goodbody says while John Hogan drew conclusions from the map of 1758 that sounded authoritative, they were only his conclusions and the map does not show this at all.

He points out that Carrigan followed Hogan uncritically and interpreted the existence of King Street. And that Phelan and Gibb offered no new light, merely repeating Hogan and Carrigan.

“None of these authors cites the extensive works by the most prolific writers on the history and antiquities of Kilkenny, Rev James Graves and John G Augustus Prim, who appear to have left no record of this building in Vicar Street or the manse house of the Prebendary of Tascoffin.

“In their book on the history, architecture and antiquities of St Canice’s there is no mention of such a manse house. Graves made no reference to it in his paper on the ancient street architecture of Kilkenny, which discussed a number of older buildings that survived in Kilkenny at time he was writing, in 1857.”

Mr Goodbody says the removal of plaster has confirmed that the front, rear and internal walls of numbers 21 and 22 Vicar Street were rebuilt. Some earlier portions of wall remain, but these are of 18th century.

The gable end of 22 Vicar Street facing the Diageo car park is part of an earlier building, or buildings, that stood on the car park site. The gable does not coincide with the building shown on the 1758 map, suggesting that either the map was wrong, or the gable is from a different building. There is a small opening, lined with cut stone, in the gable wall. Mr

Goodbody says that it is uncertain at present which building this belonged to, as it may not be in its original position.

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