



**Report on  
Excavation and completion of conservation works.**



**Carran Mediaeval Church, Poulacarran, Carran, Co. Clare.**

Monument Number: CL009-075001

Licence: Ministerial Consent. No. C000793

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15 December / Nodlaig 2017

## **1. General information:**

**Site:** Carran Mediaeval Church, Pollacarran, Carran, Co. Clare

**Monument No:** CL009-075001

**NGR:** Centre of site coordinates: 523950 697419

**Geology of site:** Shallow humus on natural limestone bedrock.

**Ordnance Datum:** 430'

**Licenses:** Ministerial Consent No: C000793

Excavation: E004819

Works: W000295 .

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**Client:** Cliffs of Moher / Burren GeoparkLIFE.

**License Holder:** Risteard UaCróinín BA, MA, MIAI, MAACO.

**Fieldwork:** Risteard UaCróinín BA, MA, MIAI, MAACO

**Company:** Clare County Council.

**Date of Works:** October /November / December 2017

**Date of Report:** 15 December 2017

**Report Author:** Risteard UaCróinín BA, MA, MIAI, MAACO

**Photographs:** Risteard UaCróinín BA, MA, MIAI, MAACO

## **Introduction**

This report details the conservation works carried out by Mid West lime Ltd. on the ruin of Carran mediaeval church, Poulacarran, Co. Clare. The church is a recorded monument, CL009-075001. The works were delayed, due to a dispute with the landowner, who required that a post and rail wooden fence be erected to protect visitors to the church and graveyard from animals and to discourage them from walking over his landholding. This was eventually agreed and permitted by The National Monuments Service and on completion of a small excavation carried out by hand, by the licensee, on September 1<sup>st</sup> 2017, works commenced in late September

### **Rationale:**

Carran Church is a Demonstration Site under the GeoparkLIFE programme (LIFE 11 ENV/IE/922). It was proposed to carry out essential repairs consolidate the building and make it safe for visitors. Repairs were required to the NW corner of Carran mediaeval church due to structural cracking. The condition of the corner was assessed by ACP Ltd. consulting conservation engineers in 2015 and National Monuments Service was notified. Ministerial consent was granted under certain conditions.

### **Initial Meeting:**

On the 26<sup>th</sup> October a meeting was held, on site, with the ACO, Risteard UaCroinin, Martin English (Conservation Engineer) with ACP Ltd. and Kevin O’Leary of Mid West lime Ltd.

Mr. O’Leary pointed out that grouting the interior of the wall would have little beneficial effect as the location or extent of the internal voids could not be determined. He proposed using more Helifix Helibar rods in the joints at the NW corner. This was discussed and agreed. As there would be a significant saving the ACO proposed that further works might be carried out at the opposite SE corner where foundation stones had become dislodged and posed a risk of collapse to that corner of the building. It was agreed that this work was appropriate and could be carried out for the same cost.

The ACO agreed to supervise the removal of a pile of stones which lay against the west gable, over the next few days to allow scaffolding to be erected. (A report on this work is included, as Appendix 3, in the Excavation report)

### **Conservation Works:**

Over the next three weeks, the work of consolidating the NW and SE corners progressed, when the weather permitted. A sample of mortar pointing was inspected by the ACO who found that the texture, aggregates, colour and finish, satisfactorily replicated the original and permission to proceed was given. A 3.5NHL mortar, with sand and stone dust aggregate was used.

Removing the grass sods on top of the wall revealed that a short flight of steps existed between the machicoulis and gable-ridge, between an inner and outer gable, providing a

continuous wall-walk over the gable and it was agreed that these would be cleaned and re-pointed, in situ.

During the removal of the pile of stones at the NW gable architectural fragments were discovered, which had fallen from the corner. These contained some dressed limestone blocks, three dressed barge stones and a barge-stop. Also discovered were a lot of broken, limestone rubble fragments. (Report: Appendix 3 Excavation Report)

It was agreed that the architectural fragments, including the barge stones would be re-erected on the external gable, from whence they came, originally. The angle-rake of the barge was calculated from that of the inner gable which had remained intact. It was also agreed that the rubble fill could be re-used to fill voids, where required. These works served to re-instate collapsed masonry, reduce the amount of imported material required and partially re-instate the original appearance of the gable.

When works to the interior and exterior of the NW corner were completed, some of the original grass sods were replaced, (to reduce the amount of water lodging on the wall tops). Works then commenced on the exterior of the SE corner which had been partially undermined. The voids were grouted with a 3.5NHL mortar and foundation stones re-instated. The corner was then re-pointed with a similar mix to the NW corner.

### **The Erection of a Post and Rail wooden fence.**

In October 2017 The National Monuments Service was notified that Burren Geopark intended to erect a wooden fence at each side of the grass path from the public road to the churchyard. Details were included and permission was granted, on condition that any ground disturbance would be monitored by the licensee.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> December 2017 the ACO Risteard UaCroinin monitored the erection of the wooden posts. As the bedrock here is very close to the surface the posts were driven with some difficulty. The spaces between the posts were not always regular as the erectors had to find the location of subsurface grikes, in the limestone, using iron probes. However by the end of day the work was completed successfully, without the need for digging, rock breaking or concrete foundations.

The works to the church were inspected by ACP Ltd. Conservation Engineering Consultants and a Certificate of Completion issued to Burren Geopark LIFE.

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## Photographic Record.



South east corner. Works completed.



**Barge stones re-instated. West Gable.**



**Gable steps re-pointed.**



**North West corner completed.**





**North west corner, completed (interior).**



**Marking out the wooden fence.**



**Driving the posts.**



**Finished north side of rail.**

## General description of Carran Mediaeval Church

A detached, gabled, fortified, stone church, rectangular in plan with a wall walk outside the roof, protected by a stone parapet. The church is built with large, undressed limestone, quarried blocks set in erratic courses, bedded in a rich lime mortar. Corner stones, corbels, machicoulis, windows and doorways are cut from limestone blocks and finished to a fine smooth surface, as is common in 13<sup>th</sup> century masonry. The main entrance doorway is an exceptionally fine piece of craftsmanship, composed of numerous orders of convex and concave mouldings under a pointed-arch hood, as is the remaining window on the south wall.

From the 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century this was the primary church of the largest parish in the Burren.

A doorway in the south wall opens into the body of the church. The altar of the church was located beneath the east window. On the west gable, protruding corbels indicate where the floor of an upper storey rested. This is likely to have been the priest's quarters.

The remains of stone cairns, medieval house footings, field walls and enclosures are still evident today in the surrounding fields.

### Doorway



### Elaborate Doorway at Carran.

The finely carved, cut stone doorway has an ornamental moulding forming a pointed arch with a carved hooded dripstone above to protect it from rainwater. An incised consecration cross is carved on the west side of the inner part of the door and a plain stoup (a small stone container for holy water) on the east side. Part of a quern stone is re-used in the interior stonework to the east of the doorway.

### Windows

All three windows in the church have tall narrow openings with cut stone surrounds. The exterior of the ogee headed arch in the most easterly window in the south wall is decorated with floral motifs. The second window in the south wall has been badly damaged with only the sill stone remaining. All of the windows have interior splayed embrasures to maximise



the amount of light entering the church.

South window,

### **The Stone Head**

On the interior north wall a small helmeted head of a soldier or knight projects from a plain block of stone. The face is pear shaped with a narrow, straight ended chin, a narrow thin slit mouth and a large, straight nose. The large, almond shaped eyes are closely spaced. The helmet covers the ears and side of the face. Historical sources state that the head was originally one of three, the others depicting a king and a female.



Stone head in north wall.

### **Defensive features**

The projecting corbels in the west interior of the Church indicate that an upper storey existed, at the west end, which may have been the priest's living quarters. On the exterior wall of the north-west corner is a defensive feature known as a machicolation. There was likely another one, beside it on the north wall, which has since collapsed. These were used to protect this corner from attack or undermining. This may indicate that this corner was outside a high defensive wall which may have protected the ecclesiastical complex and abutted the church gable. Vestiges of this wall can still be discerned near the western boundary wall. It indicated

a necessity for the church occupiers to defend themselves in times of civil unrest, which were common in 15<sup>th</sup> century Ireland.



NW corner showing machicoulis and parapet,  
prior to works.

### **Cairns and House Footings.**

There are a number of '*cairns*' or heaps of stones in the field surrounding the Church which may have been used as penitential stations or places of burial in the past. The largest cairn is located to the south of the church. This may have given the townland its name: Poll a' Chairn (The Cairn Depression), which is obvious to the east of the site. An old custom required coffins to be carried around this cairn before bringing them into the churchyard. Rectangular foundations remaining to the north west of the Church are likely to have been medieval house sites and smaller out buildings.



House site to north of church.

**Ordnance Survey Letters by John O'Donovan and Eugene Curry, 1839**  
**Parish of Carron (a)**

Inis Diomain,  
October 23rd 1839.

Dear Sir,

The next part of Burren which I have examined is the extensive Parish of Carron. It is bounded on the west and northwest by the Parishes of Noughaval, Kilcoarney and Oghtmama; on the northeast by the Co. of Galway; on the east by the Parish of Kilkeedy and on the south by that of Killinaboy.

This Parish is now called in Irish Paráiste an Chairn and the old Church Teampull a Chairn, i.e., the Parish and Church of Carn, or the Sepulchral Heap, and yet there is no cairn near the old Church at least in the same Townland with it. The nearest cairn to the old Church of this Parish is about one mile to the west of it, and in the Townland of Ballydoory; but whether the Parish was originally called after this or from some other now destroyed, which stood nearer the old Church, is a question that cannot be easily answered. Nothing, however, is more certain than that Teampull a Chairn, the present name of the old Church means the Church of the Cairn. The word Cárn, which is pronounced long in the north of Ireland, is here pronounced short - Carn.

The old Church of Carn is situated in a Townland of the same name about six miles to the northwest of Corofin. It measures in the clear fifty six feet ten inches in length and twenty feet eight inches in breadth. The west gable contains no feature but a broken belfry on its top. The south contains a pointed doorway six feet ten inches in height and three feet eight inches in width, and two windows, one of which is pointed, but the other is so broken at the top that its characteristics cannot be ascertained, but nothing is surer than that it also was pointed. The east gable contains a pointed window broad inside and narrow outside. It measures on the inside fourteen feet in height and six feet four inches in width, and on the outside ten feet in height and six inches wide, and at two-thirds of its height a small stone extends across but for what purpose cannot be easily determined.

A broken stone altar remains under this window and on its left corner a Holy Water Font of curious formation. In the north wall not far from the east gable are inserted in the wall (from

which they project a little) three heads, two of males and one of a female. The walls of this Church are three feet six inches thick and about fourteen feet high. This Church is of the fifteenth century.



Modern OS Map showing church in Graveyard.



Aerial photo of Carran mediaeval church and graveyard.





Second Edition OS Map. C1890



1<sup>st</sup> Edition OS Map c. 1840