

# The Act of Union and Anglican places of worship in early 19th century Ireland

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*The Church of Ireland's Board of First Fruits embarked on a large-scale church building programme in the early 19th century. The Board of First Fruits was terminated in 1834. The Board's pursuits coincided for a time with the building activities, begun in 1818, of the Church Building Commission for England. A study of some of the churches constructed with funding from both the Board and the Commission highlights similarities in the development of a preferred form and layout for the Anglican churches of both Ireland and England. The almost simultaneous adoption of this preferred design in both countries indicates a consistency of belief among the church building authorities of both countries as to how an Anglican place of worship should be arranged in the late 1820s.*

In 1801, the Established churches, Anglican by denomination, of both England and Ireland were unified. This was one of the results of the Act of Union; the British and Irish Parliaments agreed the terms of the Act on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 1800 and the union came into force on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1801 when the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was instituted. The Irish Parliament, which had previously had legislative powers in Ireland but to varying degrees had been subordinate to the Parliament of Great Britain, had effectively voted itself out of existence and the complete legislation of Irish affairs was assigned to the British Parliament in London. The terms of the Act of Union were presented in eight articles dealing with political affairs, the church, trade, finance and the laws of the new United Kingdom.

Article 5 of the Act of Union provided for the establishment of the United Church of England and Ireland and the article affirmed that the doctrine, worship, discipline and government of the United Church of England and Ireland would remain as it had

been up to that point for the Church of England. The newly created church was expected to not only adopt rules regarding doctrine, worship, discipline and governance as had been in existence in the Church of England but any subsequent changes to the prevailing rules would be implemented in both countries. It can further be supposed that, because of the unification, systems of governance and discipline and attitudes to doctrine and worship that were current in the contemporary Anglican Church in England would be reflected in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Anglican Church in Ireland. Moreover, it could be proposed that if a consistently unified approach to worship in particular, as proscribed by Article 5 of the Act of Union, was effected, then this uniformity in worship practice might be evident in a comparison of the form and layout of the places of worship built in both countries in the early decades after 1800. Major parliamentary-funded church building programmes in the early 19th century in both Ireland and England provide the physical evidence for such a comparison.

After the Napoleonic Wars the British Parliament granted £1 million for the construction of new churches to cater for the needs of the new industrial towns of England. The erection of these churches, known as ‘Commissioners’ Churches’, and less commonly as ‘Million Churches’ or ‘Waterloo Churches’ was a reaction to the disruption of the traditionally rural based parochial system of the church throughout the previous century with the migration of workers to the emerging industrial centres. These industrial centres had previously been sparsely inhabited and were without parish churches suitable for growing congregations, which in turn were being lost to dissenter organisations and secularism (Port 2006, 9-17). The response to the need for new churches was the setting up in 1818 of the Church Building Commission to administer the £1 million parliamentary grant and oversee the construction of churches (Port 2006, 45). This initial grant was supplemented with another half million in 1824. As the funds from the parliamentary grants were gradually diminishing, particularly through the 1830s and 1840s, further funding was obtained from parish rates and subscription. By the time the responsibilities of the Church Building Commission were transferred to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners for England in 1856 over £3 million had been spent on 612 new churches (Port 2006, 276).

Spending by the British Parliament on church construction in Ireland had begun almost immediately after the Act of Union. This extensive early 19<sup>th</sup>-century church building programme reflected the renewal of the Established church in Ireland, which, as was perceived at the time, had been in spiritual and temporal decline in the previous century. The Church of Ireland’s Board of First Fruits managed the distribution of funding for the church building programme in Ireland. The Board of First Fruits, which had its origins in the *annates* or the first fruits of a bishopric/benefice in medieval times, had supervised the Irish Parliament funding of church construction before the Act of Union. However, finances under the Irish Parliament had been limited and spending was restricted to parishes that had been without a church for twenty years or more.

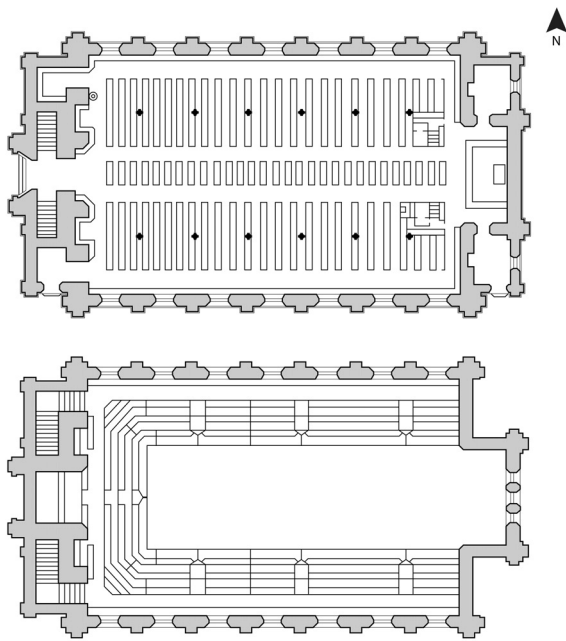
The Act of Union was to have a profound impact on the activities of the Board of First Fruits. Restrictions on spending were lifted and £431,000

was spent on the construction and repair of 697 churches throughout Ireland between 1800 and 1830 (Akenson 1971, 115-21; Brynn 1971, 284-96; Acheson 2001). Though the Board wholly funded the majority of churches built, some parishes are known to have contributed by way of private donation and/or parish subscription. These churches have become invariably known as ‘First Fruits’ churches. The work of the Board of First Fruits was terminated with the establishment of the Board of Ecclesiastical Commissioners for Ireland in 1834.

### *The Commissioners’ Church*

One of the first considerations of the Church Building Commission for England was the creation of a design for a building that was deemed both a suitable place for Anglican worship and economical to construct. Having considered different designs and through consultation with Board of Works architects John Nash, John Soane and Robert Smirke, the Commission established regulations on cost and materials. With cost as the overriding factor there were restrictions on ornament with stucco being banned and the expense of the stone portico may have contributed to the eventual preference for the Gothic over the classically styled church (Port 2006, 94-96). Architects throughout England seeking appointment provided plans of prospective churches to the Commission, which were then scrutinised, and sometimes rejected and sent back for correction, until an acceptable scheme was submitted. Only upon submission of a suitable design was an architect commissioned to build any particular church (Port 2006, 59-70). However, though the influence on church construction must have been particularly strong for the period of the first grant as the Commission provided the vast majority, if not all, of the funding for church construction, not all churches conformed to the Commissioners’ principles. Influence may have waned during succeeding years as the gradually increasing financial contributions of local parishes seems have increased local input into the design of churches (Port 2006, 90).

During the period when it did exercise almost full financial control, the Commission attempted to control internal arrangement of each church. The insistence on a preferred internal layout may have governed the



*Fig 1*  
*Approved design for a Commissioner's church.*  
*St Thomas, Birmingham, 1826-29. Pew rent plan, not*  
*to scale (courtesy The Church of England Record Centre,*  
*London; ECE/7/1/15225/2; redrawn by the author).*

overall layout of the Commissioners' churches. The regulations on internal arrangements stipulated that appropriate significance was to be given to the altar, placed in a shallow recess at the east end and elevated three steps above floor level. It was to be visible to all congregants and all seats in the church were to face east. Allowance was made for north and south facing seats on side galleries where accommodation for larger congregations was required. Seats in the nave were to face east and double or square pews were forbidden. The font was to be located at the west end of the church. The Commissioners also preferred the separation of the traditional three-decker pulpit into a pulpit and reading desk, each of equal height and situated either side of the altar at the east end. The Commissioners disapproved of transepts or cross plans for churches, forms that would have detracted from the wholly eastern emphasis of the church. In some cases a compromise on the rules was permitted, particularly regarding seating arrangements and the removal of the traditional three-decker pulpit from its central location at the east end of the central aisle. Thus, the core of the church was a rectangular nave with east-end shallow chancel before considering the

forms and locations of other elements such as vestries, robing rooms, lobbies and porches (Port 2006, 98-99).

A pew rent plan for a Commissioners' church, St Thomas in Birmingham, built in 1826-29, shows the Commission's preferred design and highlights the prominence given to internal layout in relation to the organisation of the congregation (Fig 1). The plan for the church included a shallow chancel as a sanctuary for the raised altar at the east end. The pulpit and reading desk, most often combined in churches built before the establishment of the Commission, were separated and placed either side of the opening to the chancel. Seating, in the form of bench pews in the nave, faced east and box pews were not included. In larger churches such as St Thomas, where a gallery was required, seating on the north and south sides of the gallery faced into the centre of the nave with seating in the west facing the east end. Though this was unavoidable, the internal focus throughout was on the east end and there appears to have been a concerted effort to create a balanced emphasis on the three liturgical centres of pulpit for sermon, desk for reading and sanctuary for the altar as the centrepiece (Port 2006, 219).

The east to west liturgical axis was reiterated through the positioning of the tower, or alternatively the porticoed entrance for classically-styled churches, at the centre of the west end. The preferred internal arrangement was not affected by the other necessary requirements of the church; the robing room (for the choir) and the vestry/lobby were usually externally attached structures at the east end of the church on either side of, or directly behind the sanctuary. This location may have been dictated by a number of factors including funding limitations and possibly the desire to create as short a route as possible between the vestry and robing room and the eastern liturgical reference points of pulpit, reading desk and altar. Though the plans of other churches show some alterations in the location of the robing room and vestry, the presence of which would appear to have been a secondary concern, the foremost requirements regarding approved internal layout appear to have been upheld. This is evident in the ground plan of St Bartholomew, Sydenham, built in 1826-29 (Fig 2). Though an alternative position was preferred for the vestry, the visual eastern emphasis on the altar, central to the pulpit to the south and reading desk to the

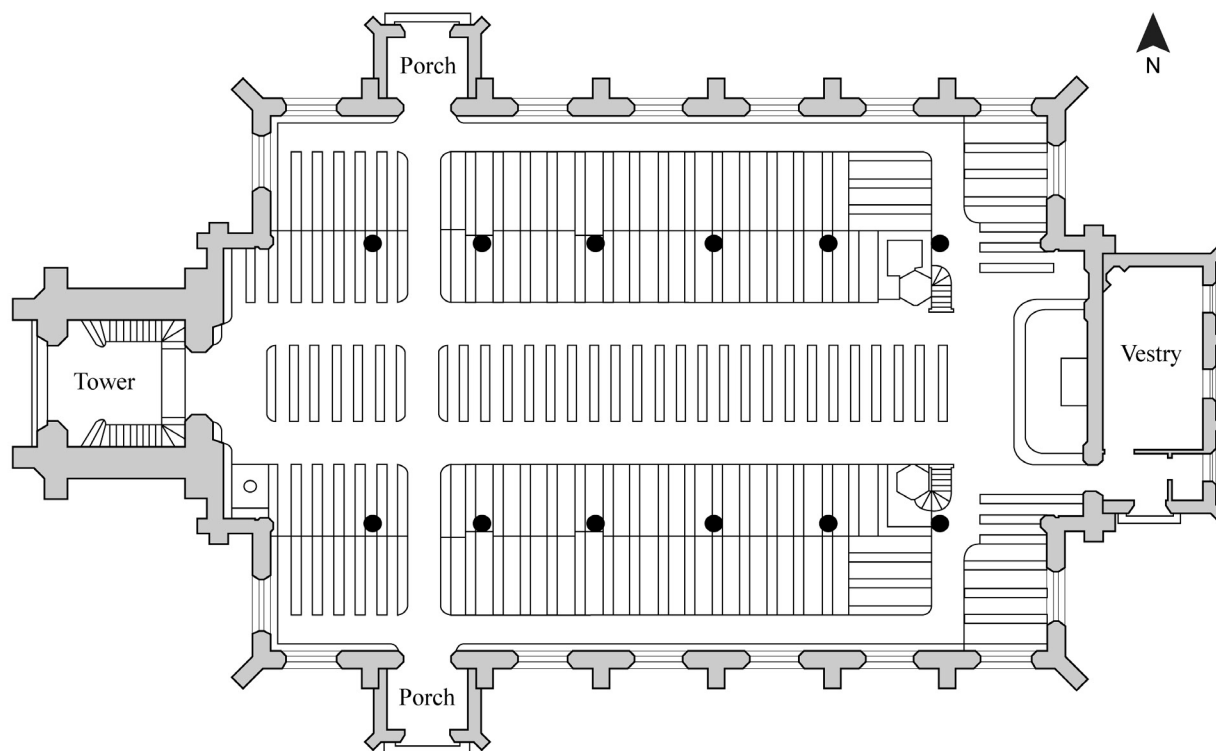


Fig 2

*Approved design for a Commissioner's church. St Bartholemew, Sydenham, Lewisham, 1826-31. Ground Plan, not to scale (courtesy The Royal Institute of British Architects, London; [SC117/2(1-10)]; redrawn by the author).*

north, was maintained (Port 2006, 208). Indeed, it can be claimed, by reference to surviving church plans, that where the rules on internal arrangement were upheld the overall form of the Commissioners' church was to a large degree governed by the insistence on the internal layout.

### *The Board of First Fruits Church*

It was not until 1813 that an official Board of First Fruits architect in Ireland was appointed. John Bowden supervised the building of churches throughout Ireland until his death in 1822. At this time an official architect was appointed for each of the four ecclesiastical provinces. James Pain, assisted by his brother George Richard Pain, was responsible for church construction in the province of Cashel, William Farrell for Armagh, John Semple and his son John Semple Jnr for Dublin and Joseph Welland for Tuam (Lee 2005, 133). Nothing is known of the builders of Board of First Fruits churches before the appointment of official Board architects. It is likely that architects or builders were appointed locally.

Though it is known that the Board of First Fruits favoured official architects, unlike the Commissioners' church no rules or regulations relating to layout are known to have existed and it is difficult to assess to what degree the Board of First Fruits or the church hierarchy in Ireland attempted to control the design of churches. To date, the First Fruits church has been invariably portrayed as simple and consistent in architectural style and form. The typical First Fruits church has been described as restrained gothic in architectural style and as a rectangular 'preaching box' or 'auditory hall' with a western tower and with the possible addition of a chancel, vestry or transept. This church has been presented as the standard with any variation in overall form ascribed to the architectural dexterity of the appointed architects (Sheehy 1978, 187-262; Craig 1982, 216; McCullough & Mulvin 1987, 75; O'Reilly 1997, 160-1; Hutchison 2003; Lee 2005).

The form of the uncomplicated single unit auditory hall would have suited the requirement for a place of worship where the sermon and reading were the primary focus of worship. Timoleague parish church, Co. Cork was built as the standard auditory hall (Fig 3).

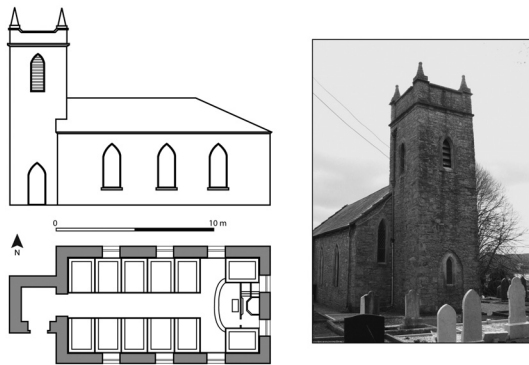


Fig 3  
A 'standard' First Fruits church. Timoleague parish church, 1811. Ground plan and South elevation (courtesy Representative Church Body Library, Dublin; MS 138; redrawn by the author). Photograph by the author.

The rectangular nave, with western tower, contained box pews throughout and the combined pulpit/reading desk was located at the centre of the east end with an enclosed area in front of the pulpit/reading desk reserved for the altar. This arrangement compelled congregants to face in to the centre of each box pew and ensured that the auditory relationship between the congregation and the pulpit/reading desk took

precedence over any visual relationship with either the pulpit/reading desk or the altar.

However, since it has been assumed that all First Fruits churches were constructed from a simple and standard design, the impact of any complexity in form and layout on the relationship between the congregation and liturgical reference points has been largely ignored. A detailed survey of the form and layout of these churches as originally constructed presents the opportunity for a more accurate interpretation of Anglican worship space in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Ireland. The survey also provides evidence to determine if developments in church construction in Ireland mirrored those in England at a time when the Commission had decided on a preferred layout.

A group of five First Fruits churches in Co. Cork were selected for survey to assess this question (since a survey of all Board of First Fruits churches constructed was beyond the scope of this study). All were constructed within a six-year period from 1824 to 1830 with full funding by the Board of First Fruits. The churches were built in southwest Co. Cork, in an area extending from near Clonakilty to beyond Skibbereen (Fig 4). Two of the churches chosen were located in urban settings – Kilmacabea in the town of

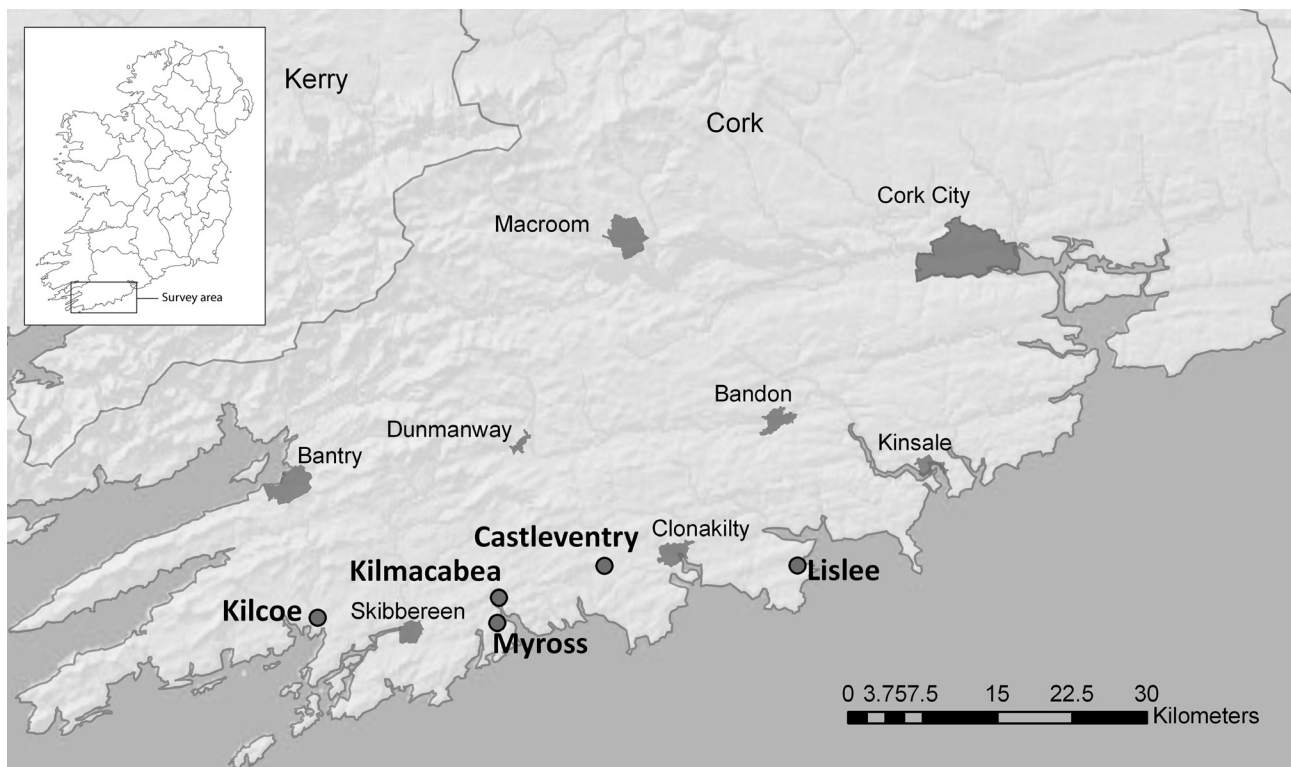


Fig 4  
Locations of surveyed churches (drawn by the author).

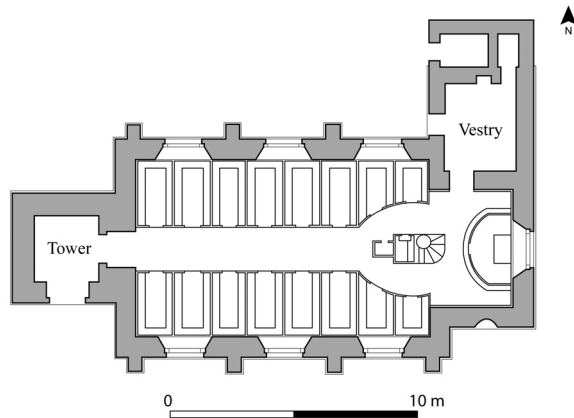


Fig 5  
Castleventry parish church, 1824. Ground plan (courtesy Representative Church Body Library, Dublin; MS 138; redrawn by the author).

Leap and Myross in the town of Union Hall. The other three, Castleventry, Lislee and Kilcoe, though readily accessible, were situated in more rural locations.

**Castleventry:** The parish church of Castleventry was built in 1824 with a grant of £830 from the Board of First Fruits (Brady 1864, vol 2, 501). The church consisted of a rectangular nave with a tower at the centre of the west end and an east end chancel (Fig 5). A vestry was present to the north side of the chancel. The nave contained two rows of box pews on the north and south sides of a narrow central aisle with a combined pulpit and reading desk centrally located at the east end. The shallow chancel provided a sanctuary for the altar, which was raised on one step above floor level and was enclosed within altar rails.

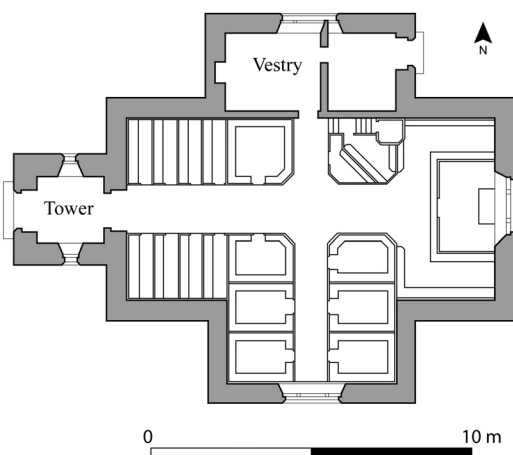


Fig 6  
Myross parish church, 1826. Ground plan (courtesy Representative Church Body Library, Dublin; MS 138; redrawn by the author).

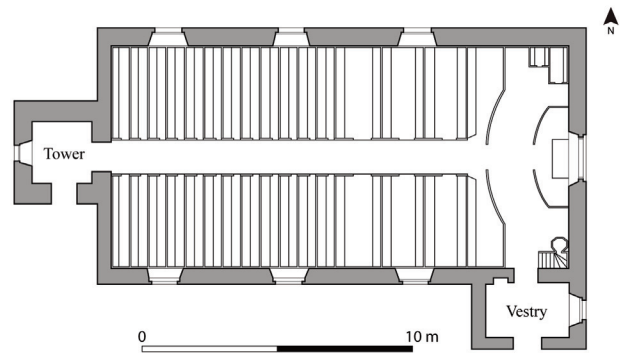
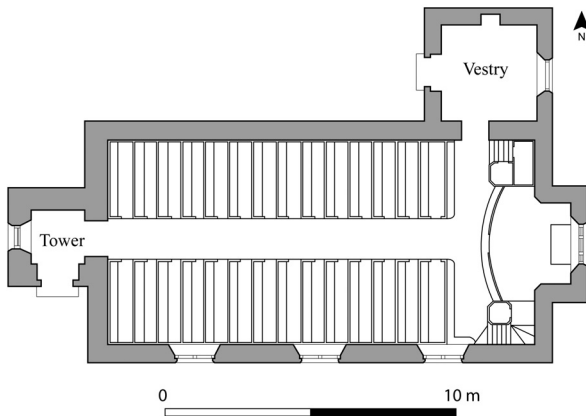


Fig 7  
Kilmacabea parish church, 1828. Ground plan (courtesy Representative Church Body Library, Dublin; MS 138; redrawn by the author).

**Myross:** Myross church was built in 1826 at a cost of £830, granted by the Board of First Fruits (Brady 1864, vol 2, 538). The church was in the form of a Greek cross with a tower at the centre of the west end (Fig 6). The western arm of the cross was the nave with the eastern arm as the chancel. The north transept was a two-roomed vestry and a south transept provided for extra seating space. The combined pulpit and reading desk was located at the northeast corner of the crossing, with box pews at the other three corners. Further box pews filled the south transept and the nave had two rows of east facing benches on either side of a central aisle. The chancel contained the altar enclosed within a rectangular rail on a raised rectangular area, one step above floor level. Benches faced the altar on both the north and south sides of the chancel.

**Kilmacabea:** Kilmacabea church was built in 1828. The Board of First Fruits granted £900 for the construction of the church (Brady 1864, vol 2, 513). The church consisted of a rectangular nave with a west end tower and a vestry on the south side at the east end (Fig 7). The nave contained bench pews throughout. The seating was arranged on both sides of a central aisle and was entirely east facing on the western side of the nave. The seating towards the east end alternated between east and west facing bench pews in the manner of rectangular pews. The east end of the nave was separated from the rest of the church by an enclosing rail with the altar enclosed further in a smaller railed area under the eastern window. The altar



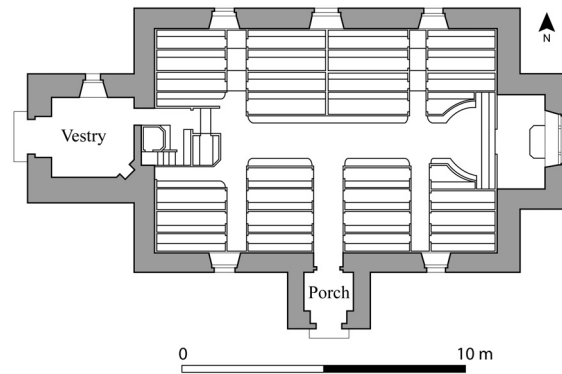
*Fig 8*  
Lislee parish church, 1830. Ground plan (courtesy Representative Church Body Library, Dublin; MS 138; redrawn by the author).

formed the centrepiece between the pulpit to the south side and the reading desk to the north side.

**Lislee:** The Board of First Fruits loaned £830 for the construction of the parish church of Lislee (Brady 1864, vol 2, 534). It was a rectangular nave with a tower at the centre of the west end, a vestry at the east end of the north side and an east end chancel (Fig 8). The pulpit was located at the east of the nave to the south of the opening to the chancel with the reading desk in a corresponding position to the north side of the chancel. The nave was filled with two rows of east facing benches on either side of a central aisle. The altar, in the shallow chancel, was railed and raised one step above floor level.

**Kilcoe:** The Board of First Fruits granted £650 for the construction of Kilcoe church in 1830 (Brady 1864, vol 2, 495). The church was built with a rectangular nave; a vestry to the centre of the west end; a porch at the centre of the south side and a projecting chancel at the east end (Fig 9). The combined pulpit and reading desk was situated at the centre of the west end of the nave. Benches were arranged on both the north and south sides of the nave facing inward towards the central aisle. The chancel, enclosed with altar rails, contained the altar raised two steps above floor level.

It is apparent from this survey of five Board of First Fruits churches in Co. Cork, Ireland that there was no standardisation of form. No two churches are identical in overall form. This high degree of variability in form is extended to internal arrangement. When the



*Fig 9*  
Kilcoe parish church, 1830. Ground plan (courtesy Representative Church Body Library, Dublin; MS 138; redrawn by the author).

surveyed churches are considered in chronological order by date of construction it appears that the projecting chancel, present at all churches except Kilmacabea, created a problem in terms of incorporating the altar. There were further problems in determining the relationship between the congregation and the altar where eastern orientated bench pews were introduced into a church where the combined pulpit/reading desk remained the main liturgical focal point. The response at Castleventry was to maintain the auditory relationship between the congregation in box pews and the combined pulpit/reading desk in the nave. The altar was situated in a somewhat detached space in the eastern chancel.

The dilemma of incorporating the altar was increased at Myross with the presence of the south transept. The design of the church seems to be somewhat of a compromise and the impression is of two interior spaces in the one building, each with a different point of focus – the benches at the west end facing the altar in the chancel and the pulpit/reading desk in the north transept as an auditory focal point for the box pews in the south transept. A compromise had been made between the focus on both liturgical centres, while preserving a more emphasised association between the transept and pulpit/reading desk.

The design of the church of Kilmacabea found somewhat of a solution to the difficulties encountered with the presence of the chancel at Castleventry and Myross. The altar was brought into the nave at the centre of the east end and the pulpit and reading desk

were separated to either side of the altar. This created an arrangement of three liturgical centres with the altar as the centrepiece. Bench pews were used throughout, although the organisation of seating ensured that some of the congregation towards the east end of the nave faced west, away from the liturgical east end.

The apparent solution at Kilmacabea was further refined at Lislee with the employment of eastern-facing bench pews throughout. The emphasis was on the east end where the liturgical arrangement was similar to that at Kilmacabea with the altar, situated in a shallow chancel at Lislee, as the centrepiece of the three liturgical centres. It would appear that the accommodation of the chancel was less problematic with this arrangement. The absence of a transept at Lislee guaranteed no further complications with the maintenance of congregational focus on the east end.

The design introduced at Kilmacabea and further developed at Lislee was not continued at Kilcoe. Though it was constructed in the same year as Lislee, the form and layout of Kilcoe has more in common with that at Castleventry, built six years earlier. Though bench pews were preferred in the nave, it was arranged so that the congregation faced into the central west-east aisle. The combined pulpit/reading desk was at the west end of the nave, with the altar isolated in the eastern chancel, as at Castleventry. The emphasis was on the relationship between the congregation and the pulpit/reading desk and the visual emphasis on the altar was minimal. This layout also impacted on the location of the vestry. As with the other surveyed churches, a close spatial relationship between the vestry and the pulpit and/or reading desk was preferred. At Kilcoe, this dictated the placement of the vestry in the position traditionally reserved for the western tower, which further necessitated the inclusion of a porch to the centre of the south wall.

### *Towards a Suitable Model*

The results of the survey of Board of First Fruits churches in the selected study area, suggest that there was no standard or typical form for the First Fruits church and also that there was no uniform approach to internal arrangement. There is a high degree of improvisation in the treatment of the interiors of these churches. The main contributing factor to the high

variability of the design of the surveyed First Fruits church was the dilemma of the integration of the altar as a liturgical reference point of increasing visual emphasis, particularly where the altar was in a projecting chancel. More complicated forms such as at Myross further influenced the improvisation of design, where the transept had to be incorporated. Consequently, complexity in internal arrangement also became a consideration in the positioning of the vestry, which exacerbated the difficulty of creating a standard church design. The form and layout of the church at Lislee was the only design where the increasingly significant altar was successfully integrated into a worship space that also included an attached chancel and what would appear to have been the requisite attached vestry. Indeed, it must be suggested that this form and layout was the result of a process of experimentation and change in the internal arrangements of churches built through the late 1820s. This process was necessary to meet the requirements of a church where the altar was becoming an increasingly visible liturgical point of reference.

The interior arrangement of Lislee is almost identical to that as regulated by the Church Building Commission for churches in England and it is proposed that this design, with overall form becoming increasingly dictated by an internal layout with the altar as the focal point, had also been gradually developing at roughly the same time in Ireland. However, the date of construction of the church at Kilcoe, built the same year as Lislee (1830), indicates that though the builders of Anglican churches in Ireland may have been developing a church of the form and layout of Lislee as a suitable place of worship up to 1830, this design had not been rigidly imposed at all parishes. This mirrored simultaneous developments in England, where the Church Building Commission preferred a regulated layout, but the rule was sometimes compromised for whatever reason at particular churches. Therefore, it can be argued that the Board of First Fruits, through its appointed architects, and as the main source of finance, had an input into the gradual introduction of its preferred church design in Ireland. However, it must be stressed that the results of this limited survey should not be taken as representative of First Fruits church design in Ireland as a whole. A larger survey of all First Fruits churches is required to confirm the results of this



study and to examine the idea that the developments in church design highlighted in the surveyed Co. Cork churches were solely instigated by the Board's official architect for the area.

The comparison of the churches of both Ireland and England can be interpreted in the context of Article 5 of the Act of Union. It is known that under the terms of Article 5 the Church in Ireland was to assume the rules of worship of the United Church of England and Ireland. The comparison of the churches built in the late 1820s indicates that a consistency in belief as to how an Anglican place of worship should be arranged had been developing almost simultaneously in both counties. This arrangement had been assimilated and proposed as regulation by The Church Building Commission for England. The endeavor to create a consistency in the rules of worship of the united Church in both countries is reflected in the consistency in the evolution of a suitable worship space in the late 1820s in both Ireland and England. Although it could be claimed that any similar developments in church design in Ireland may have been coincidental and may have occurred independently, adherence to the terms of Article 5 of the Act of Union would have facilitated the assimilation of ideas on worship and any consequent ideas on a preferred form and layout of places of worship in both countries.

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