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High crosses and round towers

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I WALK through the main entrance of Trinity College Dublin and cross the cobblestones of the quad to the Old Library. This is the home of the Book of Kells, the 1200-year-old illustrated manuscript of the four Gospels written in Latin, which attracts more than a half million visitors a year.

The Book of Kells on display at The National Gallery of Australia in 2000. Picture: John Feder Source: The Australian

My ticket admits me into the Turning Darkness Into Light exhibition, which gives a fascinating insight into the lives of the monks who wrote the early Irish manuscripts. There is also a description of the making of vellum; apparently it took about 150 calf hides to produce the 680 pages of the Book of Kells.

Beyond, in the dimly lit room known as the Treasury, I see the famous book itself. It's open at the illustration of the Temptation of Christ. The large figure of Jesus is on the roof of the temple, and beside him the black, scrawny winged figure of the devil.

Intricate Celtic patterns run down either side of the page, and the rich colours of the highly detailed illustration are still incredibly vibrant.

I imagine the monks painstakingly shaping every letter, and spending hours drawing the colourful animals, birds and figures that adorn the pages.

Intrigued, I decide to drive an hour north of Dublin to the town of Kells and visit the site of the monastery from where the Book of Kells originally came.

The book has always been associated with St Columcille, or St Columba (his Roman name), who founded the monastery at Kells in the 6th century, and it may have been compiled to commemorate the bicentenary of his death. It's unknown whether it was all written at the monastery he founded on Iona, off the west coast of Scotland, and where he died in 597, or partially here at Kells, to where the monks of Iona moved in 804, after Iona was attacked by Vikings.

I drive up the quiet main street of Kells and walk up to St Columba's church and grounds on the site of the original monastery. To the west of the church stands the 26m-tall tower.

These high and tapering towers were built on monastic sites in Ireland between the 9th and 12th centuries. Like most of the towers, this one's doorway was built more than 4m above ground level, for structural purposes and also to deter unwanted visitors.

There's been much speculation about round towers. Were they phalluses and part of a Hindi-Irish civilisation or with their rocket-like appearance and conical caps (the cap is now missing from the Kells round tower), even evidence of an early Irish space program? Actually, the towers are believed to have

held the saint's bell, which was rung from the windows at the top. The word for round tower in Irish Gaelic is cloigtheach, which means bell house. They were also used as lookouts and places to store the monasteries' valuables.

Apparently, the Book of Kells used to be taken into this round tower during the numerous Viking invasions. Kells is also considered the most important high cross site in Ireland and has four of these magnificent 9th-century monuments.

Standing in the church grounds beside the round tower is the tall sandstone Irish high cross known as the Cross of Patrick and Columba. Despite being exposed to the wind and rain for so long, the interlace design on the base of the staff, and the carvings of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and Cain slaying Abel, are clearly visible.

A central motif is Daniel in the lions' den and there's a depiction of the crucifixion. Also, in the churchyard, are the Unfinished Cross and the Broken Cross. The latter's top has been lost, but the detailed designs and scenes on the shaft are impressive. But it's the Market Cross that has particularly aroused my curiosity. Not only was it used by soldiers in 1798 to hang rebels from, but until about 13 years ago it stood at a major junction in the middle of the town.

It was only when a school bus ran into it that the decision was made to relocate it to outside the heritage centre. I walk down to the bottom end of town to look at it. The top is broken, but the rest of this 3.35m monument has survived the ravages of time. On one side of the base stone is a collection of animals, on the other a line of horsemen, and the scenes on all four sides of the shaft can be clearly made out.

The heritage centre is closed and due to lack of funding has been for the past two years. But I'm told I can get information from the town hall, which is where I learn how a local clan stole the Book of Kells from the church in 1007.

Several months later, the pages were recovered but its ornate jewelled gold cover was never found. The book remained at Kells until 1654, when Cromwell's cavalry was stationed at the church, and it was sent to Dublin for safe keeping.

A few years later, it was presented to Trinity College.

My final destination is the 9th-century stone oratory, known as the House of Columcille, which is up a lane beside the church. To my delight this small church, with its high stone roof, is exactly the same shape as the temple depicted in the illustration I saw yesterday of the Temptation of Christ in the Book of Kells. The key to it is held by a Mrs Carpenter of Lower Church View, who I take a while to locate, and then I can't disturb her because she's at lunch.

But by mid-afternoon she comes hobbling up the hill and unlocks the building. Originally it would have had three wooden floors, but now it's empty apart from some steep metal steps leading to the roof.

"You can go up," she says. The thought of climbing to the top is terrifying, but I want to see what's hidden up there, so gingerly I begin my ascent. When I eventually stick my head through the entrance to the roof, I'm astonished to see a stone floor and two low, narrow archways linking three small rooms.

It's the perfect place to hide valuables and apparently these little chambers may well have been used to store manuscripts, or possible St Columcille relics.

Instead of heading directly back to Dublin, I cut across country to Monasterboice. Like Kells, this is a highly significant centre as it has two of the best examples of sandstone high crosses in the country. Down a narrow country road I find the site of a monastery founded by St Buite in 520.

The first cross I come to is the ornate Muiredach's Cross, and rising high above the surrounding gravestones is Ireland's tallest high cross, standing more than 7m. Looming over them both is a round

tower.

I also visit the nearby town of Duleek and see what should be called a low cross. Only 1.82m high, it's one of Ireland's shortest high crosses.

Driving back to Dublin I can't help thinking about Ireland's numerous other round towers worth a visit and the many more high crosses I want to see. Ireland's golden age of saints and scholars has definitely got under my skin.

Rosamund Burton is the author of Castles, Follies & Four-leaf Clovers (Allen & Unwin, $24.99).

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