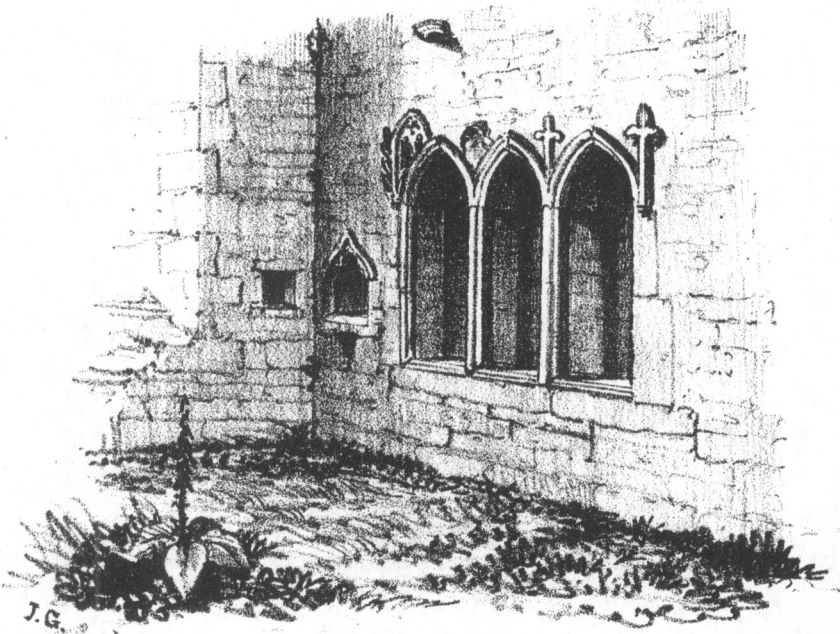


SEDILIA & AUMBRY JERPOINT ABBEY



SEDILIA PISCINA, & AUMBRY BALLYLARKIN CHURCH

Printed by Forster, 2, Crow St. Dublin.

## OBSERVATIONS ON SEDILIA IN IRISH CHURCHES.

BY JOHN G. A. PRIM.

[*Read at the Meeting of May 2nd.*]

It has often struck me as a very strange circumstance that though the Sedilia, or seats for the clergy, are to be found almost universally in our ancient churches and abbeys, yet the object and meaning of such a very useful, nay indispensable, portion of ecclesiastical furniture, seem to have been hitherto altogether overlooked or mistaken amongst our Irish antiquaries and ecclesiological investigators, whilst in England its purpose seems to have been always well understood, and indeed some of the original sedilia are used to this day by the clergy officiating in the splendid old churches of that country.

The term "sedilia"—or occasionally "Sedes Majestatis"—is the name given by ecclesiologists to the recessed seats in the chancel, situate on the south side of the altar. They were generally triple, being intended for the accommodation of the priest, the deacon, and sub-deacon, occupied in the celebration of the high mass, and used by them in the intervals of the service. Rare instances are seen in England of the number of seats being increased to five; but I believe that in Ireland three is the general number found in large churches, whilst in the smaller ecclesiastical structures, there are usually but two, as, for example, at the old parish churches of Tullaroan and Kilfane in this County of Kilkenny. Sedilia in buildings of the latter part of the fourteenth and the entire of the two following centuries, form a most remarkable feature of the structure, and cannot fail at once to arrest the attention of the visitor to those ruins in which they are found. But in the more early styles of architecture the seats for the clergy being but simple recesses in the wall, such as could by no ingenuity of the imagination be supposed to be anything but mere seats or recesses, they would appear to have excited no attention amongst our archæological enquirers. Very fine examples of sedilia of all the styles of architecture peculiar to these countries, exist in Kilkenny and the neighbouring counties; and as some of the most important of them, being exposed to the action of the weather and the more speedy and certain injury of mischievous persons, are daily suffering some new and serious disfigurement, it may be hoped that the accompanying drawings, made by the Rev. J. Graves for the purpose, whilst they illustrate the subject under consideration, will also serve as a record for preserving the architectural features and peculiarities of a class of interesting local monuments, which, I much fear, will soon have passed away.

To begin with the most early style, let us take the Norman Abbey of Jerpoint, where we find a very pretty example of sedilia, accompanied

by the aumbry, the use of which was to serve as a kind of cupboard in which the utensils of the altar, when not in requisition, were deposited. The sedilia are three simple recesses in the wall, having no projection, and merely ornamented with the very unpretending chevron moulding, peculiar to the style of architecture to which they belong. It will readily be observed that these would be taken for seats, and nothing else, if the uninitiated visitor did not pass them by altogether as objects so simple and ordinary in their appearance as to be unentitled to attention, or unworthy of giving rise to speculation. An instance in the succeeding style may be seen in the Cathedral of Old-Leighlin, where happily it is protected from the destruction which menaces that at Jerpoint. The sedile of the early English style, is of course a more beautiful piece of furniture than the Norman example, boasting of far more graceful mouldings accompanied by foliated capitals supporting its three pointed arches. But it still so far resembles the Norman sedilia as to be plainly and uncontrovertibly but a triple recess in the wall, intended for seats. The third example I will give from the little old church of Ballylarkan, near Freshford. Although not so richly ornamented a specimen of the decorated style as perhaps might be adduced, I yet prefer adopting it, in order to make its existence better known, and to excite, if possible, some interest for its preservation. It will be seen by the accompanying illustration that even here, in the third stage of architectural progress—if I may so express myself—the original design of the simple recess in the wall, divided into three compartments, is still preserved, and the structure could not rationally be presumed to be intended for any purpose but that of supplying seats for personages entitled to an extraordinary degree of honor or respect. In connexion with the sedilia at Ballylarkan are also found the aumbry, being but a simple square hole in the east wall, and also the piscina, another accompanying article of ancient church furniture, the use of which was that of a basin for the rinsing of the chalice which had contained the wine. The niche containing the basin has a pointed arch.

Thus in the examples referred to, there was nothing about the sedilia to attract particular attention, or form a peg whereon any of the whimsical theories to which our departed brother antiquaries of the past century were so much addicted, could be conveniently hung; and they were accordingly passed over, whenever met, without notice or enquiry. But when the more ornate style of architecture, termed perpendicular, was introduced, and the seats for the clergy were made to wear a more obtrusive and imposing aspect they could not so easily be overlooked by the visitor of the ruined Church or Abbey, and being found grouped under lofty foliated canopies, and overloaded with sculptured ornamental details, it was sagely conjectured and asserted—and the assertion was received and believed without doubt or enquiry of anykind—that they could be nothing more or less than sepulchral monuments; whilst from their position within the chancel and on one side of the high altar,

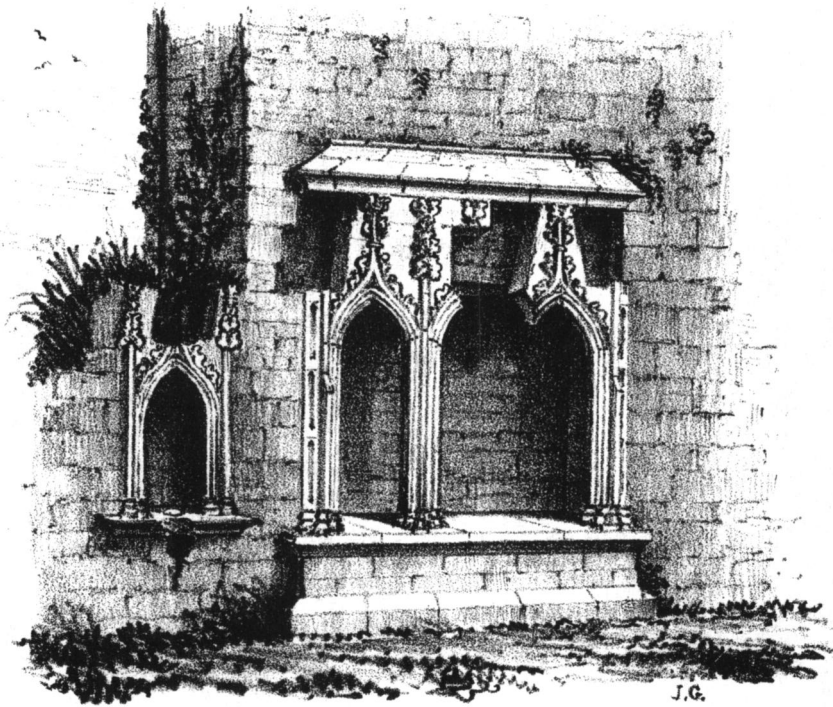
it followed as a matter of course that they should be regarded as the tombs of the pious founders of the respective buildings in which they existed. To find a case in point I have not to travel out of our County of Kilkenny. In the Augustinian Abbey of Callan, which was founded by James Butler, father of the eighth Earl of Ormonde, about the middle of the fifteenth century, is a splendid though sadly disfigured sedilia, ornamented with the most beautiful and elaborate sculptures, and covered by a projecting canopy. By its side is the piscina, which is ornamented with sculptures of a precisely similar design and pattern. Archdall, when collecting information for his works, did not fail to observe this fine sedilia, but ignorant of its original use, he threw out the conjecture, in his "Monasticon Hibernicum," that "it is probable that the bones of the founder were laid in the wall, under two [*recte* three] gothic arches which yet stand near the east window;" and ever since—notwithstanding that there was neither inscription nor tradition to warrant the statement, as well as the glaring improbability of the fact that the piscina would be actually made part and parcel of a tomb, coinciding with it in every respect as to design and ornament and standing in close companionship—the recesses anciently used and intended as the seats of the officiating clergy in the Abbey of Callan, were pointed out to the visitor and set down in the note book of the tourist as *the tomb of the founder!*

We are however furnished with a far more remarkable instance of the strange misunderstanding that exists in Ireland as to the object and design of the ancient seats for the clergy, at the well known and far famed Abbey of Holy Cross, County of Tipperary; for there two of the most clever antiquaries of whom this country can boast—and of one of them in particular she may boast proudly indeed—have fallen into the common error and set down the sedilia as a sepulchral monument. The Abbey of Holy Cross was originally founded about the year 1182 by Donald O'Brien, King of Limerick. No existing record states the circumstance of the monastery having been subsequently rebuilt at a much later period; but though history is silent on the subject, a living and incontrovertible witness to the fact exists in the architectural style of the structure—and this is proof-positive testimony, far better than documentary evidence; for whilst the writers or transcribers of chronicles may err, and of course frequently did, to the eye of the initiated there can be no possibility of mistake as to the style of an ancient gothic building. The only fragment of the original structure still existing at Holy Cross is a Norman doorway, at present blocked up with masonry, but plainly visible, in the exterior wall of the southern lateral aisle. The rest of the building, with the exception of the nave which appears still more modern, is of mixed Flamboyant and Perpendicular styles of architecture, and cannot be older than the year 1400—with greater safety it may be attributed to about the year 1420. The sedilia, which is in every respect coeval with the church, stands in the chancel, on the south side of the high

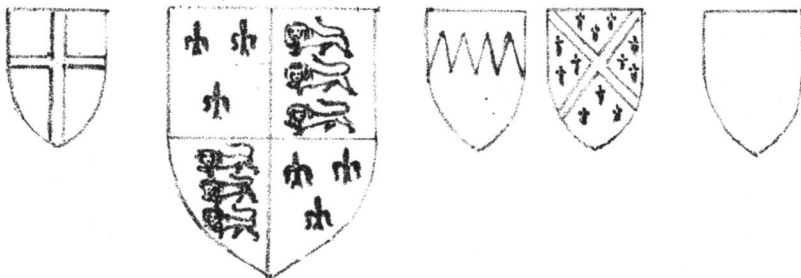
altar, and by its side is the piscina, the upper part of which, by the insertion of a shelf, formed an aumbry—the groove for containing this shelf is quite apparent; thus are here found grouped together most of the usual articles of church furniture intended to be of a solid and immoveable construction. The sedilia is triple arched, covered with a lofty canopy and loaded with sculptures—in fact so overloaded with the foliated ornaments peculiar to the somewhat debased style to which it belongs, that it presents an object in my eyes, far more curious than beautiful, and though it is larger and more pretending than that of Callan, before alluded to, it is decidedly less chaste in its design and sculptures, and therefore less interesting.\*

But the sedilia (better known as the founder's tomb,) of Holy Cross is very generally admired, and it has made a considerable noise in the antiquarian world. It was unnoticed, however, till Dr. O'Halloran took it into his head to fish up evidence of the superior civilization and knowledge of the arts amongst the ancient Irish: and that learned Theban, knowing nothing of the difference of architectural styles, but reading in the chronicles how the King of Limerick built the Abbey of Holy Cross in the twelfth century, and observing what he conceived to be a grand sepulchral monument existing within the present chancel, at once seized upon this as a convincing proof of the truth of his theory. He gave an engraving of it in his "Introduction to the study of the History and Antiquities of Ireland," and declaring it to be the tomb of King Donald O'Brien, triumphantly pointed to it as "the most satisfactory reply to the assertions of Mr. Hume and others concerning the state of this kingdom before Henry the Second's reign." Archdall, Campbell, Ledwich, and many others it appears, copied the error of O'Halloran, and so the statement not only remained uncontradicted but was still being every day more widely disseminated by every additional copying tourist; till Sir Richard Colt Hoare, an English Antiquary, visited the Abbey and ventured to suggest a doubt. He remarked of the supposed tomb—"It has generally been attributed to Donogh Cairbreach O'Brien, King of Limerick, who founded the Abbey and died in 1194. I am inclined to think this tomb has been improperly attributed to him, as it does not bear in its architectural decorations the appearance of so old a date as 1194; neither do *any* of the bearings on the escutcheons of arms, which are placed upon this monument bear any resemblance to those of the O'Brien family." Dr. Petrie, the first real antiquary whom Ireland has produced, took Sir Richard's hint, and upon an examination of the five escutcheons, which occupy the space above the arches and beneath the canopy, discovered, beyond the shadow of doubt or possibility of question, that this was no

\* For engravings of this architectural remain I may refer to Vol. 1, No. 42 of the Dublin Penny Journal, and the Works on Ireland by Bartlett and Willis, and Mr. and Mrs. S. C. Hall.



SEDILIA & PICINA, CALLAN ABBEY.



ARMS ON THE SEDILIA AT HOLYCROSS ABBEY

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mausoleum of Donald O'Brien or any of his family. But, strange to say, the learned Doctor still adhered to the original error of supposing the sedilia to be a sepulchral monument, and so he is to be found designating it "the finest specimen of *tomb* architecture which time and barbarism have allowed to remain in Ireland." Dr. Petrie put forward his theory with respect to the "tomb in Holy Cross," in 1833, in the first volume of that most excellent periodical, *The Dublin Penny Journal*, of which he was then the Editor. I am inclined to think that the Doctor had never been at Holy Cross, or he would not have fallen so readily into such a mistake; I rather conjecture that he drew his inferences entirely from drawings which he caused to be made for the purpose.

It will be necessary now to examine the bearings upon the shields, for of course whether the disputed monument be really a tomb as hitherto supposed, or the sedilia as I have no doubt it was, this is of importance for clearing up the subject in dispute. The first shield, on the dexter side, bears a cross, which Dr. Petrie suggests to be "St. George, the ancient arms of England; or perhaps with greater probability the arms of the Abbey, in allusion to its name." The second bears the arms of France and England quarterly, on a larger shield as a mark of honourable distinction. The third bears a chief indented, the arms of the Butler family. The fourth a saltier on a field ermine, the bearings of the house of Fitzgerald; and the fifth shield is plain, no arms having been ever cut upon it. Dr. Petrie observes—"These armorial bearings demonstrate incontestibly that the monument belongs to a person of the house of Desmond and Ormonde; referring then to the genealogical histories of those two noble families, we find that the first intermarriage which took place between them was at the very period to which the style of architecture of this tomb unquestionably belongs, namely the fourteenth century, when Gerald the fourth Earl (of Desmond) married in 1359, *by the King's command*, Eleanor daughter of James, the second Earl of Ormonde \* \* \* The tomb must therefore belong to either of those persons; and we have now only to ascertain to which of them it should be properly referred." The conclusion which he arrived at was, that beyond a doubt it was the tomb of the Countess, because the Earl would have no right to place the Royal arms on his monument, but she had, as her father was great grandson to King Edward I.; and because also her family arms were placed on the dexter side of Desmond's—and this he asserts was done with propriety, the former being more honourable owing to the relationship to royalty. Dr. Petrie also calls attention to an observation of Archdall, that "the tradition of the place informs us that this tomb was erected for the *good woman* who brought the holy relic (the fragment of the true cross) thither;" and notwithstanding that history positively asserts that the relic was placed in the Abbey by Donald O'Brien, the original founder, the Doctor seized this hint, and remarked of the supposed tomb—"considering its situation

on the right [it is really on the left] of the high altar of the church, the place usually occupied by the tomb of a founder, and the perfect accordance in architectural style between this monument and the venerable Abbey in which it is placed, it should, we think hardly admit of a doubt that this illustrious lady was also the rebuildler of the noble Abbey church of the Holy Cross—a fact hitherto unknown to history.” Thus then do we find even that gifted antiquary, Dr. Petrie, helping to perpetuate at least a portion of the original error, and once more declaring the sedilia to be the tomb of the founder.

But ere long another champion arose to dispute the honour of settling the question as to whom the tomb [for it was still to be called the “tomb of Holy Cross”] should of right belong. In the 45th number of *The Penny Journal*, Sir William Betham, the Ulster King of arms, published a letter remarking, with reference to the article of Dr. Petrie’s before noticed—“I cannot exactly agree with the writer in his conjecture, and am inclined to believe that he is better versed in antiquarian than in heraldic lore, and therefore has fallen into mistakes out of which I may possibly extricate him.” The suggestion of Sir William was, that the monument was that of Joan the daughter and heiress of Gerald Earl of Kildare, who was the first wife of James the fourth Earl of Ormonde. “This,” he says, “indeed removes all difficulties; all the escutcheons of arms are in perfect order and position. The Royal arms of England show the descent of the Butlers from the Plantagenets; the Butler coat is on the husband’s side; the Fitzgeralds on the wife’s. The lady to whom I assign this monument died about the year 1400. The architecture is of that period; and, as above stated, the heraldry tells the tale exactly. I will merely add, in conclusion, that the haughty and powerful Earl of Desmond was not likely to acknowledge by his own act the superiority of his wife’s family, by placing her arms in the most honourable position, to the degradation of his own; nor was such a practice usual even where the disparity of rank was much greater than between the Desmonds and Ormondes.” However, Dr. Petrie published a rejoinder, which, although it failed to establish his own theory, so fearfully damaged by the heraldic proofs brought against him, yet completely demolished that of Sir William Betham; for he actually proves from history, that a tomb could not have been erected for the Countess of the fourth Earl of Ormonde at Holy Cross, she having died in London in the year 1430, where she was buried, in the Hospital of St. Thomas D’Acres, to which her husband had been a great benefactor. Here then ended the controversy, leaving the question of the ownership of “the tomb” almost as open to dispute as ever; but the public remained, at all events, satisfied that to some person belonging both to the Butler and Fitzgerald families, the monument should be unquestionably ascribed, no one venturing to hint a doubt as to the probability of its non-sepulchral character—a strange circumstance indeed, if the Abbey had ever been visited by persons who had previously seen and under-



stood the use of the seats for the clergy in our ancient ecclesiastical buildings.

I may here, very properly, be asked how I myself can account for the armorial bearings on the sedilia. I confess that I am not fully prepared to do this; but I will make some suggestions tending as nearly as I at present find it possible to clear up the mystery, and which may, at least, have the effect of giving a hint by means of which some one else may succeed in elucidating the facts in a more satisfactory manner. I think Dr. Petrie's conclusion that the cross on the first shield is the armorial ensign of the Abbey, in allusion to the name, is a very probable and natural one; at all events we frequently find ecclesiastics bearing a plain cross on a shield, amongst the devices upon their seals of office, at the period in question; and there can be no grounds for surprise that the symbol of the crucifixion should be made a prominent feature in any sculptures designed to ornament a building devoted to religion. With respect to the royal arms on the second shield, I find from the history of the Abbey that King John granted it, about the year 1186, a special charter of liberties and freedoms. In 1223 King Henry III. "took the house under his royal protection." In 1234 the same king renewed his protection to the Abbey. In 1320 King Edward I. confirmed the great charter of liberties granted by John; whilst in 1395 it was again confirmed by Richard II.; and in 1414—the very period at which the design of rebuilding the Abbey appears to have been conceived—the Lord Deputy renewed the royal protection to the house. The inference can, then, scarcely be considered a matter of any difficulty, that the monks of Holy Cross deemed it their duty to place in a conspicuous part of their new building the insignia of royalty, under which they were fostered and protected. The practice, too, was common enough at the time. The royal arms, as well as a shield charged with a plain cross, form a portion of the devices on the seal of the Chapter of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin; and many similar cases might be cited. The third shield bears the coat of the Butlers—in this there is nothing extraordinary, as the Earls of Ormonde were Lords of the Palatinate of Tipperary, in which the Abbey stood; and further, James, the fourth Earl, in 1414 (about the time, as already stated, that the present building was commenced) "granted his protection" to the House and community of Holy Cross.

So far all is clear and satisfactory enough; but with the fourth shield we encounter some difficulty. It bears a saltier on an ermine field, and it stands side by side with the shield containing the Butler coat, in a separate compartment of the sculpture, as if, perhaps, the designer had contemplated giving those escutcheons the effect of appearing impaled. The wife of James fourth Earl of Ormonde was Joan, daughter of the Earl of Kildare, and if we could suppose it possible that that lady could be given, for her arms, the saltier on an

ermine field, all difficulty would be removed. But Dr. Petrie positively states that the arms here can only be those of the Desmond, and not of the Kildare family,\* and I fear that we would scarcely be warranted in drawing an inference that the stonemason substituted, by mistake, a portion of the bearings of the Desmond House of the Fitzgeralds, for those of the Kildare branch of the family, which they so strongly resembled. It may however be very fairly supposed that the Earl of Desmond of that day, or some influential member of his family, was a benefactor of the Abbey, though such a fact is not recorded. It was about the period to which the building belongs that the king specially interfered for the termination of the deadly feud between the Earls of Ormonde and Desmond, and procured a reconciliation between them on the occasion of their standing together as sponsors at the baptism of George Duke of Clarence, son of Richard Duke of York. Such an auspicious event as this might be commemorated by erecting their armorial ensigns conjointly in the Abbey of Holy Cross, a foundation within the Earl of Ormonde's territory, and looking up to his "special protection."

I trust I have thus afforded a clue, which may hereafter be more successfully and satisfactorily followed up, towards accounting for the armorial bearings on the sedilia of Holy Cross. But whether in that respect I may have succeeded or not, I conceive that it will be at all events obvious to any person in the slightest degree acquainted with ecclesiology, who may be hereby led to examine the structure, that this so called "monument" is not of a sepulchral character. It is certainly with feelings of the utmost diffidence and humility that I have ventured to broach a theory opposed to the views of such men as Dr. Petrie and Sir William Betham; but I do so under a strong impression that they have never themselves seen the object in dispute, and with a confident expectation that they would fully agree in my opinion on this subject, did they but take the trouble of making a personal inspection of Holy Cross Abbey.

\* The difference is that the Kildare family bore *argent*, a saltier *gules*, whilst the field of the Desmond coat was *ermine*.

## ADDENDA ET CORRIGENDA.

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- Page 8, line 22, for *Richard Purcell O'Gorman* read *Nicholas Purcell O'Gorman*.  
Page 17, lines 32 and 36, for *carn* read *cairn*.  
Page 18, lines 11 and 16, for *carn* read *cairn*.  
Ib., line 41, for *oustriped* read *outstripped*.  
Page 19, line 18, for *hand* read *hands*.  
Page 21, line 10, for *carn* read *cairn*.  
Page 24, line 15, for *was* read *were*.  
Page 29, line 15, after *eighteen*, add *to two feet six by twelve*.  
Page 48, line 3, for *santi* read *sancti*.  
Page 55, line 27, for *intermarrige* read *intermarriage*.  
Page 63, lines 23 and 27, strike out the comma after *prosapia* and *colligendum*.  
Page 64, line 28, for *consequenee* read *consequence*.  
Page 76, line 25, after *grantee of the crown*, add—*Indeed with regard to the Lucas Archer referred to by Mr. Cooke, he was not recognised by the crown, neither did he reside at Holy Cross, as appears by the following extract from the Regal Visitation of 1615 (Library R. I. Academy):—"Sir Lucas Archer, Titular Abbott of the Holy Crosse, and the Pope's Vicar-Generall of the Diocesse of Ossory, Archdeacon of the same, dwelling at Kilkenny."*  
Page 80, line 41, for *Epipheny* read *Epiphany*.  
Ib., line 43, for *assencion* read *ascension*.  
Page 89, line 15, after *quarterly*, add—*From a perfect impression of this seal, obtained from Mr. A. Murphy, King-street, Kilkenny, it appeared that the inscription was as follows—SIGILLVM. GARGIANI. GBVWV̄CĒSIS.—the meaning of which was very obscure ; it appeared, however, to have no reference to the Dominican Abbey. The inscription was in Lombardic characters, and the seal seemed to be of the fifteenth century.*  
Page 90, line 13, for *mountings* read *mounting*.  
Page 91, line 27, for *refer* read *refers*.