

A breath of fresh air in Longford



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Today we tend to think of medieval buildings such as churches and tower-houses as damp and drafty places. However, the concept of ventilation is not simply a modern one. This curious sixteenth-century decorated stone from Taghshinny, near Ballymahon in south Longford, is one of a rare type from medieval Ireland known as ventilator stones. Unfortunately no medieval structures survive at the site today, but the stone was probably originally used to provide ventilation through the wall of a building, perhaps a residential tower attached to a church. The stone measures 43cm square and features an openwork triskele surrounded by a narrow circular band of rope-moulding in false relief. In each of the corners of this square stone is a rosette in false relief, though two are only lightly incised and may have been unfinished.

Ventilator stones such as this are quite unusual in Ireland, and where they occur they are almost exclusively associated with late medieval tower-houses, such as Coole, Co. Offaly. What makes them interesting is that they were clearly purpose-made and elaborately decorated. If such attention to detail was lavished on an otherwise functional piece of architecture, it is probably safe to assume that the rest of the building at Taghshinny, in particular the ecclesiastical architecture, was also of a high standard.

These stones, only conspicuous because of their decoration, show a practical concern for providing ventilation. However, at the vast majority of sites that have no purpose-made ventilator stones the need for fresh air was presumably an equally important concern. Tower-houses and residential buildings attached to churches were lived in, with all the consequent unpleasant odours and condensation. These were among the great many everyday practical issues confronted by the people living in these buildings. Perhaps these ventilators symbolise the need to take a deep breath before we interpret our late medieval buildings.

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