The Bottle Imp

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Gaelic Place-Names:
Cill

Gaelic *cill* (pronounced keel) originally meant 'cell, church' from Old Irish *cell*, (ultimately from Latin *cella*) and now usually means 'chapel, churchyard' in modern Gaelic. It is found in a large number of place-names, whose widespread distribution reflects the spread of the both Gaelic language and Celtic Christianity across Scotland. It is frequently used in combination with the name of the saint to whom the church is dedicated, with examples including Kilchattan (St Catan or Cathan), Kilblane and Kilblain (St Blane) Kilfinan and Kilfinnan (St Finnan), Kilbarchan (St Berchan), Kilmartin (St Martin), Kilmuir and Kilmory (St Mary) and Kilphedder (St Peter).

These churches often became parish churches, with the parish taking its name from the church, as in Kilbride (St Brigid), Kilpatrick (St Patrick), Kildonan (St Donnan) and Kilmarnock (St Mernoc). In the case of Kilpatrick in West Dunbartonshire, the original church was located in the town which is now known as Old Kilpatrick. A new church was built at the eastern side of this large parish, which became known as East or Easter Kilpatrick, with the prefix West or Wester being added to the existing church. The parish was formally split in 1649, and in later times the two parishes and their associated settlements instead became known as 'Old' and 'New' Kilpatrick respectively. By the nineteenth century, New Kilpatrick was a thriving village in what is now part of the north-western suburbs of Glasgow, but the name has subsequently fallen out of use. The most likely explanation for this is that when the railway line was built through New Kilpatrick Parish in the 1860s, the station was built slightly to the south of the village, beside a house known as 'Bearsden'. The new station was given the name Bearsden and gradually the village itself acquired this rather incongruous designation.

Cill also features as the qualifying element in Gaelic place-names, with examples including *Baile na cille* 'settlement of the church' (Lewis), *Achadh na cille* 'field of the church' (Argyll & Bute), *Tràigh na cille* 'beach of the church' (Lewis), *Cnoc na cille* 'hill of the church' (Skye) and *Port na cille* 'port of the church' (Argyll & Bute). However, *cill* is much more commonly found as the initial element, in the anglicised form *kil-*, in names such as Kilbirnie, Kiltarlity, Kilkerran, Kilmalcolm and Kilmorack.

Yet it is noteworthy that not all place-names which begin with *kil-* contain Gaelic *cill*. Kildrummy Castle in Aberdeenshire was the scene of the famous siege described by John Barbour in *The Bruce* (c.1375), in which Robert's brother was ultimately defeated by Edward, Prince of Wales:

> That tyme wes in Kyldromy
> With men that wycht and hardy
> Schyr Neile the Bruce and I wate weile
> That thar the erle was off Adheill (book 4, lines 59-62)

Despite appearances, Kildrummy was not a *kil-* name originally, as this form is a corruption of the earlier Kindrummy (Gaelic *cionn droma* 'at the ridge end'). Similarly adapted is Killernie in Fife, which was *Kynerny* in c.1335, demonstrating that it is also originally from Gaelic *ceann* 'head, end' rather than *cill*.[1] Kilbowie in West Dunbartonshire has occasionally been interpreted as a *cill* name, but the historical forms *Cuiltebut* (1182–99) and *Cultbuthe (*1233) reveal that the name contains instead Gaelic *cuilt* 'nook, corner, recess' and *buidhe* 'yellow' with the meaning 'yellow nook', perhaps in reference to the colour of the flowers or vegetation.[2] Kilcoy in Easter Ross was *Culcolly* in 1294 and may also contain *cuilt*, or alternatively Gaelic *cùl* 'back' as its initial element.[3]

Kilbrannan Sound off Arran is probably 'Brendan's strait' from Gaelic *caol* 'strait', although Kilbrennan on Mull is likely to be a genuine *cill* name meaning 'St Brendan's church'.[4] In a similar vein, Kildary in Easter Ross is Gaelic *caol daraidh*, with the meaning 'the narrow place'.[5] Killichronan on Mull is Gaelic *coille chrònain* 'wood of the murmuring noise',[6] and Killiecrankie in Perthshire also contain Gaelic *coille* 'wood' rather than *cill*.

In addition to these various Gaelic elements, there is a Scots word *kill* meaning 'kiln' which is found in various place-names including Kill Burn and Killcroft in Midlothian and Kill Hill in East Stirlingshire, which can also make the disambiguation of names in *cill* rather difficult to achieve. In some cases, the true origins of

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a name may never be known. Kilsyth in North Lanarkshire is a likely candidate to be a genuine *cill* name, recorded as *Kelvesyth* in 1210, but it is difficult to identify a saint to whom this church was dedicated with any degree of certainty.

Whatever their origins, the influence of *cill* names is truly global, with counterparts of the name Kilsyth found as far apart as Melbourne in Australia, West Virginia in the United States and Ontario in Canada. Similarly, Kildonan has travelled to Manitoba in Canada, Kilmarnock has a namesake in Virginia in the USA and Kilwinning has a duplicate in Saskatchewan in Canada.

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1   Simon Taylor, *The Place-Names of Fife*, Vol 1 pp. 523-24 (Shaun Tyas, 2009)
2   Simon Taylor, 'The Early History and Languages of West Dunbartonshire', p. 34, in *Changing Identities, Ancient Roots: The History of West Dunbartonshire from Earliest Times*, ed. Ian Brown (EUP, 2006)
3   W. J. Watson, *Place Names of Ross and Cromarty* p. 143 (Northern Counties, 1904)
4   W. J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* p. 274 (Blackwood, 1926)
5   W. J. Watson, *Place Names of Ross and Cromarty* p. 63 (Northern Counties, 1904)
6   W. J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* p. 303 (Blackwood, 1926)

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