

## SOUTH KILKENNY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



### Penal Cross

There is, in the parish of Slieverue, Co. Kilkenny a 'penal' crucifix carved out of wood which belongs to a type of cross that dates to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Such crucifixes are called 'penal' crucifixes because the early examples date from the period in which the penal laws were in force in Ireland.

The crucifix, dating as it does to 1721, is 8 inches long and 3 inches wide. The main shaft is  $1 \frac{3}{8}$  inches wide below the transom and  $1 \frac{1}{4}$  inches above.

Across the top of the upper shaft is the titulus, INRI. The figure of Christ is  $4 \frac{1}{8}$  inches long and in high relief; it is  $\frac{1}{2}$  of an inch at the knees. Above the arms are two sunbursts which symbolize the sun and moon. As in the earliest examples, the head of Christ bears to the figure's right and has a halo.

Other symbols represented on this 'penal' cross include: the spear, ladder, skull, crossbones, cock and pot, nails and two scourging whips each with four thongs.

Evidence suggests that this type of crucifix was linked to the Lough Derg pilgrimage where they were used in the devotional exercises and the popularity of the pilgrimage in the country would help to account for the distribution of surviving examples.

**Jim Walsh**