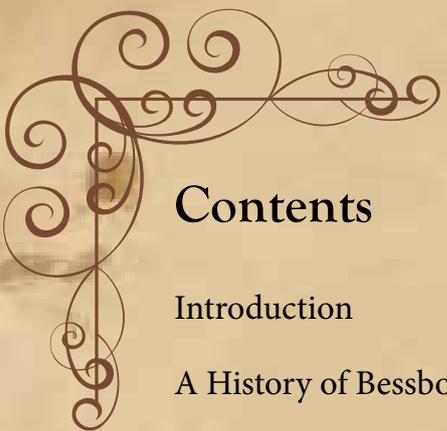


# A History of Kildalton College



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Historical Milestones of Kildalton College

*Collated by Mary O'Flaherty*

# Introduction

Bessborough House / Kildalton College has had a long and interesting history.

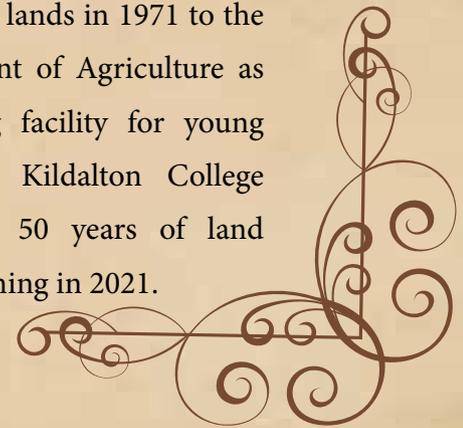
Originally, the area was known as Kilmodalla in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It became the property of a Norman family who called it Cill Datuin (later known as Kildalton).

Sir John Ponsonby who was a Colonel in Cromwell's army was awarded a house and lands on the site. The house stayed in the Ponsonby family for many generations eventually becoming known as Bessborough House.

The family sold the estate in 1940 to The Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) as a seminary and the house became known as Our Lady's Scholasticate, Kildalton Abbey.



As numbers entering the priesthood declined, the Oblates closed its order here and moved back to Inchicore in Dublin. They sold the house and lands in 1971 to the Department of Agriculture as a training facility for young farmers. Kildalton College celebrated 50 years of land based training in 2021.



## A History of Bessborough House

In 1662, when land was officially granted to Sir John Ponsonby owner of the House under an act of settlement, he changed the name of the estate to Bessborough in honour of his wife Elizabeth (called Bess).

The architect of the house was Francis Binden an Irishman who studied art in Italy. It was built of blue Kilkenny Limestone and the front hall was adorned with four iconic columns of Kilkenny marble. The lands on the estate were best known for its stock of game, and hunting was a popular event. Elk ears and moose deer horns adorned the front hall.

Sir John Ponsonby of Bessborough died in 1678 aged 60 years. His eldest son William (1657 – 1714) inherited the estate on his father's death.

There are many historic and architectural features of note on the Bessborough estate. These include The Lodge, The Grand Gates, Lady's Bridge, the pond, The Coach House, and the ruins of a graveyard as well as a water fountain which was originally a pond with a trellis of roses.

In 1739, The Earl of Bessborough title was created by King George II of England. The title was passed down through 11 generations.

The Ponsonby family resided at their Irish home for eight weeks in the summer and four weeks at Christmas. They were self-sufficient and had a farm, gardens and a dairy.



In 1826, the family were responsible for establishing The Iverk Show in Piltown.

The estate stretched to thousands of acres of good hunting ground and farmland and was said to hold many tenant cottages. Often tenants who worked on the farm and grounds were paid in produce like meat, milk, butter and wood for their fires.

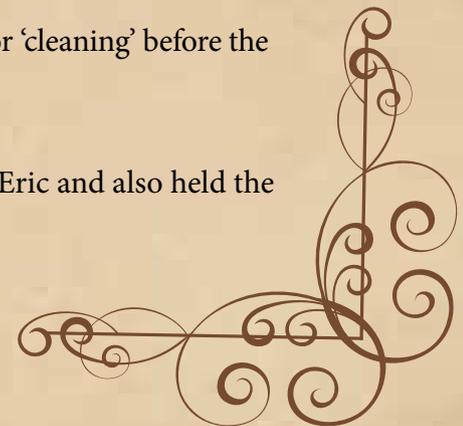
The 8<sup>th</sup> Earl of Bessborough was a British peer named Edward Ponsonby (1851 – 1920). He qualified as a barrister and was a businessman, politician and a member of the British House Of Commons.

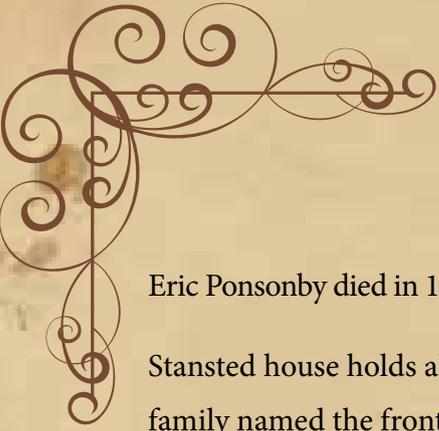
The House as a family home had many paintings by some eminent artists of that time as well as tapestries and the best of Chippendale furniture and silver. Being aware of the social unrest of that time, the family managed to move most of their prized possessions to London for 'cleaning' before the fire of 1923.

Edward's son Frederick became the 9<sup>th</sup> Earl of Bessborough. He was known as Eric and also held the title of Viscount Duncannon from 1920 – 1956. He was educated at Eton and Cambridge and became a British Diplomat, businessman, playwright, politician and peer.



*Lord & Lady Bessborough*





Eric Ponsonby died in 1993 at his home in Stansted Park in Sussex and in his will left his house to the state.

Stansted house holds all of the artefacts that the family had moved across before the fire of 1923. The family named the front hall The Bessborough Room in honour of their old home in Kilkenny .



*Plays performed in the gardens of  
Bessborough House*



*Lady Bessborough and her sister  
(circa. 1800's)*

# The Front Porch

Until the late 1890's, the front entrance to the house had access up a set of two iron staircases either side of the front door to the second level of the house. On the ground level outside, the ground can be seen to rise half way up on the windows. This floor was used as a wine cellar, pantry, and kitchens to keep perishables cold before the introduction of refrigeration.

In 1909, the ground level was reduced by 8,000 cartloads to allow more light while expanding the

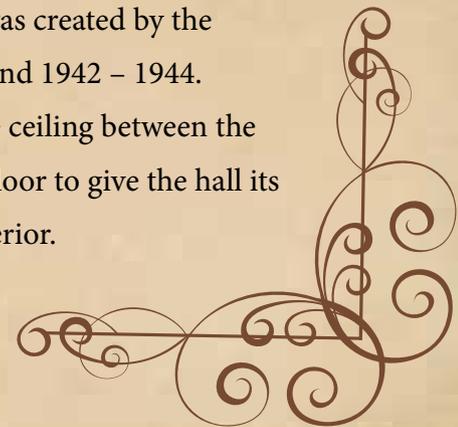


*The Front Porch*

space of the house for family use.

Following that, the front porch was built with 5 open arches and a balcony on top that could be accessed from the ground floor. A new entrance hall was created at ground level and the floor above became a gallery with access to all of the living rooms.

The grand interior front staircase we use today in the front hall of the house did not exist when the family lived in Bessborough. It was created by the Oblate order around 1942 - 1944. They removed the ceiling between the ground and first floor to give the hall its double height interior.



## Servants in Bessborough House

Bessborough House was a thriving bustle of home comforts and parties over the centuries when the house was the family home of the Ponsonbys. Staff were required to keep the house and grounds in working order even if the family were away. Some servants were Irish and many were English. They covered all of the servant duties such as dairy maid, valet, housekeeper, housemaids, livery and stable hands, coach drivers and butlers.

Bessborough House was a large home with four floors that was originally heated by natural fires before the introduction of oil fired radiators. Almost every room had a fireplace that needed to be cleaned and lit most days. The top floor was the servants quarters with a service lift (a pulley system) that accessed each floor. The service lift enabled heavy loads of wood and coal and often clay hot water jugs for beds to be delivered throughout the house.



*Bessborough servants (circa 1900)*

The house was particularly busy during the 8 weeks of summer and at Christmas, when the family were in residence and there were a lot of house parties and occasional weddings recorded.

Most of the family bedrooms were on the third floor of the house. The first floor consisted of dining, sitting and drawing rooms.

## The Oblate Order (OMI)

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate took over the house and estate on September 1<sup>st</sup> 1940 with 108 Oblates, priests, brothers and scholastics and opened Our Lady's Scholasticate, Kildalton Abbey.



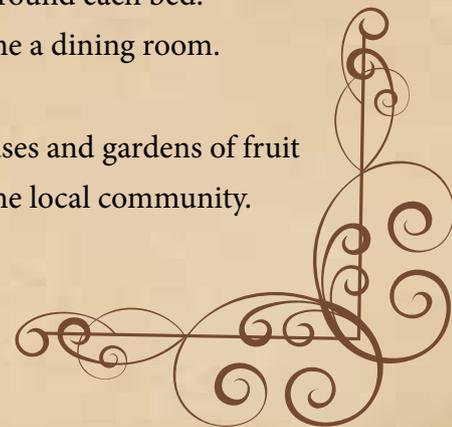
### *Oblate Ordination 1958*

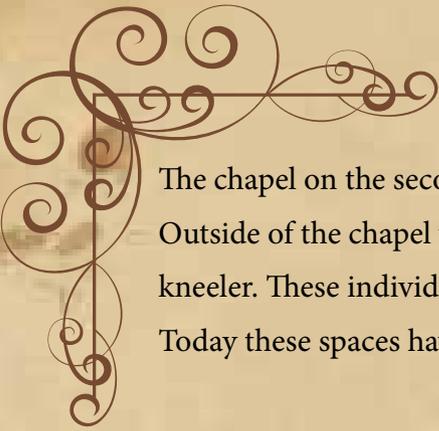
The early years saw a lot of reconfiguration of the House with the original wings demolished to make room for two new extensions to suit the needs of the seminary. One wing to the right comprised of the chapel and dormitory while the left wing was a classroom and dining room.

Their dormitory was originally in what is now the dining room with curtains around each bed. Eventually 100 single bedrooms were opened in 1963 and the dormitory became a dining room.

The Oblates worked an extensive farm with pigs, dairy, cattle, poultry, glasshouses and gardens of fruit and vegetables. They grew their own crops and sold some of their produce to the local community.

They used the walks around the grounds as contemplative space for prayer and meditation.





The chapel on the second floor over the dining room had ornate statues and an impressive altar. Outside of the chapel was a landing with 6 archways that each held an ornate altar with a statue and kneeler. These individual altars allowed for newly ordained priests to practice saying mass. Today these spaces have doors and are locally called 'Confession Boxes' that are used for storage.

Numbers joining the Oblate order began to decline in the 1960's so they withdrew from the site and returned to their mother house in Golden Bridge in Inchicore in Dublin. They put the seminary up for sale in the late 1960's and it was purchased by the Department of Agriculture in 1971.



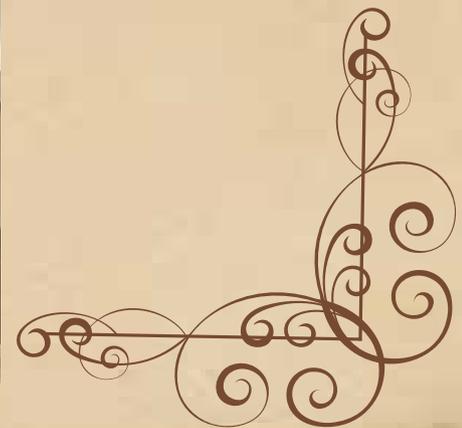
*The Chapel Exterior*

## The Coach House

The Coach House or Carriage House was built in the 1700's when the horse drawn carriage became a status symbol for upper class and wealthy families. These buildings were built as out-buildings not too far from the main house to accommodate horse drawn carriages and related tack. The 4 tack rooms in the Coach House of Bessborough House housed extra tack for the hunting season when visitors to Bessborough would hunt on the estate. There was also room for the horses.

The Bessborough Coach House was made of stone and has a weather vane on the roof. It has slot windows to allow for ventilation.

The tack rooms today are used as student locker/boot rooms and the coach house itself is used as classrooms and store rooms. It is situated in the centre of the farmyard.



## The Gate Lodges

The Bessborough Estate had a number of gate lodges speckled throughout the grounds as it had a number of entrance and exit gates. Gate Lodges were popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. They were built to retain livestock, to deter intruders and to monitor the comings and goings to the big house. A lot of the big houses were not occupied by the family all year round. The gate keeper was usually a tenant of the main house owner.

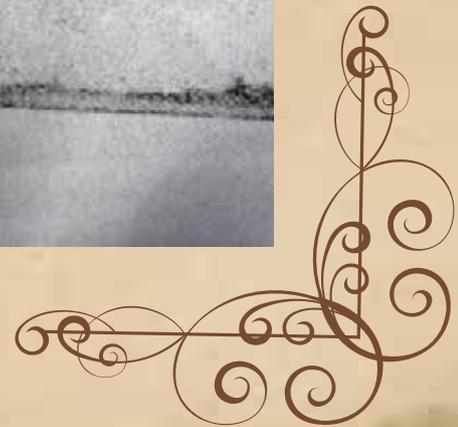
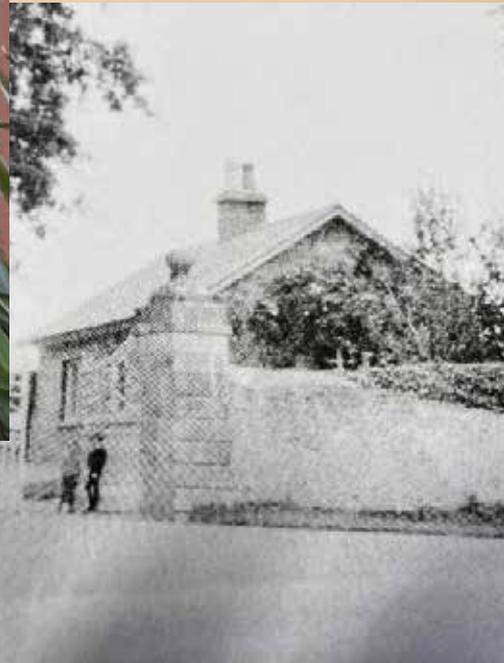
The most famous gate lodge on the Bessborough estate today stands to the front of the new college entrance. This would have been the last gate that visitors to the house would need to get through to be allowed access.

Another gate lodge was at the entrance close to the main road. This lodge was demolished by the Oblates when they built a bungalow for farm workers in the 1940'-1950's.

A third gate lodge was at the gate that accessed the village of Piltown. Large families often occupied the gate lodges which were small ornate cottages with 2 bedrooms.



There is a memoire written by Michael Foley who was born in the gate lodge at the front gates of Bessborough in 1911 and he tells of his mother having to get up at all hours to open the gate especially when the Ponsonby family were in residence and they were entertaining.



## The Pond

The pond was a creation of the Ponsonby family back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The family developed a walk through the woodland, planting numerous yew trees and great oaks. The pond attracted lots of wildlife, swans and ducks as well as otters and became a place to walk and relax in nature. Later the Oblate order used the area for contemplation and prayer.

Today, it is part of a woodland walk that curves down to the back gate into Piltown village and is used by students, staff and the local community.

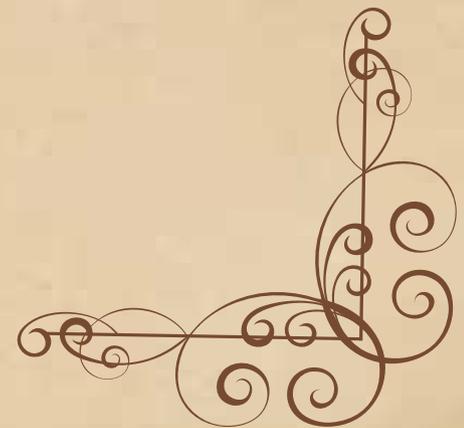


## The Bessborough Room

The Bessborough Room was named after the house and holds some of the dark wood furniture inherited from a mixture of the previous owners. When the house was a family home, the Bessborough Room would have been used as a dining room.

It is one of two rooms on this level that after the fire of 1923 held its indented panelling. All rooms on this floor would have had window shutters. The Bessborough Room retains its shutters today. Kildalton College originally used this room as one of the first computer rooms for students eventually becoming a library and today it is used as a meeting room.

The fireplace in Bessborough Room is made of Kilkenny marble. The room has 4 windows, 3 facing the front lawn and 1 to the side. There are 3 doors, that in its original design, would have accessed the front hall, the bedrooms and service lift. The third door was a possible servant's access for serving meals and clearing the tableware. Two of these doors are sealed today and are not in use.



## The Board Room

The Board Room was originally the Ponsonby family's living room in the house. It was described in its day as being ornate and highly decorative. It was severely damaged in the fire of 1923.

The craftsmen who rebuilt the house added as much definition and craftsmanship as was possible replacing the fireplace with Italian marble. The room remained a sitting room for the Oblate order for their professors and the Bishop when he came for ordination.

When the house became a College, the room was initially used in the 70's as a staff sitting room for staff living on site until it became a Board Room for the college. In 1996, President of Ireland Mary Robinson visited the college and was introduced to staff in this room. The table in the Board Room was custom made of Irish Ash with a cherry inlay and was crafted in Bunmahon, Co. Waterford.

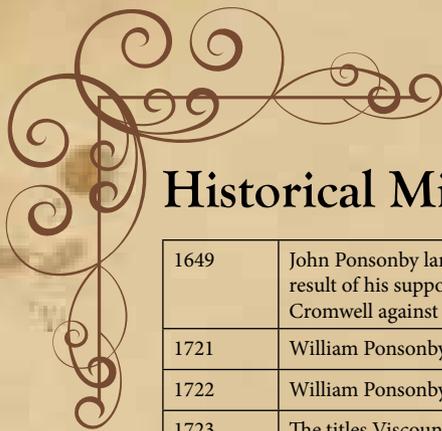


## The Oak Room

The Oak room was originally a bedroom. It became the Bishops bedroom during ordination when the house was a seminary.

Subsequently when the House became a college it was the College Directors office. When that post was dissolved, the room organically became the third of three meeting rooms for college business. It retains its shutters and has windows facing to the rear and side of the house.

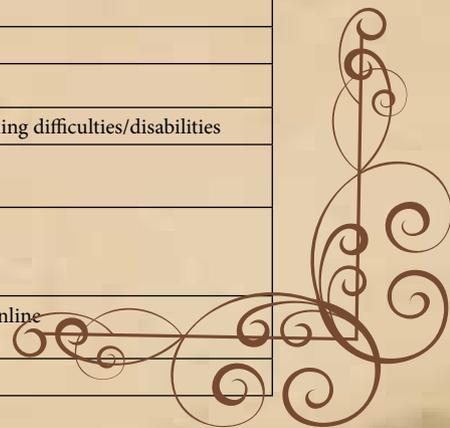




# Historical Milestones of Kildalton College

1649	John Ponsonby lands at Ringsend on the 15th August with Oliver Cromwell. The house and lands of Dalton were forfeited by him as a result of his support for the uprising of 1642. Cromwell granted the house and lands to John Ponsonby for raising an army to support Cromwell against the Royalists in England and the Irish rebels
1721	William Ponsonby son of John Ponsonby served as Colonel commanding the garrison at the siege of Derry
1722	William Ponsonby created Viscount Duncannon
1723	The titles Viscount Duncannon, of the fort of Duncannon in the County of Wexford, and Baron Bessborough, of Bessborough, Piltown, in the County of Kilkenny, had been created in the Peerage of Ireland in 1723 and 1721 respectively for Lord Bessborough's father William Ponsonby
1739	Brabazon Ponsonby (William eldest son) created Earl of Bessborough by King George II of England The Earl of Bessborough was created in 1739 for Brabazon Ponsonby, 2nd Viscount Duncannon
1745	Bessborough House was built by Brabazon Ponsonby
1826	John William Ponsonby, 4th Earl of Bessborough started the Iverk Show in Piltown
1923	Bessborough House was burned on the night of 23rd February by irregulars (IRA) to prevent it being used as a base by the free state forces
1925	Bessborough House was rebuilt by the 9th Earl of Bessborough
1940	The 9th Lord Bessborough was the last Earl to own Bessborough House. He sold it as he largely lived in Britain The Oblate Fathers bought the property. They moved their seminary from Daingan, Co Offaly to Bessborough House. The old curved wings were demolished and two new wings added
1960	A 100 bedroom accommodation block was built and opened in 1963
1971	The Department of Agriculture acquired the house and 365 acres of land. Kildalton Agricultural and Horticultural College was opened in August by the Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Jim Gibbons, and T.D. Officer in Charge Mr. John Carville. Thirty students enrolled for the agricultural course
1972	The Horticultural College was opened
1973	Mr. John Verling was appointed College Principal
1975	First female students accepted into the Agricultural course. A Macra branch was formed in the college. The chairman was John Sweeney, a second-year horticultural student from Achill Island
1976	Mr. John Foley appointed College Principal
1979	Joint course with Regional Technical College (RTC Waterford) began – The National Certificate in Agricultural Science. The first Female Horticulture students enrolled. They lived in on the top floor of the Old house with female staff. First open day in Kildalton
1980	Kildalton College staff and facilities were transferred into ACOT. ACOT was a new semi-state organization, the national advisory and training body (ACOT) set up in 1980 to provide training and advisory services for farmers. It took over the functions and personnel of the five state colleges (Athenry, Ballyhaise, Clonakilty, Kildalton and the College of Amenity Horticulture Botanic Gardens) previously operated by the Department of Agriculture. The Department retained 40 acres of land for future use for cereal variety testing.  ACOT Regional Office was established with its headquarters in Kildalton College  Agricultural student from County Cork, Claire O'Keeffe won the inter Agricultural College John Deere award. Her prize was a study tour to Wisconsin. It was presented by Mr. Ray McSharry, Minister for Agriculture
1982	The students did most of the speaking for the first time at an open day

1985	Mr. Michael Nunan was appointed College Principal. Kildalton College hosted the 9th International Course on Agricultural Education
1986	The equine course, The Certificate in Farming – Horse Production began. This was a joint course with Thomastown VEC
1987	The first national equine conference and demonstration was held in Kildalton College
1988	Kildalton College staff and facilities were transferred into Teagasc. Teagasc, the Agriculture and Food Development Authority, was established as the national agency with overall responsibility for the provision of research, training and advisory services to the agricultural industry. It subsumed the training functions of the national advisory and training body (ACOT). The rationale for this was that considerable benefit could be derived from the co-ordination of the training service with the research and advisory services.  Agriculture '88. The first of the national agricultural events held in Kildalton College
1989	Agriculture '89 show held on college grounds
1990	Agriculture '90 show held on college grounds
1991	Agriculture '91 show held on college grounds
1991	Mr. John Moloney is appointed College Principal
1994	Agriculture '94 show held on college grounds
1996	Agriculture '96 show held on college grounds President Mary Robinson visits Kildalton College John Mc Namara is appointed College Principal
1996	Mr. John McNamara is appointed College Principal
1997	Refurbishment of front hall and dining room with new tables and chairs
1999	The Machinery school opens
2000	Equine Para- Olympic preparation event held in Kildalton Mr. Frank Murphy is appointed College Principal
2003	Mr. Michael Galvin Regional Director retires. Regional Director post is dissolved
2004	Mr. Michael Conlon as College Director is moved to Head of Horticulture Mr. Tony Pettit appointed Head of College – director post dissolved. The last June bank holiday reunion of the Oblate Fathers in KC
2005	Phase 1 Aras an Leinn opens – Offices and 2 classrooms
2006	Agriculture '06 Mr. Michael Conlon dies in office RIP
2007	Visit to Stansted Park House in Sussex UK by some KC staff- new home of the Earl of Bessborough and left to the state in 1993
2009	Phase 2 Aras an Leinn opens – The Mall-Conlon theatre-classrooms-computer suites-Library
2011	In house catering and household staff are retired ( since 1971) – services outsourced due to recession
2012	Compass Catering and MLCS cleaning are the first contractors on site
2013	First college Access Officer appointed – Ms Mary O'Flaherty – supporting students with specific learning difficulties/disabilities
2014	Mr. Paul Hennessey appointed College Principal Mr. Frank Murphy moves as College Principal to the CDSU
2019	Mr. Paul Hennessey retires Mr. Tim Ashmore appointed College Principal The 12th Earl of Bessborough visits Kildalton College
2020	Covid 19- college closes for periods of time – students taught remotely through the 'zoom' platform online Social distancing – sanitizers and masks become the norm
2021	Kildalton College 50th Anniversary – celebrations moved to 2022 because of Covid restrictions



### Contact Details:

Teagasc, Kildalton College, Piltown, Co. Kilkenny

Tel: +353 (0) 51 644400

Email: [kildalton.college@teagasc.ie](mailto:kildalton.college@teagasc.ie)

[www.teagasc.ie](http://www.teagasc.ie)

