

Miscellanea

A Dated Wooden Beam from Askeaton

During the Spring of 1967 a member of the Thomond Archaeological Society, Mr. P. J. Dundon, discovered a large wooden plank built into the ceiling of the front room of his house on Main Street (and abutting on West Square), Askeaton, Co. Limerick. The plank (Fig. 1, top) measures 4.45 m. in length, varies between 14.5 and 15 cm. in width, and is 5 cm. in thickness. On one of the wider faces (henceforth termed the front) are three inscriptions, including the date 1479. The lower frontal edge of the plank is 'chamfered,' thus reducing the front face to an average width of 12.5 cm. and the bottom of the plank to 2.5 cm. in thickness; this 'chamfer' may be largely unworked, being apparently portion of the rounded surface of the tree-trunk from which the plank came. The bottom and front faces of the plank show signs of having been prepared with an adze, while the top and back faces were sawn in relatively modern times (probably during the latter part of the last century) when it was re-used as a floor-joist in the house; also modern work is the removal of one of the corners of the plank, and even more recent is the rebate cut in the top (to allow the passage of an electricity wire). The top and bottom of the plank now retain numerous iron nails, the result of its use as a floor-joist. Mr. Dundon, a building contractor and thus familiar with such things, is of the opinion that the timber may be of pine. He also suggests that the width and thickness of the original beam from which it was sawn measured about 12" x 4", the builder of his house having had the beam sawn longitudinally into quarters, thus providing four planks each about 6" x 2" in width and thickness.

The three inscriptions (Fig. 1, A-C) were gouged out to an average depth of about 2 mm.; the average width of the gouge-marks is about 5 mm. The first inscription,

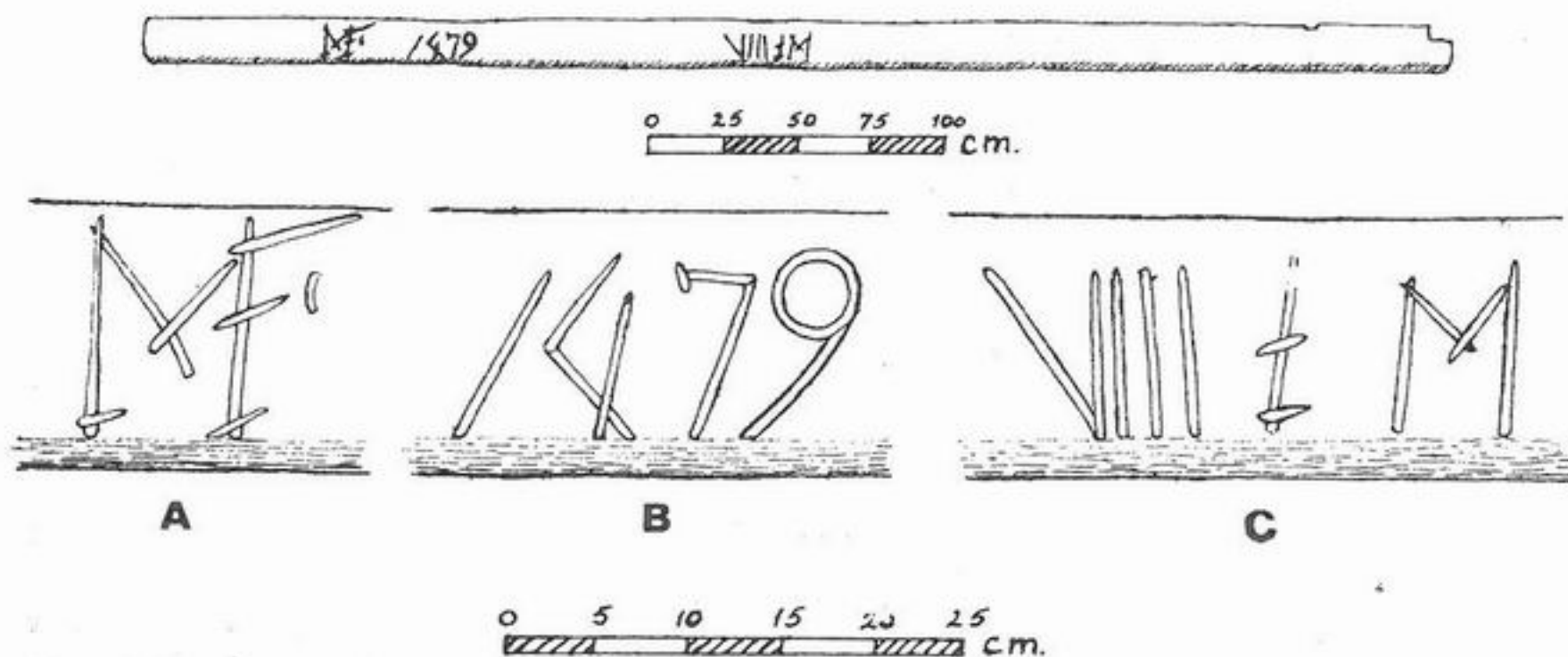


Fig. 1. Wooden plank with inscriptions (A-C) from Askeaton, Co. Limerick

apparently a monogram consisting of the ligatured letters M and F, begins at a distance of 62 cm. from the left end of the plank. The second inscription, the date 1479 in Arabic numerals, and the third inscription, apparently the Roman numeral VIII followed by the letters I and M, begin at 90 cm. and 1.97 m. respectively from the same end. All these inscriptions appear to be ancient and there would seem to be no good reason to doubt their having been executed as early as 1479.

It is not now possible to know with any certainty either from which building the original beam came or what purpose it may have served, but it would seem most probably to have come from Desmond's Castle or one of its ancillary buildings, all of which are literally within a good stone's throw from Mr. Dundon's house. Although the year 1479 does not seem to be specifically associated with any of these buildings, the most likely candidate would be the fifteenth century Great Hall. The original purpose of the beam must remain a matter of even greater speculation, including such possibilities as it having been a chimney lintel, a gate lintel, or a rafter.

(I am grateful to Mr. Dundon for bringing this interesting beam to my notice, and also to his son, Peter, for much assistance when measuring it and transcribing the inscriptions.)

ETIENNE RYNNE

A Stoup from Clonlea, Co. Clare

Built into the right-hand jamb of the doorway of the north transept of the present church at Oatfield, Co. Clare,¹ is a stoup with two ogee-headed openings at right-angles to each other (Plate VII). Originally this stoup was built into the right jamb of the round-headed south doorway of the fifteenth century parish church at Clonlea, Co. Clare.² Since the latter church and its stoup were mentioned by Westropp in 1900, the church has fallen further into decay. The danger to the stoup was recognized by Fr. Greene, of Oatfield, when he was having the Oatfield church repaired in 1952

¹ Td. Oatfield; Par. Oatfield; Bar. Tulla Lower; Co. Clare; Nat. Grid Ref. R.544.672. Traditionally this place was first used in 1651 or 1653 as a threshing-floor on weekdays and on the sabbath as a place of worship by a group of Vincentians who had escaped from Cromwell's onslaught on Limerick. The structure of the original church now forms the south transept of the present church.

² T. J. Westropp, *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 22 (1900), 160 and Pl. XII, 13. Westropp maintains that local tradition in 1893 recorded the miraculous removal of the monastery from St. Senan's Well, Killaneena, northwards across Clonlea Lake, to Clonlea. This tradition is still current, whereof two facts are quoted in proof, though the original site is claimed to have been in Knockatinty. Human bones have been unearthed at the traditional original site of the monastery on at least two occasions, one at the turn of the century (information from Mr. Kelly — see fn. 3) and the other quite recently when a relatively modern, though broken, headstone was also discovered there (information from Mr. Michael Dillon, Kilkeshin, Co. Clare). Mr. Kelly also states that "clochauns", i.e., stepping-stones from one side of a lake to another, can be seen when Clonlea Lake is at low, Summer, level. If, in fact, the site of the monastery was changed, then the change must pre-date the mid-15th century because of the later date of the stoup.

and he had the stoup removed to its present position at Oatfield. The corner column of the stoup had been broken out of its position before Westropp visited Clonlea and this piece has been excellently replaced by a local stone-mason, Mr. Michael Ryan, at the request of Fr. Greene. Oral tradition at Oatfield and Clonlea holds that there was an identical stoup from the same church built into a gate-pier at Clonlea. This gate-pier was some distance from the Clonlea church site, a fact which may explain why Westropp was unaware of its existence. Regretably, the present whereabouts of the second stoup is unknown.³ At the time of the renovation of the Oatfield church, Fr. Greene also had a "druidical pot" (apparently a mortar) removed from Clonlea to Oatfield where it is now inserted in the wall close to the doorway of the south transept and used as a holy-water stoup. It is a hemispherical stone, 25 cm. in diameter, with a hemispherical depression, 15 cm. in diameter, in its upper surface. Its precise original function has long been forgotten. It is in no way distinctive enough for one to suggest a date for it, but it is locally believed that it was used by "druids" for crushing herbs in, which leads one to the belief that in fact it was used as a mortar.

Stoups with two openings have not often been published. Westropp illustrates a simple example with round-headed openings from Kilfarboy, Co. Clare.⁴ There is another example at Toomyvara Priory, Co. Tipperary,⁵ and a fifteenth century date has been suggested for the Priory.⁶ The simple stoup with two pointed openings at the west doorway of the nave of Kilcooley Abbey, Co. Tipperary, probably dates to the post-1445 phase of rebuilding there.⁷ At Clontuskert, Co. Galway, inside the west doorway of the church there is "an unusual ornate example with figure carvings above the openings".⁸ An inscription over the doorway indicates that it was erected in 1471, and it is probable that the stoup belongs to the same period of architectural activity at this site. By analogy, then, the Clonlea stoup with two openings belongs to the latter half of the fifteenth century, the date suggested by Westropp for the church.

MARTIN A. TIMONEY

³ I am indebted to Mr. Michael Kelly, of Oatfield, Co. Clare, for the local tradition incorporated into this note, and also for making a search, though in vain, for the second Clonlea stoup. The Nat. Grid Ref. of the former position of the gate-pier is R.520.723.

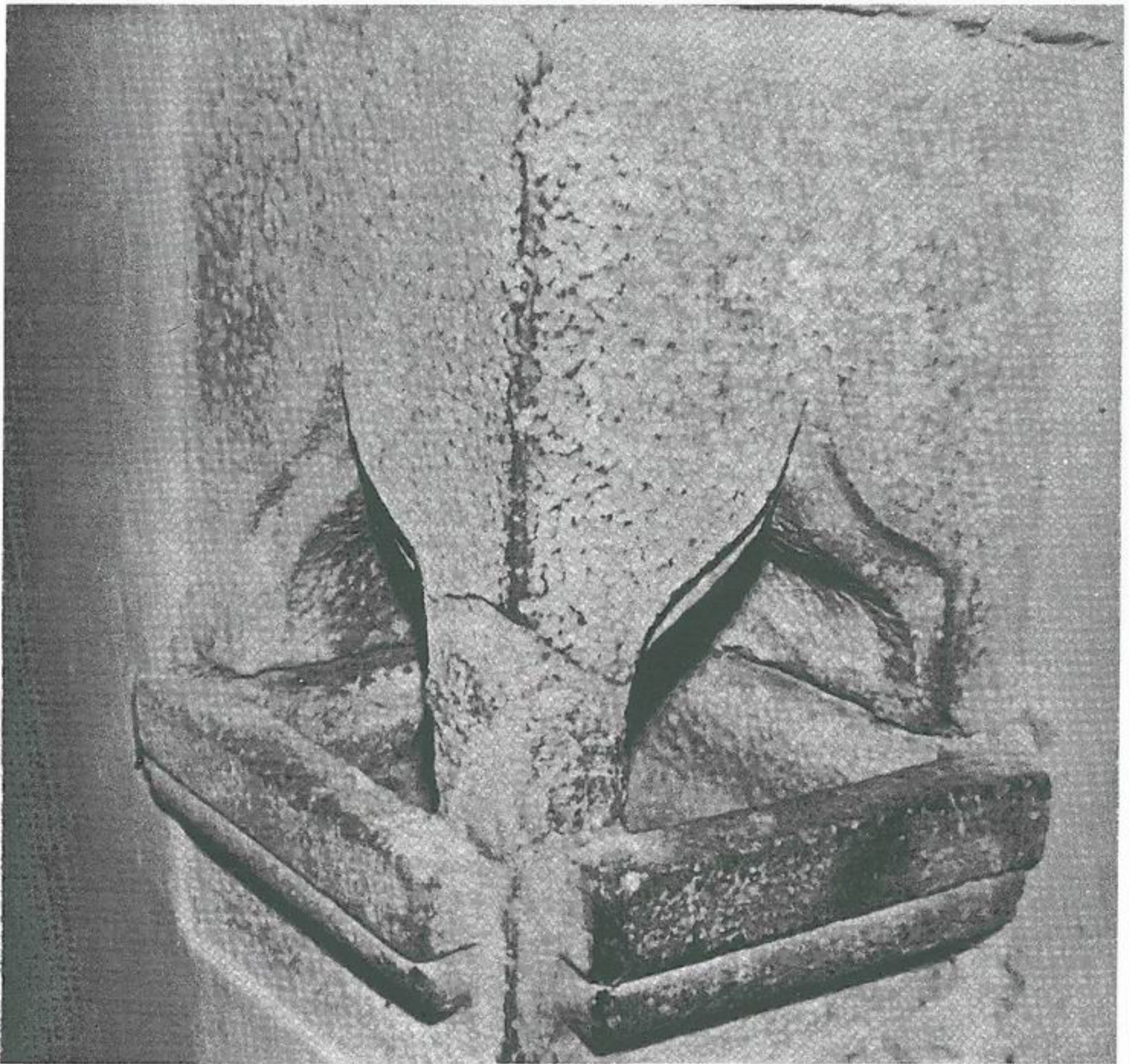
⁴ Westropp, *op.cit.*, p. 161 and Pl. XII, 10.

⁵ I am indebted to Mr. E. Rynne, M.A., M.R.I.A., Department of Archaeology, University College, Galway, for informing me of the existence of this stoup.

⁶ Lord Killanin and Michael V. Duggan, *The Shell Guide to Ireland*, 2nd edition, London 1967, pp. 112-113.

⁷ Harold G. Leask, *Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings*, vol. III, Dundalk 1971, p. 69.

⁸ Leask, *op.cit.*, pp. 167 (stoup) and 74 (date on door).



Stoup from Clonlea, Co. Clare, now in the parish church at Oatfield

(Photo: M. Timoney)

