

“The Priory of the Hospital of Sts Mary and Edward, King and Martyr, Known as Holy Cross, OSA, near the Bridge of Limerick”

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The history and location of the priory of St. Mary and St. Edward are outlined together with a discussion of the reasons for its several dedications. The house, belonging to the Crutched Friars, was founded in the early thirteenth century and dissolved at the Reformation.

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Early maps of Limerick city show that St. Mary's lay just inside the walls of English town next to Baal's bridge, on the east side of what is now Mary Street (I on Illus. 1). The house belonged to the Fratres Cruciferi, or Crutched Friars, a hospital order which followed the rules of St. Augustine. The origins of this order are obscure but, in Ireland, it is believed that they were associated with or modelled on the Italian Congregation of the order (Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, p. 208). They held sixteen houses and one cell in Ireland, some of which are known to have been double houses, with both monks and nuns, though there is no evidence that this was the case in Limerick. Throughout the medieval and early modern period the house was referred to in a number of different ways, St. Mary's, St. Mary's House, St. Edward's, SS. Mary and Edward King and Martyr, and Holy Cross, with the most developed form of the name being given as the title to this paper (CPR XV, p. 93). The number of different names and combinations has in the past led to confusion and caused one eminent scholar, T. J. Westropp, to believe that there were two separate houses in the city, the hospital of SS Mary and Edward and, St. Mary and the Holy Cross (Westropp 1905, p. 360). This error was spotted and corrected by Canon Begley (1906, p. 370).

An inquisition taken at the time of the Dissolution in 1537 states that the priory was founded by Simon Minor in the time of King John (Begley 1906, p. 373) and the date is confirmed by an entry in the Irish Pipe Roll of 1211-12 which records expenditure of £8. 5s. 10d. on the “construction of the new priory of Limerick” (Davies and Quinn 1941, p. 71). The endowment of the priory in its earliest years of existence is unknown but in 1275 it held lands from the Corporation, a part of the 40 ploughlands granted to the city by King John. The reference (CDI 1252-84, p. 213) states that “The house of St. Mary of Limerick holds in frankalmoign one carucate of the King's confirmation for 20s a year payable to the citizens”.

The priory does not seem to have prospered during the first century of its existence for in the Ecclesiastical Taxation of 1302-06 (Begley 1906, p. 191) it is listed as too poor to pay any contribution and is the only church or religious house in the diocese to be in this position. Its lot may have improved shortly after that because, by 1324, it had managed to increase the number of carucates held from the Corporation from one to six (Sexten Chartulary, p. 30). Only a little more is known about the priory in the fourteenth century. A document of 1321 gives the first known name of a prior, Richard (Westropp 1905, p.

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360), and two wills of 1376 and 1380 record bequests to Holy Cross (MacLysaght and Ainsworth 1958, pp. 4 and 9).

It is in the fifteenth century when the priory begins to appear in papal correspondence that the body of information begins to improve. A papal mandate of 1435 refers to Philip Flemyng and Laurence Dewnys as former priors (CPR VIII, p. 566). The priorship was then vacant upon the resignation of Walter Haket who had been appointed in 1428 after Edmund Fyzadann (CPR VIII, p. 75), so Philip and Laurence must pre-date Walter and Edmund. From another source it is known that Philip Fleminge (*sic*) was prior in the second year of the reign of Henry V, *i.e.* 1415, when he leased out land in Ballyenaghten (Sexten Chartulary, p. 60). So if the sequence of the names given in the 1435 mandate is the order of appointment then Laurence probably immediately preceded Edmund.

The appointment of the new prior in 1435 gives the first glimpse of what was to be something of a regular problem in the life of the priory, that is the unlawful detention of the priory by one of the brothers. There are two papal mandates regarding the appointment. The first (CPR VIII, p. 542) of these reads:—

“Mandate to cause Philip Loring, rector of the poor hospital of St. Laurence without the walls of Limerick, priest, to be received as a brother of the house of the hospital of SS. Mary and Edward alias Holy Cross Limerick, of the order of St. Augustine and to receive his regular profession. He is to resign his said hospital, wont to be assigned to secular clerks as a perpetual benefice, value not exceeding two marks.”

The second (CPR VIII, p. 566) repeats more or less the above but continues:—

“...to collate and assign to Philip, after he has made his profession and after receiving from him the usual oath of fealty to the pope, the said priory, void by the resignation of Walter Haket to bishop John, dependent on no other monastery, and value not exceeding 25 marks and, being conventual, reserved under the pope's late general reservation of all conventual priories: summoning and removing Philip de Geraldines, a brother of the said house, who has for more than eight months unduly detained possession under pretext of collation by the ordinary: whether it be void as stated, or by death of Philip Flemyng or Laurence Dewnys or in any other way.”

It seems as though there was some dispute between the central and local authorities over who had the right to appoint the prior and it may be that the brethren of the house were trying to forestall the appointment of an outsider.

It is not known how long Philip served as prior and he may still have been in office in 1443 when disaster struck the priory. In that year the following indulgence was granted (CPR IX, p. 332):—

“Relaxion, to be valid during twenty years only, of three years and three quarantines of enjoined penance to penitents who on Christmas Day and the Nativity of St. John Baptist and the feasts of St. Patrick and the Invention of Holy Cross visit and give alms for the repair and conservation of the church of the Augustinian houses of SS. Mary and Edward the Martyr by the foot of the bridge of the city of Limerick, part of which church has been swallowed up by the tides and whose other parts are in need of repair.”

The next recorded appointment of a prior occurred in 1457 when the Bishop of Limerick was mandated with two assistants to investigate the activities of the prior, Thomas Maccrathe, who was accused by Richard Fitzadam of dilapidating the goods of the priory, simony and incurring disability (CPR XI, p. 292). The Bishop was empowered to remove Thomas if the charges were found to be valid and to replace him with Richard. Evidently Thomas was found guilty, for in 1468 it was Richard who resigned the priorship and Thomas

Arthur was appointed in his place (CPR XII, p. 625). Thomas who was treasurer of Limerick was granted the dispensation to

“receive with the said priorship one other benefice, or if he resign it any two other benefices, with cure or otherwise incompatible, even if they be parish churches or their perpetual vicarages or major or principal dignities.” (*Ibid.*)

It is not clear whether this dispensation effectively allowed Thomas to keep the benefice he already held or increase his holding but whichever it was, the extra dispensation was something of a bad precedent to set in the light of what was to come. The following year, 1469, Thomas resigned on being appointed Bishop of Limerick and the stage was set for the entry of the man who must be the most controversial of priors, Eugene Ofaelan (CPR XII, p. 333).

On his appointment Eugene was permitted to take any number of benefices (*ibid.*) and he appears to have immediately cast around for vacant ones, for within the year he was requesting to hold the parish church of Rathronan (CPR XII, p. 759) and the prebend of Tollathbraky (CPR XII, p. 340). Eugene was however soon in trouble with the papal authorities, for in 1472 he was accused by Gilbert Arthur, treasurer of Limerick, that he

“for several years took the fruits etc. of certain churches in the said diocese under pretext of a certain forged process based upon certain papal letters which he alleged that he had, but which did not in fact exist and has been convicted of forgery and condemned to be punished as a forger of papal letters.” (CPR XIII, p. 318)

The commission set up to investigate was to replace Eugene with Gilbert if the accusations proved to be true and the mandate continues that Gilbert “from fear of the power of Eugenius cannot safely meet him in the city or diocese of Limerick” (*Ibid.*). Exactly what was meant by this latter statement is not clear, but it should be remembered that it forms part of an accusation in which the accuser stood to gain materially from the success of his action and thus liable to exaggerate events for effect. On the other hand it may have been a genuine fear, for by 1473 Gilbert was dead (CPR XIII, p. 420), by what cause is unknown, and the priory was still in Eugene’s hands.

A second attempt was made to unseat Eugene in 1475 and this time his accuser was the former prior Thomas, Bishop of Limerick, and a kinsman of the deceased Gilbert. It was claimed that Eugene

“had dilapidated and converted to his evil uses the fruits etc. of the priory of Holy Cross by the bridge of Limerick . . . that being under sentence of excommunication on account of crimes committed by him, he had taken part in masses and other divine offices, thereby contracting irregularity and that he had held for several years and was then holding the parish church of San in the diocese of Cloyne without having himself promoted to any holy orders and without dispensation.” (CPR XIII, p. 529)

The papal mandate setting up the inquiry into the events however refers to the recent petition of Eugene which stated that

“he believes that he has hitherto led such a laudable life that the foregoing cannot be proved before lawful judges, nevertheless, inasmuch as judges in those parts are sometimes corrupted by a small sum of money or by gifts and that accusers are wont to choose judges disposed to favour them, it is not easy to have recourse to the apostolic see in regard to the grievances inflicted by them or sentences wrongfully pronounced and appeals therefrom.” (*ibid.*)

The pope clearly felt that Eugene’s fears were justified for the letter continued

“The pope therefore hereby orders the above three [mandatees] not to proceed in the said cause without the bishop of Emly, whom the pope hereby joins to them in the cause, decreeing that if they proceed without the said bishop any sentences etc. delivered by them shall be null and void.” (*Ibid.*)

A second mandate (*ibid.*, p. 44) to the commission of inquiry in 1475 stated that Eugene had

“dilapidated the fruits etc. of the priory of St. Cross by the Bridge of Limerick of the order of St. Mary of the Cruciferi, which he holds in commendam, by papal grant and dispensations, and has taken part in mass etc. when under sentence of excommunication, in contempt of the Keys etc. and has for several years held the rectory of the parish church of Sandrum in the diocese of Cloyne without being promoted to any holy orders and without dispensation—if the said bishop [Thomas] who alleges that his church in Limerick has suffered many losses on account of wars and dissensions of princes will accuse Eugenius. . . . to deprive and remove him and in that event to grant the said priory which is conventual elective and has cure, value 40 marks sterling to the said bishop in commendam for life.”

Clearly Thomas felt he had a proprietorial interest in his old priory and he certainly had the tenacity to obtain his ends for the case continued through to 1479 when another letter reads:—

“The recent petition of Thomas, bishop of Limerick, contained that whilst suit was pending before certain executors between himself and Eugene Ofelan, clerk, about the verification of certain papal letters ordering the latter to be deprived of his commendam of the priory of SS. Mary and Edward King and Martyr by the Limerick Bridge of the order of St. Mary of the Cruciferi, which he was holding by papal grant and the said priory to be granted for life in commendam to the said bishop, the said executors proceeding in the cause delivered a definitive sentence by which they deprived Eugene and granted the priory in commendam to the said bishop, which sentence has become a *res judicata*. The pope therefore at the said bishop's petition hereby orders the above canon [Thomas Cantulum], to approve and confirm the said sentences by papal authority.” (CPR XIII, p. 257)

This attempt to remove Eugene seems to have been successful, for in 1483 Eugene had made his peace with Rome and had been appointed to be prior of the Trinitarians in Adare (CPR XIII, p. 162). The letter of appointment lists Eugene's previous misdemeanours and from it we learn that the accusations against him in 1475 were proven, even if bishop Thomas did not then get possession:—

“... he [Eugene] obtained possession of the said priorship and rectory, and has detained them for more than eight and eleven years, respectively, against Execrabilis.”

The events surrounding Eugene are difficult to interpret, even though at first glance it appears that he was an unscrupulous character who flouted the legitimate authorities. The catalogue of crimes that he is supposed to have committed should have been enough to see him barred from any high office in the church, yet in the end he was able to make his peace and receive a priorship in return. Other factors seem to have been in play which are only hinted at in the correspondence. It should be noted that both the 1472 and 1475 accusations were made by members of the Arthur family, Gilbert and Thomas, and that in both cases the accuser stood to gain the priory by a successful prosecution. The 1472 accusations were clearly unsuccessful, for in 1475 Eugene is still described as prior by the central authorities and a comparison of the charges in 1475 with 1472 shows that the charge of irregularly holding an unspecified number of benefices is reduced to a single charge relating to one specific benefice. The fact that in 1475 Eugene was excommunicate should be treated with circumspection for it may have been his accuser, Thomas, who pronounced that sentence to aid his own case. Eugene certainly feared that it would be impossible to get a fair trial in Limerick and the central authorities acknowledged his fears by appointing an outsider to be part of the tribunal hearing the case. There is, therefore, a hint of a power struggle within the church, whether factionalism or local authority resenting central intrusion is unclear, and Eugene's problem may simply have been that he fell foul of one of the sides. Another consideration may have been that Eugene, with the surname Ofaelan

(O'Phelan), was, presumably, of native Irish extraction and there may have been an unwillingness on the part of the English establishment in the city to accept an Irishman in such a high position. The Statutes of Kilkenny had forbidden the native Irish to enter religious houses in the English areas, though this was not always observed (Watt 1987, p. 389), and the charter granted to the city by Henry VI in 1423 stated that

"...no one who is an Irishman, by blood and nation, shall be mayor, or exercise any office within our said city; nor shall anyone within the aforesaid city take or maintain any child of Irish blood and nation, as is aforesaid, as an apprentice, under penalty of forfeiting his franchise in the aforesaid city." (Lenihan 1866, p. 65)

It is therefore possibly no coincidence that the two priors who were deposed, Eugene and Thomas Maccrathe (MacGrath), both appear to be native Irish.

John Fox was appointed prior in 1486, on the death of bishop Thomas (CPR XV, p. 93), and the next recorded appointment was in 1496 in favour of John Foyt (CPR XVI, p. 455). The mandate in John Foyt's favour does not indicate who the previous prior was and the circumstances surrounding the vacancy. It is however reasonable to assume that John Fox was prior from 1486 to 1496, for he was certainly still in post in 1491 when he leased a tenement near the priory to one Maurice Seston, *alias* Mortgage O'Seston, for 49 years (Sexton Chartulary, p. 59). The reason for John vacating the priory is not known but he lived until 1519 and was buried in St. Mary's Cathedral where his gravestone is still extant (Talbot 1967).

The events surrounding the appointment of John Foyt echo earlier troubles at the priory. What appears to have happened is that John had been appointed but in the meantime the pope, Innocent VIII, had learned untruthfully that the priorship was still vacant and had appointed Geoffrey Arthur. Geoffrey had then sued John before Hubert de Burgo, canon of Limerick, and Hubert awarded the priory to Geoffrey and imposing a perpetual silence on John regarding the matter. John appealed to Rome but in the meantime Eustace Arthur intruded into the priorship claiming that the grant to Geoffrey was false. A commission was appointed to investigate and to give the priory to John, impose a perpetual silence on Geoffrey and Eustace with regard to the matter, and to cause due compensation to be paid out of the fruits unlawfully received by Geoffrey and Eustace. The seriousness of the situation was such that the commission was permitted to call in the secular authorities to force the payment of compensation (CPR XVI, p. 455). How long John remained prior is not known, for there is now a gap in the documentation through to the dissolution.

In 1537 a jury of inquisition visited the priory and found that

"The Prior, Sir John Fox, left in the said house a chalice in the hands of Stephen Creagh in pledge for 30s. The jury say they found on the altar a table of alabaster, four candlesticks, a censer, two pairs of cruets, twenty one books, great and small, holy water stock, a pair of organs... eighteen wax tapers, three copper crosses, three vestments, a great bell, two small bells, three doss bowls two old coffers... beds a standing bed, three surplices, a lydge table, three small tables, six tastelles, two chairs, two candlesticks, two brooches, a hanging candlestick, a platter, two pattens, a brass pot, two... three lowys of glass, a lydge trestell and five forms which were found both in the church and hall of the said St. Mary's House. That the prior had the first voice in the election of the mayor and bailiffs and sat next to the mayor in the courthouse on the day of election." (Begley 1906, p. 373)

The following year the dissolved priory was granted to Edmund Sexton in return for services rendered in the upheavals of the 1530s:—

"Grant, by privy seal, to the King's well-beloved servant Edmund Sexton, sewer of his chamber, of the Monastery, Priory or Cell of St Mary house, the site, ambit, or ground thereof, and all lordships, manors,

lands, advowsons of churches, tithes, chapels, chantries spiritual and temporal thereunto belonging within the precinct of Limerick City or county, in as large and ample manner as Sir Patrick Harrold, late Prior, held the same, together with all the goods and utensils of the house. To hold to the said Sexton and the heirs male of his body, by the service of one knight's fee; with directions for a commission to issue for the dissolution of the said monastery." (CPCR1, p. 38)

However, the grant was not popular with the citizenry of Limerick for by 1539 the Corporation was in touch with the central authorities with the request, "to have the King's grant of Holy Cross in Limerick which Edmund Sexton has craftily obtained" (CSP 1509-73, p. 49). Whatever was meant by this is not clear but the accusations accompanying it were sufficient for the archbishop of Cashel to be sent to investigate (CSP 1509-73, p. 49). Either there was no substance to the charges or Edmund was too valuable an asset for the Crown to alienate, for the priory remained in Edmund's hands and was passed down in the family.

It is from an inquisition of 1595 that we get the first verbal description of the priory and this is a very important document for it appears to suggest that there were two sets of buildings, possibly reflecting the dual nature of the house, as priory and hospital. Stephen Sexton was

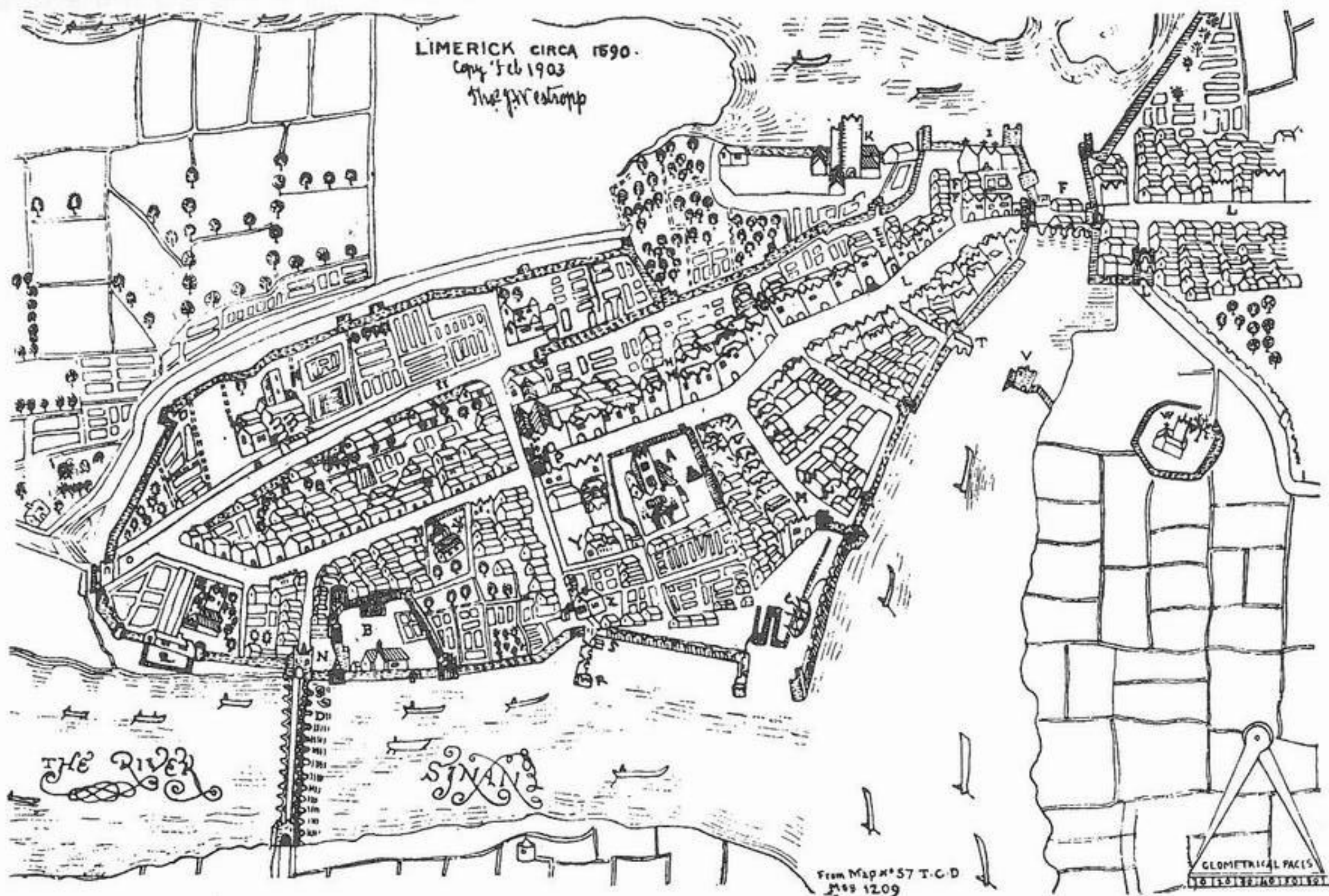
"seized in his demesne, as of fee tail, of the house of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Limerick and the house of the Holy Cross, a mansion-house, steeple, a ruined place called the chancel." (CPCR2, p. 340)

Some of the buildings were still extant at the time of the Civil Survey in 1654 (Simmington 1938, p. 429) and for a time parts were rented to the Corporation as a fish-house. A map in the (unpublished) White Manuscript shows it marked by the walls at the end of Fish Lane as "The fish house formerly the monastery of the Canons Regular of St. Augustine". It was finally demolished in the late eighteenth century (FitzGerald and McGregor 1827, p. 569).

Discussion

The 1595 inquisition, noted above, suggests that there were two sets of buildings forming the priory, and it is probable that one set was the monastic buildings themselves and the other the hospital. It has generally been assumed that these buildings lay to the east of Mary Street, next to Baal's Bridge (Illus. 1), but there is some evidence to suggest the possibility of a split site, with one set on the east and the other on the west of Mary Street in the area of Barrington's Hospital. In the Civil Survey of 1654, Christopher Sexton is listed as proprietor of, and taking rents from, a number of properties in the Baal's Bridge area, including one called St. Mary's House (Simmington 1938, pp. 418 and 429). Some of these lay to the west and some to the east of Mary Street. It is likely that the properties involved are those which were granted by Henry VIII to Edmund Sexton in 1538. In support of this contention it can be said that there are no records in the Sexton Chartulary (the family's record book compiled *ca.* 1620) which relate to purchase or transfer of property in this area. In these circumstances it is highly possible that one set of buildings lay to the west of the street and, in that case, it is likely that it was the hospital. It was certainly not unusual for the two aspects of a Cruciferi foundation to be physically separate, for example Tyone, near Nenagh in Co. Tipperary (Gwynn and Hadcock 1988, p. 214).

The suggestion that there were two physically separate sets of buildings does not however account for the confusion of Westropp (*vide supra*) who lists two separate institutions, an Augustinian Convent of the Blessed Virgin Mary and King Edward and, Holy Cross founded for Austin Hermits by an O'Brien in the fourteenth century. That there was only one institution was recognised by Begley (*op. cit.*, p. 370); however, there may be a germ



LIMERICK.
(Circa 1590.)

Illus. 1. T. J. Westropp's copy of a map of Limerick City dated c.1590. St. Mary's Abbey is schematically shown in upper right of centre (marked I).

of a truth behind Westropp's confusion. The Second Council of Lyons, in 1274, was directed at the suppression of the smaller mendicant orders and the Order of Holy Cross or Crutched Friars evolved into an order of canons regular (NCE6, p. 198). This opens up the possibility that at some stage St. Mary's was refounded and re-endowed. There is no direct evidence for when such a change might have occurred, but a case can be made for either the early fourteenth or early fifteenth centuries. In support of the former case it has been noted above that there was an increase in the holdings of the priory from one to six carucates sometime in the period between 1276 and 1324, but that the priory was too poor to contribute to the Ecclesiastical Taxation of 1302. Thus a change in the priory's fortunes can be placed in the period between 1302 and 1324, and it is possible that the first inclusion of the dedication to St. Edward in the priory's title in 1321 hints at a refoundation. In support of the second case can be cited the sudden blossoming of contacts with Rome from the early part of the fifteenth century, suggesting some change in status of the priory.

More tentatively, it is possible to argue that the 1211 foundation date was also a refounding of an existing institution. Of the sixteen houses of the Cruciferi listed by Gwynn and Hadcock (1988, pp. 208-16) eleven of the dedications are to St. John whilst one dedication is unknown. Of the remaining four, St. Mary's in Drogheda was possibly not originally founded as a house of the Cruciferi, while St. Leonard's in Dundalk was possibly founded as a hospital in 1160 and later given to the Cruciferi, which leaves St. Laurence's in Drogheda and St. Mary's in Limerick. Drogheda had three houses of Cruciferi, St. John's, St. Mary's and St. Laurence's, and so the dedication to Laurence may simply have been to avoid confusion between the various houses. Limerick stands out both for having unusual choices of dedication and for being the only house in Ireland with a triple dedication. It is suggested above that it possibly acquired one of these dedications, to St. Edward, during a refoundation in the fourteenth or fifteenth century but, even with two dedications, it is still unusual. It is possible to trace the existence of a St. Mary's church in Limerick back to the Synod of Rathbreasail in 1110 (Begley 1906, p. 378) where St. Mary's is listed as the Cathedral Church of the Limerick diocese, yet tradition has it that Donal O'Brien founded and endowed the present St. Mary's Cathedral—Lenihan (1866, p. 30) gives 1194, Begley (1906, p. 378) gives 1168-1194 while acknowledging Rathbreasail, Ferrar (1787, p. 151) states that Donal gave over his palace for the cathedral c.1180. If there is any truth in the tradition regarding Donal, then one is forced to ask where was the church named in 1110? It is therefore suggested that the cathedral church of St. Mary's was translated to its present site from near Baal's Bridge in the time of Donal O'Brien, and that the old church stayed on its old site to be refounded as a priory and hospital in 1211, when it acquired the dedication to Holy Cross.

Finally, it was possibly the different dedications and the split site which caused the problems at the time of the grant to Edmund Sexton in 1538. There is an important difference between the wording of the grant to Edmund and the request from the Corporation. Edmund was granted St. Mary's House but the citizens asked to be granted Holy Cross which Edmund had "craftily obtained". If the site was split, with each part of the whole having a separate identity in the minds of the populace, then when Edmund took St. Mary's House to mean the whole (as his grant seems to imply) then the locals may have felt that Edmund may have tricked the Crown into granting more than it had intended. The Corporation had every right to feel cheated, for the lands pertaining to the priory were substantial and included much of the land, sold earlier this century by the Earl of Limerick, on which Newtown Pery was built.

APPENDIX

List of Priors

Richard	---1321---
Philip Fleming	---1415---
Laurence Dewnys	?-?
Edmund Fyzadann	?-1428
Walter Haket	1428-1435
Philip Loring	1435-?
Thomas Maccrathe	?-1457
Richard Fitzadam	1457-1468
Thomas Arthur	1468-1469
Eugene Ofaelan	1469-1476 (or 1479)
Thomas Arthur	1476/9-1486
John Fox	1486-1496
John Foyt	1496-?
Sir Patrick Harrold	?-1538

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