

## The Franciscan Friary at Askeaton

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The sometimes conflicting statements in the scarce surviving sources about the friary are carefully analysed including the uncertainty about the date of its foundation. After an outline of its main architectural features, a comprehensive account of the long and troubled history of the friary is provided with discussion of some of the prominent members of the community and their involvement in many of the major events in Irish history, particularly in the sixteenth century.

The modern bypass of Askeaton with the new high bridge over the Deel has opened up a wonderful view of the Franciscan Friary. The ruins date back some six hundred years and are in excellent condition. James Fitzgerald, 7th Earl of Desmond, and his wife, Mary Burke, probably invited the Franciscans to the banks of the Deel at Askeaton in 1420. Mary was a daughter of Ulic Burke of Connaught. The Irish Franciscan historian Luke Wadding gives Askeaton under the year 1389.<sup>1</sup> He clearly states that the details of the foundation of three friaries in the custody of Cork, Ardfert, Askeaton and Timoleague, were unknown. He puts them under 1389 because they were included in a list of 1399. Yet Askeaton is not on his edition of the list! He translated the name Luasia in the list as Askeaton while it really means Laois. Papal privileges were given in 1400 for those who contributed to the repair of the friary of Inysgebryny. Since the Irish form of Askeaton was Inis Geibhtine, some have concluded that the document of 1400 refers to it.<sup>2</sup> The date of 1420 seems much more secure.<sup>3</sup> The building took some time to complete and dates stylistically to the second quarter of the fifteenth century. James, the 7th Earl, had been fostered to the O'Briens of Thomond and would have been aware of their great respect for the friars. He was an inveterate builder and committed many resources to improving Askeaton castle.

The friary is a standard building of its type.<sup>4</sup> A long narrow church runs from east to west. The main altar would have been under the east window. This was always a magnificent structure. The light of the rising sun streaming in each morning both symbolised the Risen Christ and helped the friars reciting office in the choir on either side of the altar. The sacristy was outside the north-east corner of the church. Normally the tower stood in the centre, dividing the choir from the nave. There was a rood loft on the front of the tower that served as a pulpit for preaching. The tower at Askeaton fell around 1820. While there is evidence for the rood loft, it has been suggested that the tower in Askeaton was outside the church beside the sacristy. A transept chapel was added to the north after the church was finished. The residential part of the friary was built to the south of the church and included integrated kitchens, stores, dormitories and garth. Usually the cloisters in Irish Franciscan houses were to the north of the church. Askeaton is one of six known exceptions with the cloister to the south and transept chapel to the north, probably due to the lie the land. A new refectory, as evidenced by a reader's desk, and related buildings were added to the south after the original cloister has been finished. The buildings contain a number of important artistic items. There is a bas-relief of Saint Francis in the cloister with a pilgrim's epitaph and a sundial. The face of the saint has been worn through being kissed as a cure for toothache. A

<sup>1</sup> Luke Wadding, O.F.M., *Annales Minorum*, IX (Quaracchi, 1932) pp 102-3 under 1389.

<sup>2</sup> E.B. FitzMaurice, O.F.M., and A. G. Little, *Materials for the History of the Franciscan Province of Ireland* (Manchester, 1920) p 170.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 180-1.

<sup>4</sup> For the architecture of the friary, see Deirdre Enright, *A study of the Franciscan Friary at Askeaton, County Limerick*, M.A. thesis (T.C.D., 1992); copy in Franciscan Library, Killiney.



bas-relief of a bishop is on the north wall of the choir. A seventeenth-century wooden statue of Our Lady and Jesus, which reputedly came from the friary and more recently was kept by a family near Glin, is now in the National Museum.<sup>5</sup> There is a badly damaged wall painting of the Instruments of the Passion in the dormitory.<sup>6</sup> A set of bells associated with the friary is in the Franciscan museum at Multyfarnham.<sup>7</sup>

We know little of the earlier history of the friary. The church became the burial place of the Earls of Desmond. Moira O'Brien, wife of Terence MacMahon, was buried there in 1472. She belonged to the family of the Earls of Thomond and her husband's family was associated with the Franciscans of Quin.<sup>8</sup> Friar Matthew McEgan came to Askeaton as a lecturer in 1441 after completing studies at Bologna in Italy.<sup>9</sup> This indicates that Askeaton was a major friary with a large community. This is supported by the fact that the friars there were slow to accept the Observant Reform that was spreading through the friaries in Ireland from 1460. A seventeenth-century source indicates that Askeaton was reformed in 1513 while Patrick O'Healy was provincial.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately he held office in 1497-1500! Perhaps he was living in Askeaton as ex-provincial in 1513. Before that in 1491 the Conventuals of Askeaton and the Conventuals of Ennis had a dispute over their respective questing areas. The limits had traditionally been halfway between the two houses, but the friars of Ennis had hindered those of Askeaton. The minister general decided in favour of Askeaton.<sup>11</sup> The friars of Askeaton were questing in South Clare in an area that may have been controlled by the MacMahons. The halfway point would be in the mudflats of the estuary of the Fergus. The Askeaton area was hardly towards Newmarket-on-Fergus, where they would have clashed with the friars from Quin. It must have included Killadysert and Kilmurray with the disputed area short of Lissycasey. It also raises the question of whether the friars of Lisloughtin quested in Kilrush. We can have a wonderful vision of the friars rowing down the Deel, across the Shannon and over the mudflats.

Legislation to suppress the monasteries in Ireland became law in 1537. Initial English efforts to suppress the friaries in Desmond lands around 1543 failed.<sup>12</sup> The lord deputy, Sir Anthony St Leger, wished to extend royal authority to the sovereign territories of the Anglo-Norman lords. He intended using the suppression of the monasteries as a lever to achieve this aim. The Earl of Desmond managed to avoid suppressing almost all of the houses in his area but did admit the principle of some royal jurisdiction. The friars at Askeaton continued undisturbed. James, the 15th Earl, was buried in the tomb of his ancestors in the friary in 1558. The area was sufficiently safe for the friars to hold their provincial chapter there in 1564.

Life was becoming more difficult for religious. War broke out occasionally in Munster and brought devastation. It was reported that the friars were chased out of Askeaton friary in 1575 but this may be a mistake for 1579.<sup>13</sup> In that year two friars arrived in Kerry and began making their way through Limerick into Clare. Bishop Patrick Healy of Mayo and his companion, Con O'Rourke went to the residence of the Earl of Desmond, probably at Askeaton.<sup>14</sup> The earl was absent but his wife, Eleanor, looked after them. She helped them on their way but also sent word to the authorities. The mayor of Limerick captured them. Lord Justice Sir William Drury was

<sup>5</sup> C. MacLeod, 'A carved oak nursing madonna from Askeaton, County Limerick', in E. Rynne (ed.), *Figures from the past* (Dublin, 1987) pp 249-57.

<sup>6</sup> K. Morton, 'Aspects of image and meaning in Irish medieval wall paintings', in R. Moss et al. (eds), *Art and Devotion in Late Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 2006) p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Bartholomew Egan, 'The bells of Askeaton Abbey', in *Limerick Association Yearbook* (1989) p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> FitzMaurice and Little, *Franciscan Province of Ireland*, p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>10</sup> Francis Matthews, O.F.M., 'Brevis synopsis provinciae hiberniae fratrum minorum', edited in *Anal. Hib.*, 6 (1934) p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> C. N. Ó Clabaigh, OSB, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534* (Dublin, 2002) p. 119.

<sup>12</sup> B. Bradshaw, *The Dissolution of the Religious Orders in Ireland under Henry VIII* (Cambridge, 1974) pp 163-9.

<sup>13</sup> Matthews, 'Brevis synopsis', p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> B. Millett, OFM, *Four Franciscan Martyrs of Ireland* (Dublin, 1990) pp 9-15.



nearby and interrogated them. They were put on trial and condemned to death. Sir William brought them with him as he set out for Cork. He had them executed at Kilmallock on or around 13 August 1579. It seems that their bodies were buried in Askeaton friary in 1647. Pope John Paul II beatified them in 1992.

At this time Munster was in a state of unrest. James Fitzmaurice landed with a small Spanish force at Smerwick in July 1579. He was killed in a skirmish a month later. In the meantime Sir Nicholas Malby, president of Connacht, had gathered an army and advanced into County Limerick. He defeated James and John of Desmond in battle on 3 October and proceeded to clear the area. He is reputed to have destroyed Askeaton friary at this stage.<sup>15</sup> Thady Daly, a friar of Askeaton, had gone to the friary in Roscrea because of the wars. He was captured near Limerick in 1579 and was beheaded. He is included in the next group of Irish martyrs proposed for beatification. John Cornelius, another member of the community, was caught and hanged from a tree. Walter Ferall fled from the friary, was captured by some soldiers and was killed by a cut from a sword.<sup>16</sup>

Persecution forced the friars away from Askeaton for half a century. They returned to live in a small house near the friary in 1627.<sup>17</sup> They managed to get the building back around 1643 and began restoring it with such effect that it was designated as one of six Irish Franciscan houses of philosophy in 1647.<sup>18</sup> A real Franciscan scholar, Eugene O'Cahan, was appointed guardian of Askeaton in 1650. A native of Thomond, he entered the order in Ennis before to studying for the priesthood in Rome. After he had completed his studies, he went to Barletta in Italy as professor of philosophy and later to Pontoise near Paris as a professor of theology. He set up a major school in Quin soon after his return to Ireland in 1641. He also taught in Ennis before his appointment to Askeaton. By now the Cromwellians were stalking the land. Fr O'Cahan was captured in 1651. His companion, a secular priest, was killed but our friar was released for a financial consideration. The following year he was captured again and put to death probably in the area of Sliabh Luchra.<sup>19</sup> As one might gather from the above, there was no possibility of the Franciscans continuing to live as a community near Askeaton. A guardian was appointed in 1661 and some friars returned to the region. It is unlikely that they were able to reoccupy the old site. The building and lands were sold to Lord Broghill in 1665.<sup>20</sup>

The Franciscans were around Askeaton for the remaining part of the seventeenth century. The Penal period brought renewed persecution when the Banishment of Religious Act became law in 1698. Friars were expelled from Ireland. We have several accounts of lay people taking care of their property. Perhaps it was at this stage that the statue of Our Lady passed into lay hands. Some friars avoided the law by going into hiding or registered as secular priests. It would seem that the friars hid across the Shannon in Clare rather than in the countryside to the south of Askeaton. The parish priest of Askeaton in 1708 was Fr David Lacy, a diocesan clergyman. Fr David Fitzgerald, guardian of Askeaton friary 1689-91, was ministering across the Shannon estuary in South Clare in 1714.<sup>21</sup> Fr Patrick Purcell came back to Ireland from the continent as a young priest about the year 1678. He was appointed superior in Askeaton 1697-99 and again 1703-11 as well as superior in Adare 1716-17. He purchased a chalice for Askeaton friary (now in the parish church in Askeaton) in 1715 (or 1719, the year he died?) even though at this time he was working in Tulla in Clare. Fr Bonaventure Fitzgerald returned to Ireland as a young priest

<sup>15</sup> D. Mooney, 'De provincia Hiberniae S. Francisci', edited in *Anal. Hib.*, 6 (1934) p. 65; Wadding, *Annales Minorum*, pp 102-3 gives the date as 1581.

<sup>16</sup> Matthews, 'Brevis synopsis', pp 65-8.

<sup>17</sup> Matthews, 'Brevis synopsis', p. 32; a list of superiors of Askeaton is in B. Egan, O.F.M., 'Superiors of the Franciscan friaries of Adare, Askeaton and Limerick', in *NMAJ*, xiv (1971) pp 266-8.

<sup>18</sup> B. Millett, O.F.M., *The Irish Franciscans 1651-1665*, (Rome, 1964) p. 357.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>21</sup> W.P. Burke, *The Irish Priests in Penal Times (1660-1760)*, (Waterford, 1914) pp 213-4.



around 1687. He was elected definitor, or assistant to the provincial, in 1697-1700, after which he became guardian of Saint Anthony's College, Louvain. He later served in Kilcrea, Nenagh and Limerick before being made superior of Askeaton 1727-9. He was guardian in Limerick when he got a chalice for Askeaton friary in 1719 that is now in the charge of the Sisters of Mercy in Limerick.<sup>22</sup> It is fairly clear that he continued to live in Limerick although superior of Askeaton. Fr James McNamara, O.F.M., was parish priest of Kilrush in 1731. He was officially guardian of Limerick friary from 1729 until his death in 1734-5 and was also associated with Askeaton. John McNamara succeeded James as guardian in Limerick and was guardian of Askeaton 1742-4. He lived in Clare as chaplain to his father's house at Ardcluony near Killaloe. Another friar, James Dundon, was ministering in Glin and other parts of the Diocese of Limerick around 1756. He was named as guardian of Askeaton in 1761-3 and Adare 1763-5.<sup>23</sup> A friar, Maurice Walsh, was appointed to Glin in 1758 and moved to Shanagolden in 1766.<sup>24</sup> He is probably identical with Fr John Walsh who was guardian of Askeaton in 1755-7, 1759-61, 1763-7 and again in 1776-8. Louis O'Donnell, guardian 1729-30, went on to become provincial in 1742-5 but was mainly associated with West Cork.

We may take it that the Franciscan community at Askeaton was forced to break up early in the eighteenth century and, despite various efforts around 1720, never came together again. Some ministered in what had been their questing area of South Clare, albeit taken in a broad sense. They may have had a sense of being helped by the MacMahons in the distant past. By the mid-century several of the guardians of Askeaton were living in Limerick city or working in parishes in the diocese. They seem to have regarded Askeaton as a satellite of the house in Limerick. Askeaton friary is given as vacant in an official list dated 1766, implying that it had been abandoned for some time.<sup>25</sup> We may take it that the connection between the Franciscans and Askeaton had come to an end after three hundred years.

<sup>22</sup> B. Egan, O.F.M., 'Franciscan chalices associated with Askeaton', in *Limerick Association Yearbook* (1984), pp 86-90; John Begley, *The Diocese of Limerick from 1691 to the present time*, (Dublin, 1938) p. 601.

<sup>23</sup> Begley, *Diocese of Limerick*, p. 625.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> James MacDonnell, O.F.M., provincial, to Propaganda Fide, 19/7/1766, edited by H. Fenning, O.P., 'Some problems of the Irish Mission', in *Coll. Hib.* viii (1965) pp 85-7.