Adare Franciscan Friary

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A wide variety of documentary sources and references is used to reconstruct some of the three-hundred-year history of the Franciscan community at Adare from the establishment of the friary in 1464. Managing to survive the various political and religious challenges of the early modern period Guardians continued to be appointed until 1873 though it is concluded that no friars actually lived there after 1754.

The architecture and art of the Franciscan Friary in Adare is well covered in print. However, with the exception of a list of guardians, almost nothing has appeared on its history. Founded in 1464 it was a House of the Observant Franciscans. The order Saint Francis started divided into two groups after his death in 1226. One favoured adapting his rule according to the needs of times and places through papal clarification. The other wished to remain true to the mind of Francis either by ignoring the papal decisions or by retaining his tradition of prayer and penance. The former, known as Conventuals, prioritised service to people. The latter, initially called Spirituals, drifted very close to heresy. It became known as Observants when re-organised around 1400 by Sts Bernardine of Sienna and John Capistran.

Initially Observants remained under the control of Conventual ministers provincial. They got their own constitutions at a general chapter in 1451 and completed legal changes at their general chapter in 1458. From that time there was an Observant vicar general under the Conventual minister general. Provinces could have an Observant vicar provincial under a Conventual minister provincial. The order split into two, Conventional and Observant, in 1517. Observant influence began in Ireland as early as 1417 and their first house was founded at Quin [Co Clare] in 1433. Quin and some other friaries remained directly under the Conventual minister provincial. An Irish Observant vicar provincial was appointed in 1458 and took control in 1460. Any new Irish Observant houses as well as their existing friaries came under his control. The Friary in Adare was the first of these new foundations. Donagh Mooney (1577-1624) covers the beginning of the friary in his history of the Irish Franciscans, written at Leuven in 1617-8.

The Convent of Adare was one of the most famous in Munster. In the diocese of Limerick, about twelve miles west of the city, it stands on the bank of the Maigue about three miles from its junction with the Shannon. The following details are taken from a book that was read in the presence of the community every Friday.

1 For example: Caroline, Countess of Dunraven, Memorials of Adare Manor (Oxford, 1865) pp 74-93 and plates 18-22.
3 A handy summary of the development of these groups is in Colmáin Ó Cluigí, OSB, The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534 (Dublin, 2002) pp 24-32.
4 Ibid., pp 33-57.
5 D. Mooney, De Provincia Hiberniae S. Francisci, edited by Bronch Jennings in Analecta Hibernica 6 (1934) pp 12-131. The section quoted here is a new translation of Mooney. Clarifications are in square brackets.
This was done to fulfil the constitutions of the Order and the statutes of the Province. Thus departed benefactors were not forgotten. This book is in possession of an old man named James Hickey, who had been syndic of the convent. The church of the Friars Minor at Adare was dedicated in honour of St Michael the Archangel on 19 November 1644, the feast of St Pontian, martyr, and St Elizabeth, widow. Thomas [Fitzgerald], Earl of Kildare, and his wife, Johanna, daughter of James, Earl of Desmond, built the church and a side of the cloister at their own expense. They also furnished the windows of the church with glass and presented the bell and two silver chalices. He died on 25 March 1478 and she on the feast of St Anthony of Padua, [13 June] 1486. The order formally accepted the friary at the provincial chapter held at Moyne [Co Mayo] on the Feast of the apostles SS Peter and Paul [29 June] in 1464. The brethren took possession on the following feast of All Saints [1 November]. The church was consecrated for the friars of the Observant family in honour of St Michael the Archangel on his feast [29 September] in the year 1466. The following places outside the church were also consecrated so that they could be used for burial of the dead: the whole circuit of the cloisters, inside and out, both sacristies and the entire cemetery. A portion of this at the south was not consecrated but set aside for those who might die without the right to Christian burial.

The other parts of the friary were built as follows. Cornelius O’Sullivan paid for the bell tower. The old book called him a pious and devout stranger who had settled among us. He also presented us with an excellent chalice gilt with gold. He died on 16 January 1492. Margaret Fitzgibbon, wife of Cunlaid O’Daly, a good poet, erected the large Lady Chapel. She died on 23 January 1483. John [Fitzgerald], son of the Earl of Desmond, built one of the small chapels. Leo of Tulach Aobhinn [sic] and Margaret, wife of Thomas Fitzmaurice, built the second small chapel. Donnchadh O’Brien, son of Brian Dubh, and Anina O’Brien built the dormitory. He died on the vigil of St Francis [3 October] in 1502. We owe another side of the cloister to a tertiary, Rory O’Dea, who also gave us a good silver chalice. Another tertiary, Marian O’Hickey, had the refectory built as well as the wooden stalls on the north side of the choir. Later he became a brother in the friary and died there after a most holy life. Lord Donald, the son of the Fair O’Dea and his wife, Sabina, daughter of an O’Dea, finished another side of the cloister. Edmund Fitzthomas, Knight of Glin, and his wife, Honora Fitzgibbon, erected the infirmary. She died on the 13 May 1503. Johanna O’Loughlin, daughter of O’Fallon and widow of a Fitzgibbon Muithamhnaic [sic], added ten feet to the sanctuary in the area near the sedelia of the high altar. She arranged for her tomb under that place.

From another source we know that Renalda O’Brien made a bequest of ten marks to the friars of Adare in 1515.
Theodoric Fitzmaurice was the first to receive the habit in the convent. He died on the 18 June 1484. Another brother named [Mathew] Quirke also lived here. Held in great esteem for his sanctity, he died in the friary on the 13 December 1532 and was buried there later.\textsuperscript{13} John [Fayt] Prior of Holy Cross, Limerick, the ordinary protector\textsuperscript{14} of the Fathers of Adare, died on the 2 August 1531. The Most Reverend Raymond de Burgo, a member of the Observant Franciscans, was [appointed] Bishop of Emly [on 20 October 1550], died on the 29 July 1562 and was buried in Adare. It is believed that he was the last bishop of that diocese.\textsuperscript{15}

Some of the precious possessions of this convent still exist. Fr Thomas Geraldine in Cork has a reasonable ciborium for the Blessed Sacrament, gilt with gold. He also has a silver processional cross and six or seven chalices, some of which are also gilt with gold. The register with these details is among the other registers of the province. I saw a list of the sacred vestments and was very surprised at the large number. All these have perished under the decaying hand of time.

The friars were driven from Adare during the time that the Earl of Desmond rebelled against the Queen of England. It had been kept in good repair but was then allowed to go to ruin. At first the roof fell in. The walls still stand, and there is even some glass in the church windows. This friary was known for religious living the reformed and regular life as well for the beauty of its buildings and the piety of the people who lived there. I am convinced that I could have collected many more details worthy of record if I had more time to continue my investigation.

A manuscript from Adare friary that is dated to 1482 which also contains later amendments confirms the account that Mooney gives of its foundation for the Observants.\textsuperscript{16} It contains the rule written for the order by St Francis as well as his Testament in addition to several papal letters on the rule and the Observant constitutions of 1451. The Desmond rebellion began in 1579 and lasted until 1583. Thus there is no reason to doubt the date of 1581 given by Matthews for the expulsion of the friars from Adare. He states:

Adare friary by the banks of the Maigue was founded in 1464. It is in the town of the same name in Munster and in the diocese of Limerick. The heretics expelled the friars around the year 1581. They fled and the place remained unoccupied. A new residence was opened there in 1633 when Henry O’Mellon was provincial. The superior was the venerable Fr Andrew Hickey, a very charitable and exemplary theologian who was also known as a preacher. His only interest in this life was the eternal salvation of both faithful and sinners. The founder of this convent was Thomas, Earl of Kildare, and his wife, Johanna, daughter of James, Lord of Desmond. They built a tomb there for themselves and their family. In addition Lord Lacy and several other local nobles were buried there. A provincial chapter was held in Adare.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{13} See Brevls Synopsis below p. 183.
\textsuperscript{14} The Franciscan order had a cardinal protector to formalise arrangements with the Holy See; a friary could have an ordinary protector to arrange matters with the local ordinary, i.e. the bishop.
\textsuperscript{15} Not quite true – De Burgo [Burke] was succeeded as Catholic bishop by Maurice MacBrien in 1557 after which no Catholic bishops were appointed until after Mooney wrote his History; de Burgo was also recognised by the State as Anglican bishop but no more such bishops to Emly were appointed.
\textsuperscript{16} Ó Clabaigh, Franciscans in Ireland, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{17} This paragraph is a translation of F. Matthews, Brevls Synopsis Provinciae Hiberniae Ej Minorum edited in Anecdota Hibernica 8 (1934) pp 158-9.
The mention of a provincial chapter in Adare could tie in with a report of a meeting of friars in Galway in October 1572 that would be followed by a meeting in Adare.\footnote{M. V. Ronan, *The Reformation in Ireland under Elizabeth* (Dublin, 1930) p. 421.} A year later Adare friary was reported as again stored with friars.\footnote{Ibid., p 423-3.} This must mean that the community was flourishing once more. A pair of wooden statues from Adare, possibly from this period, one of St Francis, the other of King St Louis of France, still exists.\footnote{Colmán Ó Clabaigh, OSB, ‘The other Christ, the cult of St Francis of Assisi in late medieval Ireland’, in R. Moss et al. (eds), *Art & Devotion in Late Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 2006) pp 151-3.} It is possible that Sir Henry Wallop was granted the friary property in 1585 but the exact extent of the area that he got is difficult to untangle.\footnote{The account of the friary property granted to Wallop is not in the usual extents but in Archdall’s *Monasicon Hibernicum*; the best version is in R. R. Brash, *The Franciscan Friary in Adare*, in *Journal of the Kilkenny and South-east of Ireland Arch Soc.*, 1 (1856-57) pp 63-4.} The date of 1633 for the return of the friars seems correct. Adare was listed as vacant at the provincial chapter in 1629 but had a community by the time of the chapter in 1639. The only problem is a report that Honora McCormack, a member of the Franciscan Third Order, presented a chalice to the friary of Adare in 1630.\footnote{J. Begley, *The Diocese of Limerick in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (Dublin, 1927) p. 455.}

The friars seem to have taken up residence in the old friary or very close to it. With plenty of well-trained priests coming back from the colleges on the Continent, the community would soon have been up to six or seven. The friars probably remained active during the early part of the Insurrection of 1641. Trouble came in 1647 when Lord Inchiquin stormed and burnt the ‘abbey of Adare’ held by the rebels, where four friars were burnt and three taken prisoner.\footnote{B. Millet, O.F.M., *The Irish Franciscans 1651-1665* (Rome, 1964) pp 251-2.} The date was probably July 14. It seems that William (in religion Andrew) Hickey, the first guardian of the restored friary in Adare, was one of those killed. From the diocese of Limerick, he was received into the order at Saint Anthony’s College, Leuven, in 1614 and ordained in Mechelen in 1617. It seems that he remained in Adare after his period as guardian ended, probably in 1639 when Anthony Meade was appointed guardian. The others who died may have been Fr Robert Mastone, Br Eugene MacCullen and Br Thady Rethan.\footnote{B. Millet, *Irish Franciscans*, pp 434 & 545.}

The friars did not give up hope of reviving Adare friary. They appointed Edmund Fitzgerald guardian at the provincial chapter in September 1647. He had been guardian in Askeaton in 1639. But the shadow of Cromwell was about to fall over Ireland. A period of intense persecution followed. John Fitzgerald, appointed guardian of Adare in 1650, was resident in London at least from 1662 to 1669.\footnote{They are named after Hickey as having been killed for the faith in the chapter bill of 1647 but the place of their death is not recorded; C. Giblin, O.F.M. (ed.), *Liber Lovaniensis* (Dublin, 1956) p. 19.} His absence, the short distance between Adare and the garrison in Limerick as well as the fact that the friary was listed as vacant in 1658 indicate that persecution forced the friars to abandon the site.

The appointment of Louis McCarthy as guardian of Adare in 1659 meant that the community had returned. Jeremiah Herbert, guardian in 1669-70, was more usually associated with Askeaton. Philip Connell, known as a poet, became guardian in 1670. He ministered mainly in Kerry and Limerick. Matthew Clery succeeded him in 1672. He describes himself as a native of King’s County (Offaly) but was the instructor of a gentleman’s son in West Limerick before he joined the friars. He attended and also served
mass at the friary in Askeaton.26 Surprisingly his name does not appear on the list of guardians there. These were difficult times for the Irish Franciscans, recovering from internal divisions and suffering occasional persecution. No guardian was appointed to Adare in 1675. This may indicate a break in residence. This was just before the short period of persecution associated with the Titus Oates Plot in 1678-79. We know very little about the guardians appointed in 1676 and 1678. Francis (Anthony) Harold, appointed in 1684, was not the famous nephew of Fr Luke Wadding, O.F.M. who wrote a life of his uncle. Our Harold was ordained in Rome in 1678 and returned to Ireland in time to become guardian of Adare in 1680. He was granted faculties for preaching and hearing confessions in Ireland in that same year. His first period in office finished in 1683 but he was re-appointed to Adare in 1684 to 1687. He was guardian in Limerick in 1689-90 and in 1693-97.

While there was an element of excitement and some reconstruction among the friars in Ireland around 1690, bad times were coming. The 'Banishment of Religious Act' came into force in 1698.27 The Irish Franciscan provincial definitory decided that the friars had no option but to obey. The friars would go to the continent and goods belonging to them would be given to lay people for safe keeping. The provincial administration moved to Flanders. Friars remaining in Ireland could either cover their identity by moving into parish ministry while registering as diocesan clergy or go into hiding. The application of the law was rather spasmodic. This was the period of the priest-catcher. The community in Adare must have gone into hiding. The friars appointed during this period are best described as nondescript. Anthony O'Brien in 1700-03 quietly moved to serve as guardian of Roscrea and later of Buttevant. Anthony MacEnery was guardian of Askeaton in 1699-1702, then of Adare in 1703-09 and finally of Askeaton in 1711-14. John Davis had been ordained in Prague in 1690 and probably returned to Ireland in 1699. He served as guardian in Ennis (1700-02), Askeaton (1702-03), Cork (1703-06) and Lislaughtin (1706-09) before his appointment to Adare in 1709-16 and again in 1717-19. He was guardian in Limerick in 1719-20, returned to Adare in 1724-27 and finally was guardian of Youghal in 1727-29. The fear of persecution had begun to fade by 1720 and in the last appointment of Davis we see a friar capable of more than holding his own.

The most famous Franciscan living in Adare at this time was Bonaventure O'Donnell. He was first appointed guardian of Adare in 1733 and died in 1754. There were three friars with the same name at this time. The one who died in or just before 1736 is easily eliminated. The next was ordained in 1700 while a member of the community at Saint Anthony's College, Leuven. He became a lecturer in philosophy there in 1705 and of theology in 1711. He was declared a lector jubilare in 1720 and made guardian of Donegal that same year. He was a provincial definitory or advisor to the provincial in 1724-27. At the same time a friar of that name, presumably the same person, took part in public debates at the University of Leuven in 1703, 1709-20, 1723-25 and again in 1733. He died in or before 1735. Previous commentators presumed that this O'Donnell was our man in Adare despite the evidence for his death. Finally a friar of that name was lecturer at the Irish Franciscan College at Boulay near Metz around 1729. Our Bonaventure was guardian of Adare on many occasions from 1733 until his death which took place in the College in Leuven in 1754 where he was buried. A plaque or small tombstone there

26 A letter of recommendation and his will on joining the friars are in B. Jennings, O.F.M. (ed.), Louvain Papers 1606-1827 (Dublin, 1968) pp 195 & 203.
commemorates his death. Unfortunately it also calls him a *lector jubilate*, adding to the confusion! This seems a genuine mistake for the man who died in 1735. Bonaventure had been visiting Leuven and there was a problem in getting the news back to Ireland. As a result he was re-appointed guardian of Adare in 1757. His death was finally acknowledged in 1759! But that is only half the story. Cuthbert MacGrath, O.F.M., identifies him as the Irish Franciscan poet, Nioclás Ó Domhaill, who lived in Adare about the same time. As such he is regarded as one of the Maigue Poets. He emerges as a real character, living in a cottage and owning a white horse called Preabaire.

The friars appointed to Adare while O’Donnell was there were lightweight. John Tiernan in 1736-39 and in 1742-44 attended meetings about the appointment of a bishop for Limerick. But he had just returned from his training on the continent and was finding his feet. He ministered successfully in Cork from 1746 until his death in 1771. John (Edmund) Hayes, guardian in 1745-48, had studied in Leuven and was ordained in 1739. He returned to Ireland in 1744 and died as a young priest as guardian of Adare. The guardian during the later period of O’Donnell’s career including his ‘living death’ was Patrick Buckley, a young priest just back from the continent. The same applies to two other friars, James Liddy and Patrick Loone, who succeeded Buckley for short terms. James Dunton was guardian in Askeaton before moving to Adare in 1763. At the time he was curate or parish priest in Glin.

What is the significance of O’Donnell’s appointment in death to Adare? It must be taken with a report on the state of the province in 1766. Most friaries had a community of two or three of whom about half were sick or elderly. Adare is listed as vacant along with over thirty other houses. The impression is that of a province in rapid decline. The inevitable conclusion is that the friary in Adare had been abandoned probably after the departure of O’Donnell to Leuven in 1754.

Did the friars make any effort to return? It was normal to name a friar who returned after training on the continent as titular guardian of an old house. This gave him status within the province and the right to attend provincial chapters. Bonaventure Healy, appointed in 1767, was living on the continent during the 1770s and probably never came to Adare. Anthony McCurtin was in Limerick when he was appointed to Adare in 1770. He was not well and was dead by 1772. Bonaventure Connelly took over as guardian but probably stayed in Cork. John Burke became guardian in 1776. He remained in office until 1782 and was dead by 1788. Francis Phelan took over as guardian for two years. He was an influential member of the province, vicar of Saint Anthony’s College in Leuven before becoming guardian of Waterford in 1767, a post that he held for many years. He died as custos (second-in-command) of the province in or just before 1796. It is unlikely that he came to Adare since his name occurs in the Waterford account books during these years. John Phelan, who had just returned from continent, took over as guardian for a year. Similarly John Shea in 1785-88 was just back from the continent as was Anthony Kelly in 1788-90. Patrick Hogan in 1790-91 had returned to Ireland in 1770. He died in Limerick friary in 1792. There are indications that he lived in Limerick while guardian of Adare. Anthony Fleming spent most of his pastoral life in Carrick-on-Suir and hardly came to Adare when he was appointed guardian in 1791-93. Daniel O’Brien in 1793-1803 does not seem to have come to Adare nor does Francis Power in 1803-06. This friar


was probably ordained in Leuven in 1790 but his return to Ireland was delayed when he was caught up in the aftermath of the French Revolution. There is a gap in the records before the appointment of Anthony Fitzgibbon from 1815 to 1819. He is another example of a friar appointed to Adare while living and working in Limerick. Daniel Kelly was ordained in Cobh in 1816, completed his studies in Rome in 1821 and was named guardian of Adare in 1822. He died in Limerick in 1823.

The listing of titular guardians to Adare continued until Rome banned such appointments in 1873. While there are examples of Adare guardians living and working in Limerick, there is no evidence for a permanent residence there after the mysterious departure of Bonaventure O’Donnell for Leuven in 1754. With a few breaks, the Franciscans had been in Adare for nearly three hundred years.