

3. The Evolution of medieval settlement nucleations

7 pages

ations within county Limerick. However, clear-cut evidence of this type of locational conservatism is easiest to come by in areas where towns and villages were late and deliberate creations. Such an area stands out clearly in that part of Ulster which lies to the west of the Bann. Here it has been demonstrated that the siting of new corporate towns in the aftermath of the Ulster plantation generally meant an adoption of the older power centres of Irish territorial lords. The best examples would include Dungannon, Strabane and Omagh.⁽²²⁾ Furthermore, the case for the direct influence of larger ráths on subsequent urban genesis has been strongly made in a pioneer study of Ulster towns. According to Camblin, many towns in the province owe their locations to the prior existence of ráths which commanded strategic sites in fertile areas.⁽²³⁾

● Notwithstanding the fact that most of county Limerick's town and village roots may be traced back to a much earlier period and allowing that documentation is harder to come by, the same kinds of locational coincidence may be deduced as in Ulster. Some 13 settlements within the county are deemed to have owed allegiance to the king of Cashel according to a tenth century source. All of these may have been lesser royal sites in their own right, but only Brughrígh (Bruree), Eas Geibhthine (Askeaton), Áine (Knockainy) and Druim Finghin/Treada na Mogh (Kilfinnane) provided a locational basis for subsequent town and village development.⁽²⁴⁾ Bruree was the leading royal site in the county. Its name evokes an association with kings and from a base alongside the River Maigue the Uí Fidgente kings dominated over most of what is now county Limerick until the tenth century. The old settlement node of the Uí Fidgente subsequently yielded to a new suite of features in the high medieval period but development as a nucleated settlement was never commensurate with the earlier royal standing. Elsewhere, Askeaton's fort was supplanted *circa* 1199 by a stone castle, around which a settlement nucleation developed; Knockainy was renowned for its oenach or fair while the three conjoined earthworks on nearby Knockainy Hill probably served as a territorial base for the Eóganacht Áine; Kilfinnane's combination of early secular and ecclesiastical functions provided an assured basis for later town development. ●

Fragmented literary evidence relating to the period between *circa* 700 and *circa* 1150 A.D. helps to extend the network of known territorial centres which at a later stage acquired recognisable trappings of nucleation. The centres which merit inclusion on the basis of this evidence are Rathguala (Rathkeale), Cromadh (Croom), Caisleán Uí Chonaig (Castleconnell), Brúgh na Déise (Bruff), and Dún Bleisc (Doon). This list could be added to considerably if the pose of reading history backwards was adopted and if assumptions based on the relative disposition of relict settlement features of varying ages were applied. Suffice it to state, however, that the selection made from among early foci in territorial organisation of a secular or ecclesiastical nature or occasionally a combination of both, accounted in large part for the pattern of nucleated settlement which ultimately emerged in the county. One tantalizing question concerning the extent to which boundary zones may have controlled the locations of early settlement nodes must remain largely unanswered, but if the placing of the leading royal sites such as Bruree, Bruff and Knockainy is anything to go by, then it may confidently be asserted that over the first millennium A.D. few features of Limerick life were less peripheral than the borderlands between peoples.

The evolution of medieval settlement nucleations

The study of nucleated settlement forms is facilitated by the fact that genesis and growth are spasmodic and are particularly associated with expansive phases in history. There have been times in the past when people, goods and ideas on the move contributed decisively to the shaping of settlement patterns. Such a phase was under way in Ireland by the end of the twelfth century and was attributable in large measure to the stimulus provided by Anglo-Norman newcomers. The Normans made a striking contribution to the development of an urban

together with extensions into mid county and detached lands around Knockainy. Of the settlement nucleations within the area surveyed, Askeaton, Newcastle and Rathkeale clearly attained primacy while Ardagh, Ballingarry, Bruree and Knockainy emerge as lesser territorial foci. The major thrust of the settlement detail suggests strong medieval overtones. In particular, prominence is assigned to castles and tower houses and a clear impression is conveyed that these items formed the centrepieces of nucleations. Judging from the surveys, Askeaton and Newcastle were pre-eminently castle dominated settlements, while elsewhere the record points to the existence of three tower houses at Bruree, two at Knockainy and one at Ballingarry. Some detailed elaboration is forthcoming only in the cases of the castles at Askeaton and Newcastle. Both are described as former chief residences of the earl of Desmond and each commanded impressive suites of features within the confines of a perimeter wall. Recurring items included halls and chambers, gardens and fishponds. Outside of the castle walls, largely dependent settlements had evolved which held a stake in the land of the surrounding countryside. At Askeaton, the sub-divisions of burgage lands are specified although no details are furnished of accompanying settlement (plate 1.1.). Vessels of 12 tons burthen could be accommodated at a quayside there, while the mouth of the River Deel was exploited through the erection of weirs for salmon fishing. At Newcastle on the other hand, a partial picture of the town's morphology is conveyed. The existence of a street pattern is signified by the presence of 'Shradegower' (Goat Street) and 'Shradenetona' (probably Church Street), and a number of tenements and gardens are also adumbrated.

Some of the most telling word pictures evoke images of desolation and ruin. The borough town of Rathkeale, for example, is depicted as being completely devastated and as a result depreciated in value. It had formerly contained 10 burgesses who were the holders of several burgages, gardens, yards, orchards and other highly productive lands alongside the River Deel. Here as in Newcastle and elsewhere, the wanton destruction that accompanied the Desmond rebellion of 1579-83 is vividly recorded in the pre-plantation surveys. Indeed devastation and depopulation in the course of the rebellion provided the government with one of the ostensible reasons for the plantation that followed in its wake.⁽⁴⁸⁾ The functions of

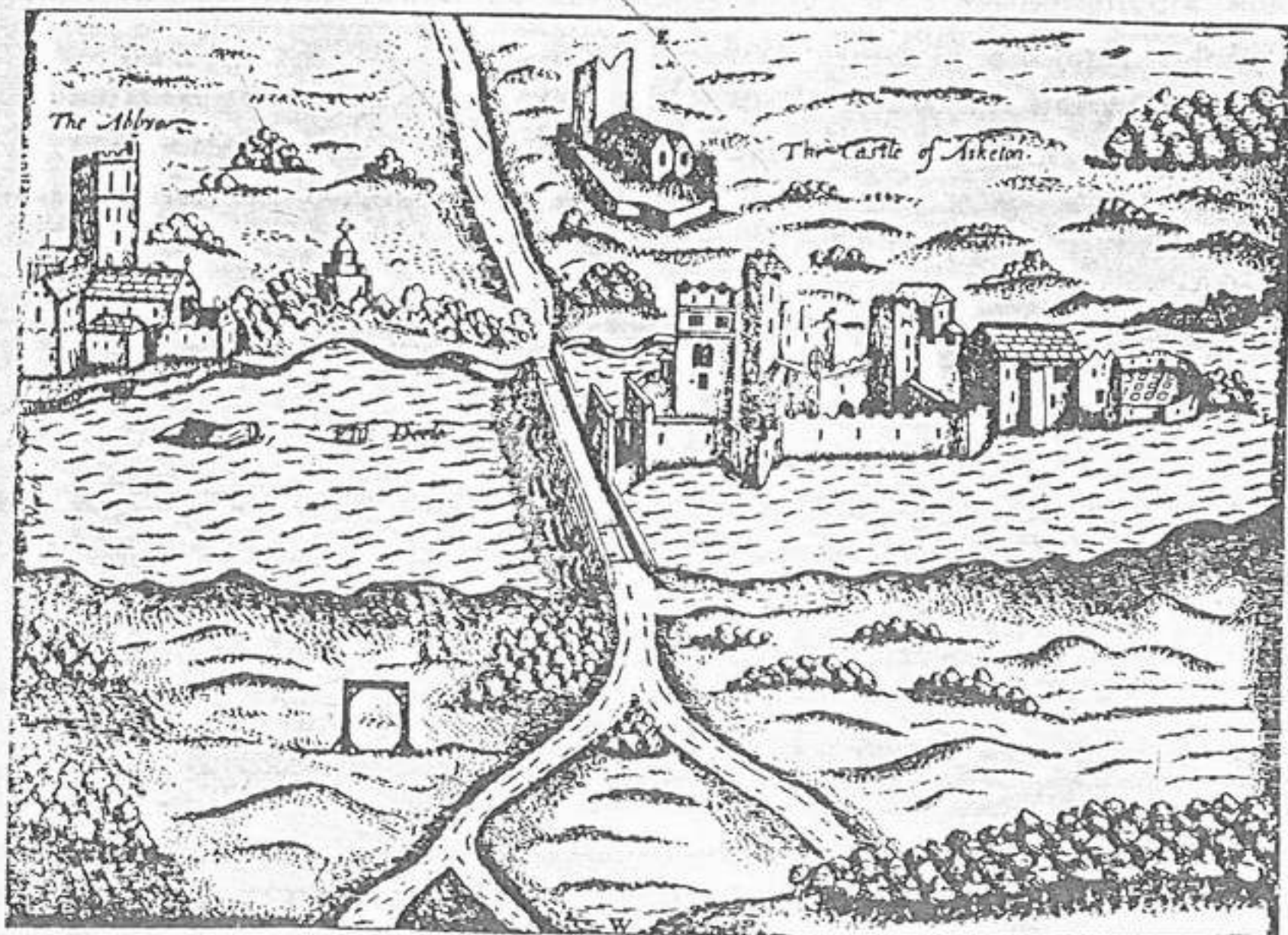


Plate 1.1. Askeaton circa 1600.

Landowner	Year of Patent	Location	Specification
Edward fitz Harris	1607	Kilfinnane	Monday market & 2 annual fairs
Sir James Fullerton	1607	Bruff	Wednesday market & 2 annual fairs
Sir Thomas Browne	1608	Hospital	Saturday market & 1 annual fair
Sir John Dowdall	1609	Rathkeale	Thursday market & 3 annual fairs
Sir Francis Barkley	1610	Askeaton	Wed. & Sat. market, and 1 annual fair
William Cullum	1611	Ardagh	Monday market & 1 annual fair
Thomas Cantwell	1611	Galbally	Tuesday market & 2 annual fairs
Francis Trenchard	1612	Shanagolden	Friday market & 1 annual fair
William Lacy	1613	Ballingarry	Tuesday market & 1 annual fair
Richard Stephenson	1619	Dunmoylan	Wednesday market & 1 annual fair at Kilcolman
Earl of Thomond	1620	Fedamore	Thursday market & 2 annual fairs
Richard fitz William Burke	1620	Lismullane	Thursday market & 1 annual fair
George Courtenay	1625	Newcastle	Saturday market & 1 annual fair
	1625	Kilmeedy	Wednesday market & 1 annual fair
	C. 1640	Dromcolliher	Weekly market & 1 annual fair
Maurice Hurley	—	Knocklong	Weekly market & 2 annual fairs
William Fitton & Anabel Browne	—	Knockainy	1 annual fair

J. Barkley owned 1200 acres

Table 2.1: Patent provision in county Limerick, 1600-1641.

The growth phase from 1603 to 1641 is attributable to an amalgam of influences. First of all, intrusive landowners played a crucial formative role. With their restoration after suppression of the 1598 rebellion, a substantial start was made in the transfer of land to New English proprietors which continued on a piecemeal basis during the seventeenth century. In county Limerick, recipients of Munster plantation seignories collectively accounted for some

Towns and villages in the making, 1700 – 1900

Between 1700 and 1900 many county Limerick settlements passed beyond the shadowy transition from village to town. At the outset Kilmallock and Askeaton had already secured the status of corporation town, but irrespective of the criteria by which they are defined, few other settlements at that time merited designation as towns. By 1841 on the other hand an impressive list of contenders had emerged. According to the census of that year – the most accurate yet recorded – 11 county Limerick settlements each registered an enumerated population in excess of 1000 persons while a further 12 settlements came within the range of 500 – 1000 persons. From among these 23, the towns of county Limerick may be derived. While acknowledging that it is impossible to identify a dividing line that is conceptually useful, a fixed minimum population sustained over a period of time may furnish the most acceptable and attractive method of defining a town. It is, moreover, the method that finds the most universal acceptance, even if the minima adopted fluctuate greatly from country to country.⁽¹⁾ In defining the towns of county Limerick a fixed minimum of 500 persons, sustained over the period 1841-1891, is adopted as the basic criterion. On this basis 14 towns may be accorded recognition within the mid-Munster county (table 6.1.). In addition, it may be stressed that all 14 were possessed of a sufficient range of functions by *circa* 1841 to merit differentiation from village status both in the context of Limerick settlements and amid the larger domain of Irish settlement nucleations. Beneath the towering Shannonside city they had come to constitute the primary network of central places across the face of county Limerick, spaced between 5 and 13 miles apart. The mature pattern of 1900 reflected local wealth and density of population supported by agriculture, rural industry and trade. It was also the product of structures and of a sorting-out process which ensured that only some settlements held or attained the status of an enduring town.

POPULATION		TOWN	POPULATION		TOWN
1841	1891		1841	1891	
4201	2073	Rathkeale	1396	898	Bruff
2917	2200	Newcastle	1208	770	Glin
1862	804	Askeaton	1095	516	Adare
1782	1173	Kilfinnane	781	695	Hospital
1690	637	Ballingarry	714	587	Dromcolliher
1470	559	Croom	699	896	Abbeyfeale
1408	1139	Kilmallock	551	766	Cappamore

Table 6.1. Population returns for the towns of Co. Limerick, 1841 and 1891.

owners such as the Leakes and principal tenants such as Ball, Bourke, Greatrix and Yielding played constructive, entrepreneurial roles. In 1761 alone it was computed that not less than 400 bundle cloth looms buzzed within two miles of Rathkeale and the forward linkages were secured by setting up a linen market in the town.⁽¹⁷⁾ The sounds of industry reverberated on to the Deelside townscape. In 1787, for example, we are informed that Rathkeale 'is near a mile in length and increases considerably having several new houses lately built'.⁽¹⁸⁾ The same author goes on to acknowledge the sizeable Palatine contribution to the trade and markets of the town.

However, the creative impulses that operated from within the estate system in the eighteenth century failed to be maintained in the more difficult nineteenth, and just as the earlier formative influences had been complex so also were the factors that led to abridgment. At the top patronage no longer smiled benignly, while the town itself was let out to intermediate tenants under two absentee proprietors. There was little or no encouragement for improving tenants and consonant with all of this, the early cohesion of the Palatines dissipated into the drain of emigration. The town took on a neglected appearance and was deteriorating *circa* 1840.⁽¹⁹⁾ Building ground which formerly let from 10^s-6^d (57½p.) to 22^s-9^d (£1.14p.) at this time hit an average low of 2^s-6^d (12½p.); rents for houses from substantial three-storey structures at best to cabins at worst had to be cut by half. The industrial structure of the town had been decimated with the loss of three tan yards, a brewery, a distillery, a bleachyard, seven chandling establishments, six salt-pans and more than 1,000 occupations in brogue and shoe making. All had in one way or another succumbed in the face of powerful external pressures, and pauperism, emigration or day labour became the lot of those previously in remunerative employment. Rathkeale was overrun by the poor in the absence of any resilient structures from inside the estate system. It came through the famine decade broken and battered with a great western rim swathed in poverty. It has never really recovered. Before 1891 Rathkeale had been overtaken by Newcastle as first town of the county (table 6.1.), and to-day its population stands at well under half the corresponding figure for 1841.

- In the absence of a resident proprietor since well before 1700 Askeaton was quintessentially a middleman's town. As such it came to be characterized by complicated tenurial arrangements and it was largely a town in stagnation during the first half of the nineteenth century (plate 6.3.). In 1840 the townland of Askeaton was held on a lease for ever by a local middleman, R. Hunt, of Inchirourke House, who occupied a part himself while sub-letting the remainder to 25 tenants.⁽²⁰⁾ Thus was set in train a cumbersome web of tenures which, in the nineteenth century, often tended to retard town development. Askeaton conformed to the generally prevailing pattern, although it is possible to point to some enterprise on the part of principal tenants. Such enterprise was, however, highly selective and it was calculated to capitalize on a trade in grain and flour and on the town's port location at the head of the Deel River. R. Hunt himself took steps to improve the fishery which had formerly been very valuable and was about to build a market house *circa* 1837, while John Hewson, another local middleman, built two extensive flour mills *circa* 1825. The trade in corn was generally acknowledged to be considerable but in the absence of a well adjusted export-import balance the benefits did not spread sufficiently and the town was deemed not to be improving in the 1830s.⁽²¹⁾ Only 20 of its 247 houses were slated and almost a half of its families derived a livelihood direct from agriculture. Other occupations typified the usual blend associated with smaller Irish towns of the time and at Askeaton the structure included 5 sub-constables and a sergeant, 14 publicans and an innkeeper, 9 bakers, 9 carpenters, 2 nailors, 11 butchers, 6 smiths, 7 tailors, 6 weavers and 6 shopkeepers. External influences bit hard into this largely pre-industrial structure given the lack of any in-built resilience among middlemen and occupiers, while the growing ascendancy of pasture and cow in the second half of the century

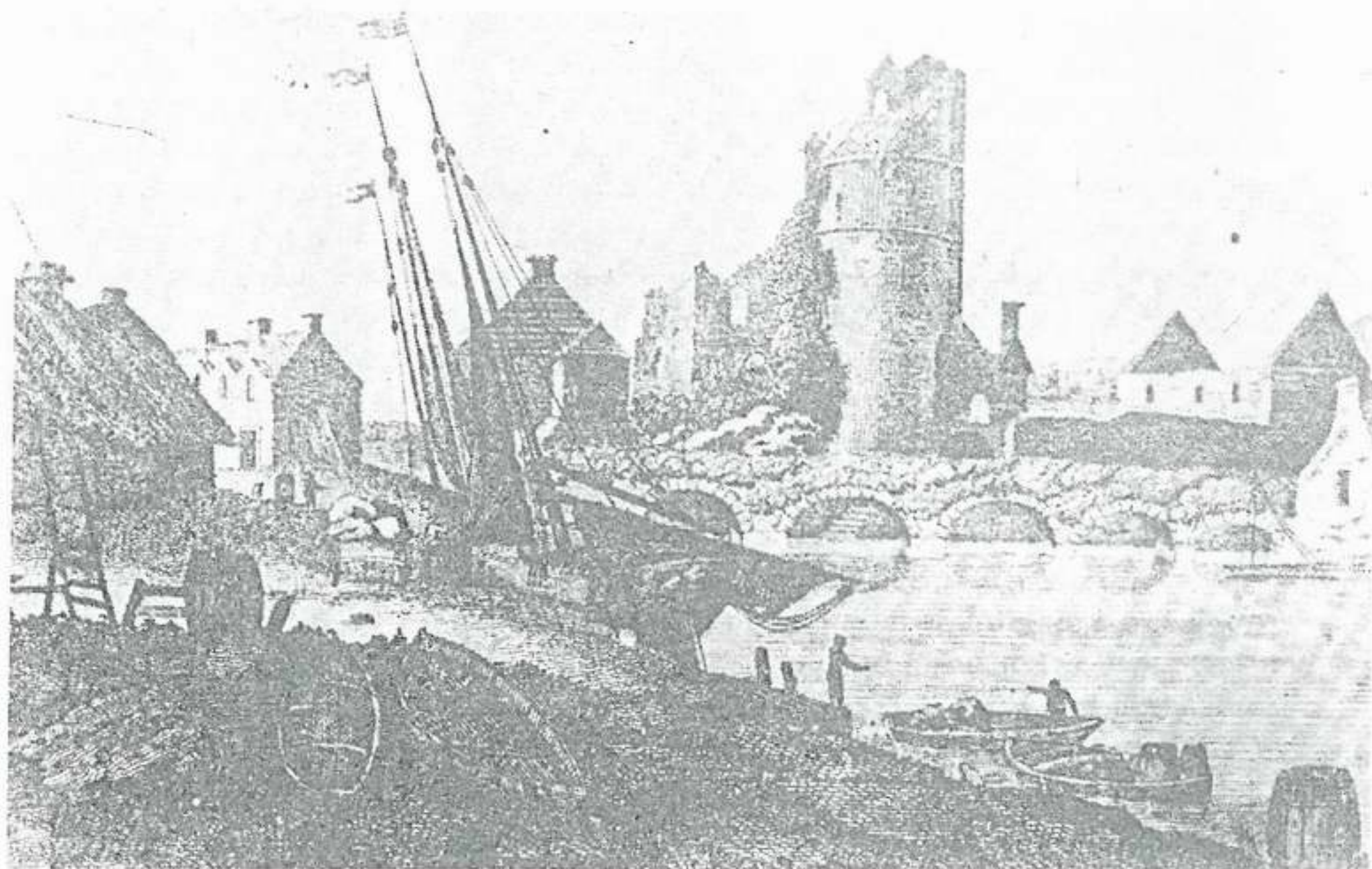


Plate 6.3. Askeaton, a town in stagnation

called for other painful readjustments. As a consequence the population of Askeaton dropped from an inflated high of 1862 persons in 1841 to a meagre low of 804 persons in 1891. ●

At opposite ends of the county, Abbeyfeale and Cappamore were only in the process of being established as components of the town network in 1841, and these latecomers owed least to the impact of either landlord or influential tenant. Instead the story of their rise related in an important way to the dynamics of change at margins where long settled lowlands gave way to sparse or late settled hill country. Relative location was therefore supremely important and in the difficult post-famine years both towns were able to draw on hinterlands which embraced relatively stable or growing hill communities. Unencumbered by worn structures or by excess population in 1841, they became linchpins of their respective spheres subsequently and indeed they were the only towns to sustain a population increase over the period 1841-91. Thus strong similarities may be noted in the fortunes of the two at take-off stage. Earlier on, timing and pathways to development diverged markedly.

Turning firstly to Abbeyfeale, it may be noted that a medieval Cistercian monastery furnished a fixing point for settlement, but apart from the monastic possessions which were modest, nothing pertinent is recorded until 1705 when Sir Thomas Southwell obtained a patent for two annual fairs and a weekly market.⁽²²⁾ Five years later the characteristic shape of Abbeyfeale emerges in an early estate map (see fig. 6.11.). But it was destined to remain small and remote until government actively intervened in road planning for the first time in the early 1820s. Then a new road from Newcastle to Castleisland via Abbeyfeale opened up access and if we trust accounts of Richard Griffith, the engineer in charge, it induced a remarkable transformation in the village 'set in the midst of a mountain country'.⁽²³⁾ According to Griffith, Abbeyfeale in 1822 contained only 1 slated house while several were without roofs, and even on the way to Sunday Mass the people exhibited the characteristic marks of poverty. In 1828 on the other hand, after construction of the new road and an injection of confidence as well as capital, the scene was transformed. Several new houses had been built in the village and several shops established, while on the Mass paths 'the women displayed in their gowns and petticoats all the gaudy finery of Manchester and Glasgow; the men were

In the famine decade the rising tide of Catholicism was temporarily halted and the building boom withered away. But it soon resumed again in the 1850s, 60s and 70s and during this time the Catholic Church, inspired by a conservative, ultra-montane ideology and led by zealous bishops and priests, might be said to have triumphed absolutely. The qualitative difference reverberated on to Limerick townscapes as the Church in triumph either translated to new uncluttered chapel sites or alternatively, and much more often, sought to symbolize in situ its total integration into town life. As early as 1851 Askeaton's old chapel near a blighted quayside sector gave way to St. Mary's Church on an expansive arm of the western road where it formed a dynamic and opposing pole to the Anglican Church ensemble on the far side of the town (fig. 6.7.). Here on new ground an inscription over the main entrance suggests a Church prepared to leave behind the reticence of the back streets and instead proclaim to the world its ethos and its achievements (plate 6.5.). Later on, new chapels at Abbeyfeale and Rathkeale clung to the older sites while signalling in their architecture the new triumphalist order. In particular, St. Mary's Rathkeale, an elaborate Gothic revival church, succeeded through its magnificent spire in dominating the skyline of the town. Along with the acquisition of such new status symbols, towns also led the way when it came to lavishing attention on the facades and interiors of existing chapels. In the 1860s, for example, the thrust of improvement and elaboration at St. Mary's Newcastle, furnished an extension of the nave, a new facade, a Gothic ceiling complete with ribbed radiations, a sanctuary and a bell tower.⁽²⁹⁾ The minute attention to detail implicit in this kind of work and especially the application of the principles of the Gothic revival to doors, windows, facades and ornamentation gave a characteristic lustre to the Church triumphant. In many respects, SS. Peter and Paul's church in Kilmallock, built 1879-89, represents the *pièce de spectacle* among Limerick towns. Translated from an obscure back lane location yet carefully insulated within the old walled precincts of the town, it is a superb example of sentiment and symbolism, of value and

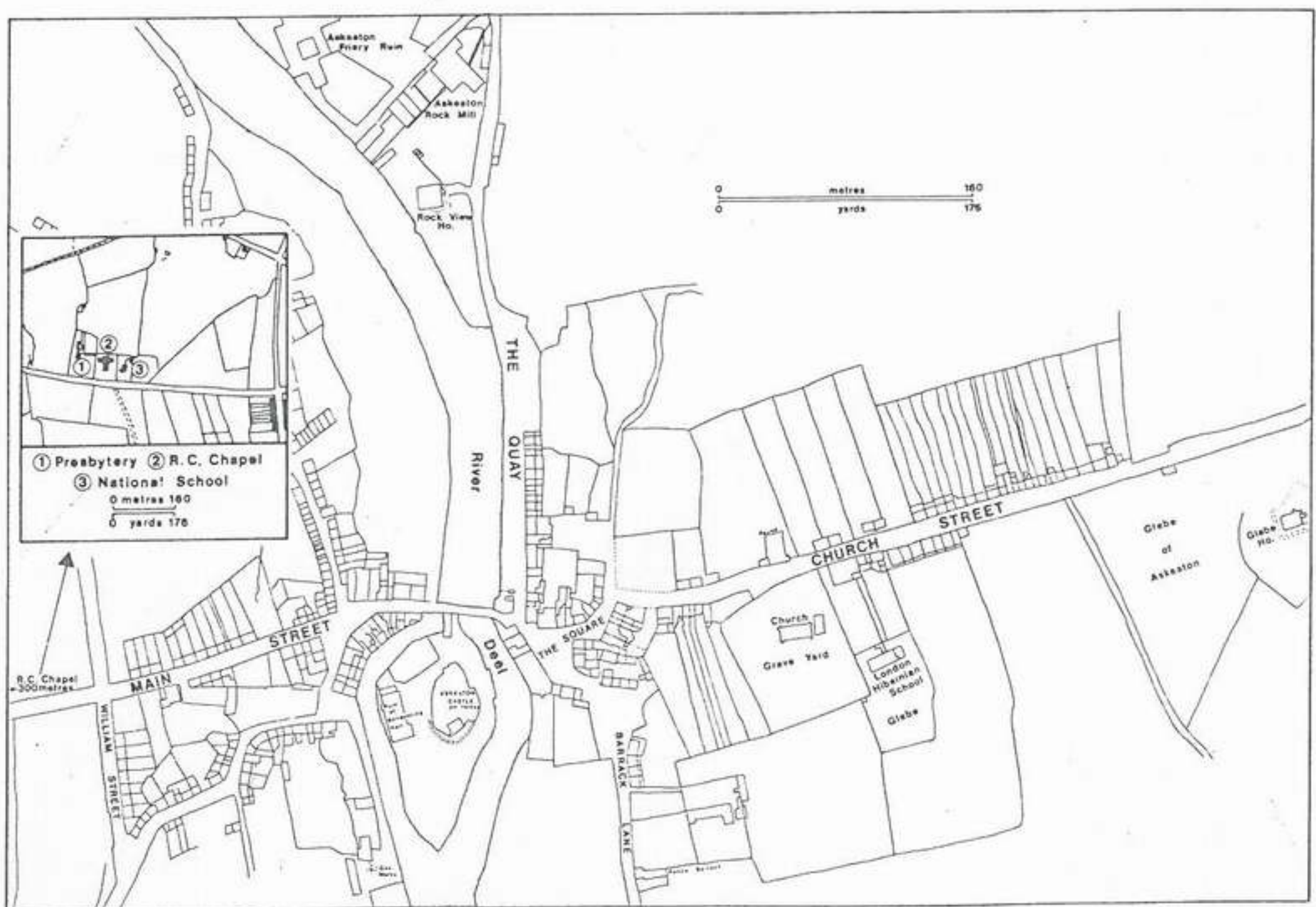


Fig. 6.7. Askeaton circa 1900