

"The Rich Land"
941.94 Local Collection

Askeaton

Greenish Island · Tomdeely · Lismakeery

4 pages

A SKEATON derived its name from a water-fall south of the town which was known as *Eas Geitine*, *Eas Gebhtene* or *Eas Gheiphtine*, the Water-fall of the Geiphtine, a tribe who settled here in pre-Christian times. Maurice Lenihan believed that the water-fall may have been known as *As-ceádtinne*, the Cascade of the Hundred Fires. The town has been known throughout the centuries as *Inis Eeibhtine*, the Island of Eeibhtine, Inikkefty, Iniskesty, Inisketti, Hiniskefty, Hinksty, Innkefty, Asketon, Askeyton, Asketton, Askeating, Rockbarkley, Rock Barkley, Rock Berkeley and Inysgebryny.

A BRONZE AGE SETTLEMENT may have been one of the earliest towns on this site. In 1834 two fibulae, or collars, of gold were found near the town. Later in the nineteenth century Maurice Lenihan was shown two gold ornaments for the hair which came from a find which included a gold penannular bracelet with expanded ends. The find also included a hammered gold ingot which had been worked by a convex hammer (possibly of stone) on a stone anvil. The date and location of this discovery has been forgotten, but even though these four items were said to have been found together, they may have belonged to different periods in the Bronze Age. In 1835 workmen found several gold coins while sinking a wall foundation on the west side of the river. Two years later, in 1837, silver chalices, croziers, and more gold coins were discovered near the friary and the castle.

ASKEATON CASTLE was built on a rocky limestone islet in the Deel River some time around 1199, possibly by William de Burgo although Hamo de Valognes who was appointed Justiciar by Prince John in 1195, is also credited with its foundation. Thomas de Clare was in possession of the castle in 1287. King Edward II (1298-1328) awarded it to Robert de Welle in 1318. The Earls of Desmond made Askeaton Castle their principal residence from 1348 although they have been in possession before that date. Most of the surviving structure dates from the fif-

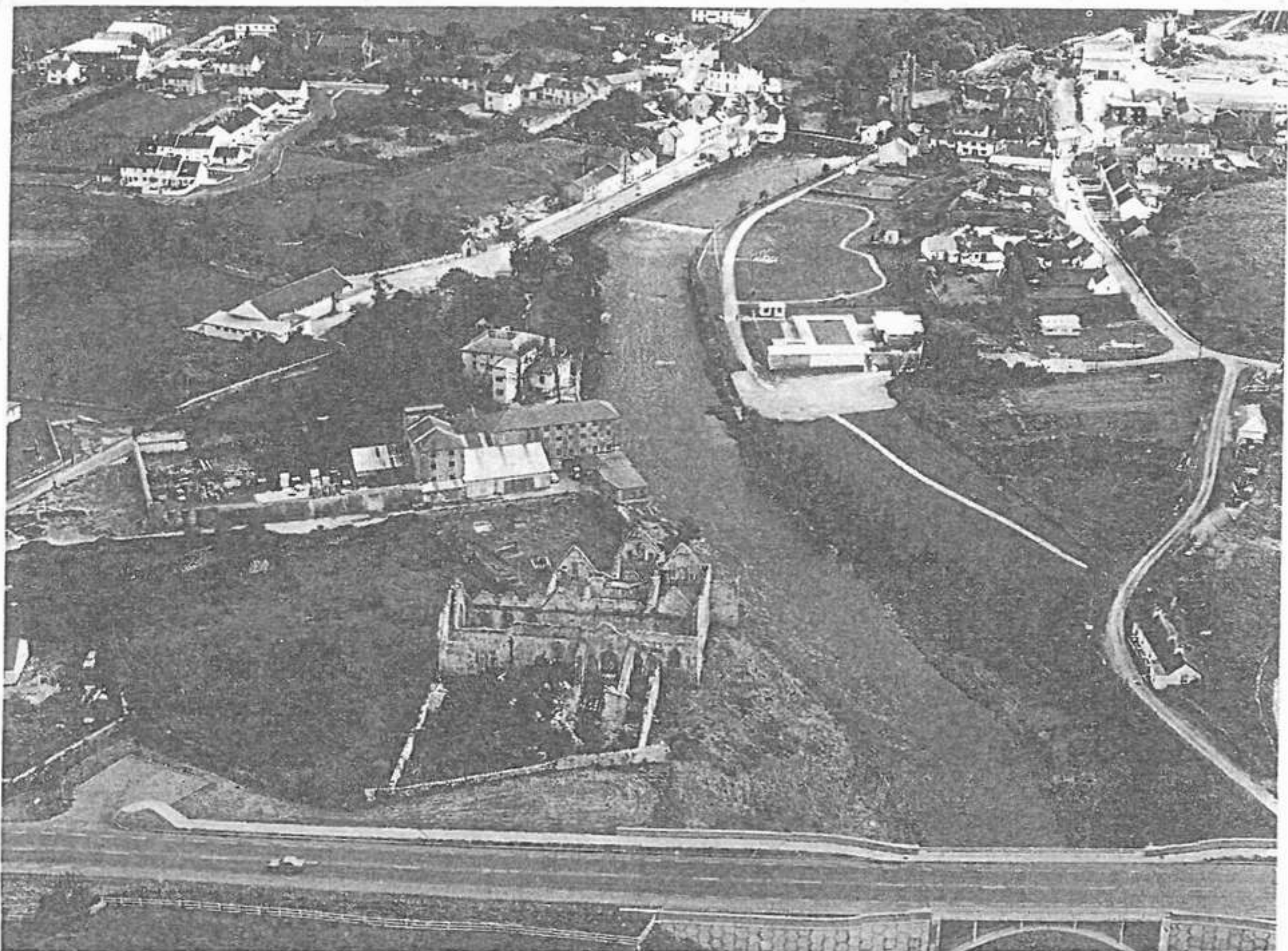
teenth century. The ruined tower belongs to this period. It contains some fine windows, and a fire-place on the third floor. The entire island was encircled with a strong wall which the tower protected at its most vulnerable point, the southern end of the bailey. The keep, located on the northern end of an eminence, and the tower were further defended by a battlemented curtain wall which enclosed the bailey. The ruined tower replaced an earlier structure on the same site.

THE DESMOND HALL is on a lower level, the lower ward or bailey, to the west. At one stage it may have been connected to a tower on the upper bailey by either a bridge or a wall. It was known as the *Halla Mór*, the Great Hall, the Desmond Hall., or the Banquet Hall. This building was erected by the Seventh Earl of Desmond, between 1440 and 1459, on the site of an earlier hall. The kitchen, chambers and cellar on the ground floor belonged to the older hall which was superseded by the Desmond Hall. This fifteenth-century hall, 72 feet long by 30 feet wide was probably built by some of the craftsmen who were employed by the Franciscans as the carved windows here resemble those of the Friary.

THE FITZGERALDS OF DESMOND had connections in the city of Florence where another branch of their family, the Di Gherardini, lived. In 1440 Giovanni Di Gherardini "gloried and drank deep" here with his Irish cousins. Leonardo Bruni, the humanist, wrote his letter of introduction on behalf of the Republic of Florence while staying as a guest in Askeaton Castle. The castle resisted the English commander Malby successfully in 1579. On 3 April 1580 the garrison abandoned it to Pelham's forces when they appeared before it with artillery. The Earl's followers destroyed some of the castle's out-buildings before they abandoned it. Captain Edward Berkeley took command of Askeaton Castle on behalf of the Crown, and remained on as constable for nine years. He retired in 1589, the victim of a recession, and died later that year. Edward's brother, Francis, defended the castle in his stead. The Earl of Essex came to his rescue on 10 June, 1599,

after Francis had resisted a siege of 247 days by the followers of the Sugán Earl of Desmond. Francis was knighted on 2 June 1599 "for his brave maintenance of the siege". Afterwards Essex and Berkeley departed to "haunt and hunt" Sir Garret FitzNicholas and his troops around the Killmallock area. The Sugán Earl made a second attempt to capture the castle, and failed again. The 300-strong garrison held out until government troops arrived to relieve them and re-victual the castle after Christmas 1599. Sir Anthony St. Leger received a grant at Dublin, on 17 October, 1599 of a "castle or chief house called the castle of Askeatinge, with all edifices, buildings, towers, gardens, courts and bawns" and forty acres which had been demised to Sir Francis Berkeley. Sir George Carew passed Askeaton in the summer of 1600 and installed a garrison of 700 foot-soldiers and 75 horsemen, while Berkeley served the Crown in other disturbed areas. Sir Francis Berkeley skirmished successfully against O'Donnell's forces at Elphin and, later, took an active part in the siege of Kinsale. In 1602-1603 he repaired Limerick Castle and maintained a garrison of 150 men in Askeaton Castle. When the St. Leger grant was revoked in 1610 Askeaton Castle reverted to Sir Francis Berkeley.

THE CASTLE was garrisoned by 200 soldiers, sent there by Lord Broghill, in 1641. On 14 August, 1642, Askeaton Castle was surrendered to Colonel Purcell and "the council of His Majesty's Catholiques for the Province of Munster". The articles of capitulation mentioned that the arms, munitions, garrison horses and goods belonging to Catholics were to be surrendered. The English and Irish warders were allowed to live and offered safe conduct to "Downarayle or Corcke" with their goods, and half the books in the castle. They also had to swear not to bear arms against the King, and a guarantee was given that any Protestants amongst the garrison or inhabitants would be unmolested. In 1652 the castle was taken without any record of a struggle. It was dismantled on the orders of Captain Axtell, Governor of Kilkenny. According to tradition the castle



Aerial view of Askeaton, the Friary in the foreground.

was undermined by "Cromwell" who propped it up with beams as he worked: when he burned these wooden supports, half the massive keep fell by its own weight. This story was in circulation as late as 1875. Cromwell's presence on the scene is extremely doubtful, but the method of demolition described was one in use during the Cromwellian period and may have been employed by Axtell's men.

ST. MARY'S CHURCH OF IRELAND CHURCH may have been founded as a commandery of the Knights Templars in 1298. It was dedicated to Mary, which may be an indication of its Anglo-Norman origin, as the Normans had a special veneration for the Blessed Virgin. Hubert de Burgo, the Bishop of Limerick, granted this church to the Abbey of Keynsham, Somerset, during the thirteenth century. After the dissolution the original building became the parish church of the Established Church. This was later replaced with the present structure but "the remains of an ancient tower, square at the base and octangular above" can still be seen, as well as a portion of the old chancel. Aubrey de Vere, the poet, was buried in the church-yard. His

grave lies, just inside the gate.

ASKEATON FRIARY was probably founded by Gerald, the Fourth Earl of Desmond, the legendary *Gearbíd Iarla*, who left his camp one night in 1398 and was never seen again. A convent definitely existed on this site in 1400 despite another date of 1420 being given for its foundation. This was built for the Conventual Franciscans. In 1497 the friars changed to the Observant rule. The friary was reformed under the provincialship of Patrick Hely in 1513, which may indicate that the earlier reform was not successful. James, the Fourteenth Earl of Desmond, was buried here in 1558. In 1564 a provincial chapter of the Franciscan Order was held in the friary. English forces under Sir Nicholas Malby plundered the building in 1579, killed some of the friars and expelled others. Malby wrecked the ancestral tomb of the Desmonds. According to folklore, he took the body or bones of the rebellious Earl's wife out of the grave to taunt her widower who was defending Askeaton Castle with a garrison of 160 gallowglass mercenaries, 300 Irish *kernes* or foot-soldiers and 30 horsemen. In 1617 Fr.

Donat Mooney wrote of this incident, and reported that the friary had "not been inhabited by the friars for many years. In the wars against the Geraldines of Munster the inmates were treated in the most barbarous manner by the English under Sir Nicholas Malbi. Some were put to death for the faith; amongst these martyrs of Christ was Father John Conor whose remains are buried in the Chapter Room. I have been unable to ascertain the names of the others".

THE FRIARS returned in 1627. They "began to dwell among the ruins of the convent and repaired it, so far as the persecution would allow them". Records of the time fail to note the various guardians of the friary from 1629 to 1645. In all probability the Franciscans did not organise themselves until the Confederate Irish took the town in 1642. This enabled the friars to repair and openly re-establish their friary in 1643. No actual re-building took place; the *debris* of the fallen tower was cleared from the church; and the buildings, or a portion of them, were re-roofed and re-furnished. Jerome Herbert was guardian of Askeaton Friary from 1645 until 1650, when

Owen O'Caghan was elected in his stead. In 1647 the bodies of two Franciscans who had been tortured and hanged in Kilmallock in 1587, were buried "with great pomp" within the friary. These were Patrick O'Hely, the Bishop of Mayo, and Conn O'Rourke. After this sombre ceremony, little else is heard of Askeaton Friary. By then the Cromwellians were overlords of Ireland and the friars had to flee abroad or go into hiding. William Hurley was elected guardian from 1661 to 1670. He was succeeded by Francis Wall and several others elected between that date and 1714, when Francis Hickey became the last guardian. T.J. Westropp wrote that "the guardianship must have been a mere shadow after 1690, though we may suppose that a few monks long dwelt in the neighbourhood and haunted the ruins of their 'holy and beautiful' house; we find no such traces of the survival of the convent as are found at Quin, Clare-Galway, Ennis — where one of the monks assisted the parish priest, and was always as such chosen guardian — and elsewhere". Part of the ruined friary was used as a Catholic Church until 1851 when a new church opened

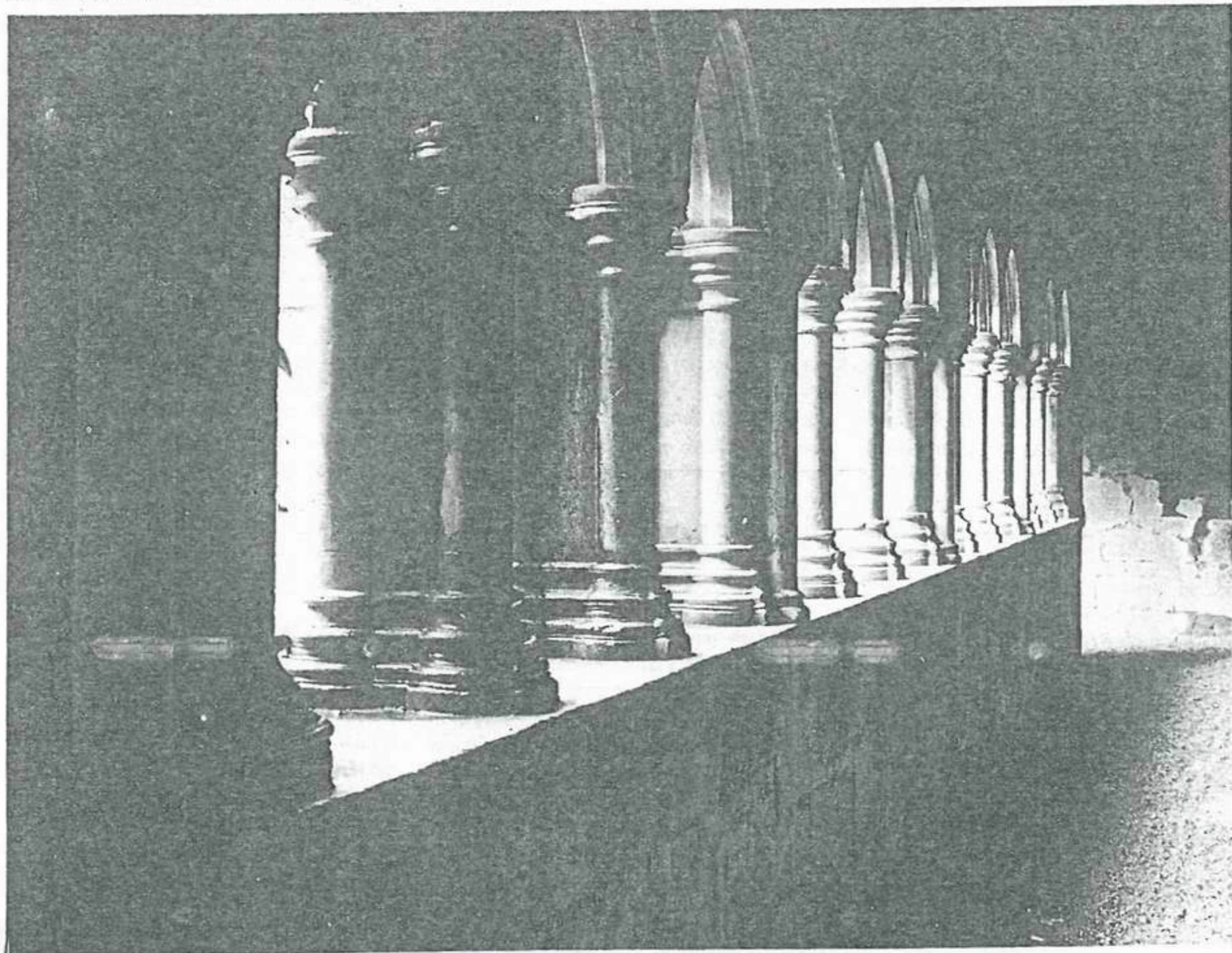
in the town.

ROCK ABBEY is another name often applied to this ruined Franciscan Friary. Most Franciscan friaries had their cloisters located to the north of the church. Askeaton is unique insofar as its cloister was built to the south, but this may have been because of the slope to the south and the rocky ground to the north. The cloister contains traces of work from the nineteenth century. In its north-eastern corner there is a crude depiction of St. Francis, with stigmata, the face of which has been worn away by people kissing it, in the belief that this would cure toothache. The nave, chancel and northern transept are in a good state of preservation. The buildings above, and around, the cloister, including the dormitory, are laid out in the usual way. In 1837 the other portions were "much decayed, and large masses of the walls lie scattered around, as if detached by the force of gunpowder". The ruin has altered only a little since then. The refectory dates from the mid-fifteenth century, and was in all probability a later addition, as was the enormous aisled wing north of the church. The delicately carved windows

resembling those of the castle's banquet hall, the triple tomb niches, the sedilia or wall seats, the reader's niche in the old refectory south of the cloister, the small prison in the south range, and the Stephenson tomb are the friary's more notable architectural features.

THE STEPHENSON TOMB is located to the right of the main altar. This commemorated Oliver Stephenson, a prominent member of the Confederate Irish Forces, whose family are reputed to have expelled the friars for "the second time"; whether this was in 1651 or 1691 is now impossible to verify.

ASKEATON was attacked by Sir Nicholas Malby in 1579. He had no artillery to batter down the castle walls, so he vented his fury on the friary and burned the town. After the Desmond Wars Francis Berkeley was given a grant of Askeaton, with the exception of the castle which was reserved to the Crown. This grant was later revoked in favour of Sir Anthony St. Leger. Sir Francis Berkeley regained possession of Askeaton in 1610 after a letter of King James I directed Sir Arthur Chichester to pass Askeaton Castle and forty acres of land to him, in fee-farm, as he had



Friary cloister.

offered to wall Askeaton Town and make the castle a refuge for the English in those parts. James I also constituted the Constable's lands to be the Manor of Rock Barkeley, and established a fair and weekly markets. In a second letter, dated 25 April 1611, the King promised the Constableness of Limerick to Maurice Berkeley after his father's death, a tribute to the family's loyalty to the Crown.

THE WALLED TOWN was incorporated as a borough on 20 October 1612. Edmund Drew was the first provost and the burgesses were Sir Francis Berkeley, Edmond Ley, Roger Rue, Gilbert Rue, William Rastell, Henry Widnam, John Eaton, Anthony Cooper, John Green, John Atkinson, John Stokes and Andrew Davys. Sir Francis Berkeley received his Askeaton holding at an annual rent of £87.50 under various terms, one of which was an obligation to erect houses for over fifty English families. Many of these early English Protestant settlers later established some of the "county" families of Limerick, Tipperary and Clare. Berkeley looked after the interests of his Irish neighbours as well as those of the new settlers. On one occasion he was accused, and found guilty, of harbouring Irish husbandmen on his lands, but the charges were dropped by the authorities, who had few friends to spare in the West Limerick of the early seventeenth century.

THE ROCK BARKELEY HOLDINGS, or *seignory*, including the town, contained 1200 acres of demesne, 900 in fee-farm, 1200 evicted, 1100 leased and 36 in other tenures. Francis Berkeley could muster 21 foot-soldiers and 7 horsemen, and he "succeeded in undoing much of the ravage of two civil wars, before his death, which took place at Askeaton Castle on December 20th 1615". His sons Maurice and Henry succeeded him but died young. By 1626 the estate had passed to two of Francis's daughters, Elizabeth, the wife of George Crofton, and Gertrude, the wife of John Taylor. None of his other daughters appear to have inherited. One of them, Frances, was married to Thomas Blayney of Tregonan, Denbighshire. Frances was an ancestress of the Crofton, Blayney, Ormsby and Browne families, while her sister, Gertrude, was an ancestress of the Barons Massy, the Taylors of Hollypark, and through her daughter, the Gores, the Gore-Hickmans, and the Westroppes.

THE 1655 CIVIL SURVEY described the mid-seventeenth century town. "Asketton town and lands, beinge a mannor with the Priviledge of a Courte Leete and Court Barron, five plowlands and a halfe with a Castle and a great stone buildinge, an Abbie and church; a corporate Town; two mills, whereof one belongs to Mrs. Crofton, with a

greate Bridge, a fishing Leape, Three Eele wears, Three Salmon weares, Two ffares in the yeer and a markt once in the weeke." In 1690 unrest in the area prompted Richard Taylor of Ballinort to correspond with King William's officers. He complained of the dangerous state of his district and asked for a garrison to be stationed in Askeaton although the castle was ruined but still worth repairing.

THE EARL OF ORRERY tried to persuade Queen Anne to refit Askeaton Castle in 1712. He wrote: "This castle was built and fortified as a stronge hold by the Earl of Desmond, and was of great and singular service to him in his Rebellion in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth: the town was made a Burrow and corporation by letters patent from King James the First ... It is scituated [sic] in an Island made by a Division of the River about one hundred yards above the Castle, and united again at a less distance below to which the tyde flowes and makes it a navigable river to the Shannon where it empties itself after a course of Three mile and is one of the best passes for crossing that river into the County of Clare. The want of wch conveniency was of great detriment and delay to the speedy reducing of Limerick in both the late rebellions of '41 and '88 ... it will alsoe be of great security to the Protestants already settled there, as well as an encouragement to others to settle, there being at present no barracks near to protect them from the insults of Irish Rapparees". Orrery described Askeaton's proximity to the "Confines of Kerry" which made it a key to that county and commanded the best passes from there "for carriages, etc., which may be annoyed or sustained by this garrison ... it will also greatly secure the navigation of the Shannon, there being noe fortress now Thereon from the mouth of the River to the city of Limerick, the sixty mile distant". The Earl related how ruinous the fortress was by 1712, but suggested that if the government provided him with £500 for its repair he would maintain it at his own expense from then onwards, on condition that he was appointed governor "at the usual allowance and with the accustomed profits made to the other Governors of Corke and Limerick". Queen Anne paid little attention to his request. The castle remained a ruin.

THE HELL-FIRE CLUB PREMISES is located alongside the ruins of Askeaton Castle. This ruined building may date from the late seventeenth century, although other accounts date it from the 1740s. The original Hell-Fire Clubs were established by Lord Wharton, later the Duke of Wharton, in 1720, but were abolished by a Royal proclamation on 28 April 1721. Another such club, founded by Sir Francis Dashwood, may have evolved

from the meeting of a coterie of literary men at some unspecified date between 1748 and 1755. Dashwood claimed it was an offspring of the Dilletanti Society which he helped to found in 1732. His more notorious society — The Amorous Knights of Wycombe, The Monks of Medmenham, The Medmenham Monks, The Order of St. Francis, The Franciscans, Dashwood's Disciples, or The Brotherhood of Saint Francis of Wycombe — became better known as the Hell-Fire Club, a name which its members did not use until towards the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Rumour, gossip and hearsay abounded about the clubs' activities; membership flourished; and clubs were formed in places as far apart as Dublin, Edinburgh and Paris. The membership included at least one Prime Minister, the Earl of Bute; a Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Francis Dashwood, Baron Le Despencer; a First Lord of the Admiralty, John Montagu, the Earl of Sandwich; Thomas Potter, Paymaster-General, Treasurer for Ireland, and son of the Archbishop of Canterbury; John Wilkes, Lord Mayor of London; various cabinet ministers; several members of Parliament; distinguished wits; aspiring politicians; and the cream of Georgian society. The society also possessed a female membership, The Nuns of Medmenham, which included Frances, Viscountess Vane, authoress of *The Memoirs of a Lady of Quality* and many other rather dubious "ladies". Chevalier D'Eon de Beaumont, a French diplomat, is believed to have been a member of both the nuns' and the friar's orders. The members masqueraded as Satanists. Some of them may have been interested in the occult but the club-houses and grounds of the various Hell-Fire Clubs were devoted to more earthy pleasures. Young and not-so-young bucks indulged in drinking bouts, heavy gambling sessions, and frequent orgies. The Hell-Fire Clubs are also thought to have had a more serious aspect. Sir Francis Dashwood's passion for black magic is believed to have been a reaction against Catholicism and organised religion generally, and to have been as much a political force as a social one. A portrait depicting the only known female member of the Askeaton Hell-Fire Club hangs in Glin Castle. The club-house contains a curved bow on one side of each of its two main fronts, one of which may be the earliest example of a Venetian window on the curve, anywhere. During the nineteenth century this building was used as a barracks.

THE TOWN was disenfranchised by the Act of Union. £15,000 was paid in compensation to the Earl of Carrick, Lord Massy, Sir Vere Hunt and Sir Joseph Hoare. The Corporation became extinct. Richard Taylor, Vice-Provost