

Askeaton tour guide Anthony Sheehy outside the town's historic abbey



(CI) Anthony Sheehy and Anita Guinane of the local tourist office outside Askeaton Castle

# A guiding light in West tourism

By LEADER REPORTER

TOUR guide Anthony Sheehy is a tourist guide with a difference, charming visitors to Askeaton with a song, poem or tune on his harmonica.

Anthony, who lives with his wife Mary in the town on the banks of the tidal River Deel, was once known for his skills as a butcher and black pudding maker.

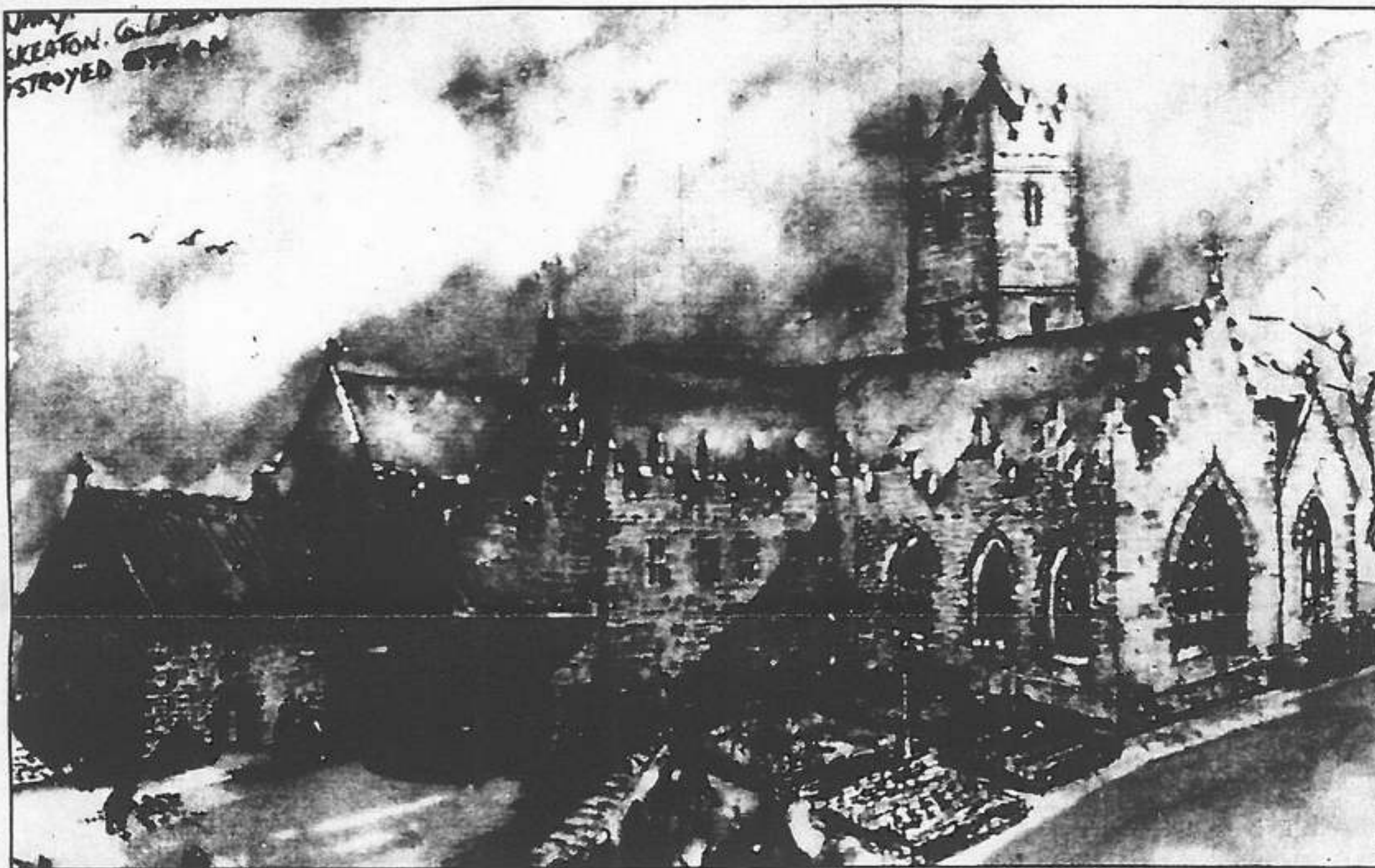
A master swimmer at 62 years of age, when he closed the door on his butcher shop he became a tour guide under a FAS scheme for the town's Franciscan Friary and 12th century Desmond Castle.

"I suppose I have been doing the friary for 30 years on a voluntary basis and I keep the lawns there. Askeaton is a mediaeval town and has a lot to offer.

"Our 14th century abbey is one of the most complete ruined abbeys in Ireland. Built by the legendary Gearoid Iarla, 4th Earl of Desmond, visitors marvel at its beauty," he said.

Facts and statistics come easily to Anthony, and he points out that he had to do a lot of research for his job and had to satisfy Dúchas that his knowledge was up to standard.

As we walked through the abbey cloisters he remarked: "I like to make the tour lighthearted and don't like boring them with dates. I give tours to people from Austria, Italy, Belgium, Germany, Britain and the US. Tourist numbers are down this year, but the strange thing about Askeaton, we



An artist's impression of a rebuilt Askeaton Abbey

find is that numbers are up. "I am doing this for the love of it and the love of my town. Between 300 and 500 people have gone on my tours this summer so far.

"As an addition to our tourist efforts, we have a tourist office run by the local Civic Trust. It has helped to get people to stop in the town".

Dúchas has carried out a survey on Askeaton and there are plans for the castle.

He believes Askeaton could be better marketed.

"Tourists on the N69 drive past the abbey, but many of them when they see come into the town are flabbergasted when they see our attractions," he said.

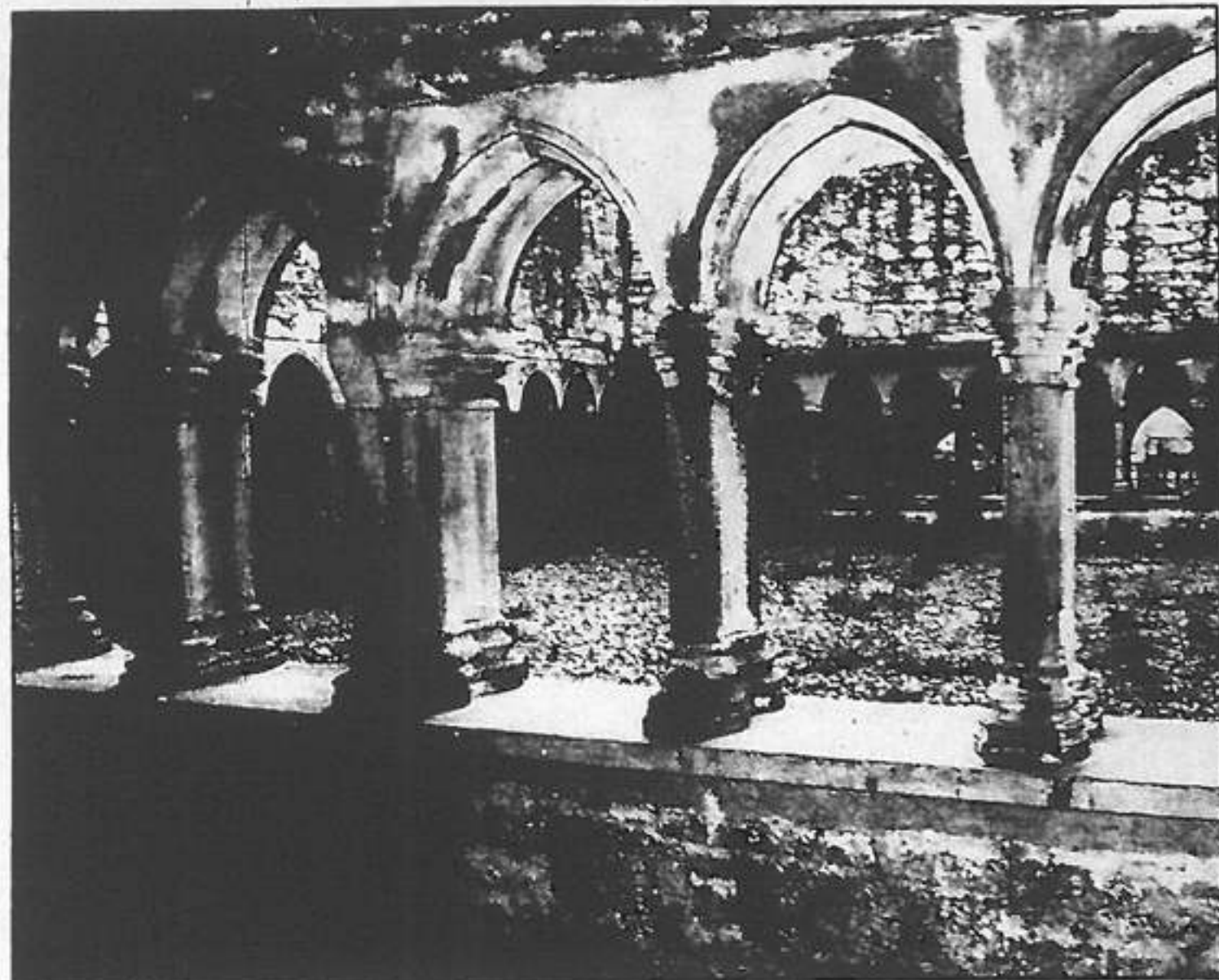
He pointed to the amenities that the town already had such as a swimming pool that is to be covered at a cost of €3.25m, the Deel Boat Club on tidal estuary waters and could be used for taking visitors on trips, and there is fishing in the area.

Anthony has the support of Askeaton / Ballysteen community council in his work.

He has family buried in the abbey and pointed to the fact that the grandparents of Hollywood star J Carroll Nash are buried in the Chapter Room of the abbey.

A French visitor painted a picture of the abbey and how it would look with a roof and presented it to Anthony and a Belgian television crew filmed in the town.

"Hopefully it will help bring more tourists into the area," said Anthony, as he went to meet another group.



The abbey's central area



The main chapel area in the abbey



Anthony Sheehy at his family graves within the abbey walls

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