

# Askeaton, a treasure trove for history buffs and locals alike

THE MEDIEVAL town of Askeaton is fast becoming a popular stop for history-loving tourists from both home and abroad.

Structures of historical significance abound; important landmarks are scattered among residential houses and ruins tower above the narrow streets.

The town boasts a castle dating back to the 1100s, an 18th Century Hellfire club, a Knights Templar tower and a famous 14th Century Franciscan Friary.

Upon arriving at the town's Tourist Information centre, a visitor can expect to be swept back through the ages by local historian and tour guide Anthony Sheehy.

Anthony speaks as though he has lived through it all; the feasts in the banquet hall, the gruesome tactics used in the castle and the boisterous nights of the hellfire club, all come to life as he tells stories and their dates, without so much as a sheet of paper as a guide.

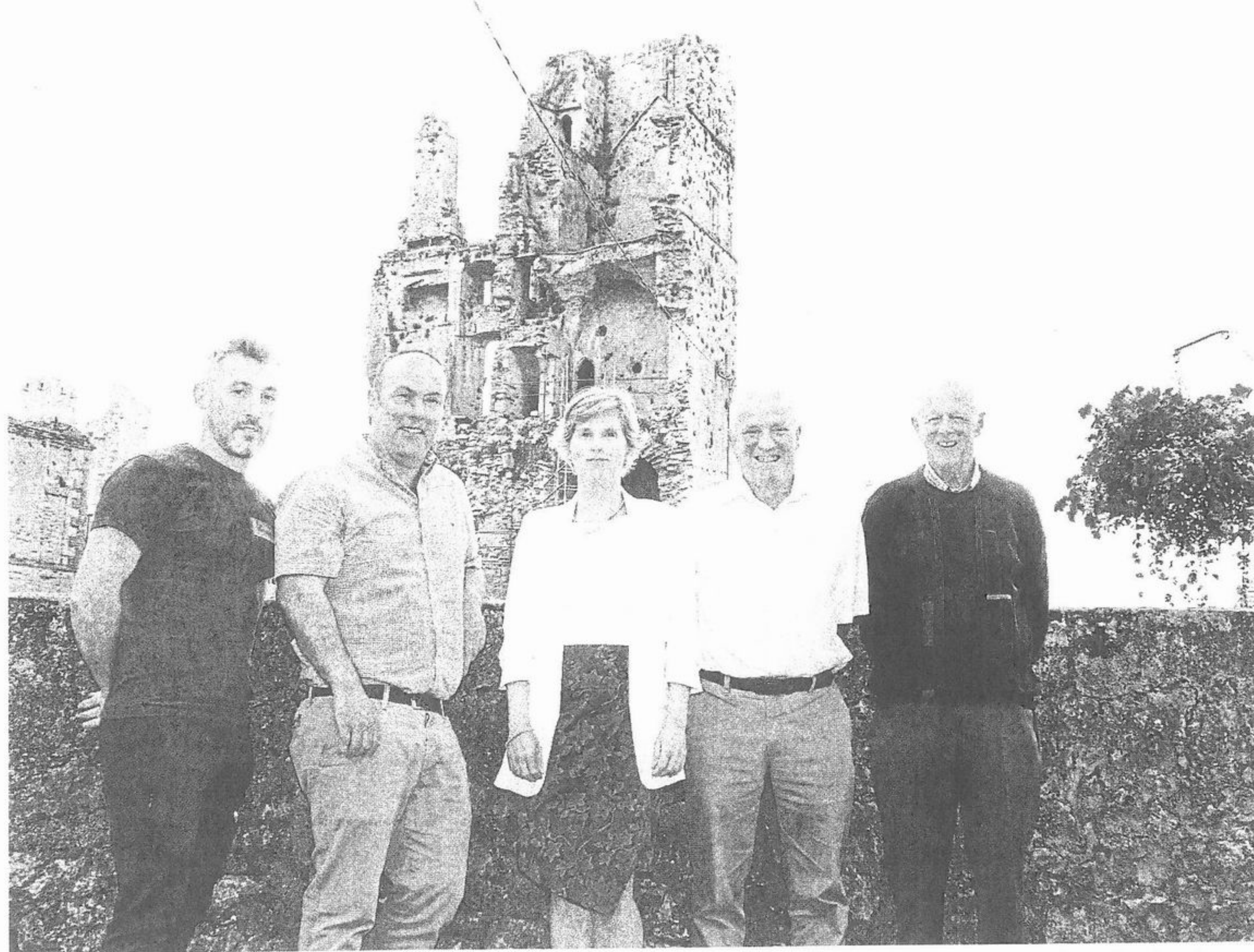
Askeaton's Desmond Castle is on an island surrounded by water, and was built in 1199 by William de Burgo.

There's a separate banquet hall, and an arrow-slitted wall surrounding the stronghold, all of which is still standing today and undergoing preservative work by the OPW.

Beside the castle, a hellfire club points to a more rambunctious past. One of just two hellfire clubs in the country, the 'gentlemen's club' was founded in 1738, with the purpose of drinking, socialising and womanising.

To become a member, men would often have to complete outrageous tasks, such as drink three bottles of whiskey or be doused in whiskey in a barrel.

The tradition of mixing whiskey, butter and cream - a concoction known as 'scalteen' - was commonly drunk at Askeaton's Hellfire club. The mixture was heated by a red hot poker, and it is often seen as the precursor for beverages like



Declan Nash, Coral pool and leisure, Brian Hanly, Centra Askeaton, Yvonne Whelan, Post Office and Yours Sincerely, Ger Blackwell, Galtee Fuels, and Anthony Sheehy, local historian and tour guide, in front of the town's Desmond Castle ruins PICTURE: MICHAEL COWHEY

Baileys.

Balancing out the hedonism downtown, the holy monks of the Franciscan Friary made Askeaton their home for over 300 years.

"At any one time, there would have been 20 to 30 monks living in here," said

Sheehy.

The cloisters of this friary are some of the best examples in Ireland, and the iconic emblem of Askeaton, the friary window, is striking even without the stained glass that would have embellished it.

The monastery is the final

resting place of many, including the Askeaton grandparents of the late American actor J. Carrol Naish.

The actor, whose father emigrated from Limerick, was a two-time Academy Award nominee and a Golden Globe winner during the course of his ca-

reer.

Those who wish to do the full tour of Askeaton with Anthony Sheehy are advised to contact the tourist office in the town.

One afternoon this August, this reporter joined a tour with a Croatian family - just one group of many who

have parked up their motorhomes to use a free facility in the grounds of Askeaton Pool and Leisure Centre.

Camper vans can be parked up and water services used completely free - in attracting tourists, the hope is that they will spend

some money in the town.

"We have a motorhome service station behind the swimming pool. It's the only one in the Republic of Ireland, and there is just one other one in Antrim," said Anthony.

"One morning in June of this year, there were eight

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Anthony Sheehy, local historian and tour guide

motorhomes here - 30 people in total. We have had tourists this year from Germany, Austria, France, the USA, Holland. They stop off on their route around the west.

"The number we have had so far this year has been well in the hundreds," he added.

Today, the community remains as vibrant as in its medieval history.

With groupings like Askeaton Civic Trust, a thriving contemporary arts group and an extremely active GAA and sporting community, the town is alive for the young and the old.

A state-of-the-art secondary school, Colaiste Mhuire, attracts youngsters from well outside the parish, and the town's busy primary school shows no signs of slowing down.

"The community hall is the hub for the area here, and the community council would be custodians of it," said Noelle Dalton of the local community council.

"It was opened in the early 50s, and all it was at the time was four walls. Over the years, a lot of the efforts of the community councils has been to raise money to upgrade the hall. It has been upgraded on numerous occasions now, and it is one of the finest in the county.

"We are having an event called Unity in our Community on October 1, from 2-6pm. It's basically an opportunity for all the clubs and organisations to display what they provide. We have over 20 clubs and organisations, and a huge number of people who run these on a voluntary basis and do great work in the community," she added.

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12TH AUGUST 2017  
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