

ST. JOHN'S PRIORY

By Rev. T. J. Clohosey

WE ARE fortunate in having a considerable amount of documentation about St. John's Priory, even from the earliest days. When the Normans came to Ireland in 1167, St. John's was already a parish, though we do not know its original name. The old parish church was probably located where the old church is now in Maudlin Street. The parish itself was very small, not extending beyond the present municipal boundary of the town. In 1211 the parish was appropriated to the Canons Regular of St. Augustine and so from this on the parish is called after the priory, the parish of St. John the Evangelist. As to the old parish church, it probably became the chapel of the leper hospital, which is the place now called Magdalen Castle. The Canons Regular might be described as secular clergy living in community. Besides their spiritual administrations they gave hospitality to pilgrims and travellers and tended the sick. Thus we find the Canons of the priory described as the Brethren of the Hospital of St. John the Evangelist of the Order of St. Augustine. The priory in Kells belonged to the same Order and gives a good idea what St. John's was like in its heyday—the church, the lady chapel, the cloister, the chapter room, refectory and so on.

Previous to 1200 the Canons Regular had an establishment in John Street between the bridge and the mill stream, but in 1211 a new arrangement was reached. William Marshall, the Earl of Pembroke and the lord of the greater part of Leinster through his marriage with the heiress of Strongbow, granted the Canons a new site for their priory and made ample provision for its support. The charter runs thus: "I, William Marshall, Earl of Pembroke, etc., have granted to the Brethren of St. John the Evangelist a certain place at the head of the small bridge of Kilkenny—to wit, that between the small aqueduct and the way that leads from my Barns to Lochmaderan and 16 acres free land on the same side of the said aqueduct, with the appurtenances to build a house of religion in honour of God and St. John, and for the support of the poor and the indigent. I have also granted the whole parish beyond the bridge of Kilkenny, towards the East and contiguous to said bridge with its appurtenances without reservation; also the ecclesiastical benefice of my land of Donfort as far as belongs to the patron; and the ecclesiastical benefice of my lands of Lochmaderan in like manner with its appurtenances in tithes, oblations and obventions and the tithes of my mills, fisheries, orchards and dove cots

in Kilkenny. My will is that the aforesaid brethren serve in the Chapel of my Castle of Kilkenny, and for such receive all oblations and obventions during the absence of me and my heirs, but when resident, then my domestic chaplains shall receive such dues. I have granted besides, a place at the head of the great bridge where originally the brethren first began their house, paying annually to me and my heirs three shillings in lieu of all services."

The Liber Primus of Kilkenny tells us under the date 1211 that the Canons entered on possession of the new priory in which they now dwell. In 1220, on the feast of St. John, Apostle and Evangelist, Mass was said for the first time on the high altar of St. John's. In the Municipal archives is a document by which William de Druhull grants a carucate of land close to the river Mayn, that is, Jenkinstown.

In 1290, as the Liber Primus tells us, on the Feast of the Annunciation, Mass was celebrated for the first time in the Lady Chapel of the Priory. And under the year 1325 the building of the new house and other works began at the Priory. In 1329 the bell-tower fell during the octave of the Holy Innocents. Two years later the Prior and the community were imprisoned by the Lord Justice of Ireland—the reason is not given. Many other items of information may be gleaned from various sources. In 1540 the Priory was suppressed and the Priory itself and some of the property was granted to the Corporation of Kilkenny. The buildings were allowed to fall into ruin.

In 1645, Thomas Rothe, the Commendatory Prior, made a grant of the priory to the Jesuits for a College or Seminary. This was later confirmed by the Papal Nuncio, Rinuccini. After the capture of Kilkenny the Jesuits were expelled from the priory. In 1690, when James II was king, they applied to have the church and priory of St. John's, together with a plot of the priory grounds then occupied by the Capuchins restored to them. The Corporation was willing, but there were difficulties. A barren plot of land had been secured by the Capuchins on which they built an oratory and the Corporation was most unwilling to remove them "from the Chapel and garden of the poor Capuchins, which they have improved on the meanest and craggiest spot about this city to our admiration and edification."

The Williamite Wars finished all this and the buildings remained in ruins for many years. Then about 1780 the nave of the church with its two square towers and the domestic buildings were all thrown down and the materials used in the erection of an infantry barracks (hence Barrack Lane).

In 1817 the Lady Chapel was re-roofed and made into the Protestant Parish Church of St. John's. In the following year, 1818, the military barracks was taken over and converted into Evans's Asylum.