

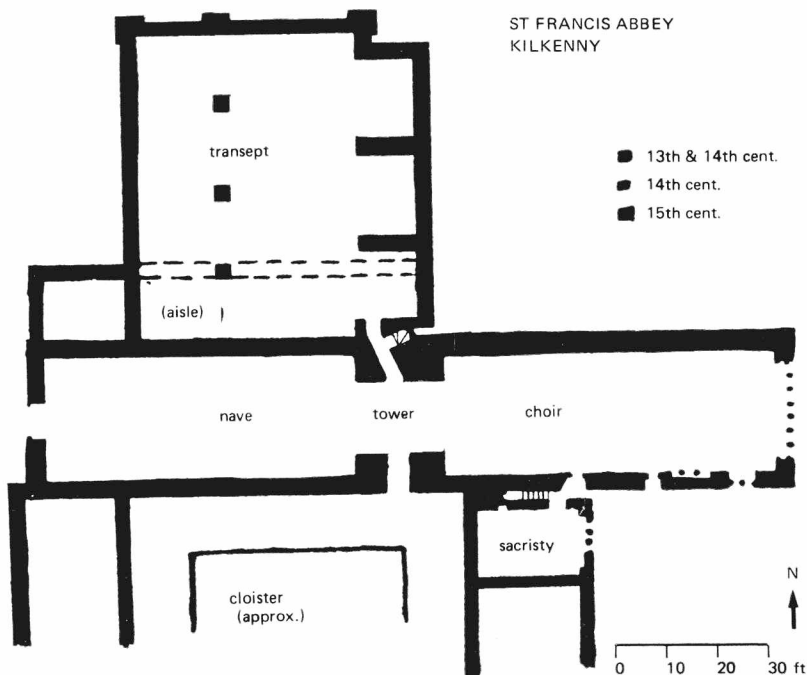
Notes on St. Francis Abbey Kilkenny

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PERHAPS because of the richness of other sites in the city, the old Franciscan Friary is often neglected. It is true that only a small fraction of the original survives, but recent excavation has uncovered a little more. Through the courtesy of Mr. Sweetman of the Office of Public Works, I was able to inspect a detailed plan of the church buildings. The results were so surprising that I decided to prepare some notes for those interested.

The standard history of this friary is still that of the late Rev. W. Carrigan (Vol. III, pp.104—119). Although it contains a mass of material, most of it is unco-ordinated. In particular it lacks a Franciscan frame, which I shall try to supply.

The Franciscans probably came to Ireland in 1226, and the Irish Province was officially established in 1230.



The first friars seem to have landed at Youghal and spread rapidly in South Munster. Kilkenny would seem to have been their first foundation outside Munster, on their way to Dublin. The first definite date for Kilkenny is 1245, when it received a royal grant, but there is sufficient evidence to give 1232 as a provisional year of foundation with Richard Marshall, Earl of Pembroke, as patron of both Franciscans and Dominicans. He was buried in the latter's church in 1234.

In later years, it was customary for a powerful patron to build a friary at his own expense. In this early period, the friars usually arranged finances from a number of sources. Thus in 1246, a year after they had obtained a grant for clothing, they obtained a second royal grant for building purposes. Initially small, the friary must have grown into a building of considerable importance, for Provincial Chapters of the friars were held there in 1267, in 1308 and again in 1332.

Relations between Irish and Anglo-Irish were difficult in those centuries. Kilkenny seems to have been solidly Anglo-Irish, since it was assigned to the Anglo-Irish custody (a group of convents of similar interests within a Province) of Cashel, being transferred to the custody of Dublin in 1345. Further, when the Observant Reform began among the Irish friars in the 15th century, Kilkenny remained with the Anglo-Irish Conventual friars.

As was typical of many friaries under direct English influence, Kilkenny friary was suppressed early, in 1540, when Patrick Doullany was the superior. It would seem that the friars were allowed to remain on until 1550, when they suffered a first expulsion. Back in 1553, they were finally expelled in 1559.

Again typical of areas under English control, the Conventual friars seem to have made no effort to return. With the upsurge of Irish feeling in the first half of the 17th century, the Irish Franciscans took heart and began a major policy of expansion. This period has been called their Golden Age, and starts with the appointment of Fr. Donagh Mooney as Vicar Provincial in 1611. The friars, this time Observant, returned to many of their old sites. They set up a small house with a community of about five in Kilkenny in 1612. Fr. William Kelly was the superior until his death in 1627. They worked inside or outside the city as the occasion allowed, and they had a small chapel about a kilometer from the city for their use. It would seem that they were able to use their old friary soon after — in fact the original high altar was still

standing in 1615! The Confederation period gave another flip to Kilkenny Franciscan friary. In 1647 it was designated as a house of formation in theology and in philosophy. Many of the friars involved in politics came there, and it was at Kilkenny that the notorious Fr. Peter Walsh, O.F.M., first came into the public eye. But in sterner times, there was one faithful servant: Fr. John Dalton, O.F.M. When Kilkenny surrendered to Cromwell, he remained on, in disguise. At the time of his capture, 2nd August, 1653, he was the only priest left in the city. He was executed on the 5th after the usual formalities.

The friars seem to have returned in 1658, with Fr. Philip Kelly as superior. By 1678, the community numbered 11 friars. But the Penal Days were coming. The 18th century saw the friars moving into parish work, to augment the numbers of the diocesan clergy. But at the same time a variety of causes ensured that the number of friars in Ireland declined dramatically. There were about 600 Franciscans in the Irish Province in 1700, a number which had fallen to around 150 by 1800 and which continued to fall to an all-time minimum of about 75 in 1875. Under these circumstances, it was only natural that there were only two friars left in the Kilkenny community in 1766, with a couple of other friars working as parish clergy in the diocese.

The rest of the story is one of slow death. The last friar was Fr. Philip Forrestall. His appointment was really titular, since he did not live in a Franciscan community, but worked as a curate in the diocese for most of his life. The Franciscan connection ended with his death in 1829. Other friars were named as superior of Kilkenny friary down to 1872, but this was a legal fiction, these men usually being members of the Wexford community.

From the history of the friars we may now turn to the history of their friary. The typical Franciscan friary had a long, narrow church, running East-West. The high altar was under the East Window. Symbolically it faced the rising sun and in practical terms of a pre-electric church, the altar was well lit early in the morning. At a slightly later period, this long church was usually divided in two by the insertion of a narrow tower. The base of the tower divided the church into a choir and nave. The living quarters usually formed a square enclosing a cloister garth to the north of the church. When the need arose, a large side-chapel or transept was added near the base of the tower, and to the south of the church. In a few exceptional cases — Askeaton, Castledermot, Claregalway, Nenagh,

Roscrea, Carrick-on-Suir and Kilkenny — the cloister was to the south of the church and the transept chapel to the north.

Kilkenny Friary seems to have started as a small rectangular chapel (nave in plan) built c.1245. As funds allowed, this was slowly extended and the choir, which still stands, was finished in 1321. One result was that the new high altar was consecrated on 11th January, 1323. It was the only part of the friary not covered during the great flood on 7th November, 1338. A new cemetery beside the church was consecrated in 1331. A confraternity was established in 1347 for the erection of a new tower.

Why all this activity? Well, the then bishop of Ossory, Dr. Richard de Ledrede (cf. Carrigan, Vol. I, pp. 45—57), was a Franciscan. While he seems to have spent most of his period in office (1317—60) looking for witches and heretics, he must have had some time for his fellow friars. Also, we are fortunate to have in the *Annals of Friar Clyn*, a general history written by a member of the Kilkenny community and thus including many details about the Franciscans there. Friar John Clyn died during the Black Death in 1349.

The archaeological evidence indicates that later in the 14th century the sacristy and living quarters were built to the south of the church and an aisle was added on the northern side of the nave. The huge transept-chapel, in reality a small church with three side-chapels, cannot be dated precisely. In other Franciscan friaries, such extensions are typical of the second half of the 15th century. This extension involved knocking part of the north aisle and replacing some of the north wall of the nave by a pair of arches. The rear of the transept chapel was also cut off by a line of small arches, again a feature of many of these chapels.

Due to the existing buildings, detailed investigation of the cloister area proved impossible during the excavations. The remains of the sacristy had always been known. As part of the general repair and restoration work carried on during the re-building of the brewery where the friary is situated, the sacristy was changed into a very tasteful for the workers, and has become a gem in its own right.

However, the real discovery following the availability of the ground-plan was the relationship of Kilkenny to Castledermot. In its present form, Castledermot looks most unfortunate. One enters where the high altar used to be, and a first glance seems to indicate a featureless building.

Yet the plan of Castledermot is practically identical with that of Kilkenny.

Both churches are about the same width (25 ft.) but Kilkenny (154 ft.) was longer by some 20 ft. Both had the cloister to the south of the church, and an aisle to the north of the nave. In both cases this was partially destroyed during the construction of a huge transept chapel. The giant at Castledermot (36 x 38 ft.) is nothing when compared to Kilkenny (58 x 66 ft.). Yet both have the same plan: three little chapels, with a row of arches creating a false aisle to the rear. This latter feature is found in other Franciscan transepts, but the triple chapels are unique to these two sites and Kilkenny has the largest of the 25 known Franciscan transepts in the country.

Further, the general dating of both sites agree. Both were initially founded before 1240. Both underwent extensive renovations in the first half of the 14th century. Castledermot having been destroyed by Bruce. Also both have a typically early 14th century series of lancets with one large window on each side of the choir. The towers are different, that at Castledermot being the only one of its type in the Franciscan series. It has been suggested that Castledermot had a "Franciscan" tower originally, but it was knocked and the present one erected later for defensive purposes. Finally, both have huge transept chapels which can only be dated in general terms to the early 15th century.

So the message is: respect St. Francis for what it has and had. Honour the six corbels as they groan under the weight of the Kilkenny tower and remember the Master of Gowran when looking at the respond to the missing transept-chapel. Finally, if passing Castledermot, look with renewed respect at the triple chapel there — you are looking at a ghost of what Kilkenny once was.

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