

Crucifix used at Friar's Hill, Thomastown

James Delaney

The wooden crucifix figure shown here was given to me by my late grandmother, Mrs. Anne M. P. Cantwell, néé Bolger of Thomastown, about thirty years ago to display at an exhibition organised by the Kilkenny Archaeological Society in the Tholsel in Kilkenny. Our member, Nell Prendergast who saw it there took it to the National Museum where apart from being treated for woodworm (which had destroyed its right arm in the early years of this century), it was identified as possibly early medieval with features strongly reminiscent of European prototypes, yet probably of Penal times ascription. It bears traces of old paint work.

The head, which has almost Byzantine features, is tilted to the right side and was originally surmounted by a metal halo or crown of which only a small fraction remains. It is joined to the somewhat elongated body by an excessively thin neck. The legs are slightly bent at the knees and have crossed feet. The loincloth is of a type unusual in Irish sculpture being very brief and apparently pleated. The present length of the figure is 35 cm.

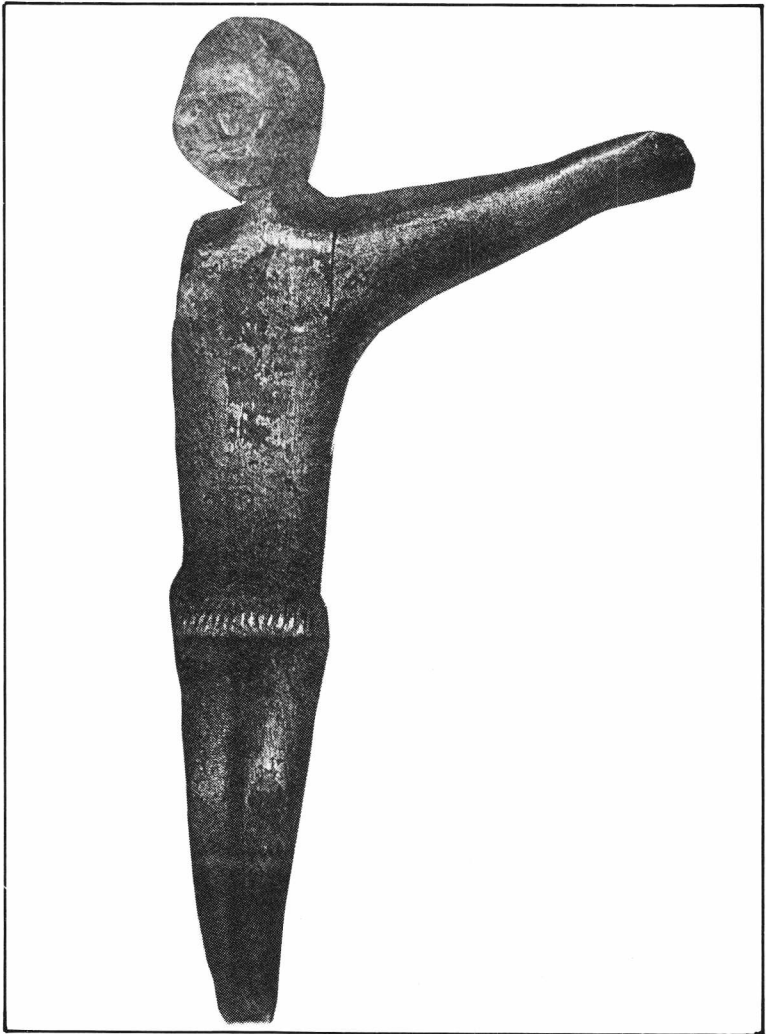
It had been for many years a valued possession in the Cullen family when in 1788 the Dominican Friars, Rev. F. V. Ennis and Rev. John Gogarty came to the small thatched chapel at what is now known as Friar's Hill on the outskirts of Thomastown on the Waterford road. My grandmother's great-great-grandparents, William Cullen and his wife Anastasia St. Ledger presented the crucifix together with a silver chalice and paten to the chapel where they were in use up to 1829 when Rev. Edmund McGrath was suspended and his chapel closed.

I had been under the impression that the closure had been brought about by the Bishop, but Rev. Hugh Fenning O.P. of Tallaght who very kindly helped me in my investigations into the closing of Friar's Hill quotes a letter in the provincial archives, written in Cork on 12-2-1829 by Fr. Bartholomew Russel to Fr. John Leahy, in Lisbon ". . . Dr. Fitzgerald (Provincial) has suppressed the convent of Thomastown . . . The begging stations, etc. of Thomastown were our greatest disgrace." So it seems to have been closed by the Dominicans themselves in 1829. Fr. McGrath, who felt that the closure would only be temporary, returned the chalice and crucifix to the donors' family where they were kept until Bishop, later Cardinal Moran, opened a museum at

CRUCIFIX FROM THOMASTOWN

St. Kieran's College when the chalice and paten were sent on loan by Mrs. Margaret Bolger, neé Cullen.

Crucifix, chalice and paten were last shown together at the first Tostal Exhibition in Thomastown in 1957. The crucifix figure is now preserved in my family's home in Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany.



Crucifix at Friar's Hill.