

*a short history of
the carmelite friary,
kinsale, co cork.*

*S.M. Hession, O.Carm.
May 2010.*

Fourteenth Century

About 1334, Robert Fitzrichard Balrain, a Norman Knight, somehow became acquainted with the Carmelite Hermits who had fled Mount Carmel in the Holy Land during the Saracen Invasion.



Balrain had built St Mary's Abbey in Kinsale and offered it, along with twenty-nine acres of land in the Liscahan area of the town, to the Carmelite Hermits who would attend to the pastoral care of the people and administer the land and other pertinent matters in the town. The hermits were closely associated with the local Leprosia. They also helped in obtaining Kinsale's Charter. The hermits obtained their water supply from a nearby well to the north-east of the Abbey on its right-hand side called 'Fan na Tubaide,' and reputed to have given Kinsale its name. Come 1380, a town wall was constructed and in that same year the hermits were officially embraced into the 'Friar Movement.' The friars were granted their own gate called 'Friar's Gate' that made access to the town centre easier for them and for their ministrations therein. The town wall remained standing until its destruction in 1690 while the gates remained in use until 1794 when it (Friar's Gate) and Nicholas' Gate (Blind Gate) were removed leaving just nearby Cork Gate standing until 1805. In the meantime the friars continued to attend to the pastoral and material needs of the local people which they continued to do right up to the Suppression of the Monasteries and beyond.

Fifteenth Century

Little of note seems to have come to light for this century. It would be reasonable to assume that the friars continued in their charism of prayer, meditating on the law of the Lord and in the service of God's people. To assist the liturgical celebrations in the Abbey the friars had a facsimile of the Kilcormac Missal made in 1460. It is now preserved in Trinity College, Dublin.

Sixteenth Century

Henry VIII's *Suppression of Monasteries Act* in 1541 saw the Abbey – which consisted of "church, belfry, hall, other houses and a cemetery" – suppressed and pillaged while anything of worth was disbursed. In its aftermath the Abbey was put to

many uses. In 1567 the property termed “the house of the Friars of Our Lady of Kinsale” was leased to Robert Meade (merchant) for twenty-one years and subsequently leased on to other merchants.

The friars moved to a nearby residence on the junction of the Bandon and Rock roads which became known as ‘ye olde masshouse’ because Mass was celebrated on the site. To spite the law, people gathered also at the nearby Abbey Well to recite the Rosary and other prayers. The junction was popularly known as the ‘Holy Corner’ because Mass was celebrated in the residence there.

Seventeenth Century

As the friars were deemed ‘foreigners’ so under the law their engagement in pastoral activity was tolerated. The *Act of Restoration* of 1660 allowed the friars back into the town area. In 1670 a William Galwey offered the friars a site on Rathmore Beg (now known as Stonewell). The friars built a house on the site among the shelters of the locals consigned there in 1656 by Cromwell’s forces. It was known as ‘ye olde masshouse on ye rocke’. In 1698 the Act banishing Religious from the town was reinstated and the friars vacated their masshouse and reverted to living in open caves, woods, and lodging in the homes of friendly and well-disposed locals in places such as Ballintubber Wood and elsewhere across the district such as Rincurran, Knopogenaree (Fort Hill), Kilmonoge (Ringanane), Clontead, and De Courceys (Old Head and Gortnacrusa).

Eighteenth Century

It was from such an environment as pertained in the previous century that a young local youth – Tadgh O’Connell – joined the friars and was sent to Europe to complete his studies for Priestly Ordination. On his return he was posted to Kinsale to engage in pastoral ministry. He was appalled that the local Irish had no proper reading material for their spiritual nourishment and so he also involved himself in translating such classics as ‘Trompette du ciel’ (Trompa na bhflaithas) and ‘Misterios del monte Calvario’ into the native Irish tongue (Gaelic). The Penal Laws or ‘Popery Code’ resulted in the friars risking life and limb as they moved furtively from place to place ministering to peoples’ spiritual, material, educational and other needs. The friars tried in 1720 to return to Rathmore Beg and to their ‘olde masshouse’ but found it beyond human habitation and repair so they had to look elsewhere for accommodation. That same year, 1720, an Act of Parliament declared “internment in the ruins of a Popish Monastery” illegal and prosecutable and it was obviously aimed at the old abbey now in ruins and deemed – because of it’s associations with the friars – an ideal burial ground by the poor locals who were unable, due to financial constraints, to convey their deceased relatives back to their native homelands for internment.

In 1730 a local Protestant landlord – Francis Kearney – from nearby Garrettstown, offered the friars a plot of land due south of Rathmore Beg in the poorer section of the town among the weavers’ hovels on Lower Catholic Walk. In 1735 the friars built a friary, a church, a small outhouse and a garden. Fr Patrick O’Mahoney, O.Carm., ‘purchased’ the land in 1737 and was appointed Prior in 1739. Come 1747, Fr O’Mahony was arrested and imprisoned for illegally owning land. Kearney intervened on O’Mahoney’s behalf establishing his own credentials to the property. Later on in 1747, Fr O’Mahoney was appointed Town Almoner. Dr John Butler – afterwards Lord Dunboyne – on assuming the episcopacy of Cork in 1763 tried, unsuccessfully, by varied means to appropriate the Friary Chapel from the Carmelites and make it the Parish chapel. Eventually he partially achieved his aim by withdrawing faculties from the Carmelites in Kinsale. The matter was referred to Rome with letters from the local Parish Priest, Philip O’Mahony, who, along with thirteen principle parishoners, testified that the chapel and the convent were built by and owned solely by the Carmelite Order.



In 1786 a group of inebriated soldiers from the town’s barracks ran amok as they returned to their barracks, torching the chapel’s thatched roof as they passed along the road.

A local lad from nearby Kilbritten, Lawrence Callanan (born in 1763), trekked all the way in to Kinsale to join the Carmelite Friars.

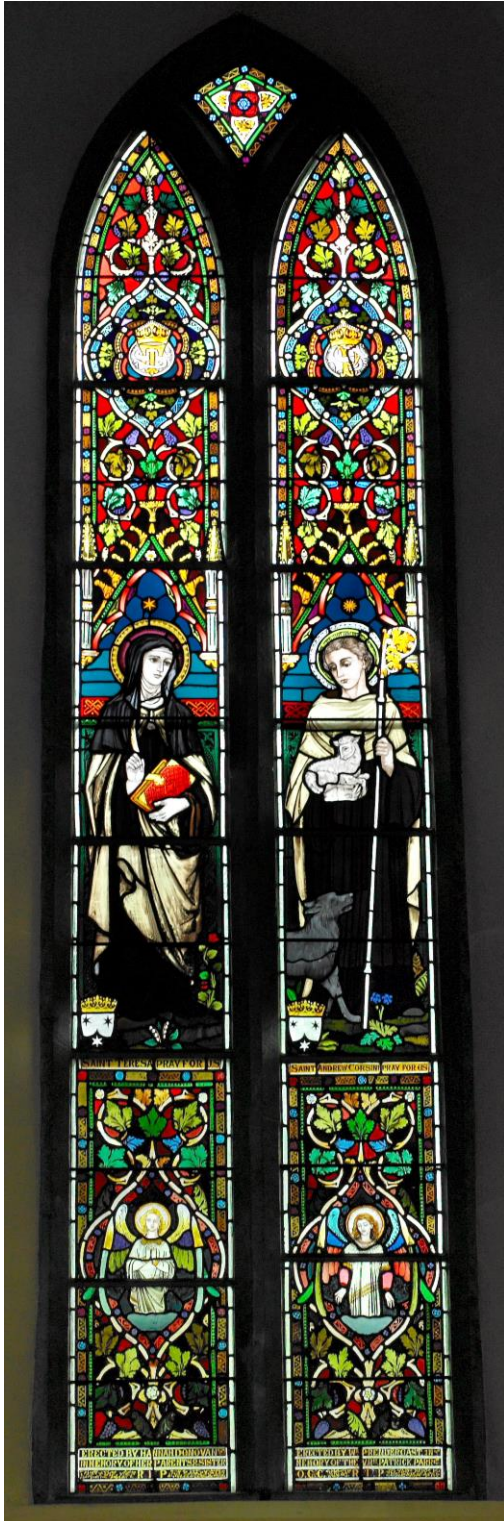
Nineteenth Century

The church probably was restored by Fr Lawrence Callanan, O.Carm., the local young man from Kilbritten who in previous decades walked from there to Kinsale to join the novitiate before being sent to the Continent to study for priesthood. He became a well-known figure as he walked the roads on pastoral ministry and as he prayed in the gallery of the chapel. Together with Fr Lulum, O.Carm., he probably – although well on in years – involved himself in the Famine-time new Friary church. Fr Lulum quested in England for the funds to defray the cost of the Friary project as well as adding help for the local Sisters of Mercy Famine Food Relief Fund.

The church was built around the original chapel on the site. The facade consists of cut limestone hewn in Kilnacloona Quarry on the Ringrone bank of the Bandon river and ferried across the river to be hauled up to the Friary site from Ferry Point. In the construction of the church the friars were able to provide local people with employment and the cash therefrom enabled their families to purchase food and pursue schooling. Their human dignity was thereby preserved. In constructing the new road from Kinsale to Bandon via the World's End, the Civil Authorities implemented the same principle through the disbursement of the Government's Famine Relief Funds. The new Friary church was built around the original site, possibly of the Lady Chapel, which has a corbel with the inscription "tu es Petrus et super hanc petram" – a statement that, perhaps, points to a foundation stone? During the 1870s Frs P. Parr, O.Carm.,



Michael Daly, O.Carm., and Southwell, O.Carm., developed a pentagonal sanctuary, had the interior plastered, and affixed a timber ceiling that highlighted the woodwork skills honed in the local shipbuilding yards. Over the sanctuary is featured a series of boat bows nestling together at anchor and portraying a sense of stability, security, peace and shelter. The wall backing the beautiful marble high



altar carries a meaningful depiction of the Scapular Vision in Caen stone. It is surrounded by strikingly beautiful stained glass windows donated by local Friary benefactors and dedicated to their departed loved ones. From left to right they represent Saints Patrick, Brigid, John of the Cross, Mary Madgalen de Pazzi, Teresa of Avila holding a book, Andrew Corsini, Peter and Paul – all whose intercession is implored. The one to Andrew Corsini is dedicated to the memory of Fr Parr at the instigation of W. Prendergast. Fr Parr was noted for his patorial and ecumenical ministeries.

On the gable walls in the transepts on either side of the high altar stand marble altars dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel and to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The side wall of Our Lady's transept carries a double panel window depicting, in the lower panel, the Annunciation. The upper panel depicts our Lord crowning his mother, Mary, as Queen of Heaven. The side wall of the Sacred Heart transept also has a double panel stained glass window whose lower panel depicts the Sacred Heart of Christ appearing to Margaret Mary Alcoque. The panel above depicts Christ ascending into heaven on a purple plume-like cloud in the midst of the apostles. Curiously, over Christ's head, is a section of glass displaying the St James scallop shell nestling on a plume of purple cloud. It may be intimating that either one of the friars had made the pilgrimage to Compostella or that the Friary was a hostel for pilgrims en route to Compostella.

A number of wall plaques testify to the generosity, loyalty and dedication of local families – significantly the Bowens – in financing the project. Additional funds to

defray the cost of finalising the church and Friary house with its in-house intermediate secondary school were probably collected among the Irish immigrants in Argentina, to whom Fr Southwell was sent to visit by the Irish Bishops.

Towards 1850 a Temperance Rally was held to raise funds to ease the debt on the Friary church. The procession began in Belgooley headed by bands and banner-bearing participants in a carnival atmosphere. As the procession wended its way to town it was joined by other banner-bearing contingents meeting together at various junctions on the way into the town. It proceeded along what is now called Pearse Street turning into Market Place and then into Cork Street and halting at the entrance to Friar Street to pay respects to the Temperance Hall beside the Parish Church. It then proceeded up the hill to the Friary church for an open-air Mass celebrated by Fr Lulum and the Parish Priest with the temperance preacher, Theobald Matthew, O.F.M.Cap., delivering the sermon.

In 1850, Frs Lulum, O.Carm., and Dunn, O.Carm., were marked present at a Tenants' Rights Meeting in Belgooley demonstrating the friars' interest and involvement in the human rights of their people. All through the Penal Years Irish youth had to depend for their education on the system of Hedge Schools run by itinerant teachers, who were mostly former clerical students educated on the Continent of Europe. As the friars ministered to the people they became painfully aware of the crying need to upgrade education standards to a higher level. It is not surprising then that the Provincial Chapters during the later years of the century advocated the establishment of boys' secondary schools as a means of attracting neophytes to the Order. Towards this end the Provincial Chapter of 1871 mandated Kinsale and Moate Communities to consider opening boys' schools in line with those of Dublin, Knocktopher and Kildare. Kinsale complied with the mandate that autumn. That same autumn a decree to open a novitiate in Dublin was promulgated.

The Kinsale Friary house was deemed to be very small so the prior's room was positioned outside the cloister and cloister regulations were not strictly observed. The beautiful and more spacious church was extended with the bishop's approval and completed in 1873. Circumstances demanded that the Community incur a debt to regain possession of a field sold by Fr Lulum some time previously. The 1881 Provincial Chapter learned that, in spite of the prevailing financial problems, the Kinsale school – pre-dating both the Presentation Brothers' and Mercy Sisters' secondary schools – was running smoothly. A plaque bearing the year '1880' with the Carmelite coat of arms emblazoned over it is affixed to the front gable of the old entrance to the Friary. During the 1885 Provincial Chapter, Kinsale was declared debt free. That very same year Fr Parr died on November 12. The people of Kinsale erected a monument in the local Abbey graveyard in appreciation of "Fr Parr's services and that of other priests of the Order buried within the precincts of the ancient Abbey rendered to Religion".

Towards the end of the century (1889) a certain friction erupted between the parish clergy and the friars prompting Bishop O'Callaghan of Cork to write to the Prior General, Savini, complaining that no sermons were being preached at Mass in the Friary resulting in the people (population of about 5,000) being ignorant. He also requested the Friary to provide a 7.00am Mass on Sundays to facilitate the servant people of the town. Provincial Bartley's spokesman pointed out that the Provincial, on a Visitation the previous year, had come to an arrangement with the secular clergy who now wanted to change it. As it would incur financial loss for the Friary he counselled that the Prior General should not bow to the bishop's request. The same year, 1889, the Friary was named as having a primary school for boys but that the Friary was in dire financial straits as it depended on church door collections for its survival. The Kinsale Friary, along with other Friaries in the Province, made cash donations towards the establishment of an International House in Rome.

Twentieth Century

Although on the surface the country was relatively calm and peaceful amid religious freedom, nevertheless there was a certain social and political unease among the "legion of the excluded". The Easter Uprising, the Civil War, World Wars I and II all made serious impacts on the nation. Amid all the difficulties of the early decades there was great concern among the friars regarding education, both secular and within the Order. The Novitiate for initial religious formation – though there were no novices – was transferred from Dublin to Kinsale on July 30, 1917. It was expected that four postulants would soon enter. Folklore recounts that one postulant, Andrew Wright – who was a medical student in residence in Terenure College – made his way to Kinsale by way of sea as rail and road travel were uncertain due to the 'Troubles'.

The novitiate continued its progress, flourishing in the mid-century with novitiates of up to twenty novices. To cater for the larger numbers the original Friary house had to be expanded. Firstly, in 1928 an extension due north was added. Fr P.C. Keenan, O.Carm., recalled that during his novitiate year of 1935-6, Fr Titus Brandsma, O.Carm. (in the drawing above), came to Kinsale for respite and reflection prior to his lecture tour of the U.S.A. Later, in 1952, an extension due northeast was added by the Prior,



M.F. O'Malley, O.Carm. This latter extension was occasioned by a great wave of missionary spirit and outreach engulfing Ireland as a consequent of the World Wars. In 1947, the Province expanded into Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in Southern Africa and this captured the imagination of many neophytes to the Order.

Priors F.P. McCartan, O.Carm., and P.L. Gallagher, O.Carm., in their respective turns, began re-ordering the Friary church in keeping with the Liturgical Reforms of Vatican II. Fr Gallagher – on sound advice – purchased the walled-garden beside the Grotto which was constructed by Frs J.C. Fitzgerald, O.Carm., and W.M. Lynch, O.Carm., with stone donated by a local farmer who wished to dismantle a church on his land (dating to Penal Times) as it was a place of pilgrimage causing destruction to his crops. Prior A.A. O'Reilly, O.Carm., and the Community completed the work on the re-ordering of the church. Bishop John Buckley of Cork & Ross solemnly blessed the refurbished church on December 13, 1987. The local energetic fundraising committee enabled the friars to purchase an 1893-built organ from the Church of Ireland, Abbey, Co. Waterford, and have it installed in 1988. Entering the church on the left-hand side gable wall, one sees a portrait of Blessed Titus Brandsma by Bandon artist, Collette Mills. On the nave wall nearby hangs a handcrafted Crucifix presented by local Carmelite, Tommie Fives, on behalf of his Zimbabwean parishioners in appreciation of the assistance and solidarity of the people of Kinsale during the War of Independence and the Drought in Zimbabwe.



The numbers entering the Order slowly dwindled and the question of the Novitiate building and the Friary was very much in the minds of the Provincial and successive Communities. In 2003, the Provincial, Fintan Burke, O.Carm., and his administration entered into dialogue with the Prior, Michael Morrissey, O.Carm., and the Community. Based on the Novitiate building they drew up a plan for a future Retreat and Spirituality Centre catering for the local catchment area. The work was completed in 2006 under then Prior,

John Keating, O.Carm., with Stan Hession, O.Carm., and Bene O'Callaghan, O.Carm. (Bursar). Again Bishop John Buckley blessed the enterprise and the Provincial, Fintan Burke, in the presence of local and Church dignitaries, together with a gathering of friars and sisters from other convents, declared the Centre open on May 20, 2007. Local Parish Priest, Canon John K. O'Mahony, declared the occasion a "very important day in the faith story of Kinsale".

In 2010, the Prior, Míceál O'Neill, O.Carm., together with Stan Hession, Frank McAleese, O.Carm. (Bursar), and Mariusz Placek, O.Carm. (Poland), and contractor, Piotr, completed the upgrading and modernisation of the heating and electrical systems. The Friary church is now a very pleasant and inviting ambiance for public and private worship. As many people use the church and Friary Centre for spiritual and social nourishment so the words of Canon O'Mahony, P.E, were prescient.

The words of the Carmelite Prior General, Fernando Millan Romeral, O.Carm., on the life of Blessed Angelo Paoli seem an apt summary of our inherited Irish tradition: *"this presence (of God) . . . we have to approach with a deep contemplative gaze, enlightened by faith and filled with charity, with the tenderness and trust of those who believe, with the faith of the mystic and with the transformative commitment of the prophet."* These charisms seem to have manifested themselves in the Irish friars' commitment to the people of God in their oppressions, misery and sufferings.