

Sherkin Friary by Dolly O'Reilly

According to the *Annals of the Four Masters*, the monastery of Sherkin was founded in the year 1460:

A monastery was founded for Franciscan Friars in Inis-Arcain, in Munster, in the diocese of Cork. Inis-Arcain is in O'Driscoll's country.¹

Collins, in his article on the Sherkin Friary, says that in 1440 a papal mandate was given to the Bishop and Dean of Ross and to Daniel O' Glavin, a Canon of Ross. This mandate was given in response to a petition made to the Holy See by Finghin O' Driscoll of the Ross Diocese who sought permission to found a monastery for Friars Minor in his territory. The building was to consist of a church, tower, bell and other accessories and was to be erected for the greater glory of God and to the honour of Saints John the Baptist and Francis.² A papal letter issued in 1469 granted plenary indulgence to Florentius O' Driscoll of the diocese of Ross and his wife, Alyna Barry.³ The death of Fineen O' Driscoll is recorded in the *Annals of the Four Masters* in 1472:

O'Driscoll More, Fineen, the son of Maccon, son of Maccon, son of Fineen, son of Donogh God, died in his own house, after having performed the pilgrimage of St. James, and his son Teige died penitently one month after the death of his father, after having returned from the same pilgrimage.⁴

Daniel Donovan in *Sketches in Carbery*, noted that a stone near the east end of the building commemorated, by an inscription, the original date of erection, 1460.⁵ This stone has not been found during the restoration works which have been ongoing since the 1980s. In the 1970s, a wall was built, as part of a holding pen for cattle, which adjoins the east wall of the friary. The date stone may have been accidentally covered by this wall, although this is speculation.⁶

The Friary was built on a sheltered spot above a small rocky strand, *Traigh na mBráthar*,⁷ (Strand of the Brothers), and faces the fishing village of Baltimore, approximately one mile across the harbour, on the mainland. The Sherkin house is of moderate dimensions and smaller than its sister houses in Timoleague and Kilcrea.

Architecture

The nave is 69 ft. 3 in. in length and 20 ft. wide; the choir is 39 by 20 ft. and is separated from the nave by a tower which was added at a later date. The base of the tower occupies the full width of the nave, 14 ft. 6 in. from east to west, and the walls at its base are four feet in width. The height of the tower from the present ground level to the summit is 48 ft. 6 in. In its northeast angle there is a projection which contains a circular staircase. The nave contained a

¹ *Annals of the Four Masters* in C.E.L.T., p. 1009. <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100005D/index.html> [Accessed: 2012/04/12].

² John T. Collins, 'An Island Friary' in Jerome O Callaghan (ed.), *Franciscan Cork Souvenir of St. Francis Church Cork*, (Four Masters Press, Killiney, 1953), p. 48

³ *Ibid.* p. 48.

⁴ *Annals of the Four Masters* in C.E.L.T., p. 1079. <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100005D/index.html> [Accessed: 2012/04/12].

⁵ Daniel Donovan, *Sketches in Carbery*, (Dublin, McGlashan and Gill, 1876), pp. 35-36.

⁶ Anthony O' Reilly, *Sherkin Island*. Pers. comm. 2012.

⁷ Anthony Beese, Downeen, Rosscarbery, Co. Cork. Pers. comm. 2011.

three-light window in the west gable, with a plain tracery head, and a doorway and single light window in the south wall. The transept extends southward 32 ft. 3 in. and is separated from the nave by an arcade of three pointed arches, and there is space for two side chapels with altars, in the east side of the transept; these chapels measure 15 ft. by 10 ft. and 14 ft. 6 in. by 10 ft. respectively. They are separated from the transept by an arcade of three arches under which there was a wooden screen. Each of these chapels has a two-light window facing east and are separated from each other by a half-arch; a rather clumsy method of construction that has also been adopted at Timoleague Friary. The sacristy is 23 ft. by 11 ft. and this portion of the structure is in three stories, as there is a floor below it and the adjoining apartment, evidently used for stores, is approached externally and not from the quadrangle. The sloping site rendered these crypt-like chambers necessary.⁸

The choir has a three-light window with tracery in the head, formed by the intersection of the mullions, and on the south side it had three windows, below which were recesses for stalls. In the north side of the choir are recesses for two tombs, and there is a similar recess in the northeast angle of the nave. The church had no aisles either in the nave or transept. The space to the east of the transept was taken up by the two chapels already mentioned, and in this respect, the arrangement is more in accordance with the side chapels in a Cistercian house than in the other Franciscan houses at Kilcrea and Timoleague, where the aisles give access to the chapels.⁹

The internal space was covered with graves and the ground had risen several feet in height owing to the successive burials.¹⁰ The cloister garth was also used for burials and an accumulation of debris had been piled in the middle of the quadrangle. The cloister area measures 44 ft. by 43 ft. In the western range, the apartment at the northern end is 19 ft. 4 in. by 16 ft. 4 in. The next room, to the south, measures 15 ft. 9 in. by 15 ft. 8 in. and is separated from the former by a passage 3 ft. 6 in. wide containing a staircase which leads to the dormitories overhead. Another passage through this wing is four feet wide and the room at the southern end is 15 ft. 8 in. by 10 ft.¹¹

There have been many alterations and additions in every part of the building. The tower and the sacristy, with dormitory over, were probably added after the burning of 1537. Both of the chapels east of the transept have the appearance of additions but there is no conclusive evidence on this point.¹²

The apartments in the range of buildings east of the cloister were vaulted on the ground floor. This wing contained the original sacristy and the other vaulted apartment was probably the Chapter Room as it is positioned accordingly. It now has a fireplace in the north gable.¹³ The refectory occupied the greater part of the range north of the cloister and measures 43 ft. 6 in. by 18 ft. 9 in. The south wall of this wing has entirely disappeared. The only trace of a

⁸ Dr. R. Cochrane, 'Structures in the County of Cork vested in the Board of Works for Preservation of Ancient Monuments' in *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Vol. 18, (1912), pp. 1-25.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

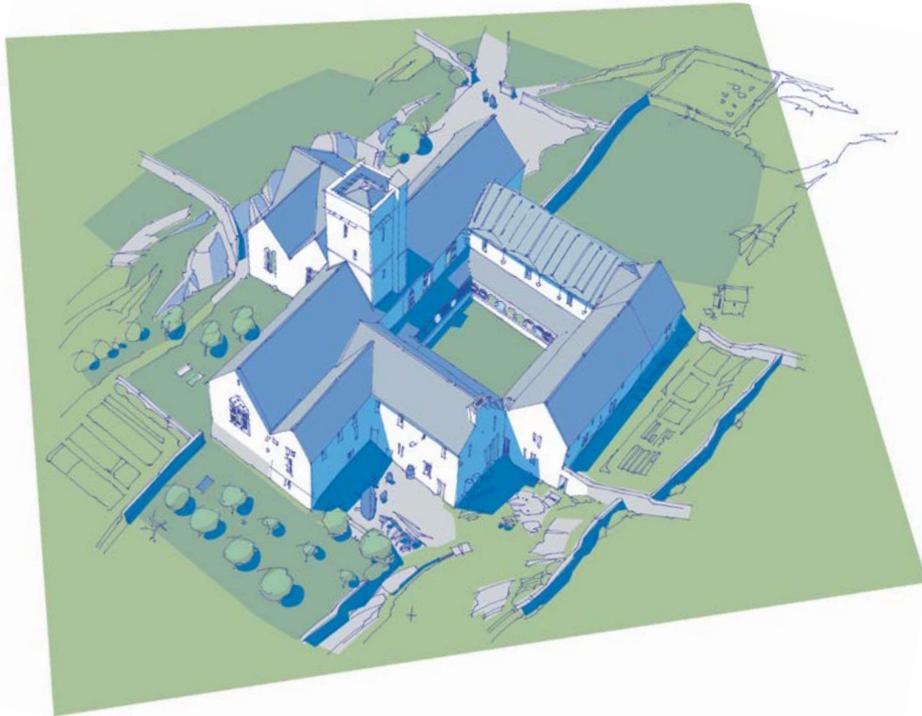
¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

cloister arcade is in the indication of a sloping roof having existed around the enclosure. The weathering courses still show in the walls of the church and the east and west blocks.¹⁴ The orientation of the church is peculiar owing no doubt to the position of the site in a sheltered slope. The doorway of the nave is not in the west as usual but in the side wall facing southeast and the axis of the church and nave is about 30 degrees to the north of true east. The architectural features are rather plain and without decoration but are interesting owing to their very simplicity and consequent suitability for a house of friars of the strict observance of St. Francis.¹⁵ This reluctance to invest in stone sculpture seems to have been a feature of the early Franciscan Observant movement in Ireland as it is noticeable by its absence from the houses at Timoleague, Kilcrea and Sherkin in Co Cork and Moyne and Rosserrilly in Co. Mayo.¹⁶

N→ Fig. 16



Conjectural Drawing of Sherkin Island Friary: Courtesy of the Office of Public Works ¹⁷ and Dave Pollock. ¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Colmán O' Clabaigh, 'Patronage Prestige and Politics: The Observant Franciscans at Adare' in Janet Burton and Karen Stöber (eds.), *Monasteries and Society in the British Isles in the Later Middle Ages*, (Boydell Press, 2008), p. 79

¹⁷ Aighleann O'Shaughnessy, Office of Public Works, Dublin. Pers. comm. 2012.

Maurice O Fehilly

The early sixteenth century scholar and Bishop of Tuam, Maurice O' Fehilly, may have been attached to the Friary on Sherkin. O' Fehilly's origins are disputed; three different places in Ireland have contended for the honour of being his birthplace.¹⁹ One claim is that he was born in Co. Down; another says that he was born in Galway and lastly, that he was born in Baltimore, West Cork. Dalton says that Baltimore would seem to have a strong claim for it is a sea port and Maurice was called *Maurice de Portu*, meaning he came from a place on the sea coast. His surname lends support to this claim as the O' Fehilly's were scions of the O' Driscoll clan and the ancient territory of the O' Fehilly's was located in west Cork.²⁰

Other sources say that O' Fehilly left the friary school to teach in Oxford.²¹ He is recorded as Ó Fithcheallaigh, Muiris [Maurice O' Fihely, Mauritius de Portu] (d. 1513), in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (D.N.B.). According to S. F. Brown, who wrote the D.N.B., entry, Maurice was already a Franciscan when he came to Oxford. He would therefore have been a member of the Franciscan House (Greyfriars) rather than a member of a college.²²

After Oxford, he went on to teach at Padua under the Doge Loredano. His oratory skills were so admired that he was named *Flos Mundi* by the Doge. Amongst his scholarly achievements he wrote: *The Life of Don Scotus Eringena* and a Biblical Dictionary. He was later consecrated and became Bishop of Tuam. He travelled once more to Italy to attend the Lateran Council in 1512. He died in Galway on his return journey.²³

An entry in the *Annals of the Four Masters*, for the year 1513, records that, 'Maurice O'Fihelly, Archbishop of Tuam, a professor of divinity of the highest ecclesiastical renown, died.'²⁴

¹⁸ Dave Pollock, *Archaeografix*, Stradbally, Co. Waterford. Pers. comm. 2012.

¹⁹ Dalton, Revd. *History of the Archdiocese of Tuam*, Volume 1, (Dublin, 1928), pp. 156-158.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Alfred O' Mahony, Skibbereen, Co. Cork. Pers. comm. 19/03/2011.

²² Julia Walworth, Merton College Library, Oxford, Pers. comm. 18/04/2012.

²³ Alfred O' Mahony, Skibbereen, Co. Cork. Pers. comm. 19/03/2011.

²⁴ *Annals of the Four Masters* in C.E.L.T., P.1321, <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T100005E/text002.html>. [Accessed: 2012/04/22].

Fig. 17 Mural of Maurice O' Fehilly



Source: *Fr. Luke Wadding and St Isidore's College Rome*²⁵

The above mural of O' Fehilly was made in 1672; it is in the church of *Santa Isidore* in Rome and was commissioned by Luke Wadding who developed this small, debt-ridden church into a centre for Irish learning in Rome.²⁶ Wadding wanted to have murals of the great Franciscans; these included St. Anthony, St. Francis, St. Bonaventura and Maurice O' Fehilly of Sherkin Island.²⁷

²⁵ Gregory Cleary, *Fr. Luke Wadding and St Isidore's College*, (Rome, 1925).

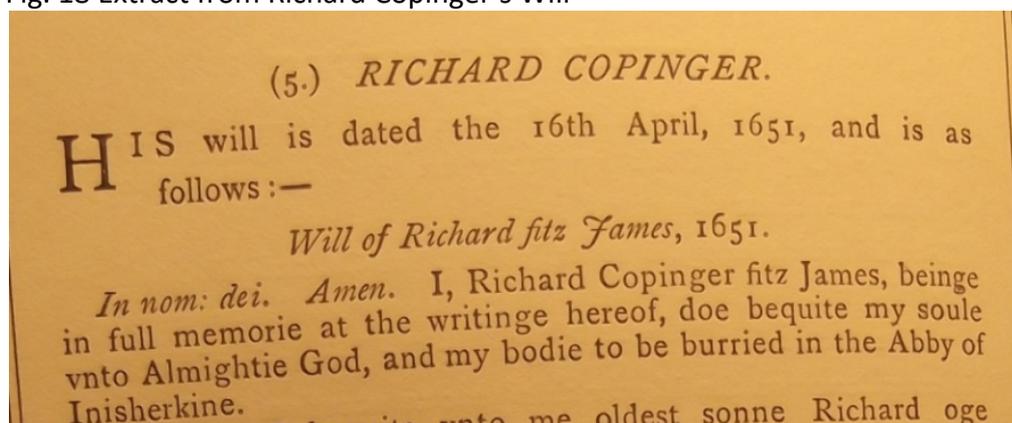
²⁶ Alfred O' Mahony, Skibbereen, Co. Cork. Pers. comm. 19/03/2011.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Destruction of Friary

This house had been functioning for approximately seventy-seven years when it was destroyed during the attack on the island by an army from Waterford in 1537 (see pp. 32-35). After this attack the friary continued to function to a lesser degree. In 1577 a Cork merchant, Alderman Meade gave four barrels of salt and a hundred measures of corn to the friars of Inisherkin.²⁸ Five years later, a lease was granted to James Hayden, gent of the house of the begging friars of Baltimore, called the monastery of Inisherkin. In the late 1580s and early 1590s leases were granted to Thomas Wye and John Bealing. In 1601, the building consisted of a croft, a cemetery and other ruinous buildings, with two gardens and a close containing six acres.²⁹ Collins says 'it would seem that the friars returned and in 1627 Fr. Francis Matthews repaired the monastery buildings.'³⁰ Things continued in this piecemeal fashion until the friary was confiscated by Cromwellian soldiers, Captains Jervois and Becher, in 1650.³¹ The site was continually used as a graveyard since it was founded, and the present burial ground is still within its walls. In 1651 Richard Fitzjames Copinger, brother of Sir Walter Copinger, was interred here:³²

Fig. 18 Extract from Richard Copinger's Will



Source: *History of the Coppingers or Copingers of the County of Cork Ireland and the Counties of Suffolk*, (Manchester, H. Sothern, 1884), p. 66.

Pilchard curing house

Smith says that some parts of the building are slated having been used for fish houses when the pilchards frequented the coast.³³ Went says that the Franciscans were not involved in the Pilchard industry and that any fish curing industry that occurred here would have taken place after the dissolution of monasteries.³⁴ Lionel Beecher of Sherkin used the Friary as a curing

²⁸ John T. Collins, 'An Island Friary' in Jerome O Callaghan (ed.), *Franciscan Cork Souvenir of St. Francis Church Cork*, (Killiney, Four Masters Press, 1953), p. 49.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *History of the Coppingers or Copingers of the County of Cork Ireland and the Counties of Suffolk*, (Manchester, H. Sothern, 1884), p. 66.

³³ Charles Smith, *The Ancient and Present State of the County and City of Cork*, (1894), Vol. 1, p. 290

³⁴ Arthur J. Went, 'The Irish Pilchard Fishery' in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, Vol. 51 (1945-48), pp. 102, 103. Source: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20490853>. [Accessed: 2010/05/11].

house in the pilchard fishery. It was worked by Randall Westropp, Beecher's son-in-law, and Robert Travers, until 1769. The curing house was 'an outbuilding some twelve yards from the eastern side of the buildings.'³⁵

Archaeological Excavations

First Excavation

The Office of Public Works has carried out three archaeological excavations on parts of the Friary. The first took place over a period of several weeks in 1987. This dig was concerned mainly with the drainage system of the friary. There had been many problems with drainage over the years; water seepage from the marshy field west of the friary weakened the walls and foundations of the part of the building which housed the cloistral range buildings.³⁶ The dig revealed a series of stone-built drains, dating from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. These were built to carry groundwater away from the cloister buildings. A stone built sump abutting the western wall was also uncovered; three drains fed into this system from the surrounding field.³⁷ A stone built well of 2.5m deep was discovered 4 metres to the northwest of the cloister and excavation of the sediment produced animal bone, small fragments of worked wood, a fragment of shoe leather and sherds of seventeenth century pottery. The bulk of artefacts from this dig consisted of seventeenth and eighteenth century pottery.³⁸

Second Excavation

The second excavation took place in 1990 and concentrated on the Chapter room and Cloister walks. A series of floors were uncovered in the Chapter room. The earliest of these was a clay floor built at the same time as the stone hearth. A number of post holes and a shallow drainage gully were cut into this floor which was subsequently overlaid by cobble stones. A human burial was uncovered in this room. A layer of black humic soil was spread over this area providing the base for a final cobbled floor. The fireplace had gone out of use at this stage. Dating proved problematic but the clay floor was unlikely to be earlier than the sixteenth/seventeenth centuries.³⁹

The cloister walks were excavated to their original surfaces and revealed a number of burials in the north, east and south walkways (Fig. 19). These burials belonged to the monastic period⁴⁰ (c. 1460-1537). They consisted of simple grave pits without grave goods. All the burials in the cloister walks were adult – there were no children present. This practise was commonplace and also occurred at Moor Abbey, Co. Tipperary and at earlier Cistercian abbeys e.g. Tintern. They were interred after construction of the cloister. The modern graveyard is confined to within the friary church.⁴¹

³⁵ Ibid. p. 103.

³⁶ Ann Lynch, 'Sherkin Island Friary, Farranacoush' (1987), in *Excavations.ie Database of Irish Excavation Reports*. <http://www.excavations.ie/Pages/SearchDB.php> [Accessed: February 4th, 2011].

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ann Lynch, 'Sherkin Island Friary, Farranacoush' (1990), *Excavations.ie Database of Irish Excavation Reports*. <http://www.excavations.ie/Pages/SearchDB.php> [Accessed: 2011/02/04].

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid. Pers. comm. 13/06/2012.

The bulk of finds from this dig consisted of roofing material (slates and ceramic ridge tiles) from the domestic ranges and post-medieval ceramics, predominantly, North Devon gravel-tempered ware.⁴²

Third Excavation

In 1996 a third excavation was carried out in the north range of the Friary. This excavation was commissioned by the Office of Public Works as part of the ongoing programme of architectural conservation works and was carried out by Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD), under the supervision of archaeologist Jerry O' Sullivan.⁴³

There were originally two or possibly three floors in this range; a refectory with sleeping accommodation overhead and a possible storage area at ground level.⁴⁴ Transient occupation during the post-reformation period was represented by numerous small pits on the floor area, some of which may have been dug for the disposal of rubbish. Others contained packing stones and were demonstrably post-pits for small upright timbers.⁴⁵ These features almost certainly represent small structures, possibly shanty or lean-to buildings erected against the south wall-face.⁴⁶ Further evidence of occasional occupation included three possible hearth sites on a bare earthen floor and midden inclusions which consisted of butchered animal bones, pot sherds, fish bones and shellfish and clay pipe fragments. No burials were found in this area. The final abandonment of the building was represented by a build-up of topsoils and rubble which were cut by a rubble-filled drain which probably dates to a previous episode of conservation work in the early twentieth century.⁴⁷

Fig. 19 Human Remains: Friary Excavation, 1990.



Remains of burials from the monastic period under cloister walk, uncovered during 1990 Office of Public Works excavation. (Photo: Courtesy of Dr. Anne Lynch, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Jerry O Sullivan (with contribution by John Tierney), 'Sherkin Island Co. Cork: Excavation of the North Range' in *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, (1999-2001), pp. 37-49.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Fig. 20



↑N Detail: Sherkin Friary. (Six-Inch Ordnance Survey Map. 1842).

Fig. 21



↑N Detail: Sherkin Friary. (25-Inch Ordnance Survey map. 1897-1913).