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The Medieval Priory of St. Mary's, Cahir

By Brian J. Hodkinson

The priory of St. Mary in Cahir, called Catherdunesque (with variant spellings) in medieval documentation and known today as Cahir Abbey, was a house of Augustinian Canons. It was probably founded in the last decade of the twelfth century and was certainly in existence by *ca* 1200, when the prior is listed as a witness to one of the documents contained in the Register of the Hospital of St. John, Dublin (Brooks 1936; 326).

In this, a grant to the hospital by Geoffrey de Camville, the prior John is described as first prior (*primo priore*) of "Kaherdunesche", which suggests that the priory was at that time a relatively recent foundation. It is this same Geoffrey de Camville who Ware (1654) credits with the foundation of the priory in Cahir. Geoffrey was baron of both Cahir and Fedamore in county Limerick (Empey 1981; 15), which would explain links between the priory and Fedamore throughout the medieval period. The circumstantial evidence therefore supports Ware's statement.

It should, however, be stated that the foundation date for the priory is not necessarily the same as that of the church building itself, which could be earlier. It was not uncommon for houses of Augustinian canons to be granted parish churches as part of their endowment by lay proprietors (Lawrence 1984; 140). In this context it is interesting to note that at the Dissolution the church building was found to have been the parish church and was therefore not taken by the Crown (White 1943; 333).

The priory does not figure largely in contemporary documentation and seems to have had a relatively tranquil and uncontroversial existence through to its dissolution in April 1540. In 1223 there was a dispute over land at Rathomer [Rathmore?], which the King ordered to be resolved in the priory's favour. The entry in the Calendar of Documents (Sweetman 1875; 174) reads as follows:-

"Mandate to the Archbishop of Dublin, justiciary of Ireland, to give seisin to the Prior of Cather of the land of Rathomer, if it appears by the inquisition which the justiciary sent to the King that Geoffrey de Camville bought that land from Thomas FitzMaurice and conferred it on the Prior in frankalmoign, as it is extended from the ford of Kilmelach [Killemlly] to Glimecloch [?], that the Prior was disseised thereof by William of Wigorn [Worcester]; and that the right of the Prior is that which Geoffrey de Camville bought of Thomas FitzMaurice and conferred on the Prior. Westminster Nov. 8th 1223".

This dispute would seem to have been a by-product of William of Wigorn contesting the estate of Geoffrey de Camville (who died sometime between 4 November 1217 and 20 September 1219; compare Sweetman 1875; 120, with *ibid.*; 133), and Geoffrey's wife's rights to lands purchased before their marriage (*ibid.*). In the Ecclesiastical Taxation of 1302-06 the priory is valued at £6-10s-8d, which places it as a middle-ranking house of the diocese of Lismore (Sweetman and Handcock 1886; 307).

In 1334 the Prior, Adam, was in dispute, "for in this year he sued Richard, son of Roger of St. Brigid, for 24 acres of arable land and eight of moor in Kylemagh [Killemlly], which Adam, the former prior, had demised for a term of years to Thomas Flamvill" (Archdall 1786; 645).



The fifteenth century saw the Prior (never personally named) regularly mandated by the Pope to serve on commissions of inquiry into the running of the church within the region (e.g. CPR vol. 7; 165, vol. 10; 518 and 520, vol. 12; 152, 272, 303, 371 and 477). The only hint of controversy was in 1472, when the prior of Athassel was ordered by Rome to install William Olonregan as prior and remove Eugenius Maceray who was acting as prior without due authority. The document (CPR vol. 13; 324) reads as follows:-

“To the prior of St. Edmund’s Hatasseyl [*sic*], in the diocese of Cashel. Mandate, recapitulating the preceding, after it has been executed, to collate and assign to the above William Olonregan, who is in his twenty-fifth year, the above named priory of St. Mary, Cathyr, conventual, dependent on no monastery, elective and with cure, value 60 marks sterling, so long void that there is no certain knowledge of the last mode of voidance, and that its collation has lapsed to the apostolic see; summoning and removing Eugenius Maceray, who under pretext of an election only, has without any title or other right detained possession for between fourteen and sixteen years, and from fear of whose power the said William cannot safely meet him in the city or diocese of Lismore; whether it be void by the resignation of the late William Tobyne, or in any other way. The said prior is to remove from him the usual oath of fealty according to the form enclosed”.

This incident reads more like a breakdown in communication between Rome and the priory than any cynical attempt to usurp authority, and the implied threats against William should be taken with a pinch of salt because allegations such as these are common in this type of document. Eugenius on the face of it seems to have been duly elected prior by the canons; but for some reason his election had not been recognised by Rome, which had the ultimate say. That this state of affairs had been allowed to exist for at least fourteen years, and that Rome had clearly no idea how the vacancy had originally arisen, suggests that the lines of communication were very weak.

In fact, just three years earlier the Pope had accepted Eugenius as lawful prior when Dermot Ymanyayn, a priest in the diocese of Emly, petitioned Rome for the grant of the fruits of the rectory of Fedamore in Limerick (canonically united to the priory), which Eugenius had granted to secular clerks. Dermot argued that Eugenius’s grant was detrimental to the priory because the laymen neglected to pay their rent and offered to pay more to the priory if his request was granted. The letter (CPR 12; 321), addressed to the dean, precentor and a named canon of Limerick, requested them to investigate Dermot’s case and, if correct, to arrange a transfer of the fruits to Dermot.

In 1475 Prior Leonard of Molana in Waterford, another Augustinian house, petitioned Rome to be granted the fruits of rectories belonging to St. Catherine’s, Waterford and “Kahirdunaheasy”, because his own house had insufficient funds to support its canons and maintain its buildings (CPR 13; 407). The letter addressed to the prior of Bridgetown (O.S.A.) and a canon of Cloyne ordered them to investigate if it was true that the rectories had been granted to secular clerks, and if so to transfer them to prior Leonard.

The rectories in question, all in Co. Cork, are listed as Dyriwillay [Derryvillane], Kyldaryey [Kildorrery], Balmyloca [Ballydeloughy] and Dagedonywayn [Dangandonovan]. None of these figure in the extent of the priory made at the Dissolution; see next paragraph.

The next recorded event is the surrender of the priory in 1540 (Morris 1861; 59) by the prior “Edmund O Lonyrgane”, who received a pension of £3-6s-8d payable out of the possessions of the priory (*ibid*; 61). Archdall (1786; 645) records that “Edward [*sic*] Lonergan”, who surrendered the priory, was made vicar of the parish church of the Virgin Mary of Cahir on 26 April that same year. An extent of the priory was made in January 1541 (White 1943; 331-



333), which found that the church building had “from time immemorial” served as the local parish church and thus was not forfeited to the Crown, so Edmund appears simply to have stayed where he was.

The remaining buildings of the priory seem to have formed an integrated unit which passed to the then occupier, Sir Thomas Butler. Associated with the buildings were an orchard and a garden of 1 acre worth 6s-8d. The priory also held other lands; 4 acres of demense lands which passed to Sir Thomas; 20 acres at Kylhemelagh [Killemlly] farmed by John Okerney; 16 acres called New Grange rented by James Legge(?); 60 acres called Great Grange rented by Thomas Donaghe; a water-mill held by John Gawan; two eel-weirs held by Philip Ryan; a tenement with three gardens in Cahir; and 1 stang with a garden at Knockehe [Knockagh?].

Excluding services due to the priory, the land produced £8-18s-6d in rents. The rectory of Cahir produced a further £8 in tithes, while the rectories of Donohyll [Donohill], Corrok [Corroge], Loghlore [Loughloherly] and Fedamore were worth £4-3s-4d. The income of the priory therefore totalled £1-1-10. Set against this were £3 in procurations to the archbishop of Cashel, the archdeacon of Cashel and the bishop of Lismore and Waterford, £3-6s-8d as a stipend to the vicar of the parish church of Cahir and 10s in quit rent to Sir Thomas Butler from the vicarage of Kyllahenlaghe [?].

The value of the priory was therefore £14-5-s-2d though, due to a miscalculation in the original document, this was written down as £14-4s-10d, which was set as the farm fee for Sir Thomas Butler. The extent concludes with the statements that the sale of the priory’s chattels had fetched £7-6s-8d, that one bell remained unsold and that the church bell belonged to the parishioners.

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