



BONAMARGY FRIARY

English Translation

BONAMARGY FRIARY

County Antrim

The Site

Though the immediate surroundings are tamed by the golf course, the general site is one of great beauty. The name – Bun na Mairge – means the foot of the Margy (the combined Glenshesk and Carey rivers) and the friary is sited where these rivers approach the sea. Rivers and sea were both important to the friars for food and transport. Inland are woods and pastures, with the rounded summit of Knocklayd to the S.W., and to the N. dunes and the sea, with Rathlin and the Scottish island beyond. The area is rich in ancient monuments – megaliths, forts and churches: Dunrainey fort is the mound in the golf course S.W. of the friary; Dun a Mallaght in the trees to the W. may be a castle mound, and on the cliffs further W. are the remains of the MacDonnell castle of Duninenny.

History

Bonamargy comes late in monastic history and late in the ecclesiastical history of this area. The churches in Culfeightrin, the parish in which the friary stands, and Ramoan, its neighbour across the river, both claimed St. Patrick as their founder. Bonamargy is thought to have been founded by Rory McQuillan in about 1500. It was one of at least 44 friaries of the Third Order of Franciscans Regular established in Ireland between the 1420s and the dissolution of the monasteries in 1537. This order made no impact in Britain but flourished greatly in Ireland, especially in the less anglicised areas of Ulster and Connacht. Third Order friaries tended to be smaller and simpler than those of the First Order (the Grey Friars). The friars followed a simple communal life and helped parish clergy with pastoral work and education.

Bonamargy is poorly documented and we cannot build up a detailed picture of its size and activities from written sources. Though its official life as a friary was short, it continued to function after the dissolution. Its history in the later 16th century was stormy: in 1584 the church was burned (its thatched roof is mentioned) when Irish and Scots attacked English troops quartered there. But was repaired, and even after the friars of the Third Order withdrew in the early 17th century the buildings were used by other Franciscans, partly as a base for missionary work in Scotland. The friary was probably abandoned by the end of the 17th century but continued to be used for burial. Its present physical condition owes much to conservation by the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society in 1931. It was placed in State Care by Ballycastle Rural District Council in 1933.

The Buildings

The roofless buildings form an attractive group and a distinctive landmark. The approach is through a small gatehouse E. of the main buildings. This would have controlled coming and going through a boundary bank, of which only slight traces can be seen. Where the path now runs was a gate passage and above a room with a small window in the S. gable and a plain fireplace with a prominent chimney in the N. The walling, of rounded boulders with small stone pinnings, is markedly different from the squared sandstone of the main buildings. From the gatehouse the visitor sees a long line of buildings – from the N. (right), the E. range, the E. end of the church with its tall window and the MacDonnell chapel.

The Church is a long narrow rectangle (internally 99 by 24 ft. 6 ins.), the common friary plan, but with no sign of the tower which distinguishes so many friaries. The tall E. window is impressive, even in its damaged state. The shaded area in our drawing is a hypothetical reconstruction of the flame-like (flamboyant) tracery. The surround is grooved for glass and behind were iron bars. The external decoration of heads, interlace, foliage and animals is weathered but still pleasing. The window in its present form is clearly a rebuilding: the relieving arch of the earlier window is visible and the outer carved stones are the remains of the earlier label stops. Here and elsewhere it is clear how much the level outside the church has risen with burials. The main entry to the church for lay people was by a W. door, now gone (the present W. wall is largely modern). The small perforated disc-headed cross just inside is said to mark the grave of Julia McQuillan, 'the black nun',. Who was a recluse here in the mid-17th century. There are no windows in the N. wall (the cloister side), but in the S. wall is a door and there may have been four windows. The two more westerly openings are blocked, but the third is open and externally is decorated.

The nave was for lay people and the chancel to the E. for the friars. No physical division survives, but there was probably a wooden screen. The chancel must have been flooded with light from the great E. window and a second large window in the S. wall which now opens into the MacDonnell chapel. The stalls for the friars have disappeared but the base of the altar survives.

Medieval monasteries provided burial for their patrons, and many remained important burial grounds long after the dissolution. S. of the altar in the place of honour at Bonamargy is the MacDonnell vault and roofless chapel above, clearly added to the church. A weathered plaque in the S. wall records its building by Randall MacDonnell in 1621, but the chapel in its present form may be rather later. A grand tomb of 1630 on the S. wall of the church marks the grave of another prominent local family, the McNaghtens.

N. of the church lay the cloister. The complete disappearance of the walks and arcades suggests a wooden structure, but the line of the top of the lean-to roof is visible and projecting stones (corbels) which supported roof timbers.

The East Range A door in the angle of church and E. range leads to a passage which gave access to the church and both floors of the range. On the ground floor a doorway leads N. into a small barrel-vaulted chamber with two wall cupboards and two open hatches into the large room to the N. (perhaps originally cupboards). The larger vaulted room as reached by a door from the cloister walk and another in the N. gable, both now damaged. There is a cupboard in the E. wall near the single small window, blocked outside by a gravestone. Returning to the passage you will find steps, ingeniously constructed with massive corbels and lintels in the wall thickness, leading to two rooms on the first floor. The tops of the rubble vaults below are now exposed, but there must have been wooden floors. The larger room to the N. was lighted by six windows, two intact, the others marked by their sills or simply gaps. The small projection at the N.W. angle must be connected with washing and latrine facilities at first floor level, communicating with the drain below. The smaller room at the top of the stairs had windows in its S. and E. walls. Between the S. gable

and the church is a carefully-constructed gutter, to carry rainwater run-off from the church roof, emptying over the window of the passage below.

The Functions of the Rooms

Monastic planning was often standardised, allowing the identification of rooms with some confidence, but at Bonamargy this is not the case. Instead of the usual two or three ranges of buildings round a cloister there is only one. It is difficult to assess what other wooden buildings once stood there, but it is unlikely that other substantial stone buildings have disappeared, so we can perhaps compress the more usual monastic plan into the E. range. The smaller ground floor room may have been a combined chapter room and sacristy, for meetings and storage of vestments, books and other equipment. The large room probably served several functions, as refectory, day-room (for indoor work) and perhaps school-room, though the lighting is poor. Cooking may have been done in a building of perishable materials, now gone (our reconstruction shows a hypothetical mud-built kitchen sharing the drain at the N.W. angle of the range). The larger first floor room was clearly a dormitory, with its latrine at the N. end. If each friar had a cubicle with a window there would have been six. The function of the smaller upper room is less certain: perhaps it provided some privacy for the head of the house. The accommodation in the gatehouse was very limited, but this secure upper room in a substantial stone structure could have been useful in times of trouble. Apart from the stone buildings we can also envisage some wooden out-buildings, gardens, an orchard and stock. Though many detailed points in our reconstruction are uncertain, we hope it gives some idea of what this small friary may have looked like on the eve of the dissolution.

The Graveyard

Since Third Order Franciscan friaries commonly had N. cloisters, the favoured position for the cemetery was S. of the church, and this is probably where the oldest graves are. The door in the nave S. wall could have led to the graveyard, but graves have now spread to surround the buildings. In one corner are burials of sailors of the two world wars, some unnamed, washed ashore here, a sad reminder that one of the friars' duties over four centuries ago may have been the burial of earlier seafarers drowned in the treacherous waters of this coast.

Further Reading

Bigger, F. J. and Fennell, W.J., *The Ancient Franciscan Friary of Nun-na-Margie*, special volume of the *Ulster J. Archaeol.* (1898); Leask, H. G., *Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings*, vol. 3 (1960); Gwynn, A. and Hadcock, R. N., *Medieval Religious Houses: Ireland* (1970).

Other friaries in State Care are at Armagh (Franciscan First Order) and Newtownards (Dominican), whilst Cistercian Abbeys are in State Care at Inch and Grey Abbey (Down).

Access The friary (grid ref. D 126408) is conspicuous on the S. side of the A1 to Cushendall, 1/2 mile E. of Ballycastle. Access by path from road, open at all times (ground floor rooms of E. range often locked, but visible through gates).