

# WHITEFRIAR STREET CHURCH A BRIEF HISTORY

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## INTRODUCTION

The Carmelite church in Whitefriars Street stands on the same site as the pre-Reformation Dublin priory. Nothing remains of the older buildings, to give an idea of what they looked like, or suggest anything of Carmel's long history in Europe or in Ireland in particular. The foundation stone of the present church was laid in 1825, the building completed in 1827. Catholic Emancipation only came in 1829. In later years, the church building was considerably enlarged and extended, but in essentials, the visitor is still faced with an example of the sort of church erected by the Irish Catholic community as they emerged from the hidden back-street chapels of penal days. Externally, it is not afraid to look like a church, internally, it is designed for a large congregation to hear Mass. The nineteenth century was probably the most dangerous yet for the Catholic Church, attacked all over Europe, appearing either as the support of a decadent aristocracy, or in Ireland, as the superstition of the poor and ignorant. The same century that saw the erection of the new Carmelite church in Dublin also witnessed the near-extinction of the Order itself. Catholic intellectual and liturgical life at the same period reached an extreme low water: most Catholics were not ready to face the challenge of new developments in human thought and knowledge. Men like Cardinal Newman, who attempted to deal with the actual problems of the time and of the future, were regarded with suspicion.

Nineteenth-century church architecture reflects this world, so remote from the contemporary renaissance of the Catholic Church. Nineteenth-century churches are content to copy the past; we look in vain for them to express any new ideas about the nature of a church, or the meaning of the liturgy. We are lucky when they result in as pleasant a building as the Whitefriars Street church.

Today the church and priory continue as the centre of Carmelite life and apostolate in modern Dublin. The church was built in horse and carriage days, when steam was only just coming into its own, and the Dublin skyline round the quays was broken by the tall masts of sailing ships. Today the skyline is one of television aerials, and men take to the air as naturally as they walk. Since 1827, there has been a revolution in the ordinary things of life, transport, medical care, food, housing communications, so vast that it requires an effort to visualise Dublin life of more than a hundred years ago.

Yet this period, which seems so long to us because of the immense changes that have taken place in it, is only a mere fraction of Carmelite history, both in the world as a whole and in Ireland. The Whitefriars Street church and priory are a part of a much longer story, that of the whole Carmelite Order, and of its work in Ireland. This booklet sets out to outline this much longer story of the Carmelites, and to let their Dublin church be seen in its full historical perspective.

## CARMEL IN IRELAND

Ever since the Anglo-Normans had invaded Ireland in 1170, Ireland had been made up of two opposing, but sometimes intermingling, elements, Anglo-Norman (later English) and Irish. The first successes of the Anglo-Normans had taken them over all Ireland; recession had followed and a Gaelic revival and recovery, later to be destroyed by the Tudor reconquest of the country. The racial and political tensions between the two groups were often carried into religious life; and in all spheres Ireland was prevented from developing into a self-contained national unit. In the centuries of the Celtic saints she had attracted pilgrims and students to her centres of learning from many other countries. Now, in the period when the great universities were springing up all over Europe, she had none—an attempt to start one in Dublin failed—and anyone in Ireland looking for higher education and a degree had to face the expenses and difficulties of a journey overseas.

We may presume that the first Carmelites to arrive in Ireland were Englishmen, though as the Order developed it would soon attract Irish vocations as well as Anglo-Norman ones. The material for the history of all the Orders in Ireland prior to the Reformation is very scrappy, it is not sufficient to tell any coherent and detailed story, either of any Order as a whole or of individual houses. In the case of Carmel, even the actual material remains of churches and priories are scanty or non-existent, in contrast to some of the medieval ruins of Franciscan and Cistercian houses, of which nearly all, bar the roofs, still survive in Ireland at many sites.

Even the dates of many Carmelite foundations do not seem to be known exactly, or even the sum total for all Ireland. There was, it seems, a spate of foundations in the fourteenth century, following the Carmelites' arrival in Ireland in the last thirty years of the thirteenth century. Other foundations continued to be made, here and there, on to Reformation times. Most of the houses were dedicated to Our Lady, which was the normal Carmelite practice. And a study of the monastic map of pre-Reformation Ireland shows that the Carmelites never spread right over the whole country; their houses have a patchy sort of distribution, often with a number of foundations clustered in one area. Several large cities were without Carmelite houses at all.

The known Carmelite foundations in medieval Ireland include the following houses: Dublin, Drogheda (Co. Louth), Athboy (Co. Meath), Ardee (Co. Louth), Ardnacrany (Co. Westmeath), Kilcormac (Co. Offaly), Bellaneeny (Co. Roscommon), Kildare, Cloncurry (Co. Kildare), Leighlinbridge (Co. Carlow), Thurles (Co. Tipperary), Clonmel (Co. Tipperary), Lady's Abbey near Ardfinnan (Co. Tipperary), Knocktopher (Co. Kilkenny), Horetown (Co. Wexford), Castlelyons (Co. Cork), Kinsale (Co. Cork), Milltown (Ballnagaul) near Hospital (Co. Limerick), Loughrea (Co. Galway), Galway, Eglishe (Sleushancough) (Co. Galway), Caltra (Co. Galway), Ballynahinch (Co. Galway), Creevaghbaun (Co. Galway), Ballinasmall (Co. Mayo), Knockmore (Co. Sligo), Rathmullen (Co. Donegal).

As Dublin was, and is, the principal city of Ireland, the Carmelite house there was of

considerable importance, though it must also be remembered that it was also sited at the very heart of Anglo-Norman power and influence, and most of its friars were probably of that race.

## THE DUBLIN FOUNDATION

Whatever may have been the exact date that Carmelites first came to Dublin, they had not made a permanent settlement there in 1279, in which year there was an official enquiry about a piece of ground that was to be given them, by Roger Oweyn of Dublin, Sir James de Bermingham and Nicholas Bacuir. On this site the Carmelites proposed to build a church and priory. Though the king gave them permission to do so (10th June 1280), the Dublin citizens, for some reason or other opposed it, and the scheme fell through. The friars had better success when Sir Robert Bagot, chief Justice of the King's Bench, built them a house in St. Peter's parish on the south side of the little walled city of Dublin. He had bought this bit of land (on which modern Whitefriars stands) from the Cistercian abbey of Baltinglass in Wicklow. The friars later acquired more land round the original site, and when the whole was surrendered at the Reformation, it was evidently quite a sizeable property.

When the then prior, John Kelly, gave up Whitefriars, at the suppression of the monasteries, on 3rd August 1539, it was described as consisting of a church with a steeple, a chapter-house, dormitory, two chambers, a hall, a small plot of land, a half acre orchard, nine messuages, seven gardens and two meadows, running to five acres in extent in Dublin and the city suburbs. The place is marked on John Speed's map of Dublin of 1610, and it was then on the edge of the city, the heart of which was still concentrated between the area where Whitefriars is, and the river. It is hard for us to realise how small and crowded together Dublin then was.

Now and again some item is recorded, about the Dublin Carmelite house. In 1333, it was used as the meeting place for the Irish Parliament—a gathering marked by the killing of one of its members by an unknown murderer as the assembly was breaking up. The comparatively spacious buildings owned by monks and friars were, at this time, often used for large official gatherings.

In 1324, the Dublin house seems to have been made a minor centre of studies for the Irish friars, but for university degrees they had to go abroad. In 1348, the Carmelites were petitioning the English King to allow them to accept a gift of property in Dublin which would produce the necessary twelve marks per annum to maintain six Carmelites at a university in England. Otherwise the students would have to return as the Irish Province was too poor to pay for them. The petition was granted.

Ireland was by then an independent Province. She had been separated from the English Province in 1305, not without considerable opposition from English Carmelite leaders!

One Irish-born Carmelite, Gilbert Urgale (Gilbert of Louth) did gain a doctorate at Oxford and became a professor there during the fourteenth century. Another Irish Carmelite,

Ralph Kelly of Drogheda, who entered Carmel at Kildare, was made bishop of Leighlin, and then in 1346, translated to the archbishopric of Cashel. Arch. bishop Kelly opposed the English King's tax on the Church to raise money for the French wars. But this was exceptional ecclesiastical behaviour for Ireland of the time; most of the Carmelite friars promoted to Irish bishoprics were Englishmen from the English Province.

Of the day to day work of the friars in Ireland, no records survive. Some estimate of the size and importance of some of their houses can be made from the descriptions given of property surrendered at the Reformation—Knocktopher, founded in 1356, seems to have had extensive lands and to have been one of the more important houses, for instance. In Trinity College library in Dublin, there is a missal from the Kilcormac (Frankford) house in Co. Offaly. Kilcormac was founded about 1430. The missal, as well as the actual texts for the Mass, contains on spare pages, notes giving the deaths with some brief facts about eminent persons belonging to the locality. It is also of interest that this Carmelite missal should commemorate some early Irish and British saints—Brigid, David, Cedda, Patrick, Cuthbert and Brendan.

The sixteenth century was the century of the Reformation. Protestantism was partly a movement of new religious ideas, partly also involved with the current political situation. It is difficult today to distinguish clearly between those who genuinely followed new ideas and those who used such ideas to gain advantage for themselves, their Party or their State. One can sympathise with the excitement men must have felt in the new Protestant teachings and theories in the interpretation of scripture and about the nature of grace, free will, the Church. Most Catholics were not prepared for the new challenges, and some Carmelites were, in fact, supporters of the new doctrines. In England, several of them supported the King's party.

The result of the Reformation was that whole Provinces were exterminated. Saxony, one of the three into which Germany had been divided, Denmark, England, Scotland and Ireland survived merely as titular provinces. The English Carmelite houses were surrendered in 1538, and English Carmelite life simply came to an end. In Ireland, the suppression was more gradual, extending across the country as the authorities could get power to enforce the law, and it did not result in the total extermination of Irish Carmelites. As all organised religious life was abolished they became very few, but they went into hiding and continued to try and work in Ireland.

The suppression of the Irish houses began with places like Dublin and Kildare in 1539. Kilcormac was only seized in Elizabeth's reign, Caltra as late as 1589, to give some examples. The Scottish Province came to an end in 1564. It is possible that the Provincial of Denmark, who opposed the Reformers strongly, died a martyr. And when Calvinism spread in France, the Huguenots attacked and destroyed a number of Carmelite houses, torturing and killing the friars and destroying their property, books and records.

## SEVENTEENTH CENTURY IRELAND

It is impossible to sum up any period of Irish history in a few words, let alone the complex of motives and actions that went to the making of the seventeenth century. The end of the sixteenth century, the period of Teresa and John of the Cross, saw the complete reconquest of Ireland by Tudor forces, the end of the old Gaelic culture and the destruction everywhere of anything Catholic. A number of priests were martyred; others fled to the continent. Yet others remained in hiding in Ireland.

When James I came to the English throne in 1603, Catholics in Ireland hoped for a let-up in persecution. Their hopes were not realised, but conditions did improve a little. The religious Orders began to try and return to normal work in Ireland, they established themselves in the cities in such houses as they could; in the country, they sometimes were able to return to their medieval monasteries.

In 1641, the famous Confederation of Kilkenny attempted to restore religious freedom to Ireland by force of arms. Its failure was quickly followed by the military success, sometimes accompanied by massacre, of the Cromwellian forces. The Restoration brought better conditions, though Blessed Oliver Plunket and others died for their faith at the time of the Popish Plot scare. The end of the century saw the arrival in England of William and Mary, and the attempt in Ireland to stamp out Catholicism by legal rather than military means. The whole period was marked by a series of killings, in which both priests and laity died for their faith, and which reached a peak during Cromwell's time.

### THE CARMELITES RETURN TO DUBLIN

The Whitefriars property had gone first to one Nicholas Stanihurst, and then to Francis Aungier (later Lord Long-ford) whose name is preserved in Aungier Street, the postal address of modern Whitefriars. Rathmullan had been the place at which young Red Hugh O'Donnell had been captured by a trick in 1587; from there in 1607, the party led by the Earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell had left for the continent—the famous “Flight of the Earls”. No Irish Carmelite representative had been able to attend the Order's General Chapters since the start of the English Reformation; in 1593, the Irish Province became a titular one—the name was preserved, but the organised reality had ceased to exist. However, the Carmelite link was not broken, for small groups of friars continued to work in Ireland. Early on in the seventeenth century, they were back in Dublin, and had established themselves in Cook Street.

Cook Street, parallel to Merchant's Quay, seems to have been the favourite habitat of all the religious Orders when they crept into the heart of Dublin. The Franciscans have remained there, their modern large church and friary on Merchant's Quay having grown out of their penal days chapel.

In the Cook Street chapel, the Carmelites, in defiance of the law, grew bold enough to appear in their habits for a public Mass on St. Stephen's Day, 1626. News of this came to

the Lords Justices who were at Protestant service in Christ Church, and they immediately ordered out a posse of soldiers. The military smashed up the chapel and seized two friars, who were, however, rescued by some of the women and youths who had been attending Mass. These latter assaulted the soldiers with stones and clubs, a vivid reminder of the condition of Dublin streets then, for where today would Dublin women come by stones to throw?

Persecution and the forcible closing of Catholic chapels was, just then, the order of the day, and the Carmelites seem to have worked very quietly and secretly in their next Dublin centre, in the Cornmarket. Meantime, the Discalced had come to Ireland, the first group arriving on St. Michael's day in 1625. Unhappily, there was trouble not only between the Carmelites and Protestants, but between the two branches of the Order. The Discalced, feeling themselves the true successors of medieval Carmel, began to take possession of as many of the old ruined foundations as they could, and the Ancient Observance not unnaturally challenged their claims. The dispute eventually reached the Holy See, which ruled, in 1640, that the Discalced could remain in the four old monasteries in which they were already settled, but were not to try to seize on any more of them.

This was not the only Catholic opposition that the Ancient Observance had to meet. At the time of the Confederation of Kilkenny, they tried to regain some of their old houses, including Knocktopher, to be met with determined opposition by Catholics who had come into possession of these properties. In fact, they appealed to the papal nuncio, Rinuccini, to try and help them get back a foothold at Knocktopher. It seems they had gone back to the old building and been forcibly thrown out again by one Thomas White and his followers. In fact, they were unable to restore the Knocktopher foundation until about 1750.

## THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

A small number of Irish Carmelites seem to have weathered all the storms of persecution, poverty and troubles with other Catholics, for the eighteenth century saw them numerous enough to ask for full restoration of the Irish Province.

In Dublin, the Carmelites had settled themselves in Ashe Street in 1728. They remained there, working amongst the Dublin people and in the surrounding districts, until the lease of their house expired and the Protestant landlord would not renew it. They then moved to a house in French Street (later called Upper Mercer Street) and built a chapel in Cuffe Lane close by. This was in 1806.



## WHITEFRIARS, DUBLIN

But it is against this background, of a handful of friars working amongst the Dublin people, where elegance jostled with conditions of poverty that the modern Dubliner can hardly imagine, that Dr. Spratt spent £4,000 on a new church. In 1820, the Irish Provincial had written to the Prior General saying that “we are poor and few in numbers, and will soon be fewer, unless we receive immediate help”. One problem was where the novices were to be educated. Yet in 1822, Ireland was agreeing to open a mission in Malabar – to try and check Protestant missions there. It was proposed that the Dublin house should become the novitiate and house of studies for both Ireland and the overseas missions. This readiness to send some of their few men overseas was to be found in the other Orders in Ireland at this time likewise. However, nothing came of the present plan for Dublin. Meantime, a Dublin youth, John Spratt, had, after being attracted to the Order at its Dublin chapel, gone to Spain and received the habit at Cordova. When he returned, he came to the Dublin house, of which he was soon made Prior. He set himself, like so many other Catholics at this time, to try to do something for the education of the children of the Catholic poor, and accordingly opened his first school in Longford Street in 1822. This was moved to a more spacious site in White-friars Street in 1824.

The Longford Street property has been part of medieval Whitefriars. Dr. Spratt managed to acquire more of the old site. The community moved to Whitefriars Street in 1825, and the next year, the archbishop of Dublin laid the foundation stone of the new church. The architect, George Papworth (1781-1855), was also the designer of Dublin’s Pro-Cathedral and of a number of large country houses in Ireland. The new church was consecrated on 11th November 1827. Although an account of the new building remarked that “the whole expense is about £4,000; and proves how much can be done with small means, when taste and judgment are combined”, the debt was a heavy one for the Irish Carmelites. The house in which the Dublin friars lived was in very bad repair and they were forced to buy the next-door property, intending the two for an Irish novitiate. Vocations did not come at once; in 1850, their numbers were down to twenty.

Dr. Spratt was active in many good works in the city, work, which today sounds dull enough as it probably was at the time, but which was very necessary all the same. He was active in Father Mathew’s temperance campaign; he founded an orphanage, homes for repentant prostitutes and for the blind, as well as a night refuge for poor women of good character. In 1856, he started the Dublin Catholic Young Men’s Society; he appears also as an active member of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. He was a member of the committee which tried to found a Catholic university in Dublin. The project, which brought the famous Newman to Dublin as the rector of the new university, the occasion of his famous lectures on the *Idea of a University*, was not successful. Yet these various activities do give some idea of the needs of the people of Dublin and of the kind of work the Carmelites were then engaged in.