

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



THE ABBEY, WICKLOW.

The small and modest ruin located behind a high, stone wall at the northwestern end of Wicklow Town which is known locally as “the Abbey” is the remains of a Franciscan Friary dating from the 13th century. Originally on the edge of the medieval town of Wicklow, the Abbey was built in the reign of Henry III (1216-72) probably in the year 1265. Several writers attribute its construction to the O’Byrnes and the O’Tooles but it is more likely, owing to the strength of the Normans in the area and the proximity of the King’s castle – the Black Castle – that it was a Norman foundation. It was probably built by one of the Fitzgeralds who had possession of the town and its environs at the time. It later came under the patronage of the Irish clans in the 14th and 15th centuries who renovated it, thereby meriting the name of “founders” by contemporary writers.

The Abbey was confiscated in the reign of Edward VI (1547-53). At the time of the confiscation the Abbey and its surrounding grounds consisted of nine acres of arable land and one acre of meadow. From 1552 onwards it was leased to a long line of tenants. A sketch of the Abbey in a book published by Grosse in 1793 shows the ruin in a similar state as it is today. At present the only parts of the original Friary extant are two sections of the chapel i.e. the south transept, of what was a cruciform church, and part of the north wall of the nave. The south transept is the major section still standing and consists of an east wall, a north wall and a south wall that contains a very fine window. There are two semi-circular arches in the east wall. These may have originally been recesses that were subsequently broken through. The transept is joined to the nave by a large round arch. Only a part of the north wall of the nave remains and is twenty feet high. This wall has a low, pointed door towards the west.

The Abbey was visited in 1948 by Rev. Canice Mooney, O.F.M. who was researching Franciscan Architecture in Pre-Reformation Ireland. The ruins were so completely overgrown by and concealed under ivy that he couldn’t make out the original building. He returned in 1954 to find the ruins stripped of ivy and the grounds cleared. Today the remains of the Friary and its grounds are kept in pristine condition but unfortunately are hidden from view behind a high enclosing wall. However, public access is through a gate in the wall, which is always open.

Brendan Cullen