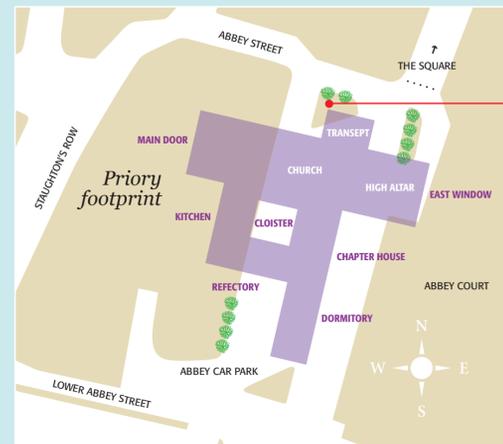


# Site of Holy Cross Dominican Priory



## The heart of Medieval Tralee

**YOU ARE STANDING ON THE SITE OF THE DOMINICAN Priory of the Holy Cross, known locally as the 'Abbey'. It was founded in 1243 during a period of rapid expansion in the town. While people had lived in the area for over 5,000 years, a settlement with urban buildings only developed after the arrival of the Anglo-Norman FitzGerald family in the early 1200s. The FitzGeralds built up their power base in Munster not just by violent conquest but also by establishing**



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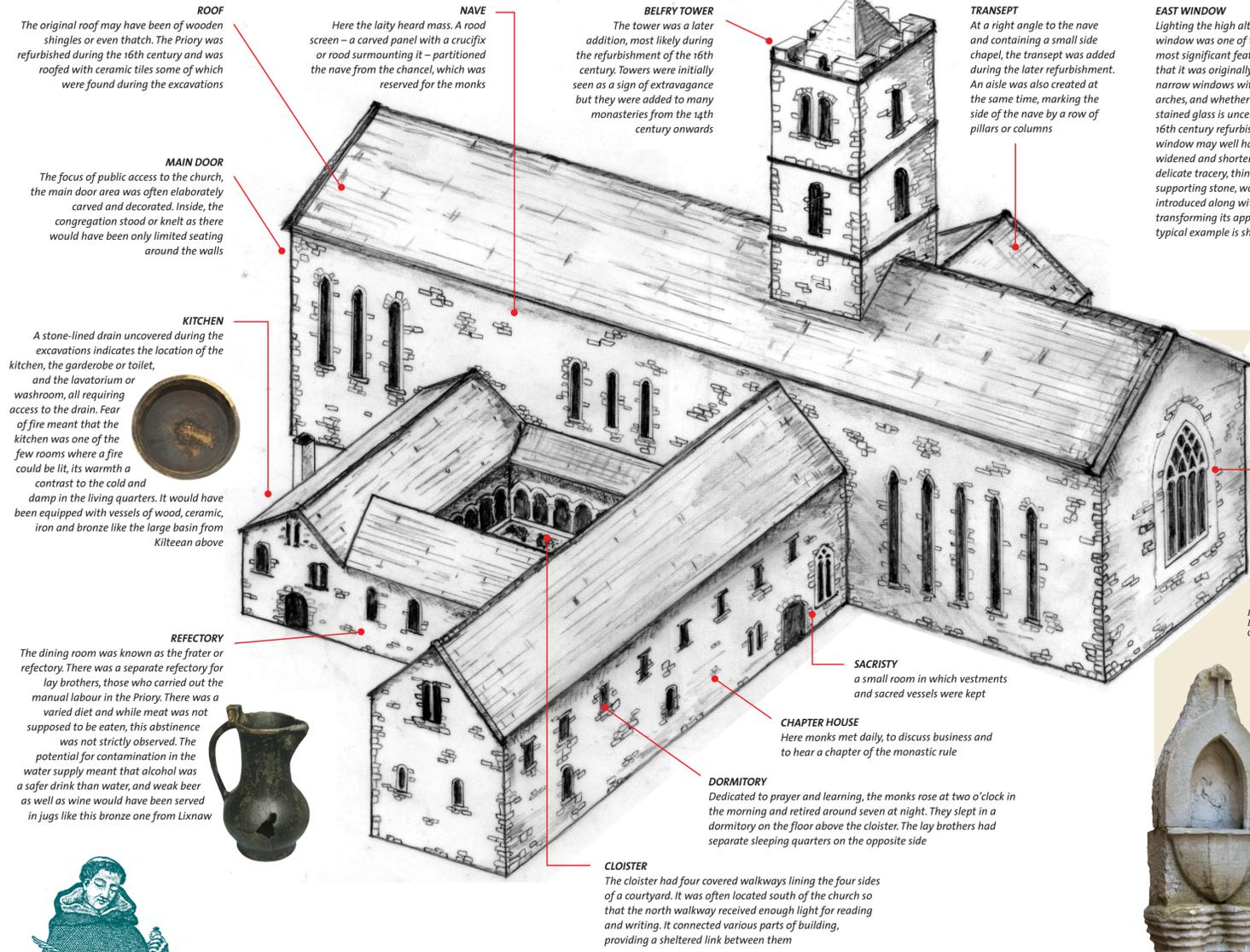
### BUILDING DIMENSIONS

Overall footprint: 1,000m<sup>2</sup> approx  
Overall length: 43m – 53m approx  
Overall width: 48m approx

castles, towns, churches and monasteries, and were eventually created Earls of Desmond. In Tralee, their first building of note was the castle, located at the junction of the present day Castle Street and Denny Street, and an urban centre began to grow around it. By 1243 the town was large enough to support the new mendicant order of the Dominicans, which relied on donations of money and gifts from the communities it served. With the patronage of the FitzGeralds, the Dominican Order was invited to build on a prime location adjacent to the castle. Inextricably linked from its foundation, the fortunes of the Priory followed those of the FitzGeralds. Under their protection it was able to withstand the upheaval of the Reformation, but the catastrophic rebellion of the last Earl in the 1580s brought the beginning of the end. In successive waves of destruction the Priory began to disappear from view and today nothing remains above ground but stone fragments.



## Priory timeline



**ROOF**  
The original roof may have been of wooden shingles or even thatch. The Priory was refurbished during the 16th century and was roofed with ceramic tiles some of which were found during the excavations

**NAVE**  
Here the laity heard mass. A roof screen – a carved panel with a crucifix or rood surmounting it – partitioned the nave from the chancel, which was reserved for the monks

**BELFRY TOWER**  
The tower was a later addition, most likely during the refurbishment of the 16th century. Towers were initially seen as a sign of extravagance but they were added to many monasteries from the 14th century onwards

**TRANSEPT**  
At a right angle to the nave and containing a small side chapel, the transept was added during the later refurbishment. An aisle was also created at the same time, marking the side of the nave by a row of pillars or columns

**EAST WINDOW**  
Lighting the high altar, the east window was one of the church's most significant features. It is likely that it was originally a series of tall, narrow windows with pointed arches, and whether it had plain or stained glass is uncertain. During the 16th century refurbishment the window may well have been widened and shortened. Ornate and delicate tracery, thin strips of supporting stone, would have been introduced along with stained glass, transforming its appearance. A typical example is shown here

**MAIN DOOR**  
The focus of public access to the church, the main door area was often elaborately carved and decorated. Inside, the congregation stood or knelt as there would have been only limited seating around the walls

**KITCHEN**  
A stone-lined drain uncovered during the excavations indicates the location of the kitchen, the garderobe or toilet, and the lavatorium or washroom, all requiring access to the drain. Fear of fire meant that the kitchen was one of the few rooms where a fire could be lit, its warmth a contrast to the cold and damp in the living quarters. It would have been equipped with vessels of wood, ceramic, iron and bronze like the large basin from Kiltewan above

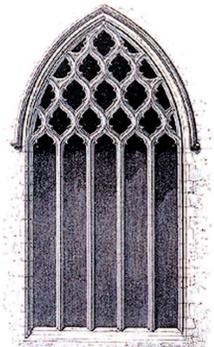
**REFECTORY**  
The dining room was known as the frater or refectory. There was a separate refectory for lay brothers, those who carried out the manual labour in the Priory. There was a varied diet and while meat was not supposed to be eaten, this abstinence was not strictly observed. The potential for contamination in the water supply meant that alcohol was a safer drink than water, and weak beer as well as wine would have been served in jugs like this bronze one from Lixnaw

**SACRISTY**  
a small room in which vestments and sacred vessels were kept

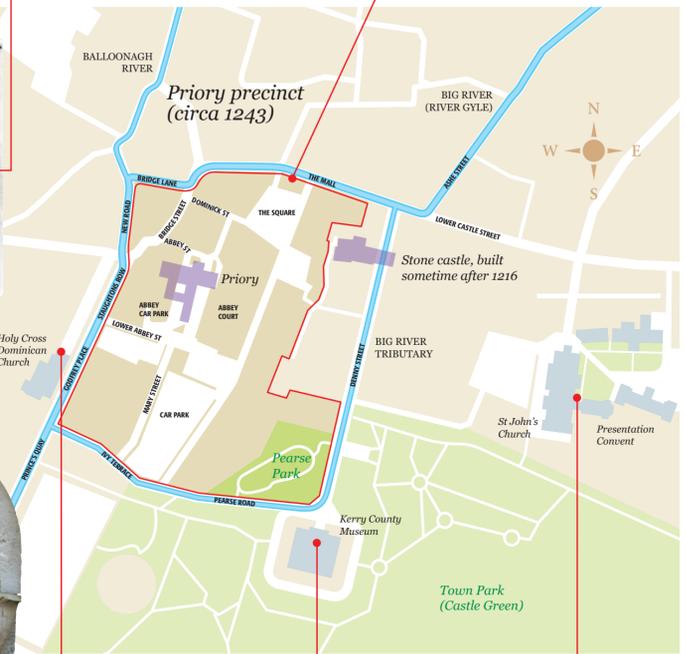
**CHAPTER HOUSE**  
Here monks met daily, to discuss business and to hear a chapter of the monastic rule

**DORMITORY**  
Dedicated to prayer and learning, the monks rose at two o'clock in the morning and retired around seven at night. They slept in a dormitory on the floor above the cloister. The lay brothers had separate sleeping quarters on the opposite side

**CLOISTER**  
The cloister had four covered walkways lining the four sides of a courtyard. It was often located south of the church so that the north walkway received enough light for reading and writing. It connected various parts of building, providing a sheltered link between them



**Location, location, location**  
The Priory stood on a low hill surrounded by water and marshy ground, essentially on an island created by the Big River (also known as the River Gyle) and a smaller tributary. The Big River would have followed the line of the present-day Mall, Stoughton's Row and on to Prince's Quay, while the tributary would have taken a course that is today Denny Street and Ivy Terrace. The Priory grounds were enclosed by a wall. Outside the wall wooden quays would have lined the river, allowing access for trading vessels up to five tons. Trade and the revenue derived from trade were vital to the continued success of the Priory. Inside the wall there were agricultural and storage buildings, orchards, gardens, animal pens, fields and the Priory graveyard.



**HOLY WATER STOUP – DOMINICAN CHURCH**  
Properly known as a stoup rather than font as is an external feature, it is made of three separate pieces of stone joined together at a much later date. The basin is sitting on top of what was once a piece of the cloister arcade



**TOMB WEEPER – KERRY COUNTY MUSEUM**  
The sides of a richly carved tomb would have been decorated with a figure such as this known as a 'weeper'. It depicts a knight wearing a surcoat, chainmail and belt, and holding a shield and sword in his left hand



**DEFACED VIRGIN – PRESENTATION CONVENT**  
This carving is now embedded in the wall of the Presentation Convent. The faces of the Virgin Mary and the angels were deliberately smashed, possibly by Cromwellian soldiers in their zeal to eradicate Catholicism and all its symbols

### The Dominicans in Tralee

Including gardens and lands extending over a five-acre site, the Priory in Tralee was one of the most substantial in Ireland. The Dominicans also had a corn mill and thirteen acres of land in Ballyvelly, about a mile to the west of the town, where they had fishing rights. Further west, they had a daughter house on a two-acre site in Dingle. The Priory's influence extended into the fertile plains of north Kerry, with a number of areas there paying five per cent of their corn harvest as a church tax known as a tith. Altogether, the Dominicans were capable of generating a significant income to support their community of approximately twenty friars. In 1584 the Priory's annual income was estimated at £12 18s (the equivalent economic power of €1 million today), making it one of the wealthiest Dominican houses in Ireland.



### What archaeologists uncovered

Although the Priory had long been levelled to the ground the foundations remained in place. A number of stone fragments were unearthed in the 1950s and 1960s during the course of building work. From the 1990s onwards, however, a series of excavations revealed the building's footprint, allowing archaeologists to map the layout of the Priory. Carved and decorated architectural pieces from the buildings were recovered, including sections of a supporting column from the church. One of the blocks of cut sandstone had a mason's mark, the signature of the man who worked on it. A number of burials were recorded around the church and cloister, and one of these, located under the cloister walkway, had a perforated scallop shell resting on its chest. This man had probably made the pilgrimage to the shrine of St James at Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain, scallop shells being the cherished mementos of that journey. Three stone tombs were recorded, high status burials that are more than likely those of members of the FitzGerald family. More domestically, bits of pottery, ceramic roof and green glazed floor tiles were also recovered.