# THE MEDIEVAL WALLED TOWNS OF KILDARE
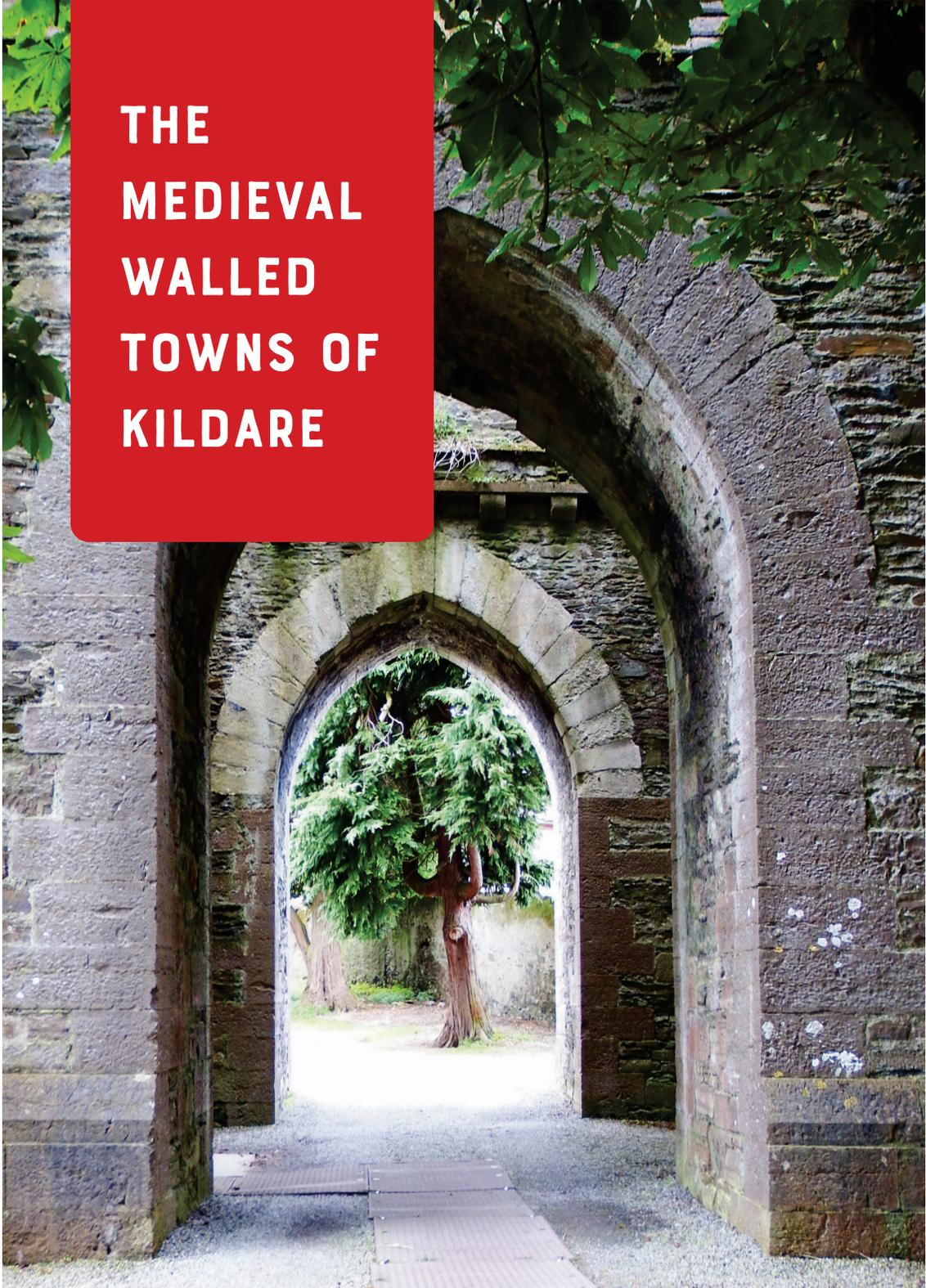
Cover image: St David's Church, Naas
Photo: Sharon Greene, Abarta Heritage

Kildare County Council
Comhairle Contae Chill Dara

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council

ABARTA HERITAGE

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# FOREWORD

I am delighted to be associated with this publication which seeks to showcase the exciting heritage of the Walled Towns of Kildare. One of the key aims of our County Kildare Heritage Plan is to raise awareness of the rich and diverse history of the county and this publication will shine a spotlight on our walled towns.

Kildare County has four towns in the Irish Walled Town Network (IWTN), Kildare, Athy, Castledermot and Naas. That membership has been very beneficial to the county over the last 20 years. Significant investment has been made for capital projects, to conserve the walls in Castledermot and Kildare town, and the preparation of Conservation Management Plans which have informed these works and greatly enhanced our understanding of the structure and function of medieval walled towns. The towns have also benefitted from investment in various interpretative projects and events which have enhanced the cultural and social life of these towns. Membership also provides for access to training and advice regarding the management and interpretation of the walls. The network provides an opportunity for peer-to-peer learning and collaboration for members.

This publication will set Kildare towns within the context of existing walled towns. It will highlight their history and interesting facts about each town. The walls provide a tangible link to our shared past and the heritage of the county.

*Councillor Darragh Fitzpatrick*
*Cathaoirleach, Kildare County Council*

# WHAT IS A WALLED TOWN?

The walled towns of Kildare encapsulate the story of our past, from the modern day right back to the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in the 12th century – in some cases even further.

At the end of the 12th century, when the Anglo-Normans arrived, most Irish settlement was rural with the exception of the Viking port towns like Dublin, Waterford and Limerick. This was a time that saw unprecedented urban growth across Europe, and Ireland was no exception. The colonising lords and the king quickly began to establish manors and towns in the Irish countryside, often placing settlers from England and elsewhere as residents. Many of them were French speaking but over time English became the main spoken language and the residents identified as 'English'. In later centuries, an 'Irish' settlement sometimes sprung up close to the town that would be known as 'Irishtown'.

Medieval towns were issued charters granting them borough status. Defence was a primary concern and in many cases the town was surrounded initially by a large ditch and earthen bank with a wooden palisade on top. As time went on, murage grants were sought from the king. These allowed the townspeople to collect tolls or taxes from those entering the town to pay for the construction and maintenance of large stone walls. Toll agents were usually based at the gates, of which there were rarely more than four. As well as gate houses, the wall circuit could also be punctuated by towers where lookouts and archers would be posted.

Town walls were an impressive display of wealth and power, while also forming a distinct boundary between the town 'within' and everything else 'without'. Part of the security it provided was not just military, but an economic security that came from a protected market place and an easy method of collecting tolls. The most important function of walled towns was as a market centre for trading goods from the town and its agricultural hinterland.

The kind of trades recorded both in historical records and archaeological evidence include brewing, woodworking, shoemaking, smithing,



*Sixteenth century effigy of Sir Maurice Fitzgerald of Lackagh in Kildare Cathedral. Photo: Sharon Greene, Abarta Heritage*

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tanning and pottery making. Both locally made pottery and vessels from elsewhere in Ireland and abroad have been found in excavations, giving us clues as to the extent of the trade network at the time.

Kildare's medieval towns received permission to hold fairs and markets. The larger annual fairs took place outside the walls and markets were held weekly in an open area within the town. The fairs would have been attended by merchants from further afield, even overseas, selling luxury goods like spices, wine and fine cloth.

Most buildings within the town would have been built of wood with stone reserved for higher status buildings such as the lord's residence or castle, the parish church and the one or more religious houses usually located just outside the town gates. Parish churches were usually located in a corner of the walled circuit and sometimes the wall circuit took a slight detour to enclose an older church and graveyard that predated the foundation of the town.

The head of each household within the town was known as a burgess and the piece of property they were granted was known as a burgage plot. These plots were long and narrow with a house at the front, facing onto the street, and a long back garden that might contain outhouses, workshops and animal pens. In some towns, the pattern of burgage plots can still be traced in property boundaries.

Town walls bore the brunt of many attacks over the centuries but it was the age of gunpowder and cannon and a prohibition on the fortification of Irish towns in 1700 that saw the beginning of the end of medieval town walls. From then they began to suffer from neglect and even demolition to make way for new developments.

Today our walled towns are recognised as important national heritage assets. They provide a connection between the current communities and the townspeople of the past, while shaping the current and future form and fabric of our modern towns. Conservation and management of historic walls contributes to an enhanced quality of life and wellbeing for residents and visitors alike, so they can be treasured long into the future.

## WHERE ARE KILDARE'S WALLED TOWNS?

There are eight medieval walled towns recorded in County Kildare of which four are members of the Irish Walled Towns Network. Some of these have survived to be busy urban centres today, such as Naas, while others, like Timolin, were destined for a more modest existence. There are many possible reasons for this including the continued importance of the route they were located on and the impacts of the Black Death or the changing fates of their overlords.

Naas, Kildare, Castledermot and Athy were the four principal towns in medieval Kildare and their stories give important insights into the history of the period. The shire or county of Kildare was formed by King John on his visit to Ireland in 1210, however it had become a significant region for the new Anglo-Normans since their arrival a few years earlier. It consisted of large areas of good farmland accessed by the River Barrow and River Liffey which extended to the ports of Waterford in the south and Dublin in the east. It was also within the province of Leinster, the territory of Dermot Mac Murrough, who had brought them to Ireland to help him regain his kingdom. Richard de Clare, also known as Strongbow, became Lord of Leinster through his marriage to Mac Murrough's daughter Aoife. Strongbow granted land to his followers, including Maurice Fitzgerald, whose family would come to be associated closely with the county for many centuries to come.

Kildare's walled towns were mostly associated with important cross-country trade routes and existing sites of political or religious significance, such as the monastery of Kildare. Although they benefited from being close to the Pale, the area of Anglo-Norman control around Dublin, this came with its challenges too. The region was the focus of frequent attacks from the dispossessed Gaelic Irish in the Wicklow Mountains to the east and Laois and Offaly to the west, which made the defence of its urban centres a high priority.
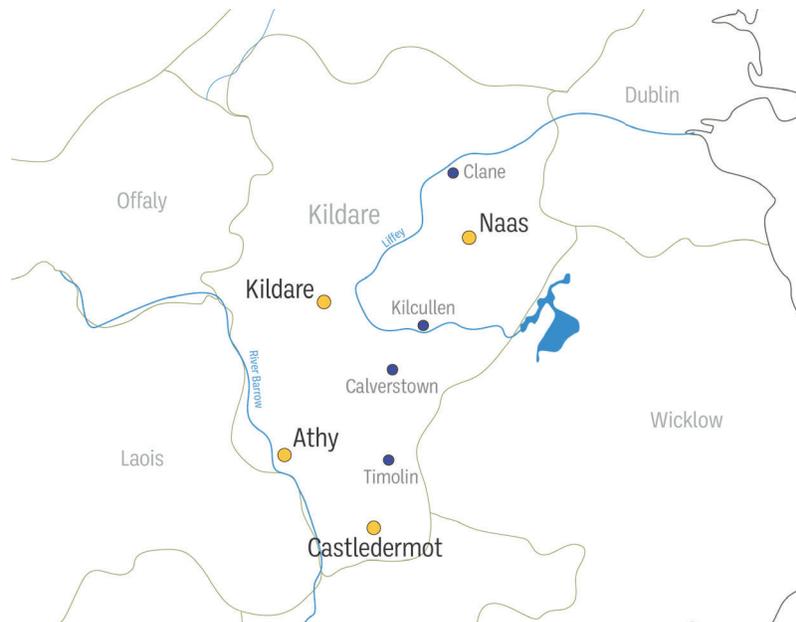


*Map of Walled Towns in County Kildare*

*'The Bridge at Athy' by Mark Guernon 2021*
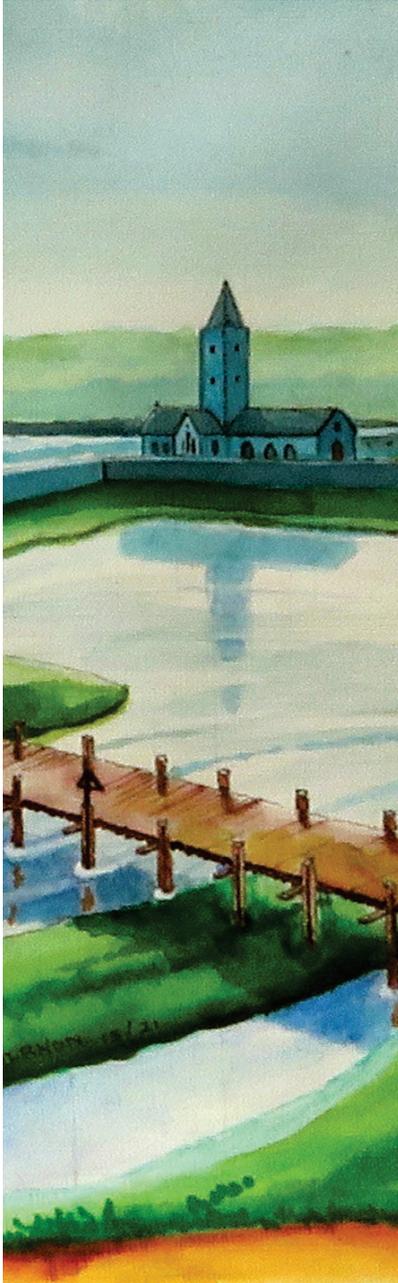
# ATHY

## THE ANGLO-NORMAN TOWN

The Irish name for Athy, Baile Áth Í, means 'the ford of Ae' and refers to the son of a Munster chief killed at a battle here in the 2nd century AD. This is the earliest recorded battle fought at Athy, but over the centuries the town has been at the centre of numerous conflicts and military encounters.

Athy was a frontier town, located on the banks of the River Barrow, Ireland's second longest river, which gave it access to Waterford on the south coast. The town developed from a significant river crossing or fording point on the ancient route way known as the Slighe Dálagh. This crossing point was always central to the story of the town.

Following the arrival of Strongbow in the late 12th century, the area was granted to Robert de St. Michael who was given the title Lord of Rheban. He built Woodstock Castle near the river crossing, on the west bank of the river and Rheban Castle about 3km further to the north with the aim of controlling strategic river crossings and routes to the south. In the late 13th century the area passed to the Fitzgerald family whose influence on the town lasted into the modern day.

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*White's Castle, Athy. Photo: Neil Jackman, Abarta Heritage*

Owing to its location, Athy experienced significant strife over the centuries. The town was constantly under threat from Gaelic Irish clans who had been dispossessed of their lands by the Anglo-Normans. The O' Mores and O' Kellys to the west of the Barrow were amongst those who raided and burned the town on several occasions, the earliest being 1308. As the 14th century progressed, the town was subject to famine, the Black Death, and frequent attacks. Edward Bruce plundered the town in 1315 after his defeat of Norman forces at the Battle of Ardscull, a short distance to the north and, as Anglo-Norman power waned and their area of influence contracted to The Pale, Athy stood at the outermost reaches of the English area of influence. It thus became an important defensive outpost for repelling the native Irish.

In 1417, Sir John Talbot constructed White's Castle and a bridge over the river, replacing one of a pair of towers that once protected either side of the crossing. Records of the first murage or town wall grants follow shortly afterwards. These defences were regularly tested. After the Silken Thomas Rebellion in the 1530s, the town was forfeited to the crown for a time and was attacked by both the Kavanaghs and O'Mores.

During the wars of the 1640s, the town was heavily garrisoned and in 1648, it became a battleground between Catholic Confederate General Owen Roe O'Neill and the forces of Thomas Preston. Preston destroyed the tower on the west bank of the river and much of the Dominican priory before attempting

an assault on the south gate. This was a disaster and he lost several hundred of his men. Just two years later, the bridge and castle were blown up so that the approaching Cromwellian forces would not be able to use them.

## TOWN WALLS

A reference to 'Thomas the janitor (gatekeeper)' in 1297, suggests that there was already some form of gated defence around the settlement at the earliest stage of Athy's development, perhaps a palisaded bank and ditch. The first reference to an actual town wall, as opposed to enclosure of the town, was a murage grant in 1431. This coincided with the appointment of a military governor with a permanent garrison by the Lord Chief Justice of Ireland. This and the second murage grant in 1448 highlight the continued desire to keep the town well defended.

Assessment of the circuit of Athy's town wall is based in part on the surviving street layouts and burgage plots, documentary material and analysis of the available historic mapping, including the late eighteenth century surveys by John Rocque. It appears to have been roughly rectangular in shape, crossing



*Preston's Gate drawn by G. V. du Noyer in the 19th century.*
*Courtesy of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*

*Cromaboo bridge and White's Castle . Photo: Neil Jackman, Abarta Heritage*

the river with the bridge at its centre. There were four gates: Lady Helen's Gate in the middle of the west wall, Preston's Gate near the east end of the south wall, St Michael's Gate in the east wall and Tubber Muiland Gate near the east end of the north wall. The presence of only one gate on the west bank of the river is a reminder that most military threats came from that direction. A mural tower known as Black Castle is believed to have stood close to the latter gate.



*Fitzgerald crest set into the wall of White's Castle. Photo: Neil Jackman, Abarta Heritage*

A charter from Henry VIII in 1515 gave the first actual direction for walls to be built, presumably repairing or completing walls built with the earlier murage grants. Direct references to the town walls are rare, as they were just one part of the town's strong defence system. In 1670, two large fires destroyed many of the mainly timber buildings within the town, necessitating large scale rebuilding. This was done by the 'English tradesmen' of the town with the support of both the Duke of Leinster and King Charles II. It is thought that any remaining town wall was dismantled and the stone reused at this stage.

Sadly, no evidence of the town wall can be seen today apart from the narrowing of the road to Carlow at Preston's Gate. Although this gate was removed in 1860, the location still preserves the name. A geophysical survey at the Parochial House in Stanhope Street in 2013 revealed evidence for a bank, wall foundation and large ditch beside the site of Tubber Muiland Gate, supporting the proposed line of the wall circuit in this area.

## CROM ABÚ BRIDGE AND WHITE'S CASTLE

The defence of this important crossing place was paramount to the development of the town. The first bridge across the river was built around the 13th century. The name of the bridge relates to the battle cry of the Fitzgeralds, who were Earls of Kildare and landlords of Athy throughout the medieval period and beyond. The battle cry "Croom to Victory" refers to Croom in County Limerick, a stronghold of the Desmond branch of the family who ruled south Munster.

The current bridge was constructed in 1796 by James Delahunty; a plaque on the bridge marks this and refers to Delahunty as a 'Knight of the Trowel'. This has remained the only crossing point for traffic passing through the town up to recent times.



*Woodstock Castle. Photo: Neil Jackman, Abarta Heritage*

White's Castle and the bridge were refortified in the 16th century and the castle was frequently the base for garrisons in the town. It was later used as a jail between 1730 and 1820 with prisoners held in a dungeon in the basement, most notably in the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion. During the 19th century it was a police barracks. Today it is in private ownership with no access to the public.

Two plaques can be seen on the external wall of the castle. One is the Fitzgerald coat of arms. This was defaced by the local yeomanry during the 1798 Rebellion, possibly due to the support of Lord Edward Fitzgerald for the United Irishmen.

## MONASTIC HOUSES

Two monastic houses were founded in the early days of Athy. Soon after his arrival in the 13th century, de St Michael founded the priory and hospital of St. Michael and St. Thomas the Martyr on the west bank, south of his castle at Woodstock. They became better known as the Crutched Friars of St John by the 16th century and the current graveyard of St John's, located off a lane of the same name, is thought to preserve part of that site. The main street on this side of the river was also once called St. John's Street.

A Dominican priory was established on the east bank, in the vicinity of the 'Back Square' (near the courthouse), in either 1253 or 1257. It is unclear whether this was built by the de St Michaels or the Wogans. Nothing of the medieval priory survives above ground, but the order survived in the town until 2015. Both monastic houses were affected by the many attacks and sieges on the town before being suppressed by Henry VIII in 1540.



*St Michael's medieval Church. Photo: Sharon Greene, Abarta Heritage*

## WOODSTOCK CASTLE

This substantial hall house castle was the focus of the first settlement built by de St Michael in the mid 13th century. As late as 1655 it was surrounded by a cluster of houses, depicted on the Down Survey map.

This castle is often associated with the story of how the Fitzgerald coat of arms came to include an image of a monkey. It is said that the infant, John FitzThomas, later the 1st Earl of Kildare, who was born in 1250, was asleep in Woodstock Castle when a fire broke out. In all the confusion of the fire, an ape, who was normally kept in chains as a pet, broke free and rescued the baby, keeping him safe in a tower. Out of gratitude, the Fitzgeralds added it into their family crest and adopted the family motto of 'Non Immemor Beneficii' ('Not Forgetful of Favours').

## ST MICHAEL'S MEDIEVAL PARISH CHURCH

The now ruined parish church dedicated to St Michael stood a short distance outside the east gate of the medieval town. It was built around 1297, probably by the de St Michaels and was in use with good attendance until at least the end of the 17th century. Two 13th century grave slabs and a 16th or 17th century crucifixion plaque from this church are preserved in the Shackleton Museum.

## AN 18TH CENTURY MARKET TOWN

In the 18th century Athy became a prosperous market town that benefitted from improvements in agricultural production, communications and infrastructure. The latter included the improved road system, the rebuilding of the bridge and the completion by 1792 of the Grand Canal. Both of these facilitated movement of goods to major population centres such as Dublin. There was also increased industry such as tanning, brewing, distilling and malting. All this activity led to the redesign of the town centre with a new market square (Emily Square and other street names reflect the patronage of the Fitzgeralds at this time) and the magnificent market house, completed in 1740. This is now the home of the Shackleton Museum, which remembers the life and career of Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton as well as including exhibits on other aspects of local history.

The current courthouse, close to the riverbank, was originally built as a corn exchange in 1858 marking the continued importance of agriculture to the town's history.
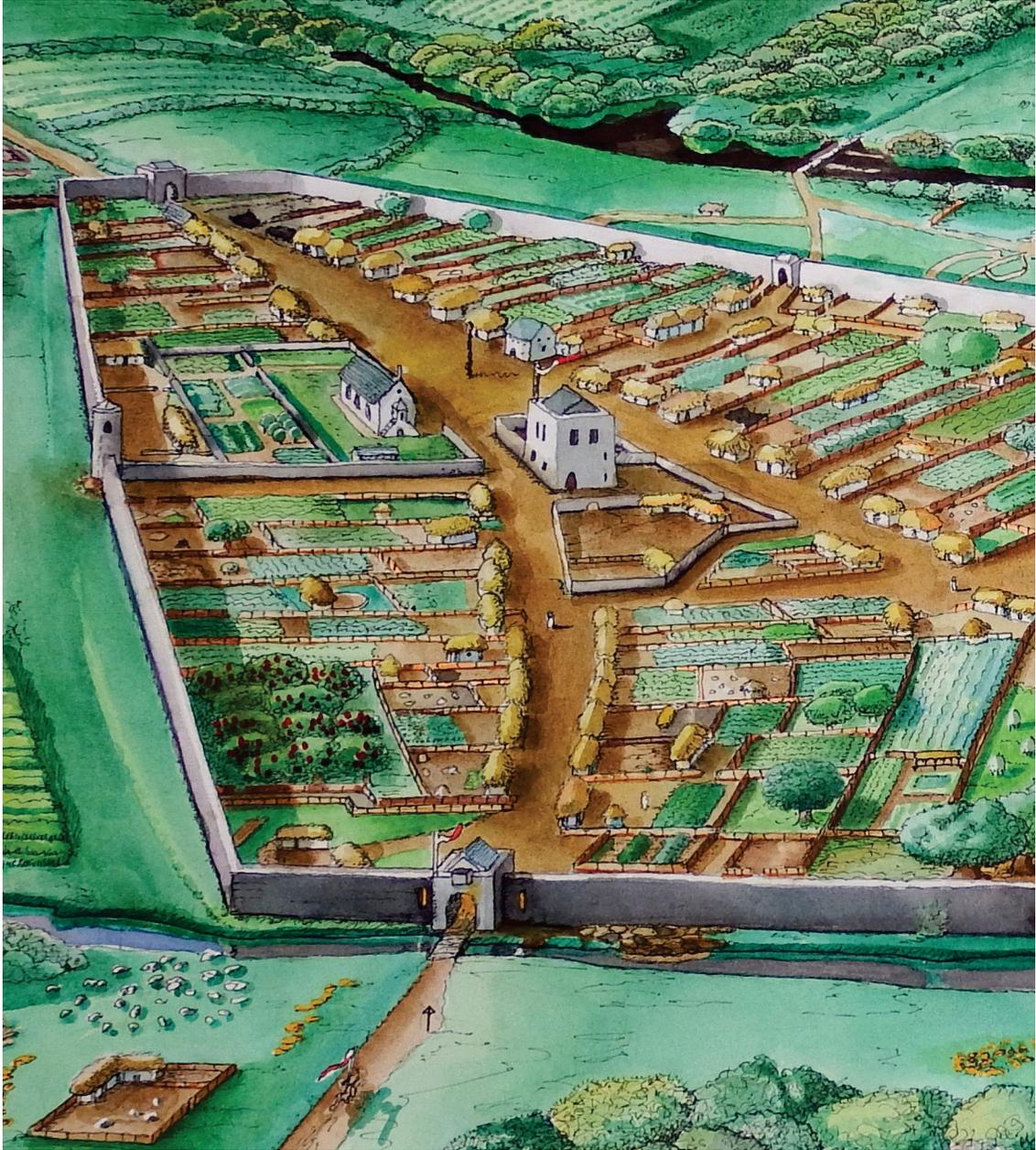
*Reconstruction of medieval Castledermot by Marc Guernon. Courtesy of Castledermot Local History Group*

# CASTLEDERMOT

## THE ANGLO-NORMAN TOWN

The origins of Castledermot are found in the early medieval monastic settlement founded by Diarmait in AD 814. Known as Díseart Diarmada, 'Dermot's desert', the name probably reflects its original function as a hermitage. This was an important site which featured quite regularly in the annals. The last mention of the monastery was its destruction by fire in AD 1106.

Around 1171, the territory in which Díseart Diarmada stood was granted to Walter de Riddlesford and the earliest evidence for the existence of a borough here is a charter for his 'vill of Trisseldermod' between 1225 and 1233. Tristledermot was laid out with a main street running north-south. This diverged at the market square and had long burgage plots running from the roadside to the town boundaries. Already by 1264, the town was deemed a suitable location for hosting large administrative gatherings. In June of that year a significant meeting took place that was the first meeting in Ireland to be recorded as a parliament.

Despite suffering the ravages of Edward the Bruce and the Black Death, and the contraction of Anglo-Norman control toward the Pale in the fourteenth century, Tristledermot rallied. No less than twelve parliaments or great councils met there between 1378 and 1404. During the Gaelic resurgence, it was attacked twice by the MacMurroughs in 1405 and 1427. However, in 1485 the Earl of Kildare, Gearóid Mór, refortified the town and built a castle, meaning that it was considered safe enough to hold a parliament in 1499. It was after this refortification that the town's name changed to Castledermot.

*South high cross. Photo: Sharon Greene, Abarta Heritage*

At the end of the 16th century Castledermot was still regarded as one of the principal towns of County Kildare, however it saw considerable decline in the seventeenth century. It was attacked by Cromwellian forces in 1650 and the castle and town walls were dismantled. The location of the castle has been forgotten but it is believed to have been near the market square. By the end of that century it was described as a 'poor beggarly town' and its principal roles into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were as a postal town, a staging post between Dublin and Kilkenny and a fair town.

## ST JAMES'S CHURCH

Located within a bend in the eastern side of the town defences is the church of St James. This is the site of the early monastery and some of its features still survive in the graveyard. The round tower is unusual in having its door at ground level. Known as cloigthech meaning 'bell house' in Irish, it is believed that the monks rang the hours of service from the upper windows using the handbells of the time. In the fifteenth century a passage was built connecting the tower to the church and in the 18th century a large, cast iron bell was added that is still in use today.

Three high crosses stand in the graveyard to the north, south and west of the church. The north and south crosses are highly decorated with scriptural scenes and abstract art. The undecorated base of a third cross stands close to the Romanesque arch. Both the crosses and tower are attributed to Abbot Cairbre, who died in AD 919.

In the later 12th century, a large stone church was built here in the Romanesque style, replacing the one burnt down in 1106. The arch that stands in front of the current church was its doorway. Rededicated to St James, this very likely stood directly on the early church's foundations. In the 13th century this was enlarged further with the addition of a new nave and south aisle. The pointed arches that once led to the aisle can still be seen inside, surviving as recesses in the south wall. Some later medieval grave slabs can be seen lying near the south high cross. These would have been commissioned by the better off members of the medieval community.

Lying close to the arch you will see a large granite slab with a simple incised Latin cross lying on the grass to your left. This is believed to mark the grave of Cormac mac Cuileannán, bishop and king of Munster. He had been a student here and was buried next to his old master Snedghus after he died in the Battle of Ballaghmoon, just 7km from Castledermot, in AD 908.

*Hogback burial stone. Photo: Sharon Greene, Abarta Heritage*

Another interesting burial monument lies near the south high cross. This is believed to be the only example of a Viking hogback burial stone in Ireland. It dates to about the mid-tenth century. Sadly this is too late to attribute it to anyone killed at the nearby battle of Sciath Nechtain, where the Norse were defeated in AD 848. It raises interesting questions about Scandinavian activity in the area and who it was erected for.

## TOWN WALLS

Tristledermot received a seven year murage grant in 1295, most likely because of both the continued threat of attack from the Gaelic Irish and the town's growing administrative importance. The walls would prove important in the following centuries when the town saw attacks from both native and foreign forces, necessitating repeated repairs.

Records suggest there were at least three named gates accessing the town: Dublingate to the north, Tullowgate to the south and Carlowgate to the south-west. The latter was the main routeway to the towns further south including Carlow and Kilkenny. There may have been a fourth gate to the east, near the Fair Green.

The only upstanding remains of the town wall can be seen at Carlowgate, where part of the gate survives and fragments can be glimpsed in the

*The remains of medieval Carlowgate Photo: Sharon Greene*

overgrown bank of the stream nearby. However, the location of the original circuit is fairly well understood thanks to a combination of historic maps, excavations and geophysical surveys.

## FRANCISCAN FRIARY

The church with its adjoining tower are all that remain of a friary complex constructed some time before 1247, when it received a royal grant from the Royal Justiciar, John Fitzgeoffrey. It was possibly founded by Walter de Riddlesford the Younger who inherited the area from his father.

The friary's church is an impressive structure. Today visitors enter through a modern doorway under the massive east window. In the west gable there are two tall lancet windows and a blocked, off-centre doorway which was the original entrance. A blocked doorway in the south wall of the nave once led to the cloister. In 1302, the friary received a large grant which saw the construction of the northern aisle of the nave, the north transept and the east window, the latter perhaps part of an extension eastwards. The high altar was under the east window. Fragments of stained glass from this massive window were found in excavations immediately outside.

*The north transept of the Franciscan Friary with three side chapels.*
*Photo: Neil Jackman, Abarta Heritage*

Another now blocked doorway in the south wall of the church once led to the vestry, which in turn led to the domestic tower attached to the south wall. This tower was probably built for defence, the friary being located outside the town walls. The ground floor now stores a collection of window mouldings and cut stone including fragments of 13th to 14th century cross slabs. By the time of the Dissolution three hundred years later, the friary was described as having a church, a tower, two halls, a kitchen, a garden, an orchard, a cemetery, a stonewalled courtyard, three dwellings, fields and a water mill.

This Franciscan friary is one of only three in Ireland with a transept to the north. No tracery survives in the notable north window, but it is recorded in antiquarian drawings made before it was pulled down at the end of the 18th century, allegedly by a farmer worried it might collapse on his livestock!

An arcade of three impressive pointed arches creates three small side chapels along the transept's east wall. The central chapel is home of the only cadaver effigy surviving in county Kildare. Its surface bears the images of two cadavers in low false relief with a ringed, fleur-de-lys cross between them. The inscription commemorates James Tallon and Joan Skelton with an incomplete date thought to be 1505.

Excavations in Abbey Street, close to the friary uncovered burials belonging to a cemetery for the medieval town's community. In addition to this, when part of the nave's south wall collapsed in 1912, a vault was revealed with four burials, one recorded as being in a tomb with moulded jambs.

In the small paddock immediately to the north of the church, a gable wall is all that remains of a chapel that was burned down in 1799. Emerging under the west side of this gable is a holy well dedicated to St James.

## PRIORY OF ST JOHN

Just outside Dublingate, at the northern end of the town, was a Priory of Crutched Friars, founded in 1210 by Walter de Riddlesford and his wife. This acted as a hospital. In 1539 the priory consisted of a church, belfry, dormitory, tower, two halls, three chambers, some land and a watermill. Shortly after this the church was recorded as being roofless with the belfry being used for defence of the town. Most of with the church was demolished leaving only the square belfry known as the 'Pigeon House', located now in a private garden.



*The bell tower of the priory of St John. Photo: Sharon Greene*

In the nineteenth century a vaulted chamber was found underground a short distance to the northwest of the tower, but no other information survives regarding the layout of this site which once had such an important religious and social role in the medieval town.

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*Medieval map of Kildare by Marc Guernon. Courtesy of Kildare Heritage Centre*
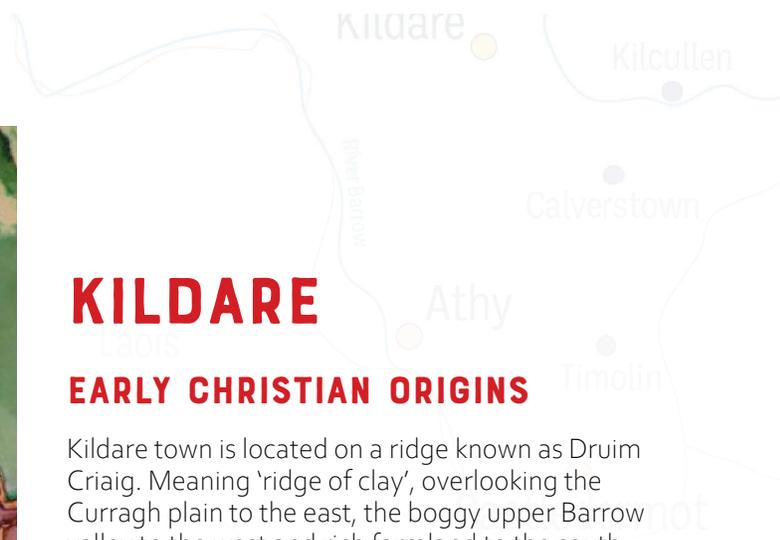
# KILDARE

## EARLY CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

Kildare town is located on a ridge known as Druim Criaig. Meaning 'ridge of clay', overlooking the Curragh plain to the east, the boggy upper Barrow valley to the west and rich farmland to the south-east. It is between the floodplains of the Rivers Liffey and Barrow but has no river of its own, something that impacted its later urban history in particular.

Saint Bridget founded her church here in the 5th century which became known as Cill Dara, 'church of the oak', Some believe that it replaced an earlier pre-Christian shrine. Bridget's Church was initially a foundation for women, but soon became a dual foundation. The first bishop here was Conleth who died in 520. Abbesses can be traced in a continual line from the 8th century to the arrival of the Anglo-Normans. There is some suggestion also that the local Uí Dúnlainge king had a settlement here, though no trace of this has survived.

Bridget was recognised as one of Ireland's three patron saints along with Patrick and Colmcille and Kildare flourished as an important pilgrimage site. As a result it became an exceptionally rich, well built settlement.  It has even been argued that Kildare makes a case for the beginnings of town life in Ireland. We get a tantalising glimpse of its infrastructure from a reference that describes how, in AD 909, the King of Leinster died in an accident outside a combmaker's house on the 'street of the stone steps (or flags)'. When Giraldus Cambrensis came here in AD 1185 he already referred to the people as cives or 'townspeople'.

*Kildare round tower and high cross. Photo: Neil Jackman, Abarta Heritage*

This wealthy settlement was a target for Viking attacks, the first of which happened in 835 and 836 from fleets sailing up the River Liffey. There were no less than fifteen recorded attacks between 843 and 998. The monastery was also occasionally attacked by Irish forces. In 1155, for example, Dermot McMurrough abducted the Abbess, forcing her to marry one of his followers and is said to have killed many men.

The importance of the monastery was marked at the Synod of Rath Breasail in AD 1111 when Kildare was made the centre of a large diocese, largely in recognition of the importance of Bridget.

## ANGLO-NORMAN TOWN

The Anglo-Normans' attraction to Kildare was more strategic than spiritual. Strongbow made Kildare his base of operations as early as 1172, attracted by the hilltop location and perhaps also by the existing infrastructure of the monastic settlement and the good farmland nearby. It became his chief manor in his north Leinster lordship. William Marshall, Earl of Pembroke and Lord of Leinster, built a castle here and it is likely that further defences were built around the settlement at the same time. He did not reside here long however as in 1197 he surrendered the 'castle, manor and shire' to William de Vesci. In 1247 de Vesci surrendered them to King Edward, who directed the Justiciary John Hogan to take possession. In 1316 the castle and town were then granted by Edward II to John FitzThomas under the new title Earl of Kildare, thus placing it in the hands of the Fitzgerald family where it would remain until the twentieth century.

Kildare received borough status before Strongbow's death in 1176 and there are numerous references to the burgesses of the town through the 13th and 14th centuries. The clearest evidence of wealth is the number of religious foundations appearing at this time and the population of the town is believed to have been about 1000 by 1328. In 1515 the town received a charter of incorporation from Henry VIII which granted permission for a weekly market and to collect pavage and murage (which were types of grants) to build and maintain the streets and town walls.

## TOWN LAYOUT AND DEFENCES

Cogitosus, a cleric who wrote an account of Saint Bridget's life in the 7th century, mentions a cashel surrounding the church, which was probably the inner enclosure common to all early monastic sites. Hints of this are thought perhaps to survive in some of the street pattern, in particular Priest's Lane and the southern part of Station Road. Some evidence has also been found of a much larger outer enclosure for the monastery. It is likely that the Anglo-Normans used at least some of the existing infrastructure of the monastery in their initial settlement.



*Gatehouse to Kildare castle.*
*Photo: Neil Jackman, Abarta Heritage*

There are few references to the medieval town wall so our understanding of their circuit and even of the layout of the streets is conjectural. We can be confident however that the circuit included the enclosing walls of the cathedral and castle. For example, Cleamore Road, meaning 'black ditch', runs along the west side of the town and is believed to reflect part of the outer enclosure that was later used in the town wall circuit.

The locations of the town gates are no longer precisely known. According to place name and other documentary evidence, we know there were at least three: Ellis Gate (on modern Station Road), White Gate to the east (on Dublin Road) and Clare Gate Street to the west. The latter may have been named for Strongbow's family name, de Clare. The main thoroughfare was Claregate Street and Dublin Street, via the south side of the Market Square. Limited evidence for burgage plots survive but John Roque's 1757 map shows some surviving on the south side of Dublin Street.

The foundations of a square stone building dating to the 12th or 13th century were found in an excavation on the corner of Bride Street and Bangup Lane. It had been built on top of a filled in early medieval ditch (probably part of the monastery's outer enclosure) but the function of the stone building is less

clear. Was it part of the town's defences or a fortified house within the town? The foundations can be viewed through a glass panel in the floor of the Credit Union building subsequently built on the site.

## KILDARE CASTLE

The original motte and bailey castle is believed to have been built by William Marshal before 1185 on elevated ground to the east of the monastery. The motte seems to have survived as late as the mid-eighteenth century when John Rocque recorded a steep sided mound close to the later stone castle.

The stone castle that replaced it appears to have consisted of four towers and outbuildings surrounded by a bawn wall. In the 19th century, this enclosed area survived as 'the Park'. The only surviving features are the fortified tower known as the gatehouse which can be seen in a carpark off Dublin Street and portions of the bawn wall.

The castle was a place of refuge for priests in the early 17th century, during the time of the Penal Laws and was taken by both Confederate and Parliamentarian forces in 1641. In the 18th century the bawn was occupied by a large house that was the home of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, a leader of the 1798 Rising.

## KILDARE CATHEDRAL AND THE PERPETUAL FIRE

Ralph of Bristol, Bishop of the diocese of Kildare from AD 1223-1232, is credited with building the stone cathedral. It stands in the ancient monastic enclosure overlooked by the round tower, most of which dates to the 12th century, though the foundations are older. The nearby high cross is difficult to date but may also belong to this time period.

After the Reformation, the cathedral became a centre of Protestant worship. However its congregation was far too small to support its upkeep and it became seriously dilapidated. The bishops and other clergy were absentees so the nearby Bishop's Palace too became ruinous by the mid-1600s and eventually was torn down.

During the Irish Confederate Wars in the mid-17th century, the central tower and the north transept were severely damaged in a military attack. After this most of the building was roofless, and it was derelict by 1649. In 1686, Bishop William Moreton, also Dean of Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin, partially rebuilt the chancel.

*St Brigid's Cathedral. Photo: Neil Jackman, Abarta Heritage*

The Protestant congregation increased with the construction of military barracks on the Curragh justifying its restoration by eminent Gothic revival architect G.E. Street, beginning in 1875. It was completed by James Franklin Fuller in 1896. The fabric of this building contains hints of its many stages of building and restoration and inside is an interesting collection of features that include carved cross slabs, effigies, tombs, stained glass windows and even the font in which Saint Laurence O'Toole is said to have been baptised.

On the north side of the cathedral, a low-walled square enclosure marks the site of the 'Fire Temple', the site of a perpetual fire tended by the nuns of St Bridget. In 1185, Giraldus Cambrensis described it as surrounded by a circular fence or hedge that men were never allowed to enter. The flame was first extinguished on the orders of the Archbishop of Dublin in 1220, perhaps because of pagan associations, but it continued in use until the Reformation. The flame was relit by the Brigidine sisters in 1993 who tend it in their centre, Solas Bhríde.

## RELIGIOUS HOUSES

There were a number of religious establishments in and close to Kildare town, all beyond the town walls. In 1254, William de Vesci invited the Franciscan friars at Castledermot to establish a house at Kildare. This was built between 1254 and 1260 a short distance to the south of the town. Construction was completed under the patronage Gerald FitzMaurice, 1st Lord Offaly and there are a number of Earls of Kildare buried here. By the time of the Reformation it consisted of a church, a belfry, a dormitory, a hall, three chambers, a kitchen, a cemetery, gardens and other parcels of land. The Franciscans returned to Grey Abbey in c.1621 but by the later 1700s it was a ruin. The church ruins can still be seen in its graveyard.

The Carmelite friary, or White Abbey, was founded around 1290 by William de Vesci north-west of the cathedral. It was surrendered to the Crown in 1539 but the Carmelites returned to Kildare around 1710. They reacquired the former abbey site in 1889 and built the impressive gothic church still in use today. On the wall of the north transept is a small collection of 15th and 16th century carved stones. These are believed to have been brought here from the Grey Abbey for safekeeping.

The Knights Templar founded a monastery at Tully in the early 13th century, which was passed to the Knights Hospitaller in 1308. Now in the grounds of the Irish National Stud, the Perceptory of Tully, known as the Black Abbey, operated for about three hundred years before it was dissolved in 1538.

By 1307 a church and associated hospital dedicated to St Mary Magdalene was located to the east of the town. Its exact location is unknown but it is believed to be around Hospital Street, which is named after the former 19th century Lock Hospital, itself built on a site known as Magdalene Hill.

## DECLINE AND REVIVAL

During the Nine Years War (1594-1603), Kildare was so badly damaged that it was described as 'altogether disinhibited.' By then the Earls of Kildare favoured their castles at Maynooth and Kilkea, so were not investing in the upkeep of the town. For these reasons Kildare lost its administrative functions as shire town to Naas.

It became an important garrison town during the Confederate Wars of the 1640s but this led to further damage. The cathedral was almost totally ruined in an attack by Lord Castlehaven.

The lack of a river in the town impeded the industrial development seen in other towns, though there were smaller cottage industries, with Kildare being particularly noted for the fabrication of felt hats.

There were some improvements in the 18th century however. It was still a focus for markets and fairs and the construction of the Naas to Maryborough turnpike road in 1731 put Kildare back on the main route from Dublin to the south-west. It became a post town so mail coaches and other traffic brought trade and the development of the Curragh racecourse also had a positive impact.

The current Market House was built at the beginning of the 19th century, replacing an earlier one that had been there at least a century. It is now home to the Kildare Heritage Centre and Tourist Office.

It was with the building of a barracks, in use until Irish independence in 1922, on the outskirts of the town at the beginning of the 1900s, that prosperity returned to the town. The population doubled over the following century with increased tourism and the development of horse racing and breeding and of industry and trade.

*The Franciscan Friary or Grey Abbey in Kildare. Photo: Sharon Greene, Abarta Heritage*


*'Brigid's Flame' in the Market Square with Kildare Cathedral in the background.*
*Photo: Sharon Greene, Abarta Heritage*

*Conjectural reconstruction of medieval Naas by Sara Nylund. Courtesy of Kildare County Council*

# NAAS

## THE ANGLO-NORMAN TOWN

The name Naas, in Irish An Nás, most likely means 'the place of assembly' and refers to its ancient role as an important base for the early medieval kings of Leinster. It is also sometimes referred to as Nás na Ríogh ('assembly place of the kings') or Nás na Laighean ('assembly place of the Leinstermen'). Their stronghold was probably a ringfort or dún which had the early monastery of Saint Corban, Cill Corbain, nearby. The last recorded Leinster king to die at Naas was Cearbhail, who was buried at the monastery in the 10th century. Neither the dún nor the monastery can be seen today but the curve in Corban's Lane may preserve part of the monastic boundary.

The choice of this elevated area as a royal centre is likely to be related to its strategic position in rich farmland close to the ancient routeway from Tara to the south, known the Slighe Dálagh.

It was the strategic importance of this established stronghold that attracted the Anglo-Normans. It was conquered by Strongbow in 1175 and the newly formed Barony of Naas was then granted to his supporter Maurice Fitzgerald. This grant was confirmed by Henry II in 1177.

*The North Moat. Photo: Sharon Greene, Abarta Heritage*

Two mottes, known locally as the North and South Moats, are the remains of clay and timber castles belonging to the early anglo-Norman settlement. The North Moat, built by Maurice Fitzgerald, is thought to have been built on top of the early royal dún. It remains a well-known landmark in the town. In the early 19th century a guard house was built on its summit, which today hosts a privately owned bungalow. The mound can still be viewed from Abbey Road, though the stone castle that replaced it no longer survives.

The South Moat survives as part of a hillock within an area of public park overlooking the ponds beside Naas General Hospital. An excavation close to the mound in 2001 uncovered the filled-in remains of a very large defensive ditch.

The Fitzgeralds brought settlers from the area of St David's in Pembrokeshire in Wales who soon set about laying out what became the town of Naas. This included building a new parish church dedicated to St David. Many of the lanes

*The remains of the South Moat. Photo: Sharon Greene, Abarta Heritage*

that run off the Main Street preserve the names of important medieval buildings that no longer survive such as John's Lane, Abbey Street and Corban's Lane and the walls that line them may even preserve some medieval fabric.

Naas quickly became an important Anglo-Norman town. It was granted a weekly market in 1186 and in 1226 Henry III granted the right for an annual fair. Both of these were important to the financial success of the town. The market place was probably the wide north end of South Main Street, close to St David's Church. The Fair Green was beside the South Moat.

King John visited twice when travelling from Waterford to Dublin, first on his first expedition as the inexperienced 18 year old Lord of Ireland in 1185 and again on his infinitely more successful second expedition as King in 1210. Five parliaments were held here between 1419 and 1477.

*Detail of castellations on St David's Castle. Photo: Sharon Greene, Abarta Heritage*

Naas's wealth and strategic location also meant that it was vulnerable to attack from the Gaelic Irish, among others. In 1316 Edward de Bruce and his forces burned Naas and pillaged its religious houses. As part of the Earl of Kildare's estate, it was confiscated after the rebellion of Silken Thomas and given to Lord Deputy Skeffington in 1534. In 1577 the O'Mores and O'Connors led a devastating attack that saw the burning of hundreds of thatched houses.

Despite all this, Naas had taken over from Kildare as the chief town of the county by the beginning of the 17th century. At this stage it was increasingly considered part of an outer defence for the city of Dublin and it changed hands several times during the Cromwellian wars. In the Civil Survey of the 1650s Naas was described as a substantial town.

## TOWN WALLS

The nature of the documentary evidence for the walls in Naas has led some to question whether they were ever actually built. One source in 1463 claimed the town was "not previously walled", while a 1567 murage charter refers to the "desire of the burgesses to fortify the borough with a fosse (ditch) and walls of lime and stone."

However, as a location of markets, fairs and parliaments, defence was a key factor for the town and it is therefore probable that an initial defensive system consisting of enclosing banks and ditches was part of the initial plan of the town. There were numerous murage grants (in 1414, 1451 and 1468) and additional charters (in 1568, 1609 and 1629) that aimed to provide funds for walling the town. It is possible that the entire circuit was not finished under the initial grants and the need for maintenance and repair was an ongoing issue.

Although no remains survive above ground, the impact of the walls on the structure of the town can still be found in buried remains, the street plan and the survival of burgage plots either side of the Main Street. The estimated circuit of the walls encloses a somewhat oval area that had the Main Street running from the south-west to the north-east along the central axis. The western side was marked by the North Moat and the eastern edge by Corban's Lane.

The report on the O'More and O'Connor attack in 1577 mentioned above emphasised the lack of defence around Naas, saying that it was "open on all sides, gates not shut nor watches kept."

The depiction of Naas on the 1655 Down Survey map shows that by then it was still at least partially walled, though the completeness of the circuit and the level of maintenance carried out are brought into question again by a petition brought to parliament in 1697 alleging misuse of murage money.

The demise of the walls probably came in the 18th century. We know that North Gate and Corban Gate were removed in 1680. The development of the town that accompanied the arrival of the canal and the development of the road system probably played a large role in the removal of the wall and its associated structures elsewhere.

## A TOWN OF MANY TOWERS



*Memorial at St David's Church. Photo: Sharon Greene, Abarta Heritage*

As well as the town wall and the religious houses outside the town, visitors to Naas would have been impressed by the number of large stone buildings inside the town. Research has revealed the former presence of eight tower houses in the historic core known as Eustace Castle, St David's Castle, Watergate Castle, Lattin's Castle, Black Castle/Duke of Leinster Castle, Lyard's/Magee's/Motley's Castle, White's Castle/White Chamber/Old Castle and Wheatley's Castle/Watley's Castle/Lord Mavo's Castle. These towers, some of which may have been murage towers along the circuit of the town wall, were often built by wealthy merchants and would have looked very impressive alongside the other small, thatched houses that the town was otherwise made up of.

Eustace Castle stood at the top of Friary Road as late as 1973. St David's Castle still stands beside Church Lane, though since the 15th century it has undergone extensive changes, particularly in the 18th century. It still contains much early fabric however and has recently been conserved.

There are references to six gate houses in Naas: North Gate, Watergate Castle, Corban's Castle, Green Castle, West Gate and Iago's Gate. Unfortunately they were all gone by the nineteenth century and their former locations are uncertain.

## RELIGIOUS HOUSES

In the late 12th century, William Fitzmaurice founded an Augustinian priory dedicated to St John the Baptist just outside the fledgling town at North Gate. A hospital was later added, no doubt performing a valuable service to the burgesses and the population of the wider area. However, by the time of the Reformation in 1540, having fallen victim to many of the attacks on the town, the church was in use as a barn. It was eventually demolished and no sign of it survives today. It is believed to have been on the site of the current Parochial House on Sallins Road.

In the 14th century, two more religious houses were founded. In 1355-6, the Eustace family established a Dominican Friary to the north-west of the North Moat. Remains stood here until about 1835. All that remains now is a graveyard. The Eustaces also founded another Augustinian friary in 1370. Its location is no longer known, though it seems possible that it was in the vicinity of Friary Road close to the Eustace's castle.



*Dominican Friary by Daniel Grose. Courtesy of Kildare Local Studies Collections*

An interesting story concerning the Dominicans in Naas is that of their prior, Father Peter O'Higgins, who had reopened the Naas house in 1625. This was apparently done with the blessing, or at least tolerance, of the Lord Deputy Thomas Wentworth, who was then building Jigginstown Castle. During the 1641 rebellion Father O'Higgins showed himself to be a true man of the cloth making no distinction between the creed or politics of those he met. He even famously saved the Protestant vicar of Donadea from the gallows in Dublin.

Father O'Higgins was captured at Naas by the Earl of Ormond who transferred him to Dublin but gave a glowing reference commending his charity and expected him to be released. The people of Naas too petitioned the release of their beloved prior. However, the day Ormond left Dublin, military governor of Dublin and lieutenant-general of Ireland, Sir Charles Coote, had O'Higgins executed for refusing to deny his religion. Ormond was enraged and demanded the trial of Coote but the justices were unwilling to act against him. Coote did however eventually receive justice, in the form of a stray bullet in Trim in 1642.

## ST DAVID'S CHURCH

There has been a church on this site since at least the 13th century. The current building dates to 1830 when it was extensively reconstructed and remodelled, however it still contains much medieval fabric. There is a rich collection of mortuary memorials in the graveyard and built into the church wall.

In 1780, Lord Mayo of Palmerstown House near Johnstown began replacing the church's existing spire with a great steeple reflecting his status as the dominant peer in the locality.  When this  substantial rectangular tower got to first floor level he erected a plaque - still visible- with a Latin inscription which reads, in English, 'I found a ruin, I left a steeple'.  Ironically, his funds soon ran out and he left an even bigger ruin than he had found. The original smaller tower was likely located at the opposite end of the church.

*The incomplete tower of St David's Church. Photo: Sharon Greene, Abarta Heritage*
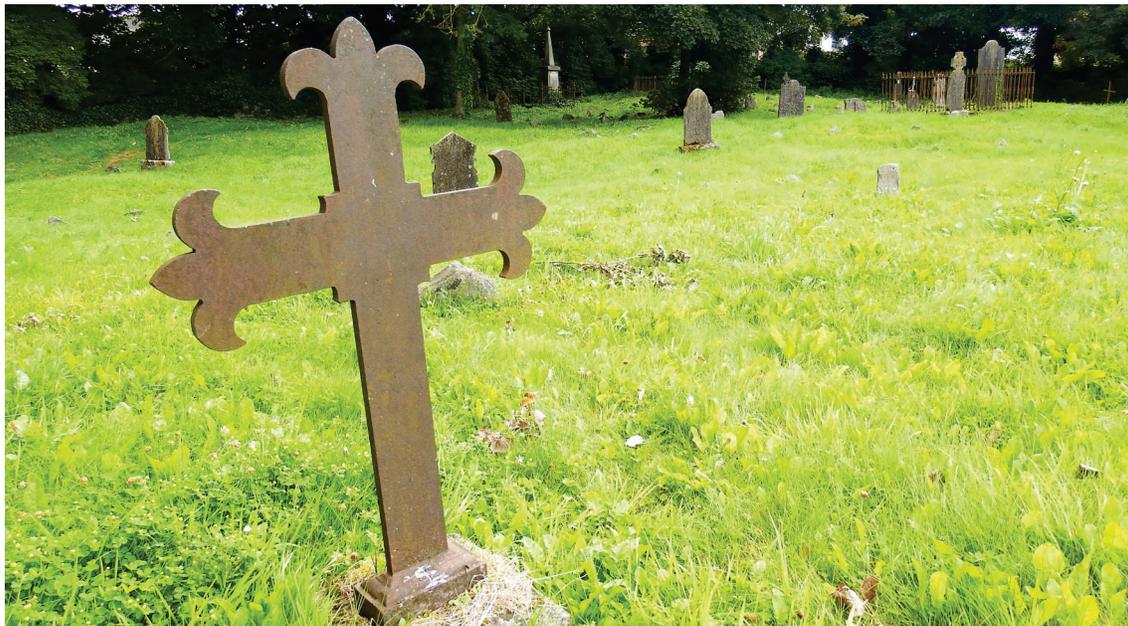


*The graveyard at the site of the Dominican Abbey in Naas. Photo: Sharon Greene, Abarta Heritage*

*St Brigid's Cathedral in Kildare. Photo: Neil Jackman, Abarta Heritage*
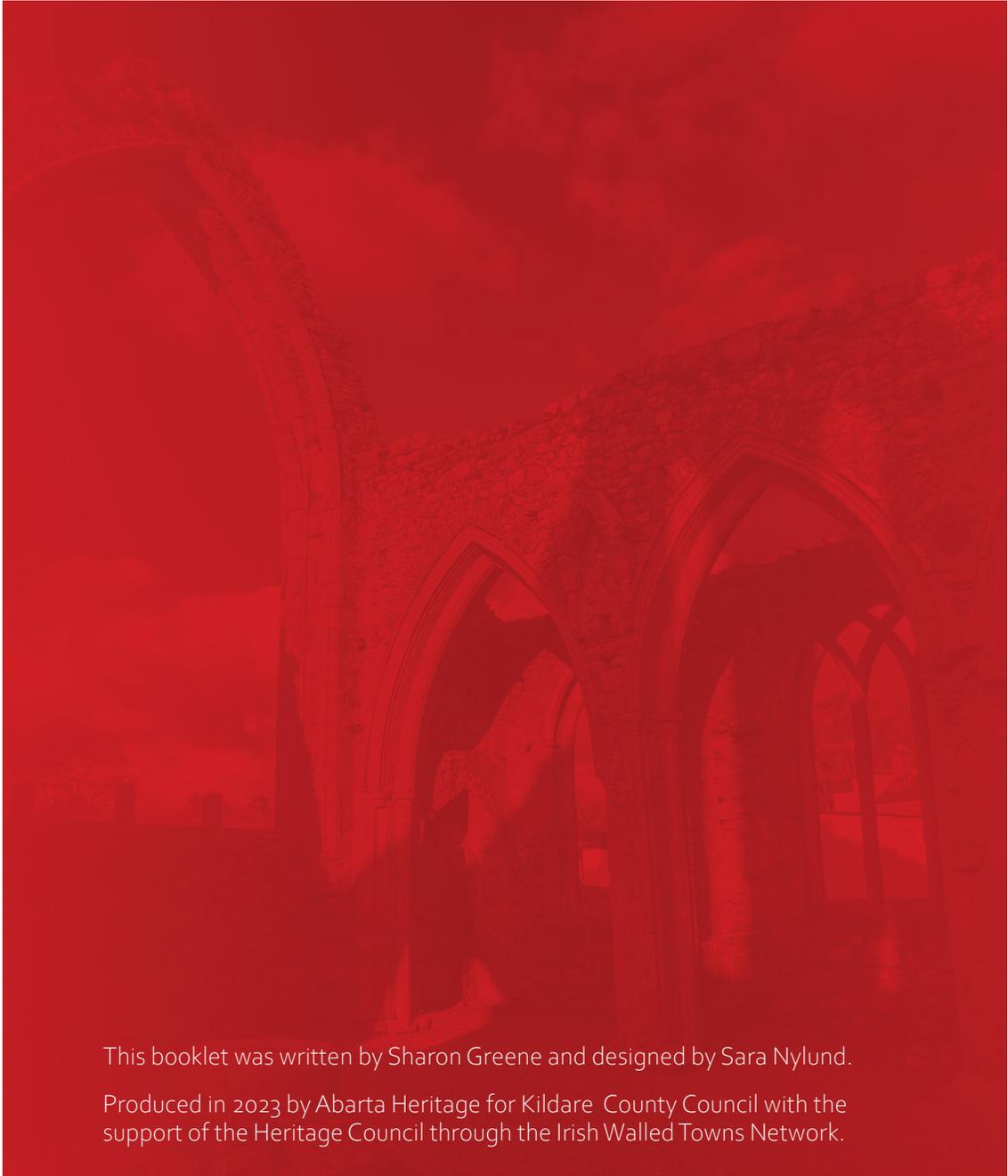
# CONCLUSION

Time and history have not been kind to many of Kildare's town walls. However, even where they can no longer be seen, the circuit of the walls usually still marks and defines the historic core of the town. Historical research and archaeological investigations can reveal all sorts of hidden stories about a town and sharing these stories evokes a sense of belonging and pride of place for today's communities. The features and history of walled towns also attract visitors, a welcome economic boost to any town.

While many town walls were damaged either through attack, development or neglect in the past, in recent years they are seeing a renewed interest and care from their communities.

When effectively conserved, managed and promoted, surviving walls or their former circuits contribute to a unique sense of place, belonging and identity. They are an important long term source of civic pride and a focus for tourism and cultural and economic development. Surviving town walls and other medieval features are being repaired and conserved while the less visible aspects of our past are being uncovered and revealed through events, signage and publications like this. So, as you walk though your historic town core, think of all those who have walked before you and what their experience of your town was like all those years ago.