

The Bishop of Limerick's residence c.1650-1784

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After a discussion of the evidence for the location of the bishop's palace between 1651 and 1784, the conclusion is drawn that the building known today as the Bishop's Palace is probably misnamed.

Early maps of Limerick show the bishop's palace to have lain at the northern end of the Englishtown, in St. Munchin's Parish, on the site now occupied by the Villiers Alms-houses, while some of the depictions seem to suggest that it actually formed part of the circuit of the city walls.¹ These maps show the situation in the Early Modern period, but there is no reason to doubt that this was the location of the palace throughout the medieval period. From the Black Book of Limerick we know it was restored by c.1621,² but from Webb's 1651 map onwards it is never named as such and from the 18th century no map even depicts it. Ferrar records that in 1784 the bishop bought a house for himself and his successors, which had been built by Viscount Pery and which, presumably, is the house known as the Bishop's Palace in Henry Street.³ So where did the bishop reside between 1651 and 1784?

The Protestant bishop, George Webb, died during the siege of King John's castle in 1642, and we do not know if his replacement, Robert Sibthorp, who died in 1649, ever visited his see because of the situation within Ireland. In the Protestant succession the see was then vacant from 1649 to 1660 when Edward Synge (1660-63) was appointed. After 1642 and before the Cromwellian siege of 1651, the palace was presumably occupied by the Catholic Bishop Edmund O'Dwyer. Once the city had surrendered to the Cromwellians there was no need for a bishop's palace because Parliament chose not to appoint one and so the old palace was rented out by the Commissioners of Revenue as recorded in the Civil Survey of 1655.⁴ When Bishop Synge took up office after the hiatus it was therefore necessary for him to find a new place to live and in 1665 this new house was formally annexed to the see as the bishop's residence by an act of parliament:⁵

And be it enacted by the authority aforesd. that the house chosen by Edward, Lord Bishop of Limerick, in the city of Limerick, & set out to him for seven years according to the act of settlement together with that small waste plot of ground and two ruinous tenements thereon, which the present bishop rents of the trustees at 20s per annum, lying on the backside of the sd. dwelling house equal in front thereof down to the wall adjoining to the wall of the sd. city, being from the sd. back side in length three score and six yards and in breadth twenty and nine yards be annexed unto the see of Limerick for ever & be a mansion house for William the present bishop (1664-67) therof & his successor.

¹ Eamon O'Flaherty, *Irish Historic Towns Atlas No 21, Limerick* (Dublin, 2010) map 6 (Hardiman, c.1590), map 8 (Speed, 1610) & map 10 (Webb, 1651).

² James MacCaffrey (ed.), *The Black Book of Limerick* (Dublin, 1907) p. 165.

³ John Ferrar, *The History of Limerick* (2nd edition, Limerick, 1787) p. 207.

⁴ R.C. Simington (ed.), *The Civil Survey vol. iv, County of Limerick* (Dublin, 1938) p. 450.

⁵ 17-18 Charles II c2 xxxii; see also Ferrar, *History of Limerick* (1787) p. 118.

No location is given for this house but there are good grounds to state that it was not the building known today as the Bishop's Palace, headquarters of Limerick Civic Trust. Firstly, the dimensions of 198ft by 87ft do not conform with the Trust's property and fit better with the dimensions of properties on the east side of the main street of the medieval town. Secondly, when reading the Civil Survey of 1655 it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Trust's headquarters is on the site of the stone castle, formerly owned by Alderman James Stritch.⁶ In 1665, the same year as the act annexing the bishop's house to the see, the Corporation rented Stritch's castle along with other properties, to Gerald Fitzgerald on an 81 year lease, 'Also a small plot of ground known by the name of Striche's Castle or Rochford's Castle with a waste plot thereto adjoining formerly the tenure of William Mahon and Thomas Houragan in St Munchin's Parish agst the King's Castle'.⁷

In 1675 Bishop Vesey (1673-79) leased the house where he was already residing from the Corporation on a 99-year lease:

All that the House wherein John Lord Bishop of Limerick then lived and that parcel of their common Land, whereon the said House was erected, situate in the North Ward of said City on the East side of St. Nicholas Street in the parish of St Munchin, commonly known by the name of the Lands of [lacuna] late in the tenure of Saml Foxen's Tenants.

This must be a separate building from that of the 1665 Act, which had become church property and so was not available to the Corporation to rent out. The fact that the house is on the east side of the street indicates that this too cannot be the Trust's headquarters, which lies on the west side. In 1706 this lease was renewed although it still had many years to run.⁸

John Loveday, an English traveller visiting Limerick in 1732, recorded in his diary that: '(Bishop Thomas) Smith (1695-1725) built an house hard by (St Munchin's) w^{ch} Bp. Burscough, his immediate Successor, rents of his Executors; for y^e Palace has these many years been leas'd out & is now y^e Sign of y^e 3 Tuns'.⁹ The Palace in question was presumably the old medieval building in the area of Villiers almshouses.

It is probable that the property rented by Bishop Vesey is one and the same as that on which Smyth built his house and it may even be that the construction of the house accounts for the 1706 renewal of the lease. The Smyths seem to retain an interest in the property into mid century. In 1747 the Corporation leased to Charles Smyth:

the messuage or tenement with the yard and out offices adjoining, lately built by the said Charles Smyth, which premises are opposite to the churchyard of St. Munchin's and to the garden belonging to the Bishop and see of Limerick, being divided therefrom by the langable or passage leading from the High Street to the King's Island'.¹⁰

Then in a deed of lease and release dated 1763, the Rev John Smyth sold to Bishop James Leslie (1755-70), his rights in a house described as:

⁶ Simington, *Civil Survey, Limerick*, p. 449.

⁷ B. Hodkinson, 'The Limerick Corporation Index of 1843', *North Munster Antiquarian Journal*, vol. 39 (1998-99, published 2006) p. 95.

⁸ *Ibid.*, nos 37 & 84.

⁹ John Loveday, *Diary of a tour in 1732 through parts of England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1890) pp 42-3.

¹⁰ Registry of Deeds, RD 126/355/87669; see also Hodkinson, 'Corporation Index', no. 126.

All that and those the great house formerly inhabited by several successive bishops of the see of Limerick with the yard and back office belonging thereto opposite to St Munchins church and Bishops Garden, divided therefrom by the langable as also the yard coach houses and other offices on the west or southwest side thereof formerly held with part of the said house by Mary Quin Widow, bounded as therein mentioned situate in the Parish of St Munchin and northward of the said city of Limerick'.¹¹

Ferrar, in his first edition, notes that in 1755 the Lord Lieutenant stayed with the Rev. Smyth in the former bishop's house.¹²

The 1841 first edition of the Ordnance Survey 5ft to the Mile map shows what appears to be a large building in the centre of the block bounded by Broad Lane on the south, and Barrack Street and the present Church Street on either side, which converge on

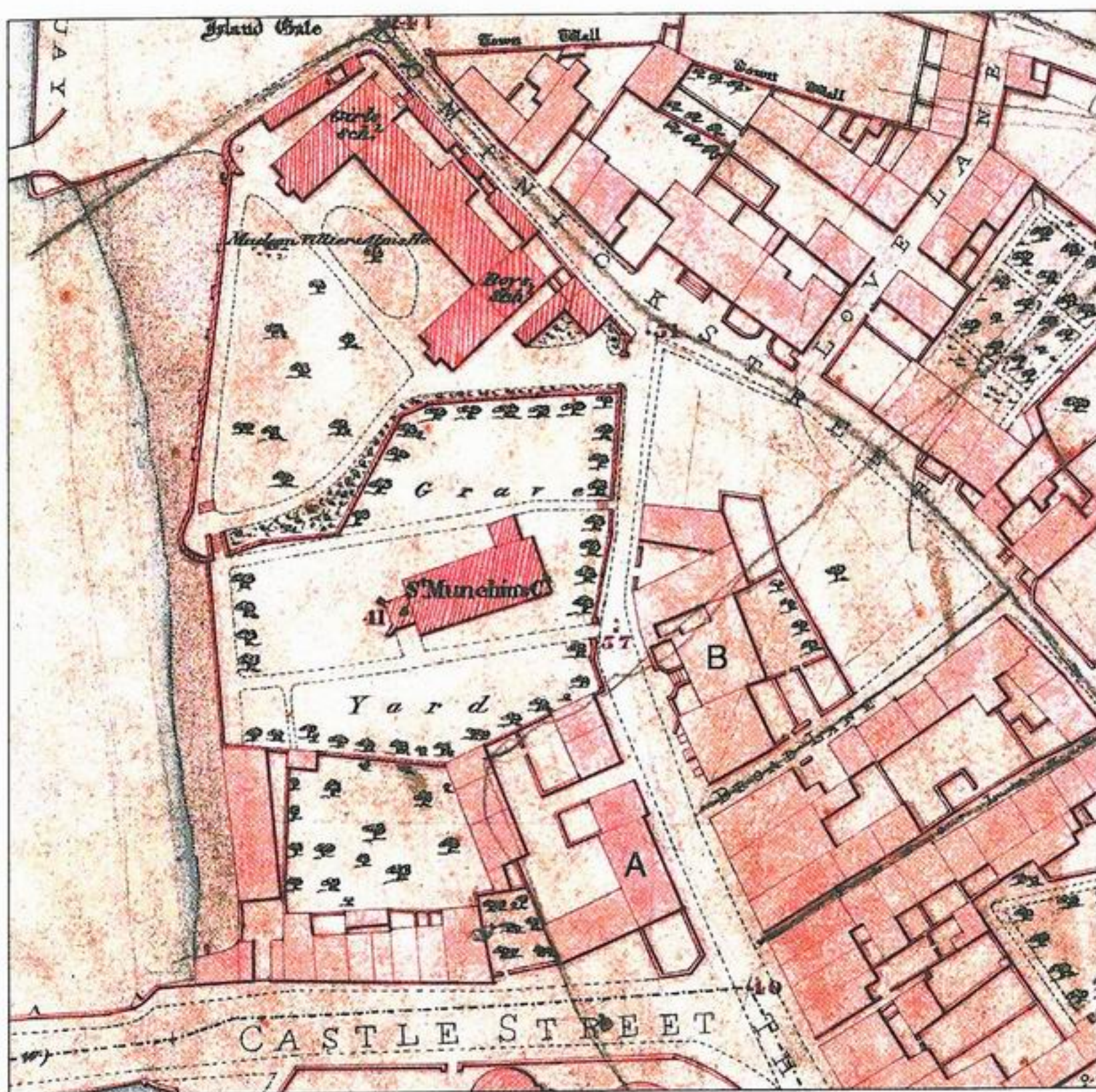


Fig. 1. Extract of the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map, showing **A** the Civic Trust headquarters and **B** the building believed to be the bishop's palace.

¹¹ Registry of Deeds, RD 236/385/ 155048.

¹² John Ferrar, *The History of Limerick* (Limerick, 1767) p. 65. In 1712 the then Lord Lieutenant had also lodged in the bishop's house, *ibid.*, p. 59.

the north to run to the Island Gate. It is suggested that this building is the 18th century bishop's house. To the north the converging roads leave a more or less triangular plot, which may be the property described in an assignment of a lease dated 12 October 1717¹³ between James Clampett, clothier on the one part and Alice Craven, widow:

Witnesseth that whereas Thomas Lord Bishop of Limerick in and by an indenture of 5th May 1715 for the consideration therein mentioned did demise set and unto farm let unto the said James Clampett ... a triangular plot of ground which is bounded on one side with the outhouses and range of a wall lately built by the said Bishop, on another side the town wall¹⁴ and on the other side with the street leading from the Island Gate to the bishop's own dwelling house, containing in length to front along the street 83 feet, situate in the parish of St. Ms. For 51 years.

The distance given approximates that on the map.

The *Limerick Chronicle* of 1774, from April onwards, contains an advert for the lease of the house:

where Dr Leslie, late Lord Bishop of Limerick lived till a few years before his decease, with all kinds of convenient offices adjoining to it. The house is in a pleasing and healthful situation, it fronts the large open street leading from the Parade to the King's Island and commands a most pleasing view of the Shannon for many miles ... expressions of interest to Edward Leslie ... together with the neat convenient house adjoining thereto, now held by the widow of Standish Grady late of Lodge'.

The adjoining house would then be on the south side between the bishop's house and Broad Lane.

Bishop Leslie had gone from the house sometime before his death in 1770 but the palace in Henry Street was not purchased by the see until 1784, so where did the bishop reside in those intervening years? It is tempting to suggest that Bishop Leslie moved straight to the new town to lease the house in Henry Street built by Viscount Pery then subsequently sold to the see when the Viscount's brother, William Cecil Pery, became bishop, but this cannot be because in February 1771 the architect Christopher Colles noted that 'I am at present drawing plans etc for our new Bishop (John Averell, 1770-71), who intends to lay out 5 or 6 thousand pounds for a new see house.'¹⁵ It is still probable, therefore, that a house was rented in the fashionable new town for the intervening period; there is certainly no evidence other than wishful thinking that he resided in what is known today as the Bishop's Palace.

The fact that the bishop resided in St Munchin's parish up until c.1770 may be the source for the tradition that St Munchin's was the original cathedral of the city. This first appears in the second edition of Sir James Ware's, *De Hibernia*, of 1658, at the time when

¹³ RD21/145/11028.

¹⁴ It is suggested that the town wall in question is the wall running on the east side of Barrack Street, Dominic Street. Although the current maps show the wall further to the east, that wall was the outer precinct wall of St. Saviour's Dominican Friary, which came to double as the town wall. The friary was effectively bolted onto the outside of the original town and the town's administrative boundary probably lay along the friary's west side.

¹⁵ Judith Hill. 'Davis Ducart & Christopher Colles; architects associated with the Custom House at Limerick', *Irish Architectural and decorative Studies; Journal of the Irish Georgian Society*, vol. 2 (1999) pp 119-45:129.

Sir James had been in exile.¹⁶ St Munchin's was simply the bishop's parish church where he would worship on a regular basis when not presiding over services at St Mary's. It would have been a short step for the chair he used in St Munchin's to be incorrectly dubbed his *cathedra*, and the church, by extension, a cathedral. The 1650s when the tradition arose were a time of great change, with a vacant bishopric, the loss of the palace to the see, dispossession of many of the landholders in the city and their replacement by new men, just the time for half truths to become fact.

Acknowledgement

My thanks to Judith Hill for drawing my attention to the Colles letter.

¹⁶ Sir James Ware, *De Hibernia et Antiquitatibus eius Disquisitiones*, (2nd edition, London, 1658) p. 322; for 1st English edition, see *The Antiquities and History of Ireland* (Dublin, 1705) p. 14. Ware's assertion is followed by most subsequent authors, e.g. Ferrar, (2nd edition) p. 149, and T.J. Westropp, 'Ancient Churches in Co. Limerick', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. 25, (1905) p. 357. For Sir James' time in London and France, see *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, vol. 9, (Cambridge, 2009) pp 798-9.

