

The Bishop's Lady's house

THE fine old house in Church Street, known to many generations as the "Bishop's Lady's House," and recently restored in a most creditable manner by the Limerick Civic Trust, today stands as a noteworthy contribution to the preservation of what remains of eighteenth century Limerick.

Though we have no evidence that a bishop ever resided in this house it is generally accepted that an eighteenth century Protestant bishop lived there. Michael Hogan, the Bard of Thomond, kept an interest in the place alive with his reference to the unfortunate bishop who met an untimely end at the hands of his belligerent wife who hurled him down the stairs, breaking his neck.

This was the infamous Bishop's Lady of Hogan's rollicking narrative, "Drunk-en Thady and the Bishop's Lady," who may have been guilty of such a crime in the far distant past. Thus the house was related to Hogan's legend, though a study of the few prelates who might have lived in the house reveals that they all died in their beds.

Owing to the absence of documentary evidence the exact date of the erection of this building is unknown, but, fortunately, there is sufficient information to indicate the places of residence of some of the Protestant bishops since the Williamite occupation and which assists in relating the building to a particular period.

Simon Digby

Simon Digby, who was Protestant Bishop up to 1691, lived in the house which stood on part of the site of the Villier's Alms Houses. "It faced the city wall, with the grand garden in between, and the soothing murmurings of the river outside which was a great comfort" (the position of this house is described in the Down Survey). Even up to about the turn of the century this complex (Villiers) was referred to by older people as "Digby's," and seldom "Villier's."

In the years before the Williamite sieges the whole area around St. Munchin's, from Castle Street to the Island Gate was the property of the Protestant church, though the landlord in 1654 is set out in the Civil Survey as the "Corporation." Digby's house was attacked and looted, and partly destroyed by the people during the first siege, but, apparently, the redoubtable bishop had saved all the documents and records

of the diocese and moved to a house much nearer the church in Castle Street, which he also had to flee (all the way to Dublin), about this time without his precious documents, for we find him, in July, 1690, writing to St. Robert Southwell: "I have already had one house plundered by the Irish."

The Lord Tyrconnell had taken up his quarters in the bishop's house at Limerick, in which were all the books and papers belonging to the diocese, fearing the house, on entering of the English forces, would be plundered on Tyrconnell's account, and therefore entreats some officer may be entrusted with the order to save it."

Digby died in the calm of 1692, and we don't know if his successor, Nathaniel Wilson, lived in the Castle Street house, as it is believed he was "taken care of by friends in the North Liberties being in very poor health." Indeed if the various references to his infirmities can be depended upon his episcopate was conducted while he had one foot in the grave. Begley tells us: "His years were few and uneventful, as he died November 3, 1695."

Dr. Thomas Smyth

Dr. Thomas Smyth succeeded Wilson in 1695 and took up residence in the Castle Street house, which, according to Lenihan "was situated near the church of St. Munchin's, within a very few yards of the church at the Castle Street side of it. Within the last sixty years the house has been removed, and on a site nearer the roadway are houses in which a humble class of persons now dwell."

The late William Reaball, noted historian of St. Mary's parish tells us that "... the old bishop's palace was nearly opposite the door of the castle, but nearer the river-side. The stone was used to fill one of the arches of the new Thomond Bridge."

Dr. Smyth, who was a charitable and benevolent man who suffered much for his public condemnation of the violation of the Articles of the Treaty of Limerick by the Irish Parliament, lived in this house for thirty years.

Dr. Begley tells us: "When the Treaty of Limerick came before the house for discussion he was one of the severest critics of the mutilation it received in the House of Commons, and voted against

it becoming law. He was one of the peers who signed a protest and vigorously opposed the bill being admitted to the statute book because it did not embody the Treaty signed by the Irish and William.

His action was considered a courageous one, and gained for him the esteem of fair minded men. His spirited action, however, brought the wrath of those who were not fair minded about his head. In September, 1710, a number of army officers under a Major Chaytor caused great annoyance to the bishop by creating disturbances outside his house. Again Begley tells us: "In one of their drunken frolics they came before his house early in the morning and sang a very scandalous song interspersed with shouts of confusion, damnation, plague and a number of other offensive expressions."

Far from being intimidated, Dr. Smyth fearlessly persuaded the authorities to take appropriate action against Chaytor and his company and succeeding in impressing some fair minded members of government. After an investigation Chaytor was dismissed from the service.

As a matter of interest Major Chaytor's grandson built Roselawn House at the end of the eighteenth century. This fine Georgian style house was afterwards the home of George McKern, the well-known printer and bookbinder, and was recently demolished to make way for the Wang development.

Getting back to Dr. Smyth, in spite of the uncertainty and turmoil all round him he fathered thirteen children, three daughters and ten sons. The house, which may not, apparently, have been a communal bishop's residence, remained in possession of his family after his death in 1725.

Courage and honesty

At this time, the tercentenary of the treaty, the courage and honesty of Dr. Smyth should not be forgotten. It would be most appropriate that a ceremony of remembrance be held in St. Munchin's and a wreath placed on his tomb.

It is possible that the Smyths would have had to quit the house if the new bishop, Dr. William Bruscoug, had not decided to live out his thirty years episcopate in his splendid estate at New Ross, near Nenagh. He died there in 1755 and was buried in a sepulchre which he had prepared for himself near the residence.

Now where does our Bishop's Lady's House come into the story? We can only

presume (if we are to acknowledge that it was an exclusive bishop's residence, though there is no certainty of this) that Bruscoug's successor, James Leslie (1755-70), was a possible occupant: this could be a logical conclusion, for no bishop lived in the city for the previous thirty years, and during the thirty years before that Dr. Smyth lived in the Castle Street house.

These observations show that no bishop lived in the Church Street house, before 1755, and we can only assume (if we accept that it was an official bishop's residence) that Leslie was the first resident. This acceptance would give gist to the notion that Francis Bindon was the architect, though there are other features which go well towards suggesting that this artist had a hand in the design.

Except for the effort of a classical doorcase the building, which is otherwise quite plain and unlikely to enhance the reputation of an artist like Bindon, is similar to those in St. John's Square (1751), a complex which is attributed to Bindon, though not on any official listings of his work.

This presumption is strengthened by the design of the Square which at least hints at the Palladian tradition much favoured by Bindon, and in a reference in the citation on the occasion of the conferring of the freedom of Limerick to Bindon in 1762, to his "contribution to the architectural beauty of the city."

Staircases

This is obviously a reference to John's Square. It is of great interest to note that the staircases in John's Square and in the Church Street house were identical.

Bindon was born sometime in the last decade of the seventeenth century, at Cloney, in County Clare. He studied art under Sir Geoffrey Kneller and spent much of his time abroad studying the works of the great masters in the Italian and French galleries. He returned to Dublin with tolerable competence and soon attracted the favour of every notable in the country, including Lord Sackville, the Viceroy, Lord Dorset his successor, Dr. Boulter, Archbishop of Dublin, Dr. Sheridan, Dean Delaney and Dean Swift, whose portrait he painted several times. One of his most famous portraits is that of Turlogh O'Carolan, the blind harpist.

Bindon, who was rewarded with a state pension because of his outstanding work, left us many realistic images of the prominent characters of the 18th century.

About 1733 the artist turned away from his easel and began

to study architecture in the office of the Surveyor General, Sir Lovatt Pearce. Bindon applied himself to his new avocation with great diligence and after a few years was designing fine houses here and there around the country. Among the local specimens of his work are Carnelly and Newhall near Ennis, John's Square, and Castlepark, outside Thomondgate.

Bindon's brother was married to a cousin of Lovett Pearce, the foremost exponent of Palladian architecture in Ireland, and this connection may have influenced him to work in the same style.

Apart from professional opinion which suggests a mid-eighteenth century foundation for our building, every other circumstance concurs in the deduction that it is the work of Bindon.

Success

The restoration of the old house has been such an outstanding success that it requires no spurious claims to antiquity to enhance its image, or the prestige of the Civic Trust which undertook the work of restoration.

Many false claims to the antiquity of this building have been made, but surely these will not enhance the intrinsic value of the magnificent restoration. The many claims espoused by a number of speakers in St. Munchin's Church during the official opening ceremony of the restored house must indicate the shallowness of the 1661

date which is engraved on the commemorative tablet which has been inserted in the facade of the restored building — "The building dates from 1661 and was designed by Francis Bindon (this man's mother wasn't born in 1661!)"

Palladian style

"It is the only Palladian style building in Limerick." (Palladian style architecture was introduced into this country by Richard Cassels and Edward Lovatt Pearce early in the eighteenth century. "It is the oldest building in the city in continuous habitation." This latter claim is ludicrous. Peter Cell House, close to St. Mary's Convent, is, and has been lived in since the Canonesses of St. Augustine left it during the dissolution of the monasteries in 1537, though there was extensive reconstruction of the building in the 18th century.

The college attached to the Augustinian monastery, at the corner of Bow Lane and Nicholas Street, though nearly five hundred years old, is still in use, not alone as a dwelling house, but also a pub! Four cottages in Park, which is in the city, are more than 300 years old.

With the restored presbytry of St. Mary's — carried out unostentatiously by Very Rev. Canon Connellan — and the old City Dispensary in Gerald Griffin Street, this magnificent development is certainly a splendid effort to retain our links with another age in the positive and enduring manner.



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