

Creating a noble past: The Design of Glenstal Castle 1836-1861

In 1925 Sir Charles Barrington offered his County Limerick home, Glenstal Castle, to the Irish Free State as an official residence for any future head of state. The proposal was considered seriously, with William T. Cosgrave personally conducting what he called "an exhaustive survey" of the castle. Ultimately the existing vice-regal lodge at Phoenix Park (now Áras an Uachtaráin) was chosen and the Benedictines order of monks later acquired the castle.

It remains in their care, and is now known as Glenstal Abbey, a distinguished private boarding school. The fact that it was initially considered by the fledgling state as a residence fit for a president illustrates the building's grandeur. Glenstal's design is unique in that it is a mixture of architectural features from the medieval past of both England and Ireland, combining Anglo-Norman and Irish Romanesque influences that has led to it being described as "a curious mixture of historicism and fantasy."

by Marion D. McGarry

Norman Revival

To the untrained eye, Glenstal looks like a rambling pile that was built in medieval times and extended organically over time. This was the intention; it was in fact designed in 1836 and is in the Norman revival style of architecture, which was once seen as a credible rival to the Gothic revival style. The Norman revival style was at the height of fashion in the 1820s, but its bulky forms proved difficult to translate onto smaller houses and its popularity waned. Glenstal, along with Gosford castle in Armagh, are the only two large-scale neo-Norman buildings in Ireland.

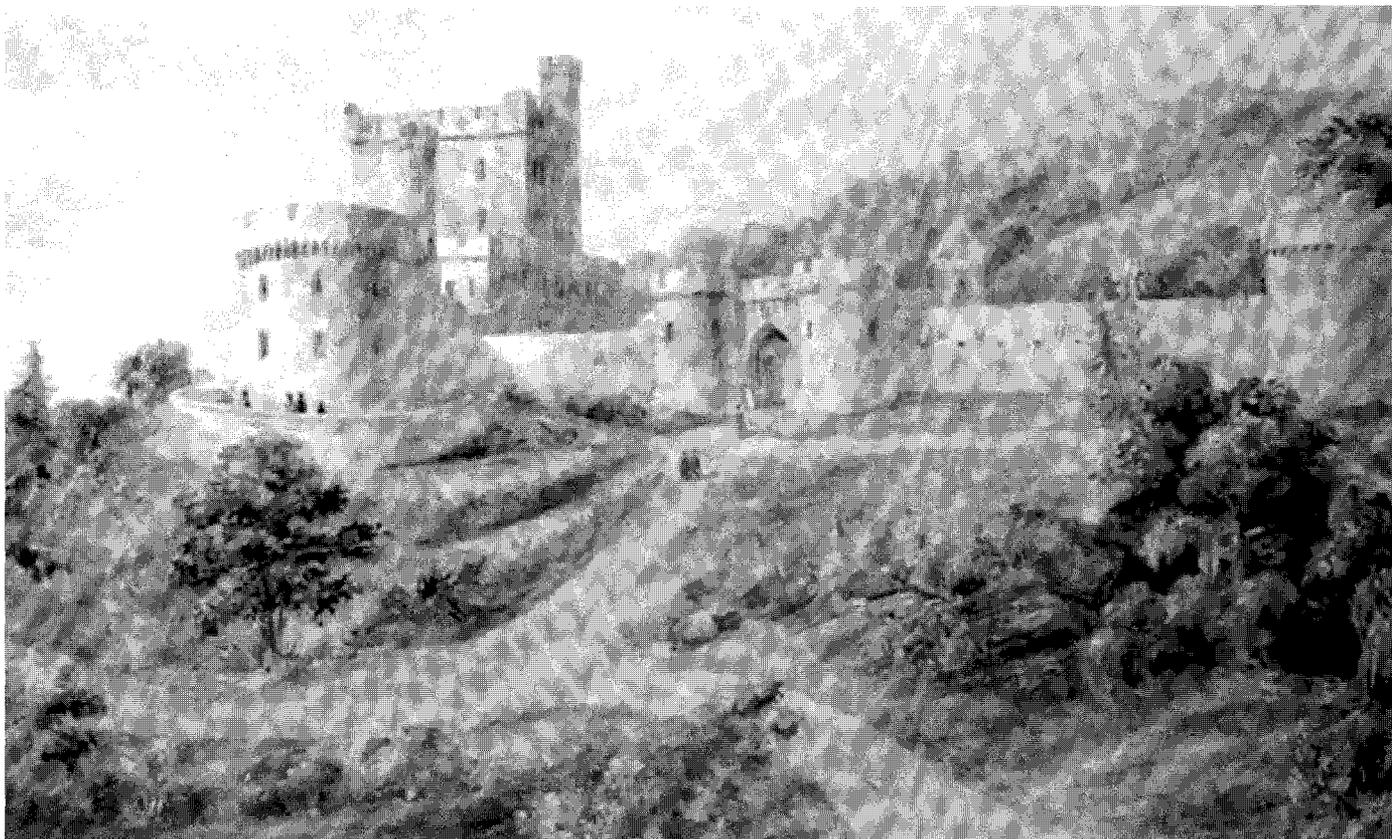
The Norman revival was the style of choice for patrons who wished to create "300 years of history overnight" and it was commonly used by wealthy families to make new money look old. It was used to this effect by the man who commissioned

Glenstal, Sir Matthew Barrington (1796-1861).

From "Working Gentry" to Lord Barrington

Matthew Barrington trained as a lawyer, building practises in Dublin and Limerick and became Crown Solicitor for Munster at the age of just twenty-six. He was also involved with building and railway projects in the province and his marriage to the wealthy Charlotte Hartigan brought the first significant land to the Barrington family. He was a successful public figure, a liberal and had an influential circle of friends, including Daniel O'Connell.

Perhaps socialising with such luminaries made Barrington insecure about his position in society, as even though he held a prestigious post and was very wealthy, he was, after all, merely the son of a common pewterer and without a title. His father, Joseph, a self-made man, had been held to be a "new money" entrepreneur by some. The Barringtons



William Bardwell's proposal of 1836 from the west



The Barrington family by William Cregan, 1830. The painting depicts the family preparing plans for Barrington's Hospital. Note that Joseph gestures towards Matthew acknowledging his elder son's significant role in the project and recognizing him as the future head of the family

were an Irish Protestant ascendancy family, the first of whom was Sir Francis Barrington who came from England with Cromwell. His title died with him and the Barrington family subsequently became pewterers and clockmakers. By the early nineteenth century the family were still associated with those professions, even though they had accumulated substantial wealth thanks to their involvement in building projects in Limerick. But Matthew Barrington knew that a title, along with the respect of his peers, could not be earned by his powerful post and wealth alone and he encouraged the family to become involved in charitable projects. Along with his father and brother, he began to organise and fund what subsequently became known as Barrington's Hospital. Founding the hospital in 1831 made the Barrington family name in Limerick. It originally catered for the poor but remains open as a private hospital today. After their involvement in this venture, the Barrington name came to be associated with civic pride and generosity rather than clocks and copper, and they gained enormous respect for their efforts.

The plaque over the door of Barrington's Hospital credits Joseph Barrington chiefly for its establishment, but Matthew Barrington was the driving force behind the project. In an 1830 group painting showing the family preparing plans for the hospital, Joseph points to Matthew, recognising his elder son's major role in the venture and acknowledging him as future head of the family.

Matthew's involvement with charitable ventures and his public sense of duty towards the poor might lead a cynical

contemporary observer to presume that he was preparing for a career in politics, but Barrington had other things on his mind. He knew that such ventures would boost the family's claim to renew the title that died with Sir Francis in 1683. He lobbied for this title for his father as a reward for his work on Barrington's Hospital. In 1831, Joseph Barrington was granted a baronetcy and Matthew Barrington, knowing that one day he would inherit this title, now set about building a castle fit for an aristocrat. The idea for a stately home seems to have been on Barrington's mind as early as 1818, when he built Barringtonsbridge to access the lands at Murroe, a hamlet he was remodelling with the intention of installing craftsmen there who would work on his future home.

Ideas and Inspiration

From the outset, Barrington chose a new and fashionable medieval revival style for Glenstal. Not a grand stately manor home in the classical style, rather a grand castle that appeared ancient, that would also create a noble past in keeping with their new title. Throughout the 1830s, Barrington commissioned a number of notable architects to submit "Gothick" style concepts for his future home, a popular architectural style influenced by the revival of interest in all things medieval at that time. He commissioned five proposals from five different architects for the castle, from 1833 to 1838; James Pain submitted two proposals, as did William O'Hara, and Decimus Burton and William Bardwell submitted one proposal each. These designs were all fairly typical

of fashionable trends at the time and Barrington's rejection of them shows his quest for something different to his neighbours.

It is not known exactly how Barrington came into contact with William Bardwell, but in 1835 the English architect gained some celebrity by putting forward a Norman style proposal for the Houses of Parliament competition. He became friends with Barrington throughout the project and his client often took his advice on design matters.¹ Bardwell was active in Westminster, partaking in Select Committees on various metropolitan improvements,² and he published a number of papers on church architecture. In 1842, during the construction of Glenstal, he submitted a proposal for the restoration of St. Mary's cathedral in Limerick. It was the subject of scathing criticism from one commentator, who accused Bardwell of ignorance of native Irish architectural styles. Glenstal would be Bardwell's only major work.

Bardwell's concept for Glenstal envisaged a fake Norman castle of monumental scale, on a higher plane than the other proposals, with greater emphasis on ornamental defensive features. The two round Norman-style towers forming the entry range into the courtyard and the large square keep were based on English rather than Irish models. The stables and outhouses were incorporated in the east side, while the west housed the living quarters, thus giving the illusion of an even bigger residential building. Although it looked medieval from the front, it actually contained all the practicalities of modern living, such as a heating system, ventilation and water closets.

A Stage Set

Glenstal Castle can disappoint the spectator because the extravagant castle one sees from a distance reveals itself on closer inspection to be merely a large house. Because of economies made during the course of the build, it turned out to be quite different from Bardwell's initial concept and gives the impression that the castle was a quadrangular enclosure, when it was in fact an open V-shape. This gives it a stage-set quality. Such equivocal design measures have led to it being described as a building "full of striking first impressions and suitable economies."

Barrington had settled on the townland of Glenstal as a suitable site to build his castle and the first four proposals had this site in mind. Bardwell suggested changing the site to another townland called Garranbane, which commanded better views. However, Garranbane means "the land of the white nag" in Gaelic, whereas

Glenstal means the "glen of the stallion." They moved the site to Garranbane but retained the more evocative name of Glenstal for the house. Therefore, the name Glenstal castle bears no association to the land on which it sits, and it is typical of the liberties that were taken with the truth at the castle.

At Glenstal, all is an illusion made to look old. The house was furnished with medieval-style furniture and even the soldier guarding the watchtower is made of stone; a painting of the mythical stallion of the glen hangs on the wall, family crests and mottos are carved on walls to look ancient, stained glass, gargoyles and turreted stairways are all designed to make the viewer assume that the Barringtons, like their homestead, were descended from an ancient order.

Anglo-Irish Fantasy

Glenstal is a product of the Anglo-Irish fondness for tracing royal ancestry and the

nineteenth century fad for medieval fashions. This obsession was passed to the next generation, as seen in the collection of photographs by the Fourth Earl of Rosse showing Sir Charles Barrington dressed in full knightly regalia in one of the suits of armour that Bardwell bought in London on behalf of his client.

The inclusion of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine at the main door at Glenstal links the building to twelfth-century Norman antiquity and lays claim to their royal lineage. The first Anglo-Norman invaders eventually became more Irish than the Irish themselves, and having "gone native," were a more romantic type of ancestor when compared to the later Cromwellian settlers. The inclusion of the couple, the parents of King John, is an attempt to suggest that the building predates the original Norman King John's castle. King John's castle remains an unmistakable landmark and symbol of Limerick city, and one that must have loomed large at a time of renewed interest in medieval styles.

Glenstal's interior is noted for its highly unusual decorative carvings in the Celtic or Irish Romanesque style on the library capitals, stairs and door surrounds. Generally, what is known as Romanesque in Ireland is known as Saxon or Norman in Britain, and the two styles employ the round arch in their construction. With this successful marriage of English and Irish styles, it is little wonder that W.T. Cosgrave considered Glenstal as a possible *Áras an Uachtaráin* – it would have provided a superb backdrop for any talks concerning Ireland's final steps toward a republic and conducting any diplomatic business.

The most elaborate Romanesque doorway at Glenstal is a copy of the portal at Killaloe cathedral, Co. Clare. Although the Barringtons were not noted for their interest in antiquarianism, it has been said that the inclusion of this "was an important moment in the history of the revival of interest in Ireland's Christian and Celtic legacy." Similar doorways occur at Adare Manor, and in both cases the influence has been attributed to Edwin Wyndham Quin, the third Earl of Dunraven (1812-1871), Barrington's friend, neighbour and a patriotic antiquarian. The earl believed it marked the final resting place of Murtoogh O'Brien, High King of Ireland, in 1100 and noted a friendship between him and Henry I. It appears that the inclusion of the Killaloe doorway is a claim to the Irish king's lineage on behalf of the Barrington family and an additional link to the Normans.

Bardwell Me Fecit

Barrington permitted the following to be carved on the stone watchtower: "*Bardwell me fecit*," which means "Bardwell made me," followed by the year, 1839, which was carved to look like 1139, a further reference the Norman era. This carving has long been held to be a token of gratitude and friendship, but investigation



A pillar at Glenstal



Sir Charles Barrington dressed in one of the suits of armour at Glenstal, stands in front of the statue of Henry II. Photograph by the Fourth Earl of Rosse

of primary sources prompts another theory that questions this and the very existence of the Celtic features of Glenstal.

Why does the inscription not read, "Barrington made me" when sources indicate that Barrington was an exacting client who decided how the building took shape? We have seen how Barrington, busy with his law career and other business interests, left the project in the inexperienced architect's care and how Bardwell was believed to be ignorant of native Irish styles. During the first phase, Bardwell, who was wholly in charge, remained in England and was neither in control of the workforce or the budget. Owing to this, work did not cease until 1860 and even then it was not completed to plan. It is notable that after 1839, Bardwell's responsibilities were increasingly delegated to Irish supervisors and craftsmen and it is in this period that the castle took on its resounding Irish design features. On inspection of the original drawings attributed to Bardwell, none contained any references to Irish architectural styles. Furthermore, the interior Romanesque door cases and Celtic-style carvings have been attributed to the influence of Wyndham-Quin and carried out by local craftsmen, probably working from pattern books.

Could the later addition of Irish references be because Barrington suddenly realised that, in the sole hands of his English friend Bardwell, the castle was becoming more foreign than he had ever intended? After all, the most prominent design features of Glenstal at this time were English; an English king and queen, the entry range was a copy of that at Rockingham Castle and the encircling walls were derived from Rochester Castle. And, at a time of unrest and famine in the country, the silhouette of an English castle in the distance might seem a powerful symbol of suppression, something Sir Matthew, a compassionate liberal, would surely not want to be associated with? Therefore, *Bardwell me fecit* may be an attempt to lay responsibility for the first phase with the English architect for the building's outward Anglicisation, absolving Barrington of any blame.

Conclusion

The design of Glenstal castle is fundamentally based on equivocation; although it looks like an ancient structure built for defensive purposes, it is not and its whole design invents a noble ancestral past for its original residents. But Glenstal castle is more than just a product of the fashionable medieval revivals of the early nineteenth century. It says much about the insecurities of a newly wealthy family while also betraying the uncertainty about the position of the Anglo-Irish in a changing nineteenth-century Ireland. By

choosing the Norman revival style for his home and combining it with certain other features, Sir Matthew Barrington denied his true ancestry, preferring to seek a more ancient, multicultural and royal lineage. The English and Irish design features that coexist together at Glenstal have long been thought to be a romantic vision of solidarity between the two countries, yet it is possible that these were added later by Barrington out of concern for his public image. Glenstal castle, for all its ambiguity, remains to this day an unusual amalgamation of styles and is one of the finest Norman revival castles on these islands.

REFERENCES

- 1 Conversation with Fr. Mark Tierney of Glenstal Abbey, 16 May 2004.
- 2 Bardwell is mentioned in the Report from the Select Committee on Metropolitan Improvements ordered by the House of Commons (1838) p.164, as proposing a system of drainage and a sewage system in the area from Westminster to Chelsea.

FURTHER READING

- H. M. Colvin. *A Biographical Dictionary of English Architects*. (London 2001).
 Sean O'Reilly. *Irish Houses and Gardens from the Annals of Country Life Magazine*. (London 2000).
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Statue of a soldier standing guard at Glenstal