# 11. GLENSTAL CASTLE

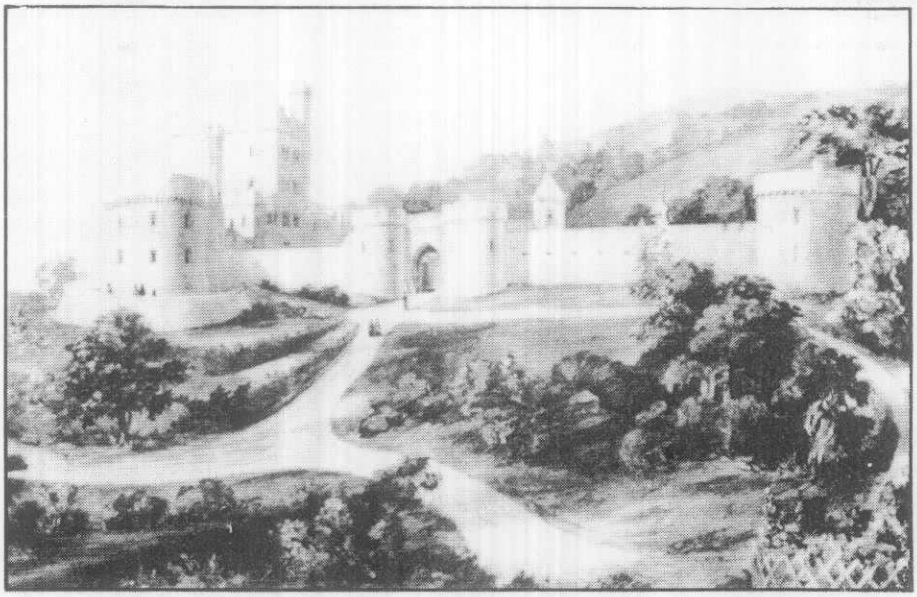
*Matthew Barrington's plans for building a great Norman-Revival castle were never fully realised, but it is interesting to follow the changing ideas of his first four architects from 1833 to Bardwell's building, begun about 1838. In 1927 Glenstal was acquired by the Benedictine Order, who run it as a boys' school; it became an Abbey in 1957.*

*by Mark Tierney*
*and*
*John Cornforth*

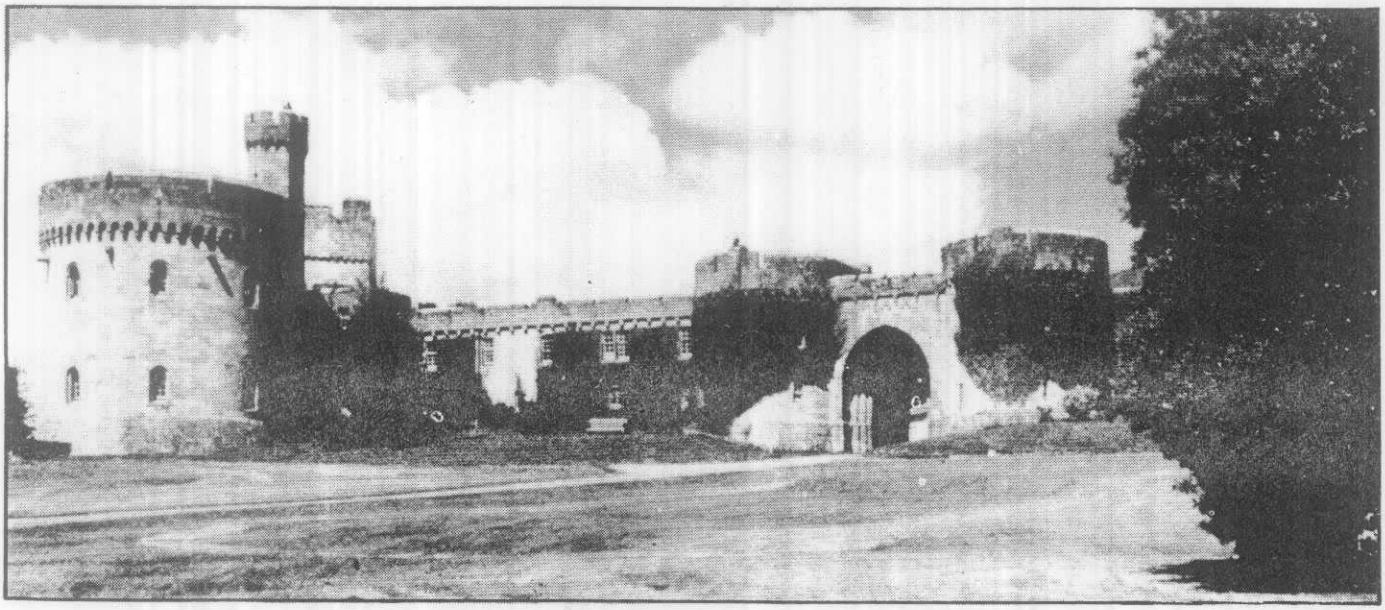
A Norman knight is still on the look-out over the Golden Vale of Tipperary, but he has never seen the peaks of the Galtees that define the eastern edge of the plain , for Pierre, as his name suggests, is of stone, and he stands on the flat turret of Glenstal Castle. There the architect's desire to be remembered conflicted with his patron's vision of medieval Ireland, and, having inscribed round the turret *Bardwell me fecit,* he added the date 1839, but cut it to look like 1139. Even in its incomplete form, Glenstal is one of the most remarkable castle-style projects in Ireland, and William Bardwell does not tell the whole truth in putting up just his name. For the project dates back at least five years earlier, and no less than seven architects were eventually to be involved.

All this makes for complications and uncertainties, but, as the castle was built on a new site on a newly formed estate, at least we need not go into the details of the early history of the place, for that is set out in the history of *Murroe and Boher* by Mark Tierney. In the second half of the 18th century, the Lords Carbery leased out their increasingly encumbered estates in Limerick, and in 1818 that part of the property that included Cappercullen, Garranbane, Glenstal and Meentolla was taken by Matthew Barrington for £150 a year. A few years later, Matthew Barrington began to consider building a more ambitious house some five miles away on that part of the property then called Glenstal. However, most confusingly, he changed his mind about both the site and its name and decided to build two miles to the west, on the present site, then called Garranbane, which means 'old nag', and which he proceeded to call Glenstal.

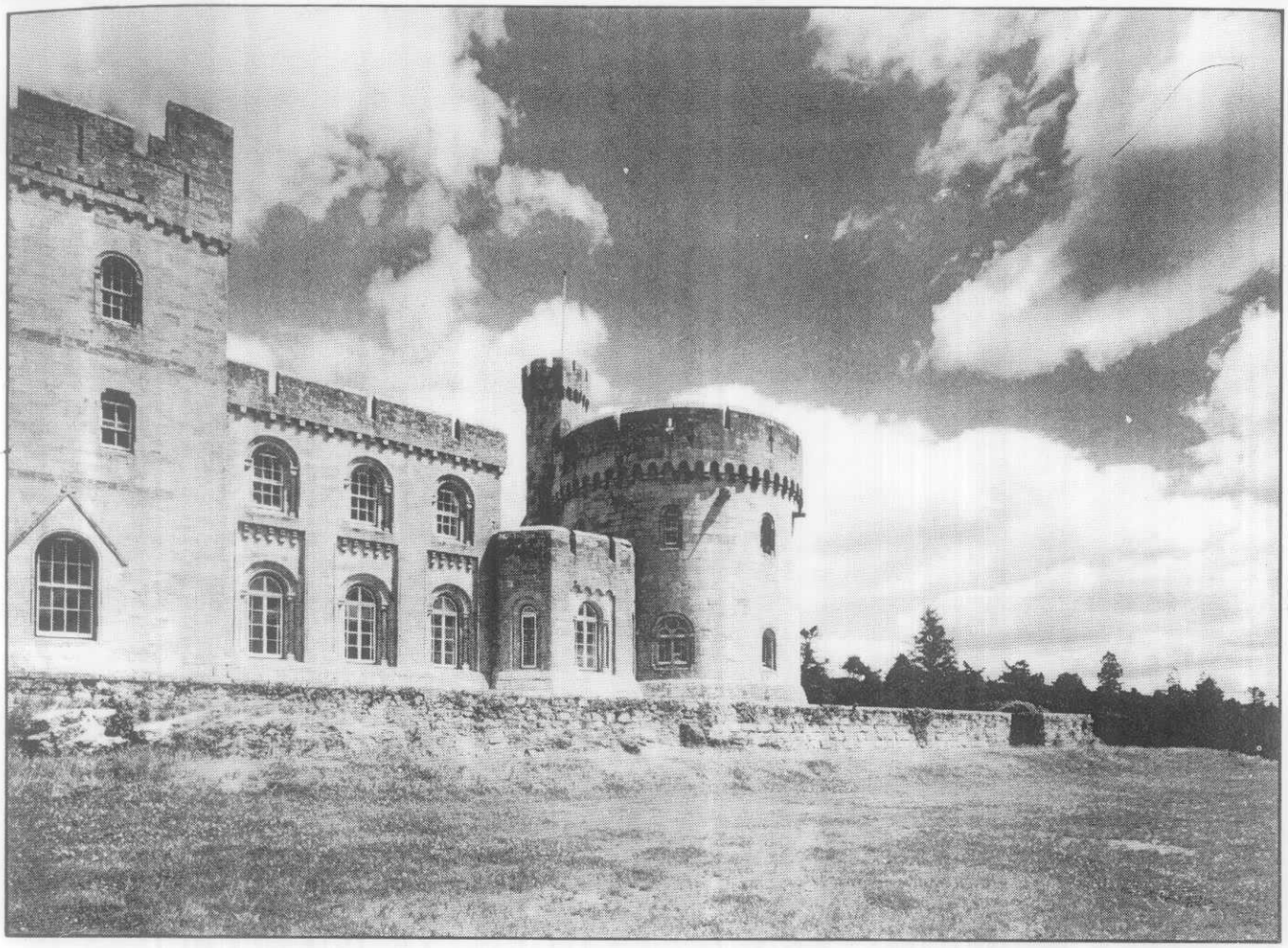
The Barringtons had settled in Limerick City at the end of the 17th century and had prospered through their copper foundry and clock-making



*1–A PERSPECTIVE OF GLENSTAL CASTLE, CO. LIMERICK. Apparently by William Bardwell, who produced the fifth design about 1838.*



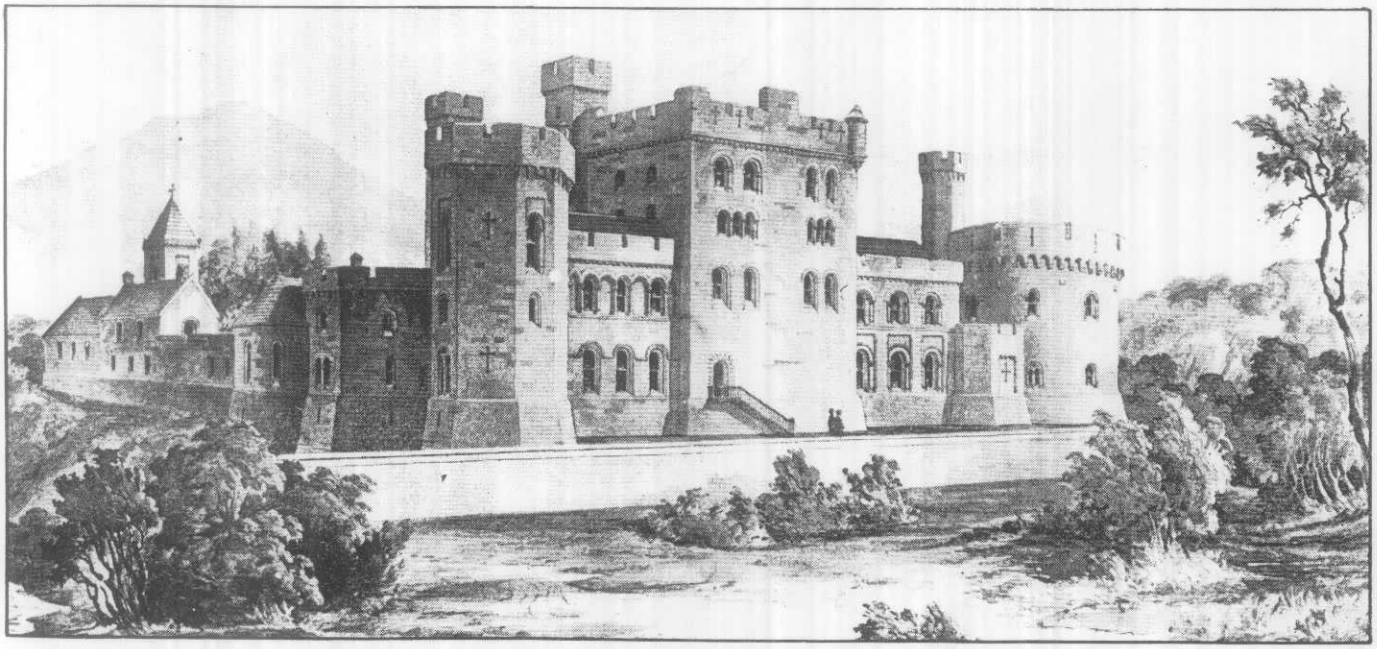
*2–THE CASTLE FROM THE EAST. On the flag turret stands a stone figure of a Norman knight.*



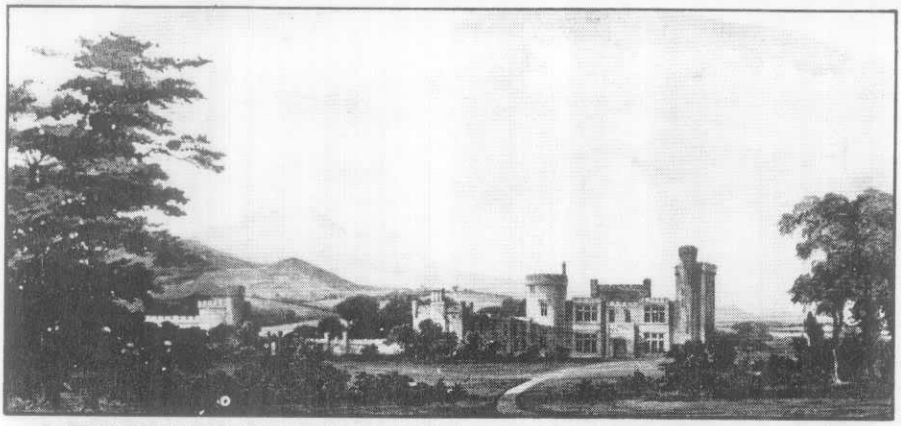
*3–PART OF THE KEEP AND SOUTH-WEST FRONT.*

business. Matthew's great-grandfather, Benjamin, was one of Limerick's leading merchants and served as Sheriff in 1729. Just over 100 years later, in 1831, Matthew's father, Joseph, was made a baronet. Matthew, who was the eldest of five boys, was trained as a lawyer and his career divides into two parts, a first period when he held the profitable job of Crown Solicitor for Munster, which meant he handled all government legal work in Cork, Tipperary, Kerry, Clare and Limerick; and, then, a second in the 1840s and '50s, when he was solicitor and adviser to the Great Southern Railway and also had a thriving private practice in Dublin.

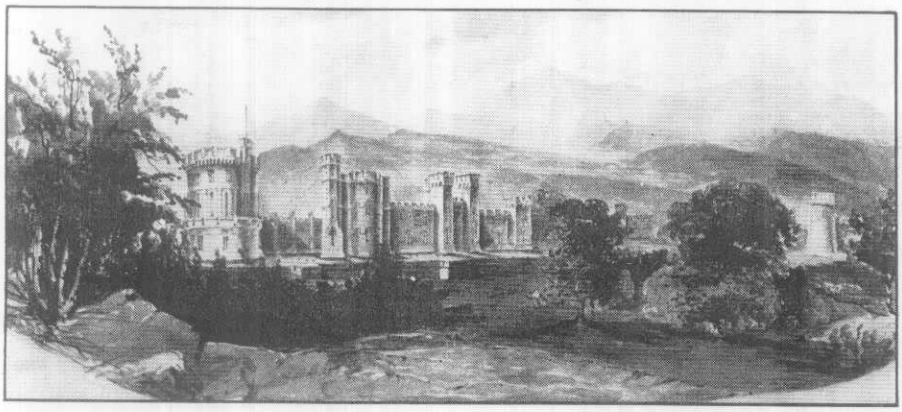
The idea of building a new house at



*4–BARDWELL'S PERSPECTIVE OF GLENSTAL FROM THE SOUTH-WEST.*



*5–THE EARLIEST DESIGN BY JAMES AND GEORGE PAIN. Dated 1833, it shows the influence of Nash. (Below) 6–WILLIAM O'HARA'S FIRST DESIGN, 1833. Influenced by Wyatville's remodelling of Windsor Castle.*



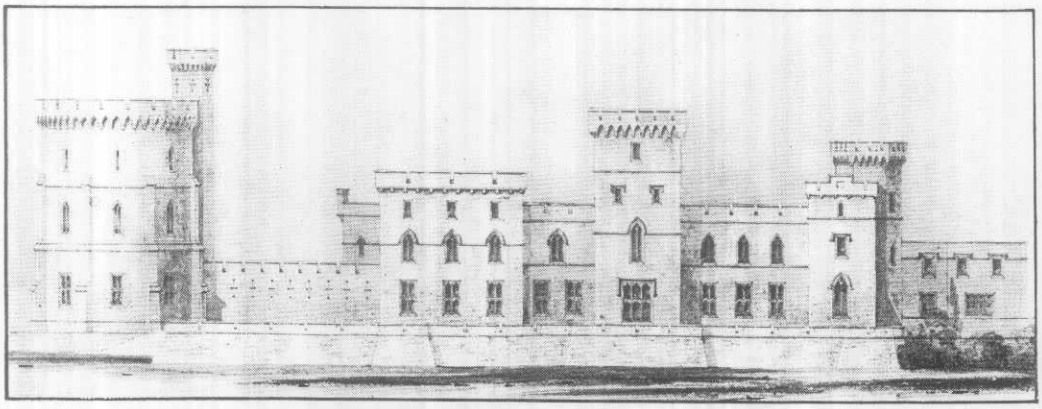
Glenstal dates from the earlier part, when he was assured of a basic income of some £15,000 a year, but its realisation and the acquisition of the estate dates from the second phase when both profits and risks were greater. It is this change of direction, and bouts of costly litigation with the heirs of the 5th Lord Carbery in the 1840s and '50s over the legality of his purchase of the property in 1840, that probably explains much of the building history of Glenstal, and certainly its stop-go character after 1839.

The survival of projects dated 1833, 1834 and 1835 that precede the perspectives, which we must take to be Bardwell's, throw fascinating light on changing attitudes to the gothic and castle styles at that time. There are two from 1833, one by James and George Pain of Limerick, dated April (Fig. 5), and one by William O'Hara of Percy Place, Dublin (Fig. 6). The Pains had been sent to Ireland by Nash to built Lough Coutra Castle in Galway, and James worked at Dromoland Castle in 1813: they stayed on and developed a considerable practice in south-western Ireland. Bearing in mind the Nash connection, it is not surprising to find strong evidence of his style in their design for Glenstal, then to be called Belvedere: what they proposed was a pretty picturesque villa with battlements and towers. O'Hara, on the other hand, proposed to Barrington an Irish Windsor. A still obscure figure from Dublin, he is recorded only as an engineer to the Paving Board, but he may well have been a railway man, for he was one of the architects who submitted a design for Kingsbridge Station, Dublin, in 1845 (*see Kingsbridge Station* by Jeanne Sheehy, Gatherum Series, I, 1973). Windsor, of course, was much in the architectural news then, because Wyatville's transformation had been begun in 1824 and the heightening of the Round Tower had been carried out in 1830-31. However, O'Hara's Round Tower was not a keep in the Windsor sense, but a Picturesque pivot of the design, as were so many of Nash's towers, both castellated and classical.

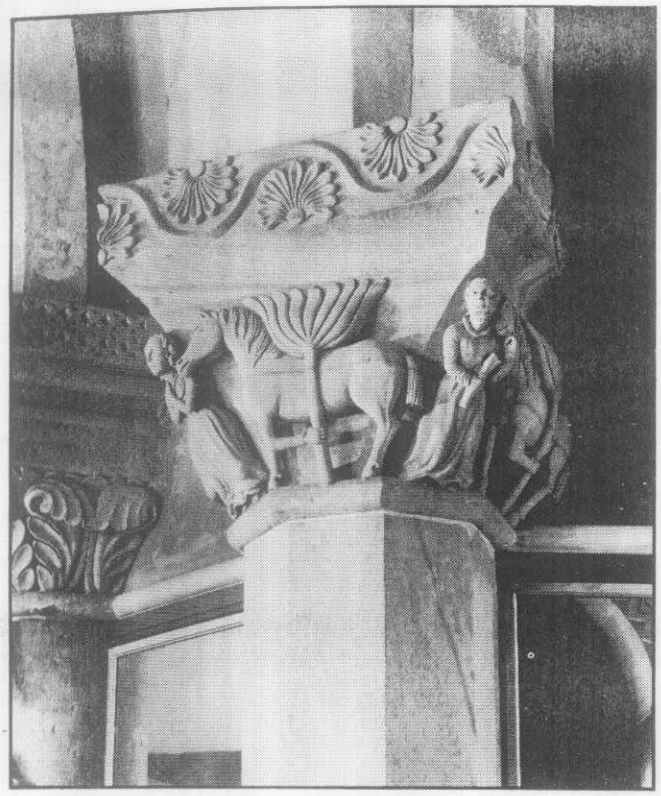
The following year, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Decimus Burton appeared briefly on the scene, producing in November yet another Windsor-inspired design (Fig. 7), a commission no doubt received as a by-product of his visit to Ireland in connection with improvements to Phoenix Park, Dublin. All that came of it was that the drawings were evidently shown to O'Hara, who produced a revised scheme in January, 1835.

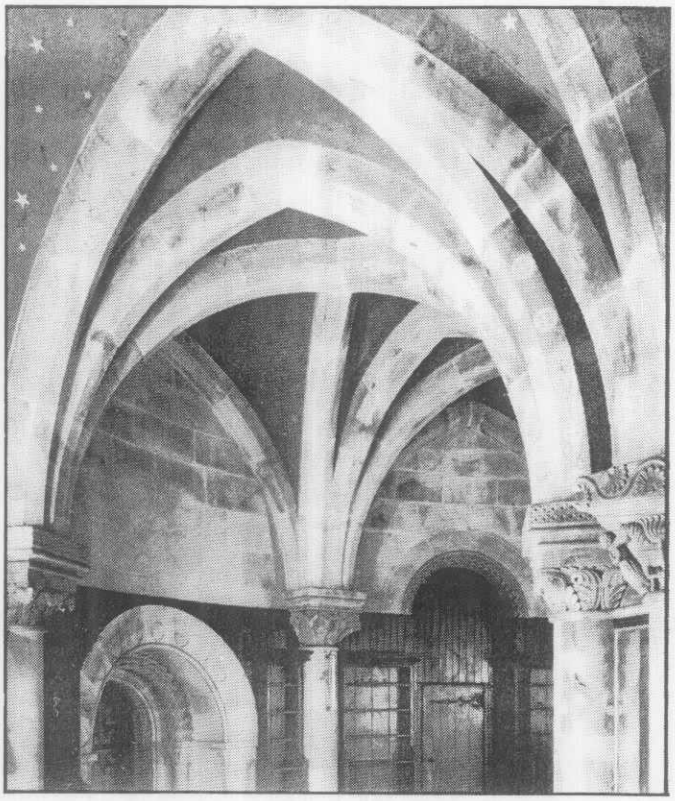
After that there is silence until 1838, when Barrington records in his only surviving account book payments to Bardwell, but there is no clue as to how the connection was made. H.N. Colvin records among Bardwell's works his unsuccessful projects for the Fitzwilliam Museum in 1835, and for the Houses of Parliament in 1836, but unfortunately nothing appears to be known about his style of draughtsmanship, and we have no positive means of identifying as his the two unsigned and undated perspectives of Glenstal, now in Glenstal Abbey (Figs 1 and 4). The buildings are very much in the manner of Thomas Hopper, as the Knight of Glin has suggested to us, and certainly the influence of his Gosford Castle, Co. Armagh, is apparent; but then it is his name that dominates the Norman Revival, largely because of Penrhyn Castle in North Wales. (However it is known that John Kelly, one of the later architects to be involved, exhibited views of Glenstal at the Royal Hibernian Society in 1848 or '49).

It is interesting to relate Hopper's influence to that of contemporary architectural literature by Carter, Rickman, Britton and Pugin, and to compare both with Sir Charles Long's views on the treatment of Windsor, which are quoted in the recently published volume of the *History of the Office of Works*, and then to look forward to the simplified forms of Salvin's Peckforton, which was begun in 1846. The character of Windsor, he wrote, 'should be that of simplicity and grandeur, and as well for



*7–DECIMUS BURTON'S DESIGN, 1834.*





*8 and 9–ONE OF THE CAPITALS IN THE LIBRARY, AND (right) THE LIBRARY VAULT.*

its History, as from the imposing style of Building belonging to that period, I should say the period of Edward the 3rd is that which should generally predominate, not however excluding the Edifices of earlier Periods, where we find anything of grand or picturesque effect- ...' He dreaded modern gothic architecture and the repetition of small towers: 'this style which has been called gothic is in a great degree fanciful, and does not belong to any period of Castle Architecture that I am acquainted with'.

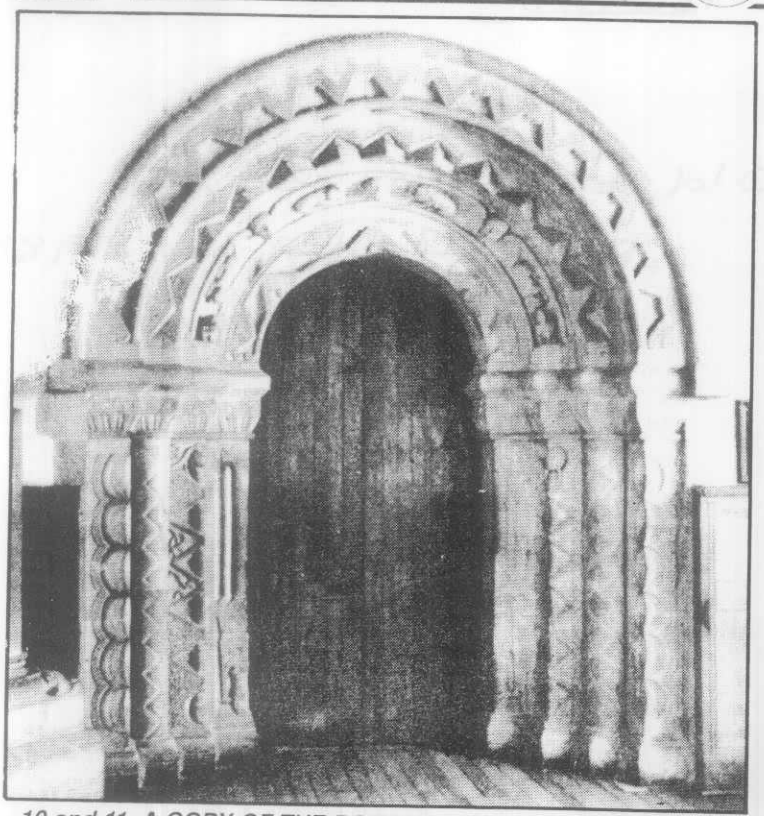
It is conceivable that the reason for the pause at Glenstal was not architectural, but lies in the details of Barrington's own career. As well as being Crown Solicitor, he had become increasingly interested in Irish railway projects in the 1830s (and in fact he chose the site for Limerick Junction) and partly in order to have more time for these, he was attempting to get the reversion of his solicitorship for his son. He had influential allies at Dublin Castle, who were prepared to accept this, and his support for the government was recognised in London by Lord Melbourne. But Thomas Drummond, the Under Secretary in Dublin from 1836 to 1839, who was an administrative reformer, refused to co-operate, and, indeed, in 1838 he more or less forced Barrington to give up his post. However the loss of income cannot have been too serious for within two years he had managed to buy out the Carbery heirs.

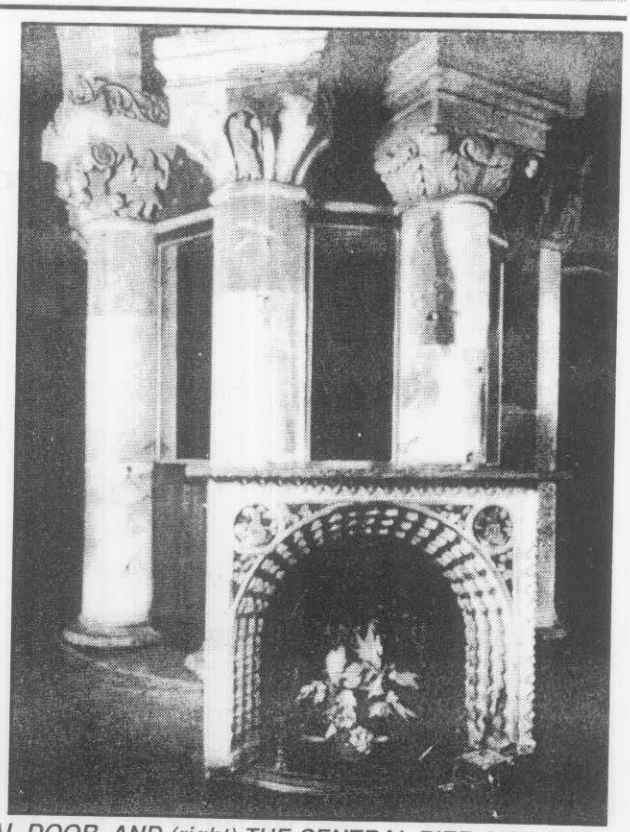
His increasing means in the 1830s had encouraged his architectural ambitions and no doubt those of his architects as well, but the change of site was an improvement and Bardwell's design cleverly exploited it. Today few people appreciate this for they approach the castle along the west drive and never get the vital first view that Bardwell intended. This was really planned to be seen from the east drive and, despite the growth of the trees and the alteration to the silhouette of 'the keep', it is still immensely impressive. Bardwell wanted to give the impression that Glenstal was a great quadrangular castle, but in fact it is an open V with his round tower at the base and the main rooms in the south-west arm, as can be seen from the perspective of that front he planned to build east to west, towards the ravine that provided 'a defence' on the north-west side, with the chapel that appears over the south-east wall in Fig. 4 as its principal building; the north-east section of the curtain was left to visitors' imagination.

Although a good start was made on the south tower and part of the south-east front as far as the gatehouse, all did not go according to plan, perhaps because of Barrington's other affairs, and work stopped in 1840 or '41. Bardwell came over in 1840 and two years later he was consulted about the restoration of St Mary's, Limerick, but despite the preparation of a new estimate in 1843, it seems building at Glenstal was not resumed until 1846 or '47. Then the designs were entrusted to a Dublin architect called Dargan, and he handed them on to John Kelly, who is recorded in the *Irish Almanac* for 1851 as being an architect and surveyor and valuator of railway and public works living in Upper Gloucester Street North; but as to his career the only other clue at the moment is that he worked at Malahide Castle. By May, 1847, 42 men were being employed on the building, and early the following year it was envisaged that the whole of the south-west range would be complete by the spring of 1849. But again there were delays and work stopped in 1849, leaving the shell of the picture gallery and the drawing room on the south front and the entrance hall behind finished, but the 'keep' hardly started.

Four years later Barrington made a final effort to complete the castle. He paid off Bardwell and called in Joshua Hargrave from Cork, a member of a dynasty founded by the grandfather, Abraham Hargrave I, and a contact he had probably met through his railway activities, because Hargrave is credited with the design for the Cork and Blackrock Railway Terminus. Although the idea was to go on with Bardwell's designs, inevitably these were curtailed; the octagon tower at the west end of the south-west front was given up, as was the range linking it to the keep that was to contain the drawing room, and so the plan of the keep had to be revised to provide a dining room.

Probably Glenstal was an economic





*10 and 11–A COPY OF THE ROMANESQUE KILLALOE CATHEDRAL DOOR, AND (right) THE CENTRAL PIER AND ONE OF THE FIREPLACES IN THE LIBRARY.*

folly from the beginning, but it produces detective work for perverse architectural historians, particularly when it comes to the details. To start with, Bardwell had a great deal of carving done by Kelsey in London, presumably W.T. Kelsey of Brompton, whom Rupert Gunnis records as working about 1830-46, rather than Charles Samuel Kelsey, who was only born in 1820. Fifteen cases of Kelsey's work, mostly shafts of columns, capitals and corbels, were sent over in April, 1844, and much of it was not finally used until the former drawing room and grand staircase were finished after 1849.

However not all the detail is English-inspired or made, and this is one of the most interesting things about Glenstal. The first sign of specifically Irish interest is the doorway from the (roughly finished) dining room to the drawing room, which is a particularly fine copy of the doorway at Killaloe Cathedral, some 11 miles from Glenstal. Even then it was coming to be recognised as the finest of the few remaining examples of Irish Romanesque carving.

From Killaloe one moves to the west door of Iffley church adapted for the overmantel in the drawing room, and then, beyond the former picture gallery, in the round tower is the library, an extraordinary octagonal room with a central pier containing two fireplaces and a stone-ribbed vault springing from elaborately carved capitals. From the point of view of 19th-century concepts of comfort and cosiness it is hard to think of a more unusable room: to look out of the windows one has to step up from the main floor level, and the sense of light is largely achieved by reflections in panels of looking glass set into the central pier.

The design of the capitals is particularly intriguing and various theories have been advanced as to the sources of their design, including an Augustinian abbey in Lisbon, but it seems more likely that an Irish carver was shown the plates in a book like Carter's and then he was allowed to use his Celtic head. But who was he? Apparently a local carver called White did the Killaloe door in 1841, and there are also unspecific payments to a carver called Shiel.

Until more is known about the Irish Revival in the late 1830s and 1840s we may not have the answer, but these Irish elements at Glenstal are not isolated phenomena. Adare (*Country Life,* May 15, 22 and 29, 1969), also in Limerick, for instance, comes to mind: begun by the 2nd Earl of Dunraven about 1832, it is rich in ornament of comparable fantasy done in the late 1830s and early '40s and in its entrance hall there is Irish Romanesque detail comparable with that to be seen at Glenstal. This may not be coincidence for it is clear from Barrington's account book that he had dealings with Lord Dunraven, and as they were both building, it is more than likely that they discussed architecture as well as business.

It is sad that not more of Barrington's papers have survived and also that there appears to be no old photographs of the interior of the house, for it is evident that Bardwell attended to its furnishing and decorating as well as its design. Tapestries, pictures, stained glass, armour and furniture were all sent over, and it sounds as if the kind of effect he was trying to achieve was a cross between Nash's Mansions and the plates in Meyrick's and Shaw's books on armour and furniture.

The Barringtons continued to live at Glenstal for some 60 years after Sir Matthew's death in 1861, but the tragic accidental shooting of Winifred Barrington, the daughter of Sir Charles, the 5th baronet, in an IRA ambush on a group of Black and Tans with whom she was returning to the castle in May, 1921, led to their departure and the eventual sale of the estate in 1925. The castle was bought by Mgr. James Ryan as a gift for a religious order, and it was offered to the Benedictines at Maredsous in Belgium, whose previous Irish abbot, Dom Columba Marmion, had wanted to found a house in Ireland. The first monk arrived in May, 1927, and later that year Glenstal was canonically erected into a Simple Priory. It became an Abbey 30 years later.

*Illustrations: 1-3 and 5-11, Jonathan M. Gibson; 4, The Green Studio Ltd., Dublin.*

*(Reprinted from 'Country Life', 3rd October, 1974, by Waterlow (Dunstable) Ltd.).*