The Old Palace of Cashel

By ROBERT WYSE JACKSON

The Old Palace of Cashel is one of the less known features of the town which inevitably is dominated by the Rock. In competition with the mediaeval majesty of the cluster of ruins which crown Cashel, everything else there seems to be lessened in importance. Yet the tiny ancient city has features of great interest—its Cistercian and Dominican Abbeys, its stretches of mediaeval city wall, its fine John Street with its fanlit Georgian houses and firemarks, its Georgian Cathedral of 1784, clearly designed from the Book of Architecture of James Gibbs and above all, the Palace has its claim to celebrity as a mansion of character and charm. The residence successively of the Church of Ireland Archbishops and Deans of Cashel, it was bought in 1959 by Lord Brocket.

The Palace was built in 1730 by Archbishop Theophilus Bolton, one of the nationally-minded group of Irish-born bishops of the period. The friend of Archbishop King and of Dean Swift, he had successively been chancellor of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin and Bishop of Clonfert. The earliest reference to the Palace is in Loveday’s Tour of 1732 where it is described as a place of notable hospitality. A record survives of the invitation of at least one guest—Dean Swift. The Dean, of course, knew the neighbourhood well. He had enjoyed for weeks on end the hospitality of the Mathew of the day at Thomastown, some six miles from Cashel (Sheridan in the Life records that Mathew’s idea of perfect hospitality was to provide his guests with the facilities and privacy of an inn, where no bill was given at the end and where his visitors might stay as long as they pleased). On April 7, 1735 Bolton wrote to Swift from Cashel:

“What if you spent a fortnight here this summer? I have laid aside all my country politics, sheriffs’ elections, feasts, etc., and I fancy it would not be disagreeable to you to see King Cormac’s chapel, his bed-chamber, etc., all built, beyond controversy, above eight hundred years ago, when he was King as well as Archbishop. I really intend to lay out a thousand pounds to preserve this old church; and I am sure you would be of service to posterity if you assisted me in the doing of it.”

At Clonfert Bolton when Bishop had undertaken a great deal of digging of drains in that marshy countryside: at Cashel he provided a new water supply for the city. The Dublin Pue’s Occurrences for the 16-19 December 1732 records the rejoicings when this was completed “chiefly at the expense and by the direction of his Grace out of a tender regard for the inhabitants who were greatly distressed for want of water.” The canal was called “by the name of the River Bolton,” and a grand-procession headed by trumpets inaugurated it, marching to the first bridge where the Archbishop’s health was drunk " with the most universal acclamations."

(The incident reminds me that Bolton’s Palace still has its wine-cellars, the bins numbered with the original painted numbers. Quarter of a century later the house

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was to produce, under the patronage of Archbishop Arthur Price, a dark stout which its brewer’s descendants were to make world famous to the present day.)

The Palace, though built in the reign of George I, is very much in the Queen Anne style. The south façade is of red brick faced with limestone. The blocked rustications of the doorway and ground floor windows are much in the manner of James Gibbs, whose style is also discernible in St. John’s Cathedral. The North side is stone faced. Over the entrance there is a fire mark, issued by the Hibernian Insurance Company in the seventeen seventies; it shows a crowned harp. The entrance hall, thirty feet square, is panelled in red pine, with an entablature facing the entrance supported by Corinthian pillars of finely carved wood. This hall opens directly into four large reception rooms and into a second hall which contains the stairway. The hall has also two contemporary mantlepieces of Kilkenny marble.

The other five rooms on the ground floor were redecorated and remodelled after the 1798 rebellion, when the occupying troops, after the manner of billeted soldiers,
did grave damage to the panelling. This restoration may reasonably be ascribed to the last years of the eighteenth century; the occupier, Archbishop Charles Agar, first Lord Normanton, was translated to the Archbishopric of Dublin in 1890. The small north-eastern room has a particularly charming mantelpiece in carved grey and white marbles.

Many people will consider the finest feature of the house to be the great staircase of red pine, panelled up to a very lofty ceiling. It is again in early Georgian style, with twisted balusters and some fine foliate carving of the fascia, reminiscent of the kindred house, Mount Ievens in County Clare.

A long corridor, panelled as the stairs, and with tall narrow doors opening into a series of interconnecting bedrooms, runs the full length of the first floor. It is lit at each end by a lofty window. Above is a series of second floor bedrooms, with dormer windows, mostly with original fireplaces.

The basement kitchens and cellars are built in a series of enormously strong and impressive round-arched vaultings.

After the Church Temporalities Act of 1833, when the last Archbishop, Richard Laurence transferred his home to Waterford, the house was divided, making a somewhat awkward residence with an ugly stairs out of one third of the building. This, with the partitions, has just been removed, opening up the house to its original spacious proportions.

For some years after the departure of Archbishop Laurence the future of the house was uncertain. Thus very soon afterwards it was proposed to use it as a school, when the Reverend William Sewell the founder of Radley thought of it as a boarding house for the boys. Part of Sewell's scheme was the restoration of the ancient Cathedral on the Rock. (Eventually the school, St. Columba's College, went to Stackallan, Co. Meath, and finally to its present situation in Rathfarnham.)

An interesting feature of Bolton's plan was the western annexe, built as a library, and connected with the main house by a passage. There is every probability that the idea of this was a simplification of the pattern of Marsh's Library beside the Dublin Archiepiscopal Palace of St. Sepulchre. In this connection it is relevant that the library contains many of Archbishop Marsh’s books, inscribed in his own meticulous hand writing with his Greek motto. The whole collection was bequeathed by Archbishop Bolton's Will in 1744 for the use of the clergy of the Diocese, and is a vast collection of early printing of the sixteenth, seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It is an unexplored source for the study of bindings. Its influence was remarkable, for its theological works left a life-long impression on the scholarship of a local curate, John Jebb. As Bishop of Limerick and a copious theological writer, he is recognised by ecclesiastical historians as the father of the Oxford Movement in the Anglican Church.
The gardens run from the back of the house to the slopes of the Rock, giving an unrivalled romantic vista. On the lawn behind the house is the "Queen Anne" mulberry, reputed to be older even than the house and to have been planted to celebrate her coronation. In this connection, the lyrical account given by H.D. Inglis, "Ireland in 1834" deserves to be quoted as a piece of romanticism worthy of the era of the Gothic revival.

"All that can delight the senses is here. Parterres of lovely flowers, and rare shrubs; velvet lawns; secluded walks rich in odours; and above the fine screen of holly and laburnum and lilac, and copper beech and laurel, towers the Rock and the magnificent ruin that covers it."

It is a happy link with those twilight days of the close of the Georgian age that his great copper beeches still flourish, a proscenium to frame the dramatic picture of the Rock.