

Palace of the past



THE EARLY 18th century Protestant Bishop's Palace is at Church Street in The King's Island in the English-town of Limerick City. Now in a lamentably ruined state, the building was designed by Francis Bindon, shortly after the 1691 Treaty of Limerick, by which Limerick became a predominantly Williamite (English Protestant) city. Francis Bindon was the greatest Irish architect of those times. Also a gifted artist, he was portrait painter to the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, the English King's representative in Dublin. despite claims by some historians that Bindon was a native of County Clare, the number of important architectural commissions he carried out in the Limerick area give Limerick a strong claim as his native place.

Bindon designed Castlepark, the Delmege's mansion, which can still be seen about a quarter of a mile from the Watch House Cross (Killeely) on the road to Cappantymore. He also designed the St. John's Square Queen Anne period houses.

For his brother-in-law, Henry Stamer, he designed Stamer Hall (near Ennis). The Protestant Bishop's Palace is an eloquent example of the Palladian (Italian) style - of which Bindon was a fine practitioner. The Protestant Bishops resided at this palace from the early 1700's until they transferred to a Georgian style palace at Henry Street in the early 1800's, Henry Street having been in the early 1800's in the newly developed Newtown Pery area of Limerick City. The Georgian era palace is now the head office of Bord na gCon.

Bishop Thomas Smyth, who resided at the palace at Church St. around 1710, suffered some alarming nocturnal experiences from some bigoted officers and soldiers of the then largely Orange garrison of Limerick City. It was a time of intense Catholic priest-hunting and other anti-Catholic activities generally by the English authorities in Limerick county and city. However, Bishop Smyth, whose handsome memorial can be seen in nearby St. Munchin's Protestant Parish Church, was a

fair-minded exception to the prevailing Governmental anti-Catholicism. He refused to commend or patronise the one County Limerick Catholic priest who "abjured" (apostasised to the Protestant religion) in those times.

Around 1710, the anti-Episcopalian riots, triggered off by a Dr. Sachervell's views and trial in London, agitated England and spread to Ireland and Limerick City. In October, 1710, Bishop Smyth wrote a letter of complaint to the Government. He related how on three different September nights ("at one o'clock in the morning") these bigoted and licentious Orange officers and soldiers disported themselves outside his palace. Among their scandalous carry-ons were the singing of bawdy songs and swearing death, damnation, plague and famine to all who refused loyalty to the English monarch.

On the second night, they threw stones on the palace roof and at the door. Some stripped themselves, pretending to benude ghosts.

Other donned white sheets for their ghostly masquerades. The terrified palace sentry had to be assured by the Bishop that he wasn't seeing nude and dressed spirits!

On the third night, the Orange officers, who were led by Major Chayter, Commander-in-Chief of Limerick Garrison, discredibly assisted a high-ranking officer called Fairfax, later Lord Justice of Ireland, and soldiers disturbed the Bishop's slumbers by dragging a dead fox followed by a howling pack of 24 hounds up and down the street outside the palace.

The palace is known in local folklore as "The Bishop's Lady's House," the one-time abode (it's said) of the ghostly Bishop's Lady of "The Bard of Thomond's famous poem, "Drunken Thady and the Bishop's Lady."

"The ghostly Bishop's Lady" wrought havoc on late night passers-by in nearby Castle Street, until the miracle-working Father Power banished her spirit to

the Red Sea shore in the mid-1800's, until Doomsday. With the recent Limerick Corporation adoption of the Northern Relief Road Plan (an alias for the Ring Road) the palace is to be a sacrificial victim to the section of this road through the St. Mary's Isle area.

A regrettable decision, as the palace is our city's only surviving early 18th century house. The decision to demolish it contrasts lamentably with the vision of the late Bishop Robert Wyse-Jackson. That scholarly Protestant Bishop of Limerick recommended in the late 1960's that the palace be restored as, with the nearby St. Munchin's Protestant Parish Church, a 19th century Gothic revival edifice, the charming 19th century Gothic revival Villiers Widows' Alms Houses and King John's Castle, this enclave of the King's Island could be developed as an attractive historical tourist precinct.

□ Photo: JOHN F. WRIGHT
□ Text: SEAMUS O CINNEIDE