Ancient Street Architecture in Kilkenny

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The vivid realisation of the past forms one of the keenest enjoyments of the antiquarian. To reconstruct from authentic data the dilapidated monastic pile, and call up before the mind's eye the manners and everyday occupations of its quondam inmates; to people the mouldering fortalice with its old inhabitants—the feudal lord in his panoply of plate and mail, or rich weeds of peace; the stately dame with her quaint horned head-dress, and ample kirtle, and the armed retainer ever ready for the foray or the fight—to trace the progress of the villa or town or the Pale, with its stalwart burgesses, its boni homines, as the old law Latin hath it, its good men and true, half traders, half soldiers, ready to drive a profitable trade with the Lombard or Flemish merchant in wines and spices, embroidered silks and rich inlaid armour, and to exchange with the English trader for his "cloth of assize" the coarser products of the native loom; and again, just as ready to don the steel cap and quilted jack, and armed with the long pike or stout yew, to march forth against some "Irish enemy" whose light armed kerns, or more formidable gallowglasses, having burst through the "marches," were devastating the Pale with fire and sword—even as the stalwart burgesses of Kilkenny, headed by their valiant sovereign, John Croker, boldly left the shelter of their walls, and, on the day of the exaltation of the holy cross in the year of grace 1407, performed good service against the Irish foe and English rebels at Callan, in memory of which a cross once reared its sculptured arms in our city, now, together with our noble market cross, utterly destroyed. Such are amongst the most keenly enjoyed pleasures of the antiquary—a pleasure lately afforded me while engaged in tracing out the peculiarities of construction and style which belonged to the domestic architecture of Kilkenny about the latter end of the sixteenth and the commencement of the seventeenth century. I may not, it is true, be able to communicate that pleasure to others, but at the same time I feel the importance of placing on record some notice of buildings which are rapidly disappearing from amongst us.
That the earlier domestic buildings of Kilkenny, as of most other cities in this and the neighbouring island, consisted of framed oak timber there can be little doubt. Still, from the abundance of excellent building stone in the neighbourhood of Kilkenny, and the facility with which it must always have been procured, it is probable that there were here exceptions to the prevailing custom, and that many domestic structures of stone existed from an early period in our city. A manuscript, descriptive of Kilkenny, written at the commencement of the seventeenth century and preserved in the Library of the British Museum (Col. Clar. LI. 4796), affords some curious and interesting information on the subject. After alluding to the facility which the water carriage of the River Nore afforded for the transmission of stone and timber, a statement which is confirmed by a contemporary by-law of the Corporation of Irishtown, still existing among the town records and which regulates the admission of timber at the “Slype” Gate, near the present Green’s Bridge, the writer of the manuscript states that oak timber of the largest dimensions was procurable in abundance from woods which existed chiefly to the northward of the city; whilst there were two quarries, one to the east, abounding in variegated marbles; and another more to the northward which produced a marble not well adapted to receive a polish, but at the same time affording a most excellent material for architectural purposes. And there was this difference, he states, between the marbles of the two quarries, namely, that the eastern marble, even when polished, was subject to imbibe damp in wet weather, or even when rain was threatening, whereas the other stone, although unpolished, did not exhibit similar phenomena even when exposed to the same atmosphere. The most cursory observer must here recognise the peculiarities of the two quarries, which to the present day are affording us our chief supply of building stone—namely, the Black Quarry to the south-east, and those beds of limestone lying to the north-west of the town, from which latter the excellent material used in the new Catholic Cathedral has been procured, and by contrasting on a damp day the stone used in the Castle (supplied from the Black Quarry) with the material employed in the former building one must be struck with the accuracy of observation evinced by the unknown author of the manuscript I have quoted. (The author was David Rothe, Bishop of Ossory, 1618-1650.—Editor.)

The earliest existing specimen of a domestic building which we possess is that fragment of the original episcopal mansion given by Geoffrey Saint Leger (who died in 1287) as a collegiate residence for the Vicars Choral of the Cathedral. Of this building, unfortunately, but little remains. Of the New Court erected by Richard de Ledrede, the year of whose death was 1360, a consider-
able portion is incorporated in the present Palace, but its distinctive features have been obliterated by successive alterations. The early timber houses of Kilkenny have all disappeared, but I am happy to say that it is peculiarly rich in domestic edifices of stone dating from the latter end of the sixteenth and the commencement of the seventeenth centuries. There are few, I am sure, who have not been struck by the picturesque gables and cut-stone chimneys of the old mansion in High Street, which stands opposite the end of Walkin Street. Although divided at present into several tenements yet the first floor retains much of its original wainscot, together with some fine examples of cut-stone chimney pieces. One of its picturesque chimneys has, however, been taken down. In the front wall is inserted, although not in its original place, a slab of limestone sculptured with an achievement of ten quarterings together, with the letters H.S. and the following inscription: "Henry Shee, of Kilkeni, Gentleman, and Frances Crisp, his wife's armies." The upper portion of this stone is, unfortunately, broken off and lost, but I have been informed that it bore the date of 1580. The head of the family, Sir Richard Shee, founded and amply endowed an hospital in the city of Kilkenny which still stands unaltered, although in a most dilapidated condition, the funds dedicated to its support having been diverted from the use to which the founder devoted them.
The hospital stands in Rose-Inn Street, one gable fronting that thoroughfare and the other extending back to Mary's Lane; both fronts are decorated with the arms of the founder, which until these last few years back were richly blazoned in their proper colours. Underneath the arms in front is an inscription stating that the founder was Sir Richard Shee, whilst that on the back is more full, and runs as follows: “Insignia Ricardi Shee Kilkenniensis armigeri et Margarete Sherlock uxoris Ilius qui hoc Zenodochium fieri fecerunt. 1582.” The upper floor is carried throughout the full extent of the building and is fitted up with an altar.

Immediately opposite Henry Shee's house in High Street and at the corner of Walkin Street stand some extensive premises which must once have been a fine example of the same style of architecture. The exterior, however, has been much transformed, and it is only in the rear that its characteristic features are observable. There is a fine window divided by mullions into eight lights at the rear and some good examples of cut-stone chimney pieces within. The front towards Walkin Street still preserves its original parapet and stone gargoyles, or spouts. I can learn nothing further of its history than that it is commonly known as Tunnadine’s Holding. The cut-stone chimneys surmounting
the house occupied by Mr. T. Shearman point out another building of this period, which the inscription under the escutcheon on the front proves to be the residence of the old Kilkenny family of Archer. It may not be generally known that the tenant is bound by his lease, under a heavy penalty, to preserve the said chimneys and escutcheon of arms intact, an example worthy to be followed by other proprietors. The date on the escutcheon is 1582 and the name of the builder is there given as Martin Archer.

Another old house, the residence of the Langton family, is also still in existence, extending from the north side of the Butter-slip nearly to the Tholsel. The Langtons, like most of the burgher families of Kilkenny, were originally of English extraction, being of the house of Low in Lancashire. Nicholas Langton was born in 1562 and "was a wise, prudent, magnanimous and hospitable man"; he was chiefly instrumental in procuring the great charter, which erected Kilkenny into a city, from James I, was elected Mayor the year after, and died in a good old age, anno 1632. "He purchased and built the stone house near the market cross in Kilkenny." The escutcheon of arms which formerly adorned the front of this house is now removed and built into a wall at the rear; it bears the following inscription: "Insignia Nicholae Langton Aldermani Civitatis Kilkenniae qui hoc aedificium construxit. 1609." Langton's house is now divided into several tenements, and preserves its original features alone at the rear, in which direction it extends very nearly to King Street. The front is now modernised, but James Robertson, of Rose Hill, still possesses an old but excellent drawing which not only gives a very interesting view of the market cross as it stood before its demolition in 1771, but also shows Langton's house with the usual gable to the front, surmounted by its chimney. This drawing also exhibits another feature to which I particularly wish to call attention, namely, an arcade or open row of arches on the ground floor of Langton's house, of which the arched entrance to the Butter-slip is the only one now apparent. (Some alterations consequent on the erection of a new shop-front have since exposed to view the remains of this arcade). Having heard from many old inhabitants that this covered way was within memory continued on both sides of the Tholsel by a wooden penthouse, it struck me that anciently a contrivance of this nature was universal in Kilkenny, and this idea of mine has received fresh confirmation within these few days by the discovery of a similar row of arches existing in the street elevation of the old house in Coal-market, erected by John Rothe and Rosa Archer, his wife. The entrance archway alone was visible until within a few days past, when, the old dashing having been removed, the imposts, piers and arch stones of four other similar arches were exposed to view. A projecting bay window has been removed within my own memory,
and the corbel on which it rested is still to be seen. The arms over the entrance are those of the Rothes, an ancient and opulent mercantile family of note in Kilkenny, of which the celebrated David Rothe was a member. John Rothe FitzPiers was the builder of the family residence at present under consideration, as appears by an inscription to the following effect:—

15.J.R.94.

Insignia Johannis Rothe Mercatoris filii Petri Fitz Johannis.

This building exhibits a most interesting and nearly perfect example of the urban architecture of the period, affording ample accommodation to the opulent merchant’s family, his apprentices and servants, together with storage for his goods. The front elevation of the house presents a gable in the centre crowned by an ornamental chimney and flanked by a parapet running along the whole front at each side, with small pinnacles at the angles; a bay window, corbeled out from the wall, formerly existed on the ground floor, as already observed; the other original windows have been removed. The plan consists of two courtyards surrounded by buildings. In front an archway gives access to the first courtyard, and from this again passage is obtained by a smaller archway to the inner court, also formerly enclosed by buildings, some of which are now removed. From this court there was a way of egress through a large gateway into the lane now called New Building Lane, and it also contains a well (which, having been cleared out in the year 1846, was found to be of considerable depth, and square form, faced with masonry) carved with the following date and inscription:—

1604

Orate pro animabus Johannis Rothe Mercatoris et uxoris eius Rosae Archer qui puteum hunc et hec aedificia fieri fecerunt.

In the internal arrangements of the house there are no party walls used, each floor runs the whole extent of the building and, resting as it does on massive oak beams, is well calculated to support the several internal partitions which are invariably of oak timber. In the principal rooms capacious chimney-pieces of polished Kilkenny marble canopy the ample hearths. The rooms were, and in some instances still are, wainscotted with panelled oak. Indeed, no other description of timber was originally used throughout the entire structure. The mode of forming the partitions was as follows: strong oak studs framed to cross pieces at stated intervals, having rough-hewn oak panels rabbeted into them, formed the centre or core of the partition and reached from floor to ceiling. Over these in the principal rooms was laid a panelled and moulded oak wainscot, with a cornice or ornamented
work running round the top: this wainscot reached to within two feet of the ceiling, and the interval was no doubt occupied by ornamental stucco work, examples of which may still be seen in Carrick Castle, one of the finest (if not the finest) of the Elizabethan houses now remaining in Ireland.

There are many other old houses or portions of houses of the same date as the examples last mentioned still existing in Kilkenny, as, for instance, that near Jenkins' Pump, the residence of the late J. Ryan, in King Street; the old house near the National Bank in Coalmarket, commonly but erroneously termed the Parliament House of Kilkenny, etc., but they do not preserve much of their original features. Two old houses which stood in High Street, at the end of James's Street, have been lately taken down, and in the course of demolition the arches in the party walls which served to continue the arcade along the street became apparent. The same feature presented itself in the party wall of another old house occupied by Mr. Cody opposite the National Bank when the house next to it was removed for the purpose of rebuilding.

From the foregoing data I think we may safely form an idea of the appearance which Kilkenny presented in the reigns of Elizabeth and the first James, and for many years after. Peaked gables crowned by carved stone chimneys of varying height exhibited their picturesque outline against the sky; projecting bay windows here and there jutted out over the thoroughfare, affording advantageous points of view to the fair city dame or damsel as the war-like cavalcade, gay with glittering armour and fluttering pennon, rode slowly along the streets. Arcades of massive stone arches or pent-houses of timber ran along the streets below in picturesque irregularity. Here the merchant displayed his wares secure from the action of the weather, for then there were no shop windows, and the thrifty housewife on her shopping expeditions had no need to wade along mud-covered footways. The pent-houses and arcades made continuous by the archways in the party walls of each house afforded a covered walk, as may be seen at the present day in Chester and some other old English towns. I am not, indeed hardy enough, to uphold that our modern houses may not be more comfortable, according to our present notions of comfort, but I think it can be fearlessly asserted that in some things there has been a sad falling off. The oriel window, high-pitched gables and elegantly formed cut-stone chimneys of 1589 and the covered arcades extending along the streets may easily bear away the palm from the stiff rectangular boxes and mud-deluged footways of 1849.