

Thomastown

By W. J. Pilsworth

I do not propose to enter into any detailed history of Thomastown, but rather to say a few words about such objects of interest as we meet with. Very briefly, then, Thomastown was founded by Thomas FitzAnthony, an Anglo-Norman baron, about whom we will have more to tell later on, very early in the 13th century. He granted a charter to the burgesses of Grenan (as the town was anciently called) creating a Corporation with various privileges. It is from Thomas FitzAnthony that Thomastown got its name.

In the fairly settled conditions prevailing in the 13th century the town prospered. By the end of the century it had over 200 burgesses, which indicates that its population was rather greater than it is now. The town received royal charters from Edward III. (twice), Henry VI., Queen Mary, James I. and James II. I will refer to the three former charters at a later stage; under Queen Mary's charter in 1553 the burgesses were entitled to elect two members of Parliament, a privilege they retained until the Act of Union in 1800.

Throughout the middle ages, Thomastown owed its importance to its position at the head of the navigable waters of the river Nore. Practically all the trade of Kilkenny and of the surrounding towns passed through Thomastown, the goods being conveyed by boats to New Ross. In general, the inhabitants appear to have retained a fair amount of loyalty to the Crown which promised them a certain amount of protection against marauders, though for the most part they had to rely on their own defensive measures.

During the Confederate Wars of the 17th century there are many references to Thomastown as a garrison town—a

doubtful pleasure at times. In November, 1649, the town was strongly garrisoned by the Irish Army under Ormonde after the capture of New Ross by Cromwell. The latter, however made no attempt to capture it at that time, but in the following March it fell into his hands without a struggle. Since then its history has been of mainly local interest. Owing to the silting up of the river and improvements in road transport (and finally by the coming of the railway) it gradually lost its importance as a depot for trade.

In the 18th century several fairly important industries came into being such as flour mills, a brewery and a distillery, but the number in constant employment failed to keep pace with the growing population and in the first half of the 19th century when it attained its maximum population of between 3,000 and 4,000 inhabitants a great many were living in great poverty and misery. One traveller who recorded his impressions at that time relates that he had considerable difficulty in changing a £5 note—in the end the parish priest obliged. Since those days, though there has been a considerable decrease in population there has been a steady increase in the prosperity of the town, and if there is still considerable room for improvement we in Thomastown can fairly claim to hold our own with any other town of similar size in Ireland.

THE WALLS OF THOMASTOWN

In the first half of the 13th century the burgesses of Thomastown requested permission to erect walls around the town and obtained permission from the Irish Justiciar to do so. However at the insistence of the Earl of Gloucester, who was apparently afraid that the erection of walls at Thomastown would prejudice the town of Kilkenny, the King revoked this permission. But in the unsettled state of affairs prevailing in the 14th century towns were in great need of protection. So in 1374 a royal charter was granted to the Provost and Commons of the town of Thomastown authorising them to take a toll on all merchandise coming into or

passing through the town for 20 years for the purpose of erecting a wall. We may with confidence date the erection of the wall from this year—1374.

In 1450 the good people of Thomastown complained they had spent the greater part of their substance on the repairs to the wall and were by royal charter granted immunity from taxes for 10 years, except the subsidies granted to the King in Parliament. The walls covered an area of about 8 acres and are said to have had 14 castles on them, obviously many of these were very small—only two remain in their original condition, namely Sweetman's Castle adjoining the bridge, and the small turret in the garden of Millview.

THOMASTOWN BRIDGE

In 1346, a royal charter granted to the provost, bailiffs and honest men of Thomastown, in aid of the repair and construction of the bridge of the said town, the right to charge a customs toll on all merchandise coming to the town for the space of four years. From the wording of the charter it is not clear whether a bridge was already in existence but whenever it was built it was for many hundreds of years the only bridge in existence between Thomastown and New Ross and was guarded by two castles of considerable strength. This ancient bridge was completely swept away in the disastrous flood of 1763. An entire street known as the Weaver's Lane was also completely destroyed and 18 people are said to have been drowned.

The present bridge was then erected, but was severely damaged by the floods in 1787. On that occasion the Lord Lieutenant made a grant of £100 towards restoring the bridge and a subscription was raised to alleviate distress in the town. Again in 1797 the bridge was once more damaged by the severe floods. According to "Finn's Leinster Journal," "nine houses were carried away together with property to a large amount, but a good deal of it was got in at Dangan and other places down the river by the generous exertions of many gentlemen in that neighbourhood. The property

thus saved consists principally of balks, boards, etc., and is valued at £800 which much to the honour of the town is exposed in the storeyards of the boat owners to be claimed by the owners." A subscription was also organised on this occasion. The plaque on the bridge commemorates its repair on this occasion: "under the inspection of Edward Hunt, Esq., and Anthony Sing, Oxiferens. Thos. O'Bryan, Mason.

The bridge seems to have escaped damage during the 19th century but was to a great extent undermined by the constant flooding of the last 20 years culminating in the disaster of March, 1947, when so much damage was done to property, and scenes reminiscent of the 1797 flood took place. Since then a considerable amount of work has been done by the County Council and the bridge should now be able to resist the assaults of nature for many a year.

THE OWNERS OF GRENNAN CASTLE

Among the second influx of Anglo-Norman settlers in Ireland Thomas FitzAnthony holds an eminent position. He most probably came over in the train of Earl Marshall, who had obtained the province of Leinster by his marriage with Isabella, daughter and heiress of Strongbow, in 1191 and was granted a considerable estate around Thomastown, Inistioge and Kilmacow. He founded the Priory of Inistioge in or before 1210 and on the death of Geoffrey FitzRobert of Kells in 1211 he was appointed Seneschal of Leinster, a post he held until 1223. We do not hear about building Grennan Castle, but it is reasonable to assume that he erected it either shortly before or shortly after his grant to Inistioge Priory about 1210 and that his charter of foundation to the town of Thomastown dates about the same time. In 1215 he was granted the custody of the counties of Waterford and Desmond by the King for the annual rent of 250 mares and at the same time for a fine of 600 mares was granted the custody of the lands of Thomas FitzMaurice in Cork owing to the minority of his heir. He was probably the "sheriff" who led an army into Desmond against Dermot of Dundirkan and gained much territory and built castles and strongholds.

During his tenure of office FitzAnthony was ordered to fortify the city of Cork and he seems to have had some lively disputes with the Bishop of Waterford. For a number of years he must have been one of the most powerful men in Ireland, but eventually he fell into disfavour through failure to pay the agreed rental and in 1225 he was dismissed from his exalted position and at his death in 1229 he was heavily in debt to the Crown.

He was twice married and had one son who predeceased him and five daughters who all married and became his heiresses. Of these one became the ancestress of the Earls of Desmond, another of the Barons of Fermoy and another called Desiderata married Stephen the Archdeke and apparently inherited the greater part of his Kilkenny property.

Sometime in the 1230's a daughter of the last named couple named Emma married a certain William De Dene whose family had come over to Ireland with Strongbow and had received a grant of lands at Cahyr (now called Wilton) near Enniscorthy. It was almost certainly as his wife's dowry that he acquired a considerable portion of Thomas FitzAnthony's lands in Co. Kilkenny including Grennan Castle and in 1247 he is returned as owning $1\frac{1}{2}$ Knight's fee in Agenty. He served as Sheriff of Co. Wexford in the 1240's and of Co. Kilkenny in the 1250's, and acquired immense wealth by means which were not always very scrupulous. His second wife was Roesia, daughter of Stephen de Longestee, Justiciar of Ireland, and on the latter's death in 1259 he was appointed his successor to the highest post in the Kingdom. His wealth was such that he was enabled to lend the King the enormous sum of 7,500 mares, equivalent to £5,000 or at least £250,000 in present day values. He was at the summit of his fortunes but in 1261 he took part with the Anglo Normans in the raid into Kerry which ended in the disastrous defeat at Callan near Kenmare. He was either slain in the battle or died soon afterwards.

Of his three sons by his first wife, one Sir Thomas, his heir married and became the father of Sir Reginald de Dene

who was born in 1268. His father apparently died soon afterwards and the wardship of Reginald was secured by Stephen de Fulburne, Bishop of Waterford who later became Archbishop of Tuam and Justiciar of Ireland. Reginald married his niece and became involved in a number of lawsuits which are on record. This Reginald would appear to have been a mighty man of war. In 1297 he was summoned (last on the list of Nobles) to join the King in the war in France; in 1300 he was 6th on the list of those summoned to the Scottish War and in 1301 and 1302 he was 4th on the list. I think it fair to assume that this rapid promotion was due to his prowess in the field of battle. But he died in 1302, whether in battle or not does not appear. We are however provided with a detailed list of his landed possessions in the counties of Waterford, Cork, Kilkenny, Wexford and Carlow, the total value of which was £137-6-11. The Thomastown portion consisted of about 900 acres valued at £14-0-6. His heir, a minor, was Sir Thomas de Dene who later became Sheriff of Wexford and was one of the "nobles and magnates of Ireland" to whom a royal letter was issued in 1324. He died of wounds received fighting the Irish in 1330. His eldest son, Fulk, succeeded him. His second son, Thomas, was educated at Oxford and entered the Church. He became Bishop of Ferns and held the See for 37 years, dying at a very advanced age in 1400. Fulk was for a number of years Sheriff of Kilkenny. He died about 1370, leaving a daughter, Ismanie, who married Philip Furlong of Wexford.

For the next century the records are too scanty and contradictory to enable us to trace the fortunes of the owners of Grennan Castle with any confidence.

Thomas de Dene apparently obtained the Kilkenny property of Sir Fulk, some of the Wexford lands passing to Ismanie Furlong and her son, Fulk Furlong. Thomas died before 1390, leaving a son and heir Reginald (a minor) and in 1392 Robert de la Freyne obtained custody of the lands during the minority. In the absence of direct historical record we must attempt to carry on our story by means of the legend of Grennan Castle.

Stated briefly the legend is as follows:— A certain noble de Dene had fallen foul of the King of England who swore to have his life and advanced upon the castle with every intention of carrying out his threat. He was pleasantly surprised to find a plentiful supply of broached casks of wine along his road. He partook freely of the good liquor and was considerably mollified thereby. On arriving at Grennan Castle he was royally greeted by the lady of the Castle and invited to partake of a rich repast. The principal dish was at one end of the table and on the cover being removed the head of de Dene, all gory with blood was exposed to view. The King (to quote Paris Anderson's poetic account) then spoke :

*“ As grace be mine
I'm sorry for the good knight's wine
I'd give a dozen of my men
For thy one life, my outlaw Den.”*

Whereupon the good knight, who had been all the time kneeling beneath the table with his head sticking through a hole, promptly came to life and was duly pardoned.

Now I am by no means vouching for the truth of this tale. But if king there was he was most certainly King Richard II, who stayed in Co. Kilkenny in 1395 and again in 1399. What records there are of this period do suggest a disputed succession to the Den property. A certain Thomas Ballon Butler for some reason that is not apparent claiming it and leaving it in his will to one of his sons. So there may quite well be something in the legend.

The first half of the 15th century is a complete blank but in 1479 we find John Den “ chief of his nation,” making a grant of lands to Kells Priory. He was succeeded by Fulk Den, “ Baron of Kayer,” who as well as his son, another Fulk, was Sheriff on several occasions. In 1556 the latter's son, Patrick, succeeded. He sold the Wexford lands to Lord Mountgarret and died in 1564. His son, Thomas, held the property for about 60 years and was followed by his son, Patrick,

who died in 1639. The next to succeed—Thomas—was the last Den to hold Grennan Castle. He had the misfortune to live in a troubled period. He was dispossessed under Cromwell and was banished with his family to Co. Clare where he received certain lands in the parish of Cloonbea. Although there are still several families of Denes in the Co. Kilkenny they have never attained the eminent position of their ancestors.

But to return to Grennan Castle. It sprang into prominence for a brief while when besieged by Cromwell in 1649. We can tell the tale in his own words :— “ Our men attempting to take the town (Thomastown), the enemy made no great resistance; but by the advantage of the bridge quitted the town and fled to a castle about half a mile distant . . . That night we summoned the castle and after two days it was surrendered to us, the enemy leaving arms, drums, colours and ammunition behind them, and engaging never to bear arms more against the Parliament of England.”

I may add that the prudent commander of the garrison was a Captain Burrell.

Under Cromwell Grennan Castle was granted to Anthony Stamp, the grant being confirmed by Charles II. The next owner was probably a William Harrison, who was proscribed by James II. and was M.P. for Thomastown in 1692-3.

During the 13th century it passed into the possession of the Hobson family. John Hobson, a Dublin solicitor, was M.P. for Inistioge 1761-8 and probably occupied it from time to time—he had two other residences. On his death in 1803 it probably passed to his relatives, the Greene family. Mr. William Deady, of Jerpoint, is the present owner.

The castle maintained its original form until the early years of the 19th century. Then vandalism stepped in. The high courtyard wall, many of the handsome quoin stones—

which probably come originally from Caen—and all the carved stones forming the surrounds of the windows, were torn down and used as building stones. Breaches were knocked into the ground floor for the benefit of cattle, and the greater part of the surrounding moat and fishponds were filled in. And so to-day it stands, shorn of its beauties, a monument to man ignorance and avarice; and the Castle which was once deemed a fitting residence for the highest in the land now gives shelter to the beasts of the field.