Newtown Jerpoint

BY W. J. PILSWORTH

The ancient corporate town of Newtown Jerpoint was situated on the lands of Belmore, about two miles South West of Thomastown and half a mile from Jerpoint Abbey, from which it was separated by the Arrigle River.

The property on which it stood was owned for more than two centuries by the Hunt family. About ten years ago it was sold to Colonel Fairley, and has recently been purchased by Mr. L. Teesdale. The most striking object is the ruin of the ancient church. This was probably built about the end of the twelfth century, and consisted of a chancel and nave with a chancel arch. At some later period it was decided to build a presbytery, and about 15 feet were taken from the nave to enable this four-storey building, surmounted by a belfry, to be erected. Probably about the same time, a new chancel was also built.

The remaining windows and doorways are of interest. In the south-east corner of the chancel is the tomb of William Den (1623). In the graveyard to the north of the church is a very interesting slab with a carving of an ecclesiastic in full priestly vestments; the hands lie flat on the breast; the head is bare, and the feet, which partially appear below the alb, are covered with shoes or slippers. At the right-hand side of the head of the effigy is a carving of a human head with a triangular mitre; on the left side is a similar head without a mitre. It may date from about 1200, but we do not know whom it commemorates. Nearby is a large circular block of stone with a square socket on it. This is what remains of the Market Cross of Newtown Jerpoint, which has, no doubt, been removed to the graveyard at some time for safety. A portion of the graveyard is preserved as a burial ground for the Hunt family.

On leaving the graveyard in the field to the north and east, we notice a number of low grassy mounds, these, together with the stump of an old castle and a heap of stones.
are all that remain of the once important town of Newtown Jerpoint.

It was founded about 1200, either by the Earl Marshall or more probably by Griffin Fitz William, one of the early Norman followers of Strongbow and brother of Raymond le Gros, who obtained as his lordship Knocktopher, Oldtown and Newtown. It thus had no direct connection with Jerpoint Abbey.

In the earliest documents it is called simply “Newtown,” later “Newtown near Jerpoint,” and finally became known as the “Newtown of Jerpoint” or just “Jerpoint.”

Griffin Fitz William was succeeded in his lordship by his sons, Matthew and Raymond, and by the latter’s daughter, Clarissa. But, by the middle of the 13th century, it seems to have passed into the hands of its over-lords—the descendants of the Earl Marshall who had married Strongbow’s daughter. The Countess of Gloucester got the leading share, but another of the heiresses, Agatha de Mortimer, had also a claim on part of the property, and we find her suing for £12-6-10.

In 1289 the Royal Court of Justice held a sitting in Jerpoint and, in a valuation made on the death of the Countess of Gloucester in 1307, we find mention of the various prerogatives of the court, of the prisage of ale and of the burgess rents in the town. The property passed to her son, who was killed at Bannockburn in 1314, and then to his three sisters.

In 1331, 24 of the inhabitants of Thomastown and Jerpoint were slain in a foray.

In 1376, Jerpoint received a Royal Charter “for the repair of the bridge over the River Nore near the said town and of the tower and gate on the southern end of the said bridge;” they were allowed to charge certain customs on all goods carried over the bridge for a term of ten years. I may add that some of the ruined piers of the bridge are still visible in very low water. In 1391, the Ormondes purchased the interests in Jerpoint of the Despencers, who represented one of the heiresses of the Earl of Gloucester,
and, in 1449, also purchased the interests of the Staffords, who had inherited in a similar way.

In 1534, Silken Thomas, who was then in rebellion, fought a battle near Jerpoint with Lord James Butler, son of the Earl of Ormonde, and defeated him.

Tradition says that, after this battle, the inhabitants of Jerpoint cheered the conqueror, who was so incensed at their traitorous conduct towards the house of Ormonde that he ordered the town to be pillaged and burnt. If this was so, the town undoubtedly recovered and was not finally destroyed at this period.

In 1540, following the dissolution of the monasteries, the Church of Jerpoint, which had been in the possession of St. John's Priory, Kilkenny, since 1211, was granted to Kilkenny Corporation and, until quite recent years, the Corporation have been in receipt of a considerable tithe rent charge from the townland. At the same time we learn that Jerpoint Abbey were owners of one messuage called Marshall's Court, five gardens and one fishing weir, in Newtown Jerpoint. Together with the other possessions of Jerpoint Abbey, these were granted to the Earl of Ormonde.

In a deed of 1595, a number of tenants of the "Long Street" of Jerpoint are mentioned by name and, in 1600-2, over twenty inhabitants of Jerpoint sought and obtained pardon from the Crown for their offences.

In 1603 we have a deed detailing property in the town of Jerpoint and, in a description of the Co. Kilkenny made in 1608, mention is made of the Provost (=Mayor) of Jerpoint. But this is the last mention of Jerpoint as a town.

In 1641, the Duke of Ormonde is returned as owning over 800 acres of land round Jerpoint and, in Petty's Map, which was made about 1656, there is nothing shown either of the town or of the bridge of Jerpoint. This would indicate that for some unknown reason Jerpoint was deserted in the first half of the 17th century.

There is a local tradition (which may well be a true one) that the town was visited by a severe plague. The inhab-
Based on the Ordnance Survey by permission of the Minister for Finance

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tants moved out for a time and later returned only to be attacked by the plague. The survivors then finally deserted the place.

The Ordnance Survey Map of 1839 clearly marks the sites of about 25 houses. Soon after this, most of the remaining walls were removed by an improving tenant and, in 1848, Paris Anderson describes the site much as we see it now. He makes special mention, however, of a huge ash tree which fell about 20 years later and was found to contain a number of nails and spikes, which might have been used to post notices in previous centuries.

At this time Mr. Hunt carried out a little exploration in the ruins of one or two houses and discovered floor tiles, portion of a glass bottle, some old window glass, a house key and a small heap of anthracite (Castlecomer) coal. In recent years another Mr. Hunt (from Limerick) also carried out a little excavation and made some interesting discoveries including a primitive pocket knife.