

Swift's Heath

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THERE are several suppositions, lacking documentary evidence, about the way the land on which Swift's Heath stands came into the Swift family.¹

1. Major Briggs-Swifte the present head of the family, believes that our mutual ancestor Godwin Swift, a lawyer from Herefordshire (1627—1695), obtained this land from the Duke of Ormonde to whom he was, for a short period, Attorney-General.

Denis Johnstone, author and playwright, has done much research into the lives of the early Swifts in Ireland. He is inclined to doubt various statements made by Dean Swift in his autobiography. The Dean, who detested his Uncle Godwin (on this all biographers agree) said that the latter was related through his first wife née Elizabeth Wheeler “to the old Marchioness of Ormonde” which influential connection helped him when he arrived in Ireland in 1663.

Now the Dean in his manuscript, altered the title “Duchess” to “Marchioness”; the only Ormonde Duchess who fits the dates is that of the first Duke's wife née Elizabeth Preston. She was Marchioness only between 1642 (when Charles I elevated the 12th Earl to Marquis, and 1661 when he became a Duke). Johnstone, who gives his reasons, does not think she was related to Godwin's first wife, Elizabeth Wheeler. (Godwin had four wives).

Though appointed Attorney General for Ormonde's Palatinate of Tipperary, he only held this appointment until 1668 — a maximum of 5 years.

Godwin was a practicing lawyer in Dublin. He lived first on Ormond Quay and later moved to Hoey's Court in St. Werburgh's Parish. Here the Dean was born in 1667. Godwin was married to Hannah Deane in Dublin in 1673 and his son, Thomas, was married there (St. Michael's) in 1679. He himself, described as “Counsellor Godwin Swift of Hoey's Court, Dublin,” died on December 7th, 1695, and is buried in St. Werburgh's Church.

I think this indicates that it is unlikely that Godwin, even if he owned the land, built a house in Co. Kilkenny; nor could the Dean have visited the house from 1673 onward, when he was six years old.

¹The brothers who emigrated to Ireland in the mid-seventeenth century spelt their names thus, including the Dean.

The Registry of Deeds in Dublin throws a little light on Swifte's Heath. Unfortunately, these deeds only go back to 1708. I found deeds of 1733 and 1736 which gave an indication of the actual lands involved. In a Swift family transaction the property is recorded as Swift's Heath (sic) alias Foulksrath alias Ballirow, 375 acres in 1736; in 1733 it was referred to as Swift's Heath alias Foulksrath; and later in the same deed as Fowlkestowne — perhaps the copyists error — the acreage being 350.

Now in the "Survey and Distribution" carried out by the Commissioners of Charles II, there is given a long list of estates grouped in parishes and baronies with the names of the proprietors of 1641 and those of the owners who supplanted them after confiscation following the abortive rebellion.

The Swifts were not in Ireland in Cromwellian times: indeed, if one is to believe the Dean's memoir they were being persecuted by Cromwell's supporters in their native Herefordshire. They did not therefore receive grants of land in Ireland and I suppose acquired these lands by purchase.

The survey tells us that Foulksrath consisted of 554 acres owned by Philip Purcell, Irish Papist.² There is a long history of the family in Father Healy's "History and Antiquities of Kilkenny." They owned two castles near Conahy called Killcollan and Esker as well as Foulksrath; one of them is buried in St. Canice's Cathedral (1552). The above Philip's father, Robert, died in 1635 and is buried in the old church of Coolcraheen near Swifte's Heath; Philip was then a man of forty.

The new owners were Joseph Bradshaw who got 181 acres and is buried in the old churchyard of Donoughmore near Ballyragget;³ Theophilus Eaton who obtained 349 acres; and Christopher Mathews, 23 acres.

It must have been from Eaton or Bradshaw that the Swift family acquired Foulksrath, rather than from the Duke of Ormonde; this is Theory No. 1.

In the deed of 1733 it is interesting to note that besides Swifte's Heath, Godwin Swift No. 2 (1671—1736) of Dublin (I presume of Dunbrew), owned 153 acres in Co. Carlow and 401 in Co. Roscommon. I have a theory on how he obtained these lands which I shall relate below.

Theory No. 2 is that of Denis Johnston. He writes: "Swiftsheath, Co. Kilkenny, the seat of the present head of the family, has a date on the front of the main building

²Part of Swifte's Heath is called in Irish Robnet's Bawn: Robnet was a Purcell name.

³Possibly a relative of John Bradshaw the regicide.

that is taken to indicate that it was built during the Commonwealth period⁴ but even if this were the date of the house (which seems impossible) the family has no documents of title that prove it was built by the Swifts who in 1657 were still in England. It was Godwin II of Dunbrew who first went to Swiftsheath between 1708 and 1711—see ‘Alumni Dublinensis (T.C.D. graduates) for the birthplaces of his sons Godwin III (Cork) and William (Kilkenny).”

This book gave the above dates.

Theory No. 3 is my own: Godwin II — who died between 1733 and 1736, when a deed of that date refers to his widow, married Elizabeth Swift his first cousin (1684—1768), daughter of his uncle, William Swift, who came to Ireland in 1661 according to Denis Johnston. “Burke” (deriving the information from Sir W. Betham) states that William owned property in Kilkenny, Carlow, Leitrim and Roscommon, the very countries in which (except for Leitrim) Godwin II had property in 1733.

Could it not be that it was William, not his elder brother, Godwin I, who acquired the Swiftsheath land and gave it as a marriage portion to Elizabeth? William, Senior, died in 1703 and perhaps Elizabeth even inherited these lands.

The present house’s interior architecture is not incompatible with a building date by Godwin II, but his will is dated from Dublin, not Kilkenny. Perhaps it was Godwin III, born at Cork in 1703, died 1770, who built Swifte’s Heath. This leaves us guessing about the mysterious Cromwellian date on the house; I think it must have come from a previous building on or near the site, perhaps a house built by Bradshaw or Eaton for there is nothing in the present house to suggest such an early date: the staircase is an elegant Georgian one and the marble mantelpiece in the drawing room (recently removed) could date as far back as 1730 or 1740. You can see a photo of this chimney-piece in the (Dublin) Evening Press dated April 29th, 1963.

As will be seen, both Denis Johnston’s and my theories demolish the possibility of the Dean ever having visited Swifte’s Heath from Kilkenny College.

Who, then, were these Swifts who came to settle in Co. Kilkenny? The Dean himself is eloquent in his manuscript autobiography dated 1728, but Denis Johnston says that he was not reliable and his material was “a

⁴Note : Date is 1657, on the left of the porch.

mass of contradictions, misdescriptions and deliberate mendacity."

The Swifts came from a line of clergy, one of them buried in Canterbury Cathedral. Sir William Betham gives their names in "Burke"

A vivid character was parson Thomas, born 1595, rector of Goodrich in Herefordshire. The Dean exaggerates his sufferings and losses under Cromwell, but at the same time relates that he presented a jacket quilted with gold pieces to aid Charles I after the battle of Naseby.

Major Briggs-Swifte has a Victorian oil painting of this episode which took place at Raglan Castle. The parson had many children of whom four sons emigrated to Ireland: the first to come (circa 1658) being the Dean's young and impoverished father also called Jonathan; next came William (he who acquired land in Kilkenny and elsewhere) in 1661; then Godwin the Attorney General in 1663 and finally Adam, who finished his days in Co. Down, in 1670.

Godwin I, who paid the Dean's school fees and in whose house he was born, was married no less than four times. Both Major Briggs-Swifte and I descend from Godwin I: he from the second wife and I from the fourth, who was a Miss Elinor Meade (which family were later Earls of Clanwilliam) from Co. Cork.

The descendants of this marriage acquired land in Westmeath which remained in the Swift-Dennis family until recent times.

I referred above to Godwin III who like his father married a Swift cousin, the daughter of Deane Swift (not to be confused with Jonathan's clerical rank) who was named after Admiral Deane, the regicide, whose daughter, Hannah, was one of Godwin I's wives.

Godwin IV, a clergyman, born 1734, followed his father and grandfather, marrying yet another cousin — this time one of the Castle Rickard Swifts, and died in 1815, a year after his son, Godwin V.

The latter's heir, born in 1806, was the most colourful of all the family. He was christened Godwin Meade Pratt (Godwin VI). His mother had remarried a French Count and this seems to have been responsible for Godwin VI's Continental tastes and possibly also for the marriages of his three sisters who all wed foreign noblemen.

Godwin VI, who entered the diplomatic service, also married a foeigner, an Austrian baroness. He acquired a palazzo on the Grand Canal in Venice, which ultimately became The Grand Hotel. He also had a gondola to match



and put his gondoliers into scarlet liveries. The story runs that he conveyed boat and crew to London and had them towed through the streets towards Buckingham Palace where he was attending a levee — a story which loses nothing in the telling.

It will be realised that he had a “folie de grandeur” and this led him to claim and use the title of Lord Carlingford.

Now there was a Swift in a collateral branch of the family who was created Viscount Carlingford in 1627. He left a daughter but as the title did not descend in the female line she did not inherit. With the bare information in “Burke” it is hard to see how such an honour could be revived, but Major Briggs-Swift tells me that there remains some correspondence with the College of Arms on the subject.

There is of course, nothing in law to prevent a person calling himself by any title, provided this is not used for a fraudulent purpose.

It may be that he needed to impress the Austrian baroness, to whom, however, he was not faithful, so that husband and wife lived apart — he in Ireland and she in Germany.

Some twelve years after the marriage, he contracted a bigamous union with the daughter of an Army officer called Hopkins who bore him three sons and a daughter and died soon afterwards; their mother was buried in Co. Meath as Viscountess Carlingford.

The unfortunate children were brought up to believe that they were legitimate; they were baptised with Swift family names and eldest thought himself heir to the property.

Meanwhile the Austrian baroness died. Four years later the self-styled Carlingford re-married, choosing an Irishwoman from an old Tipperary family who bore him the ultimate heir, christened Godwin Butler Meade, born in 1864 (Godwin VII, 1864—1924).

“Lord Carlingford” spent a good deal of money on his house on which he super-imposed a facade of pilasters, a ballustrade around the roof (now removed), a porch and a central pediment bearing his coat of arms with supporters and a motto but no coronet.⁵ This gives the house a Palladian appearance.

The date plaque was perhaps inserted by him.

He became very interested in aeronautics and con-

⁵Note: Major Briggs-Swift says that: “Lord Carlingford” carried out these alterations.

structed a flying machine in his workshop, which occupied the room now used as a dining room at Swifte's Heath. He duly patented the machine and when the great day arrived for the trial flight, he had it winched to the top of Foulksrath Castle where a kind of catapult would launch it into space. The wings had been fitted outside the workshop. The inventor, however, decided that he would use a "guinea pig" pilot and one of his unfortunate menservants, whose name has not come down to us, was thrust into the pilot's seat. The machine hurtled into space and fell to the ground, breaking a leg of its pilot who, it is hoped, was duly compensated for his daring. Major Briggs-Swifte presented the aircraft's two propellers to Rothe House, Kilkenny. He still holds the patent documents, dated 1856, which describe the machine in detail.

There is a full-length protrait of Godwin standing alongside his horse among the family pictures: he is wearing the riding clothes of about 1830.

My own grandfather, in remote India, wrote to his sister in 1863, "I see that Lord Carlingford (is not this a Swift who calls himself so?) states with regard to the French balloon man that he previously discovered his aerial machine and states some such words that that it flew so well that it would never have come down unless he or someone would have gone up after it and pulled it down. This, I fancy, is the only difficulty to be got over, it being a machine that evidently prefers flying to staying put!"

To return to the inventor himself: a year after his second legitimate marriage he died (1864), leaving his widow and the trustees of her baby son to face a lawsuit; the plaintiff was one of the children of the bigamous marriage. I read through the report of the case and was astonished to find that "Lord Carlingford" had regarded his marriage to the baroness as illegal in Ireland because she was a Roman Catholic: this despite both civil and religious ceremonies on the Continent. The plaintiff lost the case: one of his brothers ended his days as a humble sergeant in the Royal Irish Constabulary.

I believe that Major Briggs-Swifte is still in touch with the descendants of a daughter who made an advantageous marriage and lived in England.

The legitimate heir came of age at 25 and in due time was deputy Lieutenant, High Sheriff and Justice of the Peace. He had re-acquired Foulksrath Castle with a considerable acreage.

The castle is now a Youth Hostel much appreciated by such tourists as I have met along the highways.⁶

It should be mentioned that "Lord Carlingford" was responsible for the ancient spelling of his family name, using the final letter e.⁷

Major Briggs-Swifte inherited the estate through his mother, as his uncle was childless. Since his brother's children had decided against occupying the house, its owner recently sold it to Mr. and Mrs. Michael Lennon and moved to Coolbawn House, Castlecomer. Mr. Lennon is a cousin of the Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin; Mrs. Lennon is related to the former royal house of Prussia.

⁶Note: Major Ernest Swifte originally wanted to demolish Foulksrath Castle, as tinkers were squatting in it and used it as a convenient base for raids on the Swiftsheath garden. Mr. Hubert Butler suggested to him that it be sold for use as a Youth Hostel and it passed to the latter administration for £200. A member of the K.A.S. must therefore have the gratitude of posterity for the preservation of this Purcell-Swift Castle.

⁷With regard to the spelling of the property: "Burke" of 1849 gives Swifte's Heath; the edition of 1899, Swiftsheath, and that of 1958 Swifte's Heath. I have used the latter except when quoting Johnston or deeds.



PRIVATE EDUCATION

The following interesting educational notice is copied in full from a newspaper "The Dublin Evening Mail," 14 June 1826:

"The Rev. Robert Shaw, of Kilkenny, has a Vacancy for a young Gentleman, either preparing for or passing through College. His number of each is Five, all Parlour Boarders. He prepares his College Pupils for examination, and attends them to Dublin when answering. They have taken undergraduate and graduate premiums every year. A Clergyman, as Assistant lives in the house.

"Terms for College Pupils, seventy guineas a year. No Vacation."