



St. Canice's Library

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THE MANSE HOUSE, c 1280-1538

THE SITE of St Canice's Library, and some, at least, of its present structure, reach back beyond the year A.D. 1300.

Domhnald O Brian came from Limerick to the great square of Kilkenny, which lies to the West of the present site of St Canice's Cathedral. Where the Butts now are, there was a great green, providing a fine prospect of the Hiberno-Romanesque Church of St Canice. On Domhnald's arrival, the Flemish garrison fled from the Castle to the city of Waterford. The O Brian chief then proceeded, unhindered, to raze Kilkenny to the ground. This was a military measure, in which walls, houses, and even the great stone church of Canice were demolished. We can only be certain that the Round Tower survived this destruction.

These events took place in the year 1175. Therefore we cannot go back beyond that date.

Hugh Rufus, Bishop of Ossory (1202-1218), commenced the building of the present Cathedral of St Canice. His work was continued by the second Hugh, de Mapilton, and completed by Geoffrey St Leger, who died in 1287. No doubt the wall and rampart, separating the Cathedral Close from the Great Green of Kilkenny, were raised during this period. It is hard to imagine that a succession of Norman Bishops would build any structure of importance without first ensuring that they were adequately protected from the Irish.

This house is situated at the North-West angle of the ancient wall then built, later to become the wall of Irishtown. For the reasons which follow, I conclude that it is not a late intrusion into this space, and was most probably an integral part of those early fortifications.

Hogan argues first that this house, originally called the Manse House of the Prebendary of Blackrath, is in fact such an intrusion. On the other hand, he argues that the Alms House, which is now the Organist's Residence and was formerly the Manse House of the Prebendary of Killamery, was in existence in 1291 A.D. His reason for this conclusion is to be found in the mention of Killamery in the Taxation of Pope Nicholas IV. This taxation is dated 1291. He argues that the existence of a Prebend implies the existence of a Prebendal Residence. Under the name of Madokestown, the Prebendary of Blackrath is also taxed, in the taxation of Nicholas IV. Therefore, precisely the same argument applies as in the case of Killamery; the existence of a Prebend which is taxable implies that the Prebendary concerned had a Prebendal Residence. Thus this house was built, in its original form, by the year 1291.

Nor can it be argued that the organist's residence is the older of the two buildings. None but a madman would place a residence in an exposed position on the fortified perimeter of a town. It is obvious that the two houses are one structural unit strengthening the angle of the city Wall. Thus they are both the same age.

An examination of the present building shows that the West Wall was originally unpierced by windows or doors. There is neither rhyme nor order in the present openings on that side, indicating that they were dictated by a later and internal reconstruction of the house. Hence this wall was looked on as a defensive wall, and was part of the city wall built in the 12th century.

Again, if this house were a late intrusion, the Normans would have had to break down the rampart of earth which would have been on the site of this building beforehand. As the level of the ground floor is almost exactly the same as that of the floor of the Cathedral, it is hard to reach any conclusion but that

the Normans must have dismantled their earth-work to build this house at a later date. Surely this is an impossible position to maintain. The idea of the Normans removing an important fortification, and exposing themselves to attack while so doing, just does not hold water. Therefore the house is of the same age as the Walls themselves.

The remains of the old rampart may be seen to the South. It is in two distinct layers. The upper one consists of the earth and other debris removed from around the walls of the Cathedral during the restoration of 1868.

We cannot be certain how much of the original house remains today. The lower walls on the West and North are from the 13th century. Dividing the two houses there is a wall three feet thick. It is hard to see how, in such a position, it could ever have been completely broken down. A great fireplace is at its base, on the Killamery side. Much of the structure must be from the first house.

Here the floor levels of this house and the Cathedral are again significant. If the massive masonry of this building had twice been smashed to the ground, as is sometimes claimed, then the ground floor would be much higher than it now is. One would at least expect it to be higher than the level outside. In fact it is six to eight inches lower.

Perhaps the point has been a little laboured, but the evidence is circumstantial, and demands careful statement. All of it points to the continued existence of much of the original 13th century house, once called the Manse House of the Prebendary of Blackrath, a house which has seen many changes in its long life.

There is, however, an addition to this building or perhaps an even older portion which cannot be left unmentioned. It is Blackrath Castle, so called by Revd James Graves, when speaking to Mayor John Hogan. A minute from a meeting of the Library Committee held on August 2nd, 1842, records :

" It was resolved that Mr Jones be directed to examine the state of the Library adjoining the old castle, and report for what sum a gutter could be laid, so as effectivly to prevent the water from being thrown against the wall of the Library, and if this cannot be done, what he would recommend in order effectually to secure it."

A fund was established, to pay for the repairs. At the meeting held on 16th August, 1842, the Treasurer is requested to "call upon the Lord Bishop for his subscription." The Revd James Graves, himself but newly ordained, gave five shillings to the fund.

Mr Jones completed his work at a cost of £21. This, apparently, included the removal of the upper-works of the castle, and roofing the remainder. Fortunately, the lower parts of the castle were not damaged by this repair work.

Blackrath Castle was probably thrown up as a watch tower to the West of the Cathedral then being built. In process of time it became a corner bastion in the city walls, providing a cross fire along their Western face. The city walls themselves seem to have been built up to the castle, indicating that it may well be older than those same walls

The castle was a simple fortification. To the West there are the remains of cobble stones The only remaining room has a lofty mud and wattle ceiling. This is very ancient, but not necessarily as old as the castle itself.

The thickest wall of the castle is that which it has in common with the Library building. Within this wall there is a rising passage, hardly to be dignified by calling it a stair. The steps are poor and broken, although the roof is of cut stone, well faced. Hogan states that he has seen " the winding stairs of an old castle . . . within the Library House." This passage no longer winds. When the new fireplace and flue were constructed sometime in the last fifty years, they blocked the upper part of this passage. The

fireplace in question is in the middle of the West wall of the Library Room.

Entry from the castle to the Library is made through a low simple Gothic door. There is an unusual shelf alcove in the wall to the north of this door. I have been given reason to believe that a passage runs under the floor of the room next to the castle but have yet to find any evidence to support this contention

During its time as the Manse House of the Prebendary of Blackrath, the Library was probably occupied by his Stipendiary, a chorister, duly ordained priest, who would have sung the Office in place of the Prebendary. He received a small remuneration for this service. The Stipendiary of the Prebendary of Blackrath was a member of the college of Vicars-Choral in St Canice's Cathedral. In 1630, the Stipendiary of Blackrath received £2/18/0 in return for performing his duties

Ten pre-Reformation Prebendaries of Blackrath are identifiable by name. Few, if any, of them resided in the Prebendal Manse. The Stipendiary had the house and his small remuneration, while the Prebendary collected the larger proportion of the income from the Prebendal lands at Maddoxtown.

Among these ten known Prebendaries, the first named is Walter de Istelep, in 1317. He is identified with Walter de Islip, Lord Treasurer of Ireland (1314-1325) and Chief Baron of the Exchequer (1308-1335). De Islip was involved in the trial of Dame Alice Kyteller. He was an Englishman, and related to Simon de Islip, Archbishop of Canterbury. It is possible that they were brothers. Walter was keeper of Kilkenny, and, in 1322, held, in conjunction with Thomas le Botiller, the manors of Kilkenny, Callan. Dunfert, and Ballycallan, together with a stone house in Kilkenny. Was this house the Prebendal Manse of Blackrath? If that could be established, then the early date given, in this paper, for the foundation of this house would be strongly confirmed.

Two of Walter's successors, in the same century, became Archbishops; one of Tuam, the other of Armagh. In 1371, Alexander Petit de Balscot was preferred from the Prebendal Stall of Blackrath to the Bishopric of Ossory.

No remaining records tell of a Prebendary of Blackrath between the years 1412 and 1544. Indeed, in 1412 the revenues of the Prebend were in the hands of the King. A former prebendary, John Middleton, who had earlier been outlawed, was appointed to take charge of the profits, in company with one, John Stone. This appointment was made on 1st March, 1412 and is recorded in the Calendar of Papal Petitions and Calendar of Papal Registers.

Since there was no money to pay for a Prebendary, there was no Prebendary, and therefore no need, so it would seem, for a Manse House. In consequence the building fell into disrepair until the foundation of the Ormonde School.

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