
GREGORIAN ARCHITECTURE IN KILKENNY

On June 26th, 1948, the Society were fortunate in getting the services of Dr. Maurice Craig as guide to three fine examples of Georgian Houses in County Kilkenny. The following notes are taken from his lecture on that occasion.

KILDALTON, formerly Bessborough

THE present house was not the first to be built on the site since the Ponsonby family came into possession of the lands about 1660. At that time Sir John Ponsonby, who dispossessed the former owner, Edmond Daton, renamed the place in honour of his second wife, Elizabeth, who had already been twice widowed. This re-naming was ridiculed by Jonathan Swift in an essay. "On Barbarous Denominations in Ireland." Though Ponsonby had taken the lands from the rightful owner, the Norman-Irish Daton, he did at least offer the shelter of his roof to Daton until the latter's death.

The house was designed by Francis Bindon, an Irish architect, who came from Co. Clare, and was well known as a painter. Among his other works were Woodstock and possibly Castle Morres. He built Bessborough in 1744 for the first Earl (created 1739). Dr. Craig described it as a very characteristic example of the large Irish house of its time, consisting of a central block 100 feet by 80, connected by curved walls to the subsidiary wings. It was built almost entirely of blue Kilkenny limestone. It was exceptional in that there was no "grand staircase," and that the garden front had an even instead of an odd number of windows. The design relied for its effect more on the careful spacing of windows and general proportions than on very much external ornament. The speaker drew attention to the beautiful wrought-iron door of the wings and to the carving over the original front door. In about 1900 a new entrance had been made on basement level, marring the original effect by a stone porch added by Sir T. Deane. All old accounts of the house mention the columns in the entrance hall, each of a single piece of black Kilkenny marble, 10 ft. 6 ins. high.

The interior of the house was burnt on the same night as the burning of Desart in 1923, but the massive vaulting of the interior

resisted the fire and we were able to see that much of the original arrangements were still as they had been. Since their occupancy of the house, the Oblate Fathers had erected two wings on the garden front, finely harmonised with the main block and incorporating the old balustrade from a demolished outbuilding.

CASTLETOWN

By common consent Castletown ranked among the half-dozen most beautiful houses in Ireland. He himself (Dr. Craig) would put it high even among the first half-dozen, and he felt that we, standing in front of it, would have no difficulty in agreeing. He said that there was a widespread misconception in Ireland that any beautiful building of this period was the work of Italians. Usually it was not: it was much more likely to be the work of Irishmen. In this case, however, the Italian myth was the truth, at least as regards the architect.

The house was designed by Davis Ducart or Daviso de Arcort, a Sardinian canal-engineer, who came to Ireland about 1750 and died here about thirty years later. He was first employed on the Newry, Tyrone and Boyne Canals and was also concerned with developing Irish coal mines. He designed public buildings in Cork and Limerick, and also other country houses. Dr. Craig suggested that on grounds of style and date, Ducart may have been the architect of Florence Court, Lord Enniskillen's house in County Fermanagh, with which no designer's name has been connected.

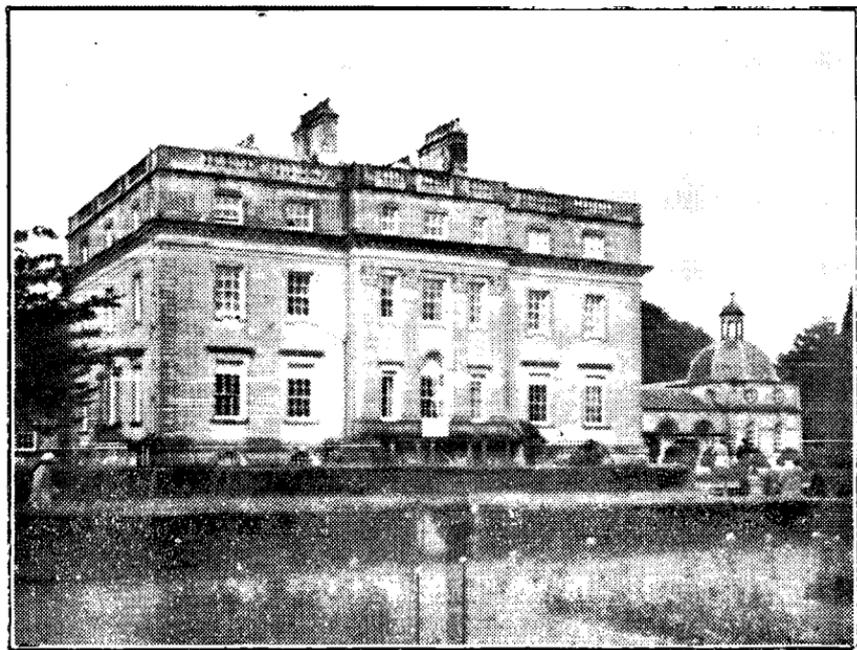
Castletown was built between 1765 and 1775 by Michael Cox, Protestant Bishop of Ossory, and later Archbishop of Cashel. He held the See of Ossory from 1743 to 1754.

The speaker pointed out some of the features in which Castletown differed from other Irish houses. In particular, he said, the relationship of the wings to the central block, not actually connected, but almost touching corner to corner, was, in his experience unique. It is actually possible to see daylight through the intervening spaces. At the ends of the wings, which are straight, with rows of open arches facing the garden, there are square pavilions topped by octagonal domes roofed with slates, bearing delicate open lanterns. The entrance front is remarkable for the complex symmetry of the out-buildings forming a forecourt. The garden front is of blue Kilkenny limestone, while in the entrance front this material is beautifully contrasted with dressed sandstone.

General Blacque then led us through the ground floor of the house, where we admired the magnificent plaster decoration of walls and ceilings and the beautiful entrance and staircase halls. The garden, with its formal trees and statues, was particularly admired.



Kildalton



Castletown

DESART COURT

Dr. Craig observed that we had now seen Georgian houses in three different states, one in full working order, another burned and restored for a new purpose, and now one which burned, restored and then dismantled, was still a noble ruin. Desart Court, built in 1733 by an unknown architect, was the oldest of the three houses. In plan it had conformed to the type of Kildalton (Bessborough), but the wings had recently been demolished. Over the door we noticed a delicately scalloped niche, and the centre was further emphasised by two orders of classical columns. At Castle-town we had seen a giant order carried up through two storeys, while at Kildalton the centre was marked only by a pediment or flat gable. It was noticed that the structure at Desart was still very solid, and the delicacy of the mouldings showed up well in the evening light.

Mr. Hubert Butler said that the Land Commission were ready to preserve the shell of Desart Court as a fine example of Georgian architecture, and to make it safe against further dilapidation, provided that some established body would take responsibility for the very small work of maintenance which would be necessary. He hoped that in some way its preservation would be assured, and Dr. Craig agreed that it could not be regarded as a mere ruin, but was a feature of the architectural history of the county, and that it would be a pity if the offer of the Land Commission had to be rejected.
