

# Blanchfield House and Demesne

By Mrs. C. J. Kenealy

**T**HE history of Blanchfield House and Demesne is concerned with two families, first the Anglo Norman family of Blanchville and secondly the Irish family of Kearney.

## THE BLANCHVILLES

We have no direct account of the first Blanchville who settled in these parts, but certainly he was among the very earliest of the Norman invaders. We find the name Martin de Blanchville as witness to a deed of Theobald Walter, the ancestor of the Butler family, about the year 1178. A Nicholas de Blanchville was Seneschal of Co. Kilkenny in 1303 and a Maurice Blanchville was consecrated Bishop of Leighlin in 1309. Their names appear frequently in the Civic Lists as High Sheriffs and also as members of Parliament for the County during the 15th and 16th centuries. They intermarried frequently with the Butlers, both the Ormonde and Mountgarret branches, a fact which ultimately affected, in various ways, the family fortunes.

In 1537 we find the head of the Blanchville family denounced by the Commoners of the County Kilkenny for the imposition of "coyn and livery" on his tenants. This was a form of taxation which was very unpopular. The man so indicted was Edmund Blanchville, who had married a niece of the 8th Earl of Ormonde. Their son, Gerald, was M.P. for the County in 1585 and married Eleanor Butler, daughter of the 1st Viscount Mountgarret. He was succeeded by his son, Edmund, later. Sir Edmund Blanchville married in 1620 his cousin the Lady Elizabeth Butler, daughter of Walter, 11th Earl of Ormonde.

Tradition has it that previous to their espousals she frequently displayed a white kerchief from an upper window of Ormonde Castle as her intended. Edmund, pranced his grey steed through the streets of the "Faire Citie" (Healy). Edmund and Elizabeth had three children,

Gerald (or Garrett), a captain in the Confederate Army ; Edmund, who inherited the property, and Elinor, who married Brian Kavanagh of Borris, ancestor of the Mac-Murrough Kavanagh family.

Gerald took an active part in the troubles of the Confederate period. To give an idea what these troubles were like I will quote a deposition of one Peter Pinchon of Castlecomer : "I took a chamber in Kilkenny, thinking it to be a safe place; but about the 18th of December, 1641, the gates of the said Citie (which were formerly kept shut with watch and ward) were either by command or neglect of Mr. Archer the Maire, that day left open for the Rebels to enter and the said Citie was rifled and robbed of all Protestants goods by Edward Butler, son of Lord Mountgarret; Garrett Blanchfield, son and heir of Sir Edmund Blanchfield; Phillip Purcell of Ballyfoil . . . one Captain Bryan and divers others which was done as deponent thinketh by the allowance and approbation of Lord Mountgarrett he being then in towne." Captain Blanchfield was also accused of being one of the leaders of the Confederate troops who attacked and slew Lieut. Gilbert, the Rev. Thomas Bingham, and about 60 others of the English party near Ballinakill and brought their heads to Kilkenny to be exhibited at the Market Cross.

Captain Garrett died in 1646 before the end of the struggle and his parents erected a monument to him in St. Canice's Cathedral. As a result of his participation in the struggle the Blanchfield estates were declared forfeited by a Cromwellian Court and a certificate of transportation to Connaught was signed for his mother, Lady Elizabeth Blanchville. If the Mountgarret influence brought misfortune to the family, the mistake was now rectified by the other Butler relations, i.e., the Ormonde branch. Edmund, Gerald's younger brother (or in some accounts his son) had all his estates restored to him in 1660 by King Charles II, and it is thought that this unusual kindness was brought about through the influence of the Duke of Ormonde. But Edmund was soon in trouble again. In 1665 he was accused by one Andrews, an informer, of making reflections on the

moral character of Charles II. He was fined £50, reduced on the recommendation of the Duke of Ormonde to £10. Finally, like most of his co-religionists, he joined the Jacobites in the struggle against William of Orange and in 1691 was declared attainted and his estates forfeited.

In 1703 the estates were put up for sale by the Trustees of Forfeited Estates. The position which includes the castle, town and lands of Blanchville were sold to Edward Worth of Rathfarnham for £1,290.

To give you some idea of the extent of the Blanchville possessions, I might mention that in addition to the portion bought by Worth, there was over 2,500 acres bought by the Incorporated Society for making hollow sword blades, which included lands stretching as far as Bennettsbridge. And this was only the senior branch of the family, there was a junior branch also in Rathgarvan, now Clifden and Rathcash and Highrath Castle.

The Castle of the Blanchvilles at Blanchvillestown, described as a large castle in repair in 1655, stood close to the public road in the lawn of Kearney Castle, Blanchville Demesne, but it has been long razed to the ground (Carrigan).

The Castle of the Blanchvilles, says Canon Healy, recalls sadly the eclipse of the Blanchville sun—Beyond the site of the castle, the broken remains of the old church and the monument of Eliza Blanchville therein, there is nothing more to reflect a shadow or startle a dream of the past. And yet the Blanchville name wore a more than bright brilliancy long centuries ago though now on the very spot that cradled their pomp, pride and prowess.

*“As record lives to tell what they have been ;  
Their laurels faded and their fame forgot.”*

The family name, however, has survived and usually shortened to “Blanch,” is quite common in the county.

#### THE KEARNEYS

With the Blanchvilles ends the first phase in the story of Blanchfieldstown. We now come to a gap in its history. Edward Worth, the purchaser, who was a son of Wm.

Worth, a Baron of the Exchequer, was an M.P. for Knocktopher and apparently a person of considerable substance. He died in 1741. Twenty years later, in 1761, we find Benjamin Kearney installed in Blanchville. How he acquired the property I don't know but I think it most likely by purchase. Worth was survived by four daughters who would inherit jointly, his only son having predeceased him. They were all married in different parts of the country, so I think it extremely likely that the property was sold.

Benjamin Kearney was the son of James Kearney of Kearney Bay, Co. Kilkenny, and grandson of the Rev. Richard Kearney, of Parkstown, Rector of Dysertmoon and Rosbercon. His great grandfather was a Vicar General of the Diocese of Ossory in the 17th century. The Kearneys, I am told, were an old Irish family who originally came from Cashel. I find Most Rev. David Kearney was Archbishop of Cashel in the early 17th century. He suffered much from religious persecution and eventually had to fly to the Continent for safety, where he died in 1624. The Ormonde Deeds contain several letters from a James Kearney to the Duke of Ormonde, which indicate that he held some post connected with the administration of Justice such as Sheriff or Judge, dated 1666.

The branch of the family which settled in Kilkenny were apparently Protestants. Benjamin was succeeded by his son, James, by profession an attorney and solicitor and M.P. for Thomastown. He was succeeded by his second son, Lieut General Sir James Kearney, a Colonel in the 7th Hussars, whose portrait may be seen here on horseback. On his marriage the property was settled in tail male, i.e., it could only descend to the eldest son. Sir James had one son and four daughters. However, in 1835 his son, James Charles, joined with his father in a deed to bar the entail and the property was settled on James Charles absolutely subject to his father's life estate. His father died in 1846 and James Charles inherited the property. He also had army service, being a lieutenant in the 2nd Regiment of Dragoon Guards. He was very eccentric, his hobbies apparently

being music and the study of strange diseases. In furtherance of his musical tastes he built the ballroom and installed an immense organ. He also built the clock tower to hold a clock and chime of bells. The bells have been sold in recent years to the Augustinian Community in Limerick. A portion of the organ still remains. His other hobby is evidenced by countless volumes of medical books still to be seen here.

He died in 1876, unmarried, one of his eccentricities being a strong aversion to women. His estate was inherited jointly by the descendants of two of his sisters, a Mrs. Stewart of Lisburn, Co. Antrim, and Henry Tottenham of London. They agreed to divide it between them, Mrs. Stewart taking the manor house, including the clock tower and bells, and 177 acres of demesne land and plantation. So far as I know she never lived here but left the place in the hands of an agent.

She died in January, 1923, and the property devolved upon his heir-at-law, Hans Edwin Brandt Anderson of Lisburn. In March of the same year he agreed to sell the property to John P. Cuffe of Dublin as agent for Robert Graham, but difficulties arose and a High Court action took place. As a result of an Order of the Court the sale, as agreed, took place the following year.

In February, 1925, Graham sold the Blanchville Demesne to the late Pierce Harte of Castletown, County Kilkenny, in whose family it has remained ever since.

The Kearney and Aylward families were closely connected by marriage, no fewer than three successive generations of Aylwards having taken Kearney ladies for their brides. On the death of James Charles in 1876 two of his cousins, James Aylward of Shankill and Charles James Butler of Drom, assumed by Royal Licence the additional surname and arms of Kearney upon succeeding to portion of the Kearney Estate. This was under the express direction of the will of James Kearney made in 1810. which provided that anybody inheriting the Kearney Estate must adopt the name and arms of Kearney. All the Butler-Kearney family have since left the country and the

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Aylward family have ceased using the name Kearney since adding the name Toler. I am indebted to Mr. H. J. Toler Aylward of Shankill Castle for the information on this aspect of the family history.

I have no record of the building of this house or indeed of any which preceded it here. Undoubtedly the Blanchville Castle was in use up to the forfeiture in 1691. Whether Mr. Worth considered it safe to abandon the Castle and build himself a manor house in the early 18th century or whether the Kearneys were the first to build a house here I do not know. The back portion of the present house, which is the oldest part of it, was probably built in the early part of the 18th century and the front part at the close of it.

Tighe, in his survey of Kilkenny, written in 1800, includes Blanchville among the fine residences in County Kilkenny, which would lead one to believe that the present house was completed at that date.

