

Bonnettstown Hall and Castle

BY COMMANDER G. MARESCAUX

In June last, the Society visited Bonnettstown Hall, where Commander G. Marescaux read a very interesting paper on the history of the Castle and the Hall. The paper is too long to print in full, and I have been forced to reduce considerably the early portion dealing with the Shee family. —Ed.

THE sad ruin now in the stable yard of Bonnettstown Hall is all that remains of Bonnettstown Castle, which long ago belonged to the ancient Irish family of O'Shee. It does not seem to have been belonged outright, but was held in feudal fashion at what we should now call a peppercorn rent from the Earls of Ormonde.

It is not easy to reconstruct the Castle from what remains, but from a study of such buildings in Kilkenny and elsewhere in a better state of preservation, one can assume that it was not dissimilar to castles like Ballybur in Cuffesgrange. It is also possible to judge from such foundations as remain that there was a later Elizabethan addition, separated from the actual castle by a courtyard. This type of castle exists at Ballyhale.

The disturbed times that existed in Ireland necessitated strong fortified dwellings, and these often appear to be built in a line along strategic roads. The road which is called the Bonnettstown road on Mr. Hogan's map in his book on Kilkenny is an ancient road leading into Tipperary via Tullaroan, and another castle, Gaulstown, flanks it a little more to the North than Bonnettstown Castle.

The Irish name of the townland is called in a document dated 1623 "Cromacke" alias "Bonestown." It was described there as being "held of the Earl of Ormonde and now held of the Earl of Desmonde, as of the manor of his castle of Kilkenny in soccage by fealty." It came to the Ormondes from the Earls of Pembroke by purchase. In the same

document it is quite clear that Bonnettstown was (to use a modern expression) 'sub-let' to others during the lifetime of certain members of the Shee family and this lease was presumably in force in the fateful year of 1652, when Cromwell's sword prevailed and the whole of the land of Ireland was divided up. The vicissitudes of Bonnettstown itself can be traced rather roughly, from the time it emerges as belonging to Robert Shee and Margaret Roothe, his wife, the parents of the founder of the "hospital" in Rose Inn St., until the present day.

THE SHEES

Many documents were preserved by the branch of the Shees who retained Sheestown and also owned Gardenmorris in Co. Waterford. Among them was the will of the most interesting member, Sir Richard Shee, who died in his castle of Bonnettstown on August 10, 1608, in the reign of James I.

The Shees themselves were a very ancient family, descended from Odanus O'Shee, who was chief of his name in the 10th century in Kerry, and owned land in Tipperary in the 13th century, mainly at Cloran. There was a Thadeus Shee, who, in 1434, killed John Butler, brother of Lord Dunboyne. He had, with other children, a son Robert, who married Ellen Birmingham and they had a son Richard, the first to marry an Archer — Rose Archer, she was called. Nothing is known of this Richard. Richard had a son, Robert, who came to Kilkenny from his native Tipperary. The records said he was a merchant and a burgess and filled the municipal office of Sovereign in 1493 and 1496. I have no knowledge of where he lived. He led 100 men of Kilkenny against Turlough O'Brien and was slain at the Battle of Moyallif in 1500.

Robert Shee, M.P.—He was married to someone bearing a well-known Kilkenny name, Catherine Sherlock, and had a son called Richard, also burgess of Kilkenny, who contracted another Archer marriage to Joan, daughter of Elias Archer of New Ross. These were the parents of the first

Shee (Robert) to be recorded as "of Bonnestown." He is described as M.P. for Kilkenny in 1559 as well as J.P. and Sovereign in 1543 and 1553. His tomb can be seen in the choir of St. Mary's Church and I saw it many years ago. His wife was Margaret Rothe, daughter of Jenkin Rothe, who built the house in Irishtown, which still stands.

Robert must have been well-to-do. He sent his eldest son, Richard, to Westminster School, and his second son, Elias is described as "born in Kilkenny, sometime scholar of Oxford, a gentleman of a passing wit, a pleasant conceited companion, full of mirth without gall. He wrote in English divers sonnets."

Sir Richard Shee—The eldest of this family of brothers and sisters is really the most interesting, and there are more details about him than anyone else. Firstly, he actually died at Bonnettstown in 1608, a few years after his Sovereign lady, Queen Elizabeth, who had knighted him, and secondly, because he is the benefactor who built the so-called hospital and alms house in Rose Inn Street in 1582. He is the first Shee whose properties were recounted in an inquisition and he seems to have been a man of considerable property. In most books of references he is described as "of Uppercourt, Co. Kilkenny, and Cloran, Co. Tipperary." Sir Richard Shee married twice; his first wife was a Waterford woman of a good old Irish family, Margaret Sherlock, and she bore him five sons; the eldest, Robert, died unmarried in his father's lifetime, so that the second, Lucas, became his heir.

Lucas was born in 1569 and died 1622. He married Ellen, daughter of Edmund, second Viscount Mountgarret, who put up a monumental cross to him, which originally stood at the back entrance to the demesne of Uppercourt, and which in 1890 stood in the Square of Freshford. Lucas Shee never lived at Bonnettstown. His son, Robert (one of six children), did not do so either, as far as we can tell. We have thus to assume that the tenants who occupied the property were one of those referred to in the inquisition dated 1623, a year after Lucas Shee's death.

In this inquisition it states that by a deed of 1613, Luke Shee, Matthew Shee, John Archer and John Rothe granted to Robert Grace of Courtstown and Richard Strange of Donkitt, a whole series of lands, including 'Bonnestowne,' a lease to last over certain specified lives. One has, therefore, to assume that some of the Graces or Stranges may have lived at Bonnettstown. Robert Shee, the ground landlord under the Ormondes, was despoiled of it all after the Confederate War. One of Robert's daughters married a Comerford of Inchihologhan, whose castle stood near the little church of that name and whose confiscated lands went to the Desart family—who enter the Bonnettstown tale indirectly later on.

Now I take leave of the illustrious Shees and come to the new owners of Bonnettstown. The lands, 228 acres, all went to one Ralph Hennick, and one is left asking how they came into the hands of the man who caused the new Bonnettstown to be built, in 1737, Samuel Matthews. We have to bridge a gap between 1652 and 1737 and I can only do this by guesswork.

Among those "planters" who were granted land in Kilkenny was one Christopher Matthews, and I have to assume this to be the possible grandfather of Samuel. Did Hennick sell to Christopher, or was there some exchange or inter-marriage? I have not delved deeply into the matter.

Now, another planter, Joseph Cuffe, had 21 children and one of them, Anne, became the wife of Captain Samuel Matthews of Bonnettstown, by whom she had six sons and two daughters. Two of the sons were killed in the troubles of 1688—presumably fighting James II. One daughter became Lady Blessington in 1709 and the eldest son, Joseph, was the father of Samuel, who built Bonnettstown Hall. Anne Matthews' husband, Captain Samuel Matthews, died in 1692.

Anne, the Chatelaine of Bonnettstown Castle, who died three years after her husband, in 1682, was an aunt of the first Lord Desart and a great aunt of Nicola Sophia Cuffe,

who married Edward Herbert, a younger son of the Muckross family. This couple were the great-great-grandparents of my uncle, Major Lindsay Knox, and consequently the first Lord Desart was his three times great-grandfather.

In finding out something about the Matthews family, I was quite unexpectedly provided with most interesting material from a totally unexpected source. When I was a cadet at the Naval College we were placed alphabetically in our dormitories and close to me slept a slim young lad called Geoffrey Manderville, of Anner Castle, Tipperary. Years later I attended with my wife his wedding to the daughter of Count de la Poer of Gurteen. When we were both 28 years of age, Geoffrey discovered in an attic at Anner, a bulky manuscript which had come down to him from an ancestor who had married a Herbert. He published it in two volumes under the title of "The Retrospections of Dorothea Herbert." It covers the years 1770 to 1806 and teems with amusing gossip and family history about the Blundens, Cuffes and Herbert. Most interesting is a description of the wedding festivities of "young Mr. Matthews and Charlotte Blunden, a sister of the 2nd Baronet.

With the primness of the Jane Austen age, Dorothea does not give us the bridegroom's Christian name, but I discovered it in the British museum—another Samuel (the third) and second son of Samuel, the builder of Bonnetts-town Hall. There were ten children altogether, among them two brothers, Joe and Arthur Matthews. We are told that old Mr. Matthews and the bridegroom's stepmother attended the wedding, which took place in the drawingroom of Castle Blunden, so we know that the builder of Bonnetts-town married twice. His first wife was Elizabeth Rogerson, grand-daughter of a Knight, and his mother was one Jane Kent.

Dorothea gives us a few sidelights on him, for instance: "At length we got a letter from Castle Blunden with the disagreeable news that old Mr. Matthews had broken off the match between his son and Charlotte Blunden on account

of money matters and that they were all coming here (to Cork) to avoid disagreeable comments. . . . Charlotte was too proud to let her gloom appear and flirted immediately with Ovy's (Overington Blunden's) brother officers . . ."

DOROTHEA'S VISIT

When Dorothea, aged 17, visited Castle Blunden in 1784, she writes: "We found the girls much improved in beauty and vivacity with a valuable addition to their train in the person of Mr. Matthews, a young man of large fortune just returned from his travels and a professed admirer of Miss Charlotte Blunden. We had not been an hour in the house when Sir John (Charlotte's brother) began to play his old tricks and sent Mr. Matthews in for his knee buckles. We were all dressing and half naked, and this being our first introduction to him, nothing could be more whimsical, whilst a roar of laughter from our wicked neighbours in the gentleman's barracks next door expounded the contrivers of this awkward recontre. The next day was all bustle and hurry. Every bit of plate was set forth to show off Charlotte's new beau to advantage. We mitted, boated, fiddled, danced, romped from morning till night. Mr. Matthews read plays to us and sang songs till one or two o'clock, after supper, he sang the most charming songs that love, wine and a perfect knowledge of music could produce. The evening we arrived, Catty Whelan, the housekeeper, an old family fixture, entered to undress us and after carefully shutting the door, whispered two important secrets in our ears—the first was the intended match between Miss Charlotte and young Mr. Matthews.

"One night, after dancing in the courtyard, Sir John and young Mr. Matthews had a dispute about their buckles and they left their quarrel to my decision and I gave it in favour of Sir John's plain buckles over the dashing macaroni buckles of his competitor—in the evening Charlotte's beau was revenged, for he found out that my petticoats had stuck up behind whilst I sat at the fire, which excited a general roar at my expense. . . ."

The wedding, which Mr. Matthews, senior, had capriciously cancelled was suddenly on again and Dorothea Herbert was to be bridesmaid to her cousin, dressed in white lustring. The bride was dressed in white sarsnet and white silk bonnet with a very long veil to it: her dress was very rich with fine lace and costly trinkets, but—says Dorothea—“I never saw her look worse as she was quite disfigured with continual fretting and anxiety.”

In 1788 Charlotte Matthews was “in a promisy way after burying her first child.”

SAMUEL THE BUILDER

Samuel, the builder of Bonnettstown, lent money to the Kilkenny municipality (£1,000) in 1748. The interest, 6 per cent., was paid annually to Mr. Matthews and later to his heirs. In 1848 Matthew's bond was offered for sale and was bought by the Catholic Bishop of Ossory as an endowment for the new Cathedral, and so the Bishop got the interest in succession to the Matthews family.

Dorothea in her memoirs gives us one or two more glimpses of Samuel Matthews junior — a quarrel between her brothers and some officers of the Carrick Yeomanry, to which Samuel, as a cousin by marriage, seems to have supported the Herberts and was challenged to a duel which, however, came to nothing: as Dorothea says, “Thus ended this horrid affair which brought us females almost to death's door.” We get a further glimpse of the young Matthews in 1796 when Dorothea writes: “The Blundens, Boltons, Weymss and Matthews spent some time here this year and afterwards the whole Kilkenny hunt beat up our quarters for some days (this was at Carrick).”

In 1806 Mr. Matthews was walking hounds for Sir John Power of Kilfane. Why did Bonnettstown go out of this prolific family of ten children? I assume that Joe, the eldest son, died and perhaps Arthur also, without male heirs, so that the property went to the nephew, William Pitt Blunden, born in the year of Waterloo and son of that William who was described by Dorothea as the “favourite nurseling of Nanny Shortal,” who always kept a chair for

him by the fire of her room at Castleblunden. William Pitt Blunden married Major Lindsay Knox's aunt, Frances Maria Knox, whose sister Eliza, married William's elder brother, Sir John. They were already distant cousins through a Herbert marriage to a Chaloner of Kingsfort.

THE HOUSE

A few words about the house itself: The attic rooms were surely occupied by some of the ten children; servants in those days slept in the passages on an improvised mattress and possibly also in the basement. Lord Desart told me that at Desart Court they used to sleep in the corridors in the 18th century. The names Jane Matthews and Mary Matthews are scratched with a diamond on one window pane. These were Samuel's daughters.

One room, now divided, has a stucco ceiling in the Italian style, done certainly by some of the foreign artisans working in Ireland. This room, opening off the South-East bedroom, must have been Mr. Matthews dressing room. The staircase and diningroom mantelpiece of carrara marble are typical of the elegance of the time and will be familiar to any who have studied the publications of the Dublin Georgian Society.

The architect is unknown—certainly not Francis Bindon (who built Castlemorres and Bessborough), but probably a skilful builder working under the direction of the owner. There are marked resemblances with Desart Court especially about the windows, but Desart, built four years earlier, in 1733, had also an anonymous architect.

Old Samuel, the builder of Bonnettstown, lies in St. Canice's Churchyard, and one day in the twenties I stumbled across his tombstone in the raised bank behind the Cathedral. He died before 1805.

It is possible that much of the old stronghold of the Shees gave its stone for the structure of the present house.

The world has moved on, but here in Kilkenny and not far distant Waterford are still representatives of the families who were born, wed and died among these woods.