

## ROTHE HOUSE RESTORATION

# The Tudor Mansion House Becomes A Monument To Past Glories

(From the "Kilkenny People")

BY SEAN HURLEY

A beautiful memorial to the past glories of the Confederate capital is gradually taking shape at Rothe House in Parliament Street, Kilkenny.

For a change, the new is giving way to the old and every day, the modern features of the building diminish and the original character of the old Tudor mansion slowly reappears.

The plaster has been stripped from the walls revealing rich stonework. Interior partitions have already disappeared. The modern-type floors are being torn up to be replaced by Irish oak floors, pegged and not nailed into position. Everywhere time is marching back.

## NEXT SPRING

It is expected that all the major work will be completed before the end of the year, and by the spring of next year Rothe House will stand almost as it did when built in 1594. It will then become a major showpiece, a civic museum and national tourist attraction.

The job of restoration was a huge undertaking. Through the years a number of renovation schemes had radically altered the character of the building, particularly internally.

And a big handicap was a scarcity of information on the appearance of the building when first erected.

Investigations had to be made about the original structural design from supports, wall plates, windows and doors and built up fire places.

The most impressive feature of the restoration is the medieval-style Irish oak roof which replaces the modern deal roof and slates. It is a very fine piece of construction which required painstaking attention to detail and a high standard of craftsmanship.

## A DISCOVERY

Before work commenced a temporary roof of corrugated iron had to be erected over the existing roof before it was demolished. After some investigation of the fabric of the building it was discovered that the house had originally been a two-storey building with an attic.

When the building was modernised about 60 years ago the wall plate levels were raised and the building converted into a three storey house. Further examination revealed the original wall plate levels and socket holds of the original purlins. These established accurately the wall plate levels and roof pitch.

Work then commenced on the medieval roof. But the job was anything but straight-forward. Rothe House is some inches wider at one end than at the other and wider in the middle than at either end. This necessitated fitting all the roof members individually.

## " LONG HALL "

Other work which has already been carried out is the demolition of a modern building which linked the outer and inner houses, and the removal of partitions on the first floor restoring the "long hall" which is mentioned in the Annals of Kilkenny.

The three stone chimney stacks were taken down and rebuilt. It was found that some of the pieces were missing and had to be replaced by concrete. New blocks of Kilkenny limestone were chiselled out and fitted to the chimneys. Part of the string course (a small stone border on the front of the building) also had to be replaced.

When the plaster was removed from the lower portion of the front wall, part of the entrance to the cellar from street level, was revealed. Excavation of the footpath led to the discovery of the original stone steps to the basement, and these, together with the stone doorway, have now been completely restored.

In an effort to have the house restored as closely as possible to its original character, the main beams for one of the oak floors were taken from Ballyshannon House near Athy. These are of the same period as Rothe House.

Why, some ask, is all this work being done ?

### UNIQUE EXAMPLE

Rothe House is the only medieval merchant's house still standing in Ireland. It was built in 1594 by John Rothe a member of a family prominent in the civic life of Kilkenny between 1400 and 1700.

It was the residence of Dr. David Rothe, Bishop of Ossory at the time of the Confederation (1642-50), when it was the meeting place for political and religious leaders among them, it is believed, Archbishop Rinuccini and Eoghan Roe O'Neill.

A banner of the Confederacy was found in the house during structural alterations in 1850. Thomas MacDonagh, one of the signatories of the 1916 Proclamation, joined the Gaelic League in Rothe House and taught history in its classrooms. The inner house is still the headquarters of the Gaelic League.

The building was purchased for £4,000 a few years ago by the Kilkenny Archaeological Society and Mr Brennan whose victualling business occupies part of the house.

The restoration work is being carried out by the National Monuments Branch of the Office of Public Works, and the progress is inspected regularly by Mr Percy Le Clerc, inspector of national monuments.

Clerk of Works is Mr Louis Feeley who is supervising six other restoration schemes in addition to Rothe House. He is in charge of the work at St. Kilery's Cross, Kilmacanogue, Bray, St John's Tower, Castledermot, St John's Church, Kilkenny, Ballinahow Castle, Thurles, Cahir Castle, Cahir, and Kilcooley Abbey, Co. Tipperary.

### OTHER SCHEMES

Since work started on Rothe House, schemes have been completed at Holy Cross Abbey, Thurles, Ullard Church, Graignamanagh, St. Francis Abbey, Kilkenny, Kilfane Church, Thomastown, Jerpoint Abbey, do. Minor works have been done in Dublin, Wexford, Tipperary and Carlow.

The workers and craftsmen on Rothe House are all locals and all refinements of stonework and woodwork were carried out in the courtyard.