

# The Ponsonbys and Fiddown Church

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THE Ponsonbys came from Haile in Cumberland. John Ponsonby married Dorothy Briscoe of Crofton in Cumberland and their son succeeded to the Cumberland estates. He married, secondly, Elizabeth Ffolliott, a widow of Richard Wingfield of Powerscourt. He came to Ireland in the army of Cromwell and soon became a Colonel in the army. After the success of Cromwell he was knighted and given a large grant of land in the valley of the Suir. There is a story, which may be true, that he first received an estate near Kilkenny and exchanged it for one in the Suir valley when Colonel Axtell grumbled at getting a wild and uncultivated estate beside the Suir. There is another story that John Ponsonby allowed Sir John Daton, the former owner, and his beautiful daughter, Winifred, to remain at the castle when he took up residence there. The Datons were treated so well that they were convinced that Winifred would marry John Ponsonby. The story goes that on a fine April day Sir John Ponsonby, accompanied by a lady and a gay cavalcade of gentlemen, rode up the long avenue leading to the castle and then proceeded to introduce the lady to the Datons as his newly-wed wife. The young Winifred Daton collapsed insensible on the ground. The old father died soon afterwards. Winifred lost her mind and became hopelessly insane. She would dress herself up in a beautiful satin dress—her wedding dress—and wander daily in the garden. She often climbed up the boughs of an old thorn tree and sit there in apparent content, clipping the buds with a scissors and this seemed to be the only pleasure she enjoyed. This tree was known as The White Lady's Tree.

In 1662 two grants of land were confirmed to Sir John under the Act of Settlement and he changed the name of the place from Kildaton to Bessborough in honour of his second wife, Elizabeth. He was buried in the church of Fiddown where a plain wall slab is inscribed — Here lieth the body of Sir John Ponsonby of Bessborough who departed this life A.D. 1678 in the 60th year of his age.

He was succeeded by his son, William, who took an active part in the Siege of Derry on the Williamite side. In 1721, in reward for his services at the Siege, he was created Baron Bessborough in the County of Kilkenny and in the year 1722 was created Viscount Duncannon. He married Mary, daughter of Brabazon Moore of Ardee, and died at the age of 67 in 1724. His tablet in Fiddown church is of white veined marble on black Kilkenny marble ornamented with skulls and cross bones, hour-glasses run down and a grass-hopper. The sculptor was Kidwell of London. The inscription reads: *Gulielmi Ponsonby vice comite Duncannon quod mortuum est Hic jacet Depositum Obiit Die Nov. 17 An Dom, 1724 Aetat 67 Siste Viator et Memento Mori.* The wife is also commemorated by a tablet in black and white marble with Ponsonby arms impaling Moore.

William Ponsonby was succeeded by his son, Brabazon Ponsonby, who married Mrs. Colvill, a grand-daughter of Archbishop Margetson. In 1739 Brabazon was raised to the rank of Earl of Bessborough. He died on 4th July, 1758, and is commemorated in the church by a marble monument, four Corinthian columns and four pilasters supporting a pediment on which the family arms appear. Below on a sarcophagus of dove marble are two portrait half-length figures hand in hand. This monument was made by William Atkinson of London. The inscription reads — Under this marble lie the Remains of Brabazon Ponsonby Earl of Bessborough Viscount Duncannon and Baron Bessborough in Ireland and Baron Ponsonby of Sysonby in Leicestershire in Great Britain and of Sarah his wife



grand Daughter and Heiress to Primate Margetson. The virtues etc. (he) departed this life July 1758 age 81, she in May 1733 aged 52.

He was succeeded by his second son, William, who became 2nd Earl of Bessborough. His wife, Lady Caroline Cavendish, was buried at Fiddown in 1760 but the monument is not there now.

The 3rd Earl of Bessborough and his wife do not seem to have been much interested in Bessborough and are not buried here. Caroline, their daughter, a well-known and notorious lady in her time, married Lord Melbourne, the English Prime Minister.

John William Ponsonby, the 4th Earl, was a supporter of Catholic Emancipation and of Parliamentary Reform. He and his wife took a keen interest in the affairs of Piltown. Creevy visited Bessborough and gives us in his papers some account of the Duncannons, as they were then, and of their varied activities in the Piltown district. John William succeeded as 4th Earl in 1843 and in 1846 was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. He apparently did a good job during a very difficult period—the years of the Famine. He died in Dublin Castle in 1847, aged 66. A Gothic mural monument in Caen stone records his death—“In memory of John William Ponsonby 4th Earl of Bessborough who was born on the 31st of August 1781 and died on the 16th May, 1847 while holding the office of Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and of Maria Viscountess Duncannon his wife, daughter of John Fane 10th Earl of Westmoreland, who was born on the 11th May 1787 and died on the 19th March 1834.

They had fourteen children, thirteen of whom lived. Some of these children are buried here.

John George Brabazon Ponsonby succeeded as 5th Earl in 1847. Nothing noteworthy about him. He and his two wives, Frances Charlotte and Caroline Amelia, are buried here.

He was succeeded by his brother, Frederick, as 6th Earl. Frederick, in his later years, lived at Bessborough and held agricultural shows in the Park every year. He died unmarried in 1895 and a floor slab commemorates his death. Yet another brother, Walter William, succeeded as 7th Earl. He was a clergyman in England for many years. He spent his later years in Bessborough and London and was buried in Bessborough in 1906 but his monument is not in Fiddown church.

The coat of arms of the Ponsonbys is — Gules a chevron between three combs argent.

Besides the Ponsonby monuments there are seven small slabs to the Briscoes, whose principal residence seems to have been at Cloncunney.

Fiddown church consists now only of the chancel of the original church. When Piltown church was built in 1861-3 the nave was taken down. Some time ago the church was cleaned and painted and is worth a visit if you are driving in South Kilkenny.

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## Hat Stamps

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