

Castletown House, Hiltown, Co. Kilkenny

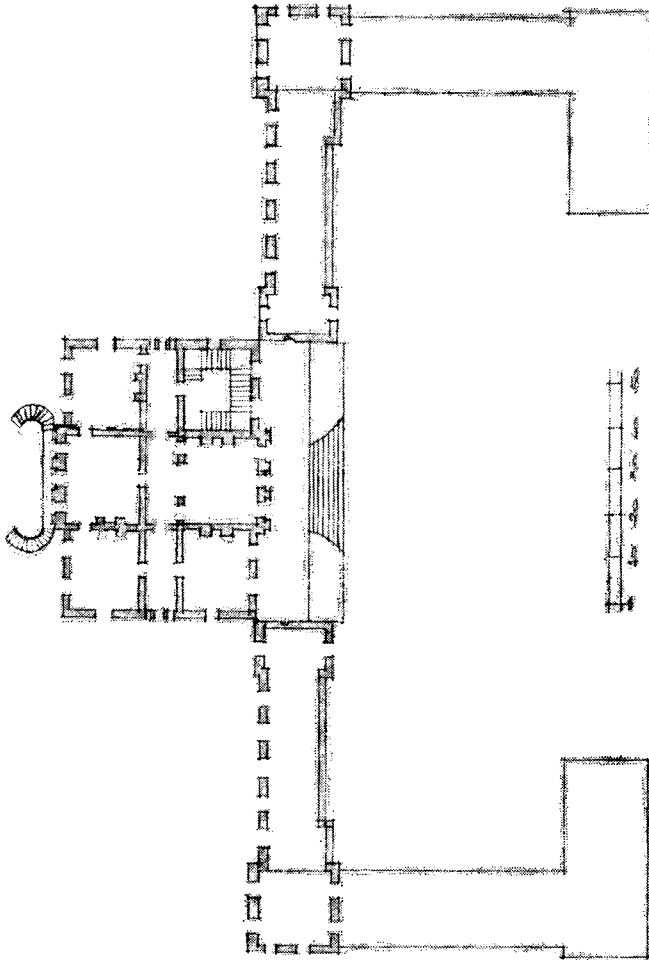
HOME OF MR. AND MRS. CHARLES BLAQUE

BY JOHN J. O'CONNELL

Castletown Cox, as well as the better known Castletown Conolly (Celbridge) are splendid examples of 18th Century Irish architecture. Castletown Conolly tends to the classical both in lay-out and detailing. Castletown Cox on the other hand is truly baroque both in the interior and exterior. Built about 1767 for the protestant Archbishop Cox (who came from Dunmanway, Co. Cork) by the Sardinian engineer architect, Davis Duchart, it presents to us today a wonderful example of a mid 18th century house complete with interior and landscape lay-out.

Baroque architecture fell very much out of favour in England towards the end of Christopher Wren's life and during Vanbroughs. It was considered to be the epitomy of all things Popish and Jesuit like. All the more strange therefore when we find a Protestant Archbishop employing the architect engineer Duchart to design a house for him, knowing that such a foreigner would probably be given to the use of baroque detailing. We find in Castletown the use of pavilions with "L'oeil de boeif" windows, slated cupolas, and rapid rhythms, all the products of the baroque spirit.

The house is situated in its original park. Approaching it the pavilions and balustrade crowning the main house and loggias come into view. Turning a large bend in the carriage way the entrance court to the house is gained. On the main axis the dwelling house rises in three stories with seven bays wide on a large podium. To the left and right are the service buildings. They take the form of a square shaped "C", the open side being at right angles to the house. The service buildings are terminated by 1½ storeys of the pavilions with domed roofs in slate and crowned by a lantern. This openness is very unusual. Perhaps they were intended to be closed by curved sweeps.



Castletown, Co. Kilkenny : Plan of Ground Floor

To gain access to the house, one rises on a flight of wide shallow steps set against the podium to arrive at the podium itself. This helps to define the sense of enclosure, at the same time marks the difference in function between the entrance court and the house. The podium, the width of the house, is terminated by the gable ends of the pavilions with baroque urns in niches gauged out of the wall itself, attendant urns and a pair of blank architraves.

The spectator now faces the main entrance and through it passes by double doors into the main hall. This is a large rectangular room one storey high and three bays wide. Two corinthian columns flank the door to the salon, and mark the position where the corridor traverses the hall at right angles. To the left is the sandstone fireplace executed to a design from the school of Kent, and above, the first of the wonderful ceilings by the hand of Osborne. From here the plan of the house reveals itself, double pile with lateral passage and the staircase off the passage. The service corridor in the middle of the house has all the reception rooms placed off it on both sides.

At the end of the corridor the main staircase is placed. This stone cantilevered staircase rises in three equal flights to gain the first story only. As in the rest of the house the detailing is of the highest order with ceiling, bannisters, hand-rail and risers decorated richly and in the most fluid baroque forms.

When returning to the hall one notices how well lit the galleries are. This is due to the plan of allowing the side elevation to be free and large venetian windows are used to flood with light the galleries on the ground floor.

Returning to the hall, one passes into the salon with dining room to right and study to left. These rooms are connected en suite and also have doors into the galleries. Thus all the rooms face into the garden with a garden window leading from the salon onto a small terrace and then down a flight of double steps into the garden itself. All rooms are rectangular the salon itself being dominant in size. Here the windows, doors and mantelpieces are finely carved, and the top of the door surround is remarkable. The ceiling, as in the hall, has been executed by Osborne, the Waterford stuccadore. It would be of great interest to know who carried out the rest of the decoration, especially the wood work.

The ceiling band on arabesque lines with motifs of fruit, flowers and cherubs in low profile resulting in a fluid composition has just right level of gaiety, joy and frivolity. Again on the main axis one passes through the garden windows down a flight of steps to the garden itself. Turning round one

can examine the garden facade of the house. It is seven bays wide, the three centre bays slightly in advance of the main block. The basement level is rusticated to contrast with the three upper floors all of which are covered in smoothest ashlar work of Kilkenny marble. This ashlar work which is smoothest on the garden facade (due to weathering) is one of the most stunning features of Castletown. With joints that are almost invisible and the finest of surfaces, it contrasts dramatically with the window surrounds, which are highly moulded and richly decorated. This combined with the use of a deep cornice demark the attic story and the way in which each elevation is punctuated with the use of a pilaster combine to give a most lively composition. The entire house is crowned with a delightfully baroque ballustrade. The accentuating of all the corners by the use of straight edged quoining should be observed.

In the side elevation the composition of the facade is much more subdued but still of the highest quality ashlar work. The service building on this side becomes an arcaded loggia, made of sandstone rubble coated with plaster and dressed stone veils. Each loggia is terminated with a pavilion of $1\frac{1}{2}$ stories with slated domed roofs already seen from the entrance court. Here again a fine contrast is set up between the main house and the service building. As regards the loggia, was Duchart giving his clients what in his native land would be an outdoor room to come in out of the sun, perhaps to be used here, as a room to come in from the rain? This porch is completely French in feeling, in the "oeil de boeuf" windows and the domed roof. The craftsmanship of the slate veil is seldom found in Ireland but Duchart used it at Kilshannig (Co. Cork).

From the steps leading up to the house the layout of the gardens now reveals itself. On the axis the steps take one down to a lower level to a circle marked out by Irish Yews with a classical statue in the centre. Then the eye passes this to the balustrade that demarks the garden from the park. Passing over the park, the eye finally comes to rest on the distant mountains and horizon. Where the service wings step back on each side, a parterre rose garden has been created

in the fashion of Andre Le Notre, the famous French garden designer. What is amazing is that these gardens were laid out very much later than the house, by Lady Dunraven, in 1910, yet they capture the whole spirit of the house and complement the architecture well. Note the limited use of plants, box and gravel with very few flowers. Here more than any other house in Ireland, the feeling of the Renaissance is captured, in the way the house and garden are related to one another and the surrounding countryside, as with the famous Villa Rotonda by Palladio.

Castletown looks to the four cardinal points and the grounds extend to the horizon.

What is special about Castletown is that today it is lived in and used as a home. In the past, a fine patron and a good architect built a beautiful house, to which were added splendid fittings and furnishings for the interior and a park was planted to surround the exterior. Later, in the 19th and 20th centuries the same spirit prevailed and the formal gardens were added. This spirit is continued by Mr. and Mrs. Charles Blacque who have re-arranged and changed the house into the charming and comfortable home that it is today.

Notes: This article owes much to "Irish Houses and Castles" where the authors Desmond Guinness and William Ryan write up Castletown and illustrate it beautifully. This is the only house the authors so honour in Co. Kilkenny.

The tomb of Archbishop Cox by the famous sculptor Schemakers is still to be seen in the South aisle of Saint Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny. He was followed in the occupation of Castletown by Villiers Stuart family, the Wyndham-Quins and the Blacques (present proprietors).

The Cox estate owned much land in Co. Kilkenny, the lands of Rathculbin (near Callan) were bought by the occupier William Torpey under the Wyndham Act of 1903, mineral rites alone preserved to the state. Mr. Uniacke Townsend was the agent in 1903.

The visit of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society to Castletown, June 4, 1972, through the gracious courtesy of the owners was the immediate occasion of this article, the writer being present that day.