

Uppercourt Manor

The story of Uppercourt Manor is set against a profuse and ecclesiastically, Freshford had already been prominent, when we find the first historical reference to the Manor in "The Calendar of Documents Relating to Ireland 1171-1252". It states :- 1245 "The King (Henry III) grants Geoffry de Turville, Bishop of Ossory, a yearly fair in his manor at Athethur from the 8th to the 15th July; and also grants him free warren in the demesne lands of the said manor". Hugh Mapleton, Bishop of Ossory (1251 — 1260), built the Episcopal Palace or court, at Aghore, subsequently called Uppercourt, and provided it with fish-ponds and "other necessary adjuncts of a manorial residence". In the same century Geoffry St. Leger, Bishop of Ossory completed the manor house. Grants of Uppercourt were made to various Ecclesiastics until the sixteenth century, and it served as the country residence for the Bishops of Ossory. In 1384 Bishop Ledrede, an English Franciscan, was president of the Ecclesiastical Court before which Alice Kytler, and her son William Utlagh, were cited on charges of witchcraft, and nearly all the letters (six) touching this famous prosecution, were written in the old palace of Uppercourt. In the year 1500, Bishop Oliver Cantwell built a castle at Uppercourt beside the Episcopal Palace.

The most colourful figure connected with Uppercourt during the Middle Ages was John Bale, an Apostate English Carmelite Friar, who became the first Protestant Bishop of Ossory in 1553. After his turbulent and controversial sojourn in England and on the continent, he finally found favour with Edward VI. He came to Ireland and proceeded to antagonise everybody, including the protestant Bishop of Dublin, and the new Dean of Christchurch, by his tempestuous words. His efforts to enlighten the clergy of Ossory did not succeed, but he found among them "adversaries a great number." The laity of Freshford proved equally contumacious. The 8th September, the feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God was a great Catholic holiday. On that day he sent his servants to make hay in the field known now as the Deer

Park. This seemed a great insult to the local people and they promptly slew five of his servants before his face. They would have treated Bishop Bale likewise had he not barricaded himself into the Castle. Later that afternoon he was saved by a force of one hundred horsemen and three hundred footmen, who had come from Kilkenny to rescue him. Next day he fled to Dublin and from there to the Continent, never to set foot in Ossory again.

In 1570 we find the first mention of the Shee (Sheth, O'Shea) family connection with Uppercourt and the passing of the Episcopal property to a layman. Christopher Gaffney, the protestant Bishop of Ossory, received a licence "to alien to Richard Sheth of Kilkenny, the manor of Aghore, to hold forever in fee farm, at a rent of £10 English to the Bishop". The manor included the whole civil parish of Freshford — nearly three thousand acres. This family was of royal descent and provided many civil officials for Kilkenny. Richard built and endowed an almshouse in Rose Inn Street, and provided for it in his will. He was knighted in 1589. Woolworth's shop in High street was owned by the O'Shees and still bears the family arms. There is also a slab set in the south wall of the church in Sheestown, commemorating the family. Richard's second son Lucas was his heir at Uppercourt. He married Ellen Butler, daughter of Edmund Butler, the second Viscount of Mountgarrett. A wayside cross was erected beside the back entrance, to commemorate Lucas and Ellen Shee. Only the base of the cross remains and this was removed to its present position in Freshford Square, towards the end of the Eighteenth Century by Sir William Morres, of Uppercourt. The road between Freshford and Ballylarkin has long been known as Buncrusha.

The Shee family continued to occupy prominent positions in the civil administration of Kilkenny. Robert Shee was heir of Uppercourt and became Mayor of Kilkenny in 1635. With his uncle, Lord Mountgarret, Robert took an active part in the civil war in 1641-42. He owned the house in Kilkenny where the lay and spiritual representatives of the towns and counties of Ireland first met and established the Confederation of Kilkenny. The site of this famous house, which came

to be known as "Parliament House," was occupied by the gate of the Newmarket since 1862. As a result of Robert Shee's loyalties he forfeited his possessions under Cromwell's regime in 1653. Uppercourt House and lands (953 acres) were granted to Sir George Askew in lieu of £200 wages due to him for soldiering in Cromwell's army.

In the old Protestant graveyard in Freshford there is a mural tablet which gives the date of the death of a certain Penelope Ryves as October 22, 1711. This Penelope and her husband Charles Ryves are probably the parents of William Ryves of Uppercourt. William's daughter was Lady Maria Juliana, and she married Sir William Evans Morres (1763-1829). Sir William began to build the present-day Uppercourt House at the end of the eighteenth century, and the structure was completed in the nineteenth century. The square castle which was beside the Episcopal residence of the pre-reformation Bishops of Ossory stood behind the present day stables. It was razed to the ground and the stones were used in the building of the house. Sit William Morre's son assumed the surname of Montmorency and was the heir at Uppercourt. In the late 1830's the property was under the court of Chancery and eventually came into possession of Mr Bryan of Jenkinstown, who, according to the "Kilkenny Moderator" (1849) "gave much employment and dispensed the hospitalities of Uppercourt House in a right and regal manner".

Mr. Eyre, an English Catholic gentleman, succeeded Mr. Bryan at Uppercourt. His nephew Thomas Eyre succeeded him and proceeded to make improvements in the manor house. He re-roofed it, raised it a storey, and built a new wing on to it. The work was committed to the superintendence of a certain Mr. Meade. In 1865 Thomas Eyre and his wife Anna Joanna de Milford, presented a ciborium to Freshford Catholic church, and that ciborium is still there. He was High Sheriff of Kilkenny in 1868 and built the schools and houses in Freshford. His children went to school in Freshford, but in 1890 the land agitation was a threat to him. Consequently he left in fear with his wife and family never to return.

However, Thomas J. Eyre came back in 1890 and was the

next possessor of the manor. He was succeeded in 1902 by his cousin Stanislaus Thomas Eyre. Stanislaus was called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn and became High Sheriff of Kilkenny in 1910. He planted the trees on the green in Freshford. He used to ride with the North Kilkenny Hounds — the meet of the famous pack was at Uppercourt until quite recently. Mr. and Mrs Eyre gave an annual entertainment to the children of Freshford. Stanislaus Eyre sold Uppercourt House and Demense, consisting of 500 acres to Messrs Maher Brothers of Freshford in 1918. The political instability in Ireland at the time was a probable factor in the sale. Moreover, an extract from a 1918 newspaper reads: "During the military manoeuvres several years ago in the neighbouring country, Uppercourt was the seat of the headquarters staff, and was temporarily occupied by the late Lord Roberts, then British Commander in Chief, and Sir Evelyn Wood". It is interesting to note that Mrs. Stanislaus Eyre, aged ninety three, still lives in London, with her son and daughter, Mrs Violet Wictham. She and her son have visited Uppercourt on two occasions recently. Her sister is a professed religious in London. Mrs. Wictham is still very interested in Uppercourt and I am indebted to her for many facts concerning the manor.

The Maher family had possession of Uppercourt until 1932 when the Mill Hill Missionaries acquired the property, and the manor became a minor seminary. The Franciscan Missionary Sisters, whose main work is on the mission fields, also helped to establish St. Joseph's F.M. College. Forty years later the Fathers, Sisters and Brothers, devote their energies to the Christian education of boys, many of whom become missionary priests. This year eight young men, who had received their secondary education in St. Joseph's College, were ordained and now are on the foreign missions.

Since the advent of the Mill Hill Missionaries, Uppercourt, has been transformed into a modern educational complex. Extensions were made in 1932 and a new church was opened in 1945. A new college was ready for use in 1950. Three classrooms were added in 1971 and a specious sports hall last year. This year there are one hundred and fifteen boarding students and twelve day students at the College. There are

extensive outdoor sporting facilities and pleasure grounds on the one hundred and sixty acre estate.

Uppercourt is a Georgian house and has been described as "Absolutely the finest in the county, a handsome house, a stately, splendid mansion". It stands on a slight eminence. Two lions, one fully sculptured, the other semi-sculptured, guard the entrance to the mansion, which is approached by a flight of steps-all in cut limestone. On the apex of the portico are four female figures each a single block of fine limestone elaborately sculptured, and quarried on the demense. The main door consists of a half-door and a sliding window, the upper section of which is splayed. Cut stone urns with floral designs, decorate the roof, which has a triangle, the apex of which is surmounted by a large oblong bowl. A french window opens on to the pleasure grounds on the west side of the building. This is approached by the same cut-stone steps and cut limestone railings, even more decorative and elaborate than the main entrance. Although Uppercourt is a Georgian mansion many of its interior features are nineteenth century. For instance, the beautifully designed and decorated fireplaces were bought in England and installed by Thomas Eyre. Italian marble was used mainly Scienna Yellow marble and Cicara white marble. They are the work of Italian craftsmen, and the intricate delicate designs are clearly the work of first class artists. The lavish plaster work decorations on the ceilings are the creation of Italian and Irish stucco craftsmen. The designs are mainly floral, foliage and corn.

In the entrance hall are round and square pillars of imitation marble. The intricate painstaking stucco decoration, over windows, doors and pillars and on ceilings dominate the whole artistic atmosphere. There are double doors and heavily shuttered windows throughout. The study-cum library on the right hand side of the entrance hall is probably the most lavish room in the house. Delicately carved wooden frames surround the book-cases, doors and windows. A large oval-shaped painting of Apollo and the Nine Muses, surrounded by golden floral and foliage designs, decorates the ceiling. The drawing-room is the largest single room. The wallpaper there is over a hundred years old. The ceiling is decorated in its entirety

and the inevitable marble fire-place is surmounted by a huge mirror with gold-gilded frame.

The architect is said to be a Mr. Roberts of Waterford, who also designed the town house of the Morres, which is now the Waterford Chamber of Commerce.

The material possessions of the Eyre family did not obscure spiritual values as is evidenced by the following request to Rome: "Thomas Eyre and his wife, Lady Milford, humbly request Your Holiness to grant the Indult of a private oratory, and the faculty to preserve the Blessed Sacrament in the said oratory to the castle of Uppercourt in the diocese of Ossory in Ireland." This parchment is still at Uppercourt and declares that the privilege sought by Bishop Moran of Ossory on November 1, 1872 was granted. One hundred years later to the day, a larger spiritual family of one hundred and forty, pay homage daily to the same Blessed Sacrament, not in the same Oratory but in the new spacious church which fittingly perpetuates the ecclesiastical atmosphere of bygone centuries.

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