

The Castle is open again

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SATURDAY the 28th of August 1976 was a day of great rejoicing for Kilkenny Citizens for the castle was opened again after many years of restoration work.

It was on the 13th of August, 1967 that the Sixth Marquess of Ormonde presented the castle to Kilkenny. The key was handed by the Marquess to Mr. Jim Gibbons, Chairman of a Committee representing the people of Kilkenny.

Alas, the building was found to be unsafe after having been virtually unoccupied for 30 years. The Butler family left the castle in 1936. There was a short period of occupation by the Army during the war and occasional cultural exhibitions and other functions were held by Kilkenny Arts Society since.

The Kilkenny Committee made a survey of the building with the help of funds provided by a benefactor, Mr. Lytle of London. They decided that the cost of restoration would be beyond the resources of the City so the castle was offered to the Government to match the National Park surrounding it, which had already been given to the Nation by the Marquess.

Mr. Noel Lemass accepted on behalf of the Government in 1970 and entrusted the restoration to the Office of Public Works. Mr. Martin Burke, Principal Architect took charge, assisted by Mr. John Cumming. It was decided to do the restoration in stages and the work began on the first stage in 1973. This consisted of the east wing containing the celebrated picture gallery and certain rooms in the north block and north-east tower.

THE GALLERY

The Gallery and its basement are the latest buildings of the present castle. This wing was built in 1780 on the old foundations and was re-designed by Benjamin Woodward of the firm of Deane and Woodward about 1860. In the course of the construction, whatever remained of the fourth (south-eastern) tower and the south wall with its ancient gateway were removed.

This great room 150 feet long was designed as a picture gallery to exhibit the enormous collection of portraits and landscapes which had accumulated in the

various Butler family castles. Almost every inch of the walls were hung with paintings, by no means all of them family portraits. Many of the great figures of Irish history appeared there. The background colour was red, for long the accepted background for the exhibition of old masters. It is no small surprise to find that the sparkling creamy-buff colour selected by the present decorators is a vast improvement. It lightens the whole scene and blends effectively with the finely carved stone corbels supporting the roof. The intricate foliage sculpture of these corbels is most probably attributable to Charles W. Harrison who certainly executed the double Carrara mantle piece in the centre of the east wall.

Looking up the vast hall one is struck afresh with the beauty of its proportions. How it must have gladdened the hearts of the Marchioness and her young son as they followed the work of artist and stone-mason! For it was the widow of the second Marquess who supervised the reconstruction. Charles Harrison records that she arrived daily with samples of flowers and leaves as models for the sculpture.

The repair of the roof lighting, which is so ideal for the illumination of paintings, caused much trouble to the present restorers. But it is well worth the long years of patient work which it entailed. It draws the eye upwards to the newly-gilt fearsome animal heads which project from the roof supports.

The curious painted motifs on the hammer beam roof were another problem. They are the work of J. Hungerford Pollen, an artist employed by Deane and Woodward, whose descendants are still active in artistic spheres. After more than 100 years, the touch of a brush for cleaning spelled disaster so the painting had to be blown clean with currents of air. No doubt, the languid ladies in their flowing robes who have looked down so long with disdain on the scene below appreciated the refurbishing.

The basement below the picture gallery which formerly contained the kitchen offices has been cleverly altered to provide a modern exhibition area. Kilkenny Art Gallery Society is at present re-assembling its fine collection of modern paintings. They will make a splendid permanent exhibition for Kilkenny when hung in these rooms. For too long has this collection been without a home.

The great kitchen at the southern end of the basement has not been altered and serves at present as a useful studio for the restoration of pictures.

THE ANTE-ROOM AND MARBLE STAIRCASE

Leaving the picture gallery one passes on the right the "Moorish" staircase. This was said to have been designed by the Marchioness according to a model seen on her travels. The carvings are curiously placed in the soffits of imitation stop-ends, on the corners of the balustrade and high above the capitals supporting the gothic arches. A small extra piece of foliage is thrown in for good measure on the last arch at each side. The hand of Charles W. Harrison suggests itself, he delighted in introducing tiny animals, birds, insects or reptiles among his foliage. It was his imagination which produced two monkeys playing billiards on the Kildare Street Club! The beautiful sandstone staircase required little restoration beyond reconstructing the "winter garden" in the well, so beloved of Victorians.

North of the staircase on the left is a lovely oval ante-room well restored by the Board of Works. The round-headed niches which had been blocked up were reopened restoring to the room its pleasing classical appearance. This room is part of the north block rebuilt by Black Tom in the 16th Century and described by Rinucinni at the time of the Confederation. From this description one could guess that the site of the present ante-room was perhaps the head of a spiral staircase similar to that at Carrick Castle. From its entrance was made to the assembly room which probably ran the length of the block. At the end of the 18th Century John the 17th Earl who was responsible for much classical rebuilding of Butler property may have removed this staircase and designed this pleasing room.

THE DINING ROOM

Descending the present staircase to the first landing one enters on the right the dining room (formerly known as the Tapestry room). This curiously shaped room forms part of the old north-eastern tower and a small part of the ancient eastern wing which survived. Of necessity therefore the northern half of the room is round and the southern half is square. Robertson, the architect of the 1825—37 alterations concluded that this part of the castle was very ancient indeed and that there were originally two separate rooms each served by a separate staircase. He found traces of the southern staircase leading to the square room.

Older residents of Kilkenny will remember the dining room when it was embellished by the 16th century carved limestone fireplace which has now been returned to Ormonde Castle, Carrick-on-Suir. It was brought here when Carrick was abandoned by the Ormondes but was returned when the state took over responsibility for Carrick about 25 years ago.

In this room also was exhibited on important occasions the celebrated gold plated dinner service of the Butler family. This heirloom is now on loan to the Pictoria and Albert Museum in London.

THE HALL AND STAIRCASE

Descending the broad mahogany staircase which dates to the 19th century we find ourselves in the "break." This is a projecting portion of the north facade which dates back to the earliest building of the north block. It may have been part of the design of the first building which united the north-east and north-west towers and has never been interfered with in the many alterations since.

On the right a stained glass window depicting the arms of Ormonde was blown in by a storm in 1967. It was not too badly damaged and it is hoped that it can be repaired and replaced in position in due course.

THE HALL

The Hall which is entered next presented considerable difficulty to the restorers. Apart from dry-rot which has to be dealt with all through the castle the ceiling plaster was found to be decayed. The entire ceiling and frieze was taken down and replaced according to the same design, a painstaking job which has been extremely well done.

The massive grey marble table in the centre of the hall is said to have been carved within the castle by local craftsmen. A brass plaque recording the names of all the kings of England who visited the castle since Richard II stayed with the 3rd Earl in 1392 was stolen by vandals quite recently. The list was quite long and ample space was left for future visits! It will be replaced.

Another casualty was the great knocker on the front gate, a loss perhaps more difficult to replace.

Such behaviour makes the care of public buildings a difficult, frustrating and unrewarding business. Fortunately, those who behave in such a selfish and ungrateful manner are small in numbers.

ORMONDE PAINTINGS

Charles Butler, 7th Marquess of Ormonde, who lives in Illinois, U.S.A. has kindly made available, on loan, to the castle some forty-two paintings mostly family portraits or those of family friends. Many of them belong to the late 17th century when the Duke of Ormonde conducted what might be called a school of Art at the Castle. He provided facilities for pupils of many of the famous painters of the day. At the time of going to press these pictures are still in the hands of the restorers. Two have been hung in the main hall — some ten or twelve are ready for hanging and the rest will appear in due course. The two hanging in the main hall are (1) James, 1st Duke of Ormonde by Kneller and (2) Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford attributed to Van Dyke.

THE TAPESTRIES

An inventory of the Ormonde Tapestries dated 1684 lists no less than 130 pieces then in the possession of the Duke. These beautiful wall hangings were a common accoutrement of the wealthy gentlemen who lived in stone castles. They were essential as draught excluders and were often part of the owners' luggage when he travelled or paid visits. The Duke brought 40 pieces with him to France when he went into exile with King Charles II.

It will be remembered that Piers, the 8th Earl and Margaret Fitzgerald, his wife, established a factory in Kilkenny for the weaving of tapestries and carpets about 1538. Black Tom, the 10th Earl, inherited tapestries from the Earl of Desmond through his Mother who was this Earl's heiress. The 1st Duke (12th Earl) is known to have purchased tapestries abroad. All these tapestries were hung in the castles of Kilcash, Carrick, Dunmore and Kilkenny. Most of them found their way to Kilkenny eventually. It would be difficult to establish the provenance and age of those remaining.

Some tapestries from the castle have been lent by the Marquess and they are being hung according as they are prepared. At present, in the picture gallery, there are 4 pieces from the set of seven depicting the story of Decius, a Roman General in the Latin war of 340 B.C. This is the set which hung in the Tapestry Room (later the Dining room) until 1824. It is listed as Antwerp and was probably bought by the Duke about 1660. A piece hanging over the well of the grand staircase is more difficult to identify as

there are many sets listed, all from Antwerp, depicting stories of the Roman gods and goddesses such as Diana and her nymphs, Polipheme, etc. and several sets simply marked "forest work." It could belong to any of these sets.

Appropriately, the opening of the Castle coincided with the opening of the third Kilkenny Arts Week. His Excellency, Cearbhall O'Dalaigh, then President of Ireland recalled, in his address, that Kilkenny Castle had been the scene of gatherings of poets and musicians in the sixteenth century under Black Tom of Ormonde. The poem referring to these festivities was perhaps the well-known "Taghaim Tomás," reputed to be by Flann MacCraith, which was translated about 1850 by John O'Dalaigh.

The opening ceremony was prefaced by "Fanfare for a City," a piece of music specially composed for the occasion by John Buckley. It was played by the Band of the Curragh Training Camp, under Comdt. Denis Mellerick. Within a week the 7th Marquess and Lady Ormonde visited the house of their ancestors to inaugurate the fourth Butler family Rally.

Kilkenny has a Castle again! So, in the words of Flann MacCraith's poem —

"Youths are wooing, wine in cups quaffed off
Enchanting music played by delicate fingers
Poems are recited, while poets expound them
Ladies are allured by tempting presents."

References: J.R.S.A.I. Vol. I, p.470; Ibid Vol. II, p.p.3, 115.
Ledwich, "History of Irishtown and Kilkenny."



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