

Kilkenny Archaeological Society 1945 - 1994

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This number of the Society's journal set aside to particularly mark the 400 years of the Rothe House existence, seems a fitting occasion to write a factual account of how the Society came into being, developed and prospered.

In the spring of 1945, Mr. Hubert Butler of Maidenhall, Bennettsbridge rang the writer's husband, Dr. William J. Phelan, to meet him in the Club House Hotel and discuss the possibility of forming an archaeological society. This my husband did and came back to say that both of them thought the time was ripe and that there was a growing interest in history, archaeology and the environment. Mr. Butler offered to contact his friends in the academic world to lecture, advise and instruct the young Society. My husband offered to contact his friends in the everyday world.

They decided to call a public meeting in the City Vocational School to announce the aims of the Society, to see if there was a good response and to carry on from there. In the event, in the spring of 1945 the meeting was held in the Vocational School and well attended; about fifty people turning up, and it was decided to proceed.

The following officers and committee were elected: Chairman: Dr. Martin Crotty, LL.D., Joint Hon. Secretaries: Hubert Butler, Maidenhall and Peter Brennan, Vocational School, Hon. Treasurer: W.G. Mahony, National Bank, Committee: Adrain Bligh, Sylvester Bourke, Dr. P.J. Cassin, Rev. T.J. Clohosey, E. Dobbs, Dr. W.J. Phelan, Mrs. M. Phelan, Miss May Sparks, Mrs. Nancy Stopford, Dr. F. Walsh, Callan.

The Society to be called the Kilkenny Archaeological Society, the subscription to be 5/- per annum, the committee to be not more than twenty members, the rules to be based on the rules of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society of 1849 and the emphasis to be on the preservation, examination and illustration of all objects of the past history of the city and

county of Kilkenny.

The two ways in which the new Society differed from the old was in electing women to the committee and to the Society, and in confining our activities to Kilkenny city and county. The old Society had no women either as members or committee and its activities covered the whole country.

The inaugural meeting of the new Society was held at the Vocational School and addressed by Dr. Sean P. O'Riordan, Professor of Archaeology U.C.D. and friend of Hubert Butler. He gave an enthusiastic talk which inspired the audience and caused about fifty people to join. Alas, the writer does not remember the contents of his talk, except in one instance. He impressed the necessity of bringing a picnic tea for all functions which would bring the participants together, renew flagging spirits and provide a social occasion. This injunction has always been followed by the Society.

The Society had a great friend in Dr. Richard Walsh, C.E.O. of the Vocational School, who put his newly restored premises at our service. Great excitement at the founding of the Society was felt by the members and our first visit to St. Canice's Cathedral, conducted by Dr. Phair, Bishop of Ossory, was a momentous occasion, followed by a visit to the Black Abbey addressed by Fr. Dempsey, Prior, and country excursions to Jerpoint, the Merino Factory at Ennisnag, Kells and Clara Castle. The country visits had to be made on bicycles, for cars were not on the road. Jerpoint was reached by train to Thomastown and bicycle thereafter, but all visits were appreciated greatly. The speakers were: W.J. Pilsworth at Jerpoint and the Merino Factory, Dr. Harold Leask at Kells, and Hubert Butler at Clara Castle. O.G.S. Crawford lectured on Archaeology Today, Rev. T.J. Clohosey on St. Francis Abbey and J.S. Gibb on Change Ringing in St. Canice's Cathedral. It was a great programme for the first year and the distinguished speakers were entirely on top of their subjects.

The events of 1946 included: lecture by Dr. Joseph Raftery of the National Museum; visit to St. John's Priory by Fr. Joseph Clohosey; visit to Graiguenamanagh, speaker John O'Leary; visit to Celtic Crosses of South Kilkenny, speaker Mlle. Francoise Henri; visit to Foulksrath,

Rathbeagh and Nore Valley, speaker John Gibb; visit to Gowran and Paulstown Castle, speakers Rev. J. Bentley, E. Dobbs and Hubert Butler; visits to Three Castles and Caves of Dunmore, speakers Tom Lyng and Willie Monks; visit to Kilfane, speakers John Prim and Hubert Butler; visit to Maddoxtown Marble Works, speaker Mrs. Clare Murphy, Millmount; and lectures by Canon Bentley and Willie Monks.

It is not the intention of the writer to list all the visits of the Society during the following years and this 1946 item is to show the quality of the sites visited and the distinguished historians who described them. All events were very well attended and greatly enjoyed.

The following were the officers for the years 1946/1947:- Chairman 1946: Dr. W.J. Phelan, Chairman 1947: John O'Leary, Hon. Treasurer: J.F. Enright, Hon. Secretaries: Hubert Butler and Willie Monks, Committee: Adrian Bligh, Sylvester Bourke, Peter Brennan, Rev. J. Clohosey, W.E. Dobbs, K.G. Drea, C.E. Faulkner, J.S. Gibb, Mrs. C.J. Kenealy, Miss May Sparks, Mrs. J.C. Murphy, Mrs. W.J. Phelan, W.J. Pilsworth, Mrs. N. Stopford, Dr. R.A. Walsh.

So the years went on, interspersed with visits from learned societies – Kildare under Gen. de Burgh, Dundalk under Charles Temple, Wexford under Dr. Hadden, Cork under Professor O'Kelly, Belfast Field Club under Richard Hayward etc.

In 1949 the old Kilkenny Archaeological Society, born 1849, and now the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland (R.S.A.I.) came to spend part of its anniversary celebration in Kilkenny, home of its birth. There was a Mayoral reception in the Vocational School, a lecture from its President, District Justice Liam Price on 4,000 years of Irish History, and John O'Leary, our President, greeted the group in Graiguenamanagh. In Kilkenny a reception was held in the Castle by our newly founded Society. At that time the Castle was without a roof and had no water or light. A large welcoming throng came to celebrate the occasion. For the tea water had to be brought in in churns and boiled on primus stoves. It was a wonderfully warm summer day and enjoyed by all.

In 1949 the distinguished scholar, photographer and

friend of Hubert Butler, O.G.S. Crawford, did a photographic survey of Kilkenny antiquities, an invaluable addition to our history of the time. The bound survey is in Rothe House and available for reference by all enquirers.

In February 1952 an exhibition was held in the Tholsel, after its restoration. This was organised by Hubert Butler with the National Museum who sent Miss Ellen Prendergast to help us to set this up. She was most helpful and instructive and her input was much appreciated. The exhibition was a great success.

In 1952 also, a limestone seat was set up near Mullinahone to commemorate Charles J. Kickham, the Fenian and the author of many novels and songs. The seat, with its inscription, is still under Kickham's tree.

In December 1952, Mr. Hubert Butler resigned from the Society. As well as being our instigator he had been Joint Hon. Secretary for the whole seven years of its existence and had also edited the first number of the *Old Kilkenny Review*. He had been a moving spirit through the years and his resignation was greatly regretted. John Gibb and Eoin O'Kelly then became Joint Hon. Secretaries.

All through the sixties the personnel of the committee was but little changed. John O'Leary remained President. During this time much thought was given to the acquisition of Rothe House. Members called to see Mr. Tim O'Hanrahan in Tennypark, but the property was then in the possession of his son, who did not want to sell, and the Society had no money anyway. Our subscription still stayed at 5/- per annum and with careful husbanding we had £150 in the bank. No mean achievement.

In the meantime we honoured our historian, William Canon Carrigan, by putting a plaque on Ruthstown House where he was born. Tom Lyng and May Sparks spoke and Rev. Fr. Clohosey chaired the occasion.

In 1960 we marked the centenary of the Canon's birth at the school house in Ballyfoyle. His nephew, Fr. Nicholas Carrigan P.P. spoke at the gathering and many friends from the area attended. Tom Hoyne, our member from Ballyfoyle was instrumental in organising these two functions.

Unexpectedly in 1961, Timothy O'Hanrahan decided to

sell Rothe House. Charlie McCreery the auctioneer informed us and we decided to try to buy it. Again, we had a public meeting in the V.E.C. and decided to raise the necessary funds by public appeal and by whatever means we could think of. The purchase price was £4,500 and the sitting tenant, James Brennan, would pay half. The bank accommodated us; James Ashe was Manager. Twenty merchants of the town agreed to guarantee us for £100 each and we bought the house. Mr. E.W. Hughes of Graiguenamanagh was our solicitor. We got the £2,500 rapidly, relieved the good merchants of their obligation and since then have rarely been in debt.

The sixties saw the deaths of many dedicated members. In 1960 Mrs. Healy died; in 1961 John O'Leary; in 1963 Dr. W.J. Phelan; in 1966 Jim Keogh and John Finn; in 1968 May Sparks; in 1969 Rev. T.J. Clohosey, and in 1972 Dick deLoughrey. Everyone of them had been committee members of great dedication and their loss was incalculable. Dr. Phelan had been Chairman from the beginning until 1960. Jim Keogh, who would never accept office, was a background worker, enlisting members all over the world, storing our greeting cards and reviews, and helping our image in any possible way. He was hard working and beloved by all. John Finn of John St. was committed to all our ideals and kept a stock of the *Old Kilkenny Review* for sale in his place of business. A great historian of Kilkenny, he gave us much material of the Kilkenny Theatre (1802-19) and many programmes – an inestimable gift and much valued. John was a founder member and gave us great help and support from the very beginning. Rev. T.J. Clohosey died suddenly in 1969 in Mooncoin where he was P.P. A long time Editor and then President, his death was a great blow to the Society and a great grief also.

By 1966 we were in Rothe House. It had been opened on April 16th on a biting cold spring day by Donough McDonagh, whose father Thomas, had been Hon. Secretary of the Gaelic League in these premises in 1904. A large crowd assembled and many important persons were present. Dr. Tim O'Driscoll of Bord Failte, Percy Le Clerc, the architect, the Mayor of Kilkenny Alderman M.J. McGuinness, Padraic

Colum, as well as the officers and council members of the Society.

The K.A.S. officers then were: President Rev. T.J. Clohosey, Chairman Margaret M. Phelan, Vice-Chairman Mrs. N. Stopford, Hon. Secretary Maureen Hegarty, Hon. Treasurer Leo McAdams, Hon. Editor Tom Lyng, Hon. Curator Mrs. Lanigan, Librarian Mrs. C.J. Kenealy, Asst. Editor Kathleen Dunne and P.R.O. Mrs. R. de Loughrey.

There was a large welcoming tea party and a cocktail party to welcome the visitors in Rothe House. The hospitality was arranged by Sean J. White, the Archaeological Officer with Bord Failte. Bord Failte had been our friend and supporter right from the beginning.

The restoration of the first house in Rothe House took four years to finish, from 1962 to 1966, and was undertaken, to the great joy of Kilkenny Archaeological Society, by the Office of Public Works, under Percy Le Clerc, Inspector of National Monuments, and his Clerk of Works, Louis Feeley. Le Clerc was an architect of genius and very interested in the restoration of Rothe House, commending the Society's courage and enterprise in undertaking it. Louis Feeley became our friend and member and has remained so ever since.

The largest part of the restoration was the wooden ceiling on the top floor, all of oak and assembled with dowels, not nails. This took two years, and one of the workers on it was Justin Ruth. He thought he was perhaps one of the family of Rothe but it is difficult to establish the link.

After April 1966 and after the parties were over and the guests and important people had gone, we had to staff the house and display its antiquities and entertain the public by exhibitions and lectures. We agreed to an entrance fee of 1/- and to open three afternoons a week as well as Sunday. This was the pattern up to 1970 and did well. These were the years of the Beer Festival and crowds were present on many occasions.

After 1970 and decimalisation, things changed. The money was no longer sufficient and we began to open longer in the summer time – all day, except Sunday.

In 1980 James Brennan, our tenant and co-owner,

decided to go out of business and to sell out his part to us. We became sole owners of the entire buildings. James Brennan had been a great supporter and friend from the beginning.

The second house of the complex had come under our control and we now had a reception area on street level. Up to then the entrance was on the second floor, straight into the Phelan Room. From 1980 to 1987, we raised funds for this renovation, the architect was Colm O’Cochlain of Kilkenny, and opened it in 1987, Mark McNulty, Bord Failte officiating. The second house gave us much room for office and storage, tea room accommodation and room for the first costume display. Immediately it was finished we started to turn our minds to renovation of the third house, floating the inaugural function at the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, courtesy of our benefactor John Kerry Keane of the *Kilkenny People*.

The third house was much more ruinous than the second house, now restored. No one had lived in it in living memory and it was roofless and windowless. Nevertheless, we started on its restoration in 1987, again our architect was Colm O’Cochlain, but had to stop for lack of funds and directions. After some years, much work and discussion, we got a European Union (E.U.) grant for half the money estimated, obtained for us by the good offices of Bord Failte through our Treasurer, Michael O’Hanrahan.

Much has been raised and much has still to be raised. The fund-raisers meet every month to lay their plans. Frank Murphy is Hon. Treasurer of this group, a man of infinite patience and value. The civic authorities and the merchants help enormously. God willing, the debt will be erased.

At the moment (July 1994) the third house is nearing complete restoration and in a few short weeks will be ours to do with what we will. Hopefully, we will make it a great benefit to Kilkenny and a pleasure to all our visitors who come from near and far.

It is thirty-three years since the premises were bought, thirty-two since we started the restoration of the first house, fourteen since we started on the second and seven years since we started the last or third house. Let us hope our efforts will bring added fame and honour to Kilkenny.

Distinguished Visitors

Many were our distinguished visitors through the fifty years of the Society's existence, and especially from the opening of Rothe House in 1966. That year President Eamon deValera came, followed by President Ernest Childers and his wife, Rita; later President Paddy Hillary, and in 1991, to mark twenty-five years of being open, our beloved first Citizen, President Mrs. Mary Robinson. She opened the extension to our costume area. In that year too, we won a Gulbenkian Award.

Only one Taoiseach paid us an official visit and that was Charlie Haughey in November 1980. Always much interested in the arts, his visit gave us great pleasure and stimulation.

Two great artists honoured us with their presence – Michéal MacLiammoir in 1968 and Seamus Heaney in 1975. Seamus launched his book of poems *North* in the second courtyard of the house, on a lovely sunny evening. Michéal's piece was 'I must be talking to my friends'. At the end of his talk we felt included in those friends.

In 1970, a very delightful group of visitors came to visit Kilkenny, from the town of Meaux, about 30 miles east of Paris. They came to honour St. Fiacre, the hermit saint of Kilkenny, who went to live in their area about the year 670. The group consisted of the Bishop, the Dean, the Mayor and many other religious and civic dignitaries. They numbered twenty-five in all and were the guests of Most Rev. Peter Birch, Bishop of Ossory and stayed in the hostel 'Peace in Christ'.

The occasion was a very happy one for the Society and each member tried to do his or her utmost to entertain the guests, so they saw all the antiquities, as well as the seaside at Dunmore East and Tramore, Mount Juliet, the shrines of St. Fiacre at Kilfera and Ullard and had a special day in Dublin at Arus an Uachtarain, as guests of the President, Eamon deValera. The last function was at the shrine at Kilfera where mass was said in Irish, French and Latin.

The well of St. Fiacre and his bed were shown to the visitors and the simple shrine was greatly valued by them. This time was a special occasion but all through the 1,300

years since he left us, prayers have been said at this quiet spot by the river Nore. The feast is celebrated on the last Sunday in August. A novena of rosaries precedes the day itself when mass is celebrated.

In 1970, a special bus left The Parade for the ceremonies. Luckily it was a glorious August day, the sunshine, lemonade and cakes were enjoyed as well as Irish dancing on special floors constructed for the occasion. As President deValera said, it was the first time in 1,300 years that a group from the continent of Europe had come to Ireland to honour one of its emigrants. The week's programme was splendidly organised by the Hon. Secretary, Maureen Hegarty and greatly appreciated by all the participants.

Conclusion

The success of the Society has not been merely the acquisition and restoration of Rothe House but in the interest we have created in Kilkenny's past, throughout the county, (local history societies have emerged in Callan, Tullaherin, Castlecomer and Graiguenamanagh) and in the children whom we have encouraged through the youth projects. Interest in the past is a great joy to those involved in it. We hope it will continue forever.

Acknowledgement

These notes could not have been written without the secretarial skills of Ann Cantwell and her patience in typing and retyping. The writer owes her infinite thanks.

[A concluding section dealing with the personnel of the Society during its first 50 years will appear in next year's Journal – Editor]