History

Castle Dargan: ‘I liked the place for its romance’
- W.B. Yeats

Patrick E. O'Brien:
“Beautifully situated, having delightful views of the surrounding scenery and the mansion house being suitable for the residence of a gentleman of the highest respectability”.

Such was the description of Castle Dargan prior to public auction in 1875, lands that has been residence to many during five millenia. Extensive archaeological remains bear witness to a continuity; stone age burial sites on the heights of Sliabh Daeane to the north, a possible henge ritual site, bronze age cooking and washing sites, an until recently unknown souterrain - the underground refuge and foodstore of early medieval farmers, and ring forts beside the 5th fairway and on the high ground above the 18th hole. The old castle area, a complex of habitation from the 15 to 18 centuries and built on an earlier cashel or stone-built ring fort, has not yet been interpreted satisfactorily.

By the early 14 century, the MacDonaghs ruled the barony of Tirerrill, that eastern half of Sligo that stretches from the southern shores of Lough Arrow to Castle Dargan. In a dispute of 1422 over the strategic construction of a castle by Conor MacDonagh of Collooney - Castle Dargan was subject to Collooney - the castle was captured by an army of O’Neill and O’Donnell forces, allies of the Castledargan MacDonaghs; which having ‘partaken’ of overnight hospitality in Castle Dargan, returned north the following day. On a return visit in 1516 another O’Donnell raided Sligo taking several castles, among them and took hostages.

Following the submission of O’Conor Sligo to Queen Elizabeth in 1585, the MacDonaghs found themselves paying fees to the Crown and liable to fines or confiscation. The Collooney family became one of the leading Gaelic families representing Sligo in the early 1600s, a period which ended with the death in rebellion of its leader Brian Óg MacDonagh in 1643.

In the aftermath of the subsequent Cromwellian Wars, the MacDonaghs withdrew into modest circumstances or returned to a tradition of military service in continental armies. Castle Dargan lands were split between three owners, Coote, Crofton and the Strafford & Radcliffe estate which later sold its interest to the Burton family, ancestors of the Cunninghams of Slane. The new ownership provided the opportunity in 1687 for the arrival in Castle Dargan of
Stephen Ormsby, great-grandson of an Elizabethan soldier, Thomas Ormsby of Lincolnshire, who had married well in Mayo. The Castle Dargan Ormsbys leased rather than owned land for several generations. William, Stephen’s grandson, married well during the 1740s, his wife bringing the 408 acres of nearby Knockmullen as a dowry. Having renewed the lease of Drumnamackin ‘called commonly the name of Castle Dargan’ in 1749 he was recorded as paying a chief rent of £3 for it in 1775; during those intervening years Castle Dargan had obviously come into full Ormsby ownership. Subsequently, he took out a lease on three townlands for 400 years in 1781.

Reflecting these improved circumstances, William built the original Castle Dargan House in the second half of the eighteenth century. He also developed the demesne, its farmlands and, probably, the walled and ornamental gardens in the castle area. He died in 1784 ‘deservedly lamented’ and was succeeded in turn by each of his sons, Nicholson and Thomas, both of whom died unmarried, and William who was in turn succeeded by his son, John.

John, the most public person of the Castle Dargan Ormsbys was elected a Burgess of Sligo Borough in 1824, appointed Provost in 1829 and 1839, High Sheriff of the county in 1834 and was regularly a Grand Juror of the Assizes. He was a founder member of and contributed to the first Famine Relief Committee of 1846 and served over many years as a Resident Magistrate. He died in 1870 and was succeeded by his son, Nicholson, who survived him by one year only and by his grandson, John Robert, the last Ormsby of Castle Dargan House.

In John Robert’s time, the young W.B. Yeats visited Castle Dargan House ‘where lived a brawling squireen’, married to one of his Middleton cousins; Mary Middleton was married to John Robert. It was, as he said, “the last household where I could have found the reckless Ireland of a hundred years ago in final degradation. But I liked the place for the romance of its two castles facing one another across a little lake, Castle Dargan and Castle Furey”; the Ormsbys were well-known for their country pursuits.

They had historically taken a dramatic place in Irish folklore when it is recorded that a group of Elizabethan adventurers, arriving by boat on a western shore, were promised a grant of land to the first to set foot on land. Ormsby, a veteran of the continental wars cast his cork-leg ahead of him, wading ashore at his leisure.

Cock-fighting in the Sligo of 1781 was noted in reporting the rivalry of Nicholson Ormsby and Philip Perceval of Templehouse, in which Ormsby lost the princely prize of two hundred guineas. Nicholson’s reputation was such that, Archdeacon O’Rorke, writing his otherwise sober in 1889,
made an exception in the case of Nicholson Ormsby, recounting tales of his practical jokes, for which he had some notoriety.

Over many years the Ormsbys had participated in Sligo horse-racing, its gentlemen and young ladies remarked upon among the attendance of the ‘beauty and fashion of the County’ at such gatherings, their racing successes beginning at the first festival of racing at Bowmore in Rosses Point in September 1781. This love of horses continued with the hunt and the hosting of several times a season. Ormsby hospitality was once remarked upon when, following ‘as good a run on so fine a day as any could wish for’, the hunting party ‘came to lunch at Castle Dargan House, where the usual hospitality of the owner was taken every advantage of’.

Inevitably, stories of Castle Dargan and Ormsby exploits made their way into Yeats’s works. Reflecting the folklore of spectral dancers in well-lit ruins; the royal attendant of, more than half a century later, sang -

O, but I saw a solemn sight;
Said the rambling, shambling travelling-man;
Castle Dargan’s ruin all lit,
Lovely ladies dancing in it.

High over Castle Dargan on Sliabh Daeane - the mountain of the two birds - is the passage tomb of Its name recalls the legend of The Old Woman of Beara - Bird Mountain Clooth-na-Bare The Hosting of the Sidhe

The host is riding from Knocknarea
And over the grave of Clooth-na-bare;
Caoilte tossing his burning hair,
And Niamh calling Away, come away ...

An event, not recalled in genealogies, in which an Ormsby daughter is said to have eloped with a groom, married and happily raised a family in nearby Coolaney, is reputedly evoked in; an event which may be reflected when the old man tells his son;

My mother that was your grand-dam owns it, This scenery and this countryside kennel and stables, horse and hound –She had a horse at the Curragh, and there met my father, a groom in a training stable, looked at him and married him.Her mother never spoke to her again,

By March 1875 a series of financial reversals finally forced the sale by the Landed Estates Court of the various Ormsby interests in almost 2000 acres. Castle Dargan was bought for £12,000 by William Middleton, Mary Ormsby’s father, with a five year £10,000 loan from Andrew Hosie, a successful miller of Dromahair.
William Middleton died in 1882, the loan unpaid and John Robert Ormsby having departed unexpectedly and alone for the United States. The 959 acres of Castle Dargan were auctioned in September 1883, Andrew Hosie being the sole bidder and Mary Ormsby and her family of seven children retired to Elsinore, a Middleton property in Rosses Point. A daughter, Amy Frances Vernon, subsequently achieved fame as a County Sligo lady golfer winning Irish and South African Ladies’ Championships; Larry (Arthur) Vernon, her husband, won the inaugural West of Ireland Championship at County Sligo Golf Club in 1923.

Andrew Hosie died in 1888, having already vested Castle Dargan in his nephew, John, in December 1883. Following extensive repairs to the house in 1884, the current hall-door entrance and bay-windows were added in 1895. The demesne was farmed by John’s son, James, and grandson, John, until the death of John C. Hosie in November 1997. With the sale of the mountain lands in 1894 to the Coopers of Markree Castle, and of several smaller sections in the intervening years, the remaining 145 acres of Castle Dargan demesne and the nineteen acres of Carrigeenboy near the gate-lodge were sold in 1998 by Mrs Kathleen Hosie to Dermot Fallon of Ballinacarrow, Co. Sligo.

With that, the continuous occupation of by three families over almost six centuries was finally drawn to a close.