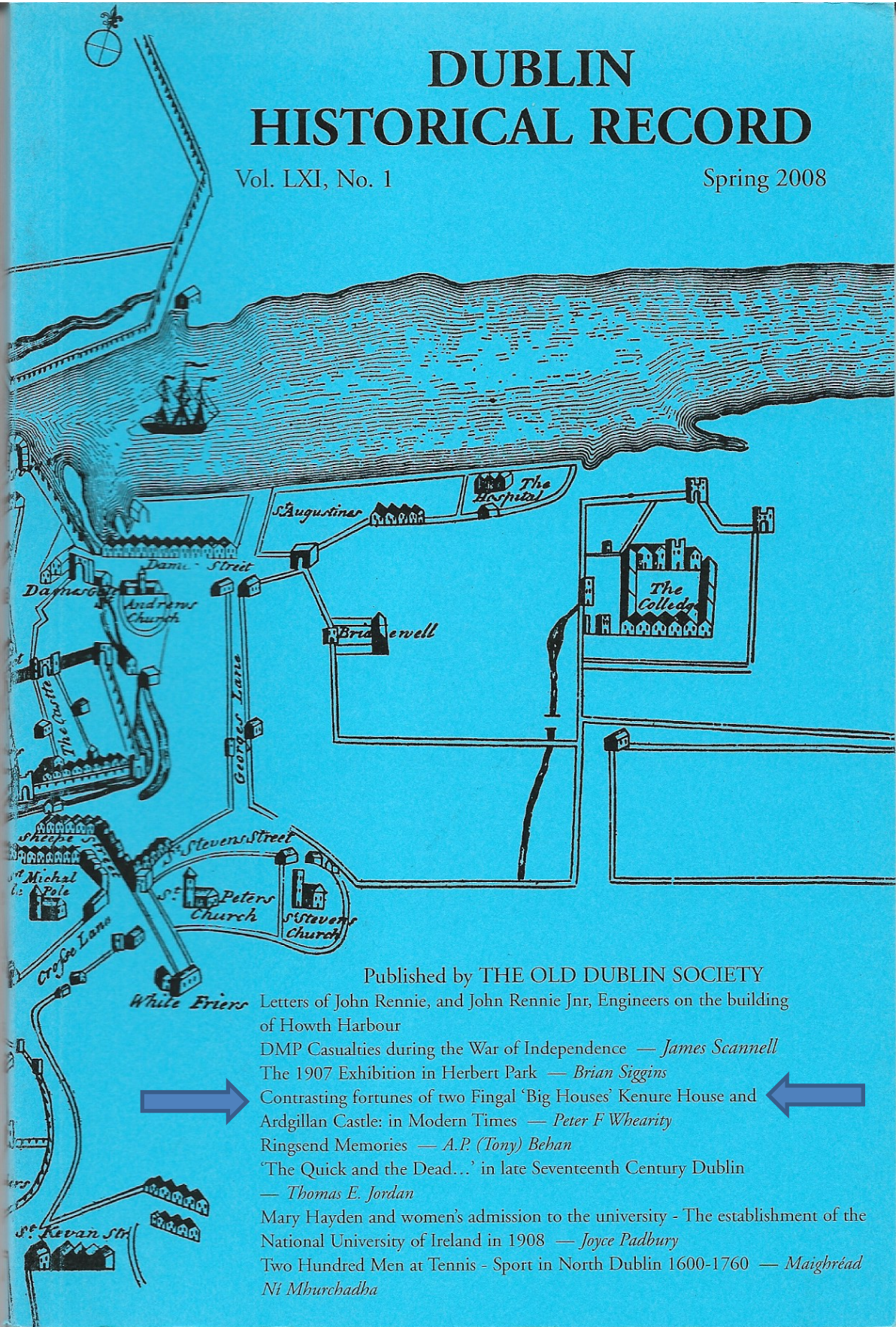


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Letters of John Rennie, and John Rennie Jnr, Engineers on the building of Howth Harbour

DMP Casualties during the War of Independence — *James Scannell*

The 1907 Exhibition in Herbert Park — *Brian Siggins*

Contrasting fortunes of two Fingal 'Big Houses' Kenure House and Ardgillan Castle: in Modern Times — *Peter F Whearity*

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Contrasting fortunes of two Fingal 'Big Houses' in modern times:

Kenure House and Ardgillan Castle

By Peter F Whearity

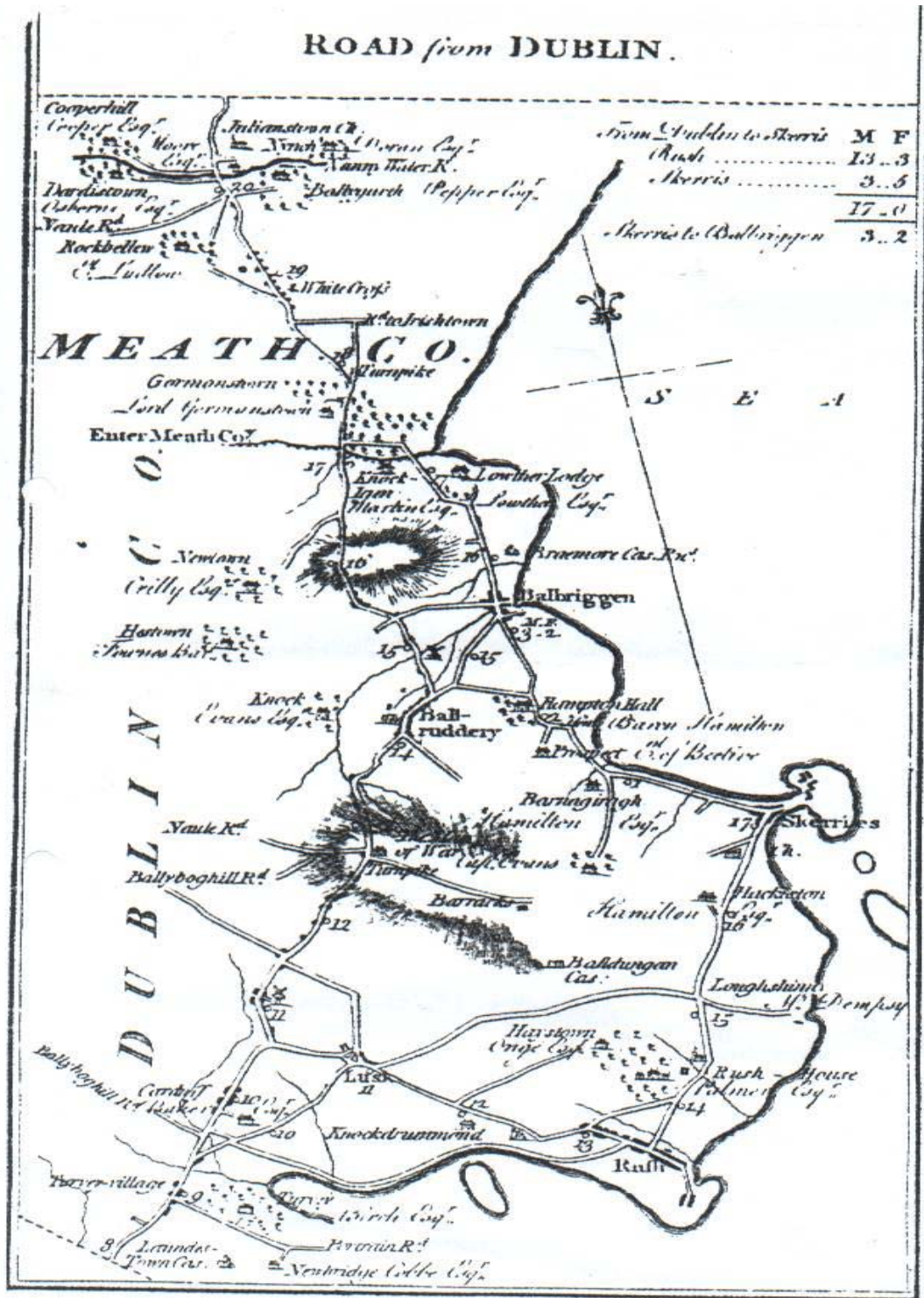
Introduction

The aim of this study is to examine the background of the houses named above with a view to answering some questions as to why one survived while the other perished. The work will be set in three parts, the first part will deal with the history of big houses of Ireland in general and the diverse factors which influenced their history. The second part will focus on the two houses' which concern this study and give a synopsis of their individual history. The third part will seek to take an overview of the determining factors which led to the positions as pertains today.

Questions asked might include whether the geographical situations had any bearing on the outcome on whether either house was saved or lost? Did political influence play a part? Were local or other protestations listened to by the powers that be? What part if any did the timing of events as they unfolded play a part with particular reference to changing opinions as regards their historical significance as a part of Ireland's heritage? Sources expected to prove useful will be:

- Newspaper reports and periodicals
- Material from the Irish Architectural Archive
- Material from local historical society's
- Maps and photographs
- Dáil Eireann debates
- Printed and published material
- World wide web

Map.1 Taylor and Skinner's Map 1778, north county Dublin (Fingal)



Kenure Demesne lies between the coastal towns of Loughshinny and Rush, while Ardgillan Castle is situated midway between the towns of Balbriggan and Skerries.

Part.1

Historical background

The golden age of big houses occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century when the scale and grandeur of these houses and gardens was unprecedented. The mid eighteenth century onwards saw an upsurge in spending on remodelling homes and gardens and the homes were filled with valuables brought back from Europe. By the late 1870s, a decline began which affected not only houses but estates as well. The 1880s saw a decline of the landlord class at the same time as the land league agitation and the lowering of rents by government left them strapped for cash. The Settled Land Act 1882, opened the door for landlords to sell moveable valuables much of which went to America. The 1880s saw the level of indebtedness increase due partly to the landed classes lavish spending on an unsustainable level. The Wyndham Act 1903 brought relief and allowed landlords to sell land to tenants at favourable rates and receive a bonus on top. Many estates became unencumbered and had money to invest abroad. The First World War affected the landed classes physiologically as did the revolutionary period with the burning of over 300 houses by the IRA in the twenty-six counties while leaving the northern counties unaffected. The Free State government did nothing to alleviate these difficulties and state agencies like the land commission regularly left houses to fall into ruin. The Wall Street crash in 1929-30, hit the Irish landlords hard and many investments were wiped out over night. By the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, costs like rates, increased taxation, and succession duties made it difficult to continue and many landlords left the country. The period 1920s -1980s, saw many houses cease to exist except for those bought by Government, Institutions or private investors. Many were structurally impaired by unsympathetic building making them fit for their new use but destroying their innate qualities in the process.

Few remained in possession of original owners and fewer still remained with house contents intact. The 1980s saw a discernable change in attitude and new-enlightened fiscal policies helped to turn the tide of neglect of such houses as remained. Organisations like the Irish Georgian Society, An Taisce, the Heritage Council, and Government Heritage Service along with various county councils all tried to do something positive in preserving big houses.¹

The question could be asked as to what determines whether a building can be called a 'big' house? Is it that which Elizabeth Bowen wrote in her work 'The big house'?

Is it height---in this country of otherwise low buildings---that got these Anglo-Irish houses their 'big' name? Or have they been called 'big' with a slight inflection---that of hostility, irony? One may call a man 'big' with just that inflection because he seems to think the hell of himself.

Elizabeth Bowen, 'the big house' in Hermione Lee (ed.), *The Mulberry tree; writings of Elizabeth Bowen* (London, 1986).²

Terence Dooley in his 2001 work, *the decline of the big house in Ireland*, suggests that such a house should have a minimum of 500 acres attached with a portion rented to tenants in order to justify the term 'big house'. The term 'big house' did not find favour with those who owned them who preferred the term 'country house'.³ An indication of landlord-tenant relations can be gauged from the following quote:

In Ireland the proprietor was an alien, with the fortunes of the resident upon his estates, and at his mercy. He was divided from them in creed and language; he despised them as an inferior race, and he acknowledged no interest in common with them. J.A. Froude (1818-94).⁴

¹ Terence Dooley, 'Report on country houses 2003'; St. Kieran's College library, Kilkenny, pp 4, 5, 11.

² Elizabeth Bowen, 'the Big House', in Hermion Lee (ed.), *The Mulberry Tree: writings of Elizabeth Bowen* (London, 1986), pp 25-29.

³ Terence Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland, a study of Irish landed families 1860-1960* (Dublin, 2001), p. 9.

⁴ Peter Somerville-Large, *the Irish country house, a social history* (London, 1995), p. 102.

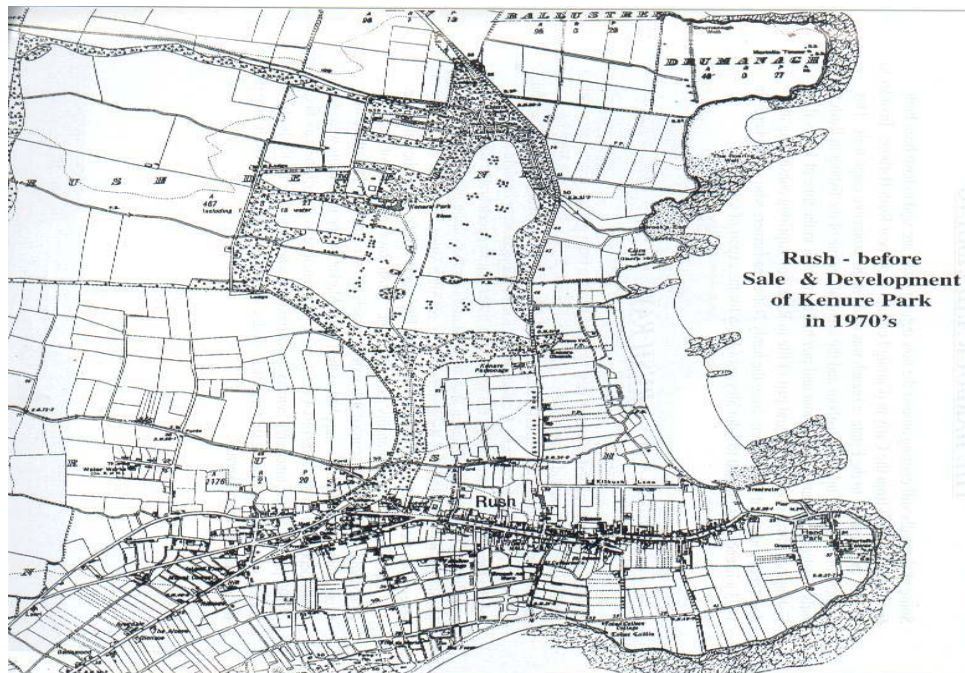
Unlike in Britain, ‘big houses in Ireland were not popularised as symbols of a common national history shared by all classes’.⁵ Landlords sometimes abused their power over tenants and the following examples show this: during the 1841 Local Elections in Fingal, W.H. Palmer of Kenure Rush, asked his tenants to vote for a Conservative candidate but warned them to expect no favours in the future if they did not comply with his request. Another landlord, George Woods, an estate owner at Milverton, Skerries, went further when he ordered that eighteen of his tenants be locked in his steward’s house to prevent them voting against his preferred candidate during the same election. However, it backfired on him when other tenants on being marched to the polling station at Balrothery voted Liberal in protest.⁶ The Ballot Act of 1872 tightened up the voting procedures allowing tenants privacy to vote thereby making it difficult for landlords to know which way a tenant voted and thereby ending such practices in the future.

⁵ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland, a study of Irish landed families 1860-1960*, p. 10.

⁶ Patrick Murphy, ‘County Dublin Election 1841’: Paper no. 61, Skerries Historical Society, pp 1, 8, 12-13: See also, *Dublin Evening Mail*, 12 July 1841.

Part.2

Kenure House and estate

Plate.1 Kenure House (Office of Public Works photographic collection).⁷Estate Map.1 Rush, County Dublin (below), (Rush ICA group, *Rush by the Sea*).⁸

Kenure house was situated inside the circle of trees and faced the coast.

⁷ Office of public works photographic collection;
www.askaboutirelandfile://f:aaibighousesofireland.htm

⁸ Irish Country-women's association history group (I.C.A), Rush, county Dublin, *Rush by the sea* (Rush, 1996), p. 43.

A short background

Kenure Park and house was situated between the town of Rush and the village of Loughshinny in north County Dublin, an area long known as Fingal. The name Kenure was anglicized from *Ceann Iubhair*, ‘the headland of the yew trees’ or Kilnure, the ‘Church of the yew trees’.⁹ In 1837, Rush house was a spacious mansion known as Kenure Park, built c. 1700. It was the home of the Duke of Ormonde until passing to Sir Henry Echlin and subsequently purchased by Sir W.H. Palmer. The house was favoured with paintings by the first masters along with vases and relics of Pompeii, brought back from Italy by the late Mrs Palmer. The estate had fine views over the sea and beyond to Lambay Island.¹⁰ However, in 1855, the *Dublin Builder* described the house as ‘a common-place structure’ with small rooms. It does however; relate that some of the larger rooms were richly decorated by the same Italian craftsmen as those employed at Dublin castle.¹¹ Mark Bence-Jones gives the following comprehensive account in his 1988 work, *A guide to Irish country houses*:

Kenure Park, Rush, co. Dublin (Palmer, bt, of Castle Lactin, / pb 1911; Fenwick-Palmer, sub Fenwick, / lg 1965). A large mid 18-century, three-story house, grandly refaced 1842, to the design of George Papworth; mostly stucco, with Corinthian corner pilasters reminiscent of those of Nask’s London facades; but with a giant pedimented hexa-style Corinthian portico of stone, deep enough to serve as a portecochere. The entrance front of two bays on either side of this great portico; the adjoining guarded front of three bays on either side of a curved central bow, with a semi-circular colonnade in front of its lower story. The top story treated as an attic, above a modillion cornice; the roof parapet balustraded. The entrance hall, with its engaged Doric columns and walls covered in yellow scagliola, dated from the Papworth remodelling, as did the vast central stair case hall, which was top-lit through windows of Armorial stained glass in the cove of the ceiling. The staircase hall was also decorated in yellow scagliola, with Doric columns below and grey marble ionic pilasters above; there was an imperial staircase with elaborate and ornate metal scrolled balustrade. Some of the reception rooms were on the ground floor, others on the floor above; which extended into the bow of the garden front, had ceilings of magnificent mid 18-century rococo plasterwork in the manner of Robert West. The rooms on the first floor included a long gallery. The dining room, next to the drawing room, had a cornice of Victorian plasterwork. The small library had

⁹ Ask about Ireland: www.askaboutirelandfile://f:aaibighousesofireland.htm

¹⁰ Samuel Lewis, *Topographical dictionary of Ireland* vols.i-ii (London, 1837), p. 541.

¹¹ *Dublin Builder*, 31 Mar. 1855, p. 150.

mahogany bookcases. Sold 1964, by Col. R.G. Fenwick-Palmer; demolished but for the portico in 1978.

Mark Bence-Jones, *A guide to Irish country houses*.¹²

A ‘scientific survey’ of county Dublin, c.1764, by Dr. John Ruttly for the ‘Dublin Society’, produced a map, which makes reference to Rush House.¹³ Another survey c.1801, by Lieut. Joseph Archer, also for that society, says no gentlemen had seats in the neighbourhood of Skerries except Roger Palmer of Rush.¹⁴ In 1852, the demesne consisted of 247 acres with a net annual value of £355.5.00, for land and buildings along with that for the holdings of Thomas Carey (herd), bringing the total to £574.5.00.¹⁵ The Palmer family appeared to have had a good relationship with their Rush tenants and people of the area in general. An example of their generosity can be seen by a bequest of a sum of money for distribution among local girls about to be married, which became known as the ‘May money’.¹⁶ In 1823, Mrs Palmer gave generously to a fund to build a priests house adjacent to the Roman Catholic chapel at Rush.¹⁷ It appears however, that such largess did not extend to the tenants on their land in county Mayo. However, information contained in a historical paper by Skerries, County Dublin, local historian, George Pratt, suggests that land agents employed by the Palmer’s were notorious for their harsh treatment of tenants in the Crossmolina and Westport part of Ireland where the family held extensive acreage of land. It is alleged that in August 1852, thirty-seven notices of eviction were served on

¹² Mark Bence-Jones, *A guide to Irish country houses* (London, 1988, revised, ed.), pp 163, 164.

¹³ James Edward Gowan, ‘The Old Maps of the locality, no. 1’, paper no. 10, read to Skerries Historical Society 1949, p.1: ‘Local Scientific references’, paper no. 11, read to Skerries Historical Society 1949, p. 1.

¹⁴ James Edward Gowan, ‘Local Scientific references’, paper no. 11, read to Skerries Historical Society 1949, p. 1.

¹⁵ Richard Griffiths, *General valuation of rateable property in Ireland* (Dublin 1852).

¹⁶ A. M., Fraser, ‘Dowry for a Rush bride’, paper no. 78, read to Skerries Historical Society 1964, p. 12.

¹⁷ Samuel Lewis, *Topographical dictionary of Ireland* vols.i-ii (London, 1837), p. 541

tenants in Swinford, Ballina and Westport (see, *The Mayo Telegraph*, 5 September 1849 for example).¹⁸

Roger Palmer of Castle Lacken, county Mayo, was once described as ‘the most dangerous papist in Ireland’.¹⁹ The question must be asked whether the Palmer’s were any better or worse than other absentee landlords in Ireland at that time. The life of the absentee landlord centred around socialising, hunting, shooting and enjoying themselves. Overall the peasantry of Ireland was oppressed not by a living man, but by a system. They represented a class, which had neither community of interest with the people nor sympathy of race. They had no fear of provoking their resentment, for they lived beyond their reach. They had no desire for their welfare, for as individuals they were ignorant of their existence.²⁰

During the ‘revolutionary period’ 1916-1923, many big houses were burned (300) throughout the twenty-six counties by the Irish Republican Army, and although Coast-Guard stations were destroyed by fire along the east coast from Balbriggan to Portmarnock, neither of the estates under study here were harmed.

In 1964, the then owner of Kenure, Col. Rodger George Fenwick-Palmer, tired of fighting ever rising costs, along with dry rot, and rising damp, put the estate up for sale.²¹ Between May and September that year, auctioneers, James H. North, Dublin, sold the contents, the house, and associated land. The latter two were purchased by the Land Commission who distributed land to local farmers. Subsequently, the house and ninety-one acres passed to Dublin County Council who had plans to build 300 houses on the site. The house was described by the auctioneer as being in sound

¹⁸ George Pratt, ‘The story of Kenure House and the families who owned it from Norman times’, paper no. 204, read to Skerries Historical Society 1998, pp 31-33:

¹⁹ *Irish Times*, 7 Sept. 1976.

²⁰ Froude, A. James, *The English in Ireland in the eighteenth century*, 3 vols. ii (London, 1881), pp 21, 23.

²¹ www.askaboutireland.ie/show_narrative_page_by_place.do?page_id=1052 (retrieved on 9 July, 2006).

condition and only requiring decoration.²² The previous owner of the house Col. Fenwick-Palmer passed away in the latter part of 1964.

In 1965, an American film company used the house for the production of motion films such as ‘Ten Little Indians’, ‘The Face of Dr. Fu-Manchu’, ‘Rocket to the Moon’ and ‘Give us free’.²³ A fee of £5,000 was paid for the privilege of using the building and the council appeared to give an undertaking to spend the money on preserving the house.²⁴ After heavy rain in spring 1966, problems with flooding occurred on the newly acquired land and a Dáil debate discussed the issue. However, it was concluded that the land commission no longer had any responsibility in the matter, which in any event the flooding was believed to have been caused when trees and shrubs were cut down indiscriminately by the new owners.²⁵ In 1967, when asked about future housing needs in the area, John Boland T.D. replied that a draft plan for ninety houses was presently being drawn up.²⁶ By 1978, it appears that the long drawn out process of making a decision on what to do with Kenure house had been finally made and on the third week in September, after two days work the building was demolished, except for the portico, which had been reprieved. The last minute decision to retain the portico came about through a combination of local protest and the intervention of the chairman of An Taisce (Fingal), Brendan Scally. His proposal to build a park and garden using the portico as a focal point found favour with many people and the council agreed to have the work done at a later date.²⁷ (See sketch.1).

²² *Irish Independent*, 23 May 1964.

²³ A. M., Fraser, ‘Dowry for a Rush bride’, pp 15-16.

²⁴ Irish Architectural Archive; ref; RW. D. 149.

²⁵ <http://216.239.59.104/search?q=cache:giitpRbblOEJ:historical-debates.oireachtas.ie/...> (retrieved on 12 July 2006).

²⁶ <http://www.oireachtas.debates.gov.ie/d/0228/d.0228.196704250017.htmlx> (as retrieved on 12 July 2006).

²⁷ *Irish Times*, 29 Sept. 1978.

Sketch.1: proposed park around portico.²⁸



The above shows a planned garden as proposed by An Taisce (Fingal) chairman Brendan Scally who appears to have accepted that the house had no future for reasons mainly to do with finance but favoured keeping the portico as a focal point within a garden development by the Council. He suggested that because the Corinthian design portico was built separately from the house by George Papworth c.1842. It is an independent piece of architecture, which will stand on its own merits.²⁹ A photograph showing the portico standing alone in its magnificence is carried in *The Irish Times* 22 September 1978. Other examples of fine porticos were at Dromdihy, county Cork

²⁸ *Irish Times*, 30 Sept. 1978.

²⁹ *Irish Times*, 11 Jan. 1977.

and Farmleigh, Dublin.³⁰ Not everyone had good things to say about it, however, and Michael O'Connell M.A. thought that the fine Georgian house was marred by the great pillars and pediment which he believed were out of proportion with the rest of the building and out of keeping with its style.³¹ The space under the portico could be utilised for a bandstand if an imaginative approach was taken said Brendan Scally. The portico had been saved once before as it came to Kenure House after being rescued from another house which was subsequently demolished.³²

Of the very agreeable plans for the area around the portico the question is raised as to how much of the content of the proposed park actually became a reality after the dust of the demolition had settled? The answer can be found from a perusal of plate 2. It appears that the ambitious plans were never brought to fruition and the portico now stands rather forlornly in a field of grass with nothing to leaven the gaunt and somewhat bleak aspect of the tall structure of the portico.

Plate.2 The portico³³



³⁰ Irish Architectural Archive; photographic exhibition 11 July 2006.

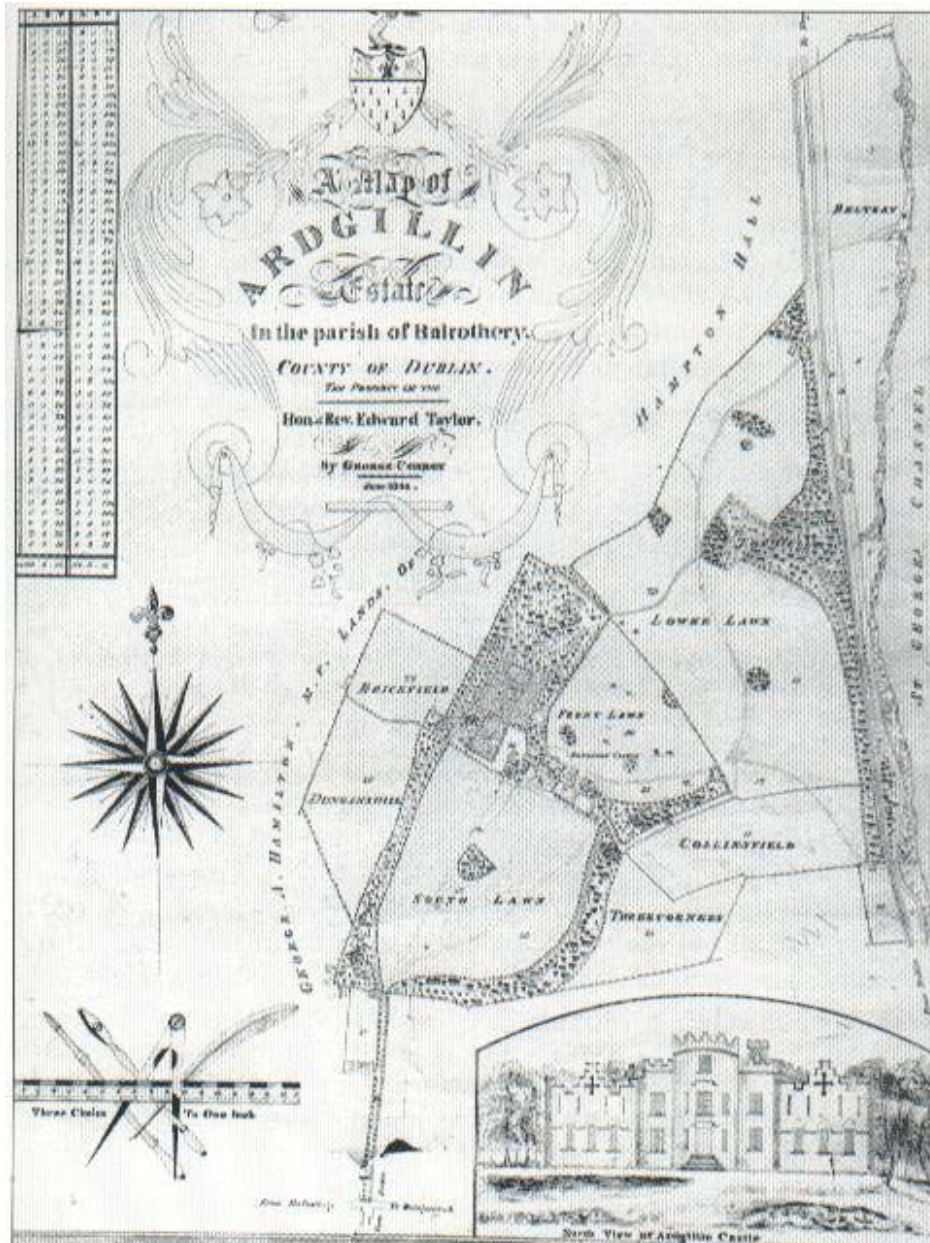
³¹ Michael O'Connell, *Fingal, story and guide* (Dublin, 1950s?), p. 27.

³² *Irish Times*, 29 Sept. 1978.

³³ Photograph taken by author on 16 January 2007.

Ardgillan Castle and estate

Estate Map.2 (1844, by George Conroy).³⁴



The map above shows Ardgillan as it was in 1844, showing areas known as Brickfield, Dunganshill, South lawn, Front lawn, Lower lawn, Collinsfield, and Threecorners. Interestingly, Conroy shows the sea lapping the coastline as St. George's Channel, and not the Irish Sea as is known today.

³⁴ National Archives of Ireland; Taylor Papers, M7069. See also, Ardgillan Heritage Project (eds, Rory Keane, Anne Hughes, and Ronan Swan), *Ardgillan Castle and the Taylor family* (Fingal, 1995), p. 19.

A short history

Ardgillan demesne is situated on the coast between Balbriggan and Skerries, Fingal (see Map.1). It takes its name from *Árd Choill*, meaning ‘high wood’.³⁵ Mark Bence-Jones, in his aforementioned guide gives an account of the castle thus:

Ardgillan Castle, Balbriggan, co. Dublin (Taylor, sub headfort, m/pb). An 18-century house consisting of a two-storied, bow-fronted centre with a single-story overlapping wings, mildly castellated either towards the end of the 18-century or early in the 19-century. The central bow has been made into a round tower by raising a story and giving it a skyline of Irish battlements; the main roof parapet has been crenulated and the windows given hood mouldings. Over each of the wings was thrown, literally speaking, a gothic cloak of battlements and pointed arches; below which the original façade, with its quoins and rectangular sash windows, shown in all its classical nakedness. Battlemented ranges and an octagon tower were added on the other side of the house.

Mark Bence-Jones, *A guide to Irish country houses*.³⁶

During the period 1726, Robert Taylor, Dean of Clonfert, acquired land in the area now known as Ardgillan where, in 1738, he built ‘Prospect house’. It subsequently fell to his brother Thomas (second Baronet of Headfort) then in 1757, to his son Thomas (first Earl of Bective). The house, a simple two story over basement design was described by the English antiquary Austin Cooper in 1783, as ‘a country seat of Lord Bective’s’.³⁷ Early in the 1800s, a branch of the Taylor family took up residence and by c.1815, it was known as Ardgillan Castle. At around that time it was remodelled with castellations and battlements added in the style of a sham castle. The land holding of the Taylor family was substantial and by 1876 consisted of 805 acres in north county Dublin, 456 acres in county Louth and 7,135 acres in county Meath.³⁸

When the great northern railway was being built in 1842-44, it ran through the

³⁵ <http://www.google.co.uk/search?hl=en&g=ardgillen&meta=> (retrieved on 4 July 2006).

³⁶ Mark Bence-Jones, *A guide to Irish country houses*, p. 9.

³⁷ Ardgillan Heritage Project (eds., Rory Keane, Anne Hughes, and Ronan Swan), *Ardgillan Castle and the Taylor family* (Fingal, 1995), pp 1-6.

³⁸ Ardgillan Heritage Project (eds., Rory Keane, Anne Hughes, and Ronan Swan), *Ardgillan Castle and the Taylor family*, pp 15-20.

Taylor's land but a facility was provided for them in the guise of a platform to alight the trains as well as a pedestrian over bridge to allow access to the beach. The over bridge became known as the 'lady's stairs', local legend has it that on occasion the figure of a lady could be seen there in the dark of night.

Figure.1 Parks of Dublin and County.³⁹



The castle was used not only as a family home but also as a place of entertainment for visiting guests who came to stay. One of the larger rooms in the house was on occasion used for putting on plays and was then referred to as the 'Theatre Loyal'. One such event took place on 10 January 1882, when the play 'King Alfred' was put

³⁹ Irish Architectural Archive; Fingal County Council Parks information leaflet; ref, RP.D.253.5.

on there at the Taylor family's expense.⁴⁰ Perhaps it can be seen as an indication that things were changing when in 1908, the Headfort branch of the family closed their house and went to Hampshire, England, to live for a time.⁴¹ Having got through the revolutionary period unscathed the then owner, Richard Taylor, was spending a significant amount of time in Singapore, where he went in the 1930s, to work as a barrister. At the outbreak of war in 1939, he returned home along with his wife and children to try and raise the productivity and thereby the financial viability of what was then a mixed dairy and arable farm at Ardgillan. However, the emergency years 1939-1945 were difficult for agriculture and little money could be made at farming then. The first indication of what was to come could be seen when in 1958, a valuable black Kilkenny marble mantelpiece original to the house was sold to Desmond Guinness, in return for a less valuable white marble mantelpiece and a sum of money. Further sales followed that same year when their prize-winning herd of pedigree Ayrshire cattle went under the hammer at auction. Then valuables from the house were sold by Town and Country Estates auctions in Dublin.

By 1962, auctioneers Jackson, Stops and McCabe, Dublin, handled the sale of the estate and afterwards the contents as well. The castle and demesne was purchased by a German industrialist, Heinrick Pott, who used it as a holiday home for himself and his family. It came to the market again in the early 1980s, and subsequently passed into the ownership of Dublin County Council on 9 June 1982. One of the main parties on the negotiating committee was John Boland T.D., former minister of education and former chairman of Dublin County Council, who lived at nearby Skerries. Clearly delighted with the purchase, he remarked, 'I think we got it at a very realistic price' (£460,000). He was probably correct in that assessment because

⁴⁰ Ardgillan Heritage Project (eds., Rory Keane, Anne Hughes, and Ronan Swan), *Ardgillan Castle and the Taylor family*, pp 36-37.

⁴¹ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland, a study of Irish landed families 1860-1960*, p. 107.

the auctioneers were guiding £800,000, for the sale of the house and land prior to the auction.⁴²

The council had plans to develop a regional park on the demesne⁴³ (196 acres) and proposed to invite the National Museum of Ireland to open a folk park there as well.⁴⁴ On 16 June 1985, the park was declared open by Ms. Bernie Malone, chair of Dublin County Council, who expressed her belief that it would be a huge success.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, work was undertaken by the owners in conjunction with the state training agency FAS, with inputs from Skerries Development and Community Association to make the castle itself suitable for public access. On Saturday 14 May 1992, the then chairman of Dublin County Council, Stanley Laing, at the end of his introductory speech, invited the president of Ireland, Mrs Mary Robinson to plant a commemorative tree and cut the ribbon to the entrance doorway to the castle, which she duly did. The president in her speech praised everyone involved in the project and said that she regarded the facilities at Ardgillan as an important addition to the potential for local and regional tourism in the area. Having cut the ribbon and entered the castle she then declared it opened to the public.⁴⁶

Plates three and four show the castle as it is today.

⁴² Irish Architectural Archive; press clipping undated; ref, RW.D.373.

⁴³ *Irish Times*, 17 July 1982.

⁴⁴ *Irish Times*, 10 June 1982.

⁴⁵ *Irish Times*, 17 June 1985.

⁴⁶ *Skerries News*, Vol.5 (May 1992), pp 1-2.

Plate.3 A northern view of Ardgillan Castle⁴⁷



Plate.4 A southern view of Ardgillan Castle⁴⁸



⁴⁷ Photograph taken by author on 16 January 2007.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Part.3

An overview

In 1970, Dublin County Council placed preservation orders on a host of historic sites in Fingal. The details stated that it might refuse applications to alter or demolish the following sites: Turvey House; Malahide Castle; Newbridge House; Lissen-Hall; Rathbeale-Hall; Kenure House, gateway, and St. Catherine's well (which formerly supplied potable water to Kenure House). Any preservation would depend on public or private support and must not drain the council's resources so as to affect other essential projects.⁴⁹ By 1972, Turvey House was falling down, its then owners, building firm, O'Shea and Shanahan Ltd, had bought it from the Counihan family three years previously but appeared to have done nothing with it since. Donabate parish council tried to find a way of preserving it and approached a Swords preservation group for advice.⁵⁰ An advisory committee based around historical societies in the area was set up with the aim of bringing increased awareness of important heritage sites suffering neglect to the wider public and look for their support. The committee also wanted to be recognised by other conservation groups in Fingal. They quickly received a commitment of support and co-operation from Dublin County Council, and were awaiting a reply from a similar request for support from the Board of Works. Secretary of the Old Skerries Society, Christopher (Kit) Fox, made contact with other groups and attempted to 'twist some arms'. Affiliated to the committee were; Donabate History and Folklore Society; Swords Progressive Preservation Society; the Old Fingal Society; Old Skerries Society; Balbriggan

⁴⁹ *Drogheda Independent*, 2 Oct. 1970.

⁵⁰ *Drogheda Independent*, 14 Jan. 1972.

Folklore Society. Each of the above was to send two delegates to the advisory committee, chaired by Bob Brown of Donabate Historical Society.⁵¹

As early as 1964 when the contents of Kenure House were going to be disposed of at auction, a Rush Archival Project led by Fr. Kit Sheridan among others set about photographing as many details of the interior of the house and its contents before the sale took place on Monday 21 September that year by James H., North and company Ltd⁵². Regarding the purchase of the house, there was one interested party; a Dublin based English language institute director, Mrs Concannon-O'Brien, who felt it was eminently suitable for a summer school for her foreign language students.

Between mid-June 1971 and the end of April 1972, a veritable flurry of correspondence took place between Mrs Concannon-O'Brien, the Secretary of Dublin County Council and various other interested parties (these letters are found in the Irish Architectural Archive, Merrion Square, Dublin. In a letter on 16 June 1971, Mrs Concannon-O'Brien wrote to the president of the Irish Georgian Society, Desmond Guinness, requesting that the society keep a watchful eye on Kenure House, as she feared for its future. On the same date she sent a note of interest to Mr McCall, Secretary of the Dublin County Council, in purchasing Kenure House, which she believed, was up for sale. She outlined her vision for a language school in Kenure House after its restoration. On the 18 June 1971 Desmond Guinness committed the Georgian society to support Mrs Concannon-O'Brien on her venture. On 20 June she wrote asking for permission from the council for herself and her architect to view the house. A report from him issued on 10 July 1971 showed that the house was structurally sound but had suffered substantial damage to its fabric. He estimated that 30,000 to 50,000 pounds would be required to put it right.

⁵¹ *Drogheda Independent*, 29 Dec. 1972.

⁵² Irish Architectural Archive; auction catalogue; ref, RP. D. 42. 10: Note, ref, RW. D. 149; 2003/ 144.

Another letter on 12 July from the Rev. professor James Kavanagh, Department of Social Science, University College Dublin, suggested that buildings such as Kenure House should be examined for use for cultural and recreational facilities before any demolition was considered.⁵³ Mrs Concannon-O'Brien (Maureen) sought help from Dail deputy P.J. Burke, in a letter on 14 July and again furnished figures for the project as well as asking for an introduction to the city and county manager Mr Macken. On 16 July, Mr O'Brien (presumed husband of Mrs Concannon-O'Brien) Mr Hanley and Mr Delaney presented the councils secretary Mr McCall with the following materials;

- An architectural report.
- A report from the social science department U.C.D.
- A psychological report.
- Previous correspondence between English language institute and the county council.

At the meeting, Mr O'Brien made many of the same commitments to retaining the integrity of the house going forward and provided estimates of costs as well. Mr Hanley commented on the following;

- The house was scheduled for demolition and plans for the housing estate are finalised.
- Allowing Kenure to remain would mean that fewer houses could be built.
- The council's refusal to remove valuable work still within the house and being vandalised.

Mr O'Brien suggested that if the council would not remove the valuables, then the language institute would carry out the work for fifty pounds. He asked that the council make a speedy decision as the house was deteriorating fast. Mrs Concannon-O'Brien sent a file on the progress of the house to Desmond Guinness on 20 July 1971, and telling him of a planned meeting with the county and city manager Mr Macken in the near future and promising to update him on events when they occurred.

⁵³ Irish Architectural Archive; letters; 16 June 1971(two of); 20 June 1971; 10 July 1971; 12 July 1971; ref, RW.D.149.

On 20 July 1971 she sent another copy of the file, which was now becoming unwieldy, to Professor Kevin B. Nowlan, who represented a civics group and informing him that the saga of the house was on-going. She had yet to meet with Mr Macken, and expressed to Keven that she was feeling pessimistic about the way the process was going and hoped that her friends could help her in some way when they met.⁵⁴ She wrote another letter on 20 July 1971 to Rev. Father O'Donohue, at the parochial house, Rush, county Dublin. She referred to a telephone conversation whereby he agreed to look at the file and relate to her about the feelings of the local people in the matter of the house. She asked if he could arrange a meeting with the residents association but extolled the urgency of the matter as the house was failing rapidly. Mrs Concannon-O'Brien received a letter from Mrs Desmond Guinness on 15 April 1972, telling her about an advertisement in an American newspaper offering the house for rent at one pound per annum. She wondered what had befallen her idea of saving the house and again reiterated her fervent hope that the council would accept her plan.

Regarding the dry-rot, Mrs Desmond told Maureen not to worry as new chemicals can neutralise its worst effects and replacing floor boards is a relatively simple undertaking in any event. Mrs Guinness sent a note to her American friend thanking him for the details regarding the advertisement and also for sending photographs of Kenure House. On 17 April 1972, Mrs Concannon-O'Brien sent a return letter to Mrs Guinness, telling her of her broken heart over Kenure House. She related of how if only she had got it five or six years earlier it would have been perfect for her institute. However, her architect has estimated that at least fifty thousand pounds would now be needed to restore it from its dire state. She relates that having first approached the

⁵⁴ Irish Architectural Archive; letters; 14 July 1971; 16 July 1971; 20 July 1971 (two of); ref, RW.D.149.

city and county manager Mr Macken in July 1971, and despite his having said of the councils willingness to preserve the house, she had not heard any further until 7 March 1972. This was despite numerous letters sent to his office by her. She was most discouraged by the plans to build 300 houses on the land and encroaching close to the house. She even saw a plan to build six more houses on the site of the house itself, which really upset her, and caused her to exclaim that, 'not even in her wildest feats of imagination could she visualise anything so grotesque' as the councils plans. Around the perimeter of the house every tree had been felled, the five acre walled garden and lake were to be removed and everything around is utter devastation. She worried about the wrought iron work and the marble fireplaces getting destroyed if they were not removed soon. She seemed resigned to the fact that the costs of refurbishment had spiralled beyond her institute's financial reach and worried in particular about her own personal part of the financial burden if a deal should go ahead. Against her better judgement she determined to give it one more try and submitted a tender for the house. However, she had little optimism of it being accepted as her stipulations included housing being kept well away from the house. In any event it would require a subvention of council funds to make the figures add up at this late stage. That seemed to be the end of the matter for her, as she believed that once housing comes close to an historic building then few investors are interested in taking it on as by then much of its appeal has gone. She finished the letter by expressing the wish that houses such as Kenure be kept out of the possession of county councils and other developers lest they be lost too.⁵⁵

Mrs Concannon-O'Brien, received a letter at her English language institute at 99 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin, on 20 April 1972, from Mrs Guinness, expressing

⁵⁵ Irish Architectural Archive; letters; 20 July 1971; 15 April 1972; 17 April 1972; ref, RW.D.149.

delight at the news of the tendered offer to the council. She suggested that the decision to build houses close to Kenure House was a great mistake, as it tended to make important houses hard to sell. When interested parties view such houses they invariably look to see what the surrounding area was like. She related about the current threat to her own home at Castletown House, county Kildare, where developers are seeking permission to build houses nearby. She inquired as to directions to Kenure House where she hoped to accompany her photographer Mr Harsch who wished to capture on film the beauty of the Robert West rooms and other fine work if any remained. Mrs Concannon-O'Brien suggested she contact Mr McCall, with regard to gaining access to the area. In any event it appears to have been relatively easy to get into the house during the previous July when trespassers and vandals had made holes in the structure for getting in and out. When she asked the council about security at the house, Mrs Concannon-O'Brien was told that a twenty-four hour guard was on the premises but she saw no evidence of it. On a Sunday afternoon she brought her husband, her two children and two builders and removed from the house for safekeeping a ten-foot long carved mantelpiece, which was in the process of being stolen. When told of what had occurred, Mr Macken clearly annoyed, ordered all openings blocked up with bricks to keep intruders out. The mantle piece was ordered to be returned forthwith. Meanwhile on 25 April 1972, Mrs Guinness was still trying to get into Kenure with her photographer but without much luck and asked Mrs Concannon-O'Brien if she could help in the matter.⁵⁶

By July 1972, a proposal appeared to come from the assistant county manager, that the façade of Kenure house be retained with the interior cleared for use as a

⁵⁶ Irish Architectural Archive; letters; 20 April 1972; 25 April 1972; ref, RW.D.149.

community centre.⁵⁷ The idea found favour in some quarters but came to nothing in the end. By 1975, a concerned Londoner, John R. Redmill, writing to the *Irish Times* on 15 December 1972, and referring to an earlier report in the same newspaper regarding the imminent demolition of Kenure House. He wrote disparagingly of Dublin county councils plans which were in direct contradiction of those of many European governments which were gearing up to celebrate 'European Architectural Heritage Year'. He lambasted the council for seeking to make a mockery of such ideals. He spoke of the work of Victorian designer William Morris who in 1877 founded a society for the protection of ancient buildings. Morris believed that 'we are the custodians of these treasures for future generations'. He suggests that public awareness far exceeded that of Dublin county council and that it was high time that they took cognisance of such feelings and follow suit. Their attitude was clear he says, and remarks that when the council took charge of the house seven years previously, it was in liveable condition, yet now it seemed fit only for demolition. He castigates them for refusing to make available a repair grant available to aspiring purchasers.

He questions too, the efforts of the Dublin Civic group, the Georgian Society, and An Taisce, in saving the house. These answers he suggests should worry and hurt those concerned. He writes in praise of Mrs Concannon-O'Brien's efforts in acquiring the house and says that Ireland should be proud of her and people like her. The important point he says regarding such historic buildings should be cultural and not financial. The lesson to be learnt he says is that nobody should be either public spirited or foolish enough to allow an historic building to fall into the hands of a public body lest it also should be lost. In conclusion, he implored the Irish people to

⁵⁷ *Irish Times*, 13 July 1972.

do something to save Kenure and undertook to assist in any way he could himself.⁵⁸ In 1977, while holidaying in Galway, he wrote to *The Irish Times* again along similar lines to his earlier letter. This time however, his language was stronger and accused Dublin county council of letting down the last member of the Palmer family who left the house in trust to the Irish nation. He again castigates them for refusing to grant financial aid to anyone wishing to make something of the house. He espouses other owners of historic buildings in Ireland to beware of whom they leave their property too and if any such person was thinking of leaving it to an Irish local authority, his advice was ‘don’t’.⁵⁹

A German lady with an address at Deer park Hotel, Howth county Dublin, wrote to the same newspaper in 1978, expressing her view that although Ireland had much in the way of beautiful scenery, it was not so well endowed architecturally that it could wilfully destroy such a pearl of classical beauty as Kenure House. She went on to relate that such a destruction in peacetime brought shame on Ireland and was also a crime against the culture of Europe itself.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, the council had been making attempts to sell the house, even putting it on the market for the nominal sum of £1 (with the proviso that it be repaired). Councillor Paddy Murphy, chairman of the housing committee is reputed to have remarked that ‘apparently we cannot give it away’. He suggested that the press would take note and show the people that we endeavoured to find a buyer.⁶¹ Notwithstanding the council’s difficulty in disposing of the house, yet the proposals by Mrs Concannon-O’Brien were not taken up. The fact that the language institutes plans required that the proposed housing development be kept away from the house

⁵⁸ *Irish Times*, 15 Dec. 1972.

⁵⁹ *Irish Times*, 21 Sept. 1977.

⁶⁰ *Irish Times*, 23 Sept. 1978.

⁶¹ *Irish Times*, 8 Dec. 1972.

on all sides was problematic for those who sought to build the maximum number of houses on the site and that this consideration took precedence over all others.

In any event Kenure House was demolished, allegedly for safety reasons during the third week in September 1978. However, local protest as seen from plate.5, managed to save the portico as a single reminder of a once magnificent building.

Plate.5 The Portico and a group of local protestors.⁶²



The events surrounding the purchase of Ardgillan Castle and grounds appear on the surface to have gone along in a blissful fashion when compared to those, which beset Kenure Estate. Whereas everything associated with the former seems to have gone horribly wrong while that of the latter was as smooth as glass. However, that is perhaps to gloss over what might have been had things turned either this way or that. In the case of Kenure, had the house not come onto the market until a few years later then perhaps it could have survived. If Mrs Concannon-O'Brien had got her way then there might have been a language school there now instead of a ruin. On the other

⁶² *Irish Times*, 29 Sept. 1978.

hand, Ardgillan was lucky that when it was sold in 1962, it was purchased by a person who could afford its upkeep and who liked it as it was and therefore retained its structural integrity intact. However, it was a close run thing, because if the right buyer had not got it in time then who knows what the outcome might have been and there was talk of turning the building into apartments.

Both houses were fortunate to have had their original owners still in residence right up until the 1960s, having come through some tough times when many of Ireland's big houses succumbed and fell into decay. Importantly too, is the fact that Dublin County Council had probably learned some valuable lessons when dealing with Kenure and used these new found skills when Ardgillan's time came along. Importantly too, in the intervening period there had been somewhat of a sea-change in attitude towards big houses in general that came about in the 1980s. Also, and perhaps as a consequence of this change of heart there was then finance made available to purchase a house like Ardgillan and its demesne outright without it having been broken up into parcels as happened at Kenure, which was purchased by the land commission whose primary interest was disposing of the land. Perhaps the only negative aspect regarding Ardgillan was that its contents were not secured along with the house and the furniture and effects found there now are on loan.⁶³

Terence Dooley suggests that this is a factor now seen by continental visitors in particular as an important aspect when visiting such houses. There was a further sale on 17 July 1982, where furniture and other household goods along with farm machinery went for auction by auctioneers Jackson, Stops and McCabe.⁶⁴ However, no information is forthcoming as to whether the council bought anything from this sale or not as the case may be. For its part, the council remarked at the time that it

⁶³ Irish Architectural Archive, press clipping, *Irish Independent*, 13 Sept. 1992; ref, RW.D. 149.

⁶⁴ *Irish Times*, 17 July 1982.

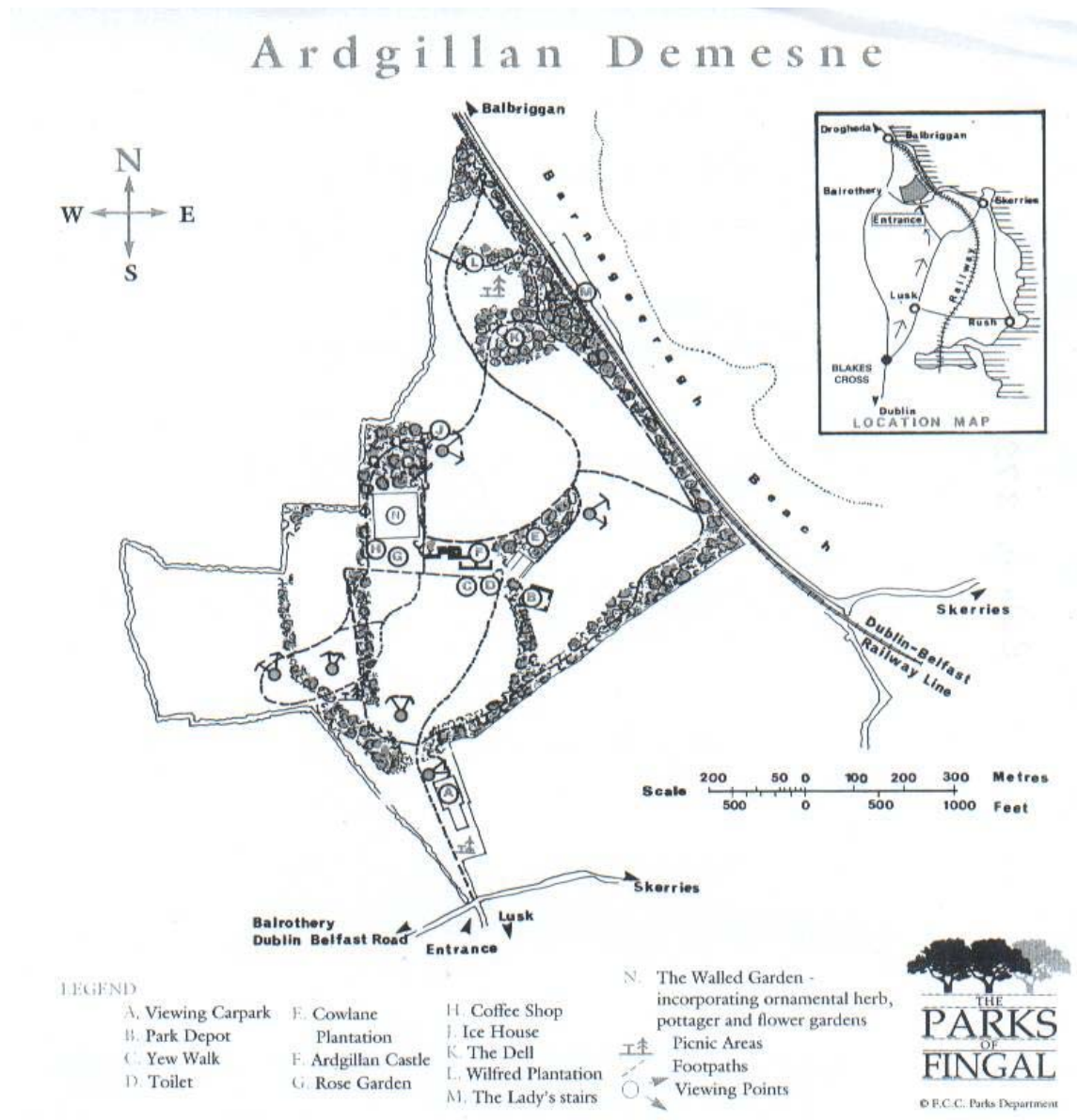
viewed parks such as Ardgillan as ‘oases’ in the encroaching concrete from the city. It was described by the council as being part of its quiet revolution, the taking in charge of a store of estates, river valleys, hillside and coastal lands.⁶⁵ Perhaps as a throwback to an earlier era when entertainment took place at Ardgillan castle, musical concerts are once again an occasional feature there now. However, nowadays the events (Rock concerts) are held outside and are not restricted to people of a certain class background as was the case in yesteryear.⁶⁶

Figure.2 shows Ardgillan Demesne and the layout of the grounds as they were in the years after the park opened and also demonstrates that Ardgillan was an integral part of an overall plan to provide recreational areas for the residents of the greater Dublin area. Facilities such as a coffee shop, picnic areas, interesting walks through the woods and the yew trees etc etc; offer the visitor myriad things to do while there. Figure. 1 shows the parks strategically placed around Dublin city and county such as Newbridge Demesne; Malahide Demesne; Ward river valley linear park, and Tolka valley linear park.

⁶⁵ *Irish Independent*, 13 Sept. 1992.

⁶⁶ *Fingal Independent*, 24 June 2005; *Ibid*, 22 Feb. 2006.

Figure.2 Outline of Ardgillan Demesne⁶⁷



⁶⁷ Irish Architectural archive; Fingal County Council information leaflet; ref. RW.D.373.

Conclusion

In 2003, the words of An Taoiseach Bertie Ahern TD, suggested that the mood towards historic buildings had changed for the better. He remarked that the job of Government was 'to ensure the protection of our heritage and to promote its enjoyment by all'.⁶⁸ Contrast these sentiments with those of Sir William Joynson-Hicks, when asked by Lady Gormanston, county Meath, for advice on what to do with Gormanston Castle at a time when big houses were in serious decline. His reply was to 'give it away with a pound of tea'.⁶⁹

By the early 1980s however, things began to be seen differently and while the new enlightenment came too late for Kenure House, perhaps the timing and the lessons learnt paid dividends for Ardgillan. Dr. Terence Dooley suggests that big houses might perhaps be better understood if looked at from the aspect set out below:

Their preservation need not be seen as a celebration of the landlord system that facilitated their construction but rather a celebration of the great artistic achievements of the architects who designed them and the everyday works of craftsmanship of those who embellished them. Terence Dooley, *The decline of big house in Ireland, a study of Irish landed families 1860-1960*.⁷⁰

If those criteria had been in vogue in the 1970s then many more big houses would still be in existence including perhaps Kenure. This study perhaps has shown that even a passionate and energetic person such as Mrs Concannon-O'Brien could not overcome the obstacles in her bid to establish an educational facility at Kenure House. Her plans though laudable and in appearance even generous as she had envisaged in a feasibility

⁶⁸ Bertie Ahern TD. (Taoiseach), in Terence Dooley, 'Report on country houses 2003', p. 1; ref. (St. Kieran's College Archive, Kilkenny).

⁶⁹ Peter Somerville-Large, *the Irish country house, a social history* (London, 1995), p. 355.

⁷⁰ Dooley, *The decline of the big house in Ireland, a study of Irish landed families 1860-1960*, p.4.

report that local people would have access to the facility for dance and drama clubs among other ideas. It appears that the decision to build houses on the site was the overriding factor and that her efforts were doomed to failure. Notwithstanding her lack of success in fulfilling her dream for a language institute at Rush, no one could doubt her commitment and sincerity in pursuing that dream before finally giving up in despair.

Thankfully, when the opportunity came along to acquire Ardgillan, the council acted both quickly and decisively in purchasing the castle and demesne. The time frame was not dramatically different in the number of years between Kenure and Ardgillan but the attitude displayed by the local authority was light years away from those in evidence in the 1970s.

A last word by a few Rush people will perhaps be allowed to end this short study:

The tragedy of Kenure's demise is that the house, walled gardens and woodland, was infinitely superior in architecture, natural beauty and history to some of the estates like Ardgillan and Newbridge House which have been acquired by the County Council as public amenities. Its sale by the Palmer family came that few years too soon for such enlightened planning. At the time of its demolition a number of Rush people did protest and managed to prevent at least the portico from being destroyed. Some derided them for their foolishness but in the economic climate of the 1970s it was difficult to see it being developed as anything but building and farmland. Ardgillan, Malahide Castle and Newbridge parks were still in the future. As it turned out we may be without a park, but the development has brought new houses and new blood to our town and a measure of prosperity to landowners in the acquisition of some of its acres.

Irish Country Women's Association history group, Rush county Dublin, *Rush by the sea*.⁷¹

⁷¹ Irish Country-women's association history group (I.C.A.), *Rush*, county Dublin, *Rush by the Sea*, p. 22.

The Rush Archival group, however, had a rather different view on the matter in 1964 when at an exhibition of photographs on the house and contents, it was said that the loss of a beautiful building like Kenure House, was a national tragedy.⁷² Brendan Scally, chairman of An Taisce, spoke in January 1977 of his upset at the demolition order but countered ruefully that sheer neglect will cause the demise of these houses in time when they ‘just fall down’. No local effort has been made to preserve it and neither the council nor his agency had the money to put it right he said. Brendan went on to relate that unfortunately ‘Kenure was on too magnificent a scale for modern times’.⁷³ Other views expressed in an untitled and undated newspaper report by local organisations are illuminating and give an insight into how people in the area saw the house. Chairman of the Local Development Association, John Redmond, said that there would be case for preserving the house only if its historical significance was a native one and not Anglo-Irish. He related that the land occupied by the house would suffice for up to sixty houses. Anthony Butterly, secretary and treasurer of Rush Co-operative and Utility Society, felt that the cost of preservation would be prohibitive in light of its present poor condition.⁷⁴

Although the Fingal area lost several fine historic big houses at Turvey and Kenure, nevertheless, the future for those that remain such as Ardgillan Castle, Newbridge House, and Malahide Castle, has never been brighter. Ardgillan in particular provides all that could be required in the way of sea air and panoramic sea views as far as the Mourne Mountains. Milo Drummond, in his newspaper column titled ‘in praise of parklands’ asked the question of where else but at Ardgillan, could one see Rockabill Lighthouse, the islands of Lambay, Colt, Church, Shennick, as well as the mighty head of Slieve Gullion standing proud in its Mourne fastness to the

⁷² Irish Architectural Archive; note of 1964; ref, RW.D. 149.

⁷³ Irish Architectural Archive; press clipping, *Irish Times*, 11 Jan. 1977; ref. RW.D.149.

⁷⁴ Irish Architectural Archive; press clipping, untitled and undated; ref, RW.D.149.

north.⁷⁵ All are in public ownership and with robust regimes in place to maintain them in a fashion of which the original owners would surely be pleased. End.

⁷⁵ Irish Architectural Archive, press clipping, *Irish Independent*, 13 Sept. 1992; ref, RW.D. 149.

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