

MANSIONS: Ashford Castle. Ashford House, now Ashford Castle, formerly family residence of the Earl of Oranmore & Browne, then purchased & extended by the Guinness family - of porter fame - was acquired by Mr. Noel Huggard in 1938 & now ranks as one of the finest provincial hotels in the country. By virtue of its situation alone this must surely be considered one of the most delightfully-placed hotels imaginable. It stands in its own lovely heavily-timbered grounds of about 350 acres, amidst smooth lawns & parkland watered by fast-running streams, overlooking the great islet-studded Loch Corrib which spreads a long extended arm westwards under the long range of tall colourful mountains of the Joyce Country.

The name Ashford is only a modern English name that is none too original & that certainly is not too appropriate, despite the profusion of fine ash trees in the vicinity, in a locality where the ancient Irish had already familiarised many soft, musical & invariably apt place-names. The old name for Ashford is Ceapach Corcog, the "Market Garden of the Beehives"; possibly the monks of Cong Abbey were responsible for this name which is still preserved in the name of the townland, Cappacorcoge.

The Oranmore & Browne family chose this delectable spot on which to erect a shooting lodge, at the middle of the 18th century. The lodge was built after the style of a French chateau & when, a hundred years later, Sir Benjamin Lee Guinness bought the lodge & property in the Encumbered Estates Court, he commenced a series of extensions & improvements to both house & grounds which was pursued on a much larger scale by his son & heir, Lord Ardilaun. Ardilaun, who took his title from a small wooded island at Lough Corrib that stands close to the shore at the W. side of the castle, never won the hearts of his tenants & poorer neighbours, & would appear to have been a selfish & proud man. He built a monument of dressed limestone & granite & well ordered lawns & avenues & vast waving plantations, in which his might & wealth would be reflected. His father's name is still held in high regard by the older people, but there are few who had contact with his methods in these parts who sincerely utter a word of affectionate remembrance of Lord Ardilaun himself. Nevertheless, he worked wonders in rapidly developing the property which he had inherited & he set about linking up the demesnes of Ashford, Strandhill, Ross Hill & Ballykine, all of which his father had previously acquired, by means of splendid drives, avenues & tunnels, so that he could traverse the entire huge estate without even crossing a public road. Where a public road or a river ran through his lands, he constructed a bridge or tunnel that would give him uninterrupted access

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even to the most remote quarters. These bridges & tunnels remain, all of them, constructed in excellent form in the local limestone. In Lord Ardilaun's time the estate comprised several thousands of acres, a great part of which was devoted to plantations & walks, but now the Forestry Division of the Irish Land Commission controls the greater bulk of the woods & the activities of this body, in felling & drawing timber, have done much to depreciate the scenic loveliness of the district. Avenues are neglected & littered with decaying vegetation, pathways & drives are torn up by the passing of carts, motor lorries & tractors, & in some parts, the woods themselves, where trees have fallen & been allowed lie, & vegetation is broken & rotting, the effect is one of deplorable untidiness. But this is due, in large measure, to the present emergency need for timber & it is to be hoped that, in time, a cleaning-up will be effected that will restore an appearance of order & beauty; not that, as a whole, the general appearance of the countryside is impaired by that of the woods individually.

That portion of the estate which is still attached to Ashford Castle, however, still presents an aspect of neatness & great charm. It is adorned with many fine trees, amongst the most notable of which are the giant Douglas Pine, the Pinus Insignis, Scotch Fir, Ash, Oak, Beech, Californian Redwood, Yew, Lime & some rare species. Cork trees, a rare sight in this country, are seen in the vegetable garden to the right of the Terrace, a few hundred yds from the castle, where 8 of them grew close together. A huge tree in the centre of the fork formed by the avenues in front of Strandhill House (now headquarters of Mr. Huggard's "Ashford Industries" - the big whitewashed thatched bldg facing the Castle) has been described as a maple but is, in reality, a plane tree of great size & with great spreading branches & luxuriant foliage.

The gardens, whilst being neat & attractive & containing some lovely floral, shrub & arboreal specimens, are pleasing though not remarkable. The "carpet garden" is especially attractive. An exceptionally fine constructional achievement is the curved tunnel, with walls & roof of cut limestone, which leads from this garden into the adjoining fruit garden.

The lawns at the front of the bldg are tastefully laid-out for recreational purposes & no more charming site could be selected for tennis courts, croquet lawn or putting green than this smooth green sward, with a gorgeous view of Loch Corrib stretching from just under this terrace away into the distance.

The Deer Park, at the back of Strandhill Hse., is now converted into a small sporting golf course of 9 holes & other recreations for guests at the hotel include fishing, bathing (a new diving board is now being erected on L. Corrib, close to the Hotel), boating, shooting, walking & horse-riding. Indoor amusements include billiards, table tennis, dancing & a host of other games & organised pastimes.

The main entrance gates on the Headford-Cong road are not used now & the principal entrance is by the gate at the abbey, at Cong village. Passing over the bridge across the Cornabaun stream, which joins the main stream a couple of hundred yds to the right, this avenue, which is less than $\frac{1}{2}$ ml long, winds between flanking trees past the neat, spired Protestant church & then, by Strandhill House on the left (the first lock of the "canal" is on the right amongst the bushes near here - it has been converted into a fine, corrugated-iron-roofed boathouse) on to the splendidly-wrought stone bridge & under the archway formed by flanking towers, to the rere entrance of the long, shallow, castellated mansion which lies immediately ahead.

Sir Benjamin Guinness intended to enlarge the shooting longe in the original form of a chateau & the pursuance of this intention is seen in the addition which he made along those lines. Lord Ardilaun, however, favoured the sham-baronial-castle style & proceeded to rebuild & enlarge in the ugly pretentious style so popular in the 19th century. Had his

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plans ever been completed, the final result might not have been so almost unsightly, but he left the remodelling uncompleted in an unsymmetrical though quite imposing group of bldgs in which mock battlements, blind machicolations, dummy loopholes & an assortment of towers take precedence in offending the architectural & artistic eye.

Viewing the castle from the other side, e.g., near the fountain, the assemblage of bldgs will be seen to comprise, on the left side a completed portion of Ardilaun's castellated plan, to the right of this the Oranmore & Browne chateau & Sir Benjamin's development of this style, to the right again, the low strange-looking extension which is the billiard room, then the writing-room which is said to have been specially constructed to honour a royal visitor who later became King of England &, at the extremity, the tall Kitchen Tower. The carved double-headed eagle of the Oranmore & Browne arms surmounts the chateau entrance.

Internally the castle is furnished in appropriate style & with careful study of the comfort of guests. Fine carved woodwork & gracefully pointed spacious fireplaces are attractive features of the main apartments.

A magnificent limestone obelisk, a memorial to Lord Ardilaun (1840-1915) was erected in 1916 by his widow. It is about 15' high & stands facing the island from which the baron took his title. It is alongside the avenue leading westwards around the lake shore & stands quite close to the "Chalet", or summerhouse, about 1 ml. from Ashford Castle.

CURIOSITIES: Under this heading may be included the various freaks of nature of the cavernous limestone, mentioned under "Geology", though too numerous to be mentioned individually in detail.

"GODS of THE NEALE": The Neale Park, formerly the residence of Lord Kilmaine & now split up & divided amongst small holders, is on the right of the Ballinrobe road, just N. of The Neale vill. The demesne comprised many acres of broad rich parkland, plentifully wooded, but the house, now empty, is a surprisingly plain & un-imposing bldg for so magnificent a setting. Close to the front of the house, amongst the trees, will be found one of the most strange objects imaginable - not so much in appearance as in what it reveals on inspection.

Facing outwards from a square stone structure is an inscribed stone slab. The letters are very crudely inscribed & the text is so nonsensical & complicated that one must reach the conclusion after study that the entire object is merely the product of the peculiar humour of some former Lord Kilmaine. The inscription "reads" as follows:- (Copied from Rd. Hayward's version).

"The Irish characters on the above stone import that in this cave we have by us the Gods of Cons:-

Lett us follow their steps sick of love with FVLL confidencin in Loo Lave Adda Yackene the Shepherd of Ireland of his eraan D.J. These jimages were found in a cave behind the place they now stand & were the ancient Gods of the Neale or the Gods of Felicity from which the place in Irish was called Ne Heale in English the Neale LL reigned AM 2577 PD 927 AHTE Cl496 and was then 60: CEDNA reigned AM2994 & 64 of Edna was wel 50 CON MOIL was ye son of Heber who divided this Kingdom with his brother and had the western parts of this jsland for his lott all which was originally called from Con Conovcht or Cons portion and his son LOO LAVEADDA who found the Druids was thought to have drawn all his knowledged from the SVN Thus the Irish history.

N.B. the smaller letters on the upper part of the great plinth jimport that it was erected by Edna Loos Gods were adopted by Con and Edna of the line of Heber established their worship there 1753.