The fruits of public service

Beaulieu, Drogheda, Co Louth, Ireland The home of Cara Konig-Brock

An enigmatic house overlooking the mouth of the Boyne remains in the hands of the family that built it. Roger White explains the fascination of this outstanding building

Photographs by Paul Highnam

Fig 1 above: **The main front of the house, with its rubbed-brick detailing and hipped roof.** *Fig 2 facing page:* **The entrance hall. Over the fireplace is an early view of the neighbouring town of Drogheda**

IN a land with such a troubled history, it is not entirely surprising that country houses—in the familiar sense of outward-looking and unfortified residences—did not really take root in Ireland until the 18th century. One of the things that has always made Beaulieu, near Drogheda, seem so important and fascinating is the fact that it has generally been dated to the 1660s.

As such, it would arguably be Ireland's earliest country house; this tradition was accepted when Mark Girouard wrote about it more than half a century ago (*Country Life, January 15 and 22, 1959*). There are convincing reasons for doubting this date, yet that does not detract either from Beaulieu's undoubted historical significance in the Irish context or its intrinsic beauty.

When Henry Tichborne (1581–1667), a Hampshire-born soldier who had arrived in Ireland in 1620, was dispatched to Drogheda in 1641 to organise the town's defence against the Catholic rebellion of Sir Phelim O'Neill, the rebel headquarters was based on the old castle of Beaulieu, two miles downstream near the mouth of the River Boyne. Tichborne's defence of Drogheda looked doomed to failure, not least because its inhabitants were overwhelmingly Catholic and sympathetic to the besiegers.

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In February 1642, however, a storm swept away the boom across the Boyne that had prevented the resupply of the town. The next day, ships carrying provisions and troops sailed into the quayside and, by the beginning of March, O'Neill had fled north, the siege was raised and Tichborne was able to occupy Beaulieu.

The castle (or possibly tower house), which had belonged to the Catholic William Plunkett, was declared forfeit and, by a process that is not entirely clear, came into the possession of Tichborne. Initially, this seems to have been as a tenant of the Commonwealth, as, in 1654, he petitioned Cromwell to grant him outright possession of Beaulieu in lieu of the large amount of money he had spent ‘in public service in Ireland’. He was allowed to stay on there, but it was not until the Restoration in 1660 that he was finally confirmed as owner.

Charles II made Tichborne a Marshal of the Irish army and, in 1661, knighted him. Traditionally, the construction of the present house has been dated to somewhere between the confirmation of ownership and his death in 1667, and, indeed, the Duke of Ormonde seems to have stayed at Beaulieu in 1666. However, Tichborne was by then in his eighties and it seems more likely that the project would ➢

have been initiated by his son, William, who lived at Beaulieu with him. This is where the conundrums start to present themselves.

A visitor approaching the present house up the lime avenue to its east front sees an ensemble that, on the other side of the Irish Sea, would be assumed to be mid- to late-17th-century (***Fig 1***): a symmetrical elevation of 2-3-2 bays, with two storeys of equal height under a hipped roof supported on deep bracketed eaves. It is constructed of rendered rubble-stone, with the projecting window surrounds and pedimented central doorcase executed in high-quality brickwork, rubbed and cut, and with lime putty to the fine joints.

> ‘Over the front door is a tumultuous assemblage of military paraphernalia’

The design goes back to the Dutch-inspired house type first introduced into England by Inigo Jones in the 1630s and, if Beaulieu were in the Home Counties rather than on the east coast of Ireland, the inclination would be to describe it as a product of City of London craftsmen, perhaps of the 1640s or 1650s; comparable English examples include West Woodhay House, Berkshire (1635), and Groombridge Place, Kent (about 1659).

In the Irish context in the 1660s or 1670s, it would have seemed revolutionary (although Eyrecourt in Galway, a house with some of the same features and long a ruin, is also traditionally ascribed to the 1660s). But is it in fact that early? Would the brick have been imported and the bricklayers with it? For that matter, could the architect realistically be an Irishman, in a country with no previous history of such houses, or was he also imported?

One thing that becomes apparent on a closer inspection of Beaulieu is that, whatever its date, it was not a completely new-built structure. Although no proper measured drawings have been made of its plan, it is clear that the north side of the house incorporates substantial masonry from an earlier building, presumably the Plunkett castle: the wall between the central hall and present dining room, for instance, is twice the thickness of that on the south side of the hall and the roof of the north side is of local oak (currently awaiting dendrochronology), whereas that of the remainder is Baltic pine. Beneath this section is what appears to be ➢

Fig 3: **The overmantel of the main entrance to the hall, embellished with a spectacular array of weapons and armour. The flag to the left bears the cipher of William III, who reigned 1688–1702**

Fig 4: **A detail of the *trompe l'oeil* painting in the oval in the centre of the drawing-room ceiling. To the right is visible Apollo's chariot**

Fig 5: **A view of the drawing room: the wainscot has wide panels characteristic of about 1700. The fireplace is a 19th-century addition**

a late-medieval cellar, so, at the very least, Beaulieu is a house (or a castle) within a house.

Further puzzles present themselves immediately beyond the front door. The visitor arrives not in the anticipated single-storey room, but in a great double-height hall (***Fig 2***). Immediately ahead is a massive arched doorcase and, to the left, is a two-tier chimneypiece. Both have pronounced cornices, such as might be expected to support a ceiling. On the upper half of the inner wall, large multi-paned sash windows look down into the hall from the first floor.

Is this a space that was originally single-storeyed, but was later doubled in height? And when were the sash windows—rare in Ireland before the early 18th century, although used by the Duke of Ormonde at Kilkenny Castle in 1679/80—inserted?

Much interest is added to the hall by the carved wooden embellishments within the tympana of the four door arches. Sir Henry is perhaps commemorated by the chimneypiece overmantel painting depicting Drogheda. Over the front door is a tumultuous assemblage of military paraphernalia fanning out from a central suit of armour, with spears, axes, swords, pistols, cannon, trumpets, drums and standards. Interspersed with these are Latin mottoes, Roman *fasces*, an SPQR banner and an eagle standard, but there is also an inconspicuous shield bearing the cipher WR, for William III, which gives a date between 1688 and 1702 (***Fig 3***).

> ‘This could arguably be Ireland's earliest country house’

Sir Henry was succeeded in turn by his son William and his grandson Henry. Both of the latter were strong supporters of William III, who knighted William and created Henry a baronet in 1697. Henry was further upgraded to Baron Ferrard of Beaulieu in 1714. As neither Sir William nor Lord Ferrard were particularly notable for their military exploits, the tympanum is presumably another tribute to the first Sir Henry.

Stylistically, the comparison to be made is with the trophies in the arch heads at the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, on the outskirts of Dublin, a viceregal project which can be dated to the late 1680s.

Directly opposite, the tympanum of the inner portal is filled with a magnificent display of Lord Ferrard's arms set within an effusion of scrolling foliage, so postdating 1714. The flanking tympana have enough musical instruments to equip a Baroque orchestra, again accompanied by the same scrolling foliage. The central doorcase on this wall now gives access to a billiard room created in the late 19th century (and now used for weddings), but the flanking lower arches lead to staircases.

That to the right, now functioning as the back stairs, has stout balusters characteristic of the late 17th century, whereas the principal staircase to the left is of a type that, in England, would be accepted as early 18th century: a handrail that ramps up elegantly at each change of direction, three slim balusters per tread and carved tread-ends.

Whether the Beaulieu staircase occupies the site of its predecessor is impossible to tell. However, letters of 1722 from Lord Ferrard to his half-brother Lord Molesworth not only allude to the imminent arrival of the staircase woodwork from Dublin and his joy at having finally got the joiners and carpenters out of the south end of the house, but also give a clue to the identity of the man who probably superintended the alterations. This was John Curle, an architect and mason of possibly Scottish origin, who first appears in Ireland in 1698 and subsequently worked at Castle Coole and Conyngham Hall (later to be known as Slane Castle).

His name has been suggested for Stackallan House to the other side of Drogheda, usually dated to about 1710, although the architectural similarity to Beaulieu is slight. Perhaps most interestingly, the letters refer to the installation of both the hall cornice and the internal windows. This certainly answers the conundrum regarding the date of the latter and points to a wholesale remodelling of the space from two separate floors into a double-height apartment.

To either side of the hall are the dining room and drawing room (***Fig 5***), each with plaster ceilings of the rather heavy geometric kind first introduced to England by Inigo Jones. That in the drawing room, the richer of the two, has, at its centre, an oval foliage frame and, although comparisons have been made with the sumptuous 1680s chapel ceiling at Kilmainham, a closer comparison is with the staircase ceiling at Stackallan.

Within the Beaulieu wreath is a piece of painted Baroque *trompe l'oeil* of a kind common enough in England between the 1670s and 1720s, but very unusual in Ireland. It features Apollo's chariot high up in a rosy sky and has been attributed to William Van Der Hagen, a Dutch artist first recorded in Dublin as a scene painter in 1718 (***Fig 4***). He then branched out into painting landscapes, such as the one incorporated in the panel over the drawing-room chimneypiece.

As Lord Ferrard outlived his two sons, on his death in 1731, the title became extinct and Beaulieu passed via his daughter to the Astons, the Irish branch of a Staffordshire family. From them, it went by marriage to the Tippings and then the Montgomerys. For much of the 19th century, the house was let (at one point to a Catholic brewer, who added a little chapel at the rear), but, towards the end of the Victorian period, Richard Montgomery married Maud Robinson, whose money paid for new chimneypieces, updated plumbing, parquet flooring, a good deal of lincrusta, and the addition of the billiard room. Their daughter, who became the redoubtable Mrs Nesbit Waddington, lived to a great age and died in 2006.

The chatelaine is now her granddaughter, Cara Konig-Brock, who took over just two years ago and has already done a great deal to tackle a substantial backlog of maintenance. At the same time, she is increasingly involved in the Irish Historic Houses Association and in the Irish conservation world.

Today, Beaulieu is one of a sadly small and ever-decreasing number of important Anglo-Irish houses that have never been sold out of the family and whose contents, gradually accumulated over the centuries, have never been dispersed. Long may it so remain!

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For more information, visit http://beaulieuhouse.ie or telephone 00 353 41 983 8557