

## Ashford Castle<sup>1</sup>

The following account is an edited version of that found on Mayo County Library web pages and derives from The Irish Tourist Association (ITA) Topographical and General Survey compiled in the early 1940s on a parish basis within each county, presumably in an effort to gather information to promote Irish tourism post World War II. Surveyors were appointed and information was gathered by visits to the parish and the filling in of forms. The author of this report is a Conor O'Brien and it is dated June 1945.

<http://www.mayolibrary.ie/en/LocalStudies/IrishTouristAssociationSurvey/>

Those of you familiar with the Castle as it is as present will note the many changes that have taken place in the interim.

Ashford House, now Ashford Castle, formerly family residence of the Earl of Oranmore and Browne, then purchased and extended by the Guinness family - of porter fame - was acquired by Mr. Noel Huggard in 1938 and 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 and 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 and 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 familiarized many soft, musical and invariably apt place-names. The old name for Ashford is Ceapach Corcóg, the "Market Garden of the Beehives"<sup>2</sup>; possibly the monks of Cong Abbey were responsible for this name which is still preserved in the name of the townland, Cappacorcoge.

The Oranmore and 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 and when, a hundred years later, Sir Benjamin Lee Guinness bought the lodge and property in the Encumbered Estates Court, he commenced a series of extensions and

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ashford.ie](http://www.ashford.ie)

<sup>2</sup> Editor thinks this should be "Bed/Plot of the Beehives"

improvements to both house and grounds which was pursued on a much larger scale by his son and heir, Lord Ardilaun. Ardilaun, who took his title from a small wooded island at Lough Corrib that stands close to the shore at the west side of the castle, never won the hearts of his tenants and poorer neighbours, and would appear to have been a selfish and proud man. He built a monument of dressed limestone and granite and well-ordered lawns and avenues and vast waving plantations, in which his might and 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 and he set about linking up the demesnes of Ashford, Strandhill, Ross Hill and Ballykine, all of which his father had previously acquired, by means of splendid drives, avenues and 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 even to the most remote quarters. These bridges and 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 and walks, but now the Forestry Division of the Irish Land Commission controls the greater bulk of the woods and the activities of this body, in felling and drawing timber, have done much to depreciate the scenic loveliness of the district. Avenues are neglected and littered with decaying vegetation, pathways and drives are torn up by the passing of carts, motor lorries and tractors, and, in some parts, the woods themselves, where trees have fallen and been allowed lie, and vegetation is broken and rotting, the effect is one of deplorable untidiness. But this is due, in large measure, to the present emergency need for timber and it is to be hoped that, in time, a cleaning-up will be effected that will restore an appearance of order and 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 and great charm. It is adorned with many fine trees, amongst the most notable of which are the giant Douglas Pine, the Pinus Insignus, Scotch Fir, Ash, Oak, Beech, Californian Redwood, Yew, Lime and 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 yards from the castle, where eight 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 building facing the Castle<sup>3</sup>) has been described as a maple but is, in reality, a plain tree of great size and with great spreading branches and luxuriant foliage.

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

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

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

The main entrance gates on the Headford - Cong road are not used now<sup>4</sup> and the principal entrance is by the gate at the Abbey, at Cong village. Passing over the bridge across the Cornabauny stream, which joins the main stream a couple of hundred yards to the right, this avenue, which is less than half a mile long, winds between flanking trees past the neat, spired Protestant church and then, by Strandhill House on the left (the first lock of the "canal"

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<sup>3</sup> This is now Cullen's at the Cottage restaurant

<sup>4</sup> A one-way system now operates in the grounds with the entrance at the main gates on the Cong - Headford road exiting by the Abbey in the village.

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 and under the archway formed by flanking towers, to the rare entrance of the long, shallow, castellated mansion which lies immediately ahead.

Sir Benjamin Guinness intended to enlarge the shooting lodge in the original form of a chateau and 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 and proceeded to rebuild and enlarge in the ugly pretentious style so popular in the 19th century. Had his plans ever been completed, the final result might not have been so almost unsightly, but he left the remodeling uncompleted in an unsymmetrical though quite imposing group of buildings in which mock battlements, blind machicolations, dummy loopholes & an assortment of towers take precedence in offending the architectural and artistic eye.

Viewing the castle from the other side, e.g., near the fountain, the assemblage of buildings 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 and 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 and, at the extremity, the tall Kitchen Tower. The carved double-headed eagle of the Oranmore and Browne arms surmounts the chateau entrance.

Internally the castle is furnished in appropriate style and with careful study of the comfort of guests. Fine carved woodwork and 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 and stands facing the island from which the baron took his title. It is alongside the avenue leading westwards around the lake shore and stands quite close to the "Chalet", or summerhouse, about 1 mile from Ashford Castle.