



*Shanganagh Castle, Co Dublin  
the Entrance Hall, looking to the front door (all photographs courtesy Mrs Barbara Clarke)*

# Shanganagh Castle and the bottle letter

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PETER PEARSON

ON THE SHORES OF KILLINEY BAY, SITUATED IN THE SUBURBS OF DUBLIN, LIES Shanganagh Castle, a late-Georgian house built in the picturesque battlemented Gothic style. The castle, which is now an open prison managed by the Department of Justice, may be found just halfway between Shankill and Bray, on the old main road (also the old coach road) to Wexford.

It would appear that a plain bow-ended house was erected near the ruins of the old castle sometime during the 1790s, at a time when south Co Dublin was becoming a popular place of residence. Between the years 1805 and 1818 the house was completely remodelled by Sir George Cockburn, and the ruined tower or castle was dismantled. Cockburn tells us, in the 'bottle letter' discussed below, that the stones from this tower were used to build the chimney and tower of his picture gallery in the new house. He also mentions that some cannon shot was found in the rubble.

Cockburn, who, it would appear, was very wealthy, left an eleven-page manuscript for posterity enclosed in a bottle and buried in a wall in the castle. The letter was discovered by workmen in 1954, when the Office of Public Works were making alterations. The letter is of great interest not only because it gives a date and a description of the work which he carried out, but also because he gives us his views on the politics of the day and his thoughts on religion.

The letter was written by a man who had assembled an impressive collection of antiquities, sculpture, painting and armoury during his extensive travels in Europe, where he had witnessed the effects of the Napoleonic wars. His collection remained at Shanganagh Castle until the 1920s, when it was sold by public auction by his descendants. A number of photographs of the castle and its collection are included in this article, courtesy of Barbara Clarke, whose family, the Wentworth-Allens, once lived there. This unique collection of photographs was taken in the early 1900s, and shows how magnificently furnished the castle was.

The castle is entered through an elegant, pillared hallway. The principal



*Shanganagh Castle, Co Dublin*

*1 – Additions and alterations by Richard Morrison from c.1803 and after, including the bow-ended late eighteenth-century house to the rear*

*2 – The Entrance Hall, looking from the front door*

*opposite*

*4 – The Picture Gallery*

*5 – The Music Room*

SHANGANAGH CASTLE AND THE BOTTLE LETTER



rooms are decorated in the neo-classical style – the largest being the shallow-vaulted picture gallery – and many are provided with niches which once held items from his remarkable collection of classical sculptures. Cockburn's new work was carried out under the direction of Richard Morrison, and the contemporary accounts and papers of Bryan Bolger record two visits to the castle. These include one in 1805 to take measurements for the rebuilding.<sup>1</sup> The sculpture gallery referred to in the latter was accommodated in the north wing, and was given particular notice by Brewer in his *Beauties of Ireland*, who referred to 'Antique Bronzes, mosaic and Egyptian granite tables', and 'numerous volcanic specimens from Mounts Vesuvius and Aetna'.<sup>2</sup> Cockburn was a contemporary of the architect and collector Sir John Soane in London, whose own remarkable collection is still displayed to the public in his purpose-built home-museum.

Cockburn's bottle letter begins by describing in some depth the positions of the various ruined castles between Shankill and Bray, and ends with a remarkable castigation of contemporary politics and religion. Fortunately his anticipation of the 'finale' of Shanganagh Castle itself, inspired by his thoughts on transience and the passage of time, have not been realised to date. While the sculpture gallery has been dismantled and the exterior has been simplified, the house remains well kept by the Department of Justice, and many of Cockburn's plastercasts and sculptures are still to be seen, especially in the walls of the hall and staircase.



COPY OF DOCUMENT FOUND IN A BOTTLE AT SHANGANAGH CASTLE  
DURING BUILDING OPERATIONS BY THE OFFICE OF PUBLIC WORKS IN 1954

The bottle the... Enclosed in wall 1st July 1818.  
1818 Second of May

I, G Cockburn commenced the alteration and addition to my house.

There was an old Tower here, but in a very ruinous state, being some of the small remains of the Old Castle. The Tower was badly built, so I took its Remains down, & built this on the site of the former one, both as ornamental, & as a chimney to my Picture Gallery. In taking it down we found Two Cannon Shot which are replaced at the same height, in which they were in the old Tower: – but how they came there – no one can tell-

There was certainly a Redoubt & Fortification formerly in my North Sea Field – next the Martello Tower – but so much of the sea bank has fallen



*6 – Shanganagh Castle  
detail of the sculpture collection*

in; that very little remains of it at this day – & it has been diminished in my own Memory – There was a Line of Fortification in this part formerly – commencing at Shanganagh Castle – near sea and Leighlings town [Loughlinstown] communicating to Pucks Castle – a strong redoubt and field work on part of Shankill – the remains of which are now visible; and easily traced thence to Ballyman Old Court & ending at Bray, where there is still the remains of an Old Castle. It appears to have formed a sort of Cordon, making a half-circle, or rather oval, from Bray to Leighlings town, the Radius of which from above this spot to Ballyman is at least 2 [?] miles and the Diameter from Bray to Leighlings town 3 miles. There were Castles also along the Coast to Dublin (& some towards Wicklow) at Bulloch, Dalkey and Monks Town – But no records of what time built. This coast was certainly in former times much frequented by Pirates: – & The incursions of the Tooles from the Forests & Woods in the County of Wicklow could only be restrained by Garrisons & Castles. In those rude times however Cannon were so little in use, & particularly with those Barbarians and Rapparees, either by sea or land, that these shot found in the old Tower & now replaced must have been lodged there in more modern times. Possibly during the Civil Wars – in Cromwell’s time or afterwards in King William’s.

James certainly slept in Bray Castle after the Battle of the Boyne & fled in this direction – of course he must have had friends adherents and Garrisons here & most likely these shot were from some of William’s Cruisers, who might be employed to scour the coast. So far for antiquity.

As to modern times I enclose a Newspaper in this Bottle – Whether in our Damp Climate it will be preserved is more than I can tell – I shall be probably long dead and decomposed before this Bottle is disturbed – But like all things on Earth – This Tower and This Bottle will come to their finale – also – Should this be preserved and hereafter found – the Reader may rely on its correctness and wishing the future owners of This House, as much pleasure and enjoyment as I have had in it and as I am at all events the Improver and chief builder of it; I hope they will do me The favour to Drink to my memory a Bumper of Good Claret – if our descendants are allowed to drink of that good liquor. At present the enormous Tax on Wine has nearly put its consumption down.

As to the Politicks – in this Extraordinary Age the Historian will perhaps like to know the secret wishes and opinions of the present day & here it is:-

Altho Napoleon Buonaparte threw away his good fortune, & by attempting to Conquer all the world was himself conquered, & the French

*Shanganagh Castle*

*7 – Garden statue of a grotesque warrior*

*8 – Ornamental Column*





Nation as much degraded & sunk – as it was a few years before exalted – & after a struggle of 25 years – & France having arrived at a pitch of Military Glory never Exceeded; we who are on the stage in this year 1818 – have witnessed her degradation & the shameful apathy with which the Present French (forgetting the glorious exploits of their brethren so lately) – have submitted to have the imbecile and Rascally Bourbons forced on them – Nevertheless – it is a fact that however highly we may admire and rejoice at the success of our own Brave Soldiers – still every fair & honest, & wise unpensioned man deplores the return of the Bourbons & all the Race of Legitimates – but particularly of that cruel ungrateful & ever to be detested Monster – Ferdinand King of Spain. If Mankind relapse into ignorance and Despotism so much the worse for those who are to live hereafter – but if, (as is the opinion of the best informed) in a short time there is a Rally – The thing will be to do over again, & corrupt & profligate as mankind are, the struggle may end in a new compact beneficial to the Human Race.

God Grant it may be so But whether it will be or whether the Races of Kings Lords & Priests will have another century of fine times keeping the People in the Dark or whether the Artful and Designing Russian who has been so foolishly introduced in to Europe, will overrun and conquer it – Establishing Darkness & Despotism – The illustration will more likely be known to the finder of this Bottle.

I am now 54 years of age – my Winter approaches – Should I live to be 80 I shall (I think) see many changes – and whether I do or not – Believe me – gentle reader – I am an honest constitutional man. My Religion is to be honest & just to all men, kind & benevolent to all, but rigid & strict, not overlooking crimes – I believe in a God – I do not believe one word of the terrible humbug story of Christianity; with which so large a portion of Mankind have been so long duped as to the Resurrection of the Body – I doubt it and if it be so – I may know what you are doing 1000 years hence – I shall be no worse than those who went before, & who will go after me.

Vale

Geo. Cockburn.

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Edward McParland, Alistair Rowan and Ann Martha Rowan, *The Architecture of Richard Morrison and William Vitruvius Morrison* (Dublin 1989) 159-60.
- 2 J.N. Brewer, *The Beauties of Ireland*, 2 vols (London 1825-6) i, 273-4.



*9 – Shanganagh Castle  
monument to the Reform Bill, part of which still stands*