



*1 – Ardbraccan Church, county Meath  
The executed design is comparable to St Paul's Church, Covent Garden, by Inigo Jones*

# The White Quarry, Ardraccan

---

TONY HAND

**I**N EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY IRELAND, THE DOUBLE-PILE PLAN WAS THE CLASSIC MODEL for the country house. Sir Edward Lovett Pearce is credited with its introduction to Irish architecture, whilst his assistant Richard Castle is credited with the dissemination of this plan throughout the country. Much has been written on the works of these men, but less information has been documented on the origins of an important element in building construction – the stone itself. Cut stone ashlar, hewn blocks wrought to smooth, even faces, became the desired material for facing private and public buildings in the eighteenth century. Prior to this, stone was still being used for such buildings in the form of rubble or roughly cut squares for walling. Limestone was the choice of builders for use as dressed masonry. It was more easily worked than igneous rock or granite, and stonecutters were able to achieve durable and sharper carved work. The purpose of this article is to give a brief outline of a particular limestone quarry that has played a major role in the architectural heritage of Dublin and surrounding counties – the White Quarry of Ardraccan in county Meath.

Situated in the barony of Navan Lower, Ardraccan lies two-and-a-half miles west of Navan, within the great expanse of the low-lying beds of reef limestone, which covers most of north Leinster. The quarry has been used for at least 600 years. Its stone has been used for monumental works, as cut stone for building, as agricultural lime, and even for glassmaking. Stone from the quarry can be found in public, domestic and ecclesiastical buildings. It has even been used in the construction and restoration of gaols. It is famous for its pale tone and infamous for changing its colour, owing to its very high calcite content.

The method of quarrying changed little over the centuries at Ardraccan. First the topsoil and scrub were removed. This exposed the inferior upper level that was used as agricultural limestone, and later for road-making. With the advent of gunpowder this level was blasted, but once the high-grade stone was reached, all

blasting ceased. The superior stone was removed by a system known as plugs and feathers, where wedges were tapped into small holes drilled into the rock to split and free the back end of the stone from the rock face. This system has been used since at least Roman times, but in the modern era mechanisation has taken over this role. The stone was then lowered from the face by a three-legged crane and brought to the bench and placed on a large stone known as a 'banker,' where the cutting and carving was done.

One of the earliest recorded mentions of the quarry was in the Civil Survey of 1654. Ardraccan had 'on ye Premises Two castles a Church, a Hall an open Quarry'.<sup>1</sup> Isaac Butler, writing in the 1740s, recorded the following: 'in ye neighborhood is one of ye best Lime Stone Quarries in ye Kingdom, it is cut into Tomb Stones, Chimney-pieces &c bearing a polish equal to ye best Marble, it is a curious grey Color.'<sup>2</sup> In 1802 the *Statistical Survey of County Meath* recorded that at Ardraccan there 'is an excellent limestone quarry, of a fine white grain, capable of being worked into any form for building'.<sup>3</sup> There are also references to the stone being used as far back as the fourteenth century in the chancel of Trim church, in the fifteenth century at Newtown, Trim, and in fifteenth and sixteenth century inscriptions at Bective Abbey in Meath. William Wilde, writing in 1849, stated that the carvings in the colonnade at Bective are of Ardraccan limestone.<sup>4</sup> Harold Leask, in 1916, regarded the colonnade as being of 'wrought and carved limestone, like Ardraccan stone'.<sup>5</sup>

Eugene Conwell, writing in 1873, made specific references to works executed in Ardraccan stone in Trim, county Meath, particularly works with detailed carving.<sup>6</sup> In his article, Conwell claimed that the stone was used in the medieval church ruins attached to St Patrick's Cathedral, situated on the north side of the town. In the south-west corner of the old chancel there is a tomb slab raised off the ground. The grave is that of a Walter Thoumbe, believed to have been a clergyman buried here in 1458. In the north-east corner of the chancel there is another stone in memory of Sir Thomas Ash, 'the stone is from the quarry of Ardraccan, about eight miles distant, and is apparently of about the date 1657'. The sixteenth-century window is regarded as being carved from Ardraccan stone. In the remains of the late medieval ruins of the parish church at Newtown, Trim, there lies 'a flat tomb slab of Ardraccan stone'.<sup>7</sup> The date of this slab is 1581 and is in memory of the Browne family.

Vestry minutes show that Ardraccan stone was used in the Church of Ireland church in Slane, county Meath. The stone was used in the construction of the new vestry in 1775, the steeple in 1795, and in the enclosing churchyard wall in the early 1800s.<sup>8</sup> Two holy water fountains of Ardraccan stone were included in the repairs to Clonmellon parish church, county Westmeath, in the 1780s.<sup>9</sup> In Wilkinson's *Practical Geology and Ancient Architecture of Ireland*, the public buildings in Trim

are stated to be constructed from local calp limestone, but the 'light coloured and more crystalline stone, from Ardraccon, is however preferred, where superior work is required and has been used in the front entrance of the new Gaol'.<sup>10</sup> The gaol was built in 1827 to a design by John Hargrave (Plate 2). It is a formidable construction, standing twenty-five feet high, and resembles a fortress. Only the front wall still stands, and one of its most interesting features is that it displays two contrasting finishes in its stonework. The combination of the heavily rusticated punched horizontal bands with the finer chiselled effect of the door frames displays the skills of the stonecutter, combining the rough with the smooth, so to speak.

Less than ten miles south of Trim once stood the great mansion of Summerhill House. Built in the 1730s, the house was burnt twice, once in the nineteenth century and again in the twentieth century, and is now demolished. The design of the house is attributed to Sir Edward Lovett Pearce, built for Hercules Langford Rowley and completed by Richard Castle. The central block was comparatively small, two storeys over a basement, with an engaged giant Corinthian order. The flanking quadrants were, unusually, of two storeys, which terminated in three-storey towers with octagonal stone domes. Beyond the domes were large two-storey pavilions of four bays, with large, single, central stacks, ending with pedimented triumphal arches. The overall length was almost 300 feet and faced with Ardraccon limestone.

The house was burned to a ruin in 1922, and was eventually demolished in the 1950s. Like many such ruins, the stone was taken away and used as building material elsewhere. The parish church in Cortown, county Meath, contains stone from Summerhill, along with freshly cut stone from Ardraccon, in renovations done in the late 1940s and early 1950s. But it is within the grounds of another religious building that we find one part of Summerhill House almost intact. In the grounds of St Columban's College, county Meath, there stands a curious pavilion-like structure in a small burial ground. This structure is a memorial to deceased members of the Columban Order interred in this cemetery. It is a tall seven-bay, single-storey loggia with a large central block crowned by an attic storey. Looking closely we can see that the central block is part of one of the three-storey towers of Summerhill House (Plate 3). The octagonal stone dome is absent, as is the lower portion containing the door, and the bases of the Doric columns now rest on the ground.

Richard Castle also worked for the Earl of Kildare on his Dublin residence, Kildare House, now better known as Leinster House. Constructed between 1745 and about 1748, the house is regarded as an early example of the use of Ardraccon limestone in Dublin. The entrance front is faced with the stone and the garden front is faced in granite, with details in Ardraccon and Portland stone.<sup>11</sup> Maurice Craig has said of the Ardraccon stone that it 'takes fine detail, remaining hard and slowly turning black'.<sup>12</sup>

Another famous building that has slowly turned black is the Provost's House in Trinity College, Dublin. The building of the house began in 1759. Built for Provost Francis Andrews, the entire façade is of Ardbraccan limestone (Appendix 1). The day-to-day supervision during the building period was carried out by Hugh Darley, with George Darley responsible for the stonecutting, though whether he supplied the stone himself is not certain.

The ground floor is richly carved using an unusual 'icicling' effect on the main rusticated piers and the arches above the windows. The upper floor is decorated with a range of Doric pilasters upon which rest an architrave, frieze and cornice. The façade is five bays long with a Venetian window centred in the upper floor. The most noticeable aspect of this front is the staining of the ground floor. The aesthetic quality of Ardbraccan limestone was ideal for the carved icicled work at the time, but without the gift of foresight, this type of carving has become a main contributor to the staining process. Much of the upper floor of the Provost's House has been replaced and cleaned, and its smoother surfaces make it more difficult for build-ups of air and water-borne pollutants to occur, but it is the icicled stone work of the ground floor that is of particular concern as the limestone is gradually turning to gypsum and crumbling away. Of all the buildings associated with Ardbraccan limestone, the Provost's House is the one displaying the worst effects of the breakdown

*2 – Trim Gaol, county Meath*

*Completed in 1827, this formidable façade is all that is left of John Hargrave's design*





3 – Dalgan Park, county Meath  
*The central block is part of the towers from Summerhill House*

of the stone by pollutants in the atmosphere.

The pollutants in the city are harmful to one's health, and it was for health reasons that Charles Tisdall was told to move away from the river next to his home, Bloomsbury House, situated on the river Blackwater between Navan and Kells. A site two-and-a-half miles away, in Athgaine, was chosen for his new home, Charlesfort House. Tisdall kept a very accurate account book, and in an entry for 15 April 1742 he mentioned paying out the initial sum of £22.13.10 for work done towards the new residence. An entry dated 20 August 1743 records the following: 'To Mr. Richard Castle when he gave me the plan for my house. I bargained with

him for twenty guineas for his plan & a guinea every day he overlooked the execution.’<sup>13</sup> Whether Castle earned his guinea every day overseeing work on the house is doubtful, as this is the only mention of payment to him in the accounts, but we do know that the house was built from stone quarried from the estate, as Michael Quin, quarryman, was paid ‘one penny per load from the quarry in the garden’.

Tisdall does mention purchasing stone from the White Quarry, which is about four miles from Charlesfort House. His first mention of such a purchase was for £3, on 16 August 1744, for an Ardraccan stone urn for his boathouse. The boathouse, an octagonal brick-built structure, was built at Bloomsbury when the estate was still owned by Tisdall. His next entry, dated 15 June 1747, was for a pair of hewn stone caps for the gate piers. For these he paid £2.5.6, which seems rather expensive when compared to his next purchase of seventy-nine feet of Ardraccan stone for the new kitchen hearth at a cost of £2.12.0, bought in January 1748. Also in January Tisdall paid £1 for a dial post made from Ardraccan stone. Later that year he makes his final entry on purchasing the stone in the form of two pedestals for urns. It is noticeable that the Ardraccan stone purchased by Tisdall was for decorative rather than building purposes. Of course, it is quite natural to assume that due to the location of a quarry on the estate, it made economic sense to use its stone for construction work, but its quality must not have been as good for more detailed work as that of the Ardraccan stone.

A beautiful example of the carved detail of the stone can be found in Bellinter House, approximately nine miles south east of Charlesfort. Began in 1750, this country-style villa was designed by Richard Castle for John Preston. It consists of a six-bay central block, linked by low, single-storey wings to flanking pavilions, which project forward to form a court in front of the house. The centrepiece of the entrance hall is the enormous grey stone mantelpiece (Plate 4). This mantelpiece is made from Ardraccan limestone. What is interesting about this work is that it displays the qualities that have made the stone the choice of stonecutters down through the years. Though the piece is very large and solid, there is a tactile softness and warmth to it that would not normally be associated with stone. It also makes one appreciate the craftsmanship of the carver, evident, for example, in the detailed carving of the face on the mantelpiece.

What is known of Ardraccan throughout this period and well into the nineteenth century is that the quarry was part of the Ardraccan Demesne, owned by the Bishops of Meath. The Civil Survey of 1654 recorded the land of Ardraccan being Church land. The *Statistical Survey of County Meath* (1802) stated that ‘At Ardraccan, on the demesne of the bishop, is an excellent limestone quarry.’<sup>14</sup> A map of the demesne lands of Ardraccan of 1841 shows the quarry as part of the demesne. Ardraccan House itself was begun in the 1730s to a design by Richard Castle for Arthur Price, Bishop of Meath (Plate 5). The intention was to construct a



4 – *Bellinter House, county Meath:*  
*the finely carved chimneypiece in the entrance hall.*

Palladian mansion, and the work started on the kitchen and stable blocks and their attached quadrant walls. Before the main central block was started, Price was elevated to the Archbishopric of Cashel, and all work ceased. Isaac Butler, on his visit to Ardraccan in about 1749, described the building as follows:

The Antient [*sic*] Mansion house falling down into Decay, was taken down by Bp Price, who laid the Foundation of a magnificent Structure ye 2 Wings are finished in ye Augustine Taste & it is expected that ye present Bp Maule will finish the Body.<sup>15</sup>

The decision to complete the house was not made by Bishop Maule but by Henry Maxwell, Bishop of Meath from 1766 to 1798, and the foundation stone was laid on 1 August 1776. Naturally stone from the quarry was used in the building, ‘Of this stone, the Hon. Dr. Maxwell ... built a beautiful palace at Ardraccan; a monument of taste and liberality.’<sup>16</sup>

Shortly after the completion of Ardraccan House work began on rebuilding



Ardbraccan Church. An undated plan for the church by Revd Daniel Beaufort showed a structure 100 feet long with a tower and spire 100 feet high. However, a more modest structure was built with the limestone, in the tradition of Inigo Jones' famous 'barn' of St Paul's, Covent Garden (Plate 1). Next to the church is a free-standing late-medieval tower built from limestone rubble from the quarry. Directly opposite the tower stands a large early seventeenth-century monument to George Montgomery, former chaplain to James I. On the back of the monument is a plaque to Bishop Richard Pococke, buried there in 1765 after only two months of arriving in Ardbraccan. The likelihood is that this monument was carved from Ardbraccan limestone, as there are many references to the use of the stone for carving tombstones.<sup>17</sup> Monumental carving has always been a constant factor throughout the lifetime of the quarry.

When Arthur Young visited Headfort House in Kells, county Meath, in 1776, he was impressed with the work done by Lord Bective, Sir Thomas Taylour. Describing the house, Young wrote 'The house and offices are entirely new built: it is a large plain stone edifice. The body of the house is 145 feet long, and the wings each 180.'<sup>18</sup> Young was diplomatic in his description of his host's residence, but others were not; George Hardinge, in 1792, thought it 'more like a college or an infirmary',<sup>19</sup> and, indeed, today the house functions as a private school (Plate 6). The great house is plain in its appearance and faced with Ardbraccan stone, unrelieved except for a simple pedimented door case. Joseph Briggs, stonemason, started cutting stone in February 1761. The work progressed very slowly. An entry in an account book of work done by Briggs at Headfort shows it took five-and-a-half days to set Ardbraccan stone in the doorways of the greenhouses.<sup>20</sup> The account book informs us also of Ardbraccan stone being used in the interior of the house. One entry records that Briggs was allowed £40.13.4 for '2440 feet of "ston quarryd" in Ardbracken at 4d per foot he being at an "Extrordner Expence" for the stairs'. The stairs mentioned are the cantilevered service stairs, which run through the four storeys of the house, with two flights to each floor. The stairs are simple in design and display very good craftsmanship and an intricate iron balustrade. The cost of quarrying the stone was just over £40, but the total for the finished stairs at Headfort was £308.00.11 (Appendix 2).

The Ardbraccan Glebe and lands were sold by the Representative Church Body to John A. Law in 1890.<sup>21</sup> This consisted of the Ecclesiastical Residence with about 130 acres of land. By this time, Bishop Plunkett, then Bishop of Meath, had moved residence to nearby Bishops court. At this time also, the Pettigree family were linked with the quarry. Thomas Pettigree was the owner of the quarry and of the land surrounding it at this time, but there was also mention of a James Pettigree leasing lands and houses of the White Quarry back in 1857. From this we can assume that at least three generations of Pettigrees owned and worked the quarry.<sup>22</sup>

In *The Irish Builder* for 15 April 1911 there appeared an article regarding the different types of building stone available throughout the country. In the section on limestone it described the stone from Pettigrue's quarry as being light-grey in colour and very crystalline in appearance. It could also be worked very well; in fact it worked more freely than 'almost any other limestone in Ireland'.<sup>23</sup> The article went on to mention a house built with stone from the quarry:

One of the finest modern mansions in Ireland was built about thirty years ago with stones taken from this quarry for Mr. Thomas Gerrard, D.L., J.P., and from the designs of Mr. W.H. Lynn, R.H.A. The building cost over £70,000 and would not be out of place in Park Lane, London.<sup>24</sup>

The house in question was Gibbstown House in county Meath, built in 1870. This house, no longer extant, was an immense Italianate mansion, with a tall campanile attached to the house by a single-storey wing containing a domed music room. The main building consisted of a three-storey block faced in limestone ashlar throughout. The Articles of Agreement and the Bills of Quantities concerning Gibbstown House specified that the cut stonework 'unless otherwise described, is to be procured from the Ardracken [*sic*] Quarries'. The total cost for the cut stonework was worked out at £10,978.19.5. The cost included all plain beds of stone and joints, sawing, waste, hoisting, and the setting with, and including, all necessary dowels and cramps.<sup>25</sup> In 1912 the house was destroyed by fire. J.F. Fuller, who created designs for many buildings in counties Meath and Westmeath, rebuilt it that same year, using G. & T. Crampton as contractors. In his schedule of prices for rebuilding in November of that year, Fuller stipulated that any reusable materials were to be itemised and stacked neatly in separate piles.<sup>26</sup> Ardraccan limestone was used again in the rebuilding, and the Newry granite used in the chimney stacks was replaced with Ballyknocken granite. The house remained intact until about 1965 when the monks of New Mellifont Abbey, Collon, county Louth, meticulously dismantled it piece by piece, numbering each block, with the intention of reconstructing the entire building for themselves. This never happened and the blocks lay in their numbered stacks in the grounds of the monastery, eventually being sold off piece by piece. Much of the stone has recently been used by the McCabe family to build a new home on the outskirts of Ardee in county Louth, giving us an impression of what the newly cut stone must have looked like originally with its crisp pale-grey appearance (Plate 7).<sup>27</sup> Fuller was also the designer of St Patrick's Church at Donaghpatrick, county Meath. The tower belonged to the medieval church that once stood there, and to this Fuller added a three-bay nave of rock faced Ardraccan limestone.

Only a few miles east of Donaghpatrick is the parish church of Kilberry. The Church of St John the Baptist was built in 1839. The church was refurbished in the 1950s, and, during the work, two groups of modern lancets of Ardraccan stone



*5 – Ardbraccan House, county Meath  
Construction of the wings began in the 1730s, but the central block did not commence until 1776*

*6 – Headfort House, Kells, county Meath:  
executed to a design by George Semple*





*7 – McCabe Family residence, Ardee, county Louth  
Detail of the Gerrard coat of arms and the date 1870 are visible on the façade*

were inserted either side of the entrance. But, curiously, these lancets are dark grey in appearance, rather than the crisp, pale-grey colour, traditionally associated with the limestone from the quarry. The common belief is that the Ardbraccan limestone darkens when exposed to the elements, but those that have worked at the quarry say the colour can vary depending on which section of the quarry was being worked. Limestone ranging from pale grey, almost white, to a darkish blue has been worked on in the quarry over the years. The darkness the stone can achieve has not been appreciated by all. According to Dr John Ruttly, describing a typical Irish quarry in 1774, the grey freestone (limestone) had ‘evil properties’ in that it ‘draweth the moisture of the air continually to it, and so becometh dank and wet both in and outside’.<sup>28</sup> Many believe that this is a major drawback regarding Ardbraccan limestone.

This darkening is extremely noticeable at the Custom House, Dublin. Completed in 1791, the Custom House is regarded as James Gandon’s greatest achievement. On 25 May 1921 Republican forces attacked it and burned it to the ground. Prior to the great fire, the dome of the Custom House was made of Portland

stone. During the rebuilding in the late 1920s, Ardbraccan stone was used in the dome's reconstruction, and now contrasts sharply with the surviving white Portland stone (Plate 8). Many presumed that it was for patriotic reasons that Ardbraccan was chosen to supply the stone rather than import stone from England. Others saw it as a way of creating employment and the newly independent state attempting to stand on its own feet. Either way, Mr Thomas Pettigru & Son, Ardbraccan Quarries, was awarded the prestigious contract. They were the only company invited to supply cut stone for the restoration.<sup>29</sup> In July 1925 a letter was drawn up enquiring if the quarry would supply cut stone for window cases in the building's north front. Two days later Pettigru sent tenders for supplying the cases. In November a request was sent for the reinstatement of four columns in the central hall, and a tender of £128 for four shaft bases and caps was accepted. A single tender of Pettigru's exists for the restoration of the dome.<sup>30</sup> The report of the Commissioners of Public Works for 1927-28 stated that 'About five-sixths of the ornamental stone-work of the peristyle of the dome were worked in Ardbraccan limestone, and about one-fourth of it set in place.'<sup>31</sup> The same report for the year 1930 recorded that the contract for the dome was completed. The dome, with its peristyle and base, was rebuilt from the main attic level; the lower part is of Ballyknocken granite, upon which is the Ardbraccan peristyle and attic backed with brick concrete. The dome is crowned by the eleven ton figure of Commerce by Edward Smyth, executed in Portland Stone. The same architects and contractors involved with the Custom House also carried out reconstruction work on the Four Courts from 1924 to 1931. It is understood that Ardbraccan stone was used on the internal reconstruction.<sup>32</sup>

Thomas Pettigru and his son Archibald continued to own the quarry until the mid-1940s. During this time, work was carried out quarrying and cutting stone for many large contracts, one of these was for St Columban's College, Navan. Construction began in 1934 and finished in 1943. Designed by Jones & Kelly this is a building on a massive scale in a Hiberno-Romanesque style.<sup>33</sup> The long façade of crisp limestone ashlar contains a projecting gabled centrepiece and advanced gabled ends, and stands out from the repetition of standard units of the sides.

Work was also carried out on the new cathedral in Mullingar. The Cathedral of Christ the King was begun in 1932 and finished in 1936 to a design by Ralph Byrne. Built to seat about 1,800 people, the cathedral was consecrated on 4 September 1939, the day war was declared between England and Germany. The cathedral exhibits an amalgam of Roman, Palladian and baroque elements. Portland stone and channelled granite ashlar are used in the cathedral, but there is some detail carved in Ardbraccan limestone also.

In 1944 Archibald Pettigru sold the quarry and its land to the Irish Glass Bottle Company. As World War II still raged, there was no export of sand from England into the country for glass-making.<sup>35</sup> The company searched for somewhere

suitable in Ireland and chose the White Quarry. The ‘spalls’ or chippings from the cut stone were found to be ideal for glass-making, due to their whiteness. There were enough spalls being produced to fill a lorry for daily deliveries to Dublin. But this did not mean that the quarry only produced for the Glass Bottle Company. Normal quarrying and stonecutting continued as the company placed a manager at the quarry to deal with monumental and building contracts. The works mentioned earlier at Cortown and Kilberry churches were carried out during this period. Also done in this period was restoration work at Kilnacrot Abbey, work on Leixlip Bridge, and numerous monumental works throughout the area.

In the early 1950s the quarry was sold to the partnership of Rennicks & Bennett, employees at the quarry. One of their largest contracts at the time was for what is now the Allied Irish Bank on Dame St in Dublin. The bank, formerly known as the Munster and Leinster Bank, was built in the early 1870s. It was designed by T.N. Deane and was built by John Nolan & Son. The limestone used on the exterior came from Ballinasloe, county Galway, and was supplied by M. Walter Doolin.<sup>36</sup> In 1957 permission was sought to extend the building. McDonnell & Dixon were the architects of the extension, John Sisk & Son were the contractors, and Patterson & Kempster were the chartered quantity surveyors. In their schedule of rates, the quantity surveyors stated that limestone for the extension was to be obtained from a quarry or quarries approved by the architect. At the time of this schedule, the architects had already inspected Ardraccon and the quarry at Ballinasloe, where the original limestone came from. By this time also, a provisional order for the supply of cut limestone for the early requirements of the extension had already been placed with Messrs Rennicks & Bennett at Ardraccon. The onus was then on the contractor to visit the quarry and discuss the extent of, and the prices incorporated in, the order immediately the tender was accepted. Sisk signed the contract 30 July 1957. *The Irish Builder* printed that the permission for the extension was granted in its October 1957 edition,<sup>37</sup> and in its edition of March 1960 reported that the extension was completed, adding that the contractors procured the limestone from Ardraccon to ‘maintain the harmony of the architectural style so that the extension would not be detectable’.<sup>38</sup> In looking closely at the façade we can see that the ‘harmony of the architectural style’ that was envisaged has, over the years, become disrupted (Plate 9).

Another major contract for the quarry at this time was the replacement of Mount Charles sandstone in the National Library in Dublin. Thomas Deane’s designs of 1883 used ashlar of Ballyknocken granite to face the buildings, and sandstone from the newly tapped quarry at Mount Charles in Donegal was used for the door and window details, in preference to Portland stone. In July 1893 the following appeared in *The Irish Naturalist*: ‘The Mountcharles [*sic*] stone, as used by Sir Thomas Deane ... a fine-grained, pale-coloured, well-cemented sandstone should be



able ... to drive limestones out of the field’;<sup>39</sup> ironic, then, that Ardbracon limestone was used in the 1960s to replace the deteriorating Mount Charles stone. During the 1960s up to fifty men were employed at the quarry, cutting stone for projects such as the new church at Westport, county Mayo, and in the restoration work on Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin. In 1965-66 work was carried out on cutting stone for the Garden of Remembrance to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising. Oisín Kelly’s *The Children of Lir* is framed by the rock-faced limestone of the White Quarry.<sup>40</sup>

One of the last big deliveries to Dublin from the quarry was in the late 1960s. A thousand tons of agricultural lime was spread on the Phoenix Park. It was while drilling holes to blast the stone for lime in the early 1970s that an unusual dark substance was encountered, prompting the Rennicks & Bennett partnership to apply for a prospecting licence. Exploration drilling determined that the depth of the Ardbracon limestone was 120 feet. A geological visit to the quarry in 1973 recorded that although no minerals of value were present, it was the discovery of pyrite mineralisation ‘during quarrying at Ardbracon that “triggered off” mineral prospecting in the Navan area, ultimately leading to the discovery of Tara’s phe-

*opposite 8 – The Custom House, Dublin:  
the darker dome of Ardbracon stone contrasts with the paler Portland stone.*

*9 – AIB Bank, Dame Street, Dublin:  
contrasting colours of Ballinasloe limestone on the right and Ardbracon limestone on the left.*







*10 – The White Quarry, Ardraccon: peace and tranquillity at sunset*

nominal zinc-lead ore body’,<sup>41</sup> the largest in Europe. The concrete products company Kilsaran leased the quarry from Rennicks & Bennett in the early 1980s, and used the stone for crushed aggregate. The quarry was then purchased by Stanley Macadam who never worked it, and it was soon sold to Roadstone, who also never worked it, erecting a large fence around its perimeter. They are still the owners today.

In 1738 the Earl of Kildare acquired Carton House, county Kildare, and set about remodelling the mansion. In 1991 a survey was carried out on the buildings stonework, and according to the survey, Richard Castle’s additions during the remodelling were of a quality limestone ‘probably Ardraccon’.<sup>42</sup> But we know for certain that Ardraccon limestone was used in the building due to the following entry in the account book (now lost) in 1739: ‘To carving the familie Arms, by John Houghton and John Kelly, in ye Pediment in Ardracken Stone, with other decorations of Boys, Cornicopias, etc., £60.’<sup>43</sup> Richard Castle died in 1751 while working at Carton.

Like Castle, the life of the quarry is no more. The White Quarry of Ardraccon now lies silent after centuries of ringing to the sound of metal on stone (Plate 10). Its stone still continues to challenge and to enchant today. It is being pre-

served in old buildings and reused in new buildings, thanks to people like the McCabe family. The only movement now are the gentle ripples on the water caused by the breeze blowing across this dormant giant. Like the breeze, this article has only skimmed the surface of the White Quarry; the selection of buildings and monuments discussed stand as a testament to this great quarry and the men who worked there.

---

APPENDIX 1

(Trinity College Dublin, MUN/P2/142. Account of George Darley for hewn stonework at the Provost's House, measured by Richard King and certified by Hugh Darley).

Bill of the hewn stonework of the Rt. Hon. Provost's House and offices in Trinity, Sept 6th 1765. Hewn stone works done at the Right Hon. The Provost's House in Trinity College under direction of Mr. Hugh Darley, by George Darley.

PRINCIPAL FRONT, ARDBRACKEN MARBLE.

Ft.	In.	
202	3	In the 2 first projecting plinths being of an extraordinary thickness at 26/-, £21-18-2.
28	2	In the ashlar under parlour window at 24/-, £2-16-4.
294	3	In stools, jambs and heads to the parlour, windows and Hall door, the stools being made solid and jambs being 11" impost at 2/3, 33-2.
441	5	In the great rustick peers which project 17" at 2/5, 53-6-9.
121	5	In projecting fascia over those piers at 2/4, 14-3-5.
30	3	In the plain arch of Hall door 11" impost single measure at 32, 4-00-8.
137	1	In the coris? to arches over 8 windows being cut circular at 27, 15-8-5.
270	9	In the great rustick arches which project 17" single measure at 36, 40-12-3.
207	9	In the rustic spanderal ashlar between the arches at 28, 24-4-9.
120	6	In the projecting fascia over 1st storey which is 12" high and has a large top bed in the opens between peers which is all made solid at 28, 14-1-2.
104	2	In the moulded base and plinth over this fascia at 30, 13-0-5. To 27 round balusters under the windows being 1" deeper than half

- balusters including plugging and fixing at 14, 18-18-00.  
 To 14 balusters which appear as balusters but are 1" deeper including plugging 7-00-00.
- 130 2 In the moulded cimasiium which forms the window stools and capping to pedestals at 32, 17-7-1.
- 134 5 In rustic peers to 2nd storey at 28, 15-13-8.
- 139 9 In moulded architrave round 4 windows at 32, 18-12-8.  
 To 8 jogle joints in lintels of same at 24, -16-00.
- 13 2 In the caps and bases of the columns and pilasters of Venetian window at 48, 2-12-8.
- 48 11 In the shafts of the columns and pilasters each lying in 1 stone at 32, 6-10-5.
- 69 7 In the inside jambs and frieze of same at 26, 7-10-9.
- 63 7 In the moulded impost over window at 32, 8-9-6.
- 23 6 In plain arch over same at 32, 3-2-8.
- 68 5 In the quoins on the ends behind the pilasters at 26, 7-8-2.
- 174 10 In the rustic arches between pilasters at 32, 23-6-2.
- 75 6 In the bases and caps of great pilasters at 42, 13-4-3.
- 257 5 In the shafts of great pilasters at 39, 41-16-7.  
 To 12 large band stones in said pilasters at 9, 5-8-00.
- 86 00 In the great Doric architrave over said pilasters at 33, 11-16-6.
- 148 00 In the Dies? of the pedestals at 26, 16-00-8.
- 19 3 In the moulded archivault of Venetian window at 40, 3-4-2.  
 To 20 jogle joints in great architrave 48, 4-0-0.  
 To 22 sets of bells in do. 24, 1-0-0.
- 98 4 In Doric frize [*sic*] with trigliphs 33, 13-10-5.
- 278 8 In great Doric cornice 42, 48-15-4.  
 To cutting of 6 holes in the Blocking to fasten lead at 3, 1-4-0.
- 190 0 In do. blocking 26, 20-11-8.  
 To cutting 22 half madilions with bells and bands 6/6 7-3-0.  
 To cutting 25 pannells with 4 bells in each and in all pannells at the ends of do. with bands round the whole 5 6-5-0.
- 48 11 The moulded Ardbracken stone steps at Hall door 30, 6-2-3.
- 8 8 In Portland stone moulded sill to do. door 30, 1-1-9.
- 67 11 In the inside piers of Venetian window 16, 4-10-8.

Total of principal front being all of Ardbracken Marble, £586-10-8.

## APPENDIX 2

(National Library of Ireland, MS 26.679, Accounts of work done for Lord Bective by Joseph Briggs, stonecutter, on Headfort House, 1773).

## THE STONE STAIRS IN HEADFORT HOUSE

1st Storey	2 flights	430 ft.	£53-16-3.
2nd Storey	2 flights	687 ft.	£85-18-9.
3rd Storey	2 flights	670 ft.	£83-15-10.
4th Storey	2 flights	459 ft.	£57-8-4.
There is 106 steps		153 ft	£18-9-9.

one foot and half allowd [*sic*] for each step in hall.

Total feet come to 2440 at a price of £308-00-11.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to express his gratitude to Prof Michael McCarthy and Dr Christine Casey for their help and encouragement; to David Griffin and staff, Irish Architectural Archive; David and Sarah Maher, Ardbracon House, Navan; Patsy McCabe and family, Ardee; Dermot Dix and staff, Headfort House, Kells; Tim Cooper and Michael Murray, Trinity College, Dublin; Valerie Ingram, Office of Public Works Library, Dublin; Frances Tallon and Andy Bennett, Meath County Library, Navan. Special thanks to Pat Bennett and Seamus Bennett for their first-hand accounts of the workings of the White Quarry. And finally, to Carol, without whose help and support this article would never have seen the light of day.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> R. Simington, *The Civil Survey of County Meath, 1654-1656* (Dublin 1940) 232
- <sup>2</sup> I. Butler, 'A Journey to Lough Derg', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, XXII, 1892, 128.
- <sup>3</sup> R. Thompson, *Statistical Survey of County Meath* (Dublin 1802) 28.
- <sup>4</sup> W.R. Wilde, *Beauties and Antiquities of County Meath* (Dublin 1849) 110.
- <sup>5</sup> H. Leask, 'Bective Abbey, Co. Meath', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, XLVI, 1916, 53.

- <sup>6</sup> E. Conwell, 'A Ramble Round Trim', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, II, 1873, 401-05.
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 380.
- <sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Livia Hurley, with the assistance of Revd Canon John Clarke, Rector, St Mary's Church of Ireland, Navan, for this information.
- <sup>9</sup> P. Fagan, *The Diocese of Meath in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin 2001) 167.
- <sup>10</sup> G. Wilkinson, *Practical Geology and Ancient Architecture of Ireland* (London 1845) 251.
- <sup>11</sup> D. Griffin and C. Pegum, *Leinster House* (Dublin 2000) 14.
- <sup>12</sup> M. Craig, *Dublin 1660-1860* (Dublin 1969) 133.
- <sup>13</sup> C. Tisdall, Estate Account Book for Charlesfort 1741-1750, private collection. All the following information regarding Charlesfort is from this account book.
- <sup>14</sup> Thompson, *Statistical Survey*, 28.
- <sup>15</sup> Butler, 'Journey to Lough Derg', 128.
- <sup>16</sup> Thompson, *Statistical Survey*, 28-29. See also S. Lewis, *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (London 1837) 42. Here Lewis also mentions the use of the White Quarry stone in the construction of Ardbraccan House.
- <sup>17</sup> Butler, 'Journey to Lough Derg', 28; Thompson, *Statistical Survey*, 29.
- <sup>18</sup> A. Young, *A Tour in Ireland 1776-1779* (London and New York 1892) 51.
- <sup>19</sup> M. Bence-Jones, *A Guide to Country Houses* (London 1988) 150.
- <sup>20</sup> National Library of Ireland, MS 26.679, Accounts of work done for Lord Bective by Joseph Briggs, stonecutter, on Headfort House, 1773.
- <sup>21</sup> Registry of Deeds, Dublin, Deed 1890, 19/279/616.
- <sup>22</sup> Registry of Deeds, Dublin, 1884/22/249. In this memorial of a deed of mortgage regarding Pettigru and the Irish Land Commission, dated 14 January 1884, there is a mention of a lease involving lands and houses of the White Quarry between the Bishop of Meath and James Pettigru on 27 June 1857.
- <sup>23</sup> Anthony Scott, 'The Building Stones of Ireland', *The Irish Builder*, LIII, 1911, 234.
- <sup>24</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>25</sup> Irish Architectural Archive, Patterson, Kempster & Shortall Collection, 77/1/1059 and 1229.
- <sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 77/1/0003.
- <sup>27</sup> The steps, windows and internal doors are all original. The wardrobes are made from timber from Gibbstown House and still bear the scorch marks from the fire of 1912. To add the final touch to the house, exact replicas of the original entrance piers and railings were commissioned.
- <sup>28</sup> Dr J. Ruddy, *An Essay Towards a Natural History of County Dublin* (Dublin 1774) 82.
- <sup>29</sup> It is surprising to think Pettigru was the only person approached at this time. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some form of political influence was involved, favouring the White Quarry.
- <sup>30</sup> Information courtesy of Christine Casey from research on unregistered Office of Public Works papers.
- <sup>31</sup> Office of Public Works, *Report of the Commissioner of Public Works for the Year 1927-1928* (Dublin 1928) 5-6.
- <sup>32</sup> Information courtesy of Pat Bennett, stonecutter, who recalls his father working at the Four Courts installing Ardbraccan stone.
- <sup>33</sup> C. Casey and A. Rowan, *The Buildings of Ireland: North Leinster* (London 1993) 433.

- <sup>34</sup> Thanks again to Pat Bennett who assures me that Thomas Pettigru bought a new car on the strength of the order for Mullingar.
- <sup>35</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that the fact the owner of the company was of German birth may have had some bearing on the matter.
- <sup>36</sup> Irish Architectural Archive, Patterson, Kempster & Shortall Collection, B05/25.
- <sup>37</sup> *The Irish Builder*, 5 October 1957, 793.
- <sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, 19 March 1960, 197.
- <sup>39</sup> G.A.J. Cole, 'The Beauty and Use of Irish Building Stones', *Irish Naturalist*, II, 1893, 180.
- <sup>40</sup> I am indebted to Pat and Seamus Bennett for their recollections on the work carried out on these projects.
- <sup>41</sup> The Geological Survey of Ireland, Dublin, John S. Jackson, *Letter to The Investment Bank of Ireland, 17 August 1973*, File on Prospecting Licence Area No. 1496.
- <sup>42</sup> Irish Architectural Archive, D.CAR.3.0. 'Planning Application for Tourism / Leisure Project at Carton Demesne, Maynooth, county Kildare' (Dublin 1991) Appendix B.
- <sup>43</sup> Lord W. Fitzgerald, 'Carton', *Journal of the County Kildare Archaeological Society and Surrounding District*, IV, 1903-05, 14.
-