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# *A survey of Thomastown Castle Ruins 2003*

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## **Introduction**

Thomastown Castle near the village of Golden, Co. Tipperary is a eighteenth century mansion renovated in the Gothic revival style, which has fallen derelict in recent times. It is situated in the townland of Thomastown (O.S. 1/2 inch 18 S 37 08) across two fields south of the N74 Cashel/Tipperary road, six miles east of Cashel.

It was formerly the residence of the Mathew family who were originally of Welsh origin. The Mathews were related to the duke of Ormonde through the marriage of Captain George Mathew to Lady Thurles in 1620, widow of Viscount Thurles. As a result of this union, the Mathews acquired extensive property in Thurles town and the surrounding area. Their younger son, also called George, built the Thomastown residence in 1670. It consisted of a two storey house of pink brick built in the classical fashion within a 2,000- acre demesne.

In turn, his grandson, known as 'Grand' George, made extensive renovations to the house and grounds from 1718 onwards. Fifty extra bedrooms, a fifty-foot dining hall, and an outdoor theatre were added onto the main house and a large formal garden with ponds and terraces and bowling greens was also created. Grand George was famed for his hospitality and his many guests included Dean Swift, who stayed four months.<sup>1</sup>

The Mathews conformed to the Anglican religion in the eighteenth century although one branch of the family remained Roman Catholic, of which the most famous was Fr. Theobald Mathew (1790-1856), who led the 1840s temperance movement in Ireland. He was reputed to have been born in room ten in Thomastown Castle and spent his early years living there as his father was employed as agent for the property. However, as the family grew in number, they moved to nearby Rathclogheen House in 1795.

The Mathews were members of Parliament for Co. Tipperary in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In 1797, Francis Mathew was created the First Earl of Llandaff and he was succeeded by his eldest son, Francis James Mathew in 1806.<sup>2</sup> In 1812 Francis James Mathew, the second Earl of Llandaff, engaged the well-known architect Richard Morrison to give the house a mock-gothic facade.<sup>3</sup> The pink brick walls were resurfaced in cement. Both square and polygonal turrets, towers and battlements were added to the main entrance and to the garden front walls.

The dining hall was transformed into a Gothic hall with a fancy plaster chimney piece. A large service wing and huge Gothic kitchen court were also added to the main building. A brick entrance gateway with a polygonal tower was erected some 300 metres to the east of the main residence. The original Morrison plan indicated that an extra wing was to be built onto the main house. However, this extra wing was never built due to a lack of funds.<sup>4</sup>

However, after the second Earl of Llandaff's death in 1833, the earldom became extinct as neither he nor his brothers had any issue. The Thomastown estate and castle passed to a sister, Lady Elizabeth Mathew.<sup>5</sup> She also died without issue in 1841 and willed the castle to a first cousin on her mother's side, Viscount Rohan de Chabot. He and his son, Comte de Jamac, used the castle as a summer residence until the latter's death in 1872. The Thomastown estate then passed to Lord Dunsandle who lived in Galway and rarely visited. The castle remained in the

care of caretakers until 1921-1922 and afterwards fell into ruin. The Land Commission distributed estate lands among former tenants in the late 1920s.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the buildings of the Thomastown estate have been destroyed in the past thirty years. These include the following:

- (1) The ornamental gardens, terraces and artificial lakes and stream bed were levelled in the early 1970s;
- (2) The lead roof of the house and service wing was removed many years ago, as were roofs in the courtyard complex. As a result, the main building, courtyard complex and entrance tower are extensively covered in ivy;
- (3) In 1973 part of the main house building collapsed, including the Gothic hall and dining room areas;
- (4) The two road entrances with lodges and farmyard buildings were demolished at the same period, so that no access path to the castle now exists.

### **Description of castle in 2003**

#### *The Entrance Gateway*

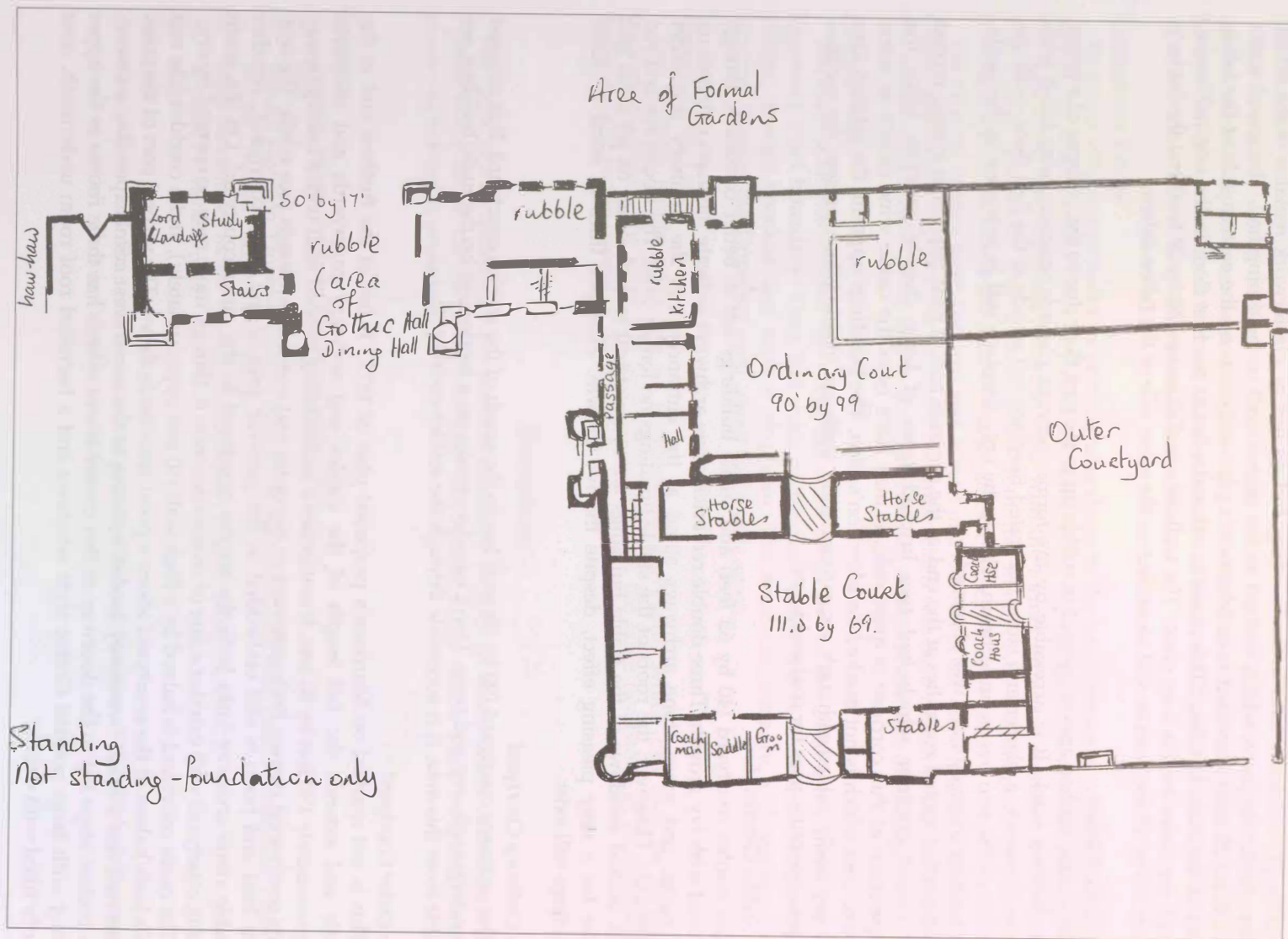
It lies at a distance of some 900 feet away to the east of the main buildings. It stood at the end of the original winding passage from the main road entrance at Thomastown Cross to the castle itself. Although covered with some ivy, it is in fine repair. The cement work surface of the gateway is damaged in parts, revealing red brick underneath.

The entrance gateway consists of a polygonal tower with a crenellated turret and a porch on either side of an entrance arch, decorated with more crusaders' crosses. Originally the tower had a winding stairs to the top and two crusaders' crosses are still visible on the turret. The entrance arch has been walled up to a height of four feet approximately, preventing access to the next field. However, five buttresses still stand against the adjoining wall at the orchard side of the entrance gateway, thus giving the appearance of a raised ditch on that side. Originally, haw-haws enclosed the castle field, but these have been levelled in recent years.

#### *The Main Building*

On the furthest eastern end of the main building lies a great gateway still lined with cobbled stones. A stone archway still stands above this gateway which is bounded on one side by the main building and on the other by a stone wall with a raised green area. Here visitors to the castle would alight from their carriages to enter the castle by the main entrance. The main building is now covered with an extensive growth of ivy and undergrowth. However, the basic ground plan of a long rectangular two storey house is still visible. The cement plaster is destroyed in parts, thus revealing the original pink brickwork of the seventeenth century house.

The four towers at the castle front are still standing, though only their bases and their turret tops are visible under the thick ivy undergrowth. Two turret dart-like pinnacles, on either side of the former main entrance, and four crusader cross engravings are visible as are the other two cylindrical turrets, also decorated with crusader crosses. The middle of the main building (the fifty foot long Gothic Hall, dining room, breakfast parlour area) between the two dart-like turrets collapsed in 1973 and is now filled with debris. The remaining part of the entrance wall has six window openings though they now have become gaping holes in the masonry as the bottom part of the windows are also destroyed. However, some stone carving decoration above the top of the window openings still exists.



Standing  
Not standing - foundation only

Fig 1: Thomastown Castle Ground Plan (based on Richard Morrison's Ground Plan I.A.A. 16/90RZ).

The fireplace flues remain in the building, but no flue or plasterwork remains of the noted Gothic plaster fireplace, which was set in the central wall of the dining hall. The grand stairs area (50 by 25 feet) identified from Morrison's plan still exists on the eastern side of the fallen debris of the main building. This massive oak stairs led to the first floor in the original house, though the stairs itself is long gone.<sup>7</sup> The walls of a bed chamber (30 by 37 feet) and the butler's pantry (15 by 19 feet) can be still identified on the other side of the fallen debris.

#### *The Gothic Kitchen*

The Gothic kitchen area is covered in rubble up to the first floor due to the collapse of a tower or a chimney stack. It is accessible by the former servant passage stairway, also filled with debris. However, a plaster and stone decorated fireplace still stands at the first floor, with the remains of the two ovens underneath. This is the only fireplace still in existence in the castle. No standing chimney stack was observed.

A barrelled roofed room lies at the end of the servants hall. It runs parallel to a long, roofed and closed corridor which had two bricked rows of large double grooves. Since the temperature of this corridor is quite cold, it may have been the castle wine cellars or some storage area which is not marked on Morrison's plan. The buildings opposite the kitchen area are very badly ruined although some foundation walls are visible which present the outlines for possible outhouses for coal and wood.

#### *The Stables Courtyard*

The stables courtyard (40 by 63 feet) and stable buildings are in better condition, though covered with ivy growth. Three double red brick stone archways indicate the main entrance on the north, and more stone archways stand at the entrances into the ordinary and outer courtyards. However, the roofs of the stable buildings no longer exist. The doorways and red brick arched windows of the stable buildings are symmetrical to each other on all sides and make for a very pleasing effect, despite the ivy growth. Fireplace flues in some of these buildings still exist.

#### *The Ordinary Courtyard*

The ordinary courtyard (90 by 99 feet) lies to the south of the stables courtyard. It is covered in undergrowth, ivy and trees. Two Crusader crosses on a battlement on the main building are visible from this area. It is accessible through the stables courtyard.

#### *The Outer Courtyard*

This is not marked on Morrison's proposed plan of 1812.<sup>8</sup> It lies at the furthest end of the castle and extends the full length of the stables and ordinary courtyards and measures approximately 190 feet by 80 feet. It comprises a surrounding capped wall with a main gateway at its north-west corner. Both gateways of the outer and stables courtyards face north. The iron gate heel and hoop is still embedded in the gateway pier of the outer courtyard. Another double stone archway links both the stables courtyard to the outer courtyard. On the south facing courtyard wall exterior a line of crosses decorate it, though more may be covered by ivy.

The outer courtyard is halved by a high wall (10 feet approximately), and a corridor-like exit links both halves of the courtyard about a point two-thirds down. The second part of the outer courtyard has a small two-storey roofed building at the south-west corner (possibly a tower). Six broken steps led to the doorway of this corner tower, which has three rooms in the upper storey with large pointed Gothic style windows and a barrelled roof room underneath, now partly filled with debris.

### *The Orchard*

The boundary wall of the former orchard still exists, enclosing an area of one to two acres approximately. Apple trees were still growing in the orchard in the late 1930s, and dwelling houses had been built against one of the inside walls of the orchard and were occupied at that time. No trace of these houses or trees now remains.

### *Thomastown Village*

An estate village was built in a semi-circular shape in the late eighteenth century on the east side of the main Cashel/Tipperary road. Directly facing the village houses on the other side of the road stand the remaining demesne walls with the former farmyard entrance to the castle. The village lies about half a mile away from the main castle buildings. It lies west of Thomastown Cross, where the main entrance gates to the castle once stood.

The original houses were knocked and rebuilt in 1994 except for three houses. One was the former gate house opposite the farmyard entrance which was been rebuilt in the same style in the winter of 2002-2003. Thus, only two original houses remain at the time of writing.

### *Demesne Walls*

The capped demesne walls ran along the estate boundary of the 2,000 acres, including the Tipperary road boundary. They still exist particularly along the N74 road at Thomastown village, though knocked and broken in places. The farmyard entrance and another back entrance were on the Tipperary road, about half a mile apart.

### *Mathew Family Crypt*

The Mathew family crypt lies in Thomastown graveyard, which can only be accessed through the fields. The crypt has been vandalised and the large headstone at its entrance is badly cracked and in danger of falling down.

## Summary

The castle and its buildings have suffered extensive damage in recent years. Although it has a preservation order, the surviving buildings will further decay unless some maintenance and preservation work is undertaken.

### Footnotes

1. Lysaght, Moira, *Fr. Theobald Mathew* (Dublin 1983), p. 7-9.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
3. Richard Morrison 'Proposed Ground Plan of Thomastown Castle 1812' (Irish Architectural Archive, ex-Coll.: Thomas Pakenham 16/90R2).
4. Mark Bence-Jones, *Burkes' Guide to Country Houses* (Dublin 1988), vol. 1, p. 72.
5. Lysaght, *Fr. Mathew*, p. 11.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Proposed Ground Plan of Thomastown Castle by Richard Morrison, 1812 (Irish Architectural Archive, ex-Coll.: Thomas Pakenham 16/90R2).