



# STRAFFAN ITS HOUSE AND HISTORY

As the crow flies it is barely more than 100 miles from Curraghmore in County Fermanagh to Straffan in County Kildare but, when you make the journey via Bordeaux, and take over 100 years to complete it, as the Barton family did, then it is a journey of some significance as *Raymond Blake*

© National Photographic Archive



Straffan Church in the main village borders The K Club Estate

The story of Straffan House begins with the remarkable story of the Barton family. Originally from Buttevant in County Cork, Thomas Barton left Ireland in 1722 for France where he became immensely successful in the wine business, a success that was built upon by his grandson Hugh who was born in 1766. Hugh, however, lived in troubled times and had to escape France after the Revolution, settling first in England before moving back to Ireland. A man with a grim sense of humour, he brought with him the lock and key of the guillotine that was meant to behead him!

Back in Ireland he bought an estate in County Kildare next to the village of Straffan, where he built the magnificent Straffan House in the 1830s, the bulk of which is still with us today and forms the east wing and most venerable portion of The K Club Hotel.

The origins of Straffan can be traced with certainty back to the time of Strongbow, after the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland. He granted the lands that now comprise The K Club and the parish of Straffan to Maurice Fitzgerald, a grant that was subsequently confirmed by King John of England, brother of Richard the Lionheart. The history of the area in the succeeding centuries is hazy but it is known that various well established families had ownership of the property in these times and by the 16th century the landlords were the de Penkiston family. Their tenure was not to last, however, for they forfeited their lands after supporting an unsuccessful rebellion.

The 17th century brought more turbulence and changes of ownership. Initially the property came into the hands of the Gaydon family but was then forfeited and granted to Thomas Bewley. Then, in a subsequent twist, the property was granted back to the Gaydon family, after they had been cleared of the charges which had led to the seizure of their property in the first place. At this time the estate amounted to about 700 acres. The Gaydons, perhaps worn down by all the trauma and vicissitudes of life, finally disposed of the property in 1679, selling it to Richard Talbot for £700. Thereafter the relentless cycle of coercive changes of ownership seems to have died down and the 18th century is marked by a period of relative calm in the history of the estate. There are few records extant from this time and we have to move onto the early years of the 19th century to pick up the threads of our story again.

As mentioned, Hugh Barton enjoyed great success in France but he wisely left that country during one of the most troubled periods in her history. With his purchase of the estate at Straffan in the 1830s, and the



WHILE THE HOUSE WAS UNDER CONSTRUCTION HUGH MOVED HIMSELF AND HIS FAMILY INTO THE NEARBY BARBERSTOWN CASTLE (ABOVE), ANOTHER PROPERTY WHICH, GREATLY EXTENDED AND MODERNISED SINCE THAT TIME, NOW ALSO FUNCTIONS AS A HOTEL.

subsequent building of his house there, he opened a new chapter in the history of the area, one that, notwithstanding all the changes in the years since, continues to this day. The house that he built, the most obvious physical legacy that he left behind, remains with us yet and, though much changed and altered, would probably still be recognisable to him.

While the house was under construction Hugh moved himself and his family into the nearby Barberstown Castle, another property which, greatly extended and modernised since that time, now also functions as a hotel. Great trouble was taken with the design of the new house and it was based on a magnificent château at Louveciennes to the west of Paris, not far from Versailles. Hugh and his wife Anna (née Johnston, daughter of another great Irish wine family in Bordeaux) threw themselves into the project, revelling in the relative peace and tranquillity of the area after the turmoil they had left behind in France. The house was finished relatively quickly and, save for one significant addition, was to remain fairly unchanged for the next century or so.

This was the construction, by Hugh, of an Italianate campanile or bell tower which is still there today. It adds a welcome touch of verve and flair, giving the whole building a distinctive focal point, especially in its greatly extended early 21st century form.

The Bartons quickly became established in the parish and by 1837 it was recorded in Lewis's Topographical Dictionary that "a school for girls" was being "supported by Mrs Barton" in the parish of Straffan. Other salient facts about the parish from that time include a record of its population of 727 souls and its area of 2,212 statute acres, "as apportioned under the tithe act, which is nearly equally divided between tillage and pasture; the soil is in general a strong stiff clay." In addition to the recently completed Straffan House Lewis's also records as the other principal seats: "Barberstown, of Capt. Robinson; Lodge Park, of A. Henry, Esq., J.P.; and Straffan Lodge, the neat residence of Mrs. Whitelaw." Another "neat edifice" was the chapel which was situated in the village and, "connected with it is a Sunday and day school."



Inside the now derelict church at Straffan



HUGH BARTON DIED IN 1854 AGED 89 AND IS INTERRED IN THE CHURCH OF IRELAND GRAVEYARD IN STRAFFAN, WHERE HE LIES BESIDE HIS WIFE, ANNA

Another school, recently founded at the time, and located just a few miles away was the Jesuit Clongowes Wood College, later immortalised by James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Joyce went there as a very young boarder aged, in his own words, “half-past-six” and later recalled that the boys, all boarders, would sometimes walk as far as Straffan House on a Sunday as a means of recreation. Much more recently, as recalled by a pupil from the 1970s, some boys, no doubt chaffing at the restrictions of the boarding school regime, would absent themselves from the school grounds and make their way across the fields to Straffan House. There they could run free and indulge whatever mischief took their fancy in the rolling acres before being chased away by a gardener or gamekeeper.

Hugh Barton died in 1854 aged 89 and is interred in the Church of Ireland graveyard in Straffan, where he lies beside his wife, Anna. After his death Straffan House passed down through the generations

of the family. During this time the wine business and the châteaux in Bordeaux were managed from a distance and it was only in 1924 that Ronald Barton went there to take a direct hand in their running. Subsequently his father, Bertram Hugh, divided his property, leaving the vineyards to Ronald and Straffan House to his eldest son Derick. Neither inheritance was quite the windfall that it might have appeared to be, for massive upkeep and investment was required to maintain the properties in a viable condition.

Huge political change in Ireland in the 1920s and worldwide economic recession in the 1930s only served to emphasise Straffan’s increasing appearance as a relic from a bygone age. Derick did his best but costs continued to mount without any commensurate increase in income. Thus the heartbreaking decision was taken to demolish a whole wing of the house in the 1930s. His son Anthony (who inherited the Bordeaux vineyards from his childless uncle Ronald) remembers: “Part



The magnificent marble mantel-piece and fire in the Yeats room in the main wing of The K Club

**THE HOUSE HAD FIVE OWNERS IN ABOUT 40 YEARS UNTIL IT WAS BOUGHT BY THE SMURFIT GROUP IN 1988**

of the house was demolished by my father. The rubble was used to fill up the vast basement which had been the servants quarters but which I am sure was very cold and damp.” The tale of destruction had a happier ending than many, for the demolished section of the house was re-built some 30 years later by the then owners, the Gallagher family.

Despite such drastic measures the Barton family’s tenure at Straffan came to an end in 1949 when the property was sold. Since then it has had a succession of owners including the colourful Kevin McClory, the film producer responsible for the James Bond film Thunderball. Patrick Gallagher, who cut an extravagant dash as a property developer many years before such characters were familiar on the Irish scene, also owned Straffan House, as did an Iranian general who lost his life around the time that the shah was deposed. In all, the house had five owners in about 40 years until it was bought by the Smurfit Group in 1988. This ushered in another period of stability and indeed prosperity in its history, for it had become very careworn over the years.

An indication of how far things had declined since Hugh’s day was witnessed by this writer shortly after the Smurfit purchase. A furniture auction was held and many people attended the pre-auction viewing expecting to see a houseful of treasures from the Georgian and Victorian eras. The truth was far from that, a sorry collection of bits and pieces including a distressing amount of white formica furniture in the bedrooms. There was almost nothing of any significance.

Straffan House’s fortunes were about to change again, however, and since that nadir care and attention have been lavished on it for the first time in many decades. Once again it is a seat of gracious living and provides a more luxurious welcome for guests than at any other time in its history. Its future is secure too and it was privately purchased by Dr Michael Smurfit and Mr Gerry Gannon in 2005 prior to the memorable staging of The Ryder Cup last year. It was on show to the whole world then and, not far from her 200th birthday, the grand old lady of Straffan was looking better than ever. **K**