

## 15. An 18th-century roadside cottage in Danesfort Demesne, Co. Kilkenny

*Richard Jennings and Michelle Delaney*



*Illus. 1—Location of Danesfort 4, Co. Kilkenny (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map).*

The study of Ireland's post-1550 archaeology and history has developed considerably in recent years. Traditionally, the archaeology of this period in Ireland was poorly understood and often underrepresented or simply ignored in excavation reports. In recent years, however, there has been a growing understanding of the need to study post-medieval archaeology if we are to understand the profound changes that affected Ireland throughout this period. These cultural, social and economic changes were primarily the result of the transfer of land ownership to new landlords and the settling of that land by immigrants, who came mainly from England and Scotland. The examination of post-medieval archaeology can help us to gain an insight into how the native Irish and Old English, who were descended from the Anglo-Normans, interacted with these new landlords and settlers, and how they adapted as their familiar landscape was profoundly altered.

Archaeological excavations along the route of the N9/N10 Kilcullen–Waterford Scheme: Knocktopher to Powerstown, in the grounds of Danesfort Demesne, Co. Kilkenny, provided an excellent opportunity to examine the evolution of a small portion of a demesne landscape. This paper focuses on the significance of a roadside cottage and its associated domestic/semi-industrial areas found at Danesfort 4 (Illus. 1), less than 200 m from the site of Danesfort House.<sup>1</sup> The intention is to place the site into its historical



*Illus. 2—First edition six-inch Ordnance Survey map (sheet 23, surveyed 1838, published 1840) showing the location of Danesfort demesne and house. The road running north–south and passing between the church and Danesfort House is the Kilkenny–Waterford road, and the road running west–east beside the two ringforts is the Callan–Bennettsbridge road (Ordnance Survey Ireland).*

context and to consider its function with the help of maps, documentary sources, paintings and evidence from the few comparable archaeological sites that exist across the country.

### **The Wemys family of Danesfort**

The demesne was part of the former medieval manor of Danesfort and enclosed an area of c. 400 acres (Illus. 2). Historical sources indicate that it was granted to Sir Patrick Wemys (1604–61) by Walter Butler, the 11th Earl of Ormonde. Sir Patrick (knighted c. 1646) was a nobleman from Fife in Scotland and was land commissioner to his cousin, Lady Elizabeth Preston, the future wife of the 1st Duke of Ormonde, when he was granted the land. He married Mary Wheeler, the daughter of the Bishop of Ossory, in 1634 (McEvoy 2006). The life of Sir Patrick coincided with the Catholic Confederate Rebellion, the English Civil War and the period of Cromwellian overlordship, one of the most turbulent times in the history of Ireland (Gillespie 2006). Sir Patrick was a well-known figure who fought as a cavalryman in the Irish Government Army against the Confederate rebellion but who subsequently allied himself to the Parliamentarians led by Oliver Cromwell. He was made a land commissioner in 1653 and an alderman of Kilkenny City in 1656 (McEvoy 2006).

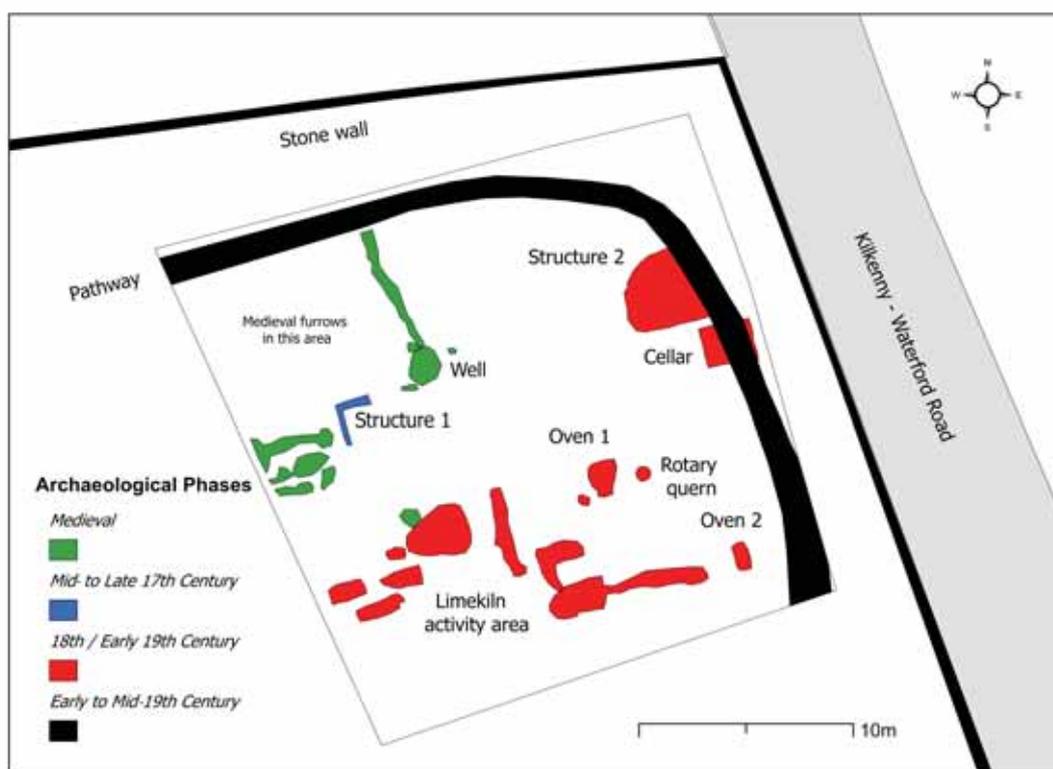
The excavations at Danesfort (Illus. 3) revealed tantalising evidence of Sir Patrick's tenure at the demesne. Two trade tokens (Illus. 4), made by local manufacturers under



*Illus. 3—Danesfort 4 under excavation, with the 19th-century farmhouse in the background. Danesfort House was located approximately to the right of the farmhouse, where the vegetation is growing. The avenue of lime trees to the left of the farmhouse leads to the Kilkenny–Waterford road (Richard Jennings).*



*Illus. 4—One of two trade tokens found at Danesfort 4. Written on the obverse side (left) is 'Francis Barker', and on the reverse side (right) it states 'Of Goran 1656'. The angel depicted is the symbol of the Tanners' Guild (Smith 1852/3) (Aoife McCarthy, Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd).*



*Illus. 5—Plan of the main features excavated at Danesfort 4 (Richard Jennings).*

licence from the Cromwellian government in lieu of coinage, and the remains of a small structure (structure 1) were found 30 m west of the roadside cottage (Illus. 5). The remains of the cottage comprised two stone foundations, which would probably have supported timber walls. Seventeenth-century pottery was found on the site, including English Lustre Ware and Frechen stoneware pottery imported from Germany.

A painting of Danesfort House in 1810 provided clues that the estate prospered under the control of Sir Patrick's son, Sir Henry Wemys (1641–1722). The painting shows a large, unfortified structure dating from the 1690s beneath the façades of subsequent 18th-century developments (Illus. 6; McEvoy 2006). The role of the landed estate as a key component of the Irish landscape, where its income was generated through the rental of land to local farmers, continued to develop in the 18th century. Although no known estate records survive, it is probable that the estate experienced a pronounced peak in prosperity during the 1730s and into the 1740s, as occurred elsewhere in New-English-settled Ireland (Reeves-Smyth 1997). The Palladian-style influences evident in the painting by Gibbs of Danesfort House offer an indication of surplus wealth (McEvoy 2006). There is no evidence of how the demesne was set out at this time but it probably had a formal design in keeping with concepts of the Enlightenment such as rationality and control over the natural world (Reeves-Smyth 1997). The demesne would have been at the forefront of economic activity in the locality. Patrick Wemys (1672–1747) succeeded his father Henry as head of the estate and, like his father and grandfather, continued to hold prominent positions in society. He was MP for Gowran in 1703 and 1713–14 and for Kilkenny in 1721–47.

The importance of the Wemys family to Danesfort and Kilkenny continued into the

1750s and 1760s, when Patrick's three sons, Henry, Patrick and James, were each at one point army officers, local MPs and heads of the estate. All three died relatively young, however, and it was James's son, also called James (1755–1820), who inherited the estate in 1763 at the age of seven. He entered the army in 1766 aged just 11 and it was probably not until 1785 that he lived at Danesfort full-time, when genealogical records indicate that he started a family with his wife, Elizabeth Blunden. It is probable that the estate was managed for him between 1763 and 1785.

### **The roadside cottage**

Archaeological evidence points to the construction of the roadside cottage during the mid-18th century. The evidence consisted of a cottage (structure 2) with an adjoining underground storage chamber or cellar (Illus. 5 & 7). It included a cobbled floor surface, 3.74 m by 3.27 m in size, and the remnants of two wall foundations. It is very likely that these were the vestiges of a larger wooden building, probably a cottage, which did not survive. The adjoining cellar contained four stone walls up to seven courses high, with a set of stone steps on its western side leading towards the southern wall of the cottage, where there was evidence for a door. It is probable that the cellar itself had a raised roof or ceiling to protect objects or produce stored inside and to ensure ease of use, as it was excavated to only 1.2 m below ground level. The changes were not just restricted to the construction of a cottage. A 30 m by 10 m area behind the cottage and cellar was stripped of its topsoil and



*Illus. 6—The painting of Danesfort House by R Gibbs (from McEvoy 2006).*



*Illus. 7—A view of the cellar during excavation, from the east (Richard Jennings).*

a series of domestic or semi-industrial features were built, including a small limekiln, two ovens, one of which had undergone design modifications, some pits, one of which was stone-lined, and a rotary quern-stone (Illus. 8). A yard area with structural remnants made up of two patches of cobbling and fragmentary stone walls was laid out to the south of this area. The limekiln may have provided the lime mortar used in the construction of the ovens. It was unlikely to have been used for the production of fertiliser for agriculture because of its small size. The main clue linking this development to the mid-late 18th century was the presence of handmade red bricks and the production of lime on the site, both of which became more prevalent in Ireland in the early years of the industrial revolution. An entry in *Finn's Leinster Journal* records the death of a person from lime fumes on the estate in 1774 (cited in Law 2008). Accompanying these features were red burnished wares and clay pipes, find types that fit within this chronological time-frame. This is further reaffirmed by the absence of stoneware and tin-glazed pottery sherds, which are indicators of 17th-century habitation.

The absence of evidence for a structure enclosing the ovens at Danesfort makes it likely that they operated in the open air. Excavated evidence of ovens in Ireland generally comes from urban contexts. Excavations in Waterford between 1986 and 1992 uncovered the remains of at least 20 ovens dating from the 13th to the 17th centuries, the majority of which were open-air structures (Hurley & Sheehan 1997, 274–5). Two open-air ovens excavated near the North Gate Bridge in Cork city date from the mid-late 13th century (Hurley 1997, 39–40). In both cases the ovens were large enough for commercial use (Sherlock 2006, 110). Evidence for mural ovens (ovens constructed in the wall of a building) has also been revealed through archaeological fieldwork. Excavations at



*Illus. 8—A mid-excavation view of oven 1, from the west, with the rotary quern-stone in the background (Richard Jennings).*

Glanworth Castle, Co. Cork, revealed evidence for two late 16th/early 17th-century ovens (Manning 2000). A late 17th/early 18th-century oven was excavated at O’Dea’s Castle in Dysert O’Dea, Co. Clare (Gibson 1997). At Drumlummin, Co. Tipperary, a mural bread oven was uncovered in a mid-17th-century house (Cleary 1987, 124–5). Evidence from England reveals that bake-ovens were often located outside buildings (Hurley & Sheehan 1997, 274).

The presence of bread ovens raises the possibility that the cottage was a bakehouse that sold bread to the inhabitants of Danesfort and to passing traders on the Kilkenny–Waterford Road. Given that the activity took place in full view of the main house, it seems improbable that it occurred when the Wemys family were in full-time residence. There is no indication that the estate was in financial difficulty at this time so it seems unlikely that it was intended as a means to bolster income if the family were in residence. When James was in the army full-time perhaps those managing Danesfort were doing their best to generate additional income for the estate. That said, mid-18th-century demesnes were influenced by the Romantic Movement, in which the idea of having farm cottages close to the main house was not uncommon. It is also worth considering the documentary evidence from the following Calendar of Ormond Deeds (Curtis 1941, 315):

Indenture of May 10, 1582, between Thomas, Earl of Ormond, by Richard Shee of Kilkenny, and Hugh ‘alias’ Ee Clery of Downefartt, tailor, witnesses that said attorney grants the bakehouse of Downefartt with two crofts belonging to the same, to have and to hold to said Hugh, etc., for 21 years at annual rent of 26s.

The indenture record raises the possibility that a bakehouse was located in the excavated area for perhaps 200 years, although the lack of associated archaeological evidence would suggest that the 1582 bakehouse was in another part of the townland.

If not a bakehouse, the cottage might have been a building to house those responsible for the incoming and outgoing of supplies to the main house from Kilkenny. The ovens were perhaps for the domestic use of those living in the building. A service entry lane to the house is shown on the first edition (1838) Ordnance Survey six-inch map, but it is in the south-east rather than in the north-east, where the cottage was situated. Another possibility is that the cottage housed skilled builders and craftsmen who were responsible for the many renovation works at Danesfort House. It is not clear whether the house underwent renovation during the 20 years that James Wemys was in the army. If there was a link between cottage construction and house renovation, which is plausible given that a skilled workforce was on hand and that bricks used in the construction of the ovens matched those found on a possible wall remnant of the main house (although this may be a secondary build), perhaps the construction of the cottage was associated not with James but with the Palladian-style aspirations of his grandfather Patrick in the 1740s.

### **Later years**

Whatever the reasons for the construction of the roadside cottage, its existence was short-lived as the estate underwent a major transformation towards the end of the century. James took up residence on the demesne, and he and his wife Elizabeth Blunden started a family in 1785. His many years away from Danesfort might explain an advertisement he placed in a Kilkenny newspaper in 1794, stating that Danesfort House and 200 acres were available for rent (*Finn's Leinster Journal*, cited in Law 2008). This did not happen, however, and instead the demesne was transformed into a natural and pastoral landscape. A major element of the change was the construction of a twin-level folly (Sites and Monuments Record No. KK023-080001) on the site of a possible ringwork (KK023-080) (Illus. 9). The architectural components of the folly date from between 1790 and 1810 ([www.archaeology.ie](http://www.archaeology.ie), accessed August 2008).

The roadside cottage and its associated features were demolished and replaced with pleasure grounds and a stone path, which formed part of a walkway that followed the perimeter walls of the estate. These walls were also erected at this time. Other aspects of the transformation included the construction to the north of the main house of a walled garden, a glasshouse, an arboretum, which grows to this day, and the avenue of lime trees. A bathhouse was built by the stream in the south-west corner of the demesne. All of these features are depicted on the first edition Ordnance Survey map (Illus. 2).

James was succeeded by his son, Major Henry Wemys, who, in addition to his involvement in the army, continued to manage the estate. As the history of Danesfort entered more recent times, Hubert Butler (1973/4) recalled hearing stories about Henry and his wife Elizabeth as an elderly couple leading 'blameless uneventful lives farming, making jam and taking tea in the summer-house'. Local resident Joseph Ireland recalled hearing stories pertaining to the 1860s about the use of the two-storied turret summer-house, where tea was served downstairs while the gentry shot at deer from upstairs (McEvoy 2006).

Life changed irrevocably for the Wemys of Danesfort in the 1880s when John Otway Wemys, the only child of Henry and Elizabeth, was so overwhelmed with debt owing to



*Illus. 9—The 18th/19th-century turret situated on a probable medieval ringwork, from the west (Niall Duffy, AirShots Ltd).*

gambling that he fled his creditors by loading up his possessions and moving to London, where he died in 1891. The Wemys estate went into receivership and in 1896 it was put up for sale (McEvoy 2006). The house became derelict and was soon demolished, with the stone ending up as hard core for the Kilkenny–Waterford Road—an inglorious end to more than 250 years of Wemys family influence at Danesfort.

## **Acknowledgements**

We wish to thank NRA Archaeologist Ed Danaher and the NRA for inviting us to contribute to the seminar and publication and for offering the opportunity, in conjunction with Kilkenny City Council, to excavate the site. Thanks also to Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd for providing the resources and direction to carry out the dig, in particular Tim Coughlan, Deirdre Walsh, Andrzej Gwozdzik and the rest of the excavation team. Finally, we would like to thank Vicky Ginn of ArchEdit Ireland for proofing an earlier draft of the paper, John Bradley, Colin Rynne, Eoin Grogan, Frank McEvoy and Cólín Ó Drisceoil for their research input, and Con Barry for his hospitality and for allowing us to explore the remains of the demesne on his land.

**Note**

1. NGR 251874, 147600; height 63.73 m OD; excavation reg. no. E3539; ministerial direction no. A032.