



# LISMORE CASTLE IN TRANSITION

**Charles Noble** draws on recently discovered correspondence documenting changes to the fabric of Lismore Castle, Co Waterford, aided by the use of early photography

In 1844 the 6th Duke of Devonshire came to stay in Lismore Castle with Joseph Paxton, his assistant auditor and right hand man (Figs 4&11). Paxton had recommended that the castle be sold so as to reduce the duke's enormous debt. However, the arrival of Lord George Cavendish, the duke's supportive cousin and trustee, bolstered the duke's misgiving so the plan was altered to sell two of his Yorkshire estates instead.

Having known the 17th-century castle since his youth, his first stay there as duke was in 1812 when he played host to his married cousin Lady Caroline Lamb (with whom he remained in love), and her family the Bessboroughs.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps chastened by her caustic reaction to the basic accommodation, the bachelor duke immediately started to rescue the castle from over a century of neglect, employing the architect William Atkinson to remodel the main reception rooms in the North range in a baronial Gothic style (Fig 10). But it wasn't until in October 1840 he had confided to his diary: 'Made up my mind to go to Ireland after great struggle'. His chance visit to the castle with Paxton in 1840, after a gap of eighteen years, re-kindled his love for the place. Egged on by Paxton's new-found delight in the castle and grounds, the duke started to make vague plans for the castle's further remodelling.

Returning to the castle again in September 1849, with Paxton and his relations, the duke was well aware of his forthcoming alterations to the castle, and had planned accordingly to record it. He wrote to his family friend Frances, Countess Morley of Saltram House to relate that the two West Country artists, Brockedon and Cook, she had recommended had not yet arrived. Although Brockedon apparently never came, the duke did not have to wait long for the latter, Cornish-born Samuel Cook who arrived on Monday 8 October (Fig 2) and must have set to work immediately, as two days later the duke recorded: 'seen Mr Cooks sketches, begins good'.

This was a start of a happy relationship as exactly a week after Cook's arrival the duke wrote in his diary: 'Artist Cook improves upon me and leaves the inn where he had been lodging to be here'. The watercolour artist stayed with his new patron for nearly a month, dining with him, being taken to explore the locality, even travelling back to England in his company on 12 November (Fig 9). The duke wrote later: 'O what a happy dream my two Irish months appear to me'.

The results of this commission mostly remain in the Devonshire Collection. There is one large watercolour of the castle from downstream (Fig 8), and about 20 smaller ones for which Cook was apparently paid



1 Photograph by Francis Edmund Currey. The rebuilt East range of the castle with King John's Tower and the Flag Tower beyond c.1855

2 Samuel Cook (1806–1859) View of Lismore Castle from the flooded river Blackwater

3 Photograph by Francis Edmund Currey: Rebuilding the circular tower in the East range of the castle c.1854. Paxton retained the medieval lower half

4 Photograph of William Cavendish, 6th Duke of Devonshire (1790–1858) by Henry Hennah and William Henry Kent c.1852

5 Photograph of Francis Edmund Currey (1814–1896) by an unknown photographer. Perhaps a self-portrait from the 1860s





£1-2 each (Fig 6). They show a few castle interiors, various views of the castle, some from the river Blackwater, and many surrounding landscapes. As the duke encouraged him to roam, even as far as Youghal, there are more distant landscapes too. Cook's group of watercolours were important to the duke. He listed their subjects, and had them mounted in London. He even showed them to the exiled King and Queen of the French when they visited his Brighton house. Subsequently they were displayed in richly ornamented gilt frames.

Some of Cook's watercolours of those parts of the ancient castle that were soon to be dismantled were to form an important historical record (Figs 10&12). This visual recording was not a new practice for the duke for he had earlier employed watercolour artists, such as William Henry Hunt and William Cowen, to record his English homes. However, unlike Cook's, these earlier watercolours were not commissioned as records specifically prior to their subject's demolition.

By April 1850 the programme for rebuilding the castle had been agreed and work started initially on the ruined chapel (Fig 10). Paxton was to be the new castle's designer and director of operations, assisted by his architect son-in-law George Henry Stokes, and John Gregory Crace, responsible for the interior decoration. Other major figures were the duke's chief auditor and solicitor, William Currey, based in London, and his cousin, the resident Lismore agent and amateur photographer, Francis Edmund Currey (Fig 5). This second rebuilding scheme continued, after a lull in 1851-2 for Paxton's Great Exhibition building, from 1853 up until the death of the 6th Duke in 1858. Almost the whole castle was re-built to Paxton and Stokes' designs.

My recent discovery of correspondence from this period in the Lismore Castle papers<sup>2</sup> between Francis Edmund Currey, William Currey, the duke and Sir Joseph Paxton, illuminates the important role that Francis Currey's photography played in the rebuilding of the castle. It has also helped confirm his authorship of many of the photographs of the castle of this era held in albums at Chatsworth.

A Cambridge graduate and barrister, Francis Edmund Currey was appointed Lismore agent in 1839. He was also a pioneer amateur photographer in Ireland. Photography in these early days was an expensive and time-consuming business. For Currey, photography started as a hobby. The duke had written to him in 1850 warning him to discontinue his sailing, as he had been nearly drowned for a second time. Currey appears to have taken up photography soon afterwards, it perhaps being no coincidence that 1853 saw the publication of one of the first manuals of photography for amateurs, Philip Henry Delamotte's *Practice of Photography*. It seems likely that Currey had purchased equipment from this early commercial calotype photographer in London. In 1855 Currey joined both the Photographic Society and the Photographic Exchange Club, exhibiting sixteen small studies at the former the following year, and becoming a prominent member of the Amateur Photographic Society. The subjects



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for his lens included portraits, landscape, architecture, and still lifes of game and flowers.

In correspondence of September 1853 William Currey wrote to his cousin Francis, affirming his talent, and thanking him for photographic views of the Anglican cathedral and 'from the bow window' at the castle. William's letters are affectionate and encouraging of Francis's photographic efforts. He wrote: 'I think you managed to arrange the views capitally. They include just what pictures ought to have in them, and with the new Camera (which I wish you would get) and your indomitable perseverance, I think you will get some very nice landscapes'. This reminds us of the difficult technical and time-consuming nature of calotype, or negative, photography, in both the photographing and especially the printing. Intriguingly, William often criticised the pictorial qualities of his cousin's photographs, much as he would a watercolour.

William Currey was a conduit for new photographs to be sent on to the duke, as a typical letter to Francis of August

1854 makes clear: 'I saw the Duke on Wednesday, and ought to have written to you sooner to tell you of his great delight with the Photographs, which really pleased him very much. I shall hope to receive copies of all.' By the summer of 1854, such was the duke's clamour for his photographs of the castle's rebuilding, Francis had to print a second set for his cousin each time. As well as reminding the duke of his enjoyable autumn visits to the castle, these 'treasures of photographs from Lismore' kept him up to date with its rebuilding and enabled him to discuss developments better with William Currey and Sir Joseph Paxton.

The duke, an enthusiastic recipient, and who was very interested in the technical developments of his era, had an early interest in photography too. He had sat in the early 1840s for his daguerreotype portrait to William Constable (1783-1861), a Brighton-based pioneer photographer. He had furthermore



6 Samuel Cook (1806-1859) The Lismore fountain, called 'the spout' 1849

7 Samuel Cook: The North-West corner of the castle prior to rebuilding 1849

8 Samuel Cook view of Lismore Castle from the river Blackwater, showing the canal, watercolour c.1849

9 Field Talfourd (1815-1874) sketch of Samuel Cook (detail)

subscribed in 1845 to William Fox Talbot's calotype album *Sun Pictures in Scotland* and received Fox Talbot photographic prints from the photographer's mother, Lady Elizabeth Feilding.

Paxton, the third correspondent, required Francis's photographs mainly to manage the rebuilding of the castle but also to avoid making time-consuming visits to far away Lismore in an exceedingly busy working life. A case in point was the failure of a number of land arches in Thomas Ivory's bridge across the adjacent river Blackwater after major flooding on 3 November 1853. Francis had written to William Currey about it the next day, and by 6 November Paxton wrote to Francis: 'Pray send me a Photograph of the disaster, I am sure you will have taken one'. A few days later William Currey had received photographs of the breached bridge (Fig 13) and wrote to Francis: 'How very satisfactory it is to be able to communicate so accurately the particulars. I think there is no doubt that the expense of a temporary wooden communication must be incurred.' Together with surveyor's plans for rebuilding the bridge, it is indicated that the photographs would help Paxton make improvements to it. In a remarkable unpublished letter to Francis of 12 November, Paxton, acknowledging receipt of three bridge photographs, revealed his own growing fascination with this new technology: 'You appear to be progressing remarkably in photography, but at present I have not seen one from the large lens, and I am sorry to say that I go on very slowly, and you must wait with patience to get any plates from me

**'PRAY SEND ME A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE DISASTER, I AM SURE YOU WILL HAVE TAKEN ONE'**

– My time has so completely occupied with heavier matters, that I have not been able to attend to the sun's rays. In this respect – the only thing I am aware of is that I have a bill from Delamotte for nearly 100£ for apparatus'.<sup>3</sup>

From the considerable number of extant photographs showing different parts of the castle in the course of rebuilding, there can be little doubt of the importance of Francis Edmund Currey's architectural photography to Sir Joseph Paxton. This can be amply demonstrated in two of Paxton's letters to Francis. In the one of 27 October 1854 he wrote:



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'The three photographs sent of the old tower are exactly what was required and I shall be enabled to do it without any further drawings.' This probably refers to the ancient tower in the East range that Paxton partially rebuilt (Fig 3). It also indicates the ingress of photography into the field of architectural draughtsmanship. In the second such letter, of 15 October 1857, Paxton laments the end of photography's role in the rebuilding, 'We very much miss your Photographs now the Tower is going up, I hope you have not given up the pursuit'. The tower Paxton refers to, the gigantic River

Tower, never rose beyond its base. This was because the castle's rebuilding was sadly halted on the duke's death on 18 January 1858. However, Francis Edmund Currey continued with his photography, following his own interests, at home and abroad for the rest of his life.

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- 1 See Peter Murray, 'Poetic Licence' *Irish Arts Review*, Spring 2012, pp.96-99.
- 2 National Library of Ireland, Lismore Castle papers
- 3 National Library of Ireland, Lismore Castle papers Ms. 43, 44/12

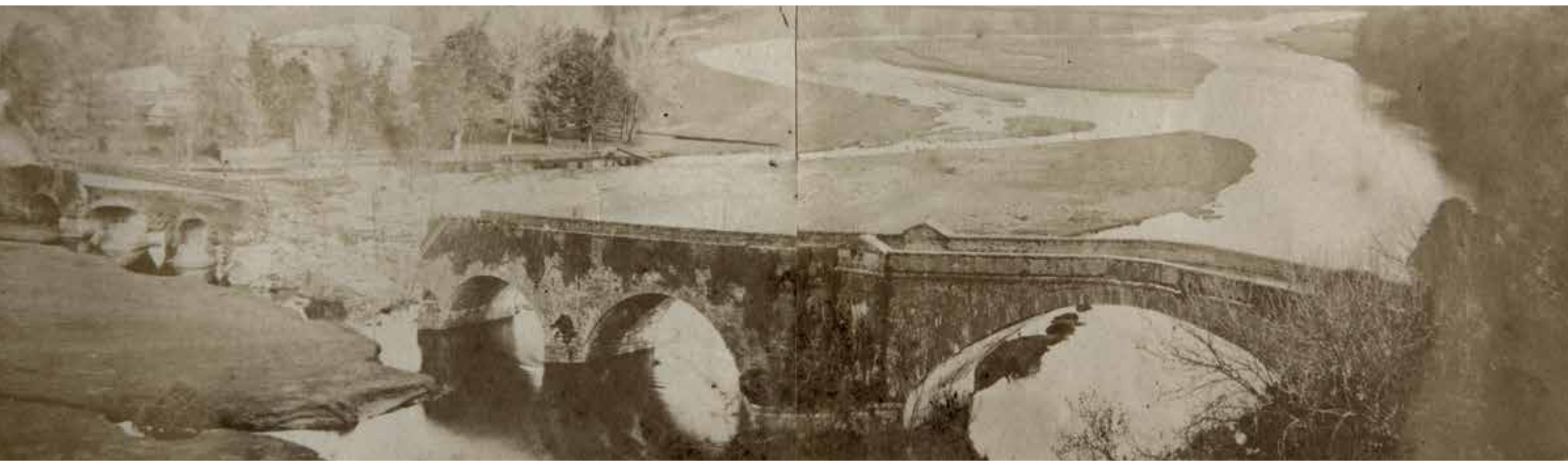
10 Samuel Cook: The castle courtyard with the rebuilt North range, right, and the gable end of the ruined chapel that was redesigned as the Great Hall. watercolour 1849

11 Photograph by Francis Edmund Currey: Lismore Castle entrance gatehouse, September 1854. Joseph Paxton can be identified in the centre with fellow directors of the Crystal Place Company, George Wythes and Samuel Laing MP

12 Samuel Cook South-East view of castle courtyard with St Carthage's cathedral beyond. The medieval circular tower of the East range is in the foreground. watercolour 1849

13 Photograph by Francis Edmund Currey: panoramic view showing the collapsed land arches of Thomas Ivory's bridge, soon after the flood of 3 November 1853

14 Photograph by Francis Edmund Currey: view of Lismore Castle with Thomas Ivory's single-span bridge. The new profile of the castle is established after the majority of Paxton's rebuilding. Only the River Tower on the far right remains to be rebuilt c.1855



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