

This is the piece that inspired the Memoir Project. Maria sent it to me in 2014, saying- 'Put this in the archives and maybe in the future someone will read it.' That triggered the thought that maybe we should try to harvest some of the memories that are out there. Helen L

MEMORIES OF CASTLECOR 1969 - 1973

The imposing iron gate set in a semi-circle of cut stone stands open. The long winding tree-lined avenue beckons. To the right are tightly packed shrubs and undergrowth, wild now and seeming impenetrable. On the left, an open field where the black and white Friesian cows gaze with a passing curiosity and then graze on. Lawns open up straight ahead with a large statue of The Blessed Virgin standing squarely and sedately amid the surrounding green.



The house comes into view on the right and the eye travels along its length which is actually the side of the building, once a grand country house. It appears to be a two-storey residence, a large window to right and left of the main door with three windows above. Gazing at the house from the front conveyed nothing of the rambling nature of my home for the foreseeable future.



The oldest part of this house was built possibly around 1735 as a hunting and fishing lodge for the owners of Newcastle House on the other side of Ballymahon. A magnificent hall greets the visitor, from which lead great and small rooms in all directions and a splendid staircase straight ahead. On the landing were more doors leading off to right and left but directly ahead an exquisite ballroom opened up, the great hall, wrapping itself around a central point at which stood four fire

places backing on to each other and facing the four points of the compass. This majestic room was composed of eight towering walls beautifully decorated and was lit by four floor-to-ceiling windows which caught the daily movement of the sun. At one point I had the 'pleasure' of polishing the great shining surface of the floor alongside exercising my vocal chords in the "octagon" as it was known and getting such a thrill from the acoustics which Maria Callas herself would have enjoyed.

It was easy to people this place with images of dazzling, diamonded ladies in lavish ball gowns on the arms of heel-clicking, bowing male partners as they swung and swooped to Strauss waltzes. That day was long past and the octagon when not hushed could reverberate on occasion to the sounds of girlish voices as those fires were circled by same-sex dance partners, one of whom had to “be the man.” The Cuckoo Waltz would never rival the strains of Strauss but that did not detract from the pleasure of swinging freely and with abandon in that space that called out for it.

There were four high-ceilinged spacious rooms off the octagon. The two in most use were the chapel and the community room. Daily Mass plus Morning Prayer and Vespers were all obligatory. Sunday evenings and high female voices with “Now the winter is over, and the rains have passed and gone. Arise then, Oh my Beloved and come to me.” Was that from the Song of Songs? It had a beauty that breaks into my consciousness still and lifts me like a lark.

The community room was just that – the place where we all sat together, chatted and knitted or crocheted, played records or sang songs and generally entertained one another. Now and then we watched a television programme like War and Peace but viewing was strictly rationed, apart from the nine o’clock news, of course. Visitors to an individual sister would be looked after in the parlour immediately inside the front door and on the left. Entire visiting families were looked after in the parlour on the right where the juiciest apple tarts were a treat to be recalled years later. The local priest would be served his breakfast following Morning Mass in that parlour and the curate was always available for a chat. He was a fair-haired boyish individual who masked his shyness with the perpetual pipe. Community visitors such as the local bishop or summer callers on holiday from Africa, California and England were entertained in the community room.

The third room was the study, a classroom where our minds were opened to the deeper mysteries within Scripture or Philosophy. One young Franciscan teacher suffered from a malaise common to Irish people, he had no TH’S. And so we were taught that all philosophers were original tinkers and that God was completely Udder! These classes were supplemented by lectures in Church History or the Documents of Vatican Two or Religious Life Today, provided by Divine Word scholars in Donamon, Co. Roscommon. This necessitated a car journey on Saturday afternoons and those trips were the highlight of the week for some of us. On one memorable day a group of us stood around the stationary car en route home. We had just been treated to an ice cream cone when a passing pigeon offloaded on to my head. While my companions fell around laughing at my discomfiture, I was torn between the need to get rid of the offending material or to take care of my fast-melting ice cream.

The sacristy occupied the fourth and coldest room off the octagon. The entire house was a nightmare to heat and was never more than partially heated. But the sacristy had an iciness that suggested possible visitations from the world beyond the grave and nobody dallied there. Off this room was a communal wash-room with cubicles, a dark, cold room where essential hygiene matters were not lingered over.

Back to the landing where the highest level of the house could be viewed. This area was approached through a door at either side of the landing and up a number of steps. A wooden balustrade formed an open circle which was lit from a roof window above. The light spilled down to the welcoming front hall below, giving a lustre to the polished wooden floor. This upper floor contained most of the sleeping accommodation which consisted of a number of dormitories which varied in size – the largest, St. Mel's followed by St. Aidan's and St. Colman's (interesting that they were all named for men!) There was a single bedroom also and a separate bathroom where you could learn to swim in the enormous bath if you had a mind to. And if nobody else needed the bathroom.

Standing on this level it was possible to see people coming and going below, to have brief conversations with them if they belonged to the house or to eavesdrop on conversations that you shouldn't! Of course, that great open space allowed those below to catch a glimpse of late risers as they crept in dressing-gown and slippers to the nearest bathroom so privacy lost out on occasions. Off to one side a door led to a single toilet and a tiny narrow set of stairs to the attic. This was actually yet another single bedroom which provided privacy certainly but it could be claustrophobic too.

Downstairs via the backstairs (the main staircase being the preserve of visitors and VIP's). To the right was a generous size single bedroom cum office beyond which was the dining room. This was a large uninspiring room where individual tables could seat six people accommodating up to a total of thirty or forty diners at Christmas, Easter or celebrations throughout the year. Meals were accompanied by classical music and over a period of three years I grew to recognize and enjoy the works of the major composers. Silent meals were relieved by Mozart, Bach and Beethoven and I found there were times when table conversation got in the way of my listening pleasure. It was not always shared by some of my companions however, whose rolling eyes and clenched teeth suggested a different taste in music. But purgatory would be all the shorter for such souls!

Opposite the dining room and on the right of the hall were two more spacious bedrooms cum studies which were occupied by senior members of the community. And just below the main staircase was the telephone booth, discreetly tucked into the left. This was a precious link to the outside world and the families that we had left behind. Its main use was for incoming calls, it seems, and the odd business ones. I cannot recall any use of it for emergency purposes.

Left of the telephone kiosk a passage led to the bottom of the backstairs and to the kitchen beyond. There was a side door in this area which was rarely used –possibly the tradesmen's entrance in bygone days. Cooking was undertaken by the younger members of the household and was handled by teams of two. You could learn a lot by being teamed with an experienced cook to the point of glorying in perfectly browned potato cakes which, in the blink of an eye, turned to charcoal. Pride comes before a fall – or a fire! The pantry was on the right and a long narrow room which held a variety of pots, ancient cooking utensils and a variety of vases and here flowers were arranged for the house. The gardener was given his meals here and on odd occasions, the children of some families that were part of our social work activities.

Moving past the kitchen and through another door, the lowest regions of the house were reached. This was, without doubt, the most eerie part of the building by day or night. The boiler room was straight ahead, the warmest area in the entire house. But it was home to heat-loving cockroaches and any visit to the boiler room meant remembering to switch on the light and waiting, to allow the creatures time to disappear before venturing beyond the door.

A curved stone passage ran left and right of the boiler room with a porthole for natural light. A storage area called Francis' cupboard (another male guardian!) occupied a tiny room on the right. It had electric light only and contained the Bishop's Ware – prized china that only saw the light of day on High Days and Holy Days. There was also the gilt edged tray for the parlour ware and the parlour visitor. And did I mention the custard creams? Francis cupboard was locked and needed to be as the custard creams were for the parlour only. If you were "on the parlour" and the departing visitor had failed to finish the three custard creams, you were in luck! Further along was the evil-smelling boot-room where outdoor footwear and coats were kept. And finally, this particular back corridor ended in two rooms, one of which was a study and the other, St. Colman's, a dark and dingy bedroom. Those of a nervous disposition were not to be found here.

Returning to the boiler room and continuing with the curve of the wall, the laundry appears on the right. Huge white sinks ran along the walls and a large window provided good light and allowed glimpses of the garden and greenery outside. Here there was space for the visiting Belge Marie Paul to instruct us youngsters with a "tirez, tirez" as we pulled and stretched sheets over the waiting drying frames.

Past the laundry was a tiny toilet on the right, Fergal's, possibly for the servants of old. Then on to the last rooms on the left, one of which housed a Gestetner duplicating machine and printed material, reflecting some of the work of Fr. Simon and Sr. Catherine Marie. Next door was a type of everything-and-nothing room where the ash from two cigarettes intermingled with that of the blessed and burning palm on one particular Shrove Tuesday. Luckily, there was no tell-tale aroma of tobacco the following morning as our Ash Wednesday foreheads were signed with "Dust thou art and unto dust thou shall return."

Bicycles were kept in one of these small rooms and they were an essential part of our transport system as we visited elderly and single people who lived in the surrounding rural area.

The back door marked the end of this great sprawling house. It also opened to a path leading to a walled garden which was badly neglected. There were plenty of apple trees, however, which provided for apple picking and storing, alongside plentiful shade for the odd sneaked cigarette al fresco.

Hens were kept too and they had their own quarters which had to be maintained. While they did their best to supply eggs to the house, their efforts were often thwarted by rats who benefitted even more! Eventually a decision was taken that the hens would serve us better in the form of meat for the visit of the bishop. Their flesh, however, was past tender and beyond the strenuous chewing of his Lordship!

There was a path too, to the milking parlour, a fitting name for a structure in which those great black and white beauties bestowed their milky bounty each morning and evening. Two of us, at any one time, were assigned to the milking parlour. This meant donning wellingtons and in winter, old warm clothing, for the task of cleaning the pipes by running clean water through them and hosing the clusters, the milking apparatus, and floors each evening. This was not the most popular duty as, apart from milk, cows have a tendency to provide material of a colour and smell that are repugnant to most of us. And then there were the rats which had to be warned of our approach so that they could obligingly disappear. Fresh milk was supplied daily to the house from this milking parlour. There were times when additional milk was needed and had to be removed without the knowledge of the disapproving farm steward. He reckoned that we took too much cream, leaving the remaining milk thinner and weaker. He was probably right as youthful waist lines disappeared under the weight of café au lait.



Living in that great house and the common life that we shared had a huge contribution in shaping the individuals that came and went over the years. Relationships were forged that have stood the test of great distances and years of separation. There is a certain something that Castlecorites share – some might call it a spirit – that sets us apart and also unites us. And while many have remained within the fold of religious life, there is perhaps an equal number who have taken alternative routes. Whatever the eventual path, the bonds forged in Castlecor have remained strong and life-sustaining. And as with any family, the joys and sorrows of one another are known and shared, celebrated or supported.

And our journey continues.

Maria Raleigh (now Higgins)

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