

Hand castle over to the Heritage Council

Dear Editor,

The fate of Menlo Castle has been well publicised in your paper over recent weeks; principally in allowing Arthur Cullen set out his position; that Menlo Castle can, and should be restored, and to set this against Ciaran Ferrie's view that, for various reasons, it would be better to preserve the building as it now stands, an iconic ruin.

Over the period of the past ten years or so, there has been considerable debate going on in Galway about various proposals being put to members of Galway City Council either advocating the full restoration of Menlo Castle, or proposing its conservation as a ruin. Restoration, if it is to be achieved, we are told will be funded courtesy of

monies to be provided by a private individual of 'high net worth,' said to be offering amounts of between €3 and €12 million euro.

That this private individual's only request is that he will provide the council with the funding required to restore the house on the basis of his securing the right to live in an apartment, to be created on the upper floor, with, perhaps another below to house his private art collection. Such a restoration is, apparently, only being made possible by his most generous offer!

Indeed Much - behind closed doors - work has gone into this project since it was first proposed as an option by the former city manager - Mr Joe Gavin (1999). With no minutes kept of the many meetings that have taken place over these 10 years

we have no idea of what commitments have been given.

The castle was destroyed 100 years ago, on July 26 1910. It has lain dormant as an imposing ruin on the banks of the River Corrib since that date. The house and its lands were subsequently disposed of by the Land Commission by means of the division of 16 shares, castle and lands being issued to local farmers. And it is these shares which were supposed to have been purchased by means of a CPO process by Galway City Council. A public oral hearing was held for this purpose in Galway on 18th July 2000.

Our reason for writing again, is that An Taisce is, and always has been concerned for the structural integrity of the ruin. While recent wrangling over the proposed restoration has

been ongoing for over a decade. The structure itself is rapidly deteriorating. Ivy growth has engulfed what is left of the house, weather and vandalism are doing irreparable damage to the upstanding walls which may not last much longer.

Galway City Council, now reputedly the owners of the property, need to ensure that urgent action is taken to curtail this ongoing destruction. They should be putting in place the funding necessary to begin a conservation programme which should have as its primary aim the stabilisation and conservation of what is left of the building, before it all falls down. We understand that another large chunk of the building has recently become dislodged and has crashed to smithereens.

An Taisce understands that the negotiations that have been ongoing in recent years have been attended by a legal team acting for the developer, while Galway City Council's team has been minimal. That certain issues have been introduced into the debate and demands made regarding possible alterations to window openings, the provision of a modern liftshaft in any design and certain limitations imposed to control public access (the public will only be allowed in as long as they arrive by boat) we believe.

Ciaran Ferrie's recent observations about Menlo Castle being a multi-period building are of course correct. Starting off as a Tower House (circa 1450), with the addition of newly attached residential structures in the 17th

century, it was extended further in the 18th and 19th centuries, when it was castellated and turrets added. To which period should the house be restored? All this of course is mere speculation since it may never happen.

I had the pleasure of bringing one of the descendants of the Blake family up to the castle to take photographs some years ago. Frances Blake-Ridgway was the lady's name. She now lives in Houston, Texas, where she married a Professor of Mechanical Engineering. Both were delighted to learn that so much interest is being shown in conserving the castle, though they could never envisage seeing it being restored.

Public pressure must be put on Galway City Council to immediately come up with a plan to

consolidate the building so that incremental damage presently ongoing, is halted before it is too late. We have no faith in the council's negotiating ability, or their own financial standing or capabilities to restore this building in full. They have no money put aside to preserve it and are relying on a property speculator's money to help them out. It is our view that it should now be passed over to the Heritage Council, who have offered to fund the preparation of a full conservation report, and to ask that they find a way that may lead to some finality.

Yours faithfully
Derrick Hambleton
Chairman
An Taisce - Galway Association
Kingston
Galway.

Menlo Castle issue rears its head again

Dear Editor,

It really must be the silly season since that hoary old chestnut Save Menlo Castle has recently begun to rear its head in your letters columns. I would venture to say that this topic has appeared perhaps 30 or 40 times in the life of the *Galway Advertiser*, and in the days when I used to write a column in your august publication it appeared about once or twice a year.

Menlo Castle, as the dogs in the street know, was burned in a very serious and devastating fire a hundred years ago, and since it was constructed from limestone, almost every inch of it was damaged beyond repair. When one burns limestone it first of all cracks, splits and then begins to turn into lime.

The stonework of Menlo castle has been surveyed by several dreamers, many of them using skilled engineers, over the years, and all came to the same conclusion that it was unrestorable, as the stonework is structurally unsound and the castle would have to be totally demolished before any work could be done. Thus, the word restoration doesn't really apply. It would actually be a total reconstruction which might conservatively run into anything between five and ten million euros or more.

In recent years many fine local tower houses have been well restored: Dunsandle (which is open to the public), Annaghdown, Ballindoooley, Caherkinmonwee, and Claregalway spring to mind and in each case millions were spent and untold problems arose, and none of them had been burned like Menlo.

I think it is time to realise that Menlo is no more than a picturesque ruin, and since I am not aware that it is a national monument, it will eventually crumble back into its component parts.

Dream on my dears, but don't hold your collective breaths waiting for Galway City Council or any State agency to tackle the problem.

Yours etc.
Dick Byrne,
Craughwell, Co Galway.

Were you a Bish boy in '85?



The boys of '85

Dear Editor,

The class that graduated in 1985 from St Joseph's College, Galway (The Bish) are planning to hold a 25-year reunion in Galway on December 29. Please get in touch with a member of the committee if you, or a member of your family, attended the Bish and finished in 1985.

We would love to hear from as many of the class as possible. The venue has not yet been confirmed but will be a hotel in the Galway or Salthill area, and further details will be placed on the alumni section of the school web-site: www.bish.ie

Many thanks,
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