



Oak chest c. 1300, in one of the towers of Bunratty Castle.
Photograph David Dewing

Friday 27 September

Bunratty Castle

The head of the Shannon estuary was recognised by the Vikings and then the Normans as a strategically important location, and successive forts and castles were built here, attacked and defended or destroyed during Ireland's turbulent early history. The present Bunratty Castle was mostly built in the fifteenth-century by the O'Briens, the most powerful of the local clans, and in succeeding centuries it was gradually altered and embellished. It was last besieged by Parliamentary forces in 1646 during the Civil War, when it was the residence

of the Earl of Thomond, and thereafter, in more peaceful times, it was little used and fell into decay. By the 1950s it was derelict, but it attracted the eye of Lord Gort, who bought it, restored it over many years and furnished it somewhat fancifully with a splendid collection of early furniture, ironwork and textiles, evoking the seventeenth-century heyday of Lord Thomond.

In its basic structure the castle comprises a central block with the Great Hall above a guardroom and kitchens, with towers at each corner containing smaller rooms such as the buttery, chambers, solars and a chapel. In the Great Hall there are rows of huge refectory tables, some sixteenth century or earlier, and a stately Renaissance panelled walnut high-back arm-chair, French and dated 1537. Flemish and Italian cupboards of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries stand against the walls beneath large tapestries. Full-length portraits, examples of fine Renaissance carvings and ironwork and a sixteenth-century clock combine with the restored oak roof to make this an impressive centre-piece.

In the towers there are several rooms furnished as chambers, glimpsed through iron gates. In one there is an early chest, hard to see in any detail let alone photograph, but bearing comparison with those we saw on the Shropshire conference earlier this year, which Chris Pickvance dates to c. 1300. At the top of the south-west tower is the 'South Solar', a guest suite of a dining parlour and chamber, richly decorated with a mixture of antique furniture and panelling and a fanciful fan-vaulted wooden ceiling created in the 1950s. The refectory table and chairs are sixteenth and seventeenth century respectively, and there are more Renaissance cupboards in the far reaches. The Earl's private



A sixteenth-century English bed in the Earl's private apartments at Bunratty Castle. *Photograph David Dewing*

apartments are in the north-east tower, the chamber with a sixteenth-century English bed and a German cupboard of similar date, and in the Great Solar, still with its original timber roof, there are several pieces of Renaissance furniture, including the painted Italian fifteenth-century cassone, or marriage chest. In several rooms there are intriguing German chandeliers, *leuchterweichen*, in the form of carved wooden figures, half human and half fish or bird, hanging from the ceilings.

This is a surprisingly good collection with much to interest and delight the visitor, in a castle which retains, after extensive restoration, a strong sense of its history and purpose. We owe our thanks to Lord and Lady Gort for resurrecting it for the nation.

David Dewing