

# TOWNLEY HALL

*Francis Johnston's Classical Masterpiece*

## THE FAMILY

The Townley Balfour family probably sprang from the Lancashire family of Townley. They appeared in Louth during the Cromwellian upheavals and gained extensive areas of land in Athclare Castle close to Dunleer. It was Hamilton Townley, born in 1673 who seems to have been the first to appear in Tullyallen. Still earlier in the seventeenth century, members of the Scottish family of Balfour came to Lisnaskea Co. Fermanagh and lived in Castle Balfour, which was built in 1620.

William Charles Balfour died unmarried in 1739 leaving his name and Fermanagh estates to Blayney Townley, his only surviving uncle in 1759, who added Balfour to his name. He inherited much land, a large house and doubtless cash to add to that already held in Louth. The family also held a share of the water powered mill at Slane, Co. Meath. He married his second cousin Mary Tenison (née Townley). Thereafter until the family became extinct, the eldest son was called Blayney Townley Balfour, and Townley Hall was the base.

Blayney outlived his only son and his grandson succeeded him in 1788. The twenty-year-old heir Blayney Townley Balfour III and his sister Anna immediately set about improving the estate. Their grandfather had extended the earlier Townley Hall, no trace of which now remains, around 1764. It had stood about 100 yards north of the present building.

In 1797 the 29 year old Townley Balfour III married lady Florence Cole who was just 18. They had ten children and of these, only the eldest son married. He had four children. Of these only the eldest son, being then over 60, married Madeline daughter of John Kells-Ingram, poet and Vice-Provost of Trinity College, and author of "*Who Feels to Speak of Ninety-Eight*". They had no children, so only three generations of that name survived. Mrs. Townley Balfour died in 1955, ending the family's occupancy since 1799.

## RECENT TIMES

The last inheritor was Mrs Townley Balfour's cousin David Crichton. He sold the estate of 850 acres in 1957 to Trinity College who used it as an agricultural school. They transformed it with the help of grants from the Kellogg foundation into a student hostel and research laboratories and also installed the present heating and electrical systems. This usage was short-lived because rationalisation of university departments made it clear that agricultural studies would not find their home in Trinity College. In 1969 the College sold 500 acres of farmland to the Land Commission, and 350 acres of woodland to the Forestry Department. Professor Frank Mitchell, a notable naturalist of that same college and his wife bought the house and the large surrounding fields in 1967. Knowing the quality and character of the house, they could not bear to think of it falling into neglect as had happened to so many other mansions in the hands of the Land Commission. The Mitchells managed the house as a study centre, accommodating archaeologists studying the Newgrange complex and other sites, and other charities and institutions. Among these



*Blayney Townley Balfour III*

groups was the School of Philosophy and Economic Science. Approaching retirement, the Mitchells wished to see the house in good hands, and this coincided with the school's need for a residential study centre. A purchase on favourable terms was arranged and donations for this purpose came from the membership of the school.

The management of the house by the Townley family has left us with precise and detailed accounts of all activities. These include legal cases, farm diaries, cash books, kitchen recipes, prescriptions, household inventories, verse, lectures, prayers, notes on education, and are to be found in the National Library. The National Architectural Archives also hold Johnston's original drawings and we are fortunate for these to have survived the events of 1922.

## **ARCHITECTURE**

His wealth allowed Blayney Townley Balfour III to get what he wanted architecturally. The desire was for a large house with a simple neoclassical exterior, its interior focussed on a circular staircase hall covered above by a dome. Like many gentlemen of that period, Balfour had made the 'grand tour' to Italy, and undoubtedly was impressed by the rotunda and dome of the Pantheon in Rome. Influence could also have come from Wyatt's London Pantheon or the Dublin Royal Exchange, now the City Hall by Thomas Cooley. One door architrave in the library is a copy of that in the Erectheion in Athens

The rotunda is a Roman feature enclosed by what is otherwise a house of the Greek revival style. At this period a return to simplicity had replaced the elaborate detail so successfully established by Robert Adam, with emphasis being placed on slender airiness rather than decoration. Quality of materials and workmanship appears to have been a priority. The house presents an austere, even severe exterior. Having emerged from



a wooded avenue, the visitor has hardly adjusted to the light when he is surprised by a sea of lawn upon which the house appears to float, untroubled by farmhouses or stables. The kitchen wing is recessed into the hillside and even the servants attic floor is hidden behind the parapet. The plan is a perfect 90 foot square, the flatness of the façade relieved only by a Doric portico. Having also seen a Doric gate lodge, the entering visitor is warmed by two fireplaces of the same order. John Summerson in ‘The Classical Language of Architecture’ describes the Doric order thus:

*“A lovely thing, I have a cheek to adopt. You can’t copy it. It means hard labour, hard thinking over every line in all three dimensions and in every joint, and no stone can be allowed to slide. If you tackle it in this way, the Order belongs to you and every stroke, being mentally handled, must become endowed with such poetry and artistry as God has given you. The perfection of the Order is far nearer Nature than anything produced on impulse or accident-wise.”*

## **THE ARCHITECT**

This house was the first private commission for the 34-year-old architect Francis Johnston. Born in 1760, the second son of William and Margaret, the father being an architect and builder in Armagh, where it is believed Francis went to the Royal School. In 1778, the



school patron archbishop Richard Robinson sent Johnston to study with his architect friend Thomas Cooley, where he spent four years and then joined the office of Samuel Sproule. When Cooley died in 1784 the archbishop appointed Francis as his architect for buildings in Armagh. In 1790 he married Anne, daughter of Robert Barnes a prosperous Armagh man, from whom she inherited property in Dublin. They had no family.

Johnston was outstandingly the finest architect of Irish birth in his day, perhaps of any time, and of fully equal stature to James Wyatt in England. In his garden in Eccles Street, he built a Gothic church tower, whose bell he enjoyed ringing to the dismay of his neighbours. He was eventually persuaded to donate the bell to St Georges Church, one of his Baroque creations in Hardwicke Place, Dublin. Other notable buildings include the Gothic Chapel Royal in Dublin Castle, the medieval Charleville Castle and the General Post Office, Dublin. He was the official architect to the Bank of Ireland from 1802 to 1826 and converted the Irish Parliament into a bank in 1804. Francis Johnston died on 14 March 1829 and was buried in the cemetery of his beautiful Church of St George.

## **THE BUILDING**

A quotation from Johnston to Balfour in 1794 estimates the cost of the new house to be 10,473 pounds. Following several revisions of the plans, building commenced in that same year. The closely fitting or 'ashlar' cut stone used in the outer walls was carted from a quarry at Sheephouse 2½ miles away. The choice of stone was well founded, as analysis has shown it to have low water absorbency unlike many limestones. Most of the masonry was shaped before delivery to the site, and its complexity testifies to the level of skill found in local craftsmen. So little mortar shows between the façade stones that a coin could not fit between them. Bricks were produced at a location still known as the brick

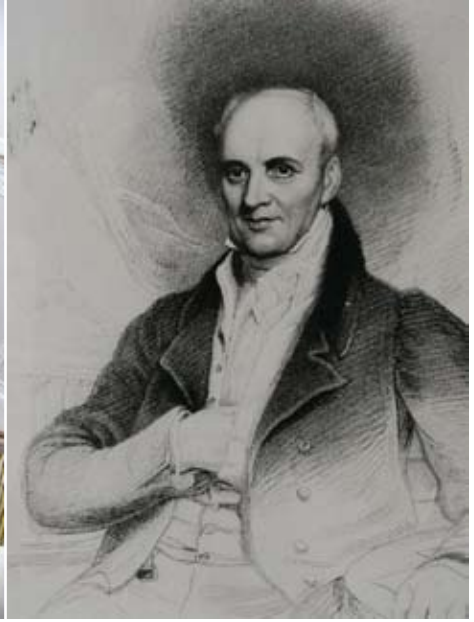


field where a kiln was set up, the best being produced in Spring and Autumn to allow a more even rate of drying. The masonry failed only in one detail – the four chimney stacks could not cope with ten or more flues converging on each. The white Portland stone used in the entrance hall, stairs and elaborate tile patterning on the rotunda floor came from the south of England. It was cut and finished before importation.

A local lime kiln would have produced the huge quantities required for mortar and internal plastering, the latter being reinforced with horsehair. The moulding of the cornices was probably done by a Robert Eustace, who was noted for similar work in Drogheda. Paint based on lime wash or linseed oil was ground on site. As the cost of pigments varied greatly, the colour was often chosen to reflect affluence. Johnston's choice for the windows was a deep maroon, perhaps to emphasise the pale grey stonework.

Very substantial timbers were used to achieve the long spans supporting the floors. Oak beams were held in longitudinal compression, sandwiched between pine tension members. This formed a 'pre-stressed' beam, a forerunner of modern methods. The floorboards in the major rooms, even the 45 foot library, ran the full length without a break and their transport alone would have required special provision. A 'secret' nail inserted diagonally at the edge of the board anchors it to the joist below and oak dowels peg adjacent boards together. Thus no fasteners are visible on the finished surface.

The internal ground floor doors are of Cuban mahogany, still quite a new material



*Francis Johnston*

at that time. Johnston's attention to detail shows in the absence of hinges, the doors being suspended on invisible pivots. The end-grain normally resulting from mortise and tenon joints has been concealed. Screws in the window frames which were unavoidably visible had their heads coated in brass. The oak front door is twice the size of that in Áras an Uachtaráin, whose porticos were added by Johnston.

In keeping with the Regency style, the original window sashes use the slimmest possible glazing bars, these being reinforced with a metal rod running within the wood. The shutters in the withdrawing and dining rooms demonstrate extraordinary carpentry – the recesses from which they emerge are concealed by panelled doors regardless of whether they are open or shut.

The entrance hall is cool, simple and has a dramatic sense of space and restrained grandeur. Its symmetry is broken only in one respect – the door leading to the withdrawing room features roundels, indicating a place for ladies to 'withdraw' to. The circle motif is repeated in the shutter cases, on the ceiling, and on one side only of the doors adjoining the library. The mirrors between the windows known as 'pier glasses' are silvered using mercury. Another fine feature is the Adam style chimney-piece of white Carrara marble which adds grace and lightness. The eighteenth century fashion for 'Chinoserie' resulted in this room being covered with Chinese hand painted wallpaper. In 1950 this wallpaper was carefully removed, sent to Hong Kong for restoration, and now graces the Green

Room of the American embassy in Regents Park, London.

The water supply for both house and farmyard came from extensive shallow ponds about 600 yards to the North. These provided ice each Winter for a beautiful oval shaped ice house which still survives in the woods. A lead tank in the attic supplied water closets on two floors and four hand basins in the lower rotunda. These are carved from a single block arranged around a pillar which not only supports the main rotunda above, but carries hidden within it the water supply pipe and drain.

Undoubtedly the major feature of the house is the stairs, which appears to float unencumbered by supports. There is a certain geometric purity in encompassing it in a centrally placed cylinder whose diameter is one third the width of the house. Here Johnston has carried Regency delicateness to an extreme. The precision with which the Portland stone is cut and the use of poured lead to lock the mating faces together allows the clutter of any pillars or brackets be dispensed with. Even after forty years of occupancy, Lady Townley Balfour remarked in 1948 that it still gave her pleasure every time she used it. Christopher Hussey says in 'Country Life' 1948:

*“I would dare to say that there is nothing lovelier than this rotunda in the Georgian architecture of the British Isles. Merely to let the eye range over the photograph is a delight. The senses are smoothed and abstracted, almost hypnotized by the endless curving movement - yet not made giddy, for, except when looked at vertically upwards, none of the curves is continuous.”*



**Townley Hall entrance is on the Slane road, West of Drogheda, close to the M1.  
Grounds are private and tours are strictly by appointment.  
Phone 041 983 8218.**