

The Story of the Butler Family¹

1. The Early Butlers

Theobald Fitzwalter, an English nobleman, came with young Prince John to Ireland in 1185. The prince gave him a large area of land and the important job of Chief Butler of Ireland. This meant that if the king was visiting Ireland, the Chief Butler had to make sure there was plenty of food and drink ready for him and for the group travelling with him. The Butlers were also given a special privilege known as the *Prisage of Wine*. They were entitled about 15% of all the wine that was imported to Ireland. Another special honour for the Chief Butler was that he had to serve the first glass of wine to the king after he had



been crowned. This is what the three cups on the Butler crest stands for. You can see the three cups on the top right of the shield in this coat of arms.

From now on the FitzWalters were known as 'Butlers'. Most of their land was in County Tipperary. At that time the area was known as Oir Mhumhan, which meant east Munster. This is how we get the word 'Ormond', a name that we connect with the

Butlers. Who was the first Earl of Ormond? To answer that, we must move forward in time to the eighth generation of Butlers living in Ireland, to a man called James Butler. In 1327, he married Eleanor, a niece of King Edward III of England, and the following year the King made him Earl of Ormond.

It is believed that this engraving in St Mary's Church, Gowran, may be that of James Butler, who died in 1338. The Butlers were living in Gowran Castle. James's grandson, another James Butler, bought Kilkenny Castle and its lands in 1391.



¹ See DVD/3rd and 4th classes/Butler Family/Unit of Work

He is also buried in Gowran, and the effigy below is thought to be his.



James was the first of a long line of Butlers who were connected with Kilkenny Castle until it was sold in 1967.

In the 16th Century, Piers Rua, or Red Piers became the Earl of Ormond. His wife belonged to another powerful family in Ireland at the time, the Fitzgeralds of Kildare. They are buried in St Canice's Cathedral. By looking at their tombs, we can get a good idea of what type of clothes were worn by rich people in Ireland in the mid 16th Century. Their son, James was Earl of Ormond for a short time, as he and a group of friends were poisoned at a feast in London, in 1546. Before he died, James bought vast amounts of land which had come on the market after Henry the VIII closed the monasteries in Ireland in 1537. His son, 'Black Tom', became the next Earl of Ormond.



Piers Butler and Margaret Fitzgerald

2. Who was to come after Black Tom?

We found out earlier on that the Butlers were connected to the royal family in England. In the 16th Century there was to be another connection. Thomas Butler, the seventh earl of Ormond, had a daughter called Margaret, who married Sir Thomas Boleyn in England. Their granddaughter, Ann, was the second wife of King Henry VIII and their great-granddaughter was Queen Elizabeth I of England.

When Elizabeth I ruled England, she was very friendly with her Butler cousin, 'Black Tom.' As well as being the Chief Butler in Ireland, he was also made the Treasurer of Ireland. Black Tom's son died while he was only six. His other child was called Elizabeth. Kilkenny Castle and all its estates were only permitted to be owned by a man, so to make sure that his daughter would inherit his castle and property, Tom arranged for her to marry a Butler cousin called Theobald. She agreed to this, but within ten years, Theobald became very ill and died.



Queen Elizabeth I

The couple had no children, so Kilkenny Castle and all its land would now go to Black Tom's cousin, Walter.



Walter Butler lived in Kilcash Castle in County Tipperary on the slopes of Slievenamon. He was a Catholic, and one of the leaders of the Old English in the Irish Parliament.

Elizabeth Butler had been looking forward to living in Kilkenny Castle and being the lady of a great estate. She was not happy with the prospect of living in a smaller house which had far less land going with it. To make matters worse, she would not be able to move into this house until her father died and in the meantime she had to live on an allowance. Her husband had owed a lot of money and she had to pay this back. Elizabeth was determined to change her father's will so that she would inherit Kilkenny Castle and lands. The only way that this could be done was by getting the King of England to change it. Elizabeth met and married a Scottish nobleman, Richard Preston and hoped that through him, she would be able to meet the people at court who would have enough influence over the king, to gain back her lands.

Black Tom died and Elizabeth started the court case. Thanks to the contacts she had made in court, she was able to persuade the king, James I, to change her

father's will. Walter was left with the manor in Gowran, along with a small amount of land.

Walter knew that the only way that he could become owner of Kilkenny Castle and lands again, was to persuade the king to change his mind. He asked James I to admit that he had made a mistake about the will. The king was outraged that his decision should be questioned like this and put Walter in prison, where he spent the next eight years. This was a very difficult time for Walter. The land that he had been left with was not earning enough money to pay off his debts. To make matters worse, his eldest son, Thomas, drowned at sea while Walter was in prison. Apart from the heartbreak of losing his son, He depended on Thomas to round up support for his cause in Ireland.

When Walter was finally released from prison in 1627, the new king, Charles I sat on the English throne. Walter made arrangements to go back to Ireland to fight the Prestons in court. However, Walter never met Elizabeth or Richard again. In October 1628, Elizabeth travelled through Wales, on her way to board a ship for Ireland. She suddenly became very ill and died. Two weeks later, Richard Preston sailed the Irish Sea to attend her funeral and drowned during a storm on the journey over. So Walter inherited the castle and all the lands again.

The Prestons left behind a daughter, called Elizabeth. Walter's son, Thomas, also left behind children. His oldest son was called James Butler. A marriage was arranged in 1629 between Elizabeth and James, who were second cousins, once removed. Elizabeth was 14 and James was 19. Walter, whose nickname was 'Walter of the Prayers', died in February 1633.



3. The First Duke

After his father had drowned, James was cared for by the family of the Archbishop of Canterbury. During that time he converted to the Protestant faith. In 1642, he was created the Marquis of Ormonde. It was from this point onwards that the 'e' was added to the title. King Charles I had appointed James head of the army in 1641 and in 1643 he appointed him Lord Lieutenant – the highest government position in Ireland. However, James was

not a popular man in his home town of Kilkenny. When it came to important government jobs in Kilkenny, the Butlers had always appointed some of the local Catholic merchants. Now James ignored this group. In 1641 a group of Ulster Catholics started a rebellion. They wanted to get back land that had been taken from them by English Protestant settlers during the Ulster Plantation, thirty years earlier. The rebellion quickly spread to other parts of Ireland. Many Catholic landowners believed that it was in their interest to join the rebels to make sure that they held onto their lands. Some of these men were members of Parliament until the time of the rebellion. Parliament could only be called by the King, so this group of men decided to form their own type of parliament, which they called an ‘assembly.’ Kilkenny became the home of this assembly during the 1640s and its supporters called themselves “The Confederate Catholic’s”. Nowadays we refer to it as the “Confederation of Kilkenny”. Although James Butler was firmly on the side of the English, many of the men at the assembly were related to him.

What was happening in England shaped the events that were happening in Ireland. England was being torn apart by a civil war. King Charles I and his Parliament had very different views on how to rule the country and ended up at war with each other. The supporters of the Parliament were known as Parliamentarians and the supporters of the king were known as Royalists.

The Confederates in Kilkenny always claimed that they were loyal to the king and that they were fighting for the freedom to practise the Catholic religion. In January 1649, they were trying to work out a peace deal with the English through James Butler. However, less than two weeks later, the Parliamentarians executed Charles I and James Butler fled to France with Charles’s son. England, Scotland and Wales were then ruled by the Parliament or Commonwealth.



The Phoenix Park in Dublin was laid out by the Duke of Ormonde when he was made Lord Lieutenant of Ireland after Charles II was

Kilkenny Castle and all the Butler property was confiscated by Parliament.

James Butler’s wife, Elizabeth, appealed to Parliament that *she* was the owner of some of the Butler land and property in Ireland that had been taken and that she should get it back. Parliament agreed to restore her land and houses and by 1657, she had

moved to her house in Dunmore, near Kilkenny City with her children. In 1660, Charles II was restored to the throne in England. James Butler was rewarded for his great friendship to the King. He was created Duke of Ormonde and once more appointed as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland.



Entrance to Kilkenny Castle

Kilkenny Castle and most of the land that had been confiscated was restored to James. He set about changing the castle from a medieval fortress to a French-style chateau. He knocked down the houses between Rose Inn Street and the castle, in order to create the Parade.

Elizabeth died in 1684. James lived until 1688 and the present grand entrance to Kilkenny Castle was completed by his grandson, James, the second Duke of Ormonde.

4. Two Royal Visitors

The next big drama to unfold in Ireland was the war between James II and William of Orange for the throne of England. In 1688, James II, King of England, was Catholic, and was forced to step down in favour of his Protestant nephew from Holland, King William of Orange. King William also happened to be his son-in-law.



James Butler, 2nd Duke of Ormonde



King James II

James II spent most of the winter of 1689 in Kilkenny Castle. He and his supporters were determined to get back the throne. James Butler was not present. He had said openly that he was in favour of William of Orange and James had outlawed all supporters of his rival. Lord Galmoy, a



King William

Catholic cousin of James Butler, was now living in Kilkenny Castle.

The armies of James and William met at the river Boyne, near Drogheda, County Louth, in July, 1690. William won this battle. James Butler had fought with William at the Boyne and made sure that he was at Kilkenny Castle to receive William, on his way down to Limerick. The Butlers preserved the fork used on this occasion as a family heirloom. William's army made Kilkenny their winter headquarters 1690 -91, when it moved down to besiege Limerick. After the Battle of the Boyne, James fled to France and spent the rest of his life there.

5. The Butlers in the 18th and 19th Centuries

We have seen how life for the Butlers often depended on what was happening in England and once again in 1715, the second Duke was disgraced because he was in favour of the return of the Stuart family to the throne – King James of the Battle of the Boyne was a Stuart. The Duke was forced to flee to France where he lived until his death in 1745. A caretaker looked after Kilkenny Castle for many years and it became very run down.



Kilkenny Design, once the stables for Kilkenny Castle

We are fast forwarding our story to the late 18th Century. Walter Butler of Garryricken inherited the Butler titles and lands and moved into Kilkenny Castle which was in very poor condition at the time. His son, John, married Anne Wandesforde of Castlecomer. She was a very rich lady and brought a fortune to the Butlers. The Wandesforde family had become wealthy as a result of the coalmines they owned in Castlecomer. Walter and Ann spent a fortune doing up the castle, planting the Castle Park,

rerouting the road away from the castle and building the stables and courtyards across the road – now Kilkenny Design.

Walter reclaimed the title 'Earl of Ormonde', that had died out. Their son, Walter, inherited the castle and properties in 1795. During his time as Earl, the



Castle Park

English Crown decided to buy back the right to the Prilage of Wine that the Butler family had been entitled to for centuries. Approximately 15% of the value of all wine that was imported into the country went to the Butlers until 1811 when the Crown paid £216,000 for it. This money helped to refurbish the castle and to pay for the lavish lifestyle of the Butlers.

During the 19th Century, the family carried out major work on Kilkenny Castle. They rebuilt the east wing to house their large collection of pictures, they filled out the west curtain wall to provide more bedrooms.

During the Famine, the Marchioness of Ormonde gave food, clothes and blankets to the poor. She set up a soup kitchen in Dunmore. The Marquis of Ormonde was on the Board of Guardians responsible for the running of the Workhouse in Kilkenny City, and for a time was chairman of the board.

6. The Butlers in the 20th Century

In 1904, royalty again visited Kilkenny Castle when King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra visited in Kilkenny at the end of April. The streets were decorated with flags and garlands. The King and Queen attended Kilkenny Agricultural Show. That night, the Butlers entertained their royal guests at a dinner party followed by a reception for 400 guests in the Long Gallery. The following day



Preparing for the Royal Visit in Rose Inn St

they all attended Divine Service in St Canice's Cathedral. A trip in an open car to Woodstock had been planned, but because it rained heavily, the royal party remained in Kilkenny Castle. The following day they left on a special train at 12.00 while a local band played 'God Save Ireland and 'Come Back to Erin.'

By the 1930s, the Butlers no longer were able to afford the upkeep of Kilkenny Castle. In 1935 they decided to sell most of their belongings in the castle and leave. An auction took place in November. It lasted for ten days. One of the days was set aside for selling over 6,000 books from the library in the castle. Some of the paintings, tapestries and a large marble table remained. In 1967, Arthur Butler sold the castle to a Castle Restoration Committee for £50. Shortly afterwards it was handed over to the state. Charles Butler, the last Marquis of Ormonde, died in 1997 age 98.