The history of the castle at Clongowes is long and complicated, with several phases of reconstruction and expansion. The imposing facades overlook the long avenue to the front, the pleasure grounds to the north and the playing fields to the east. Its architecture is unmistakeably that of a great estate, but the significance of its castellated style is entrenched in the country’s wider history of religious dissention. Castle Browne, as it was known until its purchase by the Jesuits, is one of a series of late eighteenth-century ‘castles’ built by old Catholic families of the Pale, which includes Ballinlough, seat of the O’Reilly/Nugent family, Malahide Castle of the Talbots, Killeen Castle of the Plunketts, and Gormanston Castle of the Preston family. Professor Alistair Rowan has suggested that Thomas Wogan Browne, the owner of Castle Browne in the late C18, had a hand in several of these designs as an amateur architect, including that of his own house from 1788. These represent the earliest phase of the Castle Revival style in Ireland, a fashion for chivalric architecture that forms part of the wider Gothic Revival that influenced both ecclesiastical and domestic architecture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The revival spread quickly among leading Catholic families, no doubt keen to promulgate the antiquity of their lineages. However the seed of the revival can be found in a source both English and Protestant: the work of James Wyatt at Slane Castle.

In 1773 the 1st Viscount Conyngham hired James Wyatt, one of the youngest and most fashionable London architects (who had just designed the assembly rooms there to great acclaim) to provide designs for a new castellated house. Throughout his career Wyatt moved seamlessly between the Neoclassical and ‘Gothick’ styles, sometimes employing both in a single work. As at Slane the exterior of Clongowes is firmly Gothic while the interior contains rooms in the more refined Neoclassical idiom, as promoted by the latest antiquarian publications of the day. While the Gothic style referenced the independent-spirited baronial power of a bygone age, the classical style spoke of cosmopolitanism and connectivity with the fast-paced sophistication of London.

To modern eyes the deceit is transparent – the fake windows placed for effect, conforming strictly to Georgian symmetry, with toy-like arrow loops and a theatrical roofline. If there is a childishness to it, then it might be excused as the inevitable by-product of a movement still taking its first steps. When Clongowes was remodelled in the Castle Style in 1788 there was no academic literature that clearly identified the various stylistic phases of medieval Gothic architecture, which would not be formally identified by antiquarians until 1817. Erecting houses in a Gothic mode was a new adventure and no one knew exactly how to proceed or what grand effects might be produced. James Wyatt himself took the theatricality of the style as far as anyone dared at Fonthill Abbey in Wiltshire, a house of Cathedral-like proportions that came crashing down in 1825.

The west front of Clongowes, facing the long avenue, reveals most about the castle’s earlier history (fig. 1). The narrow window openings are set far enough apart to suggest a fabric of quite early date; perhaps a late medieval structure of similar form to that contained within neighbouring Rathcoffey Castle, which was remodelled in the seventeenth century (like the castle at Donadea). An inscription by the entrance records the restoration of Clongowes by ‘S. FitzWilliam Browne’ in 1718, and to this time date the slender moulded windowsills, similar to those on the Old Library of Trinity College Dublin with which they are contemporary (the latter designed by the Surveyor
General, Thomas Burgh of Oldtown Naas). A view of the castle as it then appeared can be found on Alexander Taylor’s map of Kildare of 1783 (fig. 2), which shows a house covered by a steep roof that projected forward in the outer bays, which were then either hipped or gable-fronted. There are also a series of fine tall chimneystacks arranged symmetrically. Its general form was similar to Morristown Latten near Naas as it appeared in the late seventeenth century, prior to its nineteenth-century remodelling. Although at this time the building was without crenellations it is still marked as ‘Castle Browne’, suggesting that this designation was of long-standing. Another important early feature is the straight avenue to the west, with its double line of trees – a formality of approach typical of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, elements of which can still be seen at Castletown, Carton and Castlemartin.

Overlaid on the earlier staid and sober shell is Thomas Wogan Browne’s Gothic fantasy of 1788. From the west front the architectural effect is at its most naïve. The turreted entrance bay and flanking towers reflect the style of the 14th and 15th centuries, such as found at Bodiam and Herstmonceux in Sussex, but which continued up to the time of Henry VIII at Hampton Court. The use of quatrefoils, both in the outer windows and flanking the door is a typical device of 18th century ‘Gothick’ architecture, popularised by Horace Walpole at Strawberry Hill in Twickenham between 1749 and 1776. The survival of the delicate web of lead and glazing on those windows flanking the entrance is notable, as they have been altered elsewhere. The trio of large window openings over the door is likely an original feature of the 1780s and is paralleled on the bay window of The Abbey at Celbridge, another notable early experiment in Ireland’s Gothic Revival. The glazing was, of course, replaced by Joshua Clarke (father of the more famous Harry) in the early 20th century.

The castle’s enlargement and ornamentation by Thomas Wogan Browne in 1788 was undertaken in a period of increasing sympathy towards the plight of Irish Catholics, reflected in Browne’s appointment as high sheriff for County Kildare in 1789, two years prior to the Catholic Relief Act of 1791. In 1795, we find him a magistrate, dealing with men accused of High Treason for administering oaths of loyalty to the French. Indeed it may have been deemed wise to appoint a Catholic to such a position in the year of France’s bloody revolution to prevent the alienation of the country’s Catholic population. Browne was also a member of the Whig Club and an outspoken supporter of Lord Charlemont, the leading ‘patriot peer’ in the Irish House of Commons who was also an enthusiast for the latest style of Neoclassical architecture. If there was a model of the collector and patron for Browne to follow, Charlemont was surely it.

The decoration of the main rooms – all on the first floor – is modest by the standards of the time and perhaps compromised by want of means. The Round Room, as it is termed, is not round in plan but square (fig. 3). The name comes from its remarkable domed roof, ornamented with the light Neoclassical stuccowork typical of the late eighteenth century. Domed rooms were then in fashion – the most notable example being James Gandon’s rotunda at Emo Court. The idea that Browne worked as his own architect is perhaps supported by the failure to resolve the conflicting geometries of walls and ceiling. The standard solution to the problem of joining cubic and spherical volumes was the employment of pendentives, which can be seen in structures from the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul (C6) to St Peter’s in Rome and beyond. The omission here of so common a transitional device is puzzling. It is hard to put it down to simple architectural illiteracy. Was Wogan Browne dreaming beyond his means and then having to make hard compromises in the execution of the work?

The principal reception room (now the main dining room) has shallow coffering over a flat plane, without penetrating the surface. The lack of over-painting suggests the coffers are a later addition. Coffer is typically used to model the surface of barrel and domical vaults, inspired by great
exemplars such as the Basilica of Maxentius and the Temple of Venus near the Roman Forum, or most famously the Pantheon, working to capture the movement of light across the surface, adding depth and a sense of recession to the space, and of course reducing the structural weight. Here it used in a purely ornamental manner to no great effect. What the original ornament might have been is unclear. The Neoclassical schemes Robert Adam and James Wyatt were tailor-made for such expansive flat ceilings, articulated with delicate low relief stuccowork and contrasting pastel shades. But such work required expert craftsmen at high prices. The anthemion frieze and enriched modillion cornice seem to be original. These would have been cast from moulds. The design is repeated to some effect over the central double doorway at the south end of the room and picked up in a more subtle way in the panelling of the window shuttering.

More interesting is the drawing room, now the Community Library, which has a segmental-vaulted ceiling and frieze with lyre motif (fig. 4). Between the windows of the east wall are a fine series of engravings of Etruscan red-figure vases from William Hamilton’s Antiquités Étrusques, Greque et Romaines, a pioneering antiquarian publication of 1766-7. The idea of decorating a room with engravings from published works was already well-established in the eighteenth century, most famously at nearby Castletown House in Celbridge. Hamilton’s black and red figure ornaments are echoed beautifully in the inlaid marble chimneypiece, which must have been specially commissioned for the room. On the N side of the building is the Museum Library, which has an accomplished Doric frieze.

If the architecture of Castle Browne is in the final assessment one of compromise, then it may have been compromise forced upon Thomas Wogan Browne by a want of means. As the architectural commentator Roger North had warned would-be patrons in the previous century, architects were wont ‘to practise (sic) their own whims at your cost.’ Taking on both roles, Browne may literally have been the architect of his own downfall. That Browne had aspirations to be a man of discernment and taste is clear from the scheme of engravings of William Hamilton’s antiquities in the former drawing room, which were handsomely extended to the Chimneypiece (surely at great cost), and the commissioning of a double portrait of himself and his wife by George Romney, one of the leading London painters of the day. The portrait was intended to display the scholarly aspirations of the Brownes, showing Mrs Browne ‘seated at a table in the act of drawing, and Mr Browne standing on the left of her, and reaching to a shelf of books.’ That Browne over-extended himself during the construction is clear from the fact that he could not afford the full 200 guinea fee for the work, paying only half. As a result Romney refused to finish it and it remained in his studio for some years after his death. That the family were hard-pressed by the penal laws is suggested by Thomas Wogan Browne’s attendance at a meeting of the Catholic landowners of County Kildare, where in a long speech he complained of the fact that his younger brother was forced to live by his sword in a foreign army (fighting allies of the English). The Browne family’s occupation of the castle came to a tragic end with Browne’s suicide in 1812. According to the Hibernian Magazine in 1813, his ‘magnificent edifice’ had cost some £26,000 to construct, a huge sum which must have thrown him into irredeemable debt. His younger brother came back from the continent to sort out the estate. The sale of the library took place in January 1813 and included many Italian books, described in the press as ‘the most valuable and extensive collection ever sold in this kingdom, including Cassini’s map of France and 175 plans of cities ‘neatly bound in 15 cases’. Six months later the General sold off the family’s town house at no. 9, Dawson Street, followed three months later by Clongowes itself.
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1 For the early history of Clongowes, see Brendan Cullen, A Short History of Clongowes Wood College. 2019.
4 ‘County Kildare’, Saunders’s News-Letter, 5 August 1795, p. 3.
7 Ibid. There was also a ‘Mother and Child’ by Romney of 1771 sold by a descendent at Christies in 1880, which may have hung in Castle Browne prior to its sale. Christies, 24th April 1880, lot 185.