The History and impact of the de Vesci family of Abbeyleix, Queen’s County, from 1698 - 1884


Abstract

‘Whatever their origins, geographical location or original functions, a crucial factor in the development of many settlements during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was association with a particular landowner.’ (1) What this thesis sets out to undertake is an examination of one such area, considerably influenced not in this case by the efforts of one individual alone, but rather by the combined efforts of generations of one individual land owning family. The location of interest is Abbeyleix, Co. Laois, the seat of each consecutive viscount de Vesci from 1776-1995. Abbeyleix, a town in Co. Laois, situated on the main Cork - Dublin road, became home to the de Vesci family in 1698 when Sir Thomas Vesey obtained the estate there through marriage (2) The estate remained in the de Vesci hands until 1995 when it was sold for a sum in excess of three million pounds. The name de Vesci has been synonymous with Abbeyleix for centuries during which time ‘under the encouragement of the de Vesci family the neighbourhood was relatively fortunate.’ (3) As this work unfolds it will, I hope, progressively highlight the reasons why Abbeyleix and its surrounding areas were fortunate to have this family as patrons. Its purpose is to document the story of the de Vesci family during the period 1698 - 1884 and to throw light on the aspects of local social, political and economic history.
Viscount de Vesci, of Abbeyleix in the Queen’s County, now called County Laois (pronounced "leash"), is a title in the Peerage of Ireland. It was created in 1776 for Thomas Vesey, 1st Viscount de Vesci & 2nd Baron Knapton. The title Baron Knapton was created in the Peerage of Ireland in 1750 for the first Viscount's father, John Vesey, 1st Baron Knapton & 2nd Baronet, who had earlier represented Newtownards in the Irish House of Commons. The fourth Viscount served as Lord Lieutenant of Queen's County from 1883-1903. In 1884, the fourth Viscount was created Baron de Vesci, of Abbey Leix in the Queen's County, in the Peerage of the United Kingdom, which gave him an automatic seat in the House of Lords. De Vesci Collection. Of Norman descent, the De Vescis were a leading Anglo-Irish family. John Vesey (1638–1716), who was born in Coleraine, County Londonderry, was a prominent figure in the Church of Ireland, becoming Bishop of Limerick in 1673 and Archbishop of Tuam in 1679. His son Thomas Vesey (1672–1730) was made a baronet in 1698. Ordained a priest in 1700, he immediately became Archdeacon of Tuam and later Bishop of Killaloe (1711) and Bishop of Ossory (1712). Abbey Leix, beside the River Nore in Queen’s County (renamed Laois in 1922), had been a Cistercian monastery. The abbey lands were granted to the Earl of Ormonde in 1562 and were acquired by the Vesey family in the early eighteenth century. X Letters and papers about the history of the vesey and allied families, the history and content of the de Vesci papers, and the history of abbeyleix house and the abbeyleix vicinity, 1674-1987. 116. In a Country Life article of 26 September 1991, entitled ‘Abbeyleix, County Laois …’, the late John Cornforth provided a short but still serviceable account of Vesey family history, largely based on the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereafter PRONI) list of the de Vesci papers as it then stood: The Veseyes first appeared in Ireland in the second quarter of the 17th century and, like a surprising number of families, rose through service in the Church of Ireland.