



Public Record Office  
of Northern Ireland

# **INTRODUCTION**

# **ROSSE PAPERS**

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# Rosse Papers (MIC512, MIC564, T3498)

## Table of Contents

Summary .....	2
17th century papers .....	3
Sir Laurence's papers .....	4
Science and astronomy .....	5
Non-scientific correspondence.....	6
The Irish estate archive.....	7
The Yorkshire archive .....	8
Access to the collection .....	9

## Summary

The Rosse papers are the papers of the Parsons family, baronets, Barons and Viscounts Oxmantown and Earls of Rosse, of Birr Castle, Birr (alias Parsonstown), Co. Offaly. They run from c.1540 to 1991.

Although PRONI has microfilmed (MIC512 and MIC564) well-defined sections of the archive, and has in addition photocopied (T3498) bits and pieces from all over the place, what really matters about PRONI's holdings is its comprehensive list of the papers, which forms a major part of its 'Register of Irish Archives'. This list includes a good deal of calendaring and to that extent is a document in its own right. But, essentially, it is a guide to the originals which remain in family possession in the Muniment Room at Birr Castle. Researchers wishing to consult these originals should write, well in advance, to the present (and 7th) Earl of Rosse.

PRONI's work on the archive at Birr Castle began in 1979 and in essence is a continuation of work begun, and left unfinished at c.1700, by the Historical Manuscripts Commission in the 1870s. In 1992, PRONI was asked to draft the entry on the Birr Castle archive for the second edition of the *Directory of Irish Archives* (Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 1993). The text which follows is broadly speaking what has appeared in the *Directory*, and represents an attempted bird's eye view of a large, rich and complex accumulation of papers.



## 17th century papers



*Laurence Parsons,  
2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Rosse*

One of the great strengths of the Birr Castle archive is its wealth of 17th century (1595-1699) correspondence and related papers, deriving from the two branches of the Parsons family, the Parsonses of Bellamont, Co. Dublin, Viscounts Rosse and later Earls of Rosse of the first creation (which died out in 1764), and the Parsonses of Parsonstown, and mainly relating to the development of Birr and to the sieges of Birr Castle in the 1640s and in 1689-1690. Eighteenth century letters and papers of both branches of the Parsons family are sparser, until the advent in 1791 of Sir Laurence Parsons, 5th Bt, of Parsonstown, later 2nd Earl of Rosse of the second creation.



## **Sir Laurence's papers**

Sir Laurence's papers include approximately half the surviving archive of his political mentor and friend, Henry Flood, consisting of correspondence and speech-notes of Flood, letters to Parsons from and about Flood, and drafts for biographical and historical writings by Parsons on Flood, 1765-c.1820. Parsons' papers proper consist of his own notes and drafts, c.1775-c.1840, in connection with parliamentary precedents, parliamentary speeches at College Green and Westminster, his poems, the history and genealogy of the Parsons family, and his other miscellaneous writings (published or unpublished). His correspondence (other than that relating to Flood) runs from 1791 to 1841, and includes documentation of the '98 Rebellion, the Union and the 2nd Earl's noteworthy term of office (1809-1831) as Joint Postmaster-General for Ireland.



## Science and astronomy



*Laurence Parsons,  
4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Rosse*



The contribution of the Parsons family to science and engineering is well known and is represented in the archive by: correspondence of the 3rd and 4th Earls, 1840-1909, with fellow-astronomers or about the Birr and other observatories; journals containing astronomical observations, drawings of nebula, drafts for articles and speeches on astronomy, pre-1828-1908, all deriving from the 3rd and 4th Earls; the glass plate archive of Mary Countess of Rosse, a pioneer photographer, c.1850-1865; and an artificial collection of letters and papers, 1856-1990, received or assembled by other members of the family, relating to the Hon. Sir Charles Parsons, the inventor (among other things) of the turbine engine, and a younger brother of the 4th Earl.

## **Non-scientific correspondence**

The non-scientific correspondence of the Earls of Rosse, from the 3rd to the 7th and present, runs from 1840 to 1991. In the case of the 3rd Earl this includes his correspondence as President of the Royal Society (1848-1854), and in the case of both the 3rd and 4th Earls their correspondence as Chancellors of Dublin University, Lieutenants of King's County, Irish representative peers and general local worthies and public figures, 1840-1908. The 5th Earl, who was killed in the First World War, is little represented, but his son and successor, the 6th Earl, and the 6th Earl's wife, Anne (née Messel), are copiously represented by a voluminous correspondence with people prominent in the world of literature, conservation and the arts and in high society (c.1916-1984), including Harold and William Acton, John Betjeman, Robert Byron, James Lees-Milne and Sacheverell Sitwell. Within this period also falls the archive of the 6th Earl's younger brother, the Hon. Desmond Parsons, a notable Orientalist, who died young in 1937. Anne Countess of Rosse is represented, not only by her own correspondence, but by a quantity of letters and papers, 1826 and 1873-1912, of her maternal ancestors, the Linley and Sambourne families, and a larger quantity, c.1900-1954, emanating from her paternal ancestors, the Messels, originally of Darmstadt and subsequently of Nymans, Sussex.



## **The Irish estate archive**

The Irish estate archive includes maps, plans and drawings, 1638, c.1690 and c.1750-1970, but mainly consists of an Estate Office archive (not originally housed in Birr Castle), 1604-1979, containing: leases and lease books, 1604 and 1662-1951; rentals and rent accounts, 1834-1979; other account books and accounts, 1854-1967; Irish Land Commission papers etc., 1874-1970; and a fine run of agents' correspondence, 1879-1965. In addition, there is accidental documentation, 1840-1945, of the other estates, mainly in Cos Offaly and Tipperary, which the successive Rosse agents, George and Toler R Garvey Snr and Jnr, managed on behalf of other proprietors.





## The Yorkshire archive

Were it not for the presence of this voluminous Estate Office archive, Yorkshire would be better represented than Ireland in the Birr Castle archive. This Yorkshire material derives from the Yorkshire marriages of the 3rd, 4th and 5th Earls (in 1836, 1870 and 1905 respectively), and consists of: papers (almost exclusively estate and financial), c.1540-1813, of the Wilmer Field family of Heaton Hall, Bradford, including much documentation of estates elsewhere in Yorkshire, 1682-1987; papers, 1682-1987, of the Hawke family, Lords Hawke, about their estates at Womersley, Towton, etc, and including naval, administrative and political papers of Admiral Sir Edward Hawke, KB, 1st Lord Hawke, victor of the Battle of Qiberon Bay in 1759, and First Lord of the Admiralty, 1766-71; and letters and papers, 1739-1972 (mainly 1876-1962) of the Lister Kaye family, of Denby Grange, near Wakefield, many of them relating to coal-owning in the age of nationalisation.



## **Access to the collection**

As already mentioned, parts of the Birr Castle archive have been microfilmed or photocopied by PRONI - particularly the papers, 1807-1831, of the 2nd Earl of Rosse as Joint Postmaster-General for Ireland (MIC512), and selected items of prime interest to the genealogical researcher (lease-books, wage books, etc,) and therefore a prime target for access queries with which, until the microfilming was done in 1992 (MIC564), Lord and Lady Rosse had had to deal unaided. In addition, most of the scientific material is commercially available in microfilm form via the Whipple Museum for the History of Science, Cambridge University (PRONI's copy of this microfilm bears reference MIC512). Other researchers are facilitated, by written appointment and as time and other priorities permit, by Lord and Lady Rosse in a purpose-shelved Muniment Room set up by them in Birr Castle. It is not the least of the fascinations of this archive that the Muniment Room in which it is housed (which previously did duty as a Smoking Room!) is graced by recently restored plasterwork dating from the 1620s.

