

SUFFOLK HOUSE

By EILEEN BLACK

SUFFOLK HOUSE, the seat of the McCance family, which John McCance, M.P. (1772-1835) made into one of the most imposing residences in the area around Dunmurry, was last lived in by a member of the McCance family in 1922/23. It was then purchased by a Mr. Gaffikin, who owned it until 1927. The house then lay empty for ten years, until it was purchased by Mr. G. A. Cameron, in 1937. The rooms of the main part of the building, behind McCance's impressive facade, were used as store rooms by the Ministry of Food during World War II. In 1945, Mr. Cameron leased this wing of the house to an Austrian refugee and scientist, Otto Harriman, who established in it a small business, Ulster Pearls Ltd., making artificial pearls. The factory which had the distinction of making the pearls used on the Queen's wedding dress, employed 160 workers (mainly female) in 1957, and occupied 10,000 sq. feet of space, in this part of the house which was allowed to retain its Georgian features.

The Georgian wing of Suffolk House was built by John McCance in 1824, when he began to prosper. The facade, plain and undecorated, has a central porch with columns of the Tuscan order supporting an unadorned entablature. The dining room, which was to the left of the porch, has a fine plasterwork centrepiece in the ceiling, and large decorative medallions, cartouche-shaped, placed at regular intervals around the walls, at picture-rail height. The lime used in the plaster for these interior decorations, and for the outer walls, probably originated in the limestone outcrop on Collin and the Black Mountain.

The earlier wing of Suffolk House, lies behind the Georgian building, and at right angles to it. The walls, almost three feet thick, are of dark hand-dressed basalt stones, probably found locally, of various shapes and sizes. This part of the house, which is lived in by the Cameron family, consisted of kitchen, stable and farm buildings around a cobbled yard. The timber in the house is pine, while some oak has been used in the stables; the heavy roof timbers are held together with hand-made nails. Valuation survey records of April 1835 show that while the greater part of the entire house was nearly new at this time, and finished without any cut stone ornament, the stables and coach house were older and slightly decayed, though in good repair. The crowned chimneypots, which are used on the Georgian wing, are also found on this earlier building and were probably added c.1824, when McCance was unifying both old and new wings. The small gatelodge at the bottom of the driveway, has a hipped roof. There was a walled garden, with a gardener's house, on the other side of the Stewartstown Road (originally called the Upper Falls Road), where Glengoland Park now is; livestock were also kept in this area. Traces of paths which crossed the lawns of Suffolk House, and the remains of flower beds, long grown over, can still be seen in the grounds of the house.

Suffolk was a very picturesque area in the middle of the last century. The mountains and glens around Suffolk House were heavily wooded, and full of game. John McCance (1825-1869), grandson of John McCance, M.P., records, in his diary, seeing a fallow deer (a buck) in the area, on 13th November, 1852; he gave chase with his beagles, but lost the deer in the glen. A stag was also seen in the glen, on 27th March 1856.

Suffolk House, at this time, was the centre of much social activity, with many balls being held in the house in the spring and summer months. John McCance says of one of these dances, that which was held on 23rd April, 1852: 'Had a big dance at Suffolk which went off very well without anything disagreeable (sic) and everybody pleased with it the servants all a little through other the next day but not very bad (Tom lost key of garden gate)'.

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The future of Suffolk House is, at present, uncertain. Ulster Pearls Ltd. are undecided about the possible restoration of their part of the house, while almost half of the earlier building is due to be demolished, due to the forthcoming widening of the Stewartstown Road. Sadly it seems likely that the house will become just another memory of the Suffolk area.

Sources: Miss C. M. Cameron, 'Suffolk' a project for Stranmillis Training College, 1957.
W. A. McCutcheon, 'The Use of Documentary Material in the Northern Ireland Survey of Industrial Archaeology'.
Valuation Survey Records, (VAL. 1B: 128A), Public Record Office, Belfast.
Journal of John McCance (1825-1869), Public Record Office, Belfast.
Also information supplied by Mrs. G. A. Cameron, Mr. R. F. McCance and Mr. T. Q. Gaffikin.