HIDDEN HISTORIES
Political/Historical Perspectives of Sligo
Hidden Histories
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Edited by Kate Bell
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We all have a sense of the ‘past,’ both in an individual and collective way, and this perception is frequently bound up with an awareness of tradition, nostalgia, a sense of self-identity and a set of beliefs. Humans live on experience, and thus life cannot be lived without the context of the past, and without knowledge of where it fits into the continuing process of what has happened before. Societies worldwide value a collective social memory or history, as a storehouse that is habitually drawn on for a sense of direction, commonality and justification for present events. However, human memory, particularly through the often-opaque nature of time, tends to become distorted, altered and fallible, often changing the nature of our historical awareness.

In many ways, it is this community-based memory that the ‘Hidden Histories’ project has set out to chronicle and challenge, and through the process involved, make history and historical interpretation accessible to all sections of the community. The book has as its overarching theme, Sligo’s position as a vital nodal point and subsequent garrison town, starting with its Norman founders in the 13th century, and continuing through to the upheavals of the early 20th century.

There is a comprehensive coverage of both town and county, with a particular emphasis on the ‘architecture of authority’ as represented in the stories and legacies of institutions such as the military barracks, the workhouse, the fever and mental hospitals, as well as the Green Fort, a defining symbol of the Forthill area.

The influences of the ‘Big House’ are chronicled through a variety of landed estates and families, and these are anchored firmly in the context of the economic and social development of Sligo. In many ways this part of the project was a challenging one, as the popular bias against landlordism has been so strong following the agrarian and political upheavals of the late 19th century. ‘Hidden Histories’ focuses more on the positive aspects of the landed estates, both economic and social; resident landlords were prominent in county Sligo, engaging in the lives of their tenants, unlike in other counties where absenteeism resulted in the worst excesses of the system. The ultimate failure of the landlord system can provide an echo or reflection on contemporary society, with its fiscal and economic failures, exhibiting a pattern of repetition with the same economic consequences, albeit in vastly different times.

This project opened new windows to the past for those involved in the discussion groups, which were a core part of the programme. The facilitated workshops and dialogue sessions increased understanding and awareness of local and shared history and its impact on today’s society. The importance of the autonomy of the past -- that is the understanding of the past without recourse to modern societal values and political standards -- was a central part of the sessions, and has enabled people from significantly different socio-political backgrounds to express their stories while appreciating other perspectives, and questioning their own assumptions. The past, when looked at objectively, is not a comfortable refuge; it contains negative and positive features, often contradictory, depending on one’s social memory, political outlook and religious background. Indeed, grappling with aspects of the past that we would sometime prefer to forget, has been fundamental to the recent political progress on this island.

This book then, is the sum of the work of the many groups involved in this worthwhile project. The shared discussion and enjoyment of history has translated itself into a permanent record through the medium of print. Through this we can appreciate the differing aspects of Sligo’s chequered past, which have all contributed to the rich and varying landscape we see around us today. It is a wonderful achievement, a satisfying outcome for all those involved, and a source of reference for the future, shedding new light on familiar territory in our endless pursuit of history.
Preface

This book represents the work of participants on the Sligo PEACE III project ‘Hidden Histories.’

‘Hidden Histories’ is a Sligo LEADER Partnership project which examined the historical and political perspectives of Sligo’s history, focusing particularly on:

- The history of Sligo as a garrison town and the consequences of this
- The ‘Big Houses’ of County Sligo as a means of understanding the social history of the area

The research for this book was undertaken by local historical groups and interested individuals who worked with historical research facilitator Kate Bell. The research was undertaken by facilitated dialogue sessions and workshops. Kate guided and mentored the groups and individuals to uncover the ‘Hidden Histories’ of Sligo.

In doing this book it became obvious that Sligo possesses an extraordinarily rich history, much of which has been already well documented by eminent historians, but much more of which has not.

This book aims to inform the reader of the history of ‘Sligo as a Garrison Town’ by providing a timeline so as to put the events in context for the reader. The history of Sligo town was undertaken by the Forthill Men’s Group, Art and History Society. This active organisation of dedicated volunteers has written about some of Sligo’s fascinating history and how it has shaped the Sligo that we know today. The research highlights the great importance of the Green Fort and how a trip to its site today still gives the best aerial views of Sligo town.

Stories and experiences of the families of the ‘Big Houses’ have been uncovered in this publication by interviewing some of the owners of these enigmatic houses. These descendants have generously recounted and shared tales of their families’ long history and unusual childhoods growing up in such remarkable buildings. Former estate workers and their families also gave accounts of their experiences of working for the estates; these interviews and stories provide an engaging insight into a time that no longer exists and are great historical accounts of that era.

This project is a testament to the hard work and dedication of the facilitator and the participants. It is a record of many stories that have never been told, of an era that has since past but should not be forgotten.

Maeve Hopkins
PEACE III Development Worker
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Chapter 1 - Forthill: Sligo as a Garrison Town

Introduction by Kate Bell

Forthill as Sligo’s oldest community has played an integral part in the town’s multi-cultural history in regard to military defences, hospitals, the local economy and its links to two of Sligo’s ‘Big Houses.’

From Green Fort’s Celtic beginnings to British barracks burned during the 20th century War of Independence, Forthill has set the scene for Sligo town’s most important and fascinating acts of history.

Sligo with its castle and forts was centre stage for military campaigns which shaped the town’s changing population. Its strategic location with its pass to the North set it apart from the rest of Ireland.

Historian T. O’Rorke said of Sligo during the time of Maurice FitzGerald, the powerful Anglo-Norman who had Sligo Castle built, “it had the look and character of a garrison far more than of an ordinary town.”

During the 1600s Gaelic kings battled Norman lords from mighty stone castles and forts for control of the town, which rapidly became the urban pulse of North West Ireland and coastal gateway to Europe.

“During the thirteenth century Anglo-Norman(s) … and other settlers established castles, religious houses, manors, towns and a more developed money economy … -- a process that contributed to Connaught’s rich cultural heritage.”

Later, Sligo was savagely fought over by Protestant and Catholic kings, changing allegiances of some of its citizens, and when British and Scottish planters and soldiers settled here they integrated into the local community, even introducing their sport with great success. Likewise with the Irish, who shared their Gaelic traditions.
During the thirteenth century, Anglo-Norman(s) and other settlers established castles, religious houses, manors, towns and a more developed money economy - a process that contributed to Connaught’s rich cultural heritage.

Anglo-Irish wealth created a thriving commerce with Forthill at its heart, providing greater possibilities for its people. But during the mid-19th century thousands of Sligo people affected by the Great Famine languished in landlord-led workhouses and hospitals, many of whom died or were forced to emigrate.

After Ireland’s long conflict to become a Free State, modern housing replaced the burned barracks in Forthill, signalling a new age of peace. Today’s culturally blended Sligo no longer requires the protection of fortified walls because its best defence in modern times is its vibrant and diverse history, a legacy from which proactive communities, such as Forthill, can build a more harmonious and prosperous future.
600-1000 A.D.
An earthen ring fort, or rath, is built on an elevated site in Sligo, later becoming the Green Fort, offering sweeping views of the surrounding settlement, mountains and sea.¹

1245
Maurice FitzGerald, Chief Justice of Ireland, grants lands in Sligo and builds castle in town after battles with the Irish chieftains O'Donnell and O'Connor. Cut-stone and lime, along with labourers, may have been “ruthlessly” taken from nearby Trinity hospital construction.³ (O’Conor, p. 183)

1246
1249
Geoffrey O'Donnell, chief of Tir Conaill, marches on Sligo with his forces and burns the “srádhabhail,” or one-street village, but unable to capture it.⁴ (Annals of Connaught [AoC], 1249.7)

In the Battle of Sligo O'Donnell and Conaill killed many ‘Galls’ and burned the town. After battle at Credan Coluim Cille in the Rosses, they were routed and O'donnell wounded, so Conaill returned home. (AoC ibid, 1257.12)

1257
1265
O’Donnell and O’Conor, the King of Connaught, take over town and demolish castle.² (O’Conor, ibid)

1269

1270
Sligo burnt by O'Donnell and Conaill was killed.⁴ (AoC ibid, 1270.02)

1286
Richard de Burgo, the Red Earl of Ulster, led army into Connaught to destroy, "obtaining sway in every place through which he passed."⁶

13th Century

After Normans arrive in Ireland in 1169, they invade Connaught in 1235 and overcome the Irish chieftains.² Sligo is settled as port town to transport goods to Britain and Europe.

Sligo as a Garrison Town - Timeline
by Kate Bell

Castle rebuilt by son of Maurice FitzGerald but destroyed again by O’Conor in 1271, and again by O'Donnell in 1271.⁵ (McGowan, p. 85)

Famine Relief (image by Val Robus)

Ardnaghowan House
1294
Castle captured by Aedh O’Conor, but levelled by another Aedh O’Conor at behest of Lord of Connaught de Burgo, who was in a fierce power struggle with the Geraldines.③

1310
Red Earl of Ulster builds Sligo and refortifies castle, temporarily taken over by Rory O’Conor, and lays out town. The Earl controls over half of Ireland over Gaelic kings and Anglo-Norman lords.③

1315
Sligo castle razed by Aed O’Donnell, and he and his men “got much booty,” or spoils.④ (AoC ibid, 1315.21)

1360
Town once again destroyed by fire (Lewis, p. 16).

1362
Teige Oge O’Conor seizes Sligo Castle from O’donnells and assumes title ‘O’Conor Sligoe.’③

1370
Capture of Sligo Castle, the “heaviest and most humiliating” blow, to O’Conor Sligoe.⑥ (Wood-Martin, p. 109)

1371
O’Conor killed “treacherously” by O’Conor “with his own hands” in Sligo Castle. “Not often has a worse murder been committed in Ireland.”④ (AoC ibid, 1371.9)

1377
O’Conor killed “treacherously” by O’Conor “with his own hands” in Sligo Castle. “Not often has a worse murder been committed in Ireland.”④ (AoC ibid, 1371.9)

1394
Town plundered and burnt by MacWilliam Burke.⑦ (p. 16, Lewis) He and the sons of O’Conor “assaulted the castle of Sligeagh, burnt the whole town, took the spoyle therof, and ransacked it altogether.”⑧ (Wood-Martin, p. 102)

1299
1st Earl of Kildare, John fitz Thomas FitzGerald, hands over castle to de Burgo, a fluent Irish speaker and patron of bards, as part of peace agreement. “In all he emerges from history as a man at home in both the Gaelic and Anglo-Norman worlds.” ③ (O’Conor, p. 186)
1395
Once again, the town destroyed, its “splendid” stone and wood buildings burnt, according to the Four Masters. (Wood-Martin, p. 102)

1396
Sligo captured and sacked. (AoC ibid, 1398.21)

1414
Monastery, founded by Maurice FitzGerald, burns by accidental fire but rebuilt in 1416. (Lewis, p. 16).

1419
Surrender of Sligo by son of O’Conor to O’Donnell, out of a “grudge.” (AoC 1470.5)

1470
During the rest of 15th and 16th century, the castle “scene of almost perpetual hostilities,” taken over from O’Donnell by MacWilliam Burke and handed over to family of Brian, son of Donnell O’Conor. (O’Rorke, p. 110).

1478
During the rest of 15th and 16th century, the castle “scene of almost perpetual hostilities,” taken over from O’Donnell by MacWilliam Burke and handed over to family of Brian, son of Donnell O’Conor. (O’Rorke, p. 110).

1494
Turlough Carrach’s grandsons take control of castle; one falls at hands of Calvach Caech, who in turn is slain. (O’Rorke, p. 111)

1495
Con O’Donnell renews siege but fails and Hugh Roe is returned. (O’Rorke, p. 111)

1501
Hugh Oge O’Connell (O’Donnell) besieges castle in vain, and again in 1513 (O’Rorke, p. 112).

1512
O’Donnell is aided by a French Lough Derg pilgrim and despatches ship to Killybegs carrying heavy ordnance in order to assist in castle capture. This was the first recorded use of gun-power in Sligo. (O’Rorke, p. 112)

1516
“Even thus it was only after meeting so obstinate and spirited a resistance from the townsfolk, as to be obliged to batter the whole town, that he was able to make his way into the castle.” (O’Rorke, p. 112)

1522
Troops of Munster and Connaught battle in Sligo, with O’Donnells victorious in “bloodless triumph.” (O’Rorke, p. 113)

1530s
Teige O’Conor takes over Sligo Castle during night attack, having received guidance from part of the garrison, which offered to surrender the castle. (O’Rorke, p. 113)

1533
O’Conor assumes grand title of “The O’Conor,” takes hostages from rival clans and flaunts stolen Turrock Castle ornamental door inside Sligo Castle gateway. (O’Rorke, p. 115)

1536
Manus O’Donnell, son of Hugh Duv, invades and “triumphantly” captures castle. (O’Rorke, p. 115)
1538
Magnus O'Donnell succeeds in taking Sligo Castle, having been "well provided with garrison and ordnance." (1538.5 AoC)

1539
Lower Connaught hostages taken by Manus O'Donnell; in 1542 he obtains rent and tributes from other chiefs and acts as 'Lord Paramount' of the territory. (O'rorke, p. 115)

1545
Teige Oge O'Connor slain by Cormac McDermot at Ath-chinn-Locha, succeeded by Teige, son of Cathal Oge, until his death in 1552. (O'rorke, p. 116)

1561
Calvagh O'Donnell takes Sligo Castle: "...he sent his own standard to the town, and displayed it on the battlements of the tower, so it was visible to all..." (he said) the town was his own, and had belonged to his ancestors from a remote period, upon which the Lord Justice delivered up the keys of the town to Calvagh. (Annals of the Four Masters, available: celt.ucc.ie/published.html, 1561.9)

1565
Elizabethan Lord Deputy Henry Sydney, after marching through Ulster, forces O'Connor-Sligoe to submit. Irish chieftains surrender and are re-granted lands on condition they pay rent and swear allegiance to the Crown. (O'rorke, p. 120)

1579
Sir Nicholas Malby, Lord President of Connaught, issues orders to establish "apt and safe" places for keeping of Assizes and (court) Sessions, and chooses Sligo as safest.

1584
Donal O'Connor-Sligoe captured and taken prisoner to the Tower of London by Sir Paul Gore, but after surrendering his land is knighted by Queen Elizabeth I and allowed to return home in 1596. (O'rorke, p. 119)

1588
Three ships of the Spanish Armada are wrecked off the coast of Streedagh.

1607
Flight of the Earls spells end of Gaelic Ireland.

This date is referred to in the 1836 Ordnance Survey of Ireland in regard to one of the many possible original names of the Green Fort, Rath da Bhriotog means 'ringfort of two stuttering women' or 'ringfort of the two British women'.

Sligo's castle destroyed by 'Red' Hugh O'Donnell in order to prevent it from falling into English control. O'Connor-Sligoe strategically signs peace treaty with Queen Elizabeth I.

1595

1607

Political/Historical Perspectives of Sligo

HIDDEN HISTORIES

16
Construction of striking star-shaped Green Fort, replaces earthen ring fort, which was also known as the ‘Sod Fort,’ to prevent confusion between it and the Stone Fort located on the site that is now Sligo Town Hall.\(^1\)

1620-80

1612/13

Ten years after it is granted market and two annual fairs, the town becomes the Sligo Corporation Borough, formed by Royal Charter and consisting of 12 free burgesses, provost, judge and a commonalty.\(^{14}\)

1641

Chiefs of Sligo, including O’Conor-Sligoe, attack English garrison. But Sligo Castle apparently in such poor condition, the soldiers fought instead from the “castles,” actually fortified tower houses, of Crean’s and Gethin’s, in what is now Castle Street.\(^{16}\)

The soldiers surrender and most are given safe passage, but 20 placed in Sligo jail for safety, were murdered by mob. Parliamentarian Sir Frederick Hamilton and his forces then savagely attack town and friary.\(^{5}\) (p. 89, McGowan)

1642

Sligo suffers another massacre at the hands of Hamilton. “…it is confessed by themselves we destroyed that night near three hundred souls by fire sword and drowning…” wrote one of his soldiers.\(^{5}\) (McGowan from O’rorke, p. 89)

1640s-60

Cromwellian Stone Fort, thought to be small (not visible in the National Library’s Prospect of Sligo, 1685, depiction by Thomas Phillips) constructed in Sligo on site of present Sligo Borough Town Hall.\(^{18}\) (O’Brien and Timoney, p. 196)

1655-89

Green Fort falls into disrepair as consequence of relative peace between the Cromwellian and Williamite wars.\(^1\)

1659

Phillips’ illustration Prospect of Sligo, 1685 indicates Sligo Castle was most likely the work of Richard de Burgh with two-polygonal northern and western angle-towers and two rectangular buildings, which may have served as accommodation for the garrison and de Burgh himself.\(^3\)

1685

Sligo’s population is only 488 inhabitants.\(^{14}\)

1652

The Act for Settling Ireland passes by the English Parliament.\(^{19}\)

The O’Conor hanged in Boyle. Remaining O’Conors, O’Dowds, O’Harts, O’Garas, McDonaghs and other Gaelic clans driven into exile. Land is parcelled out to Cromwell’s soldiers and Protestant gentry.\(^5\)
1689
Patrick Sarsfield and Williamite forces seize town, including band of Huguenots. They take refuge in castle and Stone Fort, but it is retaken by King James supporters.³

1690
William of Orange defeats James II in Battle of the Boyne. Teige O’Regan orders repairs to the Green Fort to strengthen its defences so that it becomes Sligo’s main stronghold.³ Huguenot defenders retreated to the Stone Fort for better security.¹⁸

1695-1727
Penal Laws enforced.²⁰ Catholics establish secret places of worship, such as the Tobernalt Holy Well. Only 15% of land remained in hands of the Irish. The only Catholic landowners remaining in Sligo were the Taaffes of Ballymote and Terence McDonagh, the sole Catholic barrister practicing in Ireland.

1695
Four military barracks exist in Sligo: The Strand Barracks on Barrack Street; the Middle Barracks on Holborn Street; the Horse Barracks on Bridge Street; and the Old Stone Fort or Foot Barracks on Quay Street.¹⁴

1750s
Under leadership of Col. Mitchellburne, the Williamites take over Sligo, including the Green Fort, and Jacobites surrender under condition that the garrison members and their families be protected and given safe passage out of town.¹

1798
Unsuccessful Irish rebellion led by Robert Emmet.²³

1800
Act of Union unites Ireland with England, Scotland and Wales.²²

1803
General de Humbert with his French forces land in County Mayo to support Wolfe Tone’s Rising of the United Irishmen but are defeated in Longford. The forces had forged a path through the West and North West of Ireland.²¹

1810-20
Strand Barracks, only remaining Sligo barracks, could accommodate three Horse troops.¹⁴
1817-22
Severe famines occur within Sligo and throughout Ireland.24

1818
The polygonal-shaped Sligo Gaol (jail) is built within five years to house 200 inmates, including a hospital, surgery, dispensary, cookhouse, furnace, clothing store and school. Later when gas was introduced to heat water pipes, the jail was nicknamed "The Cranmore Hotel." Punishment could be harsh enough with inmates forced to pump water using the 'treadmill.'

1824
New Strand Barracks built to accommodate 72 officers and soldiers.14

1829
Catholic Emancipation passes in Parliament through the Roman Catholic Relief Act.25

1832
Strand Barracks is further enlarged and hospital built. In 1846 the 88th Regiment was stationed there with Lieutenant James O’Brien as Barrack Master.14

1836
Calvary barracks have capacity for 103 officers and privates, stabling for 60 horses and "excellent" hospital for 15 patients.7 (p. 18, Lewis)

1837
Sligo, as chief town in county, has 15,152 inhabitants (p. 16, Lewis) and 2,238 houses.7 (p. 18, Lewis)

1840s
Cholera epidemic spreads throughout Sligo town, where at least 640 deaths were reported, but most likely many more were not. Bram Stoker may have been inspired to write "Dracula" by his Sligo-born mother’s horrifying accounts of the time when sometimes the ill were buried as dead, but still alive. [unverified]
1844
According to a report of the Old Enniskillen and Sligo Railway Co., Sligo's average trade was worth £758,400. (O’Rorke)

1845-49
Great Famine devastates Ireland and Sligo’s population decimated by about a third through death, with 30,000 victims, and emigration. About 60,000 people emigrated to America and Canada from Sligo Port within a 20 year period. (p. 92 McGowan)

On 3rd December 1862 the first scheduled steam train arrived in Sligo station.

1865
The Sligo Champion reports that the foundation of Town Hall, containing a photograph of the Corporation members and parchment with their names, along with coins “ranging from a golden sovereign to a copper farthing,” is laid on the site of old castle by the Mayor.

1867
Erin’s Hope, a ship crewed by 40 Irishmen, who had just fought in the American Civil War and were carrying weapons and ammunition to capture the town, attempts made to arrive on Sligo shores but this rising fails. (p. 92 McGowan)

1879
The Irish National Land League movement, to end rack-renting, eviction and landlord oppression, gains momentum through the leadership of Charles Stuart Parnell and Michael Davitt, the latter whom was unsuccessfully tried for sedition as part of ‘The Sligo State Trials,’ as reported by The Sligo Champion.

1880-90s
Gaelic revival takes hold with organisations such as the Cumann na nGaedheal and Gaelic Athletic Association. (p. 92 McGowan)

1898
The 1798 Rebellion is commemorated with the ‘Lady Erin’ statue monument placed at Market Cross. A time capsule containing such items as a mother-of-pearl Rosary and ‘98 emblems are sealed under the foundation stone, as reported The Sligo Champion.

1900
At the turn of the century Sligo is “one of the best market towns in the West of Ireland,” according to The Sligo Champion. Population is 10,274 and there is considerable shipping and trade, although most housing is in “appalling” condition.
1903

The United Irish Land League, with its motto “The Land of the People,” successfully agitates the British Parliament for the Land Purchase Act for tenants.29

1914

The people of Sligo celebrate the Home Rule Bill. Nationalist houses and shops are “illuminated” and are “aglow,” according to The Sligo Champion.

1916

Easter Rising. Constance Markievicz arrested, tried and convicted with death sentence commuted.30 In 1918 as a Sinn Finn candidate, she is the first woman elected to Parliament.

1919–21

War of Independence fought between the Irish Republican Army and the British.31

1921

Anglo-Irish Treaty allows establishment of the Irish Free State.32

The ‘Ballinalee,’ a heavily armoured car of the National army, takes part in capture of Wine Street Barracks. But it is taken over by Republican forces during ambush at Rockwood, according to The Sligo Champion.

Barracks burned to the ground by anti-treaty forces during the Civil War. Benbulben Terrace houses built on site in 1932 by the Sligo Corporation.3 Remnants of the old barrack walls still exist.14

1922
Green Fort: From the ‘Sod’ to the ‘Star’

Contributions by the Forthill Men’s Group, Art and History Society

On the summit of this remarkably historical hill there once stood an earthen ringfort called Rath da Bhritog (meaning “ringfort of the two stuttering women” or “ringfort of the two British women”). Most ringforts date from around 600-1000 AD and were enclosed farmsteads. This was modified into an earthen bastion or star-shaped fort, probably in 1646, after Sligo’s fortifications were strengthened following the 1641 rebellion, and became the Green Fort; although its townland name of Rathquarter reflects its ancient origins. Sligo’s Anglo-Norman castle appears to have been modified into a bastioned Stone Fort around the same time (where the Town Hall is today). These fortifications reflected the development of artillery warfare.

The Green Fort is strategically located on the highest point in the town of Sligo (42m ASL), and guarded the pass from Connaught to western Ulster, as well against naval incursions into Sligo harbour. From 1689 to 1691, during the Jacobite and Williamite wars, Sligo and the Green Fort changed hands on a number of occasions. Notable events were Sir Patrick Sarsfield’s recapture of Sligo from the Williamites under Lloyd and a French Huguenot Captain St. Sauveur. Sarfield left Col. Lutrell as commander (Oct 1689) and Lutrell greatly improved the town defences (see his 1689 map inlay). By mid-1690s Sir Teigue O’Regan, a Jacobite veteran, took over command and used the Green Fort as his key point of the defences of Sligo.

Sir Teigue held the fort for more than a year until September 1691 when it was attacked by 10,000 men under command of Michelburne and Forbes, Earl of Granard. James Wynne fought with Michelburne and in time the Wynnes would own that land and build Forthill House, a few hundred metres from where their ancestor fought. Eventually Sir Teigue surrendered on his terms.

< Aerial view of Sligo City 2006 (after Bing Maps) with Lutrell’s Town and Fortifications of Sligo 1689 (after Wood-Martin 1889, Fig. 14(image courtesy of Sam Moore)
“The garrison was allowed to march out with full honours of war, with their arms and baggage, drums beating, colours flying, match lighted and bullets in their mouths.”

The capture of the Green Fort was of so much importance that a medal was struck to commemorate it, along with the towns of Athlone and Galway. The Sligo aspect of the medal depicts the town and the Green Fort majestically on the hill above (inset). At its surrender it was garrisoned by 600 Jacobites and had 18 cannon, 30 barrels of gunpowder as well as stores of all kinds. The fort gradually went out of repair, the town walls and outer defences around the Green Fort have been removed and today only the earthwork ramparts and bastions survive.
How neighbouring hospitals & workhouse shaped Sligo

Sligo Fever Hospital

Located on the site of what is now the orthopaedic wing of Sligo General Hospital sat Sligo Fever Hospital. The construction of this building became necessary due to an outbreak of fever in Sligo in 1817. Edward Synge Cooper made the recommendation that it be built and it was funded jointly by Mr. Cooper and the Grand Jury of the County, though it is reputed that he paid over half the cost and spent £150 per week of his own money to pay the construction workers. The site for the hospital itself was chosen in order to take advantage of the fresh air and pleasant surroundings. Work was completed in 1822 and the hospital opened on May 29th of the same year. The Grand Jury suggested that the new hospital be named "The Cooper Hospital" but Mr. Cooper insisted on it being simply called "Sligo Fever Hospital." He did agree, however, to allow his name to be inscribed in located over the main entrance. The inscription read:

"Erected at the Joint Expense of the County and Edward Synge Cooper Esq. M.P. 1822"

Dr. Henry Irwin, M.D. was the first physician at the newly built Sligo Fever Hospital, which had an initial staff of a matron, nursing staff and some servants, and was capable of catering for 38 patients. This was later extended to 50 beds: 25 male and 25 female. The hospital was immediately put to the test and helped to alleviate the pressure when famine broke out in Sligo in 1822.

On Saturday, 11th August 1832, the first case of cholera was reported in the Sligo town. There was a fair and market in the town and the day began with a fierce thunderstorm, as if to announce the arrival of the disease. There was evidence to indicate that the disease reached Sligo as early as July 31st when a woman was discovered at Barracks Hill in a dazed state. She had been in Westport shortly before, where she may have caught the disease, and she died the next day. Several other suspected cases of the disease had occurred but they were not reported until 10th August when a second hospital admission occurred. The epidemic was confirmed the next day when the hospital began to take in a steady stream of admissions. Lack of water treatment and use of the river and small town wells for drinking and washing led to the spread of the disease. Open sewers and street drains were also a major contributing factor for its spread.

Dr. Henry Irwin kept a detailed record of the 1832 Cholera Epidemic and the doctors at the Fever Hospital worked tirelessly to contain the disease. Dr. Irwin was assisted by Dr. Coyne, Dr. Leahy, Dr. Knott and Dr. Powell, with outside assistance from Dr. Murray, Dr. Carter, Dr. Christian and Dr. Tucker. Five of the doctors succumbed to the disease before it began to abate.

In their efforts to discover the origins of the disease, kites were used to see if it had an atmospheric origin, well water was analysed, and the people were advised on how best to cope with the disease. The townspeople through ignorance and panic turned on the doctors and blamed them for bringing the disease into Sligo via the tests that they were carrying out.

As the death toll began to rise, it became apparent that there would be a need to dispose of the deceased in a manner that would not allow for the further spread of the disease. It was decided that a deep trench would be dug in the field to the rear of the hospital and that the bodies would be buried there and coated with a layer of lime. Staff at the hospital ensured that the proper procedures were followed when burying the dead. This was a major factor in halting the spread of the disease. The pit was filled in and a wall was erected around the site of the mass grave some years later in 1846. The area then became known locally as the ‘Cholera Field.’
Sligo suffered more from the Cholera Epidemic than any other town in Ireland, and during the months of August and September 1832, 700 people died of the disease. As many as 2,000 people were reputed to have contracted the disease during this period. The town virtually shut down with shops and business closed, and 11,000 of the then 15,000 inhabitants left for the safety of the surrounding countryside.

During the Famine capacity was increased from 50 to 165 beds and temporary sheds were erected to the rear of the building. Between September 1846 and September 1848, 2,571 patients were treated. There were small outbreaks of cholera in 1847 and again in 1849. During this outbreak of May 1849, 166 people were admitted to the Fever Hospital suffering from the disease of which 98 people died. Up to August of 1849 in the wake of the Famine, 500 people were admitted to the hospital. People not admitted were housed along the opposite side of the road, from Calry Church to Ballinode, on beds of straw under tents and temporary shelters awaiting admission to the hospital. The outbreak ceased in September of 1849. The hospital ran into a state of disrepair over the following 40 years and was refurbished in the late 1890s.

Typhoid broke out in Sligo in 1903 and again the hospital was called into action. Out of the 104 people admitted to the hospital infected with the disease, only four people actually died. Doctors resident at the time were Dr. Murray and Dr. P. M. Quinn. Dr. Murray regarded sneezing by a patient of typhoid as a sign that they were recovering from the disease and was known to knock on the hospital door with his stick in the mornings to ask the matron how many patients had sneezed that morning. Spanish flu broke out in 1918 and numbers swelled again in the hospital, but increases in vaccinations meant that the Fever Hospital was only really used for diphtheria, scarlet fever and tuberculosis from the 1920s onwards.

Dr. Tom Murphy was the last physician to the Fever Hospital and it closed its door as a hospital in 1958. It was used as a medical residence and a nurses’ home until 1978 when a large portion of the building was destroyed by an electrical fire. It was demolished in 1979 to make way for the building of the new Orthopaedic Wing of Sligo General Hospital, which opened in 1982, as well as a section of the hospital car park.

Two monuments were erected in Sligo General Hospital in 1997 to commemorate the victims of the Great Famine and the Cholera Epidemic.

St. Joseph’s Church and St. John’s Hospital in Ballytivnan stand today on the site of the Sligo Union workhouse. The workhouse was part of the system of poor relief that developed in Britain over the centuries and can be traced back to the end of the sixteenth century when a Bristol workhouse was established that combined the care of the poor with a house of corrections for petty offenders.

In 1838 the Poor Laws were extended to Ireland and workhouses became established throughout the country. Harsher than their British counterparts, the Irish workhouse unions were under-funded and there were too few of them to deal with the worsening economic situation.

In Ireland workhouses were administered by a board of guardians consisting of the ratepayers of the area and controlled by the landlords of the larger estates, such as the Wynnes and O’Haras. The workhouses were a nightmare of death and disease and by 1845 there were 123 workhouses throughout Ireland. Sligo was split up into three unions and Sligo’s workhouse was completed in 1841, built to accommodate 1,200 people.

The first elected guardians for the Co. Sligo workhouses included chairman Charles O’Hara and a committee of 39 members. The population within the union area in the 1831 census was 109,561 and Sligo had six representatives, or guardians on the board. The guardians decided to build a workhouse at Ballytivnan, at a cost of £13,000, on nine acres of land owned by Owen Wynne. The gothic-style building faced onto Ash Lane and was a grim, unwelcoming institution, quickly despised. People entered it only in desperation because food was poor, made up of only two meals a day of oatmeal, (perhaps just watery ‘stirabout’ skimmed from the top), potatoes and buttermilk, its ration half as much as what prisoners received.

Work inside was also mundane, with knitting, cleaning and laundry for women, and stone-breaking and other hard labour for men. Older persons were also put to work, such as ladies spinning wool. When a family entered a workhouse, members were segregated and children separated from their parents.

Responsibility for the costs of the poor laws were shared equally between landlord and tenants. However, after the potato crop failure of 1845, tenants could not pay their share, which increased the
The Sligo Workhouse
From Memories of Forthill cont’d

burden on the landlords, whose rate was determined by the number of tenants on their estates.

As the Famine worsened, tenants were not able to pay their rents and this led to mass evictions by some of the more ruthless landlords. People evicted from estates reluctantly made their way to the workhouses in a desperate bid to obtain help and the institutions thus became overburdened. Some landlords, such as Lord Palmerston in North Sligo, decided that it would be cheaper to pay to send their tenants to America and Canada through mass emigration to escape the Famine. Many perished on “famine ships.”

For those who remained in Sligo, the workhouse was their only escape and roads leading to the workhouse became choked with desperate people waiting to get in. The Ballytivnan workhouse soon became unable to cope, and in an effort to deal with overcrowding, the Sligo guardians decided to lease out large buildings. These were primarily empty corn stores, which they adapted to house the children and orphans. Five of these buildings included: The Charter House on the Mall; Quay Street Auxiliary; John Street Auxiliary; Wine Street Auxiliary; and Ballinar “Lunatic” Auxiliary. Quay Street housed female adults and the others were set aside to accommodate children.

Sligo’s workhouse followed the standard layout of the architect of George Wilkinson, who designed all of Ireland’s workhouses. There was an entrance and administrative block at the south (facing towards Ash Lane) which contained a porter’s room, a waiting room and the guardians’ room overhead on the first floor. The main accommodation block housed the quarters of the workhouse master at the centre with wings for men and women on either side. To the rear were single-storey utility rooms such as a bake house and a wash house connected to the infirmary and “idiot’s” ward through a central spine that also contained a chapel and dining hall. During the Great Famine sheds were built in the infirmary yard that accommodated 70 or more people, and the Sligo Fever Hospital was erected to the north of the site.

Paupers affected with disease were placed in a probationary ward, examined by a medical officer, and washed in a bath of hot and cold water until they were fit enough to join the main body of the workhouse. The workhouse population reached its peak of 217,000 in 1851 and from then on began its decline.

In 1857, with the population reduced by famine, disease and emigration, care for the sick improved. Better nursing was due to the Sisters of Mercy, who were instrumental in improving conditions. As a result, some of the workhouses surviving today do so as part of hospitals and homes for elderly people, such as St. John’s.

Ireland’s new independent Irish parliament abolished the workhouse system and started a new scheme that would provide the old and infirmed proper care they deserved. During the War of Independence and the Civil War that followed, a large number of workhouses were occupied by the military. To prevent the buildings being used by terrorising forces as the Black and Tans, workhouses were burnt down, as was Dromore West’s, and others became dilapidated. Today many of Sligo’s citizens are unaware of the town’s workhouse history, its inaccessible Famine graveyard hidden from view.

St. Columba’s mental hospital

Set back from the road and hidden behind a high stone wall sits a beautiful 19th century building that is now a luxury four-star hotel. But for the majority of its existence this impressive edifice was home to the Sligo and Leitrim District Lunatic Asylum, also known as St. Columba’s Mental Hospital. The building was designed by independent architect, Mr. William D. Butler, which was unusual for the time as all buildings of its kind were usually designed by Office of Public Works architects. This resulted in a grander design than other similar building of its purpose that was constructed around this time.

The foundation stone for the new building was laid on November 7th, 1847 and construction work was carried out by a Mr. Caldwell, a prominent local builder. A bottle containing the current issues of the Sligo Champion and Sligo Journal newspapers, as well as silver and
copper coins of the realm, were sealed in a cavity stone to mark the occasion. The building was completed in 1852 at a cost of £35,199 and opened in 1854 with a capacity for 250 patients.

Dr. John Mc Munn was the first Resident Medical Superintendent of the newly opened Sligo and Leitrim District Lunatic Asylum. During his tenure, which spanned 31 years, he was responsible for organising formal dances and an annual ball for local people in one of the hospital’s larger rooms, which became known as the “Ballroom,” as well as parades, which included a procession of patients accompanied by the Asylum Brass Band. These traditions continued until after World War One.

Some of the Board of Governors appointed and serving between 1852 and 1872 included: Sir Robert Gore-Booth, M.P., Lissadell; Colonel E. Cooper, M.P., Markree Castle; Owen Wynne of Hazelwood; and the Right Honourable Earl of Leitrim.

In 1872 a plot of land known as ‘Wynne’s Field,’ immediately south of the building, was purchased by the Asylum from John Wynne for the sum of £1,200. John Wynne was then a Guardian of the Board of the Union Workhouse, Governor of the Board of the District Lunatic Asylum, as well as being the town Weighmaster. This land was purchased to be used as agricultural land as the hospital produced a lot of its own food.

The building was extended again in 1877 at a cost of £18,000, resulting in an increase in bed capacity from 250 to 470 beds. The new extension also included the addition of two slender towers to the entrance area, a feature that remains today.

Dr. McMunn died in 1883 and was succeeded by Dr. Joseph Petit, who proceeded to make a raft of changes -- not only to the building’s structure -- but also in the way the patients were treated. One of the first changes he made was to abolish the use of physical restraints which were deemed essential throughout every asylum in Ireland. He also removed doors from some of the dormitories to give a better sense of freedom, and instead of locking up patients, they were allowed to roam freely around the hospitals extensive grounds. Dr. Pett also did away with the ‘Airing Courts,’ which were large areas surrounded by stone walls that were used for patient exercise at certain parts of the day. Some of the male patients were permitted to work on the asylum’s farm which proved to be extremely successful, not only for the patients, but also in the volumes of produce.

As a new century dawned, two chapels, one Catholic and one Protestant, were built to flank the front entrance to the building. The doors to each of the chapels faced each other about 60 metres apart and were designed by T. M. Deane.

The early 1900s also saw the construction of a row of houses on nearby Blackmud Hill to accommodate some of the married nurses who worked at the hospital. The builder who constructed these houses fitted a shiny brass knocker to each of the houses front doors, which became known locally as the ‘Gold Rappers.’

Some of the wards in the building became well known locally by name. One ward in the women’s wing of the building became known as ‘Straw Lodge.’ This ward is reported to have received its name as a result of overcrowding and financial constraints during the early part of the 20th century. During this time, straw was spread on the floor and used as bedding by the patients.

The building was extended again in the late 1930s with the addition of a new complex of buildings situated on the hill to the right of the old building. This new building, however, is overshadowed in its design by the ornate grandeur of the main building.

During World War II, a particularly industrious nurse trying to make a bit of extra money for the hospital decided that a sheltered portion of the hospitals 200 acres of farmland would be particularly suited to growing tobacco due to its sheltered location. Unfortunately, this venture was to prove unsuccessful and the field in question became known as the ‘Tobacco Field.’ This field was sold as part of a large portion of the hospital’s land that was sold to the state in the 1960s to accommodate the building of the Regional Technical College. The site is now home to part of the Sligo Institute of Technology.
Chapter 2 - Hazelwood’s hold on Sligo

The Wynnes tightly controlled local politics and affairs for both town and county. Elected officials were “always members, connections, friends or creatures of the Wynne family.” (The Wynnes of Sligo, p. 31)

Sligo and the Wynnes: A complicated relationship

With contributions by the Forthill Men’s Group, Art and History Society

Several generations of the Wynne family ruled Sligo for more than two centuries from their grand estate of Hazelwood and were strong catalysts in the local community, with both positive and negative implications. The Wynnes’ history is essentially Sligo’s.

The first of many lines of Owen Wynnes settled in Lurganboy, Co. Leitrim from Wales in the 1600s with a small grant of land, originally church property. During the Williamite Wars Lieutenant-General Owen
Wynne, third son of the original Owen Wynne, previously served under King James before switching allegiance to William of Orange.

In 1722 Major General Owen Wynne II purchased 14,500 acres, originally the seat of the powerful Gaelic O’Conor Sligo clan, for £20,000, which became Hazelwood.

**Tolls, customs and markets**

The Wynnes tightly controlled local politics and affairs for both town and county. Elected officials were “always members, connections, friends or creatures of the Wynne family.” *(The Wynnes of Sligo, p. 31)*

As part of the Hazelwood land purchase, Owen Wynne II and his family also acquired Sligo’s rights to fairs, markets, tolls and customs, a substantial source of income for them, but were also a bone of contention between the family and local market traders. Although the Wynnes were primarily the people who profited most from these agreements, the community ultimately gained some benefit too. *(Wynne Family Papers, p. 10)*

“Patents for markets and fairs were often used by landowners as drivers of settlement and economic development.” *(Duffy, p. 108)*

By the late 18th century the Wynnes built a new Market House at the Corn Market, relocated the Butter Market premises adjacent to Cadgers Field (Emmet Place) and created the Cattle Pounds at the northern entrance to the town.

Through the Irish Butter Act of 1812 Owen Wynne V and his son John Arthur Wynne were appointed deputies of Sligo’s Butter Market, but the Wynnes maintained a vicelike grip on fees.

Resentment among the traders over corruption festered through the years. During the time of Owen Wynne V (1775-1841), merchants rebelled by evading tolls on grain and sold it on non-market days. They also resented the Wynnes’ control over powerful positions such as Butter Taster and Weighmaster.

The Irish Municipal Reform Act of 1840 started the process to create a more democratic system, in which to reduce feudal power over towns. Sligo held the distinction of being the only borough in the West with this “civic prestige.”

Ordinary merchants were finally given more voice when Owen Wynne VI was paid £6,500 through the Sligo Borough Improvement Act of 1869 to transfer power to the town corporation the rights to fairs, markets and slaughterhouses.

**The Butter Market**

Butter was Ireland’s most important agricultural export during the late 18th through the 19th centuries with much of the land under grass or fodder, crops to sustain the dairy herd. The revenue generated from the production of butter was the principal means of paying the landlords’ rent. The Sligo market was the leading mart in the North West. For the sale of butter out the country they used to bury the butter in the bags to keep it fresh. Markets were held on the streets. In Sligo the Wynnes established a corn market for the sale of all types of grain and also a butter market, where lump butter could be weighed, graded and sold, and certain areas were assigned for the sale of pigs, fish, seaweed and turf. In 1819 the Weighmaster and Butter Taster, Owen Wynne, erected a purpose-built butter market off lower Quay Street. In its heyday 1,800 to 2,000 firkins were sold on a single market day and Sligo butter enjoyed a high reputation in both the London and Glasgow markets. The prices paid to producers matched, and at times, surpassed that of other Irish marts. Sligo butter was in great repute in Liverpool. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s the butter trade in Sligo experienced a period of uncertainty due to the aforementioned illegal practices. The dilemma facing producers was highlighted by Thomas Foster, *Times* correspondent, who wrote: “The country people complain a good deal about the way in which the butter sales are conducted. A weighing master and
inspector are appointed to weigh the butter and brand its quality as 1sh, 2d, 3d and the butter was formerly sold according to the brand to these officers.”

**Earlier monopolies**

Monopolies on everyday necessities were enforced in Sligo even before the advent of the Wynnes. In 1674 William, the Earl of Strafford, was granted the rights to the tolls, profits and customs of the yearly fairs and weekly markets. Strafford, along with others who had a share of these sources of income, held power over use of corn and “tuck” mills (use of water power to operate textile machinery).

“As Lord Strafford was entitled to half of the whole estate, and … the yearly fairs and weekly markets of Sligo, and the tolls, profits and customs thereof proceeds thus: A monopoly in milling was left and secured to Lord Strafford: do hereby covenant and grant … that no mills of any kind shall hereafter at any time be built on the north or south side of river Garvagh (Garavogue), and that all persons … in the town of Sligo, and the quarter of Rath, shall be obliged to grind all their corn at Sligo mills, … also to tuck all their cloth at such tuck mill or mills as shall here-after be built by the said William Earl of Strafford … except those who are already obliged to the mills of Rathbroghan, they having their corn and cloath (cloth) as well ground and tucked at the said mills, and at as reasonable rates as in any other mills near adjacent thereunto, provided the said mill or mills be in repair, and do not want water, and that each person have his turn as is usually accustomed.” (Wood-Martin, pp. 197-199)

**Agrarian revolution**

Owen Wynne V, a member of the Irish Parliament, most likely did not endear himself to ordinary Sligo folk when he and other Protestants voted against the 1800 Act of Union and Catholic Emancipation in 1812. But he did end up benefiting the region with his progressive agricultural practices and was considered a pioneer in his field by planting 17,640 trees in the early 1800s, creating what is now beautiful forest enjoyed by the modern public.

“As a practical farmer and a judge of livestock Wynne stood unrivalled in these parts. He prided himself in the proper and beneficial use of the land and reserved part of his demesne as an experimental farm … His reputation as farmer was widely acclaimed.” (Wynnes of Hazelwood)

As president of the Farming Society of Ireland and member of the Royal Dublin Society (RDS) for many years, his diversification of agriculture allowed his tenants to become less dependent on the potato crop and was believed to help them better survive the 1822 famine. (Wynne Family Papers, p. 11) He also introduced Devon cattle to his Hazelwood estate, and was the first in Ireland to breed South Down sheep. “Wynne was an improving landlord,” according to the RDS.

**Forthill House**

With contributions by the Forthill History, Art and Men's Group

Forthill House, located in Rathquarter near the Green Fort, was owned by the Wynne estate
and functioned as a town house for some minor members of the family, and for those who worked in elevated positions, such as Collector of Customs, Borough Councillor, etc. During other times this 18th century “very desirable gentleman’s property” (McTernan, p. 87) was leased to wealthy merchants, the retail elite of Sligo.

The entrance to Forthill was at the Connaughton Road and Mall junction, (just beside The North West Hospice); a small gate house on the left of the entrance was inhabited until the late 1950s. A long winding track led to the house passing the Green Fort on the right.

One of the tenants of this stately two-storey house on the hill was James Beatty, who held the post of Governor of Sligo Gaol for 30 years before he was removed in 1837 by the county’s High Sheriff. Beatty subsequently became a member of the reformed Sligo Corporation and of the Board of Guardians, and continued to reside at Forthill House, where he died in 1847. Another tenant, auctioneer James Hall, illuminated Forthill House in 1863 to commemorate the marriage of the Prince of Wales to Princess Alexandra of Denmark. (McTernan, p. 86)

The last occupant of Forthill House was Matthew (Mattie) Scanlan, who was the nephew of Thomas Scanlan, (Nationalist M.P. for Sligo North 1909-14). Mattie had one sister Mary Kate (Molly) and two brothers Thomas, and James. Mattie was married to Brigid (Biddy) Burke. Thomas, James and Molly all moved to England. Every summer during the 50’s and 60’s, Molly returned with her daughter Ann and husband Gilbert Long to see the home place.

Mattie ran a dairy farm, selling the milk to the local creamery at Calry, and oats and hay were harvested in the summer. Mattie left Forthill House in 1975 and lived in Dromahair, until his death in the 1980s.

The layout of the house was simple, through a small vestibule at the front you came into a hall with dining room on the left and sitting room on the right. The wide stairs led to four bedrooms and a bathroom (w.c. separate). At one time there was a breakfast room to the left of the house. There were panoramic views looking over to the Darty Mountains with its majestic Benbulben on one side and all of Sligo town and Knocknarea mountain on the other. The house, however, was not the most comfortable as it did not have any modern conveniences, it could be quite cold and draughty (there was no electricity and the water was pumped manually once a day from the well, which was near the basement door).

Unfortunately this town house of the Wynnes, whose intriguing occupants played an integral part in the history of Sligo town, fell into disrepair and was demolished. It is Ann’s greatest regret that she and her family were not able to save and restore Forthill House, but one of her treasured possessions is a large rococo mirror that once hung in the sitting room, which now reflects long ago days.
Chapter 2 - Hazelwood’s hold on Sligo

Asset rich, cash poor: The financial affairs of the Hazelwood Wynnes

By Irene and Paul Allen

One of the most magnificent demesnes in Ireland was Hazelwood, regarded in 1791 as ‘one of the most beautiful seats in the Kingdom.’ Over the centuries its acreage was owned by several notable families including the Sligo O’Conors, the Grehans, and later, the Percivals. But it was the Wynne family who created this great estate and ruled over it for 200 years as landlords bringing in great wealth, but also losing it.

Hazelwood’s ownership

Hazelwood is first recorded as the Castle of eanach (Annagh), stemming from Eanach-locha-Gile, ‘eanach’ which in Irish might mean ‘watery place’ or ‘meeting place.’ Being of extreme strategic significance it belonged to the dominant O’Conor Sligo clan, whose Gaelic rule lasted until the end of the 16th century and was listed in the 1641 Down Survey.

Ownership was then passed to Andrew Crean, one of Sligo’s ‘merchant princes,’ whose wealthy family was also associated with ‘Crean’s Castle,’ the fortified town house that gave Castle Street its name.

Following the 1641 Irish Rebellion, the 1642 the Adventurers’ Act was passed by the Long Parliament giving the government’s creditors authority to reclaim their debts by receiving confiscated land in Ireland.

In 1649 the New Model Army led by Oliver Cromwell came to Ireland with an army to re-occupy the country. The army was raised with support and money advanced by private individuals, on the security of 2,500,000 acres of Irish land to be confiscated at the close of the rebellion. The campaign lasted three years and was almost complete by 1652.

Lands of the defeated Irish, mostly Confederate Catholics, in addition to other Cromwell opponents, were confiscated and re-distributed with the Act of Settlement of Ireland in 1652. Parliamentary soldiers serving in Ireland were given entitlements to confiscated land, in lieu of wages, which the English Parliament was unable to pay out. Thus Annagh was placed into English hands and was owned by a succession of Protestant landlords. In 1670 the new owner of the estate was William, the Earl of Strafford, who had 160 plantation acres. The Earl held a powerful position in town, having received a partial grant to Sligo’s markets and fairs in 1674.

During the 17th century Ireland was almost 15 percent wooded, but due to the increasing requirements of shipbuilding and iron-works, these great woods were greatly diminished. Much land was turned into sweeping estates by prominent families, such as the Ormsbys. During the time of that family’s ownership, the estate comprised a greater area, stretching as far as ‘Willowbrook,’ the ancestral family seat, on the other side of Garavogue River. Francis Ormsby, High Sheriff of the County Sligo in 1715, sometimes referred to the whole parish of Calry as Annagh, as the 1659 Commonwealth Census did also.

The Welsh Wynnes, who first settled in Lurganboy, Co. Leitrim during the 1600s, received this extensive property of confiscated lands in Sligo for their service to the British Crown and created the former Gaelic seat of the O’Conor clan into the impressive estate it became.

Woodlands of Hazel trees dominated this area of countryside, which must have inspired the Wynnes to change their townland name from Annagh to Hazelwood.

The estate at that time was listed as having 900 acres of arable land, of which 80 acres were under tillage, 130 acres as meadow and the remaining 690 acres for grazing. A further 600 acres were of forestry, some of which can still be enjoyed by the public as a park today.

The Wynnes’ income from rentals

This section delves into the financial affairs of the Wynnes of Hazelwood and the running of the Hazelwood estate, then summarises any known factors that may have influenced its financial aspects, and the outcomes of these fiscal impacts.

Also highlighted is the income received from the rental of the land over a 15-year period (1798 to 1813), using the estate’s rental records as research. This was decades before the famines, including the mid-19th century Great Famine, so it is assumed this was a relatively reasonable period of ‘normality’ for a study such as this, with a steadily growing population and reasonable living conditions obtained.

Income for the Wynnes from Hazelwood steadily grew over this time by some 38 percent, most certainly an increase greater than any level of inflation of the period. What were the reasons for this increase? One may be that the land would have been subdivided into many small plots, and it was said that an average family needed some six to eight acres on which to live. It may be assumed that plots were larger because fathers could pass down land or parcel off areas for their
sons to farm. This would mean that the number of tenants grew, as well as income received to the landlord. The population of the country also grew significantly over this time.

The total of the Wynnes’ Land Rental Income in Sligo from 1798 – 1813 was £92,012 0s 3d. Their land value, provided by the family solicitor William Dix in 1833 was £175,000, with rental of more than £7,000 from the Sligo portion of the estate, which shows the continuing income increase. It would appear that there had to be cash assets from this source and all other streams of income to cover the lifestyle of an affluent Anglo-Irish family required at the time, equal to those of the surrounding notable families such as the Gore-Booths of Lissadell, O’Haras of Annaghmore, Coopers of Markree and Percevals of Temple House.

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>6708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1813</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Research from these records has discovered mortgages on the land to other family members and land owners. It would appear that it was not always possible to sell land to raise funds; therefore mortgages had to be obtained. One of the reasons was to cover marriage settlements, not only for the daughters of the Wynne family, but also for the women who married into the family. A trust would be set up by the parents of both parties to the marriage to ensure that when the husband died, his widow would be provided for and a yearly income would be paid from the trust. This also had to cover payments for the younger children of the marriage, who were not to inherit any of the land. At one stage there was in the region of £100,000 owing in mortgages on which annual interest of £5,000 was paid, substantial amounts for that time.

The family may have owned large valuable estates from which a good income was received, but they were not rich in cash and thus unable to meet their obligations. To maintain the appearances of aristocratic lifestyle and to keep their elevated position in Sligo social circles, they were forced to mortgage the properties they owned.

This research illustrates the various incomes coming into the Wynne estate, as well as detailing the problematic situation they found themselves in society, which might explain why the Sligo Wynnes reached their demise, and Hazelwood its erosion, during the 20th century.

Rental income

Whilst mainly dealing with the Sligo element of the estate in this chapter, the family initially obtained land in County Leitrim from church lands and these leases were called ‘Bishops Leases.’ The family was able to use these lands to their own benefit and rented them like other parts of their estate. They still, however, had to pay rental themselves on this part of the estate. In Dix’s Valuation of 1833 the Wynnes were paying £1,400 in this regard.

Earlier within Sligo, according to estate rental books over a 15-year period from 1798 to 1813, rents were paid on a six-monthly basis in March and September of each year. The rental book shows the income being received broken down in area and by tenant and gives the half yearly totals. As can be seen from the illustrated table, the amounts grow gradually over this time period. Reasons for this gradual growth of income were dependent on what was happening generally within the county, economy, population growth and other influential factors.

As expected, an element of inflation within these increases must be reflected in the growth of income. The population of the country grew considerably during this time due to better living conditions and the ability of the ordinary person to provide a living for him or herself. As a result family numbers grew, and those renting and living on the land increased. It would still be early days in Britain’s Industrial Revolution, so the majority of the workforce would still have been on the land and supporting themselves as farmers.

However, the patriarchal system of handing down land to sons, and continually dividing plots into smaller areas, eventually led to the fact that plots in the end became very small. Therefore, when the potato famine occurred the crops could not fully support the families, who only might have had one good crop grown per year.
Furthermore, with the rental due to the Wynnes, there would have been an element of arrears, so all which was due was not necessarily paid. Another way in which tenants could pay would be ‘in kind.’ They would work for the landlord, or indeed, provide produce or other goods, in payment as part of a barter agreement. Ireland, with its links to England, exported a considerable amount of its produce to the United Kingdom and other parts of the world connected with it, so Irish farmers were contributing substantially toward that trade, while, sadly, many of their own people were starving.

**The business of marriage settlements**

Turning now to the marriage settlements made by the Wynnes, there are some records available, which are a fascinating look into how marriages were essentially business agreements. It was the aim of these settlements to provide for the wife, who was joining the family, to ensure that she would be provided for after her husband died, enabling her to receive an annual income for the rest of her life.

These funds were put in trust for her and could not be accessed by the husband, which goes against the usual perception that once a woman was married, all her wealth passed to her husband and that she would be reliant on him to provide for her.

This was the case certainly in England until the Married Women’s Property Act, which overturned this practice. The wife would, of course, have been dependent in a certain regard when the husband was alive. However, it ensured that she would have independence in her widowhood and not be reliant on the eldest son to support her.

An excellent example of this is the marriage in 1754 of Owen Wynne IV to Anne Maxwell. Of the £10,000 contributed by Anne’s father, £8,000 went to Owen Wynne III and £2,000 to Owen Wynne IV. The father and son then had to transfer land to trustees, who would have been obligated to pay an annual income to Anne of £1,000 during her widowhood. The £8,000 given to Owen III was used to repay his debts. However, the Wynnes still needed a further £3,000 to discharge all of the outstanding liabilities and this was achieved by both sale and mortgage of lands. In addition to these transactions, provision also had to be made for the younger children of the marriage; as such they had to raise a further £10,000 from the estate lands. So, as can be seen, whilst they were using part of the dowry to repay some £8,000 of liabilities, they were worse off as they had to raise another £10,000!

This practice continued throughout the generations. This can be noted when Owen Wynne V married Lady Sarah Elizabeth Cole. Sarah in her marriage settlement brought £10,500. Of this, once again, funds were used to bail out the family, in this case £8,500 to discharge Wynne debts. The cycle then continued as the balance of the wife’s settlement, together with £12,000 that had to once again be raised from lands owned. To enable this sum to be raised, lands in County Cavan, previously purchased from the Duke of Wharton, had to be sold.

As well as having to sell parcels of land to pay off arrears, the family had to raise funds from other landed families, and also from families with whom they shared connections, such as through marriage. Obtaining cash loans from banks was not an option at that time.

Some of the parties may have driven hard bargains, as in the case where one of the Wynnes was making provisions for his children, and one daughter got very little compared to all the others. When it is seen that she married, it was to a local man, whose father had previously lent money to her father, so he had obviously sought very preferential terms for himself that had not been forgotten by the Wynnes.

Likewise when any of the Wynne daughters would be married, if no provision had been made for them in wills of parents or grandparents, further monies had to be obtained to meet their marriage settlements. Obviously, some savvy wheeling and dealing was necessary in securing the family’s future and high standing.

The sums involved were large for that period and amounted to many thousands of pounds. As mentioned, part of the settlement would have come from the wife’s dowry, but the Wynne family would have had to also meet their obligations. If they did not have enough cash, as when they had to sell the Cavan land, it meant the disposal of assets.

However, in many of the cases the Wynnes were able to obtain mortgages on their properties. It was important for the family’s financial and social survival to be seen as meeting their commitments. In this way they could continue maintaining connections with other well-placed families and other alliances in order to make ‘good’ marriages.

The interest on the mortgages from account records indicate to be in the region of £5,000, even increasing to as much as £7,000. If this is compared to the rental income, as detailed in the table, the interest payments accounted for most of the rent received from the Sligo portion of the estate, certainly a large drain on their resources. If the Sligo element of the 14,500-acre estate was covering debt repayments, this shows the financial burden the Wynnes were shouldering. Indeed, in this current economic climate, if half of a person’s income went to paying interest repayments, with no reduction in capital by doing so, he or she would be thought of as being in a very precarious state.

When it is considered that the daily wage of a labourer at the time was between 7 pence to 1 shilling, 3 pence, this average pay amount gives a good indication of the large amounts of money involved. Also,
another comparison to values can be seen in the 1858 Griffith’s Valuation in which Hazelwood House is shown to have a value of £120, whereas an ordinary house nearby in the townland of Kiltycahill was valued at £7.

The Wynne’s wealth of income and debts

In summary, a steady income was available to the Wynne family from their estate, which grew throughout the period at a good pace. The reasons for this were various, including an increase in population and better standards with more people using the land. However, this eventually became a problem during the 1840s Great Famine when the potato harvest failed.

As can be seen, the Hazelwood estate was vast and generated a significant amount of income for the family. However, they also had a great amount of expenses and little ready cash available. The Wynnes had their own rents to pay on various parts of the estate, and the demesne running costs as well. As was usual for the time, and indeed even ours, the family sought to lessen their debts by obtaining mortgages on their assets. Times are not so very different among the seemingly rich of society, especially during this post-Celtic Tiger era.

Making a ‘good’ marriage was crucial for families such as the Wynnes, as it was regarded as an astute business arrangement providing economic advantages. A lady marrying into a family may have brought her dowry to grow a family’s coffers, and in some cases that might have been the case. In the Wynnes’ example, although they were in debt, it was also their family obligation to ensure a sufficient amount was held in trust to cover the wife during her widowhood, and to also ensure children, who would not inherit, also be provided funds.

Over time the estate gradually diminished, due to changing attitudes and the passage of Land Act laws within Ireland. Landowners of large estates were now pressured to give up their lands so that Catholics, and other less privileged individuals, had the opportunity to purchase holdings of their own. As such, Hazelwood’s once vast realm was reduced, and with no clear male descendant, the remaining part of the estate was sold to the Land Commissioners in the 1920s. It was the end of an era for ‘Big Houses’ and their great demesnes throughout Ireland.

Transport to Regattas: Boating on the Garavogue River and Lough Gill

By Wendy Lyons and Beatrice Macdonald

The lake was first and foremost a means of travel in times past. In the Middle Ages and before, the countryside was covered in thick forest and was mostly impassable, so travel across rivers and lakes was more the common transport norm. That is one of the main reasons why settlements grew up at the mouth of a river, or where rivers entered or left a lake. In the case of Lough Gill, it was Dromahaire at the east end of the lake and Sligo town at the mouth of the river, which developed as a result of the traffic and trade along the waterways. The Garavogue River is about one mile long and is the shortest river in Ireland. It is only navigable as far as the Riverside and not all the way to the sea, because of two weirs near the mouth, in Sligo town.

Combined with the rowing regattas were sailing races with yachts of various sizes. Sailing, as it is today, was then very expensive and the boats were owned by the gentry. There is record in The Sligo Independent of a sailing race 9th September in 1887, which won by Mr. Maveety’s yacht called ‘Electric’. The prize was five sows! The races were set with different courses but the larger yachts had a restricted course.
In the 19th century a proposal was made to dig a channel from halfway along the river to link it to the sea, entering the sea near Cartron. It was intended that larger sea-going boats could transport goods and passengers between Sligo and Dromahaire and actually meet up in the harbour area with larger ships. This project was never completed, so larger sea-going boats had to unload their cargo at the docks. The cargo was then taken overland by horse and cart from Sligo town and had to be reloaded at what we know today as Windmill House (on the Hazelwood estate). From there goods were then taken up the lake to Dromahaire. Cargo coming down the lake had to do the same. A toll house situated on the side of the river enabled the Wynne family to tax every barrel, sack, and bundle of produce or goods travelling either up or down the river. In spite of the tolls charged boating was still the most popular, easiest and common way to travel between the two towns.

In the 1830s the first steam passenger ferry called Maid of the Mill, which was built at Ballast Quay in Sligo, plied the lake between Dromahaire and Sligo at Doorly Park. She was replaced by a paddle steamer called Lady of the Lake in 1842. This steamer was built on the River Clyde in Scotland. On arrival in Sligo she had to be taken out of the water at Sligo Port and manhandled through Sligo, then put in the river at Doorly Park. This must have been quite a feat as her size was 60 feet long.

Steam ferries continued in business with many up and downs. The end of the steam boats came about when another steamer, the Maid of Breffne, sank at the mouth of the River Bonet. Sabotage was suspected. In the 1870s the Sligo to Enniskillen railway line was completed and was therefore in competition with the steamers. There was also a proposal to dig a canal from the Bonet to Lough Allen via Lough Behavel. This would have then connected Sligo to the Shannon and opened up huge possibilities for increased trade and travel.
Regattas and other lakeside recreation

Rowing and sailing were very common skills for everyone from the earliest times who lived near or beside a waterway. In the early 1800s many rowing clubs grew up around the shores of Lough Gill, including Hazelwood, Gold Rappers, Holy Well, Killery, Rockwood and Aughamore.

The racing boats were clinker-built wooden types with a draft of no more than 18 inches. They were crewed by four oarsmen, each with a single oar and a cox, the cox sitting in the stern section. During the summer there were a series of regattas held on the lake, with the culmination of the season being the largest regatta held at the Aughamore course. This was always held on August Monday and was eagerly anticipated by the various crews who had been training hard during the season. For spectators the regatta was the ‘big day out’ in the summer, and a great place to meet everybody. The ‘Big Houses’ round the lake would have encouraged their tenants and staff and completion was very fierce between them all.

In 1882 two men were drowned while competing at a regatta, when their boat took in water and capsized, throwing them into the icy lake water. A third man was saved by Owen Wynne, who was on the water in his own skiff. This led to a falling off of the competition between the clubs for a few years, but the interest was rekindled again eventually.

Rowing races still take place on the lake and some of the club are trying to revive interest in rowing. There are still some of the original wooden boats around, but most rowers compete in modern boats with a much lower draft and the oars are mounted in outriggers, with the rowers sitting on sliding seats. The forerunners of this modern style of rowing were first seen on the Garavogue river in the 1950s when teams were first invited from the River Bann Rowing Club in Co. Antrim. Sligo town now has a vibrant rowing club, in the modern style.

Combined with the rowing regattas were sailing races with yachts of various sizes. Sailing, as it is today, was then very expensive and the boats were owned by the gentry. There is record in The Sligo Independent of a sailing race 9th September in 1887, which won by a Mr. Maveety’s yacht called ‘Electric.’ The prize was five sows! The races were set with different courses but the larger yachts had a restricted course.

The Ladies Cup

The most famous of all races in Sligo was the Ladies Cup, the “oldest perpetual trophy in the world for which sailors still compete,” according to the Sligo Yacht Club.

This trophy was first presented by the women of Sligo for the encouragement of fast sailing boats back in 1820 and has been competed for ever since.

The ladies of Hazelwood House were the first in 1821 to hold a sailing race on Lough Gill. The course sailed twice around the lake, starting and finishing at Sheriff Point, a distance of almost 18 miles. The boats were strictly classed and had to be 26 feet, six inches long, and handicapped by one minute per ton. This race has been a prestige race from its inception and there was great competition between the ‘Big Houses’ in the area and many of the wealthy businessmen from Sligo town such as Mr. Harper Campbell, Mr. Pettigrew and Mr. Alex MacArthur.

The trophy itself is worth its weight in silver, at the very least, and a work of art. W. G. Wood-Martin in his 1891 The History of Sligo had put a value of about £140 on the Cup itself, but no doubt its current value has multiplied many times over.

“The Cup itself is a beautiful piece of Irish silverwork. It is 37 cm. high and 33 cm. across. Originally donated by the ladies of Sligo, it is made of sterling silver, marked by the Irish Goldsmiths Hall and...
engraved with the words ‘For the encouragement of fast sailing boats on Lough Gill.’” (The Sligo Champion)

Wood-Martin, at which time there were about 10 boats in the Sligo Yacht Club, also wrote about the Cup: “the original weight was 69.5 troy ounces, from repeated cleaning it now weighs only 68 ounces but is in excellent condition.”

The Sligo Yacht Club still holds ‘The Ladies Cup’ annual event for its ‘Cruiser’ class for the home fleet and visiting cruisers who wish to “lay claim to this most prestigious of sailing trophies.”

“Nowadays the event consists of five races which take place over a single weekend during the summer in Sligo Bay. The series is no longer one design but handicapped under the IRC (Irish rule authority system). The series winner under ECHO (handicap performance system) receives the Elsie Trophy, a handsome piece of cut glass, equally sought by keen racers.” (Sligo Yacht Club)

The Wynnes’ influence wanes

With contributions by the Forthill Men’s Group, Art and History Society and the Hazelwood Heritage Society

The Reform Act of 1832 abolished ‘rotten boroughs’ dominated by nepotistic landlords, and in 1843 John Arthur Wynne (1801–1865) lowered his income and reduced rents. (Wynne Family Papers, p. 12) The Right Honourable John Arthur Wynne was considered by many as a “benevolent” landlord because of his charitable work, including founding Sligo’s mental hospital, St. Columba’s.

“...
Owen Wynne VI sold his estates, apart from Hazelwood, to the Land Commission during the late 1880s. The Commission chose Wynne’s land because “the landlord was not considered harsh in his dealing with tenants.”

A new era for Hazelwood

Owen Wynne VI died in 1910 with no heir, thus ending the Wynnes’ occupation in the house. His daughter and her husband, Philip Dudley Perceval (of the Temple House family), lived in Hazelwood House until 1923. From that time until 1930 the house remained empty until a retired tea planter, a Mr. Berridge, lived and renovated the house.

In 1937 the Hazelwood property was bought for £20,000 by the Land Commission and the State forestry department, now Coillte. In August that year the house contents were sold off in a public auction.

During the Second World War the house was occupied by a contingent of the Irish army. After the soldiers left in 1945 the Land Commission offered the house for sale and demolition, but this caused both local and national outrage. As a result the house was saved and it, plus 46 acres, were purchased for £2,000 by the Mental Health Committee to use as an annex to St. Columba’s mental hospital. The house served as such for a number of years before being purchased by nylon fabric-producing Snia Ltd., then later Saehan Media, providing many jobs for the community. But improving the local economy came at a hefty price with an unsightly, polluting factory located directly behind Hazelwood House and the historic structure misused, quickly becoming derelict.

Hazelwood in the 21st century

Manufacturing on the site was abandoned and during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ the house and grounds were bought by Foresthaze Developments Ltd. in 2006 with ambitious plans to build exclusive, high-density residences and associated developments, which would have destroyed much of the natural habitat if built. Reminiscent of the 1940s, another community protest erupted campaigns by a newly formed group, now called the Hazelwood Heritage Society, and due to their efforts planning permission was not granted by Sligo County Council.

Meanwhile, the property bubble had also burst, thus ensuring Hazelwood House’s latest reprieve, at least temporarily. In 2013 it is once again for sale with its destiny in limbo. A few years ago the current owners were forced to replace the roof, as part of remedial work, but water ingress threatens to push deterioration to the point of no return. Time is of the essence in the house’s survival.

The c. 1731 limestone Hazelwood House, designed by renowned architect Richard Cassels (ie. Castle) is considered one of the finest surviving Palladian and most ‘At-Risk Buildings’ in Ireland. It is hoped by many that Hazelwood House and its 81 acres of lush demesne on Lough Gill, with its stunning views of the Garavogue River and Benbulben, will be bought by a caring custodian who will preserve and restore the house to its original splendour to benefit both local heritage and national tourism.

If these dreams are eventually realised, the people of Forthill and beyond could enjoy a beautiful nature walk along the cleared ‘River Bank’ trail to the ‘Bog Woods,’ linking the town to Hazelwood, a site occupied by both Celtic kings and Ascendancy elite, but appreciated by all in a more democratic 21st century, regardless of culture or creed.
The ‘ancient aesthetic’ architecture of Hazelwood House

With contributions by the Hazelwood Heritage Society

A structure of exquisite beauty and grace, Hazelwood House was “a fine and elegant seat” (p. 93, Wilson) for many generations of the Wynne family. It was designed by the German architect Richard Cassels (later anglicised to “Castle”) between 1720 and 1740 in the Palladian style, derived from Italian architect Andrea Palladio (1508-1580), who based his theme on classical Grecian and Roman buildings.

Following Castle Hume in County Fermanagh, in Ireland Hazelwood House led the fashion in ancient aesthetic revival and Cassels went on to design such notable edifices as Westport House, Strokestown Park House, French Park House and Russborough House. Cassels’ work in Dublin includes Powerscourt House, Rotunda Hospital and Leinster House, centre of Irish government. Another fine example of Irish Palladian architecture is c. 1722 Castletown in County Kildare, designed by Alessandro Galilei.

In keeping with Palladian principles, which include that architecture “should be governed by reason,” Hazelwood House reflects Grecian and Roman ideals of “clarity, order and symmetry” through the use of columns, pilasters and pediments, features which evoke Roman temples.

The imposing residence is created of polished, cut limestone with a three-bay, three-story central block, over a basement, from which two east and west graceful wings curve, three-bay, two-storey wings, each three-bays deep.

The Palladian architectural elements include a pedimented entrance, cross-vaulted ceiling in a room off the hall with decorative plaster enrichments, recessed and round-headed niches, fluted Ionic columns and pilasters, Doric pilastered aedicules (small shrines), Venetian windows and door case, moulded transom, fan light, and front steps leading to a sweeping lawn overlooking extraordinary views of the Garavogue and Benbulben mountain. From the house’s south vistas, one could look out in past centuries to terraces, a walled garden and beech tree-lined avenue leading toward Lough Gill and the mountains, part of the “shared landscape.”

The house includes a slate-roofed, two-story stable block to the east, which was stabilised a few years ago and remains in fair condition.
Palladian country houses were part of working farms, therefore, Palladio and his followers kept this in mind “to reflect this reality.” Outbuildings often were consolidated into a single “simple and yet sophisticated, rational yet handsome” unit, hidden but functional. The typical Palladian stable yard included the housing of livestock and work space for a blacksmith, farrier and other farm operations. Hazelwood House was progressive in having a steam-driven sawmill and water pump.

In addition to being in a dilapidated state, the house also unfortunately sports an unattractive c. 1970s fire escape that was built as part of the mental hospital annex once located at Hazelwood, but this could be removed in restoration. The large abandoned factory located to the back of the house also presents a problem but could have other uses if not demolished. Despite this and other challenges ahead, Hazelwood House has great potential due to its architectural significance and rich history. It is described as “one of County Sligo’s most neglected treasures,” according to the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage.

“IT is a splendid and imposing example of the Palladian style. In spite of abject neglect and inappropriate alteration, it is testimony to the quality of the building that is has survived relatively intact. An abundance of fine stonework attests to the high quality craftsmanship employed in its construction and pays tribute to those whose vision was responsible for its conception. In addition to its very high quality architectural value the house is important both socially and historically.”

The Palladian style was often used throughout Europe in the 19th and 20th century in public and municipal buildings. Although Hazelwood House wasn’t designed as such, if it is properly preserved, restored and utilised, its symbolic elements of democracy and justice could very well reflect the structure’s new purpose of serving the public as a community and tourism treasure.

“The (Irish Georgian) Society believes that the future of this internationally important building must be preserved and that it could play a strong role as a core educational/tourist amenity for the North West as a whole.” (Irish Georgian Society: Buildings at Risk)
Chapter 3 - Influence of ‘Big House’ in south Sligo

*Edward (Cornet Cooper b. c.1616 d. 1679
= Margaret d. of Nicholas Mahon
(of Ballinamulty Co.Roscommon)

Edward 1711
Arthur b.1667 = Mary d. of Sir Joshua Allen
Richard (of Limerick) Mary = George O'Reilly (of Lough Mask)
Margaret = Gualtheria Hamilton

Joshua 1694 d. 1752
= (1729) Mary d. of Rich. Bingham (of Newbrook Co. Mayo) Richard
Joshua 1694 d. 1757 = Mary d. of Rich. Bingham (of Newbrook Co. Mayo) Richard
Edward 1711

E. Hen. Joshua P1 (*MP 1759 d. 1800
= Richard (of Bath) = (1758) Alicia, d. of Edward Synge, bishop of Buhen
Edward Synge d. 1830 = Elizabeth (=) Rich. Lindsey
Richard d. s. b Jane (possibly m an Utheron)

Edward Joshua
Joshua Henry d.s.p.
1792 d. 1868 = (1858) Charlotte Maris d. of Ed. W. Mills

Francis Edward (Maj. R.F.A.) 1859-1900
= Ella Beatrice d. of Gen. Mark MPrendergast

= Kathleen Emily 1861-1942

Beatrice 1886-1913 = Frederick Williams Wynn d. 1940
Guy Edward Lt. Col RN (1892-1941)
Winfred Women

Brian Ricco (Maj. R.F.) Maj. 1864-1933
= Dorothy Handcock 1892 Lilian (Hawson) Fitzpatrick

Beatrice 1886-1913 = Frederick Williams Wynn d. 1940
Guy Edward Lt. Col RN (1892-1941)
Winfred Women

*Believed to have been son of The E. Cooper, a Cromwellian Officer, descended from Cooper of Thargarton
The Coopers and Markree

With contributions by Val Robus

For 350 years Markee Castle and its vast acreage has been the domain of the Cooper family. But before they came on board, the McDonaghs of Cloonamahon ruled the roost and used it as a fortified outpost to guard the ford across the Unsin river, which flows from Lough Arrow. The clan also had quite a lot of sway over Collooney.

“‘In the 14th year of James I, “Bryan M’donogh of Coolevoney,” received a grant of lands from that monarch, and by this grant, “All the lands of Coolevoney are created the manor of Coolevoney, with 200 acres in demesne; power is given to create tenures, to hold courts leet and baron; to have free warren and park; to enjoy all wails and strays; to hold a Wednesday market at Coolevoney, and a fair there on St. James’s day, and the day after, unless such days occur on Saturday and Sunday, in which case the fair is to be held on the Monday and Tuesday following, with a court of pie powder and the usual tolls.”’” (Patent Roll, James I, 14, O’rorke, p. 62)

The McDonaghs lost the lands and perks in the 1641 rebellion, which in turn were passed to Patrick Plunket, who forfeited the estate when he supported the rebels, who became part of the failed Catholic Confederation of 1642.

“The M’donaghs paid dearly for devotion to the national cause; for it brought ruin on their posterity as well as on themselves; and since that time no M’donogh or Plunket has ruled the brown plains of Markree.” (p. 62, O’Rorke)

The Coopers are actually descended from Conor O’Brien. After O’Brien was killed in the 1641 battle, Edward Cooper married his widow, the intriguingly named Márie Rua (‘Red Mary’). The union was a rather smart political move for both parties, as that ‘Red Mary’s plan was protect herself and two sons against the English by taking the Cooper surname.

And Edward got an instant family as a boon. But as with the Coopershill Coopers morphing into the O’Haras, the history of south Sligo’s ‘Big Houses’ becomes even more complex. (The current Charles Cooper, 10th generation of the family, is actually descended from the O’Brien, being related to ‘Red Mary’s’ second son.)

After Cromwell’s army defeated the O’Brien clan in 1663, Edward Cooper, who served as Comet with the Dragoons, received Markree lands as military service payment, since the army was broke.

Cornet Cooper died in 1679 and his estate was willed to ‘Red Mary’s’ second son, Arthur, who therefore inherited Markree. By 1665 Markree, or ‘magh reagh’ in Irish meaning a ‘brown plain,’ is listed in the Hearth Money Rolls (tax on fireplaces sometimes called ‘Smoke Silver’) as having a value of £90.

Arthur Cooper figured in the Jacobite war – he was a supporter of King William and built defences in at his Collooney houses, “the frontier garrisons toward the Boyle and Ballymoat, to prevent the incursion of the Irish from those parts.” (p. 65, O’Rorke)

Arthur was one of the leading members of the Protestant resistance movement in County Sligo and led a patrol of troopers in an attack on
Ballymote Castle garrisoned by Jacobite supporters. Their overall aim was “securing the Protestant religion, their lives, liberties, properties, and the peace of the kingdom.” (p. 54, O’Rorke)

After the treaty of Limerick, Arthur re-established himself at Markree. The castle was a favourite place for the well-heeled to visit during their Irish sojourns.

“I must likewise trust you to make my regretful acknowledgements to Mr Cooper of Markree; pray do not forget: I staid only two nights at Sligo, and was under special charge, of a very friendly kind, all the time.” (Thomas Carlyle letter)

Joshua Cooper, Edward’s son and heir, succeeded the estate in 1727, purchasing the Coote Estate in the vicinity of Collooney, and represented County Sligo in the Irish Parliament for a record number of 37 years, until his death in 1757, according to McTernan.

Joshua Cooper, The Younger, M. P. and a Privy Councillor; succeeded his father and in 1758 married Alice, only daughter and heiress of Richard Synge, Bishop of Elphin. Alice was described as “a most beautiful lady with a very large fortune.” The estate earned £10,000 in annual income rentals. After representing County Sligo in Parliament from 1768 to 1783, Joshua Cooper died in 1800 and was laid to rest in St. Paul’s Church, Collooney, where his tomb is inscribed as follows:

“Beneath this tomb lie interred the remains of The Right Hon. Joshua Cooper, Who departed this life on 16th Dec. 1800, In the 71st of his age, universally lamented.”

Joshua Edward Cooper, his eldest son, succeeded. He was a Colonel in the Sligo Militia and represented Sligo in the closing years of Grattan’s Parliament. He purchased the Ballisodare fishery from Sir Edward Crofton in 1806 and conceived the idea of turning the barren rivers, the Owenmore and the Unshin, into a rich salmon fishery by constructing a series of canals and ladders, a scheme that was successfully carried through after his death by his nephew Edward Joshua Cooper. He sat in Parliament from 1801 to 1806 and for the remainder of his life was incapacitated by ill health and died childless in 1837.

In the meantime, his brother Edward Synge Cooper managed the estate. He was a charitable sort and founded the Sligo Fever Hospital in 1822 and also looked after the needy who worked on his estate when there was a food shortage. In keeping with family tradition, he sat in Parliament from 1806 until his death in 1830, aged 67 years.

Edward Henry Cooper, the eldest son of Richard W. Cooper, succeeded his uncle in 1863. He had two sons, Francis Edward and Richard Joshua. Edward Henry also represented Sligo in Parliament from 1865 to 1868. He died in 1902 and left an estate valued at £66,000. Bryan Ricco Cooper was the next Cooper to take over at Markree. He was the eldest son of Major Francis E. Cooper, who died on active service in South Africa in May 1900. Bryan Cooper was interested in politics and fought the general election of September 1923 in the South Dublin constituency as an Independent. He was elected and returned again in 1927 with an increased majority. Bryan Cooper felt Markree castle was too big for his needs and sold off most of the 30,000 acres. He died in July 1930 in Dublin after a short illness and is buried in Collooney. He left an estate valued at £176,000. Markree Castle and the lands were bequeathed to his eldest son Edward Francis Cooper.

Edward Francis Cooper served in the Royal Navy during World War II. He married Elizabeth Clarke of Sussex and they had three sons and two daughters. Edward Francis died in 1982. His eldest son Edward Cooper inherited the castle and lands. In 1994 Edward Cooper sold off 598 acres of land, which had been part of the estate for over three centuries.

Markree in modern times

In the early 1980s Markree Castle appeared on the front cover of a book entitled Vanishing Country Houses of Ireland, a testament to the sad state of decay in which many of Ireland’s great houses found themselves.

Markree Castle was built in the early 19th century replacing an earlier property, which Dr. James McParlan, architectural historian, indicates was known as ‘Mercury.’ McTernan notes that it is the oldest residential site in the county, having been founded by Cornet Cooper in the seventeenth century. At the time of Griffith’s Valuation it was owned by Edward J. Cooper and was valued at £90.

The design of Markree Castle is of the “very finest in Irish Victorian and Georgian architecture is to be seen.” The castle, as seen in modern times, dates from 1802 with exterior changes by the architect Francis Johnston. Its most recent redesign took place in the late 1800s, with some interior modifications from 1896.

By the mid 20th century it had fallen into disrepair but was later acquired by Charles Cooper, having worked in the hotel business all of his life, undertook major restoration work. Since 1989 Charles and his family have run it as a hotel and wedding venue.

Since World War II the house had fallen in such a dilapidated state that a photograph of it, apparently roofless, was featured on the cover of the 1989 The Vanishing Country Houses of Ireland, a sad shell of its heyday. But the near ruins still contained a rich history, especially during its 19th century period, much of which Charles Cooper was able to save.
Markree Castle was the inspiration for country legend Johnny Cash and ‘hometown gal done good’ Sandy Kelly when they filmed the video for their duet, “Woodcarver,” a song written by Pam Wolfe and Rusty Wolf.

The castle did indeed seem to be ‘the house of my dreams’ for Johnny Cash, his wife June Carter Cash, and their large entourage when they came to stay for three days in 1990. The destination choice was the brainchild of Sligo-based country music star, Sandy, whose singing talent was discovered by Cash just by chance while he was in Ireland on tour. She was invited by her new mentor to record in Nashville and tour the world with him.
After a tiring final Dublin gig, Sandy, the considerate person she is, knew Cash and his band of musicians, roadies and assistants were desperate for a rest after completing a long tour and reckoned the castle in her neck of the woods, newly refurbished as a hotel, would be the ticket. She also thought it would an excellent location to film part of an episode for her RTÉ television show, ‘Sandy.’ Despite Cash’s manager’s protests, the crew made its way to the wilds of Collooney.

Later, when Sandy reminisced to the *Sligo Weekender* about this auspicious turn of events, shortly after Cash had passed away in 2003, she said that Johnny and June both loved the castle. “(Johnny) had the rare luxury of being able to walk around the gardens and fields by himself, undisturbed, he looked so happy. I will always remember that.”

“There are those who are taking vacations To the mountains, the lakes and the sea; Where they rest from their cares and troubles What a wonderful time that must be!” (Buffum, H., recorded by Johnny Cash, 1961)

Sandy told the newspaper that the Cash’s stay encompassed All Hallows Eve, so the group even kitted out in fancy dress for a party. “They couldn’t believe their good fortune in spending Halloween in a castle on the west coast of Ireland. Spooky!”

**More lyrical than ‘spooky’**

Markree Castle is not as much a ‘spooky’ place, especially after Charles Cooper, the 10th generation of his family to live there, lovingly restored and opened his historic country house as a luxury hotel in 1989.

Even before country western music made its historic mark on Markree, another songwriter, albeit more Victorian in time and manner, was apparently charmed by the castle and its vast estate. Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895), a clergyman’s wife, is thought to have written the lyrics in 1848 to the much loved hymn, by believers of all denominations, “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” during a stay with the Coopers at Markree. (This hypothesis is disputed by another Irish manor house that also holds claim, but this is merely ‘academic.’)

Not so ‘beautiful,’ was a stanza Mrs. Alexander wrote for her most famous hymn. It reflects the prevailing elitist attitude from those times, but encouragingly it was omitted by the Church of England.

“The rich man in his castle The poor man at his gate He made them high and lowly He ordered their estate.”

No matter the location of her literary illumination or possible prejudices, Alexander was an Anglican who ‘walked the walk’ and was involved in charitable work for much of her life. A prolific hymn writer, who also composed “Once in Royal David’s City,” she used the
Markree Castle’s Victorian era Cooper was the Hon. Edward Joshua, son of Edward Synge Cooper. Edward Joshua (E. J.), like Alexander, shared the same kind of benevolence to the needy as Mrs. Alexander, and also embraced a world – indeed -- universal view.

As a young man educated at Oxford, E. J. Cooper travelled extensively throughout the Middle East and Africa. Now married to a daughter of Owen Wynne of Hazelwood, when E. J. Cooper took over the 30,000-acre Markree estate after his uncle Joshua, who died in 1837, he had his eye on the sky because of his passion for astronomy. Despite the expense, he built a ‘gentleman’s observatory’ in 1834 behind the castle, “one of the best equipped in Europe” that included one of the largest Irish-French ‘Grubb/Cauchoix’ refracting telescopes in the world at that time, its thick, heavy lens 13.3 inches in measurement.

“The Observatory of Mr. Cooper of Markree Castle - undoubtedly the most richly furnished private observatory known - is worked with great activity by Mr. Cooper himself and by his very able assistant, Mr. Andrew Graham.” (Royal Astronomical Society, 1851)

Quite significantly, the first asteroid, ‘9 Metis,’ was discovered from Ireland (the ninth in the world) in 1848 by the aforementioned Graham (1815-1908) at the Markree observatory. Only one other asteroid has been discovered from Ireland since then, ‘TM9,’ by Dave McDonald in 2008 from his Celbridge, Co. Dublin observatory.

Cooper also used the telescope to sketch Halley’s Comet in 1835 and to view the solar eclipse of 15th May 1836. During 1835 and 1836, the instrument travelled to Europe with Cooper and Mr. Graham. The telescope was later used by Graham for the bulk of the measurements made to produce the 4-volume Markree Catalogue, with measured positions for about 60,000 stars along the ‘ecliptic.’


The late Patrick Wayman, the Honorary Andrews Professor of Trinity College, wrote that E. J. Cooper was “one of the distinguished private individuals in 19th century Ireland who contributed to astronomy quite effectively.”

The observatory remained active until the death of Edward Henry Cooper M.P. in 1902 and then the telescope was sold c. 1928 to the Jesuit Seminary in Aberdeen, Hong Kong, where it was used during the 1930s. However, Japanese bombing during World War II damaged the observatory in 1941 (the attackers mistook the telescope for a gun) and the telescope was moved by another group of Jesuits to Manila Observatory in the Philippines c. 1947.

It was thought that the scope’s ‘objective’ was still being used in 1989 (Hoskin and Glass) but according to a 2003 email from Victor L. Badillo of the Manila Observatory to Albert Kong, a member of the Hong Kong Astronomical Society, the lens wasn’t used for that solar work and was being stored in the basement of the Hong Kong Observatory.

At any rate, this then state-of-the-art telescope had semi-circumnavigated the world quite impressively, from its French-Irish origins to Collooney, and then on to the Far East, its view still on space. Unfortunately the observatory at Markree is no longer in the caring custody of the Coopers and it is believed much of the furnishings and other equipment are missing.

In addition to his amateur yet respected enthusiasm for the stars, E. J. Cooper also had a keen interest in meteorology. Weather observations of atmospheric pressure, temperature, wind direction and speed, cloud cover and rainfall were recorded irregularly from 1824 to 1832 but then recorded twice a day from 1833 onwards until the present day, the third longest run available in Ireland, according to Met Éireann.

The lowest temperature ever recorded in Ireland was -19.1 degrees Celsius (-2.4 degrees Fahrenheit) at Markree on 16th January 1881. The Royal Astronomical Society stated that Markree’s weather station during the time of the Coopers was “the best…in Ireland.” The Met Éireann Library now holds the meteorological record archives of Markree Castle dating 1869 to 1968, a valuable resource relating to Sligo’s weather history. (Treanor, GLINT-19, p. 29)

Brendan McWilliams, the late writer for The Irish Times, wrote in 2005 in his ‘Weather Eye’ column about the significance of Cooper’s work to meteorology.
“…Edward Cooper established Markree Castle as a weather station, whose meteorological records were to be unrivalled in their duration anywhere in the west of Ireland, and rarely equalled in the country as a whole.” (p. 44)

In addition to providing a valuable weather service for Sligo and Ireland as a whole, E. J. Cooper locally completed the nearby river fish passes his uncle started, “to establish and protect a salmon fishery upon the lakes of the Owenmore and Arrow, and, also, within the Bay of Ballisodare,” according to McTernan. “For the first time this allowed salmon full access to the river system.”

E. J. Cooper was elected to the Royal Dublin Academy and in 1858 the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) awarded him the prestigious Cunningham gold medal for his contributions toward science. In 1846 Cooper presented his meteorological observations in a paper to the RIA regarding the potato blight, an issue that much concerned him and his tenants.

Edward Joshua Cooper not only benefited the scientific community with his contributions towards astronomy, meteorology and aquaculture, but he also seemed to have a genuine concern for his tenants, having also established a School of Trades in Collooney for the benefit of their children. He died in 1863 and is buried in the Chapel of Ease (which E. J. Cooper had previously paid £2,000 to build), Holy Trinity Church of Ireland, Ballisodare. St. Paul’s Church in Collooney has a window dedicated to his memory.

In summary, Markree Castle has played a quirky, yet extremely vital part of local, national, international, and even cosmic, history. ‘Beautiful words,’ to quote another Johnny Cash song, whether for science or art, can be written here by the famous and ordinary alike.

As Johnny Cash sought quiet refuge at Markree and was inspired by its beauty, so may have Cecil Frances Alexander … indeed anyone now who is welcome to visit this beautifully restored castle hotel and its lovely demesne. No wonder ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful,’ inspired by stars, clouds, and all living things, could have easily been created at Markree.

“The tall trees in the greenwood
The meadows where we play
The rushes by the water
To gather every day.”

Interview with Michael and Ann Fitzpatrick

By Val Robus

Michael Fitzpatrick worked on the Markree Estate farm, and along with his wife Ann, they graciously shared their memories of that time with me.

The couple moved to Markree on the 17th October 1959. Michael had previously studied agriculture at Gurteen College in Limerick where he studied agriculture. He went to Markree for his interview and was offered the job. The job came with a house on the land and Mr. Bell (Michael’s previous boss) advised Ann to ask Mr. Cooper if the house came with a bathroom. Mr. Cooper said he had a feeling they were going to ask that and he installed a bathroom into the house for them.

The house was part of the farm itself and was built in 1771. The house and farm are still standing today and has now been converted to Home Farm Cottages that are beautiful self-catering cottages. I had a lovely tour of the cottages with Michael, and also Amy, who works at
Home Farm. It’s hard to believe that these were once used as stables and sheds, as well as home to Michael and Ann.

Michael’s job was 24/7 as he lived on the premises. During his time at Markree he built three large sheds on the land. There were around 1,500 acres of land to take care of, but much of this was river or woodland, so it made for around 700 acres of farm land. There were over 100 cow sucklers kept on the farm. Also, there were some dairy cows which provided milk for the cattle and also the workers. There were 12 to 14 sows and also corn and potatoes were grown. The farm had its own equipment for tillage and silage.

In total Michael had seven men working with him, but this included two in the garden and one in forestry. During busy times such as harvesting and hay-making all the men helped.

The men worked from 8am until 6pm Monday to Friday, with a break for lunch from 12:30-1:30pm. Saturday was 8am until 12 noon. The wages weren’t the best but there were some perks to the job such as potatoes, eggs and firewood, although the firewood had to be collected.

Michael and Ann were telling me that Markree was a big estate with various houses on the land. There was even a village for the workers called Knockrawer which the tenants and locals called Crook. The village is now derelict. There are also several gatehouses: one was in Union Wood and the gamekeeper Harry Bracken lived here. He left in the 1960s to work for Lord Mountbatten’s daughter in England. Willie Lawson took over from as his gamekeeper.

Before Michael and Ann moved to Markree in 1959 there was an auction held for quite a lot of the furniture in the castle, as only 18 rooms were inhabited. The locals were delighted to own ‘a piece of Markree.’

Michael and Ann thought very highly of Edward Francis Cooper and his wife, or Mr. and Mrs. Cooper, as they called them. They have very fond memories of them. One Christmas when they couldn’t travel to visit their parents, the Coopers invited them for Christmas dinner at the castle.

Ann was telling me that one day she had her daughter Trudy outside in her pram and the dog Sputnik was outside as well. Mr. Cooper came over to talk to them and the dog growled. Ann said she was very embarrassed but Mr. Cooper told her Sputnik was only doing his job and protecting his family. Ann said Mr. Cooper was like a father to her. Mr. Cooper also made time to talk to the workers.

Michael told me that the Sligo, Leitrim and Northern Counties Railway better known as the SLNCR ran through part of the Markree estate. At one time it used to take cattle to Enniskillen. The railway ran from 1881 to 1957.

Michael retired from Markree in 1991 after 32 years of service. He was the last of the farm workers to leave.
Markree: Then and now

Interview with Charles Cooper

Charles Cooper, the 10th generation of his family to live at Markree Castle, said that the estate was an employer of quite a lot of local people, even around the turn of the 20th century when there was far less land to farm.

He said there were 46 people working on the farm at that time, but didn’t know how many people were employed in the house itself. As far as the farm was concerned, he said it was of mixed use including the keeping of pigs and ducks.

“*In my childhood there were two or three milking cows, some beef cows, geese, hens, pigs, we grew grain—wheat and barley,*” he said. “*The grain was for selling, the milk was for our own use and was supplied to everyone who worked here. My mother had a Jersey or a Guernsey for the cream and made butter. She used to sell butter and eggs. There were three gardeners and a vegetable garden, and she used to deliver (produce) to Sligo twice a week.*”

Charles said the estate’s team of farm workers toiled hard. A bell in the farmer’s yard was rung each day at 12 p.m. for lunch and again in the evening when work ended. He said the workers brought their own lunch and ate it in a room with a lit fireplace so they could warm up and enjoy some chat during their break.

Although the Coopers were generally regarded as good landlords and employers, Charles said divisions existed and there was some tension occasionally. But community relations were fair enough, he added.

“There was always a divide but for the most part they were good landlords, bar one Joshua Cooper who wasn’t a good employer.”
Chapter 3 - Influence of ‘Big House’ in south Sligo

… (The Coopers) would never have the workers in the front door,” he said. “(But) for the most part, they got on.”

Charles said the estate workers lived in a nearby village, which is now mostly abandoned. He said although there was no school for the workers’ children in Collooney, the Coopers did build a school and church in Ballisodare. Markree’s own village was quite populated, he said.

“In the old days there was an estate village called Cruic with about 15 houses, where they all lived,” he said. “There was no water and electricity. Water came from a well and an ancestor of mine built a ram pump with nice stone facing on it to bring the water up the hill. The houses were all at the top of the hill and the pump brought the water from the stream to the top of the hill. In my childhood day the pump didn’t work and they used to go down to the well with their buckets. I remember one of them getting a washing machine. They didn’t have water and they used to carry the bucket of water to the machine. ”

Charles described what some of the houses in the village were like, mostly small and crowded. He said there were other Markree workers, who didn’t live in the village, but resided on Cooper land.

The higher one’s station was, such as a gamekeeper, the nicer the house they lived in, he said. The gamekeeper’s house, located besides Union Woods, would have been larger than the other village houses. He said that the house is still occupied. As for the village, he knows one house that’s being renovated.

“The buildings are there and one is being restored; (the owners) don’t live in it but visit it, they live locally. They used to live in it and two of the sons work for me. I think there were eight to nine people living in it with one bedroom,” he said. “There were other houses through the woods, all ruins now. A gamekeeper’s house, (there were) three gamekeepers at one point. They had different houses in the woods.”

Charles said his ancestor Joshua Cooper inherited Markree in 1800 and was “indisposed.” Joshua had a brother who “married a lot of money,” and although the estate’s income was large, due in part to rentals, a lot of the wealth was spent.

Charles, however, speaks with admiration of his ancestor Edward Joshua Cooper, who is a subject for a book about Victorian travellers that is currently being written by a historian, who recently interviewed Charles.

“Edward Joshua was a traveller, writer, scholar, he went all over the western world travelling; he went to the (Egyptian) pyramids,” he said. “In one particular journey he made into the Arctic Circle, he went from Norway to Sweden across the mountains, but he had his carriage dismantled and carried across so he could put it together the other side.”

Charles also talked about the many benefits Edward Joshua, who was progressive for his time, contributed to the Collooney area, despite never owning Markree Castle.

“He built an observatory here, he studied the stars, built a fish pass at Ballisodare (the first fish pass in Europe), he built the chapel, also helped fund the Roman Catholic church in Collooney. He did a lot of research to find (and fund) a cure for potato blight,” he said. “(He) did a lot of Famine relief work, built the Fever Hospital in Sligo.”

“Joshua, who was incapacitated, was actually still alive even though Edward ran the place. Edward died the year before Joshua, so he never owned Markree even though he spent all his (own) money and did all these wonderful works,” he said. “There is a story that he offered the Borough of Sligo a clock to put in a tower, but the members of the council fought over where it should go, so he said, ‘If you are going to fight, you can’t have it.’ So he gave it to the church in Collooney instead, and that is where it is now.”

As a world traveller, Charles said Edward Joshua travelled with an Italian artist named ‘Bossi,’ who documented their exotic adventures with sketches. Charles believes some of the drawings still exist but does not know their locations. He said one of the sketches, for example, was of a tomb ceiling’s ‘celestial scene,’ but a Frenchman ran off with it and the valuable rendering ended up being damaged in transit.

Charles said the chapel’s former ecclesiastical furnishings have an interesting tale behind them, which spans across Europe and plays a part of its military history.
“(Edward Joshua) travelled in France, travelled all over. There’s a story my father tells … in the 1950s an Italian came to Markree to see my father and asked to see the chapel. My father brought him in and he looked puzzled and said, ‘Oh no, this isn’t what I want to see; where are the …. lovely ornate choir stalls?’”

Charles’ father then told the Italian that Edward Joshua’s successor deemed the stalls too fancy for ‘high Victorian’ taste, so he donated them instead to Tuam Cathedral.

After finding out about the changed location of these antiques, this Italian signor went to Tuam Cathedral, where he ended up purchasing them. It transpired he was doing research on a monastery in northern Italy, for which the chorister seats were originally created, so now he was able to return them to their original holy home of the monks.

How did these sacred fittings end up in Ireland from Italy? Apparently their arduous journey began when Napoleon plundered northern Italy, where one of his generals stole and transported the large, and most likely heavy, objects to France, from where Edward Joshua Cooper later purchased them for Markree Castle.

If only these choir stalls could talk because, unfortunately, Charles does not yet know the location of this Italian monastery. Today although those elaborate pieces are gone, Markree Castle’s chapel, now unconsecrated, is quite beautiful and used for many civil weddings and marriage blessings of all denominations, he said.

Changing times at Markree

Much has changed at Markree since the 19th century, especially its reduction of area. Charles said within the estate walls there were 1,000 acres, but during its peak, c. 1830s, was there 43,000 acres. Now there is a mere 500 acres on the estate. He explained how the various Land Acts affected Markree at that time.

“The … Wyndham (Land Acts) acts diminished (the estate) because tenants got the right to buy their land,” he said. “They were paid in land bonds, which were worthless, so that’s when the (Cooper) fortune started diminishing from the late 19th century onwards. My grandfather wasn’t here a lot; he lived and worked in Dublin. He was a T.D., and prior to that he was an M.P. in England. He wasn’t a farmer and he wasn’t here.”

Charles said his grandfather’s father died in the Boer War and inherited Markree when he was 16 or 17 years old in 1901. Charles’s father was also about 17 years old when he received the estate, after his father died in 1930. Charles said that he and his family only lived in part of the ‘Big House.’

“We grew up in a wing: the main house was closed in 1952,” Charles said. “All the rooms you see now, the doors were locked. There was a big auction and most of contents were sold. We were brought up in a wing and weren’t allowed in this the old part of the house. There was dry rot, it wasn’t in great order.

Markree Castle and its estate must have been an extraordinary place to grow up but Charles said it just seemed ‘normal’ because he didn’t know anything different. It was special enough though for Charles to be featured on a RTE programme about 10 to 15 years ago called “Unusual Childhoods,” he said.

Charles said he has a twin brother, who is older than him by 20 minutes. He has three other siblings and as children they had the run of the place outside, trees to climb and the river to explore. However, inside the house their father was quite strict.

You are brought up in any environment … and took it as it was,” he said. “My father was very Victorian; if you missed a meal you didn’t get it, if you weren’t on time for it, the door was shut and you had no food. I still to this day wonder when we didn’t have watches, how we knew (the time). I still don’t wear a watch and I’m always on time.”

Although the family lived in the one wing of the house and the rest was locked, Charles and his siblings did manage to sneak into the forbidden zones, even climbing high to the roof rafters. He said there was a myriad of ways to access the maze-like roof, which must have been a boy’s ideal playground.
“We weren’t allowed -- I’m not saying we didn’t go,” he said. “I vividly remember running along the top of that roof. It’s lead, it’s flat. … (there were) lots of ways on to the roof, (by way of) stairs, windows, because the house was built in so many different periods. The roof is a jigsaw puzzle.”

After Charles became an adult and ran a hotel business elsewhere, the quickly deteriorating house with its shrunken estate languished in another family member’s ownership. Charles purchased Markree during the late 1980s, when it began its stunning transformation, beginning with the partially restored castle opened as a country hotel on 30th April 1989. He had his work cut out to reach that point.

“I didn’t inherit it -- I bought it back, but the buying was the cheap bit of it,” Charles said. “At that stage we just had a small dining room and three guest rooms fully restored. Gradually as time passed we restored more and more. Now we have 30 (guest rooms).”

Charles said restoration of the castle is still uncompleted and he would like to renovate the mostly unused massive ground floor below.

“When we have weddings they take over the whole place,” he said. “It means we are turning away a lot of business lunches, drinks, meals. If we had downstairs we could let them in.”

Charles said restoring the house was a huge job and that it, like any other house, remains a work in progress — but on a grander scale, of course.

“When we were first started, there was a lot of work, but now we maintain it. Perished lead is the biggest problem, as all the valleys and flushings are all lead and that cracks with age, so you can melt it and reseal, and then sometimes if water seeps in you’ll get a beam that rots,” he said. “We have got grants from the Heritage Council to help us, but the grants have died. Every job is a big job and there is always a list. Priority of what needs doing always changes … heating is a huge cost, getting rid of dry rot was the biggest problem.”

Clearly a labour of love for Charles Cooper, Markree Castle once again benefits the community, but in a more modern way. Instead of hosting only the privileged, the public is welcome to dine in the Rococo-style restaurant or enjoy tea in the plush sitting rooms surrounded by age-old family portraits. Charles is even available to lead tours around the house and can tell visitors even more ‘hidden histories’ of Markree Castle and its fascinating estate.

(Many thanks to Charles Cooper for giving generously of his time to take part in this interview, May 2013)

On tour with Charles Cooper at Markree Castle

By Val Robus

Here are just a few of many fascinating points shared by Charles Cooper during a tour of Markree Castle on 15th May 2013.

- The Cooper family of Markree Castle constructed the falls at the Ballisodare fishery and introduced salmon to the river.
- The surrounding farm is home to one of Ireland’s only herds of Wensleydale sheep.
- The signatures of Johnny and his wife, June, are included in the Markree Castle guest book, when they were guests there in 1990.
- The video that Johnny Cash filmed with Sligo-based country western star Sandy Kelly performing ‘Wood Carver’ during that same time can be found on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=1_Lap4uw6dM
- Other notable people who have stayed at Markree include Charles Kingsley, author of The Water-Babies, and Sligo’s world-famous William Butler Yeats.
- When Charles Cooper took over the castle, it was in a very poor state of repair. In fact, two-thirds of the dining room ceiling was on the floor. He has spent a lot of time and effort restoring the castle to its former glory.
Only the estate was purchased, none of the furniture or belongings. In recent years Coopers (who would have been relatives) from the UK have visited the castle and returned items that came from the castle such as paintings and plates.

There is one painting in the castle that was held when a gentleman owed money. He was told the painting would be returned when he paid his debt. He never managed to pay and the painting is still on the wall.

There is a photo of the staff that worked at Markree in 1904. There is only one woman in the photo.

A chapel is also part of the building. It has separate steps from the outside so people could go straight into the chapel without entering the castle itself. The chapel was built in 1842 and is used today for civil ceremonies.

Ireland’s lowest officially recognised air temperature, -19.1°C (-2.4°F), was measured at Markree Castle on 16th January 1881.

A happy Cooper homecoming

From John C. McTernan compiled by Val Robus

In the late summer of 1856, there were great rejoicings in Collooney to welcome home a number of young men from the neighbourhood who had returned safely from the Crimean War. Lieutenant Cooper of the 93rd Highlanders arrived home on September 3rd 1856. The public came out in force to celebrate this occasion.

A large crowd of pedestrians and horsemen greeted Lieut. Cooper on his arrival on the evening coach. Lieut. Cooper and the other Crimean Soldiers made their way on horseback from Sligo to Markree Castle. At the front of the procession rode a Markree tenant, carrying a banner bearing the inscriptions “Welcome home to our Brave Defenders.” After the soldiers, over 200 farmers of the district followed the procession wearing a bunch of red, blue and green ribbons.

There was plenty of cheering from the crowd who lined the streets. The country people had erected a fine arch of laurel, 40 feet wide, which completely spanned the Mailcoach Road. As the heroes entered the Markree demesne, a canon was fired to salute their return. As they approached the castle a fine band of the Sligo Rifles played several appropriate pieces of music. Lieut. Cooper rode along the line of horsemen welcoming him home and was greeted by the members of his family.
Family flexibility: How the Coopers became the O’Haras

No other landed estates families in Sligo exemplify resilience and survivorship more than County Sligo’s Coopers and O’Hara clans, past and present.

The Coopers apparently were related to the same Coopers of Markree Castle, although the Riverstown branch didn’t own their land outright. Arthur Cooper was High Sheriff in 1698 and married Sarah Carleton of Co. Fermanagh, whose dowry financed his high ambitions, first living in Tanzyfort, located across the Unsin River, which still stands and now stores hay and straw.

Aspiring to bigger and better things, this Cooper couple then built Coopershill on a hill across the river, although it took almost two decades. The long duration was partially due to lack of access, but was finally managed by securing the bridge’s slipping foundations with sheepskins.

Arthur’s son, Arthur Brooke Cooper (1757-1854) married into the ancient Gaelic tribe of the O’Haras, a politically and economically clever partnership for both families. By forming this integrated alliance, they maintained their lands and power during a tumultuous period of Ireland’s history.

The next generation at Coopershill was Charles William Cooper (1817-1898), nephew of Charles King O’Hara of nearby Annaghmore. Since Charles King was a bachelor and left no ‘issue,’ he left his vast estates to Charles William on the condition the latter would change his name by royal Warrant to O’Hara, his mother’s maiden name. While Charles William and his wife Annie moved to Annaghmore, the newly re-named O’Hara retained ownership of Coopershill, where his two spinster sisters were still living.

Charles and Annie had 14 children, five of whom died before reaching the age of 30, a statistic which was not uncommon during those days, but shocking and sad by modern standards.

The eldest son of Charles William and Annie, Charles, inherited Annaghmore. Arthur Cooper O’Hara (1862-1934), their second son, took on Coopershill. Both were bachelors and left their estates to
Frederick ‘Freddie’ William (1876-1949), the great grandfather of Simon O’Hara, the current proprietor.

The sons of Freddie inherited the estates, Annaghtmore to Donal and Coopershill to Francis ‘Frank’ (1907-1982), the latter whom was Simon’s grandfather. Frank was a tea planter in India (as was a Perceval of Temple House) and married English woman Joan Bridgeman. Frank and Joan opened up a new chapter for Coopershill in the early 1950s by farming, and later, providing elite bed and breakfast accommodation during summers.

“A big attraction was the ponies in the stables at that time, and some families came year after year for the children’s riding,” according to Simon.

During the 1960s and through to the current day many owners of other Irish ‘Big Houses’ have executed similar enterprises for extra income to maintain these historic buildings, which are expensive to preserve, renovate and run. In earlier history many of these houses, such as Fortland in Easkey, had roofs removed and were left to rot, due to either inability or refusal to pay rates. However, Sligo has been fortunate to have the likes of the Coopers, O’Haras and Percivals act as good stewards of their properties.

Frank O’Hara passed away in 1982 and his wife, Joan, continued to take in guests with “remarkable energy and boundless cheerfulness” until she died in 2008, according to her grandson.

In 1987 Simon’s parents, Brian and Lindy, took over the operation of Coopershill, added three more guest bedrooms to the original five, “investing much love, attention and funds” in its renovation. They now live in a new stone house beside the stables, able to enjoy the estate in retirement, although they still run the fallow deer farm, while the new era takes over Coopershill.

Simon O’Hara and his family are now the caring custodians of Coopershill, while his brother manages a sheep farm next door. The O’Haras remain at Annaghtmore, so it’s quite remarkable that after more than 300 years, these blended families still have a strong yet positive presence in County Sligo, having adapted well to changing times and needs and preserving these important facets of local heritage. The Coopers and O’Haras remain pliable, like those sheepskins that still safely secure the Coopershill bridge foundations.

**Interview with Simon O’Hara of Coopershill**

Simon O’Hara did not live in Coopershill House until he was 16 years old. This was early 1985 and his parents, Brian and Lindy had come to take over the house and continue running it as a country house hotel as the previous generation had started to do. Simon was generous for this project in describing his experience of living and working in this ‘Big House.’

“I used to visit my grandparents for the school holidays with my brothers; my grandmother taught me to ride here. It was cold. We’d get sent to bed with hot water bottles. There were old paraffin heaters in the house, so the whole house smelled of paraffin. There were plenty of leaks in the ceiling. When ladies...
used to meet from ‘Big Houses’ in the 1950s and 60s, they would ask ‘How many buckets has your house?’ meaning how many buckets for leaks.”

Simon said these were ‘hard times’ for many of Ireland’s ‘Big Houses’ because the owners were unable to pay the property taxes. Many of the ‘Big Houses’ and their furniture were sold, and owners would sometimes move into smaller accommodation on the estates, such as the stables, and sometimes even roofs of the main houses were removed because that was the only way to avoid property tax.

“Ireland lost a lot of its heritage through punitive taxation. I used to come from London and we’d get on the train in Euston Station and take the train, boat and train; it would take 14 hours door-to-door from London. Things were difficult then for people, they were taking the roofs off the houses. My grandfather was asked to come back; he was a tea planter in India. He was working in the same place as Roderick’s (Perceval) grandfather, of Temple House, they knew each other -- we’re related. (Simon’s grandfather) wasn’t that keen because they had a nice life out there; he was managing a tea plantation. He didn’t know anything about farming in the West of Ireland and it was going to be cold and wet. Ireland in the ’50s and ’60s was a hard place to be. (There was) post-war resentment from the English and Americans that the Irish had been neutral during the war, so Ireland was denied the Marshall aid, reconstruction aid and languished in poverty until the ‘Celtic Tiger.’”

When asked if Coopershill employed a lot of people, Simon said times have changed in how much staff the house and its estate now have, although the workers are still local.

Simon said Riverstown was the estate’s village and that’s where most of the workers lived. He said some of the Coopershill lands there were bought by compulsory purchase to build the Garda Barracks. Coopershill still employs people from the area, who are related to the original workers.

Simon said Riverstown was the estate’s village and that’s where most of the workers lived. He said some of the Coopershill lands there were bought by compulsory purchase to build the Garda Barracks. Coopershill still employs people from the area, who are related to the original workers.

(“The same families are being employed, there are two ladies in their 40s and their girls work here during holiday. We have the original rent books, you see the same surnames employed here now. . . . If you did go to Belfast all the Cooper family papers are available on microfiche. They are in this house but are hard to get to. (Simon said some of this information can be accessed online through the website of Public Records of Northern Ireland (PRONI): http://www.proni.gov.uk/).”
Simon said there was quite a lot of work necessary to further restore and renovate Coopershill as a country hotel after his grandfather passed away in 1982.

“When my parents came back in 1985 to take over, they renovated the coach house and made it home for my mother. (The Irish rugby player) Ronan O’Gara’s grandmother was born in that coach house, his grandmother was the coachman’s daughter. The O’Garas are from Ballisodare. The house needed work. The chimney stacks, two of them needed to be taken down as they were about to collapse and fall through the top floor. Half of the roof needed to taken off and put back on. That was pre-boom, so there was no funding available. So my Dad used some of his pension. (The house) was not derelict, just needed modernisation, bathrooms, maintenance. In the last four years I did the rest of the roof with help from Sligo County Council Heritage Office, and the Heritage Council. I was able to take the slates off and out them back on with copper nails. The slates had the original nails, handmade iron, which were rusting through and were starting to slip.”

Simon said the entire house is all operational and utilised.

“Yes, it’s all used. It’s quite compact, it’s quite a big house for the size the estate was. The man who built it was a provincial gentleman, but he wasn’t particularly important like the Wynnes (of Hazelwood) and Coopers in Markree. When he was building it, we can see that he was selling his wife’s land in Fermanagh to fund it. No one liked to sell land, so he was using that to fund it. The house is classically Georgian, so when you go and visit Annaghmore, or even Temple House, (you can see they are) more modern buildings, and the original house might have been Georgian, but was added to. For example they have pillars and porches over the front door which was added in Victorian times. Also, houses added wings later, but this house never did, so this would suggest that probably they didn’t have the money.”

When asked about the choice of the house’s location, Simon said he thinks Coopershill was built on an ideal site, although some guests might prefer it being waterfront property.

“Yes, I think they did (pick the right location); the trees shelter it from the wind. We had an author come and stay here, who wrote a book, and ‘Photoshopped’ the house beside the sea (for the book cover)!“

Simon said the restaurant of Coopershill is available to the general public but they prefer to casually promote it locally, instead of officially advertising.

“We don’t advertise it, but people ring up,” he said. “We are happy for people to find us by word of mouth because of the limited menu.”

Speaking of such, since Coopershill is known for its fields of lovely grazing fallow deer, Simon explains how he and his family got into the venison business.

“My parents began that … after my grandfather died, my uncle, who was a farmer here and he was using the land for sheep. They wanted to use it too. At that time the EU (European Union) was trying to get people out of traditional farming, so they were offering grants to get people into ostrich farming and deer farming. Ostrich farming didn’t last too long, and deer farming hasn’t done too well either. They offered money for fencing. We bought deer from a deer farm near Mullingar. We got funding from (Sligo) LEADER and came up with pilot plan to sell the meat locally, so we started selling at farmers markets, online and to delicatessens in Dublin and Belfast. It’s a small business.”

(many thanks to Simon O Hara for taking the time to do this interview and give a guided tour of Coopershill House for this book; May 2013)
Chapter 3 - Influence of ‘Big House’ in south Sligo

generations of O’Haras thus far, it has been delicately restored and is still well utilised and shared.

“Its simple but perfectly balanced classical styling, elegant proportions and particularly finely-crafted masonry construction, contribute to an imposing and harmonious overall appearance. Particularly handsome, formally planned, outbuildings are also well preserved, and the coach house has been sensitively converted to residential use. Landscaped setting and mature farmland are of importance to the overall composition.”

(Buildings of Ireland)

Built for Arthur and Sarah O’Hara, the limestone three-storey, five-bay over basement house is of a classical style with a hipped slate roof, cut-stone corbelled chimneystacks with terracotta pots, timber sash windows, hardwood floors and lacy fanlight. Around the door are such exquisite features as square-cut limestone ashlars (masonry) with an ornamental surround (molded door frame) with a wedge-shaped masonry keystone under the pediment, inscribed ‘1774’ to commemorate the completion date of this elegant residence. The house took 19 years to build and must have been a substantial source of employment for local workers and artisans.

Bindon, the architect, unfortunately died before the house was finished and the change in building is apparent from viewing the sandstone blocks near the top floor, according to Simon O’Hara. The blocks, from which the outer stones were cut, were dragged by mules from a quarry five miles away and taken to the front of the house, where the rocks were shaped by masons. The ‘Mule Park,’ where the beasts of burden were stabled, still exists on the estate in a wood, writes Simon.

The stable yard has also been lovingly restored, along with the two-storey coach house, the latter brilliantly adapted as living accommodation. Simon O’Hara and his family now run the house and estate as an upscale bed and breakfast, sell quality venison and offer tours of the house to the public during National Heritage Week.

Farming, fairs and pony rides in Annaghmore: In conversations with Michael and Bridget Gallagher, and Dermot O’Hara

It’s been more than 40 years since Michael Gallagher of Gleann, near Collooney, retired as a farm worker from the O’Haras’ Annaghmore estate. He has many memories of his life, especially on the Annaghmore estate where he worked for many decades, which he was kind enough to share.

Before he began work at Annaghmore, Michael, or ‘Mick’ as he’s called, worked as a teenager at the Collooney flour mills in 1948. It was during the lean war years when nothing was wasted.

“I was working before I went to the estate for a couple of years, I wasn’t 17 years,” he said. “Myself and another fella got into the mill in Collooney repairing sacks. Well, those sacks, there was nothing to be done repairing the sacks, putting patches on them.”
Michael said the only electricity available at that time in his area was produced by the mill for the village only, not for the country dwellers.

“There was a big mill in Collooney, they knocked it now and it’s all houses. At that time it was a mill and was supplying electricity for Collooney as well. The big turbine at the back, that was the only electricity at that time. There was no ESB there, was no light in the country, it was only around the town. My father used to look after that... he used to bring me in on a Sunday to check it out. I was going to school at the time. There was no light in any house in the country during the war years; you couldn’t even get a candle.”

Michael said his father had a lorry, and used to charge its battery in the mill while he was working. The charge “could nearly do the week.”

“There was a light on (the lorry) and all the neighbours used to come carting to our house, as we had the light. The mill closed down then; there was a lot of men working in it. It was a great setup in there, it was all water-powered and the mill was one side of the river and even had a conveyer to the railway station -- the bags went across the river.”

Working on the estate

Michael spent four decades as a farm hand at Annaghmore and it was hard work.

“I worked in Annaghmore then, many men worked there, my uncle worked there, but there was no machinery, it was all done with horses. I was with the horses first, gathering up the hay in the field, oat and barley crops, and they were built in big stacks in the yard. I was then put on a tractor and was driving a tractor for 30 years doing every kind of work, ploughing and out the depths in the woods. (There were) no cabs on the tractors, out in the big fields from 8 in the morning till 6 in the evening, you wouldn’t be very warm.”

Although his job was difficult, Michael said he enjoyed working for the O’Haras, who were model employers and got along well with the staff and assisted them when times were tough.

“Oh, they were grand -- they were very nice people. Oh, they were the most popular people. They used to have a lot of crops, turnips, everything, hay, if neighbours ran short or anything, they were there. They helped each other out. Well, they brought you out whatever you wanted, they were great for that.”

In a later conversation, Dermot O’Hara returned the compliment and said that both Michael and his wife, Bridget, were excellent and loyal employees. Dermot had returned from New Zealand in 1962 and had to let some of the workers go in able to improve the estate’s struggling finances, but kept Michael employed due to his experience and many skills. He said he was sad to let the others go, but he made sure they were of pensionable age.

“Mick was the most helpful of the whole lot,” said Dermot. “He was a huge help to me when I came back.”

Dermot added all the staff was a “great bunch” and there was “great camaraderie amongst the staff.”

“It was a happy ship,” Dermot said.

In its heyday, Dermot said the O’Hara estate used to comprise about 23,000 acres, although some of that was mountainous and not suitable for farming. Tenants farmed about 5,000 to 6,000 acres of land, he said. Michael described the estate and how it worked as a farm, including what people were employed and where on the estate they lived.

“There was a lot of houses, every entrance had a gate house, houses for the herders, those who used to herd the cattle, house in the yard, people used to look after the horses in the stables, game keepers, gardener had a big garden house in that. Land steward had a house beside the big house. At that time they just had cows for their own use; make their own butter for themselves. In later years they got into more dairy cows, they had a Friesian herd there. But first it was mostly the tillage and the crops, feeding their own cattle and sheep. They used to grow a lot of barley and oats. They had a kennel and their own pack of...
Chapter 3 - Influence of ‘Big House’ in south Sligo

hounds, lovely, cut-stone kennels. Two men used to work with the dogs and bring them out.”

Farming was very different back then, he said. Cows were free range and could wander where they wanted, but the bovines seemed to sense when it was milking time.

“These (Ox) mountains were all part of Annaghmore. The cows used to know where to go in the milking shed, hand milked. There were no fences, so they could go wherever they wanted.”

Michael said one was reason the O’Haras were pleasant to work for was that they trusted their employees to do their jobs because they knew they were hardworking.

“They did, there was no standing watching. I suppose we did our work.”

There was still a lot of acres on Annaghmore when Michael was a farm worker because the land hadn’t yet been divided by the Land Acts. He used to be sent over to Cuiltibar, near Coolaney, where Dermot’s aunt lived, to do some work there too.

“(I did) various bits and pieces. Dermot’s father used to bring me over for any little thing that needed fixing. I used to do a good bit of that, handy kinds of jobs.”

He said work was particularly busy in the summer on the Annaghmore estate. The work was long and wages were low, about £3.50 per month. Sometimes the government would give an “odd rise of half a crown.”

Michael said the farm workers had plenty of time anyway to eat their lunch, or ‘dinner.’

“We had an hour, always had an hour. Brought food from home, tea and milk, have to boil it up. Everyone had their own kettle or teapot, eat the lunch in a small little house in the yard, and in later years we used to go to the gardener’s house; it was unoccupied then.”

Long summer days meant extra work, but at least the tired workers got their tea breaks.

“If weather was good we used to work late, they used to bring tea from the house to the men in the fields.”

Annaghmore had a large garden and the produce used to be transported to shops in Sligo, he said.

“They had a big garden and they brought the vegetables into Sligo, they used to bring them in a horse van to the shops. In later years they used to bring them in a car. All the garden stuff was brought this way. Anything else, barley and all, that people used to come to buy. There was no machinery when I was there, first it was all horses. Oh, anything they had was just with the horses, even the mowing machine was with the horses, bringing in the cocks of hay, had old iron wheels on them, horse carts, massive horses. The horses were unbelievable. How them horses was trained was something else!”

Michael said the Annaghmore staff was a close-knit community and remembers the steward from Donegal, the gardeners, butlers, cooks and cleaners, with surnames of Mullen, Conlon, Brehony and other Gallaghers.

Special events

The O’Haras used to have big hunting parties, which were quite thrilling to watch for community onlookers, he said.

“(There were) horses and dogs out hunting across the country and up the mountain when we were young; we were mad to see the hunts and beagles. Ah, with the hullabaloo of these beagles, could be up to 30 or 40 dogs. You’d hear the yapping the whole day. There was a man he had a house not far from the hounds, that was his job looking after them.

The O’Haras have been known for their equestrian expertise through the generations. Michael said it’s particularly been an O’Hara tradition to provide horse riding lessons, especially for children with special needs.

“Dermot’s (O’Hara) wife, she was great for ponies and the disabled children. She put more work into that; it was unbelievable. She used to work with Rehab and she used to bring the children out to ride horses and have parties for them. The old Mrs. O’Hara (Elizabeth Linnel O’Hara) used to do it too, the parties, barbecues in the stable, Dermot’s mother and father. Dermots’s wife (Frances ‘Rosemary’ Fulcher) was a wonderful woman, she was a New Zealand woman.”

Bridget Gallagher, Michael’s wife, joins in the conversation since she was also an Annaghmore employee and knew the O’Haras well.

“Rosemary was a lovely lady, wonderful to the handicapped people. She used to work in Sligo General Hospital as a (physiotherapist), high-up job. Spent more time with those children. Died very young with Alzheimer’s. She was a wonderful cook making jams; she could do anything,” said Bridget.
Bridget said she worked at Annaghmore for eight or nine years for the older Mrs. O’Hara (Elizabeth) during the 1960s. She said Dermot was in New Zealand then but he was given half the Annaghmore house. She added that the Annaghmore O’Haras are related to the ones of Coopershill, and that they are first cousins.

Bridget said she really enjoyed working for Dermot’s mother, Elizabeth.

“It was great. She was a wonderful lady,” said Bridget.

Bridget said the Hunt Ball was held annually in the house, although restricted to the family and their guests. There was also a ‘do’ for the hunters once a year “down in the stables,” and another Hunt Ball in the Collooney Hall, where ladies were “all dressed up, in long dresses.” Although the community couldn’t attend, it was great fun for them to watch the guests’ comings and goings.

Although Dermot O’Hara believes these events took place in summertime in another location, such as Beltra, Bridget said the O’Haras held an annual autumn Sligo Show to display summer’s wealth of garden produce and livestock. Wherever and when ever these shows were, the Annaghmore community looked forward to them.

“Bernie Conlon used to (organise) that, sheep, animals,” said Bridget. “Mrs. O’Hara used to cook and serve dinners for people in the show, September time. ”

Michael said Dermot O’Hara’s wife, Rosemary, used to be “fascinated” by the Sligo Show and enjoyed helping the community then, giving children pony rides. It was a highly anticipated and enjoyed event for everyone.

“I used to drive the tractor bringing the sheep,” he said. “We used to pull into Quigley’s pub on the way home with the sheep in the trailer. Great day out!”

Wild weather

He said winters could be very difficult, especially since transport was usually by bicycle or on foot. He remembers a particular bad winter in 1947 with “fierce frost and snow.” About a decade later there was a hurricane that hit Ireland which caused severe damage.

“(There was a) big wind storm that year, Debbie, in 1961. (It was) harvest time, the oats were cut and in stooks in the field, haycocks were in the field, everything was blown away. The storm that day we all had to head for the yard, the whole woods you see the trees falling. Iron and slates flying outside. (It was a) hard year, but there was no rain so the crops weren’t damaged. Few cattle killed with trees that fell on them. Worst storm ever I seen.”

He said once he and his fellow farm workers witnessed a funnel cloud, also rare for Ireland, coming through the estate.

“I seen one year, there was a roasting hot weather, we were doing hay and we could hear this noise and there was a small tornado clearing a path through the field of hay,” he said. “Was real hot weather.”

Michael said he and the other estate workers laboured hard all year round, even at Christmas, because the work had to be done.

“Some of us didn’t get much holidays at Christmas as the cattle had to be fed, the cattle were out not like in later years, they were all out in the fields. You had to go out and feed them. Winter was just as busy as summer, out feeding cattle.”

“When my uncle was there they used to kill a bullock every Christmas and divide it up amongst the work staff. That was before I worked there. In my uncle’s time they didn’t have a bicycle, they had to walk to work in all weathers. Even in my time we used to have some job getting to work with the frost and the snow. One way or another we had to get to the farm. Even with the bicycles and the bad roads the bikes would get punctured. We were often brought to pull turnips in the frost out in them big fields. Your hand got that cold it got warm again. Pulling turnips with snow on them, no shelter in those big fields.”

He said the 1960s and ’70s were a time of great change for farming because machinery was brought in to assist the workers.

“Started making silage, how I don’t how they managed saving all the hay that had to be saved before. The cattle were all in sheds.”

Michael said there was a strong sense of community around the estate and people used to help each other out and share resources.

“People cut turf in Annaghmore, all townlands around used to cut turf by hand. The neighbours would go to the bog at around the same time and would light a big fire all around it cooking together. He said there were up to 12 farm hands working in the fields (where there were three herds of cows at one time), garden and yard.”

Michael, who has mischievous sense of humour, shares a story, which he claims is true.

“Dr. Branning, Fianna Fail T.D., this old man landed at his house in the middle of the night. The doctor was in bed at the time and the..."
man was shouting, ‘Come quick, my wife is having a baby!’ The doctor got up and the man shouted up again. The doctor put his head out the window and asked was she in labour and the man said, ‘No, she’s in Fianna Fáil’!”

Michael said when he wasn’t working hard on the estate, he enjoyed playing Gaelic football, which a lot of the community enjoyed watching.

“(There was a) Gaelic team in Ballisodare and I played with Collooney,” he said. “Football on Saturdays and few drinks after, if we won. Great crowds and the old people would cycle in for the matches. There was a football pitch at the back of Quigley’s pub. There would be a lot there on a Sunday.”

Michael said there were three railway stations in Collooney: one to Galway, one to the North and one to Dublin, all linked up in Collooney.

“I remember as young fella all the trains coming in with cattle on this line to Mayo, wherever they were for, I don’t know, and take them off at Collooney, and take them to other station to the North and Dublin. I don’t think there was another town in Ireland that had three stations. I seen them working and knew the three station masters, I knew where they lived, the houses are still there.”

As that Collooney was such a thriving market and railway town, there was a fair every month on the ‘Fair Green,’ which is now a housing estate.

“Every month hundreds of cattle on the streets, the whole way up the town from Quigley’s up the top of the hill, to the Protestant church, hundreds of cattle. The mess of the street after! Carts with pigs, the mud on the shoes of people going into shops. Some months there was two fairs.”

He said it was very exciting as a youngster that Collooney was such a busy railway terminal.

“The train was on the line there, I think that went the whole way to Limerick. We were young when the trains would pass, you’d put a ha’penny on the line on the rail and the train would flatten it. There was a shop in Collooney you could buy a square of toffee for a penny and we used to give the old woman the flattened penny. It was like a penny that was well worn!”

Not only were trains a major source of transport in Collooney, but Michael said the O’Haras were renowned for their horse carriages, featuring beautiful ones made by the famous Italian Charles Bianconi, ‘King of the Irish Roads,’ who was the founder of mass transportation to Ireland before railways. (The O’Hara carriage collection was donated by Donal O’Hara to the State although they are not yet displayed in a national museum. It is the hope of John Perry, M.P., to establish a carriage museum in Ballymote.)

“All the coaches were there, and were given to the museum. They were to go to Ballymote. There was every make and shape of coaches in the coach house. Coaches for different locations. (Donal) gave them to the museum, I remember they used to come every year and polish them up. The coach houses were all central heated with proper doors. (There were) several coach houses near the stables in the yard and for school horses. It was lovely and still is; it was recently done up. There was living rooms overhead. You could ring the bell, they’d ring for the dinner hour and the morning, I could hear it here. I remember my uncle said it was 20 minutes faster that the normal time. I often heard my uncle say that there was Major O’Hara going for the train to Collooney and he was late with the coach and said it would never happen again, so they changed the time. All the people around the area when they heard the bell said that’s ‘Annaghmore time.’

When asked if he thought, despite all the hard work, were people happier then?

“I think people were happy in a lot of ways,” he answered. “Ah, they were, all the people have nothing now, all done their own. I remember my mother she never bought a sock. She knitted socks, pullovers.”

He said people were always busy, especially the women. He remembers his mother always in the kitchen cooking and creating.

“Oh, she was knitting away. She made the finest bread, Christmas cake, jam from blackcurrant bushes and gooseberries. She’d have a supply for months. You can’t get jam like what they used to make!”

“They had their own cabbage and potatoes. It’s crazy now with the chemicals on them. Everything you buy now it’s all sprayed with chemicals. With the potatoes they spray something on the stalks of them, but sure that’s going into the potatoes. Cabbages, everything you buy now has chemicals. Out on the big farm they grew turnips, carrots, barley, oats. In the garden there was every kind of vegetable.”

Many thanks to the Gallaghers and Dermot O’Hara for their generosity in sharing these stories.
Finding family roots: The O’Haras and their tenants

Tenants who rented and worked on the Annaghmore estate, like thousands of others across the country in similar situations, had challenging existences during troubled times. However, these south Sligo tenants were apparently some of the luckier ones in 19th century Ireland, according to some sources. Although disputed by some, Charles King O’Hara was described as a “model landlord,” according to O’Rorke in his History of Sligo.

“… under him improvements of a most extensive and generally of a permanent kind were carried out all over the property. He encouraged the tenants to carry out these themselves and paid them for bettering their condition.”

O’Hara was considered a progressive landlord in bringing in agricultural advances into his estate, which benefited his tenant farmers, according to Samuel Lewis in County Sligo in 1837: A Topographical Dictionary.

“The rotation system and green crops are common with the gentry, and, through the laudable exertions of Mr. Cooper, and Major O’Hara, who have formed farming societies for the diffusion of agricultural knowledge, and for improvements in rural economy by means of premiums, they are gradually extending among the small farmers.” (p. 7)

Not all was rosy though. Despite these improvements, the economics of the area were still poor and getting worse, due in part to the eventual failure of the flax crop for the linen industry, and poor yields of potato crops, on which tenants were very dependent. Many Irish started to emigrate, even before the mid-19th century Great Famine. Between 1831 and 1833 about 220 people from the Killoran and Kilvarnet parishes alone had to emigrate to the United States or Canada, and more would have gone if they could have afforded ship passage.

For those who stayed, subsistence wasn’t easy, especially for labourers and tenants who leased small farms (most 25 acres or less) because there was no guarantee of food nor leases. People depended primarily on pounds of potatoes per day, supplemented with milk and butter. (More fortunate folks supplemented that meagre diet with bacon, cabbage, onions and dried herrings.) Between poor potato crops and lack of rental security, their lives were tenuous.

“Most tenants held their land at will, that is they had no lease and could be evicted at any time … Major O’Hara estimated that there were in 1835 about 500 labourers, 200 of whom were cottagers holding no land, the other 300 holding small portions of land. The labourers lived on what they could earn when employed and on what they could grow on their little plots or on plots taken as conacre …. There was no safety margin and when distress struck, the labourers were the first to suffer.” (Farry)

In other estates some incoming tenants were at the mercy of landowners with the practice of the ‘hanging gale,’ which allowed rents to be unpaid until at least one harvest. If the tenants produced bad yields, usually due to poor weather conditions, they became further indebted. Like current ‘pay day loans’ with their exorbitant interest rates, these people were kept “in a kind of perpetual bondage,” according to Edward Wakefield in 1812.
“This debt hangs over their heads, and keeps them in a continual state of anxiety and terror.”

John Stuart Mill, the great English thinker and political economist, wrote in his *Chapters and Speeches on the Irish Land Question* (1870) that most tenants could not count on depending on a particular plot of land for more than a year.

“In Ireland alone the whole agricultural population can be evicted by the mere whim of the landlord, either at the expiration of a lease or, in the far more common case of their having no lease, at six months’ notice.”

Despite these fears and problems, the people of Annaghmore apparently had life better compared to others in Ireland. In addition to improving conditions for the tenants, the estate’s infrastructure was becoming more updated. O’Hara reported all was functioning better on his estate, at least on the surface, due to such projects as drainage, fencing, tree-planting and road-making. Thought even his tenants looked more attractive, if that was in any way important. “There are fewer mendicants and the dress of the poor looks smarter though not so substantial as formerly,” he reported. (Farry)

Richard Beere of Dublin and Co. Tipperary was hired by O’Hara as his agent (1820-1867) to manage some of his estate. Beere advised O’Hara to improve the farms as they fell out their leases by dividing and draining them and letting to “good tenants” (ie. Protestant).

O’Hara did dramatically improve some living conditions, one example being healthcare. In 1817 he founded a doctor-attended dispensary in Coolaney, his estate town, and built yet another clinic in 1834. As many as 900 patients were treated in just one year alone “relieving sickness” and preventing needless deaths.

In 1817 when food shortages were dire, a relief committee, led by Charles O’Hara, was set up to help the suffering of the united parish of Killoran and Kilvarnet. O’Hara sent letters to absentee landlords asking for subscriptions, and although some of the requests were ignored, £200 was raised, an impressive amount then. As part of this scheme, Indian meal was bought and sold at a discount to the tenants.

Also as beneficial to the people, the first post office in Coolaney was set up in 1832 under the leadership of O’Hara.

In 1834 Beere complained to O’Hara regarding the “many improvements I should like to make but no funds … My business next Summer to build a few houses on the estate one within the last enclosure I made on the Seevness mountain and then place a Protestant there.” (Beere letter, Farry).

**O’Hara family history**

The O’Haras of Annaghmore were one of Ireland’s more tenacious landed gentry families to have maintained power in Ireland. They have lived in County Sligo since Gaelic times, descended from ‘O’Hara Bui (yellow)’ branch of the family, and have managed to hold on to some of their lands despite Cromwellian settlement and contemporary challenges.

What sets the O’Haras apart from other Ascendancy families, besides being of Catholic origin, was their willingness to ‘roll with the punches’ throughout history and adapt to new ways. They were ‘innovative,’ long before that term was coined, which made their survival possible.

The success of this flexibility was due in part to the family’s legal savvy, religious conversion, determination to hold on to their lands, and political involvement, all of “which together ensured the family’s survival and its re-emergence as one of the leading country forces in Sligo by the end of the 18th century.” (Bartlett)

By the 16th century the family controlled 15,000 acres of land. These were trying moments of history due to Cromwellian upheaval and English rule, but Cormac O’Hara (1578-1612) was legally astute enough to convey land to his trustees. Subsequently, his son was re-granted the acreage, allowing the family to maintain their land.

Another sophisticated tactic was when Tadg O’Hara, M.P. for Co. Sligo in 1613 (and also the family bard) ‘alienated’ his acres to his minor-aged sons and raising the boys as Protestants, determined to protect the family real estate.

Failing marriages, legal disputes, increased debts and suspicion of “turning papist” (due to rumoured connections with Catholic King James) added to family difficulties. Although some relatives were implicated in the 1641 uprising, no land was confiscated.

Still, the family endured various threats during the 1600s and 1700s. Despite the family possessing 6,500 acres in Co. Sligo by 1700, much of the land was waste and rents difficult to collect. Overspending ran rampant by the likes of Kean O’Hara, a ‘country gentleman,’ who enjoyed life to the full, a lifestyle that would be repeated by future generations, to their detriment.

Kean was forced to finally find a ‘good wife’ (ie. rich), but because most ladies of his rank rejected the idea of moving to the wilds of Sligo, he married instead Eleanor Matthew of Thomastown, Co. Tipperary, a wealthy Catholic, who brought a much-welcomed £1,000 to the marriage.
The family’s fortunes and reputation were much improved by the offspring of Kean and Eleanor, Charles O’Hara (1705-1776). As a “genuine child of the Enlightenment,” (p. 46) he was regarded as a “Patron of Industry” (p. 45) with a strong interest in “the real inside of business.” (p. 46)

Charles set up a linen industry, employing many northerners, and a fishery, although these endeavours did not lead to long-term success. As an ‘improving’ landlord, he tried to ‘modernise’ his tenancy to make them more industrious.

“He had great interest in economic and financial business and attempted to increase County Sligo’s standing in Ireland.”

To ‘keep up with the Joneses’ in high society, such as the Wynn and Coopers, Charles built a ‘Big House,’ first called ‘Nymphsfield,’ at Annaghmore. Due to building costs and Charles’ passion for the ponies, the family became in debt.

Charles “personified the independent country gentleman of the 18th century” as a wealthy but debt-ridden “patron of the turf” who owned several race horses and enjoyed high standing among the elite. To this day the O’Haras are well regarded for their equine expertise.

“The fellowship and camaraderie of the hunting field or the race course engendered a spirit of rough equality among participants and O’Hara was soon on terms of easy intimacy with the highest in the land.” (Bartlett)

However, despite his lofty equestrian connections, Charles never became M.P. of Sligo, perhaps because his Gaelic and Catholic connections led to bias. But his son, also Charles, was elected to the Irish Parliament in 1783, fulfilling his father’s goal.

As another excellent example of the family’s flexibility, Charles King O’Hara in 1860 chose the son of his sister Jane, Charles William Cooper (1817-1898) of Coopershill as his heir, on condition that he change his surname to ‘O’Hara.’ Coopershill also became O’Hara property, thus keeping future family genealogists on their toes.

At least the O’Haras engaged many people living on their land, if marginally, especially in relation to construction work of the Nymphsfield/Annaghmore house, according to the O’Hara Papers (NLI). They also employed many servants, as did most gentry families of that time.

“Landlords, such as O’Haras, were the greatest employers of servants and in many of the better-off Protestant homes, servants were numerous.” (p. 97, Swords)

Both Charles King O’Hara and Charles William O’Hara undertook many improvements of the house and property at Annaghmore. The O’Hara Papers in the care of the National Library of Ireland (NLI) contain a plethora of bills, payments and receipts for work carried out by labourers, masons, glass fitters, lock fitters, chimney sweepers, painters, roof slaters, carpenters, stone cutters and brick layers. Projects that were planned and/or built included a coach house, servants’ rooms, glebe house (in Riverstown), gate lodge, kitchen offices, dairy and steward’s lodge, cow house and the schoolhouse (now owned by the Irish Landmark Trust and run as a self-catering cottage, the income from which funds other restoration projects).

The O’Hara papers also include information about work on the Coolaney River: drainage, improvement of navigation and water power, and the building of a bridge at Annagbeg of the Coolaney River, with Charles William O’Hara as a trustee. These papers are a wealth of information relating to social and economic conditions in County Sligo in the latter half of the 19th century.

Family history research

For descendants of the tenants of Annaghmore who are doing family research, they are sometimes more fortunate than others in locating information due to the sheer size of the O’Hara archives. Other landlords like O’Hara also left impressive paper trails, such as maps, tenants’ lists, rentals, account books, lease books, etc. However, in those other records, tenant names are often not included, due in part to the land having been subdivided multiple times, and then sublet from ‘middlemen,’ making it impossible to identify who the tenants were.

“It is very rare for estate records to document the smallest landholders, as most of these had little or no right of tenure in any case.” *(The Irish Times: Irish Ancestors)*

Fortunately though, O’Hara tenant descendants have more research available to them through rent roll details because more names are included.

“To take one example, the rent rolls of the estate of Charles O’Hara in Cos. Sligo and Leitrim, which date from c.1775, record a large number of leases to smaller tenants and supply the lives named in the leases, often specifying family relationships.” *(The Irish Times: Irish Ancestors)*

In addition to contacting the NLA and National Archives of Ireland (NAI) for O’Hara tenant information, *The Irish Times: Irish Ancestors* website recommends Richard J. Hayes’s *Manuscript Sources for the History of Irish Civilisation* and its supplements (copies of which can be found in the NLI and NAI, and online at sources.nli.ie.).
Also, Family Search (familysearch.org) recommends Hayes’s guide as a genealogy guide, especially when there are no church or census records available.

“Manuscript Sources helps in locating genealogical material in the National Library of Ireland and major collections of Irish interest in other repositories, both public and private, in Ireland, Britain and elsewhere. It’s an important, little-used source partly because many researchers are 1) not aware it exists, and 2) not sure how it will help in their research efforts. The intent of this article is to explain the arrangement of the volumes.”

In that source Charles W. O’Hara, as an example, is listed as owning 21,070 acres, 1 rood and 25 perches, valued at £8,324 and 10 shillings.

Another publication that may also be of value to a researcher of tenant families is U.H. Hussey de Burgh’s The Landowners of Ireland, a guide to the major landowners, the size of their holdings and where in the country they were situated.

The largest collection of estate records, the Landed Estate Court records (also known as the Encumbered Estate Courts) is in the National Library of Ireland. Since 2011 the records have been searchable at the subscription site www.findmypast.ie.

Griffith’s Valuation

For one researching Irish ancestral history, there are several sources to assist, such as the Tithe Applotment Books (NaI) and the 1901 and 1911 Census records (NaI). The 1858 Griffith’s Valuation can also be a valuable family history fact-finder tool. What makes this source particularly helpful are the corresponding maps, meticulously surveyed and drawn, which accompany the books, making the Griffith’s one of the most important surviving 19th century Irish genealogical sources available.

The Griffith’s Valuation was the first full-scale valuation of property in Ireland, overseen by Richard Griffith and published between 1847 and 1865. Although limited in information it can provide, if a researcher has a good idea of the townland the family resided in, sometimes the location of a family’s homestead can be found, down to specific plot/s. (Keep in mind, however, the plot’s immediate lessor could have been an agent or ‘middleman,’ and not the plot owner). Once the corresponding plot number is identified through the database, the listed information under columns includes: the names of the occupiers and their immediate lessors, description of the holding (land, house, outbuildings, etc.), the plot area (measured in acres, roods and perches), and valuation of the land and property.
Annaghmore Schoolhouse

From the Irish Georgian Society

History

This charming lime-rendered building on the southern end of the Annaghmore Estate in County Sligo was built as a rural schoolhouse for the estate tenants’ children c. 1860. After its use as a schoolhouse and headmaster’s quarters became obsolete, the small structure served as a gate lodge and residence. The house fell into disrepair and was in a severe derelict state when acquired by the Irish Landmark Trust in 2004. Shortly thereafter a total restoration project was undertaken toward which the Irish Georgian Society granted €5,000. The Landmark Trust received €40,000 in 2005 under the LEADER Programme towards the restoration of Annaghmore Schoolhouse.

Conservation project of architecture

Works funded by this grant included: the installation of a damp proof course; the replacement of windows re-using original plate glass whenever possible; rebuilding of the Oriel window; much interior and exterior re-plastering; and the replacement of structurally unsound floors.

Upon project completion, the house was fitted out to a high standard and is operated by the Irish Landmark Trust for short term holiday-lets. Not only do holidaymakers enjoy the house’s period details and historic character, but the funds brought in by its operation also continue to fund further restoration projects.

The L-shaped, one-and-a-half storey house features a double height living room, moulded fascia, a pitched roof with gables, and an Oriel window. Tudor Revival details like diamond-paned fenestration also remain, along with some 19th century furnishings including the schoolhouse fireplace, coat hooks, and chalkboards.
Chapter 3 - Influence of ‘Big House’ in south Sligo

Good fun in Annaghmore

Compiled by Val Robus
From A Sligo Miscellany by John C. McTernan

The annual fete given by Charles W. O’Hara to his tenants was reported in the Sligo Chronicle on 28th May 1868, the event of which was held at Rathnarrow, a short distance from Annaghmore.

Mr. O’Hara announced there would be some sports to insure a large attendance. On the day of the fete a few thousand people came from all districts in the county to enjoy the amusements, which included races, throwing the sledge, wrestling etc. The crowd was delighted to see these events reinstated by Mr. O’Hara. Some of the sports had to be postponed due to poor weather. However, there was a horse race for which a silver goblet was presented to the winner. Five men took part; these men had all hunted during the past season with the Annaghmore hounds. Captain Phillips, on his horse, Lightfoot, won the prize. The rain set in heavily, so it was impossible to carry on with the other races. At 4pm the people dispersed and Mr. and Mrs. O’Hara were delighted such a large crowd had enjoyed the sports.

The Sligo Chronicle on 6th November 1880 reported a festive gathering that was held at Annaghmore. Mr. C. W. O’Hara entertained the labourers of Annaghmore and Coopershill at a sumptuous dinner held in the spacious hall. This was to thank the workers for gathering such a bountiful harvest. The gardener, Mr. Reid, decorated the room with laurel wreaths adorning the ceiling, along with sheaves of corn. Seventy people took part in a hot dinner of roast beef, ham and plum pudding washed down with whiskey punch. The O’Hara family, who did everything in their power to welcome their guests, carved the meat.

At the end of the meal a toast was proposed by one of the oldest farm labourers to Mr. and Mrs. O’Hara, and Miss Cooper of Coopershill. The toast received loud and hearty cheers. Mr. O’Hara said how grateful he was to the labourers of Annaghmore and Coopershill for all their hard work in gathering such a wonderful harvest. After the meal there was singing and a pyrotechnic display.

Fair Green at Temple House

With contributions by Val Robus

The tradition of holding Fair Days has a long history at Temple House, dating back to the 17th century. It was a ‘big day out’ for many in the area and fair goers wore their ‘Sunday best.’

In 1611 a patent was granted to William Crofton, Temple House, for holding a fair in July in the townland of Carrowntawy (which in Irish means ‘Quarterland of the Sorrel’) and in 1618 permission was given for an additional fair in late October. Following marriage to Mary Crofton, daughter and heiress of William, to George Perceval in 1665, the rights to tolls passed to the Percevals, according to John C. McTernan.

By the 1830s there were three annual fairs in May, July and November at Temple House to sell and purchase livestock and wool. People came from far and wide from other counties, so it must have been quite a time consuming journey to travel back and forth when transport like carts and horses were used on rough roads.

Eventually at Carrowntawy there were seven fairs and they became integral as part of the local society, not only for the economic benefits, but social as well. On or very near the Fair Green were two public houses and a police barracks, according to McTernan.

Sandy Perceval was told by his grandfather of a cold winter’s day fair held on Temple House Lake, when the ice measured 18 inches deep! It was so thick, a big pot of food was cooked above the freezing surface, with no danger of melting the compacted crystals below.

During fairs women sold butter, eggs, poultry (chickens, ducks and geese), yarn and unmanufactured flax, the latter due to the once
thriving flax and linen industry in nearby Ballymote, which had thriving fairs of its own.

Transactions involving calves, foals, pigs, oatmeal and dried herrings were made, the income from which helped tenants to pay their rent and buy more food. Sometimes some luxuries could be bought such as sixpenny popular novels (sometimes used by children as schoolbooks) and tobacco (Swords).

“The little tenant farmer had a foal for sale very year, for which he got eight to ten guineas, and a two- or three-year-old cow worth three to five guineas. All had pigs for sale and they sold for a guinea each.” (Swords)

These fairs gave people much welcomed opportunities to socialise and find wives and husbands for themselves. However, occasional ‘faction fights’ would break out in fairs. In 1713, in nearby Ballymote, a particularly notable ‘bust-up’ was reported to Kean O’Hara by the vicar of Ballisodare, Tobias Caulfield. (Swords)

“Our county (is) quiet except some battles at Ballimote fair between the Lynians (inhabitants of Leyny) and the Corinthians (inhabitants of Corran) in which both suffered at the eyes and nose.”

As the above quote suggests, the diocese clergy did not condone the social component of these market events, fearing money earned would be spent on alcoholic libations that fuelled some of these faction fights. A Protestant vicar of Kilmactigue had this to say:

“From these they seldom return without laying out some part of their small means for whiskey, which often produces rioting and fighting.”

Still, it was a ‘good day out’ and provided the larger community the chance to benefit from trade, and to also enjoy themselves, which must have been a break from their difficult and oftentimes isolated rural existences.

The Fair Green was also used as a play area for children and adult alike. Serena Perceval, who interviewed many people of the old tenant families for an oral history project, interviewed a gentleman who had fun memories of the place.

“(The children) would play tug of war, fight with black thorn sticks, and pitch and toss. Sometimes there would be a mock fight between the two men. One man would put his coat on the ground and stand on it while they both fought over the other coat in a row.”

Near the turn of the 20th century Henry L’Estrange, the Perceval agent, proposed that the “open common” plan of the fair venue be walled-in, but this was met with much opposition, according to John C. McTernan. Those in the community claimed if the area was fenced in, their right-of-way access would be compromised. These kinds of issues are still being dealt with, even in modern day County Sligo.

The fairs at Temple House continued into the 1950s, and since then the magnificent Temple House grounds have been used for various events. An award-winning music festival was held in 2010 and 2011, and in the autumn of 2012 the Gundog Fair, a gathering for breeders and buyers of hunting canines, took place.

Family stories by Alexander ‘Sandy’ Perceval

From his 1995 Temple House history manuscript

Alexander ‘Sandy’ Perceval generously shared some stories taken from his history of Temple House, compiled in 1995. An article of other stories, part of this original manuscript, appears in the 10th Anniversary Special Edition 1985-1995 of The Corran Herald.

“In 1969 Deb and Sandy met (a gentleman, descended from a Temple House tenant family), presenting the prizes on behalf of Esso at a young farmers’ dinner. During the evening they realised that he had been the leader of the Lissadell Flying Brigade old IRA and they spoke for two hours. Sandy asked why his home had not been burnt, as many others were during ‘the Troubles.’ The gentleman seemed horrified and exclaimed that ‘Your great grandmother Jane died of famine fever Jan 20th 1847. My grandparents were the children of two tenant families of the Percevals. They told me as a child that she had come every week with her own daughters to help with food and medicines for their families. They probably wouldn’t have survived without this assistance and the foregoing of rents. Mrs. Perceval died and her daughters later moved to England.’ He and many others knew about the sale of Temple House, the trouble with the new landlords and the rejoicing of the population when the agent arranged the return of the family. There was a scandal when ‘one of the guests tempted orphans and other children in the locality with soup in one hand and ‘No Popery Tracts’ in the other.’ (The guest was a fervent evangelical). Her mother and Irish friends were horrified, as was ‘the Chinaman’ (Philip Perceval), when approached by the local parish priest. He is said, by a local paper,
to have ‘denounced these proselytising arts as the curse and disgrace of the country and at once gave such reproof and orders that it ceased. He gave land for the new chapel in the village.’"

"(The family) papers of the early part of the 19th century show a dreadful period of change in the old easy relationship between landlords and tenantry in general. The moats had been replaced with woods and demesne walls and the agents and staff were generally not now recruited from the locality but brought from Scotland, England, or even France, anywhere but Ireland and often with a hatred for Ireland and Catholicism. This meant that the large proprietors soon cared or knew as little about those who dwelt on their estates or in the surrounding regions as they would have known about the peoples of Timbuktu. It was a time when an unchristian political economy run by Prime Minister Russel was teaching landlords to look on their tenants as mere rent producing machines, to be exploited or removed at the whim of the agent."

Sandy said that his daughter Serena, who was carrying out Temple House research for a university project, had discovered that part of the estate was cleared by the Hall-Dares for sheep. “The Irish memory is noted for its longevity and it is difficult to forgive and forget the disasters that were happening at this time in Ireland.” He said another estate, on Lough Gara, that the land was farmed by four families to the acre; they grew half of the potatoes for themselves and half in oats to pay the rent. There were 21 middlemen between the absentee landlord and family, each taking their share of the cereal crop.

“Opportunist landlords, agents, money lenders and tanglers bled the system dry, leaving no hope for those who hoped to survive the famine. The landlords had to pay the taxes even though most of the tenants could not pay their rents.”

“The plight of the people when their crop first failed with potato blight must have been dreadful and deepened as it continued for the next three years. It is hard to conceive the misery with which the population reverted to just over 4,000,000 by the 1860s; it has remained near this level ever since. The people dreaded the ‘Poor House’ and the fever hospitals were full of death. In Sligo a quarry was called into service and the sick lowered by ropes into it. Straw and bedding, food, water and medicines followed..."
and many more of them survived than expected. Many of the bankrupt families, forced to sell under the Encumbered Estates Act, went with the tenants and other emigrants from Europe to the New World. The disasters were then transferred to the native population of those regions who were dispossessed by greed, violence and disease, by the settlers’ land hunger and the gold rush.”

“Charlotte was widowed in 1887 (she had been married to Alec) and she ably oversaw the running of the estate for the next 30 years. The Land Acts from 1880 saw a change in the management of the lands. The enclosures were improved and hedges planted with hawthorn and the bogs were divided under turbery laws, giving each tenant family a portion to save for themselves. Charlotte started to sell their farms to the tenants earlier than most landlords. … Life for the ‘Big House’ and the cottage was improving at last. The house staff then consisted of five men and 11 girls, the gardens were worked by five men and seven boys, and there were five girls between dairy and poultry as well as five gamekeepers and 23 men on the farms. Serena has found that this workforce was mostly drawn from the locality and that it gave many young people the chance to learn a skill and to earn a wage for two years before they left to give someone else a chance.”

“Ascelin (Charlotte’s son) became the first adjutant of the 4th Battalion Irish Guards. A photograph shows the regimental band playing on the Temple House croquet lawn, drumming recruits to the flag. Ascelin realised that there was very little for the Irish soldiers and policemen to do in their time off, so he organised boxing matches between them.”

Sandy then describes the effects of World War I on ‘Big Houses’:

“One of the main reasons for the demise of these houses was that their sons had become junior officers automatically and lasted 11 days on average. The butlers, head keepers and head grooms became sergeants at the same time and only last 6 weeks.”

Sandy writes about the time when Major Perceval was badly injured in the war. He had been buried for three days in a shelled building when
two Ballymote men, Grey and O’Dowd, returned, to bury him. But the Major was alive taken to a field hospital for surgery. The surgeon told him after the operation that he was not able to do much to help because the Major’s injuries were so serious (diaphragm torn and stomach now up in his chest), that he was going to be in great pain the rest of his life.

“He recommended a glass of port after every meal and at least two glasses of whiskey on the way to bed. Ascelin followed these medical instructions and returned to live in Ireland until 1967!”

Relations between the Percevals and IRA

Sandy tells of some of the interactions between his family, the Temple House community and the IRA, where were not all negative for the Percevals, which he had heard from the descendant of the tenant family, referred to in this chapter as ‘the gentleman.’

“Memories of this period (from the gentleman) tie in again now, with the execution of the leaders of the 1916 rising and the feelings of the Irish people. His elder brother was the butler at the Constitution Club in Sligo, and because of his long service, Ascelin and his friends spoke freely in front of him. He reported that they reacted like any other Irishmen and were as horrified at the shooting of a man in a wheelchair; they thought the whole affair bungled. They abhorred the excesses of the Black and Tans, and gradually the leaders of the IRA realised that they were Irish in their own way. (The gentleman) was on the run during the War of Independence and the civil war and found that no one looked for him in the butler’s bedroom in the club, so he was often kept up to date with the lunch time conversations. His stories of setting up an alternative justice system during this period were fascinating as they interacted on an unofficial level with the royal Irish Constabulary. His cousin was the sergeant in Ballymote and he was once asked to leave handcuffs on the church railings. The policemen looked the other way when a burglar with pony and ass carts of furniture was brought past the barracks before mass one Sunday. The thief was handcuffed, surrounded by his boots, with a notice around his neck, “I stole this property, not the IRA, please take yours home.’ He left Ballymote by train that afternoon!”

“(The gentleman) then described marching up to Hazelwood, Sligo with 11 armed men during the civil war. He was met at the front door by Major Philip Perceval, Ascelin’s uncle, lame since the Boer War but with such a presence that when asked for food and accommodation by 12 armed men, ‘He looked us up and down and said to go to the back door and the cook would feed us. I don’t know why we did so. We were then met by a fierce woman who said that we were not coming into her kitchen with those dirty boots. We took them off and were well fed. The girls were instructed to make up beds for us in some of the empty rooms of the servants’ wing. Before I went to bed I asked to see the Major and asked if he was interested in politics, he was not. I then explained that we would require the key to his boat house the next morning as we were to capture the armoured car in the Sligo prison. He agreed and I told him that we had been on the run with little sleep for three weeks. I asked him to not give us up during the night if I withdrew the guards. He agreed but replied that he would like to consult the staff first and they agreed too. We slept very well but were woken by scuffling downstairs in the early morning. We grabbed our guns as we leapt out of bed but realised that it was only the girls getting our breakfast. I don’t know what got into me then, he said, I lined the men up before the front steps and asked him to inspect us. The Major then handed over the boat house key and we captured the armoured car.’”

“‘The first raiders on Temple House were led from Bunnanadden, from the south of the county, and were met by Nora (Ascelin’s wife) at the front door. They knew that Ascelin and Bracken the keeper were away shooting. She was asked for arms but produced the RIC (Royal Irish Constabulary) receipt for them and the leader then said that he had his orders and asked if he might have something to take away. They pilled his men with old pikes and swords Nora chose, off the walls and as they left, the leader picked up Nora’s bag from the hall table and closed it as he handed it to her, saying, ‘You should never leave your handbag open like that Ma’am, it could be a temptation to someone.’

Sandy said “not all the interaction were so friendly.” He described a second, violent raid on Temple House (which has been edited for sensitivity). Nora recognised some of the raiders, a tall, red-haired 17-year-old pantry boy whom she had recently sacked, along with the local leader of the IRA.

“(The gentleman) said he knew nothing of the raid and that (the local leader of the IRA) later wrote to apologise for this action and organised the return of the ‘confiscated goods’ and there was somewhat of a reconciliation. There is a note somewhere from him before this episode asking for the boat house key again for a certain date – the night of the Achonry Ambush when they escaped down the Kilowee River. Alec was unable to forget the second raid until he met the redhead 40 years later and threw him off the bridge into the river.”

“Nora was a determined woman and when the pantry boy and then the butler returned empty handed from a trip to Sligo during the civil war, she bicycled herself to Ballisodare. She demanded to meet the leader of the Freestaters on the south shore, despite the civil war raging across the river. She explained that she must go to Sligo shopping and to meet her father the surgeon. A white flag was raised and a truck called to allow her to be led across a plank laid over the gap in the bridge, followed by her bicycle. She then
arranged with the IRA on the north shore to stop the battle on her way back, which they did! Her father had to use the family sitting room at that time for a second waiting room. Years later Sandy knew their politics when he met men who said that Dr. MacDowell had saved their lives when they went to attend him, from the street or from the garden, one for the IRA and the other for the Freestaters. Nora later became keen on poultry breeding and by 1934 her Khaki-Campbell ducks were only four eggs less than the best leghorn hens in the RDS (Royal Dublin Society) year-long trial. Nora and Philip ran the farm until Alec returned from India in 1954. By then there were only two part-time girls working in the house and Nora, Ascelin and Philip had withdrawn to a few rooms in the house leaving the others under dust sheets. Ascelin drove to Sligo for lunch at the club most days and yet Nora did not leave the property until hospitalised in 1957 with a fatal heart attack. Like most Church of Ireland folk, they kept their heads down under the political parapet, as we still do."

A new era at Temple House

Sandy discusses some of the history of Temple House in the 20th century, opening up a new chapter for his family and the community of Temple House.

"The estate was by now down to 460 acres of grassland and 800 acres of woodland, much turbery bog and preserved shooting rights over the old tenant land for shooting. The tenant farms were all gone by the time of independence and this upset the economy of the 'Big House' system. The depression of the 1930s was called the economic war and Anglo-Irish families in the Free State felt marooned by the border."

Sandy writes about the affects of World War II on the family, railway sleepers studding the fields to prevent German planes landing, etc. He then describes the years his parents ran the house.

"The indoor staff of 17 is gone and ‘Maidens Lane’ and ‘Bachelors Walk’ are empty now, but standing in the hall or vestibule it could easily still be 1930 or earlier, but much warmer. The house was lit by acetylene gas until 1957 and it was then closed up under dust covers for five years until Alec and Yvonne moved in, a few years after they returned from India (as tea traders) to take over the estate. Yvonne repaired the roof and some plasterwork and converted the gasoliers to electricity. Alec saved the estate by increasing the dairy herd and Yvonne ran the pony club and joined the Church of Ireland synod and many other local committees. They bought Forthill, Ballymote when they left Temple House, a nice small house with only five bedrooms, built in 1800. The next generation of the family is now in residence. Deb and Sandy, faced with the problems of ‘keeping the roof on,’ decided in 1980 that, instead of opening the house to the public, it would be more fun and profitable to share the house with a few guests at a time and to meet people from all over the world."

Sandy and his wife have retired to a quiet life in Derreen to enjoy semi-retirement. Serena Perceval continues to professionally manage the substantial family archives. Roderick and Helena, and their two children, are the latest generations of Percevals to be the dedicated caretakers of the ‘Big House.’

"Temple House is humming again, giving much employment locally to help run the house and farm. They were sensible not to get caught by Lloyds and after so many generations it would take a brave bailiff to move them out now. A mystical yet confident air pervades this ‘Big House’ almost to the point of defiance, as it looks out over terraced gardens and the ruined castle to the lake. The newly planted trees amongst the old oaks and beech in the parkland give a feeling of peace, permanence and faith in the future."

Famine relief at Temple House

With contributions by Val Robus and Sandy Perceval

When many landlords throughout Ireland turned a blind eye to their starving and sick tenants during the Great Famine of 1845-1850, the Percevals of Temple House took action and provided what relief they could to their people.
In 1779 Philip (‘Caech’ or ‘Bat’) Perceval was a Sligo magistrate and was asked by Mary O’Hara of Aclare to issue a writ for payments of goods supplied to ‘Centy,’ or Hyacinth O’Rourke, a noted duellist. He was later accosted by O’Rourke on the steps of the Sligo courthouse and struck in the face by a glove, so felt compelled to challenge Centy to a duel. Centy was a noted swordsman but chose pistols to take advantage of Bat’s poor eyesight. A site was chosen at Claragh, but when they arrived, Caech complained that there were so many of Centy’s followers there that he was doomed, even if he won. They galloped to another site at Muckelty, but again Caech complained that he was facing the sun and so Centy changed places. Ten paces later Centy fired fast and first, as was his habit, but unusually he missed. Caech couldn’t see him at that distance but called to him to apologise to Mary O’Hara and pay her bill. Centy laughed and refused to apologise, a shot rang out and the notorious bully was killed. This riveting tale was lyricised in a local ballad, which was regularly performed in gatherings at Temple House, according to McTernan.

Their benevolence was due primarily to one member of the family, Jane Perceval, wife of Alexander, who used to visit the suffering twice a week with gifts of food and medicine, according to Sandy Perceval.

The Great Famine was a disaster waiting to happen, with many factors in play. First, much of Ireland’s food was being exported to England, which left the Irish over-reliant on the potato as a food crop for themselves. A long series of smaller famines beginning in 1739 led to food shortages, a problem that kept growing.

Additionally, the British government was causing artificial inflation of grain prices, although Prime Minister of England Sir Robert Peel did try to get the Corn Laws changed. The government’s motivation was to provide cheap food to feed the thousands of minimum wage workers of the growing English Industrial Revolution.

But then due to fear of rising prices, farmers stopped hiring already suffering Irish labourers, who in turn became desperate and started to deplete and sell what few assets they had (stored food, clothing, livestock, etc.). The poor of Ireland, with no thanks from the ‘gombeen man’ (loan shark charging exorbitant interest rates), fell into rent arrears and debt with landlords and local merchants, according to John Percival in his book The Great Famine.

Once this mid-19th century potato blight occurred, mushrooming into the Great Famine, it was the most devastating event to ever happen in Ireland and a major turning point for its people and future.

Thousands died and many more emigrated, leaving the population decimated. In County Sligo alone 52,000 people perished, leaving just 128,000 from 180,000 – about a 30% drop in population. Serious illness from ‘famine fever’ and typhus plagued those who remained, killing further people, according to McTernan. It was worse than any horror story one could imagine, as suggested in an article in an 1846 issue of The London Universe:

“Famine – pale, gaunt, ghastly – is taking throughout Ireland, withering up men like the flowers of the field, consuming millions of human beings with the breath of his mouth; and pestilence is following fast behind him to devour what he leaves and yet there are men who have the hardness to deny his presence.”

Landlords throughout Ireland, many of them absentee, neglected the suffering of their tenants. Lt. Col. John Augustus Conolly, Irish recipient of the Victoria Cross, noted in a letter dated 1846 to Charles Trevelyan of the English treasury, who administered famine relief (poorly, by all accounts):

“Where the landlords have never even seen their estates, you can hardly suppose that their sympathies are very strong for sufferings they have never witnessed.” (Evergreen State College)
However, the Percevals, being resident landlords, and others in authority sensed early on in the crisis that this was a problem that was only going to worsen. Back in 1822, a meeting took place in the Sligo Courthouse to discuss the growing problem of poverty and food shortages throughout the county.

The Percevals did seem to have genuine concern about the wellbeing of their tenants. Col. Alexander Perceval, M.P. of Temple House wrote a letter during this same time relaying his concern to “the Committee for the Relief of the Distressed Districts in Ireland,” an extract of which reads:

“No later than yesterday, I heard of one unfortunate family that had not had any provisions for the last fortnight or three weeks and principally subsisted on herbs. The family consisted of the father, mother, seven young daughters, (and the mother daily expecting to be confined again), and a niece. They were respectable Protestants and had been ashamed to make their distress known. I gave them a barrel (80 stone) of potatoes, and a hundred weight of oaten meal. The father, who came to take home the provisions, was ordered his dinner in my house, and upon getting food he fainted three times. He said some of his children were in convulsions for want of food and the whole family upon being relieved of hunger were seized with illness, and are now keeping their bed (if a bed it can be called). Many, many instances of similar distress exist.”

Col. Perceval’s relationship with his tenants and employees was “above reproach,” and he was looked upon kindly, despite his political conservatism, according to McTernan. (Sligo Families, p. 305)

But thanks to Alexander’s wife, Jane Perceval, and her daughters, tenants on the Temple House estate were given some assistance providing food and work, even employing 50 women to craft needlework. Indian meal and oatmeal were sold at reduced prices at a depot in Bunninadden. (McTernan, p. 305).

Sadly, Jane caught typhus or cholera from carrying out her good works and died in January of 1847. Sandy Perceval and his family were touched to later learn about Jane’s selfless continuing concern for others, even when she knew she was dying.

“We received information from a guest that she had discovered a letter from Violet Martin of Galway commending Jane Perceval for...
reminding her carers from her deathbed ‘not to neglect the tenant families between my death and my funeral,’ wrote Sandy.

Jane’s portrait, which depicts her with three of her beloved children, still hangs in the dining room of Temple House, a reminder of this remarkable woman with a generous heart.

Good works not forgotten: ‘Haul-Dare, I dare to address you…’:

The kindness of the Percevals apparently was not forgotten by the people of the Temple House estates.

Eleven years after his wife’s death, her husband Alexander also passed away prematurely, which forced the son and heir, Philip, to sell the estate under the Encumbered Estates Act of 1858 due to his inability to pay the new death duty tax. (This was a common problem across Ireland, according to Sandy Perceval)

Robert Westley Hall-dare thus bought the 2,500 plus acre property in 1858 for £80,000, according to McTernan. This new landlord was not deemed in any way benevolent by the tenants, especially after he obtained court orders for rent arrears and evicted many families. Also, he had a disagreement with Christopher L’Estrange, who had been a Perceval agent, over ownership of some turf rights, valued at less than £10.

The situation reached a boiling point, culminating in a notice anonymously posted to Hall-dare’s door:

“Haul-Dare (sic), I dare to address you with these few lines as I think you are let run long enough with you Tyrany, what the poor tenants ware not accustom to – so I strongly recommend you to quit Templehouse …”

Although the local magistrates offered a reward to punish the culprit(s) behind this notice, no one was caught. Relations between the new landlord and estate workers worsened, as well. Thomas Montague was hired as a gamekeeper in 1859, but he had alcohol issues, which didn’t endear him to his new boss.

About a year later Hall-Dare was accused of breaking into Montague’s house and ‘molesting’ one of the gamekeeper’s female relations, but when the family went into the Coolaney court to make a complaint, they were warned not to take the matter further, according to Sandy.

When the news spread, the community was further outraged and the matter came to a head 31st March 1860 in the Ballymote courthouse. Despite that Hall-Dare pleaded innocent, Montague’s brave relation (wife or daughter), Elizabeth, stuck to her guns during the trial. The jury found Hall-Dare guilty and ordered him to serve one month, plus pay fines to the court’s prosecutors and Queen of England.

Some of the dispossessed families of Temple House asked L’Estrange, the Perceval’s agent and relation to Jane, to invite the third son, Alexander, or ‘Chinaman,’ as he was called, to buy back the estate, according to Sandy.

Much rejoicing ensued in the Temple House area, according to McTernan. Sandy Perceval said when the Percevals were returning via their private train from Dublin, a steady line of bonfires lit the way. By the time they arrived back at Temple House, celebrations were well underway, including “cheering and every possible demonstration of delight,” as reported by the Boston Chronicle in 1866, according to Sandy.

“Bonfires blazed in the old fair-green and fireworks lit the night sky while a battery of three cannons thundered out at intervals from a nearby hillside as former tenants and neighbours rejoiced at the news.” (McTernan, Sligo Families, p. 306)

Alexander went on to repatriate many families from within Ireland, Britain and America, fixed up their houses and returned their land. Sandy said that a photograph on the Temple House dining room mantelpiece shows gamekeeper Mel Carney, who was brought back with his family from Boston. His house had been rebuilt and he was returned to his old job. A cousin also came back with his family from Cape Cod to a restored house. The wife was delighted, and as a bonus, “thrilled to find some of the white goats she’d had to leave behind when she was evicted four years before,” according to Sandy.

Poor Knights become rich: The Knights of Templar

With contributions by Val Robus and Sandy Perceval

Perhaps Ireland’s ‘Celtic Tiger’ can partially be blamed on the Knights of Templar, who are credited for creating the modern international banking system. This mysterious and exclusive order, steeped in intrigue over the centuries, had a presence in County Sligo at Temple House — not that they were overselling tracker mortgages or 0% finance there — but adding to that estate’s rich history all the same.
The Knights of Templars’ secretive background is so shrouded (perhaps literally) in mythology, thanks to the likes of author Dan Brown of *The Da Vinci Code*, it’s difficult to sift fact from fiction. It’s doubtful, for example, that the order had connections to the legendary Ark of the Covenant, Holy Grail or Shroud of Turin. Still, these symbols, whether real or not, have been weaved into tales of conspiracies and secret societies and continue to capture the imagination of many a novel and screen writer and their audiences.

This religious military order had its origins during the Crusades, when Christian soldiers fought Muslims for control of the Holy Land. After Christians took over Jerusalem in 1096, affluent European pilgrims poured into that sacred city and protection was needed for them as they toted their money. Founded by the French knight Hughes de Payens, this group was first dubbed ‘the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Jesus Christ and the Temple of King Solomon.’ They based themselves at Temple Mount, an ancient site hallowed to at least four religious denominations, and essentially acted as body guards to the prosperous. Their name, thankfully for future historians, was simplified to the Knights of Templar.

These warriors of God took an oath of chastity, poverty and obedience and wore plain white tunics emblazoned with red crosses, to symbolise blood shed for Christianity. They led very strict existences in prayer and going to confession; eating their meals in silence; weapons training; and punished if they committed larceny, heresy, treason, murder of a Christian, revealing secrets of the chapter, misrepresenting one’s social class to gain entry as a knight and fleeing the battlefield. They were very conscious of the expense of their profession and did not tolerate waste. (Christopher Check)

Despite their vows and austere lifestyles, in their role of providing protection for the rich, the Templars became wealthy themselves after the Vatican allowed the order ‘extraordinary’ privileges and exempted it from local laws, taxes and any authority but the Pope’s. Grants of property and money flowed in from affluent volunteers from some of Europe’s most noble families, “for the good of their souls,” according to historian, Herbert Wood.

However, it was not as if the Templars were stuffing their simple tunic pockets full of gold and silver for themselves. Most of their wealth was tied up in real estate, from which farming proved quite profitable (by 1308 their lands were worth £400 per year, a tidy sum then). From their Paris headquarters with its considerable assets, the increasingly more dominant order acted as moneylenders to monarchs across the land, a financial service that ended up as their downfall. As for cold cash, much of it belonged to the well-off pilgrims who banked it in preceptories (armed branches of command) in small villages or small, fortified cities. These wayfarers were able to make deposits and withdrawals as they travelled to and fro across Europe to the Holy Land in the name of Christianity. It was quite an impressive system of ‘cash points’ for that time.

The Templars were also responsible for ensuring taxes from Ireland arrived safely to the royal court, which can be compared to armed Irish military accompanying cash-in-transit vehicles around the modern day nation to banks — a crucial supportive role to those who rule, whether from Dublin, London, Brussels or beyond.

Because of the extraordinary clout they wielded, these enterprising Knights of Templar were pivotal in shaping this period of medieval history, whose legacy still affects the world.

“…for 150 years in the high Middle Ages, their order was incontestably one of the most powerful and creative military and economic forces in the world,” according to award-winning religion journalist David Van Biema.
Chapter 3 - Influence of ‘Big House’ in south Sligo

The Templars in Ireland

Despite their bounty of investments, the Templars remained one of the most devout orders in history and took their vows to heart, which was recognised by the Vatican. In 1129 they gained support from Bernard of Clairvaux and formal acceptance of the Catholic Church.

Evidence from deeds proves that Henry II issued a charter to the Templars in Ireland between 1172 and 1177, according to Wood. The knights founded a preceptory in Clontarf, Co. Dublin in 1185 and other strongholds were subsequently established in Counties Carlow, Kildare, Louth, Kilkenny, Tipperary, Waterford and Wexford, in addition to Sligo, the most western of its European reach.

The Templars in Ireland apparently used this island as a ‘pensioners’ home’ for their more senior soldiers, but these semi-retired knights were valued for their wealth of combat experience and strategically positioned them to act as an unofficial police force for the crown in enforcing peace among the native Irish.

It seems possible that a community of Knights Templars established a Commanderie beside Temple House Lake and the Owenmore River in the late 12th century, according to Alexander ‘Sandy’ Perceval. The oldest dwellings found on the estate have been crannogs (artificial fortified islands) and a promontory fort on the wooded point of the south eastern shore of the lake. Stone implements, such as a stone pestle used for a flat quern (stone hand mill for grinding corn), and a stone-skinning knife were found in this area, in addition to a souterrain (underground chamber or passage).

“(The knife) contrasts to the circular quern stone found near the castle with the Knight of Templar cross in a circle marked on it,” wrote Sandy Perceval. (Corran Herald, p. 30)

Sandy Perceval said the quern stone had been discovered by his father in a rabbit burrow (warren).

Percevals arrive in Ireland

Warriors from the French duchies of Normandy and Brittany first invaded Ireland in 1169 and these brutal but elegant people of Viking extraction quickly settled throughout the country, including Connaught, and assimilated so well that they were often referred to as ‘more Irish than the Irish themselves.’

Sandy Perceval said there were 11 Norman farmsteads along the Owenmore River, which allowed people living there to make a quick getaway by boat to the castle at Temple House if needed. These square-shaped farmsteads are easy to differentiate from the circular forms of Celtic settlements. Archaeologist Brian Graham said more findings about them would be valuable.

The Temple House Percevals are descended from Ascelin ‘Gouel’ de Perceval, Lord of Yvery and Breberal with a fierce temper, whose nickname of various spellings means ‘the wolf.” Ascelin became noteworthy defending his castle of Yvery in 897. A Perceval assisted William the Conqueror as ‘Cup Bearer’ in invading England in 1066, for which he was made a Lord and rewarded estates in Somerset County.

Richard Perceval, the first of his generation in Ireland, helped capture Waterford and Dublin with his cousin, Richard Fitz Gilbert de Clare, best known as ‘Strongbow’ in c. 1170.

“Richard, Baron Perceval, of Somerset … being nearly related to Strongbow, Earl of Pembroke, … was early engaged in the expedition to Ireland … when he sailed thither with Richard de Marle, Stephen de Borgo, and near two hundred other knights, where he behaved with so much valour, that he acquired great possessions, and seated himself wholly in that kingdom, making over to his brothers, Hugh and John, all his lands in the county of Somerset.” (Burke, p. 610)

Demise of the Knights

The Templars lost their reason to exist after Muslims drove the Crusaders away from Jerusalem in 1187, forcing the order to give up their powerful Middle East foothold. The knights then lost their attempt to take over Cyprus, furthering weakening their stand. Also, many in authority throughout the world were growing to resent the order’s apparent arrogance, immense wealth, prestige and influence.

By 1307 King Philip II of Spain was in serious debt with the Templars and decided to get them off his back by accusing some of the knights of heresy, imprisoning and torturing them to confess to crimes they did not commit. Many were brought to trial in virtual ‘kangaroo courts’ at various sites, including Dublin. After two years of languishing in prison and grilled through inquisitions, the four-month-long trial at St. Patrick’s Cathedral ended with a whimper, with no convictions.

Under the order of Pope Clement, knights on trial in Avignon were found to be ‘immoral’ but not heretical in a 1308 verdict. (Van Biema) The Pope then gave Philip the power to arrest and suppress all Templars, which included confiscating their lands throughout Europe. The writing was on the wall for these fighting friars of finance who ran out of luck, spelling the end of the order. Grand Master Jacques de Molay, in addition to dozens of other Templars, were burned at the stake. Before he was put to death, de Molay prophesied that his main tormenters would die. Within 40 days, Pope Clement V was dead, and the King departed from this Earth later that year.
Temple House opens a new page

The Pope officially disbanded the Knights of Templar c.1312 and although some members were pensioned out, the rest of the rights and riches were transferred to the Knights of the Hospitalers (also known as the Knights of St. John or Knights of Malta). At Temple House this new order apparently undertook more building c. 1320, which is evident by vaulted chambers in the ruins’ ground floor.

“A fourth step from the thatched roof was sloped outwards to prevent flooding downstairs and a spout can be seen on east wall of castle, near the ravens’ nest,” according to Sandy Perceval.

During the 1360s the property was rented to two local Irish chieftain clans, the McDonaghs and O’Haras. Rents were taken over by the English crown and in 1560 the O’Haras built a tower. The Gaelic clan was dispossessed in 1580 and the property was granted to a Mr. Goodman of Co. Meath. The Croftons (of Longford House) built a brick house on the southeast corner of the castle, by the jetty and boat house (McTernan). In 1641 after Sligo Castle fell, the O’Haras besieged Temple House when it was taken ‘by trickery.’ The Croftons surrendered but during negotiations the castle was once again invaded. Those who did not attend mass were hanged from nearby trees, and others obtained safe passage by the Taaffes at Ballymote Castle. The Temple House castle had been damaged by Cromwell’s troops when reclaiming it for the Croftons, who returned home after the Rebellion was crushed, according to the family history by Sandy Perceval.

George Perceval married Mary Crofton, heiress to the lands of Temple House, in 1665, succeeded by several generations marrying into Sligo ‘Big House’ families such as the Coopers, O’Haras and Wynnes. The family’s current residence, described by the National Inventory of Architectural Heritage as a ‘commanding, monumental house,’ which started as a small c. 1760 house that was extended in 1825 to a neo-classical 2-storey residence on the present site overlooking the estate’s lovely lake and islands. Half of the house was knocked down c. 1863 and rebuilt into the grand manor that it is now, greeting its guests through the arched porte cochere. Temple House, home to the Percevals for almost 350 years, is now run as an upscale bed and breakfast amid a placid sheep farm, surrounded by its compelling past of Celtic kings and Anglo-Irish knights, a place truly rich in heritage.

Cracking mysterious codes

The premise behind The Da Vinci Code may be more fiction that fact, but Temple House has a proven connection to an equally compelling, yet true tale of code cracking.

A portrait of Richard Perceval (1558-1620), the grandfather of George (1635-1675), hangs in the resplendent dining room of Temple House, keeping modern B & B guests good company. Richard is best known for having solved the conundrum of ‘the Armada Code’ in 1587, thus helping to save England from a Spanish invasion, according to his descendant Sandy Perceval in a 1995 issue of The Corran Herald. In fact, Richard’s knowledge of the Spanish language was at such a high level he had published the first Spanish/English dictionary in 1589.

This story of international intrigue, spies and royalty is so full of suspense, derring do and conniving world leaders, it could probably be made into a blockbuster film.

In the struggle to keep Britain Protestant, Queen Elizabeth I’s top advisor Lord Burleigh had sent ships to the Bay of Biscay to intercept an important message, which was then sent from Spain’s King Philip II to his army in the Netherlands. For the next three weeks no one in the English camp could decipher it, but then it dawned on Lord Burleigh, who was known to be of wise counsel, that Richard Perceval had spent 12 years in Spain.

Perceval was quickly dispatched for an audience with Queen Elizabeth I one night. Within 24 hours the Queen’s court was surprised when Richard returned with the message, decoded and translated.
Discovered in this interception were elaborate plans for a Spanish Armada to attack England, but they seemed so preposterous that no one took them seriously. However, four months later a Vatican spy sent intelligence that contained the identical armada plans, which had been sent to the Pope in Rome for his blessing. And as a student of English history knows, this invasion went awry and the Spanish were defeated, due in part to Sir Francis Drake and serendipitous bad weather, but particularly to Richard’s clever code cracking and language expertise.

Richard’s contributions toward this major English victory were generously rewarded. He was appointed Paymaster General in Ireland, awarded a £400 pension and granted substantial land in counties Kilkenny and Waterford, although he had to sell most of it three years later during a rebellion when Queen Elizabeth I refused to pay her troops. As ‘Earls of Egmont,’ however, Richard and his son rallied and built a fortune as land speculators, according to Sandy Perceval.

Fishy Stories

“In July, 1928, while fishing at Templehouse Lake, a Ballymote farmer, Pat Begley, landed a 58-lb pike. Its stomach contained two George III coins, a jaw (jews) harp, safety razor blades, a small cocoa tin, an assorted collection of nails and a miniature shield believed to be from the old abbey at Templehouse.”

From The Sligo Champion
Sesquicentenary 1836-1986

Sandy Perceval said other impressive catches found in Temple House Lake included a 42 lb. pike, caught by a Dutchman in 2002, who returned the fish to the waters. Another pike that was hooked but returned, by a Lithuanian gentleman in this case, was a 62-lb.-whopper in 2012.

In addition to fishing as recreation on the lake, the local community also used to gather at the bay on Temple House Lake for Sunday picnics and swimming, including swim lessons for children, a tradition which lasted until the 1960s, according to Serena Perceval. There were dances throughout the area during evenings. Serena added that the staff of Temple House enjoyed weekly ceilidhs in the kitchen to jigs and reels, which inspired “The Temple House Reel,” as found in Jim Donoghue’s collection, The Trip to Sligo. http://www.tradschool.com/en/tunes/the-templehouse-jim-donoghue.
Chapter 4 - West Sligo’s Threshers and Scutchers

The ‘minor landowners’ of Easkey

By Gregory Daly

The “minor landowners” in 19th century Ireland of four estates, Castle-town, Fortland, Templeview and Cooga Lodge, in the parish of Easkey, Co. Sligo, reflect changing times of land ownership in post-Famine Ireland. During this period of Irish history about one-seventh of land changed hands within a few years, and by 1870 the majority of landlors were new proprietors, as in the case of ‘big houses’ Templeview and Cooga Lodge.

In the Parliamentary Papers of 1876, the ‘Return of Owners of Land of One Acre and Upwards in the Several Counties of Ireland’ indicate the acreage amount of the four estates: Fortland 6,730 acres, Templeview 2,952 acres, Castletown 790 acres and Cooga Lodge 308 acres.

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Fortland House

“At Easky Bridge, on the L. pleasantly situated on the banks of the River Easky, is Fortland, the seat of Mr. Browne, and on R. Are the ruins of a castle ...” (Wilson, p. 406)

Fortland House belonged to the Ormsby, Browne, Brinkley, Jones, Prioleau and Carmichael families, according to J. C. McTernan. It was offered for sale in the Landed Estates Court in 1874 was thus described in the sale catalogue:

“The house and offices are in good repair; the demesne and pleasure grounds are tastefully planted; there are excellent fruit and vegetable gardens; a salmon fishery on the river adjacent to the mansion and the lands were of excellent quality.” (McTernan)

The largest of the four, Fortland, was owned by Robert Brinkley in 1876, but belonged to the Browne family when Arthur Young visited the place in 1776 and documented it in his book A Tour in Ireland 1776-1779. Browne was referred to as an ‘improving’ and progressive landlord. On his estate sheep farming, flax growing and kelp farming are the main activities and Young details Browne’s passion for bog reclamation for the growing of crops:

“The moor was one foot deep on rock clay; and under that a loose gravel, not limestone. Marked at the rate of 150 barrels and acre, which cost in labour 5 shillings, left for a year which killed the heath effectively, then ploughed it twice, and took two successive crops of potatoes, without dung, the first an extraordinary one, the second not bad: then two crops of barley, which were very good: then oats two cocks, both very good.”

The house was also subject to a raid for arms by insurgents in 1798. It later passed to a Robert Jones, but went bankrupt during the Famine when it was divided, subdivided and sold. The estate, totalling 2,500 was then bought by Richard Brinkley who cut down and sold most of the mature woodland. Charles Carmichael purchased the property in 1952 and ran it as a hotel for some years, an attraction being the fishing rights on one and a half miles of the Easky River. David Higgins, whose father Percy was the Fortland estate manager, attempted to purchase the house, but was unsuccessful. He said after the property did not sell, Carmichael didn’t want to pay the rates and instead had the roof removed. After partial demolition, the remaining was left to ruin. The Fortland gate lodge was renovated in 2004 for Fortland Fishery and is available as an exclusive guest house during angling season.

Interview with David Higgins: Fortland House

The late Percy Higgins, manager of the Fortland House estate beginning in 1941, was well known as highly entrepreneurial and employed “nearly every man in Easkey at some time or another.” In addition to dairy farming, he grew seed potatoes and exported them, kept pigs, grew sugar beet, ran a saw mill, flax mills and many other farm-related activities, according to a 2008 Sligo Champion article commemorating Percy’s 100th birthday.

The late Percy Higgins, manager of the Fortland House estate beginning in 1941, was well known as highly entrepreneurial and employed “nearly every man in Easkey at some time or another.” In addition to dairy farming, he grew seed potatoes and exported them, kept pigs, grew sugar beet, ran a saw mill, flax mills and many other farm-related activities, according to a 2008 Sligo Champion article commemorating Percy’s 100th birthday.

David Higgins, son of Percy, generously shared this history of his family’s life at this west Sligo ‘Big House’ estate.

Ben McKinley owned Fortland estate, possibly he bought it around 1929. He was my mother’s uncle and he asked my mother (Minnie Carnegie) to look after Fortland House and look after the guests that he would bring to it, on and off, to fish and to shoot. She agreed and he promised her that he would pay her for her services. She agreed and he promised her that he would pay her for her services. She agreed and he promised her that he would pay her for her services. She agreed and he promised her that he would pay her for her services. She agreed and she promised her that she would pay her for her services. My father came from Canada on holiday and before he left, (Percy and Minnie) obviously had contact with one another, and when he came home on holiday instead of going back to Canada, they got married in August
1939, and the reception was in Fortland House. He lived in Fortland House in the annex because at that time Fortland estate was losing money and Ben said to my father that if he took over the running of the place and made it pay inside two years, he would offer to him to sell it to him. (Percy) did start to turn it around and make money on it and Ben offered it for sale to my father, hoping he wouldn’t be able to raise the money to buy it, and he wanted £2,000 for it at that time.

My father had a terrible job trying to get money from the banks to buy it, as he only had an ordinary job in Canada. He ran around to most of the banks in Sligo and Ballina. The only person that he came across was an ordinary bank manager, Sean Ford of the Provincial Bank, Stephen Street Sligo; he came on board and gave him support. My father was able to buy Fortland from Ben McKinley, but there was a dispute between my mother and Ben McKinley on Fortland House; he reneged on his promises to my mother and wouldn’t pay her for her work in the house.

So there was a court case in Sligo, my father had to get senior counsel to fight his corner, and he won against Ben McKinley in Sligo. Ben McKinley then threw them out of Fortland House in the early 1940s and (Percy) went to the house of Colonel Prioleau. We all moved over to Ballymeena to Glenburn house that a neighbour of ours in Easkey, Tom Kivlehan, had arranged to get my father this house in Ballymeena. We lived there for a number of years and at this particular time Colonel Prioleau (was) in the big house in Fortland. Now, my father still worked the land and he built a flax mill, and Colonel Prioleau and my father didn’t see eye to eye as the Colonel didn’t want a flax mill built in Fortland. There was a song written about the Fortland flax mill, which is available some place, don’t remember the lyrics ….

At that particular time there was skutchers from Monaghan and a lot of farmers around the place grew flax. There used to be flax barn dance in Fortland loft every year for the skutchers and the people round about, that went on for about three years. There was great money to be made by the skutchers as they were always paid on piece work. My father used to weigh the tow every evening, and some of them at that time, the top skutchers were able to earn £14 a week at that time. They spent all their money on beer in the local area in Kilcullen over in Killeenduff, a pub halfway between here and our home in Ballymeena, and they used to go in there, and they used to come in here to Easkey to T.D. Harte’s pub and drink in that place as well. My mother often saw them coming in about 7 o’clock or 6.30 to go to bed for an hour. They were well drunk, they used to come back to Fortland and my father had a job watching them when they were going into work to skutch, they weren’t fully sober. That was a great money spinner at the time, there were 22 people working in Fortland at the time from the neighbourhood, all local people from Fortland cottages.

There was also a saw mill attached to the flax mill and a crusher which used to crush the grain for the local people one day a week; that was very successful too, it used to keep local people employed. They used to cut timber during the war from the woods and send a load once a fortnight to Dublin where they were using the wood to build houses. So, after Colonel Prioleau left Fortland House in the late ‘50s, a Captain Kirwin and his wife came to Fortland House and they lived there for a few years … he was a captain of a British liner and was retired at this time at Fortland. He had a Rolls Royce car in the garage at the time; it was something that was not very common at
that time in Easkey! He lived there a number of years, maybe five years, when Charles Carmichael came. He was one of the Carmichael road builders of Great Britain. He used to get an allowance from that company and he was able to live a life of luxury in Fortland. He spent a lot of money on Fortland House in the ‘60s. He had Lindsay and Irwin, Lindsay was from Strandhill and Walter Irwin was from Beltra, and they spent 18 months renovating the house, and after it was renovated he had six painters and decorators from Meldrin’s Sligo.

They took six months putting the finishing touches to the house and it was in first-class condition.

Carmichael and his wife lived there and at that time a fellow called Jimmy Hardy lived in the annex of Fortland House with Mrs. Keane. Mrs. Keane’s daughter, Rosemary, had been married to a man named Reynolds, who was an electrical engineer from Sligo, but had separated from him, and she lived with Jimmy Hardy and Mrs. Keane, who was her mother in the annex. She was Hollywood material -- she was a really good-looking woman.

Carmichael had a fancy to her as well and he bought a confectionary shop in Ballina for her and bought a van for her and she ran a pretty successful business in Ballina for a short period of time, when they started to party a bit out of order and she was crashing cars on him. That came to a bad end and Carmichael seemingly people of not the very best of characters started to come around him as well. There was a chap from Kildare ... and he used to come down fishing illegally in Fortland with harpoons and diving gear for salmon. He actually went away with Carmichael’s wife. Jimmy Hardy went down to the gatehouse with Mrs. Keane and Rosemary, and after a while another man came on the scene there. He was head of British Railways in Ireland, Mr. Veltteam. Veltteam and Rosemary struck up a relationship between themselves and eventually she married him. Veltteam’s wife and two sons had to fend for themselves, as Rosemary and Veltteam went to Wicklow to live and lived out their lives there. Carmichael eventually became penniless in one way and had to sell Fortland House and sold it to a fellow called Murray. He was English, reputed to be a millionaire. He was a chartered accountant of a huge firm of chartered accountants in England. He bought Fortland House, the fisheries and the gate house and came to live about three weeks in the whole entire year to Fortland. Eventually he decided that Fortland House was too big to heat and decided to take up residence in the gate house, so he lived in the gatehouse.

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That was the beginning of the end for Fortland House. Mr. Murray got several chances to sell the house to different people, including myself, and wouldn’t sell. He had a business woman in Easkey called Eileen Mary Harte, who threw a cheque book on the table and asked him to fill it in, she wanted to buy it as a convent at the time, but he wouldn’t even do that. Fortland House became a ruin overnight, after all the money spent on it by Charles Carmichael. It became a tragedy, that was the downturn of Fortland House, and I remember that the rates of Fortland House was £79 at that time, and here we had a wealthy man that said he couldn’t afford it. If that law wasn’t in where taking off the roof wouldn’t save the rates, the house would possibly still be there. That was in Charlie Haughey’s time, but where’s the brains?

I remember after the house was stripped of roof and timber, he asked a local man called George Moore of Skreen, who was a land reclamation man at the time. He used to reclaim land and there was a government grant going for draining land. He was the only man who had a licence for gelignite at the time, Mr. Murray (asked) would he demolish the remainder of the house. I remember George coming and he bore about 30 holes in the front wall of the house and proceeded to set charges in all those holes. About half a hundred weight of gelignite was put into the bottom of that wall, and blew the wall, and it took that to blow one wall of the house down. There was two other remaining walls standing and George went down to Mr. Murray and told him he would need the same amount of gelignite again. Mr. Murray told him he wouldn’t give him any more money, so the remainder of the ruins stood there for years and years after.

Mr. Murray sold the fisheries and the gate lodge to a syndicate from Sligo. Kevin Murray, the sons, Crawford, George Lindsay, who did the work with Walter on the house for Carmichael, ... (Denis) Boland, surgeon in the Sligo Hospital and St. Joseph’s nursing home, and he was on the syndicate. They held on to it for 25 years and really never spent any money on it, never kept it up or anything like that. It got overgrown and they never respected it, there was no man to keep it in repair.

The present man who owns it now, David Cahill from Dublin, he came down and it was real bandit country for a lot of those 25 years with people from Northern Ireland poaching the river day and night. It was just a free-for-all at the time, the fishing, seeing that there was no Fortland House, no one living around, and it was a nice quiet place to carry out that work. David Cahill came along and he decided he would buy it from the syndicate and he bought the fishing rights and the remains of the old big house and the gate lodge, which was derelict at the time and was very badly damaged by squatters, by party goers and the general public, who wanted to use it as a drinking den. It was in a bad state when David Cahill bought it. Fair play to David when he came he employed two men to look after Fortland fisheries and to try and stop the poaching that was going on it at the time,
which he successfully did in one year. David Cahill has spent quite a lot of money renovating the Fortland Fishery and the grounds around, eventually demolished the remaining walls of Fortland House. The rubble and the stone is still there in a pile beside the original site of the house, so he still continued to spend money and keep the place in good shape and (as a) tourist attraction and deserves the credit for doing so. So, that’s the last 50-60 years of Fortland House.

Working and playing on the Fortland estate

When Charles Carmichael was in Fortland House it was a lovely place, well kept. He kept a gardener and there was a fine garden there. He bought a Ferguson 20 tractor and trailer and corn drill, and he did a bit of farming on the land he owned beside the river. I used to drive the tractor for him and do the farm work. I was only 15 or 16 at the time, it was great, he would always give you a few shillings to keep you interested. He was a nice generous type of fellow. Of course we used to spend quite a lot of time around Fortland House, at the time there was always people coming and going and people fishing. I remember one day Jimmy Hardy and Brendan Dowd who lived in our yard at the time, Brendan Dowd was only a young boy going to school and he hooked a salmon at Fortland Falls and Jimmy Hardy was there. And of course, when Brendan hooked the salmon, Jimmy jumped up and said ‘I’ll land him for you,’ and slipped and fell into the falls and went down a couple of hundred of yards and around the corner before he came up -- we thought he was lost, that’s an experience I remember well. They were good times.

We built a house then in Fortland, just beside the yard and beside Fortland House, a bungalow. In 1947 my father built it with local tradesmen and some of the workmen who were working in the place at the time with the flax. By the way, they used to go a lorry load of tow to Northern Ireland every week from Fortland flax mill. It was up to Belfast, it went to the linen mills. It was a big industry at that time and it kept all those people during the war years in Fortland cottages employed and were able to raise big families around the area. My father used to give them a few drills of potatoes, for cabbage, carrots that they wanted to grow for themselves during the war. There was no such thing as free handouts from the government for unemployment, they were all able to raise eight and nine (children) and still exist and have an odd beer. I don’t know what would have happened if (the estate) wasn’t there at the time now because when you have 22-23 people employed locally, it was a big asset. Some of those people that are still alive today are very thankful for being able to get over those difficult war years because of my father at the time. The right man, the right place.

David’s determined father

… He hadn’t money to buy the place, he had to borrow the money to buy the place, and then to be put through the stress and strain hire senior counsel to fight his case. No, it wasn’t easy, especially when he was fighting my mother’s uncle in court, it made it horrible.

It was very stressful, my mother was a strong woman, she wouldn’t lie down under her uncle, none of her brothers who went to Dublin lay down under him either. He was a controller, he was man who wanted to control and he had three or four shops in main street Blackrock in Dublin, and he owned Frescati House in Dublin, which is gone now too, Roches stores have a shopping centre built on it.

The same man painted the ceiling in Castletown House and in Frescati, only painted two in Ireland. The house was left and let go and squatters came, tinkers camped in the grounds, something which the government should have stepped in and saved. It was at that time, too, that Fortland House was let go. They didn’t want to preserve any history, it’s very difficult to know what was going on in government’s minds at the time. Most of my mother’s brothers went to Dublin, the only one remained on the farm, her brother George, the rest went to Dublin. The Carnegies, they eventually broke away from the claws of Ben McKinley and set up their own business, sand and gravel business, Ben went into the undertaking business, and his sons are still undertakers in Monkstown. Jimmy emigrated to Australia. They went to Ben McKinley to work, but they broke away because he was a control freak, they rebelled and left him to his own devices. I remember him when my father was working in Fortland running the farm and owned it. He used to come down now and again and look at his portion of it the river and that, but there was never much comeuppance with him, you know, there wasn’t. My father wouldn’t go to meet him if he didn’t come to meet him. That’s the way it is and it just he got into his 70s and he died, but we were on good terms with his son, Fergie.

… the children were nice, one of his daughters married Maxwell, a chemist in Dun Laoghaire, and he owned Maxwell Motors in Blackrock. Still there to this day, but not owned by Maxwell, but new owner still uses the name. All his family are now gone, his daughter Kitty McKinley used to live in the gatehouse at one time, she was married to a submarine commander and he was Maxwell, he was brother of the Maxwell married to Kitty’s sister. They went to England to Bath for retirement, haven’t seen them since that.

Difficult war years

There was at a very critical stage where the war years were tough years, because I remember my mother having a ration book and they used to dry the tea. When they made the tea the kept the tea leaves and dry them again, even if it took longer and longer each time. You had to boil the water with the tea leaves in it to get the last out of it. They survived and kept skutchers in Glenburn House in Ballymeena, we kept seven skutchers in it and she used to cook for them and everything else, it was difficult, but she was a good baker. There
was a shop in Easkey, Fred Mac was the owner of that, and she got on well with him, but she used to get an extra pound of sugar, extra pound of tea to keep going. She used to bring him down a basket of eggs and bargain with him and he’d take the eggs and shed get a pound of tea under the counter. He knew she was keeping those people, and those people were spending the money in the village.

Despite tough times, happy days

We had good fun, they were good years to grow up, we always had a salmon when we wanted it, so did everyone else. People were able to save their own turf and had there own vegetables, carrots, cabbage and potatoes. Nobody went hungry, everyone was happy. It took the war to put manners on people in those times. There were great party times up there in Fortland House when Carmichael was about, he was a nice chap.

There was a big party in the gatehouse one night and there was a fellow from Enniscrone called Kilcullen, he was in England for a long time, I think he used to sell Dresden china, and he had a real posh English accent. He used to come down, maybe he was fond of the women, he came down to the gatehouse on several occasions to these parties and one night the locals took the car and put it into the field and locked the gate, and when he came out to go home he couldn’t get the gate open. Those sorts of things used to go on. But it was all taken in good sport, there was no guards for anything like that. They were mild parties to what they have nowadays.

The ‘Fighting Fentons’ of Castletown

The ‘Fighting Fentons,’ connected with Castletown in Easkey, were an audacious lot who served the English army all around the world and became pioneers in the frontier of Tasmania. As of particularly hardy French-Irish stock, they didn’t back down easily, courageous as today’s young Irish emigrants to Australia.

Although the Fentons had been in Ireland for many generations, the family’s link to Easkey began in the 1700s, with some members acting as agents for absentee owners. James Fenton was leasing the house at Castletown with about 63 acres (in addition to rights to the ‘Finned’ and ‘Easky’ rivers), valued at £10, to George Fenton during the time of the Griffith’s Valuation (c. 1858).

According to John C. McTernan, all three Fenton brothers of Castletown were captains in the army and by the mid-19th century
had settled in Van Diemen’s Land, off the southeast coast of Australia, a beautiful but wild place. Cousin James Fenton, inspired by his kins’ boldness, also emigrated from Ireland to ‘Down Under,’ where he invented new forestry ‘ringbarking’ techniques, joined the Victoria gold rush and wrote a series of history and travel books.

Captain Michael Fenton (1789–1874), ‘The Younger’, third son of Michael and Catherine Rea, was born at Castletown and joined the 13th Light Infantry in 1807, serving in India and Burma until 1828. He then sold his commission and emigrated to Van Diemen’s Land, later known as Tasmania and notorious as Britain’s largest penal colony.

Michael Fenton received an initial grant of 1,970 acres near New Norfolk in Tasmania, where he distinguished himself by becoming a progressive farmer by creating ‘Fenton Forest’ in Glenora with extensive tree planting, according to the Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol. I. He was also a noted politician and helped to establish self-government in his new homeland.

As a forser and farmer, Michael Fenton cultivated hops on his property. The late historian L. L. Robson of Melbourne University claimed in his History of Tasmania (1983) that Fenton acquired his estate workers from abroad, apparently transported via his own ship, Lindsays, captained by Daniel Ross, a member of the Bombay Marine survey ship team. In 1832 this ship, which might have been considered akin to a ‘convict ship,’ transported 76 men, women and children as his indentured servants to work for him, according to Robson.

However, McTernan writes in his Light of Bygone Days: Sligo Families that it was actually Michael Fenton’s ancestor, Capt. Thomas Martin Fenton, who had sailed from Sligo in 1831 with his large family in the American-built Lindsays with the 76 servants, to join his cousin, Michael Fenton of Castletown. They arrived at Hobart, Tasmania in 1832, according to McTernan.

Whichever scenario is the case, the ‘Pioneering Fentons’ were regarded as “fearless and hard working Irishmen,” an intrepid, enterprising family in a new world. (McTernan, p. 93)

By the time Michael Fenton died there were nearly 30 families as tenants on the Fenton Forest estate, whether or not they were there against their will, with rent roll figures amounting to approximately £800 a year, which had provided him a substantial income.

Fenton was highly admired by his new country’s ruling elite and nominated to the Tasmanian Legislative Council in 1840. However, he resigned with others of the ‘Patriotic Six’ on the question of whether financial responsibility for the convict services in the colony should be borne by the local administration or the imperial government, as documented in the Australian Dictionary of Biography.

The issue became a hot potato when the six unofficial members of the council, including Fenton, withdrew from the council in October 1845, leaving it without a quorum. The result prevented the passing of the appropriation bill, which pleased many of the colonists, who didn’t want to pay for the prisoners’ upkeep. Fenton, therefore, was unsurprisingly reappointed by Lieutenant-Governor Sir William Denison in 1847.

Furthermore, in 1851 Fenton was voted into the new partly-elective Legislative Council as member for New Norfolk, and made Speaker in 1855. However, he faced more political conflict when legal action against the council was brought by the Comptroller-General of Convicts, who refused to appear before the council when summoned to do so to give evidence concerning administration of the Convict Department.

Fenton, as Speaker, wouldn’t let this matter lie and issued a warrant for the comptroller’s arrest. A writ of habeas corpus (requiring a person under arrest to be brought before a court) was then served upon Fenton and the sergeant-at-arms. The case ballooned so dramatically it went to the Privy Council, which gave judgment against the Legislative Council.

Fenton’s latest political victory won him more votes and in 1856 he was elected unopposed to the House of Assembly in the first election. He remained Speaker, a position he occupied until 1861, until he retired from public life. He died in 1874 at his property in Fenton Forest.

English novelist Anthony Trollope had described Fenton as “a man of position and influence in Tasmania.” (McTernan, p. 95)

Captain Michael Fenton was married to Elizabeth Campbell (widow of Captain Neil Campbell, also of the 13th Light Infantry) in Calcutta in 1828. She was the daughter of Rev. John Russel Knox, a rector of Lifford and Inishmagrauth, County Leitrim. They had six children, of whom one son, Michael, and three daughters survived Fenton. Following in the Fenton tradition of travel writing, his wife’s The Journal of Mrs. Fenton, a Narrative of her Life in India, the Isle of France—Mauritius—and Tasmania During the Years 1826-1830, was published in London in 1901.

Whether or not the ‘Fighting Fentons’ emigrated to Australia to exploit their new country with virtual slaves to work for them, they are to be credited for their fearless pioneering instincts. Post-‘Celtic Tiger,’ thousands of young Irish people, many of them from the west of Ireland, should also be admired for their courage to relocate to the other side of the world, having been forced to emigrate for better opportunities.
Sligo’s links to South America: The O’Higgins and The Fentons

A living opera: liberation libretto

One might not think there was a connection, but Sligo has strong ties between Ballynary and South America that involves a story of epic, almost operatic, proportions.

Bernardo O’Higgins, whose father hailed from Ballynary, was a significant catalyst in the formation of the Latin American country of Chile. His father, Ambrosio (Ambrose) O’Higgins, was quite an intrepid adventurer himself and served the Spanish Imperial Service as an engineer and was 1st Marquis of Osorno.

Bernardo, born in 1778 in Chillán, Chile, was the illegitimate son of Ambrosio and Isabel Requeleme, daughter of Don Simon Riquelme y Goycolea, a member of the Chillán council and ruling class.

Although born out of wedlock, Ambrosio financially provided for his son, but either he never met his son, or didn’t face him until 1788, depending on what source is read. Ambrosio might have wanted a family, but it is thought that it was improper for Isabel to marry outside her class, because her paramour was then just a junior military officer, or because her parents didn’t want her marrying a man not of her heritage.

Bernardo grew up in his mother’s area and used her surname until his father died. Isabel married Don Félix Rodríguez, an old friend of her father’s, and who was considered a better match for the upper class Isabel. Ambrosio O’Higgins continued his professional rise and became Viceroy of Perú.

Bernardo was sent to London as a teenager to complete his studies, where it is believed that by absorbing the principles of American democracy and independence, he was inspired and developed his own nationalist pride for Chile. Also, while in London, Bernardo met a Venezuelan idealist and joined a Masonic Lodge that was dedicated to achieving independence for Latin America.
O’Higgins traveled to Spain from England in 1798 but was held up from returning to South America because of the French revolutionary wars. After his father died in 1801, Bernardo was left a large parcel of land, the Hacienda Las Canteras in Chile.

Once he returned to Chile in 1802, he adopted his father’s surname and became a gentleman farmer. In 1806 he was appointed to a council, then after Napoleon took over Spain, the elite of Chile formed a government to rule in the name of imprisoned king Ferdinand VII. O’Higgins was instrumental in beginning this quest for national independence.

O’Higgins joined the revolt against the now French-dominated Spanish government. Chile’s leaders were not in favor of Joseph Bonaparte’s control in Spain so they formed a self government, with the goal of restoring Spain’s power, on the 18th of September 1810, a day that was to be known as Chile’s Independence Day.

O’Higgins, who continued to be in the pro-independence camp, was elected a deputy to the first National Congress of Chile in 1811. The anti-Royalist camp in Chile was deeply split along lines of patronage and personality, by political beliefs, and by geography (between the rival regional groupings of Santiago and Concepción.

As a result, O’Higgins was to find himself increasingly in political and military competition with a political rival, José Miguel Carrera. Much of O’Higgins’ early military knowledge stemmed from Juan Mackenna, another immigrant of Irish descent and a former client of Ambrosio’s, whose advice centered mainly on the use of cavalry. O’Higgins’ more experienced rival led the battle in 1813 to resist the Spanish government, who wanted to reconquer Chile.

By this time O’Higgins was retired from the army due to poor health and was back on his estates. But when he heard about this invasion, his mobilised his local militia and marched to Concepción meeting up with Carrera and given orders. O’Higgins was successful in cutting the Spanish off, which earned him a promotion, but following a badly performed siege weakened his commander’s reputation. Still, O’Higgins bravely battled on against the royalists and at the Battle of El Roble took control and rallied the troops.
“Lads! Live with honor, or die with glory! He who is brave, follow me!”

Although he was injured, the Junta in Santiago reassigned command of the army from Carrera to O’Higgins, who then appointed his father’s old friend Mackenna as commandant-general. Carrera was subsequently captured and imprisoned by the royalist forces. In his absence, O’Higgins supported the Treaty of Lircay in May of 1814, which promised a halt to the fighting. Once released, however, Carrera violently opposed both O’Higgins’ new role and the treaty, overthrowing the Junta in a coup in July 1814 and immediately exiling Mackenna.

O’Higgins and Carrera fought against each other in another battle, but they decided to join forces again after the royalists were planning to ignore the treaty and threaten Concepción. However, because the competing commanders didn’t stay on the same page of the plan, the royalists were victorious. O’Higgins was not going to go out with a whimper though, and shouted yet another rally cry to the troops.

“Those who can ride, ride! We will break through the enemy!”

O’Higgins, Carrera and other nationalists languished in Argentina for three years while the royals were in control. One of O’Higgins’ loyal supporters was killed by Luis Carrera in a duel in 1818, deepening the rift between the two nationalist families.

After exile, O’Higgins, along with an Argentinean general, returned to defeat the royalists in 1817. While approaching the border of his homeland, O’Higgins was seized by passion and once again defied the plan of attack, charging with 1,500 troops. The patriot forces lost 12 men in the battle, but an additional 120 died of their wounds. In another battle the nationalists won, and although another commander was offered the position of power in the newly-free state of Chile, Higgins accepted it instead and became the leader of an independent Chile as Supreme Director in 1818. The next year Chile proclaimed itself an independent republic, a goal fulfilled for the nationalists.

O’Higgins’ feud with the Carreras, however, continued, which led to José Miguel Carrera’s imprisonment and eventual execution in 1821. By allowing this to happen, many Chileans turned against O’Higgins’ leadership.

Regardless, for six years O’Higgins was a largely successful leader, and his government was a success at first. He established markets, courts, colleges, libraries, hospitals, and cemeteries, and began important improvements in agriculture. He also undertook various military reforms and founded the Chilean Military Academy in 1817, aiming to professionalise the officer corps. He also founded the modern Chilean navy and other military operations. O’Higgins continued in his desire to see independence across Latin America, using his new forces to support the liberating expedition to Perú.

O’Higgins’ plans for liberal reforms and democracy were opposed by some powerful groups, losing the support of the church, aristocracy and business people. In what might sound familiar to the modern Irish, the government of the still-emerging country became bankrupt, forcing O’Higgins to negotiate a £1 million loan, Chile’s first foreign debt. A massive earthquake in central Chile also devastated part of the country.

Rebellion rose up when citizens in southern Chile were suffering from famine and neglect, unlike their more affluent countrymen in the capital of Santiago. Out of apparent desperation to win hearts and minds, O’Higgins established a new constitution in 1822 but many accused him of abusing state power and becoming dictatorial. A conservative coup, led by another of his former allies, forced O’Higgins to resign in 1822. In his typically theatrical manner, he defiantly bared his chest to sacrifice himself.

But instead, and perhaps robbing his hope for martyrdom, the Junta saluted O’Higgins and he was made governor of Concepción. However, he only served as such for a short while and intended to return to Ireland, the land of his patriarchal ancestors. In a ‘stopover’ in Perú, he ended up meeting Simón Bolívar, who encouraged him to join his nationalist movement there.

Bolívar’s government granted O’Higgins the Hacienda de Cuiva and the Hacienda Montalván in San Vicente de Cañete, near Lima. O’Higgins lived in exile for the rest of his life accompanied by his illegitimate son, Pedro Demetrio O’Higgins, his mother, and his half-sister Rosa Rodríguez Riquelme. Bernardo may have also had a daughter, Petronila Riquelme O’Higgins (b. 1809) by Patricia Rodríguez, according to a 2001 documentary.

O’Higgins joined Bolívar’s army in its final liberation of Perú, but was disappointed that he was only appointed a mere general and court-martial judge for the Chilean volunteers. He started to return to Lima, but upon hearing of Bolívar’s victory at the Battle of Ayacucho, he returned, not wanting to miss the action. Once again in his melodramatic fashion, O’Higgins offered a congratulatory toast to the new Peruvian leader.

“Señor,” addressing Bolívar, “America is free. From now on General O’Higgins does not exist; I am only Bernardo O’Higgins, a private citizen. After Ayacucho, my American mission is over.”

Next, O’Higgins endorsed the integrationist policies of the Perú-Bolivian Confederation in 1836, which threw him in the bad books.
of Perú. In the meantime, the Chilean government enticed O’Higgins to return as a captain-general in the Chilean army. However, while en route to Chile in 1842 he became ill and was ordered to return to Lima, where he died, aged 64, on the 24th of October 1842. He was first buried in Perú but repatriated to Chile in 1869. His body remained in a marble coffin for more than 100 years until it was transferred in front of the Palacio de La Moneda in 1979, ordered by Augusto Pinochet. He is now finally laid to rest in the underground Crypt of the Liberator.

Despite his history of rather questionable military tactical decisions, O’Higgins is widely memorialised today, both in Chile and beyond. Villa O’Higgins, a village in Chile, was named in his honour, along with a national park, plus Santiago’s main thoroughfare. A statue of Bernardo O’Higgins in the city of Concepción was destroyed during the devastating 2010 earthquake in what was his spiritual home.

Sydney, Buenos Aires, Spain and Costa Rica also celebrate his memory. Richmond, in London, where O’Higgins studied, has a statue, plaque and annual Chilean Embassy ceremony in his honour. Dublin also displays a plaque in his honour in Merrion Square, as does Sligo, at the Garavogue River walkway.

Chile’s highest award for a foreign citizen is in honour of O’Higgins, as are several of the country’s naval ships. The memory of O’Higgins is even lauded at the South Pole, where Chile’s research station in Antarctica bears his moniker.

For the Irish, it is notable that O’Higgins was keen on people from Ireland to settle in territories around Trujillo, in northwestern Perú, and the Apurimac River. He frequently promoted immigration for the Irish to South America in correspondence with Sir Thomas Hardy, a British doctor: arthur, George, Thomas and Victor.

An Post, in partnership with the Chilean Post Office, issued stamps in 2010 to commemorate the bicentenary of the war for Chilean Independence, honouring the two men of Irish roots, John MacKenna and Bernardo O’Higgins, for their influential roles in the country’s struggles.

As that O’Higgins’ life was played out like a spectacular theatre performance, worthy of Wagner, it is no surprise an opera was composed about him in 1949 by the American composer Henry Cowell. The libretto, written by Elizabeth Harald, was never orchestrated nor staged, but if it was, it would be quite a production, bursting with Latin drama and daring.

‘Forward-thinking’ Fentons in Patagonia

In 2011 the American news channel CNN broadcast a story about Richard Fenton, a sheep farmer, in Patagonia, the southernmost tip of continental South America. Richard is the fifth generation of Fentons, referred to as “forward-thinking farmers,” to live in this seemingly desolate place, which on an atlas appears nearly at Earth’s end. The area the family had settled in was called Monte Dinero, or ‘Money Mountain’ by gold prospectors, and sheep were soon introduced. Many generations later the Fentons are still tending sheep in this location, producing sustainable high-quality wool and meat that is in demand around the globe, and promoting tourism.

Castletown doctors of medicine

The family’s first profession was in medicine. Richard’s great-great grandfather Arthur Fenton came to Argentina from Ireland in 1885 to become Santa Cruz province’s first medical doctor. Arthur married a wealthy widow and began living on her homestead “overlooking the rough seas at the mouth of the Strait of Magellan,” according to CNN. Arthur, was born in the townland of Castletown to Michael Fenton (1817-1873) and his wife Jane McCloghy. The large Protestant family had lived in Sligo for about 130 years, having originally come from Wicklow. All four of Michael’s sons had qualified as medical doctors: Arthur, George, Thomas and Victor.

Thomas Fenton was born in 1850, Castletown, Sligo. He married Mary McMunn (1847-1929) in 1875 in Bath, Somerset, and after becoming a medical doctor was the first Fenton to travel to the Magellanese territory in 1875.

For a fascinating glimpse into his new life, a transcribed letter to his mother dated July 3rd 1885 can be read online at the British Presence in Patagonia: http://patbrit.org/eng/events/r1885fenton.htm.

In 1877 Thomas Fenton assisted victims of an artillerymen’s revolt in Punta Arenas. He narrowly escaped death in 1881 when the HMS Doterel exploded at Punta Arenas. For having served so well, plus performing a particularly big favour to the local government, (involving amputating the governor’s wife’s leg on the lawn of his own home), Thomas was awarded a vast tract of land near Laguna Casimiro. Not sure what to do with it, but coming from farming stock, he got together with another landholder and went off to the Falkland Islands to buy some sheep. The two men effectively thus started the Patagonian sheep farming industry, which was at one time the largest in the world.

At the time Punta Arenas was a penal colony on the Straits of Magellan and the southernmost outpost of Caucasian settlement in the world. After the development of steam navigation, the Straits
became the fastest and safest route to the Pacific coast of the Americas. Nobody had formally claimed the Patagonian territories and the penal colony at Punta Arenas was the only white settlement for 1,000 miles in any direction when Thomas arrived. The Chilean government was recruiting people to help turn the place from a colony into a proper city, not least to prevent the Argentinians dominating the area. Perhaps Thomas had answered an ad in the English or Irish classifieds or been inspired by the likes of founding father of Chile, Generalissimo Bernardo O’Higgins.

Thomas and his young wife Mary McMunn, daughter of Dr. James McMunn from Killeenduff, arrived in the Magallanes territory and had several children in Punta Arenas, including Thomas, born in 1876. Thomas Gerald also grew up to qualify as a medical doctor and became the medical officer of Easkey. He married Ida Angelino McMunn of Seafield, but sold his inherited residence of Castletown and its contents through the Land acts and relocated to the UK, according to McTernan.

The other children of Thomas and Mary included Constance Violet, Mabel Helen, Michael Claude Magellan, Virginia Rose Sylvia and Geoffrey Arthur. Geoffrey Arthur was reportedly very close to his elder brother Magellan, who named his only child Michael Arthur Fenton. Thomas knew the rest of his family in Ireland were being challenged by land reform laws so around 1885 he found Arthur a job as a doctor in the new Argentinian colony of Santa Cruz, about 150 miles away on the Atlantic coast. But sadly, by the time Arthur arrived, Thomas had died in 1886 of pneumonia, apparently contracted while going out in a blizzard to deliver a breech-baby.

Greenshields

Arthur Wellington Fenton, the brother of Thomas, was born in 1861 in Castletown. In 1891 in Wolverhampton he married Emma Louisa Greenshields (née McMunn), the young widow of Scotsman Thomas Greenshields. (Incidentally, Emma was the sister of Mary McMunn.)

Greenshields had been the owner the Monte Dinero ranch in the Santa Cruz territory, which Arthur took over, even he had been working as a successful doctor. Arthur and Emma had three children: Hubert born 1893; Geraldine born 1895, and Victor born 1899. Arthur returned to the UK and lived there until he died in 1942, although these dates have not been verified.

Meanwhile, Emma’s sister Mary, widow of Scotsman Thomas Greenshields, married Arthur’s brother Thomas, adding to genealogical confusion. The newly blended family developed ‘Fenton Station’ into a booming business.

Ben Fenton, Thomas’s great-grandson, wrote for a 2007 edition of The Telegraph of both his father and grandfather being born and raised on Fenton Station’s 250,000 acres, an isolated ranch 80 miles north of Punta Arenas.

“Theyir sheep flocks were counted in tens of thousands and they clung tenaciously to their little bit of Empire through economic boom and bust.”

Victor

Richard Fenton, whose great-great-grandfather first came to Argentina in 1885 is continuing the pioneering tradition but in an environmentally sensitive way.

As an ‘eco-pioneer’ concerned with the wider community of the world and its future, Richard introduced a new system that constantly rotates the sheep to different pastures, thus allowing the grass to regenerate. There are now 120 farms in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, part of a network which fosters innovation in sheep breeding and land management across South America, thanks to the Fentons. Richard also has been among the first in Argentina to promote ‘agro-tourism’ from his estancia (landed estate or ranch) to globetrotters curious to hear how “an English-speaking Irish family has thrived in a remote but wonderfully wild part of Spanish-speaking Argentina.”

“What we are really trying to do here is imitate what Mother Nature used to do -- which is the natural herding of the wildlife,” said Richard.

The visionary Fenton family has been held in high regard since adopting their new country in the 19th century, jutting from the edge of the world. A memorial plaque located in the Municipal Cemetery in Punta Arenas reads (translated):

“This monument symbolizes the gratitude of the people of Magallanes to the late Dr. Thomas Fenton. Erected to his memory in homage to his fine qualities. Punta Arenas, October 2nd, 1886.”
‘Eureka!* Thar’s gold in them thar hills’: The Hales’ California connection

With contributions by Gregory Daly

It’s a long way from Ireland to California, but the Hales of Templeview amassed their fortune as capitalists in America’s ‘Golden State,’ and contributed generously to the Easkey community.

Templeview, built by Peter Hale in 1855, represents another class of landlord. During the time of c.1858 Griffith’s Valuation, a building was listed at this location owned by Peter Hale and leased to George Fenton. Although the Hales were an old family who made a number

of advantageous marriages (including the Howleys), they were Catholic business people, rather than landed ‘blue bloods.’ The Hales held merchant interests in the town of Sligo and also made a considerable fortune through businesses in central California, the territory of which received land in 1848 from Mexico through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

Peter Hale came back to Ireland a wealthy man and established himself as a significant landowner in the locality of Tireagh, listed as owning 2,952 acres in 1876. The Irwin estate in Killeenduff was purchased in the Landed Estates Court in trust for Peter Hale, then of New Orleans, for £4,100, according to McTernan. He died young so his nephew James, who was manager of his uncle’s businesses in California, returned to Easkey and was a Grand Juror and High Sheriff of Sligo in 1869.
Chapter 4 - West Sligo’s Threshers and Scutchers

The Hales have rather of a ‘Wild West’ history in California as being amongst the first settlers in the Santa Clara Valley, located between San Jose and San Francisco, where there were many large wheat and cattle ranches. Joseph P. Hale, in fact, was one of the largest land owners, not just in California, but in the whole west of the United States. He married the daughter of a large Spanish grant holder and bought 2,000 acres of Donna Juana Biones’ original ranch, becoming one of Los Altos’ earliest large land owners, according to Patricia Leach in her study of Los Altos history. He and four other of the Hale families lived on the Hale Ranch, which was on the Adobe and Permanente creeks, with hills to the south.

Beginning in 1856 these original Santa Clara settlers, in addition to mining for gold, diversified into creating an “orchard economy” growing prunes, apricots, peaches, cherries, pears and other fruits at a huge profit, for as much as $200 per acre, according to Leach.

“The American settlers transformed the valley into fields and orchards mined for maximum profits. Families such as the (Hales) dominated the economic and political life of the valley during the 1850s, creating a landed aristocracy,” according to Leach. (p. II-12)

Most unjust though, members of the local native American tribe of the ‘Bay Area,’ the Ohlones, suffered and were probably displaced by these white settlers. Their population was replaced by Mexicans and European immigrants working as cooks, servants, labourers and farm support, who had challenges of their own.

“...these early immigrants to Los Altos were vital to its growth. Often faced with economic hardships or discrimination, the immigrants joined together in order to achieve their goals.” (Leach, p. II-21)

Back in Ireland, James C. Hale, regarded as of the ‘new rich’ and probably viewed with some disdain by the old landed aristocracy. As there is little documentation regarding his standing within this landowning class, his appointment as Sheriff points to a reluctant shift in the old hereditary status of aristocracy in post-Famine Ireland, in spite of the values of the old landowning class who regarded wealth based on trade and commerce as something of an unwelcome innovation. Interestingly, Templeview is the only house of the four included in the Easkey area for this chapter which still stands more or less complete.

In 1906, Peter’s grandson, James H. Hale was recorded as the occupier of property, as well as other buildings, including a mansion house, in the townland of Killeenduff valued at £32. In October 1906 more than 700 acres of the Hale estate was vested in the Congested Districts Board, according to McTernan.

James Hale of Templeview paid for the building and furnishing of a schoolhouse for the benefit of children of Killeenduff, according to Gerard Donagher in his historical account of Easkey schools. The school was established in 1866 and had 21 male pupils (with girls integrated soon thereafter), with a salaried teacher and provision for books for 130 pupils. Most remarkably, James Hale himself acted as manager, as opposed to one of the local clergy, going against convention. After he died his wife took over in 1875, which was also a highly unusual and progressive arrangement in Ireland. Furthermore, the school also offered evening classes, “exclusively secular,” every day, from 6 p.m. to 9.30 p.m.

However, the school was fraught with problems including low attendance, poor finances and teachers being reprimanded, and sometimes let go, on a frequent basis by the Hales, who must have ruled with a iron hand. Their apparent strictness is evident by the roll records, now kept at the National Archives.

According to this roll journal entry of 7th June 1883, a teacher received a harsh warning.

“Teacher severely reprimanded for general unsatisfactory answering of his pupils and for neglecting to make his 2nd and higher classed pupils write a copy everyday they attend school and that he be cautioned to teach agriculture in future in accordance with the programme.”

The Hales also provided funds for many other charitable causes in the Easkey area, such as funding for a church.

“Tradition is kind to (James Hale) as a good landlord and a liberal benefactor of all worthy causes.” (p. 469, McTernan)

House for sale

After the Hales sold much of their property under the Land Acts, Templeview was the home of a parish priest, stewards and acted as police barracks and doctor’s surgery dispensary, according
to McTernan. He also wrote that an extension was added to the rear of the house around the turn of the century but demolished after 1940 to reduce annual rents by the owner. Since then the once beautiful “gentleman’s residence” house has fallen into dereliction, but would be a challenging yet worthy project for a DIY enthusiast. Its new owner could shout ‘Eureka!’

As of July 2013, seaside Templeview is listed for sale in the amount of €350,000 on daft.ie. It is described as a detached house on 12 Castle Street with five bedrooms and one bathroom. The selling points should include ‘riveting California dreamin’ history’ as a bonus.

* ‘Eureka!’ is California’s official state motto, from the Greek, ‘I have found it,’ and reputed exclamation of Archimedes after finally figuring out the method of detecting the amount of alloy mixed with the gold in the crown of the king of Syracuse. It was also declared by many of America’s 19th century ‘Gold Rush’ miners on the discovery of gold.

Bucks and Threshers

By Gerry Donagher

Gerry Donagher is a retired principal of Easkey Vocational School and author of From Slate to Mouse: A History of Schools in Easkey and has many memories of the West Sligo area connected with the ‘Big Houses,’ some of which he has generously shared in this project.

The Fortland estate consisted of about 2,000 plus acres of land. There were about 100 homes in the village of Easkey, with many of the people employed in Fortland. However, when the estates were sold out to the Land Commission, the people depending on the estates for their living were no longer employed. In order to survive, countless had to emigrate to the U.S., Canada and Australia.

By people going abroad to work, they often brought back new traditions upon returning, if they did. County Sligo is particularly famous for its unique brand of traditional music. Michael Coleman and James Morrison came from Sligo, and today there are festivals and summer schools in their honour to share and preserve this music. I came to Easkey from east Sligo, where I learned to play ‘trad.’ Traditional music is usually played in keys of G and D on the fiddle, but in Easkey some of the older men played many tunes in keys A and E. I often wondered why they played in these keys. It wasn’t until later I discovered that many men went to Scotland to work on farms harvesting potatoes. They learned lots of tunes there and brought back the Scottish style (keys) and tunes. Scottish bagpipes were apparently tuned to the key of A and the fiddle and other instruments would have to play along with them in that key.

A well-known Irish fiddle player was playing in Scotland and met up with an equally famous Scottish player. They were playing together in G and D everything went well, but when the Scotsman played in keys of A and E, the Irishman found it difficult to play with him. He came home and learned the tunes in the Scottish style and was able to compete with the Scot the next time he went to Scotland.

Cooper’s Lodge

Edward Cooper, who owned Markree Castle, had a shooting lodge in the mountain in the 1600s above Dromore West. He was a cornet, the lowest rung of commissioned cavalry officers in the British army. When the Cromwellian wars ended and the Crown restored, there was no money to pay the soldiers who fought. The soldiers were given small holdings of land in Ireland as payment instead of cash. Cooper was in Coote’s regiment (Welsh) and most of the soldiers received land in this area. The soldiers were not anxious to come to Ireland at the time. Cooper then bought their shares of land cheaply and made an estate, first in Limerick, and then bought plots in Sligo from the soldiers he knew in Coote’s regiment.

There were big parties in Cooper’s Lodge, especially during shooting season, for all of Cooper’s visiting friends. The last caretaker in Cooper’s Lodge was murdered more than 100 years ago. He was beaten up and left in the street, so a policeman came along and investigated. The man lay dying and the policeman leaned down and put his ear to the man’s face. The man said something to the policeman and then passed away. It was never known what the policeman was told. The lodge is in ruins now.

The ‘Bucks’

Many of the soldiers who had attained land as payment took possession of lands in the area and built fine houses and mansions, referred to in several sources such as John C. McTernan’s. Some of their sons were gentlemen of leisure and formed little private clubs.
of their own. Their informal motto was, ‘Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die.’ They had their own haunts and spent their nights drinking and gambling, etc. They were commonly known as ‘Bucks’ and many Irish tunes refer to them by name, such as “The Bucks of Ballisodare” and “The Bucks of Oranmore.” A memorable occasion occurred in Sligo when a stranger dropped into an inn in Sligo, a rendezvous of a club of Bucks, and asked for food. However, there was nothing but cold meat. He asked for the dish of fine grouse already cooked. The waiter told him it was for the gentleman (the Bucks) upstairs. The visiting stranger insisted and sat down to the meal. The waiter told the Bucks upstairs and they were outraged. They cast insults on the stranger, so he challenged one to a duel. Then he gave them his card – he was a noted ‘fire-eater’ (duellist) from Galway. At the first fire he lodged a pistol ball in the shoulder of the Buck he selected, who was to serve for him forever after as a souvenir of the occasion.

An ecumenical debate

In 1824 a controversial discussion took place between three Catholic clergymen and four Protestant ministers in the Catholic chapel of Easkey on the 23rd and 24th of November chaired by Michael Fenton, Esq. in the presence of more than 600 people.

The discussion came about when Fr. Devins P.P. of Easkey observed a group of people gathered around a gentleman new to town. He was an evangelical minister holding forth his view of religion. The parish priest invited him by message to a discussion on the moot points between them. The challenge was accepted and after some negotiations the original arrangement was modified. Three priests, Fr. Devins, P.P., Fr. Lyons and Fr. Hughes agreed to meet the four ministers, Messrs. Jordan Murray, McKeague and Urwick.
“The question to be discussed being the propriety of the indiscriminate reading of the Bible and the right of private judgment in its interpretation and making it the sole rule of faith.”

The end result of this forum is not known, but this may possibly have been one of the first inclusive, ecumenical gatherings of its kind in Ireland.

The ‘Threshers’ of Fortland

The Fenton farm grew corn and potatoes. They would bring in corn to the haggard (Old Norse-Irish term: an enclosure beside a farmhouse to store crops) and build it in stacks and leave it for a month or so to season before thrashing it with a flail to remove the grain from the straw.

At that time the landlords owned the land and the people were only tenants and could be evicted, sometimes without cause. The people organised in the country and formed the Land League to fight their cause. Groups of Land League members such as the ‘White Boys’ would go round at night and harass the landlords.

One group was known as the ‘Threshers’ and they went to the landlord’s haggard at night, and unknown to him would thresh some corn and take it away and leave him the straw.

Two men were caught in Fenton’s haggard and hanged at the bridge in Easkey as an example to all. Mr. Fenton was a magistrate and had the power to have a person hanged. He also had a man hanged near Easkey for stealing an ass.

An ‘Able’ pun

A man by the name of Hastings from Quaker’s Hill, New South Wales, Australia, wrote to me seeking information about his grandfather, William, who lived in Easkey. According to the c. 1858 Griffith’s Valuation William leased 25 perches from Godfrey Brereton (who was probably an agent or middle man), worth 10 shillings. Among other items of information gleaned about William Hastings and Easkey include:

- He was a carpenter by trade.
- Fr. P. Flannelly, P.P. owned a lot of land in Easkey in the 1800s and was considered an ‘able’ dealer where land was concerned.
- Fr. P. O’Kaine was the curate in the parish as well at this time.

Money was probably scarce, so William Hastings made good use of his carpentry skills. He was commissioned to make a small table for the Catholic church in Easkey. When he had finished and delivered the table, there was no money forthcoming. Eventually one morning as people were going into Mass, a notice was posted on the door the church. It read:

“I made a table for Cain and Abel (‘Able’ dealer)
Furniture for the house of God
When I asked Cain for payment
He said he wasn’t able.
And when I asked Abel
He said he’d give me work in Carrownrod (on his lands).”

It is not known if William Hastings was ever paid for his carpentry work.

Murder and Mayhem at Rathlee House

By Carmel Whitty
with contributions from the Cowley family

The Boithrin Glas (‘green lane’) today is a quiet country lane abundant in different types of flora and wildlife and there is nothing much to indicate its importance as a landed gentry seat in Sligo from the 1600s up to 1913. There is also no sign of its violent past amongst the colourful wildflowers and bird life.

Entered from the R297, the Boithrin Glas is the first laneway on the right hand side after the Rathlee national school travelling towards Enniscrone. It was one of the three gated entrances to Rathlee House, or the ‘Big House,’ as it was called.

Rathlee was for centuries an important seat of the O’Dowd chieftains of Tireregh and occupied during the early 17th century by the...
McDonnells. Rathlee was granted after the Reformation to Captain William Ormsby. Rathlee House was a mansion in the Georgian style (1714-1830), which has been described as a three-story six-bay house, according to John C. McTernan. The house faced east, towards the Ox Mountains, and was said to be cold with an eerie atmosphere, due to the ‘moaning’ winds off the Atlantic, at least to its last owner, Hastings Jones.

The ‘Big House’ was serviced by two wells; one at the gable of the house was 80 feet deep and decommissioned when the house was being demolished, as the gable fell into it. The other well was approximately 300 yards away and is known as ‘The Big House Well.’ It is a limestone spring well. When the big house was in full swing the water from this well was pumped to the yard. A man was employed to operate this pump.

In a lease dated 1727, it is recorded that Mathew Ormsby released one-quarter of the lands at Rathlee to Mathew Junior, for the term of three lives. At the turn of the 1800s, Nicholas Fitzgerald came into possession of the lands of Upper and Lower Rathlee, worth £1,200 per annum, by a decree of the Court of Chancery. Fitzgerald then sublet the estate and in 1814 a lease recorded the house at Rathlee as the residence of Michael Fitzgerald. Dorothea, the daughter of Nicholas Fitzgerald, married Thomas Hewitt, of old Bond Street, London. The Hewitts then came into possession of Rathlee and leased it to Philip Atkinson, according to McTernan.

In 1822 Rathlee House was raided and bank tokens taken, according to McTernan. In 1823 atkinson’s carriage was ambushed at the Boithrin Glas entrance, where he was robbed. He only escaped with his life when the assailant’s guns failed to fire. The gentlemen of the locality put up a reward of £150 for information leading to their capture.

One night in 1825 Jack Madden, an agent for atkinson, was robbed of a roll of bank notes and murdered as he left the big house by the door of the high wall. Madden collected the rent from the tenants of the estate. He was despised in the area due to being suspected of acting as a spy for Atkinson. Madden was buried alive in a shallow grave and was discovered three days later, with one of his hands coming up out of the ground. Six local men were arrested and were charged with his murder. Two of the men, by the name of McDonnell, were convicted and sent to the penal colony of Van Diemen’s Land in Tasmania. Those men were innocent but a sheebeen (illegal pub) keeper in Cabragh was either bribed or blackmailed to testify against them.

A song was written about this incident and one of the lines goes something like this, “they never saw his face, they never killed Jack Madden.” Ironically, the man who was supposed to be responsible for killing Madden died from gangrene, after a horse cart wheel ran over his arm.

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In 1822 Rathlee House was raided and bank tokens taken, according to McTernan. In 1823 atkinson’s carriage was ambushed at the Boithrin Glas entrance, where he was robbed. He only escaped with his life when the assailant’s guns failed to fire. The gentlemen of the locality put up a reward of £150 for information leading to their capture.

One night in 1825 Jack Madden, an agent for Atkinson, was robbed of a roll of bank notes and murdered as he left the big house by the door of the high wall. Madden collected the rent from the tenants of the estate. He was despised in the area due to being suspected of acting as a spy for Atkinson. Madden was buried alive in a shallow grave and was discovered three days later, with one of his hands coming up out of the ground. Six local men were arrested and were charged with his murder. Two of the men, by the name of McDonnell, were convicted and sent to the penal colony of Van Diemen’s Land in Tasmania. Those men were innocent but a sheebeen (illegal pub) keeper in Cabragh was either bribed or blackmailed to testify against them.

A song was written about this incident and one of the lines goes something like this, “they never saw his face, they never killed Jack Madden.” Ironically, the man who was supposed to be responsible for killing Madden died from gangrene, after a horse cart wheel ran over his arm.
Next generation was ‘electric’

Philip Atkinson (1826-1898) was born in Rathlee House on 15th June 1826 to Philip Atkinson and Ann Leech. Philip Jr. emigrated with his family to Chicago, Illinois, USA and was one of the first to have electricity in his house. He wrote several books on electricity, including *Electricity for Everybody: Its Nature and Uses Explained* (1899). Philip married Lucy Campbell and had eight children. He passed away on 13th October 1898 in Chicago.

House for let

In 1844, the six-bedroom house and 253 acres were advertised for letting by Thomas Hewitt. They included a corn store capable of holding 300 tonnes of grain, a kiln, a kelp store, an extensive farmyard and an enclosed garden, according to McTernan.

At the time of Griffith’s Valuation, Thomas Jones was leasing the property of land, house and offices to John Christie from Dublin. They consisted of 253 acres, 2 roods and 10 perches at Rathlee, barony of Tíreraigh. The house was valued at £18 and the land was valued at £195. John Christie was married to Nicholas Fitzgerald’s other daughter, Sarah Frances. It is believed that John Christie was both a landowner and a soldier, according to his grave inscription at St. Anne’s Church in Easkey.

The Sligo County Directory of 1862 indicates that John Christie was a man of some standing in the county. For almost 30 years he was active in local affairs as County Magistrate and Grand Juror. He was also a generous contributor to local relief schemes, according to McTernan. Within the local community the Christie family played a significant role. The beautiful marble baptismal font and pulpit in St. Anne’s Church in Easkey were donated to the church by the Christie family.

The inscription on the baptismal font reads as follows:

“To the Glory of God
And in loving memory of
Samuel Morris Fitzgerald Hewat M.A.
Who died at Rathlee House
23rd November 1902.”

The inscription on the pulpit reads as follows:

“To the Glory of God and in Memory of
Dorothea, Widow of Thomas Hewat,
Daughter of Nicholas Fitzgerald
of Rathlee House.
Died 6th August 1885. Aged 76 Years.
Erected by her Son,
Samuel Morris Fitzgerald Hewat
of Rathlee House”

John and Sarah Frances Christie were buried in St. Anne’s churchyard in Easkey. When Sarah Frances Christie died in 1900, the headstone, in three sections, was imported from England for the grave in St Anne’s; the pieces were landed at Sligo Docks. The Land War was in full swing, led by Michael Davitt and Charles Stuart Parnell at that time. There was a lot of unrest and agitation in Rathlee. This was mainly because the people wanted the land divided. Therefore, anyone that appeared to be helping the gentry would become a target.

Mike Begley from Rathlee, an employee of Rathlee House, was bringing a horse cart full of grain to sell in Sligo. He agreed to bring back the stones for Christie’s grave, at a good price. When he reached Lougheeds in Dromore West, he left his horse and cart there and walked home to Rathlee to avoid suspicion. The following night at 3 a.m., he returned to Dromore West to collect his horse and cart and delivered the stones to St Anne’s. Himself and another colleague attended Mr. Christie’s funeral in St Anne’s, which is a Church of Ireland Church. Because of this, they were not allowed to enter a Catholic Church or attend any ceremony until they received absolution from the Bishop of Killala, in Ballina.

The inscription on the Christie gravestone reads as follows:

“In memory of
John Christie
Of Rathlee: in this Parish
Born 10th Sep. 1820. Died 1st July 1889
Also of Sarah Frances His Widow
Who Died at Rathlee,
August 13th 1900. Aged 86 Years
Life and times of the ‘Big House’

This picture was taken outside Rathlee House in 1882-83 and shows two young boys on ponies. The boy on the black pony is a Christie, Fitzgerald’s grandson. The boy on the white pony is Peter Nealon, son of Peter and Bridget Nealon. He was employed in Rathlee House as a coachman and horseman for the Christies.

Peter would collect the Hewitts and Christies from the train station in Ballina and return them to Rathlee House. (Note the two variations of the surname Hewitt/Hewatt). He also would bring the gentry from Rathlee House out to Coopers Lodge, located on the Lough Easkey road. Coopers Lodge was owned by the Cooper family of Markree Castle in Collooney. They also frequented Lough Conn, in County Mayo. They would stay there for up to a week, hunting, shooting and fishing.

Other local workers in Rathlee House

- In that era Dudley Hanley and his family were herdsmen for the ‘Big House.’ They lived on the main road near the Bolthrin Glas entrance and had a cattle pound there.
- The Sheridan family were the gate keepers to the Bolthrin Glas entrance.
- The Kennedy family were gatekeepers for the west entrance; descendants of that family still live there, namely Michael John and his wife Molly.
- Gordons/Begley operated the gates to the northerly entrance, now the home of Hughie O’Brien.
- The 1901 Census of Ireland shows a Samuel Morris Hewat from Cork City as householder of Rathlee House. Also in the house on census night were Michael Lavin, a male servant; John Mullowney, a butler; and Ellen Campbell, a cook.
- Besides the servants living in the house at this time, numerous local people were employed there. These included herdsmen, milkmaids, farm labourers, laundry maids and coachmen.

After Samuel Morris Hewat died in November 1902, Henry Roper Curzon Hewitt, a retired Lieut.-Col., from Hereford, became beneficial owner of Rathlee House and lands. Henry Roper Curzon Hewitt sold the house and demesne lands to Captain Henry Hastings Jones, eldest son of Major Thomas Jones of Ardnaee, according to McTernan.

In the 1911 Census of Ireland shows that Rathlee House was occupied by a Samuel Smyth, aged 21, a single man from County Cavan; he is listed as a caretaker. (National Archives of Ireland).

In 1913 Jones came to an arrangement with the Congested Districts Board, whereby he sold Rathlee to the Board and received Fortland in part exchange, according to McTernan. The land was divided among the local farmers in 1916. A buyer was sought for the house, but to no avail. Consequently in 1923, the slated roof was stripped and sold, together with the stones of the building. In the local area, a number of lofts and houses were constructed with the salvaged materials from Rathlee House. According to local Rathlee man, Tony Jones, a cart of stones from the remains cost six shillings to purchase. ‘Big Mike’ Dowd, a local builder, recalled bringing many a cart of stones from the ‘Big House’ in Rathlee at that time.

If walls could talk

The walls that surrounded the orchard, built with a lime sand mix, are visible and the only physical indication of the presence of Rathlee House today.

These ‘stirabout’ walls were constructed during the Famine, as part of a national construction initiative offered by residing landlords to tenants in exchange for paid work. The men were fed a mix of maize meal and porridge oats, referred to as ‘stirabout.’ Although Rathlee House has now been demolished, the cobble-stoned farmyard is still visible inside those walls. If only these walls could talk, there would be tales of Irish chieftains, gentry landlords and their hard-labouring workers, robbery and even murder.
There’s not too many landlords in Ireland who would have been celebrated with a parade led by a marching band playing “Let Erin Remember,” but John Shiel Howley (1835-1911), the owner of Cooga Lodge, enjoyed that honour during Ireland’s turbulent Land League era.

Howley, “hailed as a ‘model’ landlord,” was lauded by his tenants after he gave a quarter percent reduction in rents and cancelled all arrears in 1886, according to John C. McTernan.

To show their gratitude, the local Land League band and residents marched to Cooga Lodge, also referred to as Cooga Manor, with an address.
“In his reply the considerate landlord told the assembled crowd that his action was prompted not only by a desire to alleviate the hardships they were experiencing but also a wish to live in harmony with them.” (McTernan, p. 67).

Howley told The Sligo Champion he was delighted about Ireland’s future of Home Rule and that “landlordism was on the way out and that the land was being transferred to the people, the rightful owners.” (McTernan, p. 67).

It is no surprise then that Howley, who came from Welsh stock, was elected unopposed in 1899 as a member of the Sligo County Council for Easkey.

Previously Howley served as a colonel in the 4th Regiment of Foot abroad, including India. The Howleys, of Bonniconlon, in addition to being “important” land agents, were also “influential members of the local education board in Ballina,” (p. 66, Donagher) parts of which at the time were part of County Sligo (east of the Moy River). During the difficult post-famine years, even though he was absentee part of the year, he was known to be a benevolent landlord.

In the 1937-1938 national schools folklore collection project, now called the Schools’ Manuscript Collection kept in the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin, J. O’Kane, a student of Dromore West National School, was told by his elders of how Howley periodically checked on the condition of the houses of his tenants.

“When he found (the houses) dirty or required white-washing, he paid for lime to have the work done,” said O’Kane. (Póirtéir, p. 202)

Schools for the community

Col. Howley also provided land for creation of the Owenbeg National School in 1844 to educate the regional children. He also gave land for Clooneemore National School (1839), according to Gerard Donagher, retired principal of Easkey Vocational School and author of From Slate to Mouse: A History of Schools in Easkey Parish.

Before 1831 education in Easkey was “unorganised,” because Catholic children were denied this right. What education existed, which was primarily the ‘three Rs’ (reading, writing and arithmetic), was taught through ‘Hedge Schools’ secret rural places located in barns, cabins and private homes, according to Donagher. A school in Rathmore was described as being in a “wretched cabin” and the teacher was paid £3, 10 shillings, with no assistance received, according to the 1826-27 education survey of Ireland. (Donagher)

Enlightenment runs in the family

John Shiel Howley’s progressiveness was preceded by Patrick Culkin Howley, an attorney, magistrate and High Sheriff (1868), who purchased the 180 acres of the Cooga Lodge estate, originally part of the Jones’ Fortland properties, in the Landed Estates Court in 1855.

P. C. Howley practiced innovative farming by breeding pedigree cattle and holding annual sales of livestock at Danesfort or Old Fort on the estate. He also dabbled in land reclamation, among other projects, according to McTernan.

McTernan adds that the Howleys wed into some of County Sligo’s Protestant ‘Big House’ families, but also with a Gaelic clan, and were known to be forward-thinking people and were considerate of their tenants, more than many landlords of that era.

“They intermarried with the MacDermots of Coolavin, the Hales of Templeview House and the Cogans of Lisconny, were liberal in politics and in Famine times widely noted for their benevolence to the poor and destitute.” (p. 66, McTernan)

Cooga Lodge an ‘agreeable residence’

Patrick Culkin Howley (1805-1872) purchased the Cooga lands in 1855, according to McTernan, although the house may have been built in 1838 by Edward Howley, of Ballina, who also constructed a gate lodge, farm offices and a mill.
19 (perches) of which about 450 acres are cultivated; the remainder bog and moor.

O’Donovan gives an account of the different variations of the townland names as follows.

Coogicoran and Coogilegan, Down Survey (map)
Quige, Mr. W. Strong, Ardvally
Cugue, Mr. Groves, Cess Collector
Cogi McLaughlin, Down Survey (reference)
Cog mac Laghlin Keagh (map)

‘McLaughlin’ or ‘MacLaughlin’ may be derived from the name of a Cromwell soldier, who was transplanted on to the Cooga lands, but then sold them to one of the Howley ancestors.

According to the 1858 Griffith’s Valuation, Patrick Howley lived in a steward’s house at Cooga, which was valued at £4, along with 300 acres of land. By 1906 the house was the property of John Howley, and was valued at £26. (Landed Estates).

Cooga Lodge was described as being 2-storey, 3-bay slated 19th century residence with central mullioned (divided) window, rounded doorcase and one-storey annex, three miles inland from Easkey, according to McTernan.

In a March 1864 issue of The Sligo Independent, Cooga Lodge is depicted in pleasant terms as the seat of Edward Howley.

“(Cooga Lodge is) a new agreeable residence, well situated and bids fair to become one of the most attractive residences in that part of the country.” (McTernan, p. 66)

The Name Books are available in manuscript form on microfilm at the NLI. There are also typed transcripts of the name books for many counties at the NLI (reference number IR 9294203). The NLI collections include the counties of Northern Ireland. The books are divided by county and alphabetically by civil parish. Microfilm copies for Ulster are at Queen’s University in Belfast (Mic. A/1-13).

Some of the Name Books provide the following additional information for townlands:

- Name of land owner
- Number of Catholic and Protestant families
- Name of the major lessor
- Terms of tenure of the tenants
- Major surnames in the townland

The Name Books may also provide information regarding townland sub-denominations and geographical features within the parish; (The Irish Times: Irish Place Names and the Immigrant: Sources)

Cooga folklore

Compiled by Carmel Whitty

The following story about the Howleys of Cooga Lodge was shared with Carmel Whitty by Nora Walsh.

The Howleys were Catholic land agents born in Bonniconlan, and built Belleek Castle in Ballina. Thomas Howley was educated in England and joined the British army, where it is said he bought his title of colonel. However, he was a very talented man with the sword and gun, he was a champion marksman. It is said that while in India another colonel asked him to swap his regiment for an estate in Sligo and Howley accepted the offer. Within one month he had recruited and trained another regiment, who fought and won a famous victory in battle. Shortly after this Howley returned to his newly won estate in Cooga, Co. Sligo.

Like many landlords of his time, there are many stories told of good and bad deeds. It is said that he was very lenient to his tenants, when the crops failed and they had no money to pay their rent. It is also said that he evicted tenants, when he wanted to expand his own farm.

The Landlord of Cooga Lodge

The following story was collected from John Kelly, Cooga, a student in the Clooneenmore school 1937-38, taken from the national schools
folklore scheme, now called the Schools’ Manuscript Collection, in the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin.

The Landlord

A landlord whose name was Colonel Howley lived in his home which is called Cooga Lodge. The tenants lived close to his home, and as he wanted to enlarge his farm, he evicted his tenants even though they had paid their rent up to date, and took all the good clay land to himself. Then he transferred them to bog land that was useless two miles away from his home. They had to drain the reclaim the cut away bog trying to make land for themselves. Their farms from that day out were part of the landlord’s estate. Their houses were knocked down, and the stones were used for building walls round his estate. It was a sad sight to see these poor people and their families evicted, and transferred to sad houses with boggy land and nothing but heather growing in it. The people now point out the ruins of their old homes.

This is how Colonel Howley got possession of the land in Cooga. One of Cromwell’s soldiers was transplanted and a man name McLoughlin (McGloughlin) got his land. Then he got sorry and he sold the land to one of the landlord’s ancestors for five pounds and a horse to take him to the railroad station. The land was handed down from father to son until Colonel Howley became heir. It is said that once when Fenton of Castletown, who was the local magistrate, was arranging to hang a man, Colonel Howley interceded and personally went, to somewhere in May, to another magistrate with higher powers, to get papers signed to stop the hanging. Fenton was anxious to get on with the hanging and was not going to wait for the documentation.

A rider with a loose horse one side of him went in search for Howley. From the hill at Oghill the rider spotted Howley at the county road in a place called Spotfield, when he met up with Howley. Howley’s horse was fatigued and covered in a lather of sweat. Howley mounted the fresh horse and rode as the crow flies, over hill and hollow, until he reached Easkey, where Fenton was about to proceed with the hanging. Once Howley arrived and produced the papers, the hanging was stopped. It is said that Howley evicted tenants, and Father Flannelly represented those tenants in court, which was held in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary.

Father Flannelly addressed the court with a speech that included the following, ‘It was on the 25th of March, the day our Lord was crucified on Calvary, that Colonel Howley evicted the tenants of Cooga.’ With that Father Flannelly struck the bench and shook all in the court up, after that the Howleys were hospitalised from the shock. It was the Howleys who sponsored the grandfather of Patrick Kavanagh to become a teacher. He also built Clooneenmore School in 1839 after
the government passed an act compelling landlords to provide an education for their tenant’s children after Catholic Emancipation in 1829, won by the great Daniel O’Connell. When the final rents were being collected, the tenants thanked Howley. He is said to have told them, ‘It is not me ye should thank but Michael Davitt.’”

Landlordism had come to an end in Ireland, thank God for Michael Davitt, writes Carmel Whitty. The final resting place of the Howleys is Kilgarvin old cemetery in Bonniconlan, Co. Mayo.

**Letters from Dan Feeney, Cooga, Easkey parish to Thomas Burns, Jr. in America**

Dan Feeney was a schoolmate of Thomas Burns, Jr., presumably just before Thomas travelled to America in 1849 with his parents. The Burns family had a farm in Cooga townland, Easkey parish, and Dan apparently lived nearby. All of the Burns children could read and write, and Dan’s letters confirms that Easkey, at least, was a literate area at a time when County Sligo overall was said to have been 80% illiterate.

In May 1866, when Dan wrote his first letter to Thomas, he wrote from ‘Cooga Jones,’ the portion of Cooga townland that at one time was owned by Robert Jones, Esquire. But he says ‘Howley,’ presumably Patrick Howley, had been the owner for six years, so apparently P. Howley owned all of Cooga after 1860. Miss Benson of Ballysadare was Mary Anne Benson, Thomas’s first cousin, who operated a store there; while Pat, Mark and JS presumably were other Feeneys.

Dan’s second letter was written from Albany, New York, and shows that sometime between 1866 and 1870 he migrated there to stay with an uncle.

He was not happy with his new life, missed Ireland, and was asking for help to move to Watertown, New York, where Thomas and the other Burnses lived. Watertown apparently was the Mecca for many who left Easkey.

Dan’s second letter was written in October 1870, but unfortunately Thomas had died the previous April.
Postmarked from Dromore West 1866

Dear Thomas,

You must think it verey quere to think wone of your shool boys thought of you so long. Let me now how ye ar all getting a long and let me now how your father and mother is getting a long. I wood be happy to heer fro my old agentence. I (w)as in with Miss Benson. She is well and has a very good shope there at Balsodare and has fine groser shop. Please let me now the way of the countrrey. I do depend So muth you. I am determent to go Shortly, I wad be gan ther but the reports of ware an pleas (war and plagues). I am first plow mane ther for the 6 yeares howley is the master man ther he is coming to live ther and the people may beg before they plase heme.

The way of Cooga I mane to let you now the hole farme is west(?) an in large feeldes. So you must think it verey qere now Thomas you must think I wood be hapey to now how you and John is getting long in perteceler an I ame verey proud how well miss Benson is seted.

The wages but very small 6 shilenes a week Pat 5 shilenes Mark the Same bu J S confined to the bed last 20 weekes. My father an mother sendes ther cinde regards to ye all I hope you will excuse my writing this time plase write soone Ireland is the lonelest plase in the hole worlde good by this time but I hoep it won't be the last with the asesance of God. Dan Feeney

October the 28, 1870

Mr. Burnes

Dear Sir I ame more thene surprised you did not ancer the kind letter I sent you. I would be happy to heer frome you or any member of the Fameley the cost of riting is not so mutch and you that can rite so well. I have a letter from home last week and father and mother would be as glad me to go ouste to your place if you would Reckmend me to go ouste there under Mark sendes his blessen to you and every member of the family. I have a letter from Aunt Bridget and she wishes to be remembered to you and all the family and She wants to know who is your sister Marget married to and what is her husbands’ name as your Brother would not ask for me that is John that was a great ferend of mine whene small and young but I am in a in a hurry this time but I hope you will anser this soone and if you can get a good farmeres jobe for me I will go as I can do all sortes of farmeres business all sort of mashinerey in fiel or barn. I won’t say nomore until I heer frome you Dear Friend. I don’t lik Albany the pay is to small and the Board is hige (board is high) and I don’t see what I could mak of my time. I would go home but for shame sake. I hope you won’t minshe (mention) in your letter when you right Derecked (directed) your letter to me and I will gete it at the offes (office) as I pass the offes every day

Uncel (uncle) or his folks mus not know I sending this

Good by this time but is yours truly

Dan Feeney

From the mouths of babes: Children’s folklore

By Gregory Daly

A useful source of information concerning folklore with regard to landlords is the National Schools’ Folklore Scheme of 1937-38. (The collection can be accessed online through University College Dublin).

Now called the Schools’ Manuscript Collection, this was a nationwide project which was initiated with a view to collecting any material relating to local lore from primary school children. This material was very broad in scope and recorded by older members of the community. Although generally speaking, there is less relating to landlords in the collection than other topics, but still there is a surprising number of relevant stories from the Easkey district. These came from Easkey National School and St. Anne’s National School.

The folklore around landlords paints a negative picture with the gap between ‘the people’ and the landowning class apparently very wide. The religious divide also features prominently. The following is a selection from the Schools’ Manuscript Collection, in which estates as Castletown, Fortland and Templeview are mentioned by the children.

Stories

Castletown Wood was formerly in the possession of Mr. Fenton and now it is in the hands of Mr. Conway. There was a lovely orchard on it. It was divided amongst the people. Fortland Wood is a nice one also. It extends from Easkey to the workhouse in Dromore for about four miles. There is a lovely big house in the middle of it. People from England used to visit it every year. People stood for a few weeks fishing and shooting in it. Captain Jones owned it at first, but last year a man called Mr. McGinley bought it. Fortland Grove is noted for the excellence of its timber and that is why the present owner Mr. McGinley bought it. He is a contractor in Dublin and he has men cutting timber there at present. There was another grand grove in Templeview but when the land was divided among the people some of
I have heard of no cross animals, only a white horse that Fenton had, and every time he smelled a person, Fenton said he was a papist and would be slain.

Betty Gillespi
Easkey National School
14/11/1938

There is an old fort in Michael Kevaney’s field. The passage runs from the fort under the ground and ends up in Castletown House.

John Edward Glennon
Easkey National School
11/07/1938

Placenames

The Commons: Wasteland along the shore for the tenants to spread wrack on.

Bun Abhainn: “Bottom of the river”. It is land that was divided among tenants.

Geraldine Gibson
Easkey National School
27/05/1938

A landlord whose name was Colonel Howley lived in his home which is called Cooga Lodge. The tenants lived close to his home and as he wanted to enlarge his farm he evicted the tenants even though they had paid the rent up to date and took all the good clay land to himself. Then he transferred them to bogland that was useless two miles away from his home. They had to drain and reclaim the cut away bog trying to make land for themselves. Their farms from that day out were part of the landlords estate. Their houses were knocked down, and the stones were used for building walls around his estate. It was a sad sight to see these poor people and their families evicted and transferred to sod houses with boggy land and nothing but heather growing in it. These people now point out the ruins of their old homes. This is how Colonel Howley got possession of the land in Cooga. One of Cromwell’s soldiers was transplanted and a man named McLoughlin got his land. Then he got sorry and he sold the land to one of the landlords ancestors for five pounds and a horse to take him to the railway station. The land was handed down from father to son until Colonel Howley became heir.

(No name)
Killenduff
Allín Dubh (school)
Cluainnín Mór

Ellie Curley
Easkey National School
10/10/1938

Between our school and the sea is a very pretty residence called Templeview. There are many stories about this nice house, told by the old people. Unfortunately it has been built between two forts. One tale told if it is when the men were building it, a man dressed in black appeared to the builders and said: “You are doing great work here”. And the men said: “We are. “Well the man you are doing it for will not enjoy it long.”

Marjorie Violet Day
St. Anne’s National School, Easkey
14/11/1938

There is also an old chapel in Castletown. No part of it remains now only the four walls and arched windows. There is an old story about the chapel in Castletown. It is said that a cow gave birth to a calf in the chapel. Not far from the chapel lived people named Fentons, and the land around the chapel belonged to them. One day Mrs. Fenton went into the chapel to see the cow and calf and when she saw the calf she said it was a priest. Sometime afterwards, one of the Fenton’s servants went out to bring them in, but when he arrived in the chapel the cow and calf were dead. The old people of that district have the conclusion that it was on account of what the woman said that killed the cow and calf. This woman was a Protestant and she hated the Catholics.

Maggie Gibson
St. Anne’s National School
09/01/1939

Jones was the landlord in Rathlee. He has a cousin Colonel Knox, and these two men were very harsh and cruel. Mr. Fenton was the landlord over Castletown. He had a grandfather and the grandfather was commander of the English yeomen. He treated the Catholics very harshly and cruel. Mr. Fenton used very high rates on the farmers that had only 2 or 3 acres of land.

Ellie Curley
Easkey National School
10/10/1938

Betty Gillespi
Easkey National School
14/11/0938

Tom Curley
Easkey National School
28/01/1938

There was another great burning in Fortland where Mr. McGinley resides now. It was owned by Mr. Brinkley at that time. There was a well near the house and Mr. Brinkley would not let the people take water out of it and he closed the gate. The Easkey parish priest went up to the well and some person broke the lock and it was not long after that until his house was burnt to the ground.

Ted Murray
Easkey National School
14/02/1938

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Maggie Gibson
St. Anne’s National School
09/01/1939

them sold the timber and some burnt it and now it is nearly all cut away.

Tom Curley
Easkey National School
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Easkey National School
27/05/1938

A landlord whose name was Colonel Howley lived in his home which is called Cooga Lodge. The tenants lived close to his home and as he wanted to enlarge his farm he evicted the tenants even though they had paid the rent up to date and took all the good clay land to himself. Then he transferred them to bogland that was useless two miles away from his home. They had to drain and reclaim the cut away bog trying to make land for themselves. Their farms from that day out were part of the landlords estate. Their houses were knocked down, and the stones were used for building walls around his estate. It was a sad sight to see these poor people and their families evicted and transferred to sod houses with boggy land and nothing but heather growing in it. These people now point out the ruins of their old homes. This is how Colonel Howley got possession of the land in Cooga. One of Cromwell’s soldiers was transplanted and a man named McLoughlin got his land. Then he got sorry and he sold the land to one of the landlords ancestors for five pounds and a horse to take him to the railway station. The land was handed down from father to son until Colonel Howley became heir.

(No name)
Killenduff
Allín Dubh (school)
Cluainnín Mór
I was told how Jones of Woodhill prosecuted three women for gathering up the tops and ends of the turnips left in the turnip field after the turnips were pulled, before being put into pits or brought into the yard. I was told it was common to see women and even men in the turnip fields gathering and taking home the tops and bottoms of the turnips cut off when the turnips were pulled and cleaned.

Ormsby gave orders to his men, it seems, that they were not to be ‘too careful’ about the cuttings of the tops and bottoms of the turnips, so that a share of turnips might be left attached to stem and leaves, and to the root, for the hungry who came to gather them.

Jones on the other hand gave orders that nothing was to be left. I was told that a man found stealing a turnip or turnips on Jones’s land was shot dead by him or some of his employees.

Ormsby owned a great portion of the land of this district. If the bread winner of a family died, I was told that he never asked for rent from the widow until a son or somebody else was able to take the place of the bread winner. If a tenant owed him £20 in rent, he often accepted £5 as a total payment. He had very few evictions. The result was that he and his tenants were always on good terms. But with the rent the tenants were obligated to do ‘duty-work,’ to give so many days in each month gratis.

J. O’Kane, Dromore National School, Dromore West, Co. Sligo (From Schools’ Manuscript Collection in Famine Echoes, p. 202)
Old Ghosts of Classiebawn

By Joe McGowan

Like ants we were, or worker bees, and just as susceptible to the whims of wind and weather as we shook out the hay on warm summer days, or feverishly made ‘lappings’ if rain was on the way. Most of the time it was. Above us, Classiebawn, that great impressive hulk of Mountcharles sandstone built in the 1860s by twice Prime Minister of England, Lord Palmerston, looked impassively down. Vying for attention with Benbulben and Maeve’s Knocknarea, those majestic natural landmarks, it failed — but only just.

Too busy with concerns of crops, cattle and survival in the hungry ‘50s, we knew nothing of the castle’s history, and cared less. Classiebawn’s owners then, the Ashleys, were absentee. The Bracken family were gamekeeper/managers on the estate: bachelor Watty, Jules and his wife, and their daughter, Yvonne. Wearing tweed knickerbockers, jackets and hats, their manner of dress alone pointed them out as different to everyone else in the area. Their relationship with the villagers in Mullaghmore was a Jekyll and Hyde one. On pitch-black winter nights they patrolled the Classiebawn estates with shotguns and flashlights, protecting Lord Ashley’s rabbit warrens. The local poachers with carbide lamps and hounds played cat and mouse with them. Sometimes the poachers won and carried off a haul of rabbits; sometimes the Brackens succeeded and the miscreants were forced to plead their case before a hard-faced D.J. in Grange District Court.

When morning came it was business as usual. Men who skirmished with the gamekeepers and stole the landlord’s rabbits the night before now went to the Brackens for permission to cut a load of firewood in the Classiebawn woods. A cartload of timber cost five shillings. It was all very civilised, a game almost, and no one thought it odd. It was as if nothing at all had happened the night before. The Brackens kept a dairy too. When our cows ran dry we bought milk, and sometimes delicious salty home-made butter, from those people who were so different from us, but in a sort of detached way, were yet a part of our community.

Old ghosts live there now, but I remember the Bracken family for the efficient and homely dairy they kept, for well scrubbed flagstone floors, for the smell of fresh buttermilk, for the men’s strange tweed hats and baggy plus-four trousers, for Mrs. Bracken’s kindness to a small boy, for the fresh milk we bought when our cows went dry, for the rich, salty taste of their delicious homemade butter. Sights and sounds so commonplace long ago, exotic now, but etched forever in a child’s mind.

Hordes of shooters with tweed knickerbockers and shotguns came at appointed times of the year to shoot pheasant and wild duck frightened towards them by ‘beaters;’ lines of local men employed for the day to flail the grass and bushes. Led by Jules and Watty they halled and scoured, flushing concealed birds to an artillery of shot, and hoots of victory. The victor’s prize the crumpled feathers and tasty flesh of fallen pheasants.

These expeditions did not always pass without incident though! At the turn of the 19th century a large and noisy crowd had gathered at Grange Petty Sessions, Co. Sligo. They had come to support Patrick Boyce of Mullaghmore, a tenant of Lord Ashley’s, who was up before the court charged with assault. Outside the courthouse armed police patrolled the crowd who had gathered to jeer and shout abuse at the R.I.C. and landlord agents. The authorities feared a riot as the case had attracted huge attention in the countryside.

Boyce, the prosecution claimed, had attacked a party of shooters headed by Lord Ashley as they crossed the fields in search of game.
Charles Barker, the agent on behalf of Ashley, told the court that Boyce was mowing in a field when the huntsmen crossed the fence in pursuit of game. Boyce had confronted the party as they attempted to pass blocking their path; he had first threatened them and then attacked the party with his scythe.

Boyce denied the charge saying that he had just tried, in a peaceful manner, to prevent the party from crossing his field. His meadow and potato crop would be trampled and destroyed by the horses and hounds. His pleas falling on deaf ears the judge decided the case against Boyce and committed him to prison for six weeks. The crowd outside were batoned and dispersed by the R.I.C. while Boyce was taken away and lodged in Sligo jail. Crowds gathered and bonfires blazed throughout the countryside to welcome the still defiant Boyce when he was released some weeks later.

Another local episode in landlord/tenant relations concerns the Healy brothers. Pat, Owen and their mother lived in a little two-roomed, thatched house with earthen floors across the road from the Classiebawn estate. While owning little themselves by their own fireside — and a constant thorn in the side of authority. Fishing a Greencastle yawl to earn an uncertain living, a small plot of land behind the house provided them with the essentials: potatoes, vegetables, hay, oats and rye. Although lacking in formal education they were very well versed in natural lore and local history. Pat, the last native Irish speaker in Sligo, was 91 years old when he passed away in 1951. In addition to Irish he spoke English and French, or at least enough French to impress his peers who had no French at all. He had great respect and love for nature at a time when people paid no attention to such things and whose efforts were often bent to trapping thrushes and blackbirds for the dinner table.

The family matriarch Mrs Healy lived to be 100 years old. A native Irish speaker, she had not a word of English and often told Pat of a tragedy that befell the family during the famine years. Pat told the story to his neighbours and to a collector from the Department of Irish Folklore in 1950. He was over 90 years old at the time.

In order to alleviate the effect of the blight Pat’s father and his neighbours cut down the contaminated foliage, plus a ridge or two of those adjoining, and removed the stalks to a corner of the field. Smallholders lit fires to purify the air, all to no avail as, ‘the big potatoes melted’, leaving nothing but rotten shells and ‘poheens’ (tiny potatoes). A small patch of Healy’s ground remained blight free so with great delight the family gathered these potatoes into a pit, a clay-covered heap, to keep for the spring. When the winter passed they went to bring the potatoes into the house only to discover they were gone. The outward appearance of the heap remained the same as the pit had been shored up on the inside with stones to conceal the theft. Pat recalled his mother telling him that, ‘the household cried in despair when they discovered the cruel wrong they had come to.’

My father and other neighbours spoke well of the brothers and, indeed, sometimes admiringly. Pat was a gentle man, no one ‘ever heard him cursing or swearing’. Although having no children of his own he was good to youngsters of the village, they said. He gave them pennies, imitated the blackbird’s song for them and encouraged them to talk the Irish they learned in school. Stories of Pat and his brother’s exploits passed many a pleasant hour around winter firesides:

‘Y’know the hÉalais were the only ones in Mullagh that didn’t sign up their rights to the crowd up in the castle.’ they’d say with a smile and a hint of pride. ‘If it’s a landlords shot a pheasant and it landed on the hÉalais land they couldn’t go in after it. They tried it one time an’ Owen chased them with the pitchfork! Ashley took him to Grange court but damn the hate they he could make of him because he hadn’t signed off his rights!’

There was no limit to the variety of ways in which the Healys outwitted the castle and their agents. Owen, having once decided on a modest expansion of his property, requested permission from Lord Ashley to move his boundary wall a bit closer to the road. He explained that he wanted to plant an extra ridge or two of potatoes. Having so little land it would mean a lot to him. On being refused he was quite indignant. After all, he complained to anyone that would listen, the landlord’s entire wall was close to the road and he had thousands of acres. So why couldn’t Owen move his fence out that had only two! Having failed to get permission fair and square he decided to skin a cat by other means.

When cropping time came, access to the field was gained by opening a gap in the stone fence to admit the ass and cart. Now, each year, he made an opening in a different place; rebuilding the wall a few feet at a time he moved it out, little by little each year. Ashley’s agents eventually noticed. They came to chastise Owen, ordering him to move the ditch back to where it was. Owen held his ground and made what he felt was a reasonable case: ‘Why don’t you move your ditch back? Haven’t you more land than me?’

In time the entire wall was moved: a small victory, but a victory nevertheless. The wall’s irregular contours can yet be seen, a monument to the past and to the spirit of Pat and Owen Healy.

Out in front of Healy’s home, across a little grassy lane, was a plantation of sycamore trees belonging to the Rt. Hon. Wilfrid Ashley. Pat and Owen saw possibilities for expansion there too. There would be an awful fuss if they went out and cut the trees down so, according to local lore, they quietly bored holes in the trunk, inserted nitre, plugged the holes and waited. The trees soon died and had to be cut down. Pat applied to the estate manager and had no trouble acquiring the trees for firewood.
The plan was going well so the brothers pitted their potatoes on the now open space where the trees once stood. It seemed a harmless enough move, but, through time, by virtue of using the property, they established a legal claim to it. If left undisputed for a number of years the ground was going to go by default to the ‘trespassers.’ After a while they thought they might hurry things up a bit so they asked Ashley to cede or sell the piece of land to them. Stung to action by another refusal they called a meeting of adjacent plot owners who, under the leadership of the dauntless brothers, decided to take the initiative. They would fence in and take control of the whole plantation, an area of about twenty acres.

This plan went well — until it came time to put the confiscation into effect. This required the Healys and their accomplices to go into open defiance of the authorities. As time went on people thought about the inevitability of legal retribution and the consequences of failure. They dithered and dallied. When it came time to buy the fencing wire they fell away and the plan came to nothing. Years afterwards the committee, older and wiser and with benefit of hindsight, regretted they didn’t follow through. They saw the wisdom of the Healys plan and lamented a missed opportunity that just might have succeeded. The open space in the wood, where the Healys pitted their potatoes, can still be seen across from where their house once stood.

Letters discovered on a visit to the landlord’s archives in the Hartley Library in Southampton, England, revealed another side to Pat Healy. It showed a man who was prepared to play the two sides of the fence and use whatever guile was necessary to achieve his ends. We can only speculate as to whether Pat’s admirers knew he was buttering up the landlord in such a seemingly servile manner. This letter was probably sent prior to their attempted annexation of the woods:

Pat Healy Mullaghmore, March 10th 1928

Dear Mr Wilfrid Ashley,

I write to you these lines hoping to find you well and in good health as the departure of this leaves us well at present, thanks be to God. I am asking your Honour if your Honour would be pleased to sell the bit of a plantation that is pending on at our door. I would pay your Honour by the year or else the money down, but by the year it would be best, the fishing has greatly failed in Mullaghmore but just for a while in Summer time. So this bit at the door would be for setting a little potatoes in it. It would do if your Honour would be pleased, my division of land is small and I feel it more since the fishing failed.

I will be obliged and thankful to your Honour for ever and ever so now I must say goodbye to your Honour for this time but I hope you will kindly answer this letter. As I have already said Mullaghmore is the same old way as just when your Honour seen it. It is very lonely looking since the houses was burnt. That made it lonely and poor also, and put a great lot of earning out of the poor people’s way. I lost very severe as I had the boating of some great families but great thanks to them they are very good to me all the time. I hope the great God will assist in goodness to them.

I am your truly obedient servant, Patrick Healy, Mullaghmore, Co. Sligo Ireland

Another story concerns the landlord’s pheasants that roamed free and knew no man-made boundaries. They were always guaranteed a welcome and a tasty meal on Healy’s plot where the brothers left down oats and small potatoes to tempt them. It was a trap! The potatoes had hooks inserted that were attached to a string that led down the potato drills to an outhouse. Any pheasant tempted by a free meal on Healy’s land was in for an unpleasant surprise. It was promptly and unceremoniously reeled, in a flurry of feathers and loud squawks, to the waiting Pat who quickly despatched it.

The trail of oats was another false promise that ended in a concealed trap and another nutritious dinner for Pat and Owen and their aged parents. The Brackens, successors to Barker that prosecuted Patrick Boyce, knew what was going on but all they could do was bluster. They couldn’t enter the property and could never catch the brothers in the act. This is all the more surprising, and a tribute to the men’s cunning, when we realise that the gamekeeper’s windows looked directly down on the Healy’s’ land and cottage just one field away!

A different slant to the story emerges in another one of Pat’s letters on deposit in the Hartley Library. Here there is no mention of poaching but a claim of quarrels with his neighbours in defence of Ashley’s birds. He has managed to build up a big head of steam about the damage they are, ostensibly, doing to his crops:

Mullaghmore, January 6th, 1913

Dear Mr. Wilfrid Ashley,

I write your Honour these lines hoping to find you in good health as the departure of this leaves us in good health at present:

Thanks be to God I was speaking to your Honour at Classiebawn about the pheasants, and so also did Mr. Bracken offer 4 shillings to my mother which she did not take, and did not think it in any way honest or just for the damages and cares that me and my mother got from protecting them pheasants in our field. We were sure that we would get from your honour something fair and just and honest, as usual.

Now I stopped all people from firing stones in to my field at your pheasants and I got into a scrimmage about it from the effects of stopping them, and if I had permission or a pay from your honour I
would make it dear on them. Your Honour knows well they have not far to come, your Honour knows the distance very well. No man can know it better.

The corn is not worth speaking about from the depredations of your fowl. So now I must say goodbye to your Honour. My mother says she should get in proportion to the damage.

I am, your obedient servant,

Patrick Healy, Mullaghmore

A dense fog of time and neglect has closed over these tantalising glimpses of another era and we are left to fill in the gaps ourselves. Did Pat ever get his stipend for ‘protecting’ the pheasants? How much did the neighbours know of his attempts of a cosy relationship with the landlord? We will never know.

What we do know is that Pat never got the desired piece of plantation. We believe the story about the wall because it still maintains a crooked vigil on the margin of Pat’s plot. The field that sustained life for the Healy family is not a field anymore but a parcel of sites and holiday homes. The little stone ditches demolition is imminent and few will regret its passing or know its story. The only memorial to its existence and Pat’s labours of defiance will be a few lines on this page.

Republicans were billeted in Classiebawn during the War of Independence. Hostages were once taken and held there to secure the release of condemned IRA prisoners, Johnson, O’Shea and MacBride. The castle was mined with dynamite: any attempt at rescue and it would be blown sky high! If the Brackens noticed anything unusual in their patrols, and they must have, they said nothing. ‘Less said is easiest mended’ was an old country saying. Although they were in the pay of Classiebawn the people who lived in the small community at Mullaghmore were their friends and neighbours.

During the Civil War, soldiers of the new Freestate were stationed there. Many years later, the war a fading memory, Jules Bracken...
often stopped at our house. Leaning across the stone ditch my father — an active participant in the War of Independence and Civil War — and Jules talked for hours. About the concerns of small farmers I suppose: cattle prices, weather, will the turf be saved at all this year? Don’t mention the poachers — or the war!

Origins of Ownership

Lord Louis Mountbatten, Earl of Burma, last Viceroy of India, supreme Allied Commander in southeast Asia during World War II and great grandson of Queen Victoria, married Lord Ashley’s daughter, Edwina, in 1922 and so came into ownership of Classiebawn and its sprawling estate. Following the dispossession of the O’Connor clan in the late 17th century 10,000 acres of land was annexed by Edwina’s forebearer Sir John Temple during the Cromwellian confiscations of the 17th century.

Sir John was Master of the Rolls in Ireland — and a man of letters too. Following the rebellion of 1641 he wrote a book called ‘History of the General Rebellion of Ireland’. It was this account of the events of the Rising of 1641 that was taken thenceforth as a true historical record by loyalists — and justification by Cromwell for his excesses in his Irish campaigns. According to DeBurca it was “An outstanding success as a piece of propaganda it had the greatest impact of any book on Irish history. Because of its blatant sectarian nature and having as its objective the incitement of hatred in England against the Irish, it had the unique distinction of being condemned by the Irish Parliament and publicly destroyed by the common hangman in Dublin.” Under William of Orange, Temple was made Attorney General and Speaker of the Irish House of Commons.

A descendant of Sir John’s, Henry John Temple, the Third Viscount Palmerston, was the first of the line to visit his Sligo estates in 1808. It was he who commissioned the building of Classiebawn Castle on a hill overlooking Mullaghmore with magnificent views of the surrounding villages, sea, lake and mountain. Palmerston died in 1865 leaving the completion of Classiebawn to his successor the First Lord Mount Temple.

Palmerston’s greatest achievement and most useful contribution to Mullaghmore was the development of the beautiful stone harbour. It still serves the community well. Work on it began in 1822 under the direction of the engineer Alexander Nimmo. It was almost completed in 1841 when he wrote to a friend: ‘My harbour, which I have been obliged to enlarge lately, is nearly finished, and will now fully answer all purposes. It will be 800 feet in length by 300 wide and will have 13 to 14 feet of water at Spring tides… enough to admit vessels of 300 tons, as much as any harbour on the West coast of Ireland.’

An absentee landlord, his greatest failure was the treatment of his tenants during the Great Famine. During the summer and autumn of 1847, nine vessels, carrying over 2,000 persons left Sligo port with tenants evicted and “shovelled out” from his Sligo estates. The Canadian authorities roundly criticized him when this desperate mass of humanity arrived in Quebec province “half naked and totally destitute.”

In August 1979 Lord Mountbatten’s boat was blown up by the I.R.A. off the coast of Mullaghmore. Four died on that day: Mountbatten, his grandson Nicholas, Lady Brabourne and the boatman, Paul Maxwell. The castle and surrounding lands are now privately owned.

On the day of the killing, August 29th, 1979, Hugh Tunney then owner of Classiebawn, claims that young Knatchbull asked his mother, Lady Pamela Mountbatten:

‘Why did they do this to Grandpapa?’

Her enigmatic reply was: ‘Oh, they have their reasons son, they have their reasons.’
‘I have a place in Eire, Classiebawn Castle in County Sligo,’ Mountbatten told a gathering of the Empire Club of Canada in 1967, ‘and I and my family could not be treated with greater friendship by the Irish. My son-in-law’s grandmother was the Marchioness of Sligo who died not long ago at the age of 98. Shortly before the second election for which Mr. De Valera stood, Lady Sligo asked her head gardener:

“Do you think Mr. de Valera will be re-elected?”

“Of course he will, your Ladyship, after all it was the poor who got him elected last time, and there are many more poor now,” was his reply.

In Mullaghmore today the waters ripple peacefully around the assassination site near Oilean Ruadh. The mists of time have closed in and left no trace of the bloody event that occurred here so many years ago. Classiebawn has a new owner now. It still stands proudly atop the Fairy Rock and yet vies for magnificence with proud Benbulben and Maeve’s Knocknarea.

It still fails — but only just.

Childhood memories of the Lissadell Estate
By Leo Leyden

The Workshop
My grandfather James Waters began working on the farm of Lissadell Estate in the early 1900s. After a short while his prowess at understanding and fixing all things mechanical was noticed and he soon was brought to work in the estate workshop. The estate produced its own electricity from a water source — a fast flowing stream where the water was harnessed and diverted to a piston type mechanism. This became known as the battering ram mainly because of its in/out motion and also the loud noise this motion caused which sounded like a very loud boom-boom.
Because of this electrical source the workshop contained a number of working lathes and during the First World War made shell and munitions components for the allied war effort. It was also used to make metal parts and weld broken farm and auto machinery. James Waters could turn his hand to any of these jobs. There are a few stories handed down in the family about his prowess on understanding all of these new technologies nowadays we take so much for granted, such as mechanics, electricity and radio.

One of these stories concerns Sir Josslyn’s new Wolsely car. James was responsible for its mechanical upkeep. The head light system on the car consisted of two carbide lamps which which were fixed rigidly to the car and did not throw out a good light beam. James soon got to work in the workshop and inserted two electric bulbs in the head lamps which he wired back to the dynamo and battery through a series of wires, looms, fuses and a switch so that they did not use up all the battery’s power. He also mounted the headlamps on springs to absorb some of the rigidity while the car was in motion.

The new concept was so innovative that two representatives from the Wolsely factory in England came over to Lissadell to see the system working and upon seeing what he had done offered him a job back at the factory in research. Being so innovative his new system was modified and copied back in the factory. James declined the job and stayed at Lissadell with his wife Mary Kate (Feeney) from Grange whom he met when she came to work on the estate during the First World War. They went on to have a family of eight children some of whom went on to work on the estate.

Jame also made radio parts and constructed his own radios. People came from all around to hear the new technology – how sounds could be drawn from space. He also built his own motorbike on which he raced competitively and successfully in the Phoenix Park in Dublin. He also raced a car which he called the “Swift” into which he incorporated “Baby Ford” axles and brakes.

Not content with not having any electricity in his own home and after seeing the benefit of having it for work during the day James set about to remedy the situation. He made an electric wind powered generator which he secured to the top of a pole at the back of the family's estate cottage. This worked well for a while but when it was too windy he was unable to use it. He went on to design and make a new generator which had a tail fin and when it was too windy he was unable to use it. The family’s estate cottage. This worked well for a while but when it was too windy he was unable to use it. He also mounted the headlamps on springs to absorb some of the rigidity while the car was in motion.

The parish priest of Maugherow at the time was Fr. Malachai Brennan and the graveyard dispute

Until the 1830s most of the peninsula of Maugherow was owned by the Gore-Booth family with the Palmerston/Ashley family of Classiebawn/north Sligo owning the rest. The whole area was heavily populated and was served by two cemeteries both of which were on Classiebawn land. They were both badly positioned to serve as grave yards. One was right beside present day Raughley harbour and could only be accessed when the tide was out. Raughley probably derives its name from the old Irish word for cemetry ‘Relig.’ The other graveyard was in the townland of Ballinened near Ballyconnell on the southwest sloping hill facing Raughley. The area suffered from the blowing sands and after the night of the ‘Big Wind’ in 1839 the chapel and village and graveyard of Ballinened were covered by the blowing sand. In the 1830s there was a very bad outbreak of cholera in the Maugherow area. It was described as the worst stricken area in the West of Ireland.

The parish priest of Maugherow at the time was Fr. Malachai Brennan who came originally from Strokestown, Co. Roscommon. In 1829 he was removed to Maugherow which was then a separate parish from Drumcliffe. He became parish priest of Maugherow after two years and erected a residence on a plot of land, containing about six acres, about 100 yards from the present Lissadell House. The plot is still called ‘The Priests Field.’ He, along with another one hundred families (some estimates say 200) were evicted from Ballygilgan also known as the Seven Cartrons in Lissadell in order to make a bigger lawn for the Gore-Booths’ new mansions. Adding insult to injury, Fr. Brennan was offered one pound compensation if he pulled down his own house.
The Pomano

The clearances left a deep and painful scar that only in recent times has begun to heal. There is to this day a place near Ballygilgan known as ‘Cats Corner.’ It earned its name at the time of the evictions when, it is said, the cats of the area gathered there, also homeless. Desperate with hunger, their piteous cries could be heard for miles as they too sought vainly for something to eat or someone to feed them. Locals recalled seeing evicted families living in ‘scalpeens’ a shelter dug into a bank of earth that had no windows. A ‘shakedown’ of straw and rushes was used as there was no bed. They recalled a man named Jack McLean living in such sod house in Ballygilgan, ‘somewhere between Cooper’s and Frank Mc Gowan’s.’ The clearances at Ballygilgan are recalled in a now almost forgotten ballad:

“Many a pleasant summer day I spent in Maugherow,
And many a cold hard winter day at the handling of a plough.
Our rent was paid, we were not afraid,
But still we were forced to go
When they banished the Roman Catholic aboard of the Pomano.

Many’s the lad and pretty lass, that evening on the shore,
Lamenting for their own sweethearts, they’d never see them more.
They’re sailing on the ocean to a place they do not know
And they’ll mourn tonight for their heart’s delight
On board the Pomano.

The ship she was a rotten one, the truth to you I’ll tell
And they struck her on the Corraun Rock, right under Lisadell…”

And so it goes on…

The priest stood by his parishioners and sought a field from Sir Robert Gore Booth but there was none forthcoming. After many fruitless applications for a graveyard Fr. Brennan secured a field from a tenant who was fortunate enough to have a lease of his holding. After granting this favour to his pastor this same tenant was evicted by Sir Robert from another holding which he held from year to year.

Dangerous Liaisons

Another story told by locals concerns Sir Henry Gore-Booth, descendant of Sir Robert, who along with his close friend and butler Kilgallon spent most of his time sailing the North Atlantic. While he was away for long periods the task of rearing his five children and running the estate fell to his wife Georgina Mary who by all accounts was a fiery woman of no fear. Local lore recalls that she ordered her coachman at gun point to drive his horse coach around the cliffs of Knocklane while looking into the foaming waters beneath.
While Henry was away on one of his journeys which sometimes lasted over a year, Georgina Mary became very friendly with the new rector who persuaded her that he deserved the comforts of a fine house fit for his position being he was on such close terms with the family. On his return, Henry could not go against his wife’s wishes for her friend and comforter the rector and had a fine house built for the parson. His displeasure was evident though in that he had it built in the worst piece of land in his whole estate in a bog hollow at Ballinfull. It is now occupied by Dr. Klocke, a German dentist. The house has stood the test of time despite the boggy nature of the ground. Until Dr. Klocke moved in it was always known locally as the parson’s, even when derelict.

Lissadell House history in a nutshell

The impressive Lissadell House is one of Ireland’s finest country houses. It is situated outside Carney in the townland of Lissadell, 12 miles from Sligo town. The house is situated close to the iconic mountain of Benbulben and Sligo Bay.

This grand country house was built using Ballysadare ashlar limestone in the 1830s for Sir Robert Gore-Booth M.P. by London architect Frances Goodwin, in the neo-classical Greek revivalist style.
Lissadell House has great historic significance as it was the childhood home of Constance Gore-Booth, her suffragette sister, Eva Gore-Booth, and their siblings, Mabel Gore-Booth, Mordaunt Gore-Booth and Josslyn Gore-Booth.

It was also the sometime visitor, William Butler Yeats He immortalised the house in his work which adds to its historic and cultural significance.

The house was sold by the Gore-Booth family in 2004 and continues as a private residence.

Progressive farming at Rahelly House: Francis Barber as the ‘Model Farmer’

By Michael Feeney

By far, the most famous resident of Rahelly was Francis Barber, often times referred to as the ‘Model Farmer.’

Barber applied scientific methods to irrigation and produced bumper crops when other farmers around him were struggling. His expertise and hard work were noticed by the Gore-Booth family at nearby Lissadell. They gave him more land to farm each year. Ultimately, he built roads and other construction projects in the area and a beautiful house.

Francis Barber was one of the principal road contractors for the Grand Jury responsible for all the road works, including the Sligo to Bundoran Road, between the bridges of Ballydrehid and Bunduff. He had a fleet of horses and carts and gave extensive employment. Barber was also the contractor of the quay wall which extends from Hyde Bridge to Hughes’ Bridge, constructed as a famine relief work project.

In 1881, he secured a contract to build the Sligo Water Works also. But blasting in the north end of Sligo damaged houses in the area. Barber borrowed £5,000 from Sir Robert Gore-Booth to settle the...
Chapter 5 - ‘Great windows open’ in north Sligo

damages. The Gore-Booths foreclosed, even though the money was nearly paid back. Francis (Frank) Barber then built two houses on the Bundoran Road at Castlegarron.

He was extremely knowledgeable about his area and spoke before the Devon Commission of 1844, which was created to research problems and investigate land tenure in Ireland, such as unfair leases, with the view to reform.

When the Devon Commission sat in Sligo in July 1844, Francis Barber was amongst those invited to give evidence. In the course of the hearing he told the Commissioners that he had a holding of 160 Irish acres which he held under Sir Robert Gore-Booth, on a lease of three lives at a fair rent. He also stated that over the preceding 20 years he had laid out capital of £1,300 of his own money on improvements.

The following exchange took place, according to the Devon Commission report.

**Commission:** Francis Barber, where do you reside?
**F.B.:** At Rahelly, near Carney.

**Commission:** What is your occupation?
**F.B.:** A farmer.

**Commission:** To what extent?
**F.B.:** Perhaps I hold about 160 Irish acres of land.

**Commission:** What is the district with which you are well acquainted?
**F.B.:** I know the Barony of Carbury very well.

In September of the following year Thomas Campbell Foster, a commissioner appointed by *The Times* to study the condition of Ireland, visited the area and was very impressed by Barber’s industry and enterprise — his drainage, sub-soiling, ditching, planting and general improvements. He described him as “a clever, shrewd, active, respectable man,” who attended to his farm and work and unlike many of his neighbouring tenant farmers, did not involve himself in the politics of the day.

In a lengthy interview Barber outlined the background to his success.

“My father, William, occupied a farm of twenty-seven acres, under Sir Robert Gore Booth, for which he paid £40 rent. My father died before I was fourteen years of age, leaving my mother and ten children depending on the farm, and myself as a mere boy to manage it. My father was £183 in debt, and the whole stock was two cows, a heifer, and two horses; two-thirds of the farm was in wretched condition growing little beyond thistles and weed. The first year I expended £2, 15s. in draining a field: the following year I expended £4 on another field. Finding the benefit I derived from these improvements, the third year I spent £10 in draining. The following year I was about to carry out more extensive improvements in draining and trenching, but the people of the country and the neighbours went to my mother and advised her to prevent me laying out more money on the farm, as they said ‘I would destroy the family.’ My mother, in consequence, took the charge of the farm out of my hands. I begged for half an acre of rough land to manage for myself, and pursued the same plan on this half acre, the produce of which I sold the following year for a profit of £4. My mother then let me have another acre of waste land unfit for anything else. On this I expended £1 0 in draining and trenching. I had but this £4 and borrowed £5, and got credit for £1 worth of labour from a neighbour who helped me, thus making up the sum. This half-acre again left a profit of £4, and the crop on the acre of land sold for £???, I had thus cleared myself and had got an acre and a half of good land. My mother seeing that I succeeded, let me have two more acres of waste land. On these two acres out £16 in draining and trenching, borrowing part of the money, and the neighbours helped me, and I sold the whole produce of the three acres and a half for £15; the following year, over and above the cost of bringing in the two acres. My mother, finding that I had gained so much by the improvements, gave me back charge of the farm. I then continued improving to a greater extent, according to my ability, and I found the farm paid me for all my expenditure as I went on. The agent taking notice of my improvements and perseverance said I was entitled to have a larger farm and added fifty acres to the extent of the farm. I continued improving the remainder of the farm, and having laid out a large sum of money upon it, the landlord gave me a lease at a reduced rent of 4s. 6d. an acre. I continued this course, and landlord became so pleased with me that he extended my farm to 160 acres. The whole of this land I have improved, and has laid out upon it no less a sum £1,300, every shilling of which was created by my own industry. I have paid my father’s debt, supported my mother and her family, and, according to the custom of the country here, have given portions befitting to my sisters. As first one, and then another, of my sisters married off, I was often left without a shilling, in order to pay them their portions. From having a small farm at will, much of it swamp, and feeding snipe and wild duck, I have now got a large cultivated farm on lease, which will amply repay me all my outlay. I am now a substantial farmer.”

(Notes on above interview: Lease renewal, dated February 1865. Annual rental was £102.15; house and out-offices are said to have cost in the region of £8,000.)

The extraordinary success story of Francis Barber made news far and wide. In 1848 a correspondent from The Western Star visited Rahelly and described the enterprise as follows.
“Francis Barber, of Rahelly, is well and favourably known to the public of his native County for the last twenty years, as a most industrious, enterprising, persevering and successful farmer. The farm at present comprises an extent of about ninety acres, Irish, and is rather picturesquely situated, the site of the dwelling commanding a side view of Sligo Bay, and encircled in the south and north-east by broken ridge of mountain in the distance . . . .”

The writer then went on to detail Barber’s livestock which he described as “of a superior description and breed -- the milch cows being a miscellany of Ayreshires, Durhams and Irish.”

“Everything is first-rate: he has ploughs, as many harrows, a well mounted roller, and three carts got up in the first order. There is not a flaw in the harness either. The question whether labour is the mother of capital, or the latter the parent of the former, has been satisfactorily answered on Frank Barber’s tenement. Something like £1,500 has been laid out here for the last three and twenty years, in various kinds of improvements, exclusive of farming offices or dwelling house, neither of which having been yet provided or commenced.”

In 1861, Henry Coulter, a correspondent of Saunders News Letter, visited Sligo. In the course of his travels he made his way to Rahelly. He was so impressed by what he saw that he had no hesitation in singling out Barber’s holding as a model farm and a striking example of industry, enterprise and success.

“It is one of the best of its size in Ireland, being now in the highest state of cultivation. Fine meadows and rich land producing abundant crops have, by skilful management, taken the place of the barren, stoney and swampy soil. Its extent is 135 statute acres, of which 21 are under tillage, 25 under meadow, and the remainder devoted to grazing. The entire farm has been thoroughly drained and sub-soiled, and there are arrangements forgiving a constant supply of water for cattle in each field on the farm . . . . The crops produced are excellent in quality and quantity, and can compare favourably with any produced elsewhere in Ireland. The external and internal fences are excellent, the fields being thoroughly fenced with either good stone walls or hedges and good iron gates. There are also good roads through the farm. He keeps a large stud of horses for his farm work and carrying out of his contract for the repairing of the public roads. He feeds about 160 herd of cattle and intends increasing his stock. He has built a large house and an extensive range of offices, stores, stables and cattle sheds. They are not fully completed but a few months would suffice to finish them . . . . In building the house and offices and in land improvements he has expended in excess of £12,000, all from his own resources, without any assistance from the landlord.”

A further description of Barber’s model holding and newly built residence was contained in an article by a special correspondent in The Times (London) in March, 1881.

“... The largest tenant on the Lissadell estate is Frank Barber, who began his farming career forty years ago with about ninety acres, mostly in snipe bog and a bit of rough pasture, remarkable for molehills. Drains were put 3 ft to 4 ft deep, the mains a foot deeper; a square culvert was built with picked stones in the bottom, and regular stones, only too abundantly got out in subsoluing, were shovelled within 18 inches of the surface. On some land, afflicted with springs, deeper drains were run 5 or 6 feet through bog and shale into the more porous subsoil. Not a drain has ever given way or caused the slightest trouble. On the reclaimed land potatoes are usually first grown, followed by oats and grass seeds. Besides, homemade manure, lime, sea-sand, etc. were freely used. After three or four years grass the lea was ripped up and cropped. Good cultivation and manure have banished rushes, rough grass, moss and weeds . . . Great as was the expense of thorough draining, removing the numerous stones and boulders, and deeply subsoluing, the magnificent crops speedily repaid all outlay. So pleased was Sir Robert with the enterprise and success of his tenant, who at first held only from year to year, that he took 4s. 6d. an acre off his rent and gave him a lease of thirty-one years. That with expired, without any addition to the rent, he granted him, unasked, a lease for three lives.”

“Resounding to this most liberal treatment, Mr Barber has built a handsome, three-storied house, with barns, stabling and shedding, which must have cost £4,000. Part of the money has been borrowed at 4 per cent. The house is built in the Elizabethan style, with a frontage of 96 feet, and from 24 to 28 wide, two storey high; inside court-yard, 100 by 120 feet surrounded with ranges of offices 20 feet high by 19 wide, the upper rooms being very lofty. The rear yard is the same frontage, but longer with sheds 14 feet wide at one end and a range of offices round the sides. The whole are entered by a gateway with a lofty tower and gilt cock on the top which forms a conspicuous object. The house and offices are finished in a superior style of masonry, the centre of the yard gravelled, both the sides and stables beautifully paved and drained. The only thing wanting to make all complete is a threshing, sawing and general mill, which, from a river passing close to the offices, could he easily worked with water-power.”

The house was originally built in 1847 for Barber, a tenant on the Gore-Booth Lissadell estate, at a cost of £8,000. It was built of stone and brick and consisting of two storeys and basement, had sixteen
apartments. The Inner, or Stable Yard, consisted of excellent out-of-places with accommodation for six servants, stables for ten horses and two large coach houses. The Outer, or Farm Yard, had stalls for sixty herd of cattle, a dairy and a piggery. There was also a forge, cart sheds and a boiler house.

In addition to Rahelly, Barber also had a holding at Cashelgarron and a further leasehold of over 500 acres of mountainous pasture from Gore-Booth at Gleniff. A boundary fence on the mountain top, where the two counties meet, is still referred to as ‘Barber’s Wall.’

Misfortune befell the ageing Barber at the pinnacle of a remarkable career. The fruits of his untiring labours and a considerable investment slipped out of his control in rather unusual circumstances. Having undertaken extensive road contracts for the Grand Jury with the utmost satisfaction over a long period, he successfully tendered for the laying of a major sewer system through the principal streets of Sligo and ending at the Quays.

It was a massive undertaking and in the course of the construction work layers of rock had to be blasted in places and this resulted in subsequent claims for damages to properties, an outlay the contractor had not anticipated. Already over-stretched by earlier borrowings, he was now forced to increase his indebtedness further to pay off his creditors. He mortgaged the Rahelly farm as security for the additional overdraft facilities afforded to him. Three years later in 1880, he accepted a loan of £1,200 at 5% interest from landlord, Sir Henry Gore-Booth.

By 1884 his indebtedness to the lord of the manor amounted to £1,360, consisting of unpaid rents and interest on the loan. In addition, he owed the Belfast Banking Company £750. At that stage, Gore-Booth secured an eviction order against him. But before this could be enforced, Barber surrendered his interest in his ‘model farm’ for a sum of £3,250, a figure equivalent to his indebtedness to both the landlord and the Belfast Banking Co. However, this agreement came with the stipulation that it would be handed back for the remaining term of the lease once Barber had repaid his indebtedness to the landlord with interest.

Francis Barber left Rahelly in the autumn of 1885, having sold off his livestock, farm machinery, etc. He then took up residence on his other property at Cashelgarron where he lived out his last years. He died there in December, 1893, aged 88 years. A few years before his death, his son, John Lipsett Barber, called on Sir Henry at Lissadell and, with cash in hand, offered to redeem the Rahelly property. The offer was not accepted and the Barbers were deprived of an opportunity of re-possessing the ‘model’ farm. Rahelly House was subsequently occupied during 1900-1918 by Gore-Booth’s agent, James A. Cooper. After his departure in 1918, the house became vacant.

Earliest recorded Rahelly Barber burial in the Drumcliffe Church Cemetery

Jane Barber died on December 29th 1827. She was 98 years old and was recorded as entry No. 464 on Page 59. She would have been born about 1729.

Earliest Rahelly baptisms were:
Charles Barber about 1775
Jane Barber 30th December 1805
Francis Barber 7th April 1806
Francis Barber 5th November 1814
Jane Barber about 1859
Anne Barber about 1865

Lissadell Estate rent roll records for Rahelly House
Oct 1810 William Barber £39
Oct 1810 John Barber £53
Oct 1810 Samuel Barber £32
Mar 1813 Joseph Barber, Jnr £40
Mar 1813 John Barber £33
Apr 1840 Francis Barber £70
Jun 1844 Francis Barber £32

Rahelly House during ‘the War of Independence’ with contribution from Michael Feeney and Des Gilhawley

During ‘the War of Independence’ Rahelly House was occupied by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) for a time and, subsequently, in the autumn of 1922, by the Free State Army. Later during Ireland’s Civil War the house was re-occupied by the IRA but when they came under siege from the Free State troops in January, 1923, they set it alight before vacating it for an alternative place of refuge. It is said that the house and out-offices burned for three days and nights, leaving only a shell of what was once an imposing range of buildings.

The Gore-Booths offered Rahelly house and yards to the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) as a base in north Sligo for ‘the Black and Tans’ which they used on a regular basis. Rahelly House in north Sligo was headquarters for the Republican forces. This now became the objective of a massive assault by Freestate military that came armed with motor lorries, armoured cars and artillery. On September 1st, under the direction of General Sean McEoin, the Ballinaloe and Republicans were engaged near Drumcliffe. Following fierce fighting the Freestate forces gained the upper hand taking nine IRA prisoners. The main body escaped taking the armoured car with them. Advancing to Rahelly the Freestaters found the house deserted, the occupants having withdrawn to the surrounding wooded and mountainous areas for cover.
Contact was made again later with the Republicans. According to reports in The Sligo Champion, “that elusive Vickers gun car was well handled and avoided the dangers of artillery fire; long distance sniping then ensued.”

The battle continued to rage for almost three weeks. A ring of steel continued to close around the Republican forces as Freestate troops from Dromahaire and Finner Camps continued to close in on north Sligo capturing the IRA-held villages of Tullaghan and Kinlough as they came. The Ballinalee along with the main body of Republicans under the command of General Pilkington and Brigadier Seamus Devins was now surrounded. Every avenue of escape was cut off to prevent any attempt at a successful dash through the cordon with the armoured car. On the 19th of September at Carnamadow, near Ballintrillick, heavy fighting between the opposing forces continued for most of the day. When capture seemed inevitable the hard-pressed Republicans, realising their position was hopeless, attempted to destroy the armoured car. Leaving it ablaze by the roadside they took to the surrounding mountains for cover.

September 1922 Attack on Rahelly House

In the first weeks of September there were major engagements in Ballina and on the Ox Mountains between Ballina and Tubbercurry and numerous local actions. The Military Archives contain a report dated 11 Sept 1922 of an FSA intelligence survey of North Sligo and Rahelly. The report includes information on the number of IRA men, their arms and equipment, the areas occupied, the tent camp at Castlegal in North Sligo, Rahelly house defences and road blocks. It is clear from reading this report, that the FSA were planning a major military action.

From Wednesday 13 Sept. it was reported that additional FSA troops were arriving in the town. Companies of uniformed and fully equipped soldiers were frequently seen passing along the streets. There was considerable military activity in Sligo during the weekend, and it was apparent, even before the actual advance did take place, that the move north was not too far off. Large bodies of troops with an 18-pounder gun with the inscription ‘McKeon’s Own Peace-Maker,’ the armoured car ‘Big Fella,’ three Lancia cars, transport trucks, ambulances and general equipment arrived in the Sligo area on Sunday night and the small hours of Monday morning. The FSA forces were in much greater numbers than the IRA expected. It can be estimated that the IRA were outnumbered by a ratio of at least 10 to 1.

On Monday morning, 18 Sept, the FSA troops advanced from several directions on Rahelly House, which had been the headquarters of the IRA since they evacuated Sligo town in July. With a major FSA force, supported by artillery, converging on Rahelly House, the IRA decided to withdraw to the area around the North of Benbulben. The position on Monday evening was that the main body of IRA troops was surrounded, and the Ballinalee armoured car cut off and confined with the main body. On Tuesday morning a skirmish took place lasting several hours between the two opposing sides at Clough and consequently the Ballinalee armoured car was abandoned at Carrownamaddow in North Sligo.

Monday 18th FSA Action

An advance guard of FSA troops left Sligo for Rahelly in the early hours on Monday morning. The IRA outpost at Rathcormack School was first taken. Simultaneously with the advance guard leaving Sligo, the main force FSA troops operating from Bundoran, Manorhamilton, Dromahaire, and Kiltyclogher cooperated in making an encircling movement, cutting off all the retreat routes. The main FSA force left Sligo later in the morning.

IRA Response, Ballinalee, IRA and FSA engage

With a major FSA force, supported by artillery, converging on Rahelly House from all directions, the IRA made the decision to withdraw. According to a plan adopted on Sunday night the outposts kept the enemy at bay while the main body, which had been split into three units, retreated to the mountains. This first part of the plan worked well.

The bridge at Drumcliff was the scene of the first significant action on Monday. There was no bridge in place so the only way across was
Chapter 5 - ‘Great windows open’ in north Sligo

by way of a ford beside it. This was passable when the river level was low as it was that morning. The Ballinalee and IRA forces were engaged by the FSA, and after an hour or so the bridge defenders retreated to the Rahelly house area. Being forced to abandon Rahelly House, the IRA troops retreated to a wooded area around the Glencar mountains. No further serious engagement took place on Monday. There was desultory firing between the FSA and IRA troops during the day. Most of the action was dominated by long range firing until night set in. The wooded heights under Benbulben were shelled by the 18 pounder gun. Eight shells were fired but no material damage reported. IRA and Ballinalee cut off; Rahelly House captured.

On Monday evening the Ballinalee was again in action near Cliffoney and retreated towards Ballintrillick and effectively stayed out of the action after this.

On Monday, on the road to Manorhamilton, ten IRA troops with a motor car containing a large mine and a detailed plan for an attack on Manorhamilton Barracks on Monday night were captured. It seems they did not expect attack from Manorhamilton side. They were expecting advances from Finner and from Sligo but not from the East. Not anticipating the scale of the encircling movement the IRA most likely had planned a retreat towards the mountains and on to Manorhamilton. It can be concluded that by Monday evening their plan had been frustrated and their forces in disarray. FSA took possession of the now empty Rahelly House on Monday evening.

By Monday evening the main body of IRA troops was surrounded and the Ballinalee cut off. Every effort was made by the FSA to prevent a successful dash through the cordon by the armoured car. During the week the S.S. Tartar patrolled the coast during the engagements in order to prevent the escape of parties by sea.

Tuesday 19th Capture of the Wild Rose of Lough Gill/Ballinalee

On Tuesday operations were continued in the Ballintrillick district and on the Glencar mountains. A party of FSA troops operating to the north of Clough came in contact with a strong party of IRA Troops. In the ensuing action, lasting several hours, fourteen IRA troops were taken prisoner, including several well-known leaders. In the Military Archives it is recorded that a column of the 1st Midland Division captured the prisoners in this action. The IRA brigade diary records that one section of men came down from the mountain for food and to get their clothes dried. While in the safe houses the FSA arrived. Fourteen IRA troops were captured. The remainder of the unit had to fight for over an hour before they successfully retreated. The main reason for covering this point in detail is that the Archive document records the name of the FSA unit that made the arrests. This is also the unit on the top of Benbulben on Wednesday.

The capture of the Ballinalee was one of the main objectives of the FSA troops and now it was surrounded near Ballintrillick. Two determined attempts were made to break through the cordon, but in each case heavy fire was encountered and the roads were completely blocked. The IRA adopted the only alternative available – they took the gun and ammunition off the armoured car and then put it out of action in the townland of Carrownamaddow. The damaged Ballinalee subsequently fell into the hands of the FSA troops.

The Irish Times of Wednesday September 20 carried an unconfirmed report that the Ballinalee had been captured. The Sligo Champion of Saturday 23 covered the recapture of the Ballinalee under the heading Tuesday’s Operations.

The primary members of the crew of the ‘Wild Rose of Lough Gill’, as the Ballinalee was called while in IRA possession, were Christy McGlynn as driver, and Jim Mulholland (better known as Dynamite Jim) as machine gun operator. Neither of these two was captured by the FSA during this week. The reason for covering this event in some detail is that one version of the deaths of McNeill, Devins, Carroll and Banks states that it was the crew of the armoured car that was killed after the car had been captured.

After the Gore-Booths took back Rahelly House and Lands from Francis Barber, they established a pedigree Aberdeen Angus herd of cattle on it. The Gore-Booths held an annual Aberdeen Angus sale and farmers from all over Ireland came to buy cattle from the prized herd. This continued until the Land Commission bought the Gore-Booth Estate in the early seventies.

In the early seventies the lands of the Gore-Booth estate was divided among the local small farmers. Rahelly House was later sold to a German who undertook extensive renovations and restored it to its former glory. The German owner is now deceased and the house has been put up for sale.

In early 1922 the Republicans used it as a Barracks. In August 1922 the National troops moved in. The buildings have been recently restored.
Haunted Histories

Compiled by Val Robus and Sarah Stevens

Once bitten, not shy ghost of Coopershill

Simon O’Hara shared some ghost stories with Val Robus, which he swears are true. He said there is a gate on the other side of the river near the old house, called ‘Mrs. Cooper’s Gate.’

Mrs. Cooper was originally Annie Streipfield and had 14 children with her husband Charles William Cooper. Simon explained that because the head of the O’Hara clan was a bachelor and didn’t want the family name to die out, his nephew Charles took the surname O’Hara. Charles William went on to inherit 23,000 acres and move to Annaghmore, leaving his ‘spinster’ sisters in Coopershill.

But poor Annie was bitten by her own dog (her own dog!) at the bridge in Coopershill and contracted rabies, perhaps being one of the last people with the disease in Ireland in the 19th century. It was near the time Louis Pasteur was developing his vaccine for rabies in Paris. However, Mrs. Cooper was too far gone, rabies being a horrendous painful disease which drives one mad with pain.

Heart-breakingly, her children were called in to say goodbye and because there was nothing like a hospice or painkillers available to ease her suffering, she was smothered, a desperate form of euthanasia at the time.
Simon says there now appears the ghost of Mrs. Cooper who haunts the house and part of the estate. There’s a laneway, for example, where horses refuse to walk up and where the ghost has been seen, especially by the gate, which is all rusty and overgrown now.

“She hasn’t been seen there for a long time but she has been seen in the house by guests,” claims Simon. “It will be a couple with a young child in the room, the mother usually wakes up in the middle of the night with a fright and sees a woman in a long Victorian black dress leaning over her child in the cot, and then she feels an overwhelming sense of peace and goes back to sleep. Three separate couples have come down and related the same experience, not having known each other or heard the story. This happened during my mother’s time. It happened in two different rooms, but similar experiences.”

Simon told Val he’s had some fascinating folks staying at Coopershill, some quite famous.

“I had a man called Prince Michael of Greece -- he is Prince Philip’s cousin. He’s a ‘ghost hunter’ and written books,” said Simon. “He didn’t meet Mrs. Cooper but did say that he felt a strong presence on the stairs and landing. He said all buildings have a ‘ghost presence’ and the feeling (at Coopershill) is good -- there is a really warm feeling in the house. He also went to talk to Sean Simon who has a mock castle on an island on Lough Key. He went out to the island and said there was a very bad feeling in the castle.

‘Ladies’ loo-o-o-o-o-o-o

There is at least one ghost in Markree Castle, as Val Robus was told by Charles Cooper on tour. One is a servant girl who has been seen by several guests in the ‘Ladies’ toilet, which was once the butler’s pantry. Perhaps in the past ‘the help’ had gotten into some kind of terrible tiff over rank, or the man of the house was stealing a kiss from a maid, à la Downtown Abbey, or expired by other deadly means.

Mummies link to Temple House

The remains of several of the ancestors of the Perceval family rest in an ‘extraordinary’ crypt at historic St. Michan’s church in Dublin, according to Sandy Perceval.

St. Michan's is infamous for its five long burial vaults of mummified remains in ornate coffins of some of Dublin’s most famous families from the 17th through the 19th centuries. The exact date of construction is unknown, although in their present form they may date from the rebuilding of the church in 1685. The constant low humidity has caused mummification of the bodies and preservation of the coffins, according to the website of St. Michan’s.

“Since Victorian times visitors have descended the vault steps to see the mummies, and Bram Stoker, creator of the ‘Dracula’ stories is believed to have visited the vaults in the company of his family.”

True, some of the myths and legends surrounding the bodies have been scientifically disproved, but isn’t it strange that Stoker, who might have been inspired by his Sligo-born mother’s tragic tales of her hometown’s cholera epidemic, was perhaps further motivated by this place to create his world-famous horror story?

“I want you to believe...to believe in things that you cannot.” [Bram Stoker, Dracula]
‘The Night of the Big Wind’

From John C. McTernan
Compiled by Val Robus

“The biggest storm in Irish history, ‘The Night of the Big Wind’ occurred on January 6th, 1839. It was a Sunday evening and the wind from the west rose to a gale at 10.30 p.m. Just after midnight it blew with savage fury accompanied by rain squalls. At times blasts blew from opposite directions forming ‘whirlwinds’ that shook buildings to their foundations. It has been said that people living in the centre of Ireland, fifty miles from the sea tasted salt on their vegetables.

Sligo did not escape the fury of the storm. The Sligo Journal reported as follows on the nature and scope of destruction:

‘About half-past ten o’clock, the gale set in with tremendous violence. Scarcely a house in Town escaped uninjured; chimneys, sidewalls, and roofs were shivered to atoms – entire houses leveled to the ground. In the direction of Hazelwood immense damage has been done; several cottages were completely razed to the ground;—entire houses leveled to the ground. In the direction of Hazelwood immense damage has been done; several cottages were completely razed to the ground, but the inmates, as far as we could learn, have, in almost every instance, escaped unhurt. Hazelwood Demesne – the pride of this neighbourhood, has suffered severely – a great number of its finest trees, being torn up by the roots ….

Annaghmore, has sustained the greatest injury – hundreds of trees having been uprooted and a number of houses thrown down ….

Markree Castle has suffered seriously, and nearly all the ornamental trees have been torn up and otherwise destroyed ….

Templehouse is a complete wreck, scarcely a single tree left standing ….

Coopershill presents a scene of desolation. The damage done is immense ….

A number of fishing boats were smashed to pieces along the coast of Mullaghmore, and many houses were carried away all together ….

It would be impossible at present to estimate the loss sustained by the inhabitants of this County. Turn in what direction you will, nothing but a scene of havoc and desolation meets the eye.‘

Ardaghowen House

This “imposing” c.1828 residence in Rathquarter, Sligo was built as a ‘dower’ house, a residence available for use by the widow, or ‘dowager,’ of the late estate owner to nearby Hazelwood House.

Currently uninhabited, supposedly, this secluded two-storey house of classical and Georgian design is approached by a winding tree-lined castellated avenue surrounded by overgrown grounds. As part of the vast Hazelwood estate, it was owned by Owen Wynne in the 1850s then let and sold to several subsequent persons, according to John C. McTernan.
Once known as ‘Ellenville,’ this not unsubstantial house was appropriately renamed as ‘Ardaghowne,’ meaning ‘Height of the River,’ since it perches on an elevated site with impressive views of Sligo town and the Garavogue River.

However, there is nobody to admire the view. The house’s impressive cobbled paths leading to the Tudor Gothic porch and entrance hall greet no guests; its “four fine reception rooms” with marble and stone fireplaces remain empty of teas or parties. The sun coming streaming through the coloured glass-leaded panes of the “elaborate” late-Victorian cheer no residents on a fine day. The cobbled stable yard with hayloft is quiet.

There is not a soul to stroll around the exotic trees or step into a row boat from one of the two private jetties on the Garavogue, leading to Lough Gill, inspiration for some of the greatest poetry ever written.
Although no horror stories have been heard about Ardaghown, one can easily imagine there might be sad spirits lurking about it, perhaps a dowager, still grieving for her long past husband.

This is no fib: The odd goings on of Seafield House

Seafield House, also known as ‘Lisheen,’ is the ruined house of some pretty scary stories, according to Tarquin Blake on his Abandoned Ireland website.

Owen Phibbs (1842-1914), owner of the house, was considered an “eminent” archaeologist of his time. He filled the long gallery of his house up with ancient artefacts from the Far East, Syria and Egypt, a space known as ‘The Museum,’ according to Blake. Creepy incidents began to happen.

“Trouble started soon afterwards when the house became infested with a particularly unpleasant and malicious poltergeist. A strange gure was often seen on the stairway at night accompanied soon afterwards by terrible loud crashes heard throughout the house. Broken pottery and ornaments would be found the next morning. On one occasion the whole house shook violently -- all in the house fled in terror. After this event servants refused to stay inside the house. Shortly after, a gardener was terrified by a tall dark shadowy gure seen disappearing into the sea laughing maniacally. The gardener was also said to have fled in terror, never to return.

The house had such a bad reputation that its name was changed from ‘Seafield’ House to ‘Lisheen’ House to try to conceal its past history. Eventually in the 1900s the house was handed over to a group of Jesuit priests who performed Mass daily for some weeks in an attempt to exorcise the poltergeist. The priests attempt failed -- they fled the property never to return. Unable to rid the house of its infestation W. H. Phibbs sold the house in 1940. Shortly after, the house was dismantled and left as a roofless ruin.”
The Phibbs family may go back as far as 1589 with the Spanish Armada, according to McTernan. Possibly spelled as ‘Fibbs’ or ‘Phillips’ the family was very influential in Sligo.

Seafield house was originally built in 1798 for William Phibbs (1738-1801) and inherited by his son, Owen Phibbs (1776-1829), who only used it as a summer holiday house, according to Blake. Owen’s son, William Phibbs (1803-1881), rebuilt the house in 1842. William liked to think of himself as a benevolent landlord and community champion, especially during the time of the Great Famine, but he was regarded earlier as being rather harsh on his tenants, often evicting them.

Owen Phibbs (1842-1914), travelled widely, was respected as a theologian and held many lofty positions, such as shareholder of the Collooney Co-operative Creamery. His reputation was quite high but resentment may have been brewing by the people who rented and worked for him. “Tenants were obliged to salute him as he drove past in his carriage,” according to McTernan.

Rather mysteriously, Owen Phibbs died “unexpectedly” at the aforementioned Ardaghowen House, survived by his wife, who was a grand-daughter of Sir Richard Griffith of the Valuation Office, according to McTernan. Perhaps the tormented ghost of Owen, who forced tenants to practically genuflect before him, is floating around the ruins of Seafield House. Would the apparition be detectable by a modern GPS system, as is used for modern Ordnance Survey mapping, as seen on the Griffith's Valuation at www.askaboutireland.ie?

Finally, as an example that truth is always stranger than fiction, Talbot Phibbs of Seafield, son of William Phibbs, practiced as a solicitor. He and his partner, W. H. Argue, ran a law firm for many years until 1944 on what is now Teeling Street, according to McTernan. The firm, trading under their surnames, even after they passed away, was known as Argue & Phibbs. Frighteningly funny, and no one can argue with that story.
Forthill Timeline footnotes


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