The Village of Ballywalter – A Brief History

Unlike other parts of the Ards Peninsula there is little or no evidence of early man in the area now known as Ballywalter. In fact is not until the late Iron Age that we find any evidence at all. There are cattle enclosures also known as raths and forths occupying prominent hilltops at Blackabbey and Tullycavey.

The Anglo Normans

In 1162 Pope Adrian was concerned about the quality of Christianity in Ireland and he encouraged the Normans to extend their influence in that direction. The Normans were looking for fresh fields to conquer and as Ireland was rich in cattle and wheat they did not For five years they did not come further north than Dundalk but in 1167 John De Courcy marched through the Newry Gap with 22 knights and 200 men-at arms. He defeated the native Irish at Downpatrick. Indeed within 13 days he had conquered Antrim and Down. To his knights were given large tracts of land and Lucian De Arquilla received land at Dunover, about one mile from Ballywalter. Here can still be seen the remains of the mote which he built. It is thought that on top of the mote stood a wooden tower known as a bretesche. These were usually square, 6-9 metres each way and 6 metres in height. They were often brought in sections from England and could be erected quickly.

The Norman church at Whitechurch

The oldest building in the Ballywalter area was probably built by De Arquilla or one of his descendents. Under the name of Templefyn- the English equivalent being 'Whitechurch' – the ancient church, standing in what is now the village's graveyard, is mentioned on the Roll of Taxation of Pope Nicholas in the year 1306. Little is known of it beyond the fact that it was cruciform in shape, it was the largest church of its period in the county and the rector lived at the priory at Blackabbey. When the incoming Scots arrived in the 17th century

they found it to be in the hands of the reformed Episcopal Church of Ireland.

The Priory at Blackabbey

When the Normans came to England in 1066, they brought their spiritual advisors with them. A group of monks from 'The Priory of St. Mary' at Lonlay in Normandy first built at Folkstone and later at Stogursey in Somerset. They then came to Ireland and under the patronage of John De Courcy, built 'The Priory of St. Andrew of the Ards' in 1180 at Blackabbey which is just over a mile from Ballywalter. We must presume that this priory carried out the functions usually associated with monasteries including the collection of tithes – money which the people had to pay to the church to support it and its clergy. It is known that it had 600 acres attached. The priory was closed in 1636 by Henry 8th but local people believe the site was not cleared until around 1840 when two or three still-existent farm barns were built with the stones. It is said that an underground tunnel joined this Benedictine abbey with the Cistercian one at Greyabbey!

The Coming of the Scots

By the 14th century Norman power was in decline and control had reverted to the Irish – in this area to the O'Neills. Both Henry 8th and Elizabeth 1st tried to regain complete control over the whole country and success in North Down came in the early years of the 17th century. Con O'Neill, the Irish noble, who lived at Castlereagh on the outskirts of Belfast, had rebelled against the British crown and found himself locked up in Carrickfergus Castle. The new king of England, James 1st , was earlier the king of Scotland and was known to the nobility of that northern kingdom. One of these, Hugh Montgomery, the laird of Braidstane in Ayrshire, saw his opportunity to acquire some land across the Irish Sea. Together with James Hamilton from Dunlop in the same area, he reached agreement with O'Neill that they would use their influence with the king to attain his

liberty. Each of these gentlemen would, in return, receive one third of O'Neill's lands. King James readily agreed as it was felt that at least this eastern part of Ulster could now become 'peaceful, profitable and Protestant'. And so the Scots came to the Ards. Montgomery became the owner of certain areas and he developed Newtownards, Greyabbey, Comber and Donaghadee while Hamilton who was later to become Viscount Claneboye (later Clandeboye) was the landlord around Bangor, Killyleagh, Killinchy and Ballywalter. They brought with them fellow Scots to people their areas – farmers, blacksmiths, carpenters, honest men and criminals. All had their reasons for coming: farmland in Scotland was scarce: tenure of land there was insecure: harvests were poor: grass was greener over the hill.

A Barren Land

To what sort of place did they come? It is said that the Ards of that time was barren and desolate. The reason was that the Irish chieftain, O'Neill, had met and defeated an English invasion force led by Sir Thomas Smith. He then layed waste the whole area by burning in order that the Ards would be 'uninviting' to possible future invaders.

Most of the settlers were given farms and they built houses on top of hills. The reason for placing the houses here was partly because the land was not well drained but also because it is easier to get a successful well on the side of a drumlin near the top.

The hard-working Scots came determined to succeed. They ploughed the land and grew wheat and oats. By 1610 a few cottages were built by Hamilton, in the place now known as Ballywalter and by 1620 the village was established as 'a port for loading and unloading all manner of goods, wares, and merchandise whatsoever'. It is thought that a wooden pier or wharf was built close to the area known locally as the Green Isle opposite the present Presbyterian Church.

Why the name 'Ballywalter'?

Quite frankly we do not really know. 'Bally' means town or townland but why 'walter'? It has been suggested that it refers to Walter De Arquilla, son of Lucian.

Why did a settlement occur here?

This question is more easily answered. The settlers had to find a convenient site from which to transport their produce to Scotland and England. They also wished to travel regularly back 'home'. The Ballywalter location suited their needs.

It is likely that a significant number of the simple homes in the embryonic village had roofs of slate brought from the nearby quarries at Tullycavey. This was a thick, coarse slate which was usually held on the roof by mortar. Newtownards suffered less from fire than many other towns in Ulster during the rebellion of 1641 as the houses had slated roofs rather than the usual thatch.

The Williamite Wars

After the 1641 Rebellion people became more polarised on sectarian lines – Protestant and Roman Catholic. William 3rd decided that the only way to get control of Ireland was by force of arms. He sent over Marshall Schomberg with 10,000 men but while this army was camped at Dundalk disease was rife – over half the men died. It was decided, in an attempt to contain the outbreak, to divide the remainder into smaller units. Colonel Villiers brought a regiment to camp for a winter at Ballywalter and Ballyhalbert.

Events leading to the 1798 Rebellion

By 1700 Ireland had come directly under English rule. Dissenting Protestants had fought well for William but the English Parliament continued to regard Ireland as a danger spot. Laws against Roman Catholics and dissenting Protestants were made even more stringent. In 1704 it was decided that everyone should conform to the laws of the Episcopal church. As part of the drive to improve the efficiency of that church, the old Norman church at Whitechurch was closed and a new one built at Balligan, around 2 miles from Ballywalter, to serve a wider area. Like others of their denomination throughout the province, the Presbyterians in Ballywalter continued to find the law severe. They could not hold public office, marriage in a Presbyterian church was not recognised in law and they had to pay 10% of their income to the Episcopal church.

During that period many Presbyterians emigrated to America. Those that stayed behind were excited by the result of the American War of Independence. They envisaged an Ireland independent from Britain. These thoughts led to a rebellion in which the residents of Ballywalter and the Ards Peninsula played a prominent part.

The 1798 Rebellion

During the morning of Pike Sunday, 10th June, 1798, a body of United Irishmen, chiefly from Bangor, Donaghadee, Greyabbey and Ballywalter made an attempt to occupy the town of Newtownards. They met a brisk fire of musketry from the market house and among the dead was James Cain, aged 18, from Ballyferris outside Ballywalter. He was buried in Whitechurch graveyard.

The extent to which the people of Ballywalter were involved in the 1798 Rebellion is illustrated by an announcement in 'The Freeman's Journal' on 11th August, 1798. With evident satisfaction it stated that 'the magnitude of the punishment of many districts of County Down may be conceived from this single fact – of the inhabitants of

the little village of Ballywalter, 9 men were actually killed and 13 returned wounded, victims of their folly. If a trifling village suffered so much, what must have been the aggregate loss in those parts of the country which were in a state of rebellion.'

A number of Presbyterian ministers in the Ards were deemed to have taken part in the rebellion. As punishment Rev. James Porter of Greyabbey and Rev. Archibald Warick from Kircubbin were tried, found guilty and executed. A minister from near Ballywalter, Rev. Robert Goudy of Dunover, suffered the same fate.

After the insurrection bands of soldiers and yeomen scoured the country looking for United Irishmen. It is said locally that some Ballywalter men escaped capture by spending days at sea in hiding behind the Long Rock.

Churches

Information on the history of an area is often found to be centred around and literally within its churches and Ballywalter is no exception.

Church of Ireland

Reference has already been made to the Norman church in Whitechurch which served the area for over 400 years. Its replacement built in 1704, St. Andrew's Church, Balligan is , by far, the oldest church building still in use around Ballywalter. In those days the people of Ballywalter, Kircubbin and Ballyhalbert were expected to walk to Balligan to worship each Sunday. There is evidence that its oak roof timbers may be older than the church itself. Possibly they were transferred from the much older church at Ballyhalbert.

Early records show that the church not only catered for the spiritual needs of its people. It also organised homes for orphans, looked

after the local beggars and even collected for the repair of the roads.

By the middle of last century the three centres of population which Balligan served, had grown and the people of each wished to have their own church. Kircubbin was built first in 1843, Trinity Parish, Ballywalter in 1849 and Ballyhalbert (Ballyeasborough) in 1850.

Presbyterian

The vast majority of settlers who arrived in Ballywalter in the early years of the 17th century were Presbyterians from Ayrshire. They needed a building in which to worship so they joined their Episcopal brethren at Whitechurch in the church which was repaired by James Hamilton, the Scottish Presbyterian who now owned the Ballywalter area, This time when Episcopalians and Presbyterians worshipped together is sometimes called the 'Prescopalian period'.

Hamilton installed his nephew, also called James Hamilton, as minister and he remained there for 10 years.

Like other Presbyterian ministers during that period, Hamilton was under the authority of the established Church of Ireland and this led to serious difficulties. With the restoration of the monarchy in the middle of the century, for example, the government decided that Presbyterian dissent could not be tolerated and ministers including the Ballywalter minister, Robert Reid, were driven from their parishes. They preached in fields and barns – anywhere not under the attention of the authorities.

At this time Presbyterians from North Down would sometimes cross to Portpatrick for a communion service or to have children baptised. They walked to Donaghadee on a Sunday morning, made the three-hour journey to Scotland and returned home in the evening.

The first Presbyterian meeting-house was built in Ballywalter, probably around 1770, on a site near the present harbour. It is thought that it was a low thatched building with sod walls, small windows, if any, and an earthen floor. Forty-five years later its successor was built on a site at the corner of Well Road and Main Street which is at present occupied by the Sandpiper Inn.

In 1820 a split occurred in the congregation and a minority of members built a second Presbyterian church at Greyabbey Road. That building ceased to be used as a church in 1925. It was afterwards used for various purposes including housing a clothing factory for some years.

In 1889 the church at Well Road was in such poor condition that it needed replacement. Medievalism was at that time fashionable in architecture and the present church was built in Victorian Gothic style.

The Sea

Ballywalter owes its existence to the fact that it is on the coast and it faces Scotland. However between the two lies a very dangerous sea. The South and North Rocks at Cloughey have always been regarded as the two most deadly hazards off the coast of the Ards Peninsula. But every rock along this coast has had its victims.

In the 25 years between 1875 and 1900, 75 vessels were totally lost together with 29 men. There are a number of stories of shipwrecks at Ballyferris Point, the Long Rock and Skulmartin off Ballywalter. One concerns 13-17 Dutch and Frenchmen who lost their lives when a sailing ship floundered on Skulmartin Rock. Sycamore trees were planted to mark each grave. Another describes 'The Caesar' which struck the same rock in 1813. Ballywalter seamen went to the rescue. The crew from 'The Caesar' all got safely ashore but, tragically, all five local men were drowned. The ship's bell was brought ashore and is on display in the Presbyterian church.

Local anxiety and pressure concerning loss of life at sea brought success in 1866. A lifeboat, 'The Admiral Henry Meynell' was presented to the village by the Misses Ingram of Lisburn. It was a sailing ship with oars. On occasion the lifeboat was taken part of the way to a distress call by road in order to shorten the journey through rough seas. In 1893 a new boat, 'The William Wallace', was brought to Ballywalter. Towards the end of the century steamships were taking over from sailing vessels as they were more reliable and safer. By 1906 the coastguards had been withdrawn from the village

and there was some difficulty in finding a crew to man the lifeboat so it too was withdrawn. It is recorded that Ballywalter lifeboat saved 154 lives. Many will remember the lightship on Skulmartin Rock. The first ship was brought in 1886 and the last was taken away in June 1967. From1760 an assortment of barrels, cones and bells had been tried on the rock but they were usually carried away by rough seas so ships continued to be wrecked.

Wind and Water Mills

There is evidence that as far back as Norman times this was a corn growing area. Records show that Bristol and Chester were supplied with corn and it is thought that there was a Norman water wheel on the Dunover Road just outside the village. Through the Middle Ages wheat and oats were exported.

One of the principal reasons why so many Scots came to Ireland at the beginning of the 17th century was bad harvests in Scotland and the expectation that land was available for grain growing here.

A problem which had to be faced in the Ards Peninsula was the lack of water power to drive the mills as the Ards does not have rivers of any significance.

Hugh Montgomery and his wife soon faced this problem when they first came here and they introduced the Danish horizontal waterwheel which could operate in shallow water. However milling received a considerable fillip from the introduction of windmills. At the end of the 18th century, 75% of the windmills in Ireland were in the Ards Peninsula. The remains of the Ballywalter windmill is at the appropriately named Stump Road. It was built in the late 1700s and seems to have become defunct in the 1860s.It is thought that an earlier form of windmill, a postmill, had previously stood on the site. The windmill and the watermill on Dunover Road were used in tandem – when there was wind the windmill was used and when there was sufficient water in the river, use was made of the watermill.

The miller in Ballywalter paid £50 per year for the use of both mills, 14 acres of land and the right to burn kelp for fertilizer. He was paid by receiving a percentage of the grain which he milled. This was called mouter. He claimed to make no more than 2 tons of mouter a year worth £10 per ton. Had he been suspected of taking more than his share of the mouter?

Windmills were probably at their greatest working pitch between 1800 and 1840. Steam mills then came in. After 1870 the grain industry declined and the majority of land was used as pasture.

Flax Mills

The scutching of flax by water power was introduced from Scotland about the middle of the 18th century. Scutching is a step in the process of preparing the flax for spinning. The straw and woody stem is separated from the flax fibres. The earliest scutch mills were simple adaptations of the cornmill on which 4 wooden scutching blades were substituted for millstones. The blades were boxed like millstones and the flax was pushed in through openings to be scutched. By 1830 scutch mills were as common as corn mills. At that time all the wind-powered scutch mills in County Down were in

the Ards Peninsula. A number of these were around Ballywalter at Ballyferris, Whitechurch, Ballyboghillbo and Tullykevin.

Lime Kilns

A good example of a lime kiln stands at the south end of the village near the harbour which was built around the same time in 1851. Lime was brought ,possibly from the Carrickfergus and Dundalk area, by small sailing ships. It had a number of uses; as a fertilizer, as a purifier of water and as a component of mortar for the building trade. It is thought the Ballywalter kiln was used to produce lime for mortar to build the wall around Ballywalter Park.

Schools

The first known school in the village was established in May, 1834. We find that in 1837 it had 96 pupils, all Presbyterians.

In 1847 Rev. Gibson, the Presbyterian minister in the village, made application to the National Board of Education in Dublin for a grant to pay salaries and for books. It is thought that the school had earlier been withdrawn from that Board as a means of removing a teacher who was not regarded as satisfactory. The application stated that a site had recently been given for a new school by Andrew Mulholland of Ballywalter Park. This became known as Ballywalter Park or Springvale School.

In 1872 Mrs Mulholland made application for a school for females but after consultation this was changed to an infant school. Both continued in use until 1932 when the present school was opened. The 'big' school became the Parochial Hall and the 'wee' school is now the Orange hall.

Ballywalter Park

Ballywalter Park was originally known as Ballymagowan. Around 1671 Hugh Montgomery came to the area and according to 'The Montgomery Manuscripts' he built and planted. By the time Hugh died in 1707 the name of the area had changed to Springvale. His son, Rev Hans Montgomery, who became Vicar of Ballywalter, succeeded his father to the property but it was eventually sold to George Matthews around 1729.

As a captain in the Royal Navy George Matthew travelled to many countries and brought back to Springvale a hoard of interesting and unusual curios. His son, John, married Catherine Montgomery of Greyabbey.

In April 1846 the house, the park and all the Ballywalter interests of the estate were sold to Andrew Mulholland of Belfast for £23,500.

The Mulholland family owned the York Street linen mill in Belfast. It was said to cover 4 acres of land and was probably the biggest of its kind in Europe.

Andrew Mulholland was elected Lord Mayor of Belfast in 1845 and he bought Ballywalter Park the following year. Andrew's son, John, became Member of Parliament for Downpatrick in 1874 and in 1892 he was created Baron Dunleath of Ballywalter.

Alexander McKenzie – The Bard of Dunover

It may be unusual to include an account of an individual in the history of a place but this may be excused when that person was esteemed province-wide by those sharing his field of interest - poetry. Of the poets in Ulster at the beginning of the 19th century, few are more worthy of mention than Andy McKenzie. He was born at Dunover outside Ballywalter, the son of a farmer. When he was 14 years old he was apprenticed as a handloom weaver. The hours were long and the work was hard.

McKenzie's first poem appeared in the 'Belfast Newsletter' in 1800 and for the next 10 years he wrote continually. In 1810 he decided to publish a volume of his works called 'Poems and Songs on Different Subjects'.

It was customary in those days for poets to produce their works by subscription. McKenzie collected a list of 1600 subscribers and the collection of poems made the author £200. With part of the money McKenzie built a cottage at Dunover. To support his family he spent the remainder of his money on a fishing boat. During a storm the boat sank and the poet himself was lucky to escape with his life. Disaster followed disaster because McKenzie had neglected to secure a land lease for his cottage and he and his family were evicted. He left Dunover to live in Belfast and after a variety of jobs he became Chief Scavenger to Belfast Corporation. Before his death he sank into utter poverty. A poem he wrote describes his situation.

'My mansion is a clay-built cot,

My whole domain a garden plot-

For these each annual first of May

Full thirty shillings I must pay:

Ye who in stately homes reside,

Th' abodes of luxury and pride,

May deem it false when I assert,

My house would scarcely load a cart;

So little straw defends the roof,

Against the rain it is not proof-'

McKenzie was only saved from a pauper's grave by the kindly action of another poet who had him buried in Shankill graveyard.

The Future?

Historical reasons for the existence of Ballywalter are no longer relevant. People no longer travel to Scotland or indeed from one part of Ulster to another in small boats. Roads have improved, transport of goods has become sophisticated and small harbours have been dispensed with.

In almost 4 centuries the village has grown, slowly for most of that time but more quickly during the last 3 decades. However residents will be happy that there is unlikely to be an explosion in its growth in the foreseeable future.

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