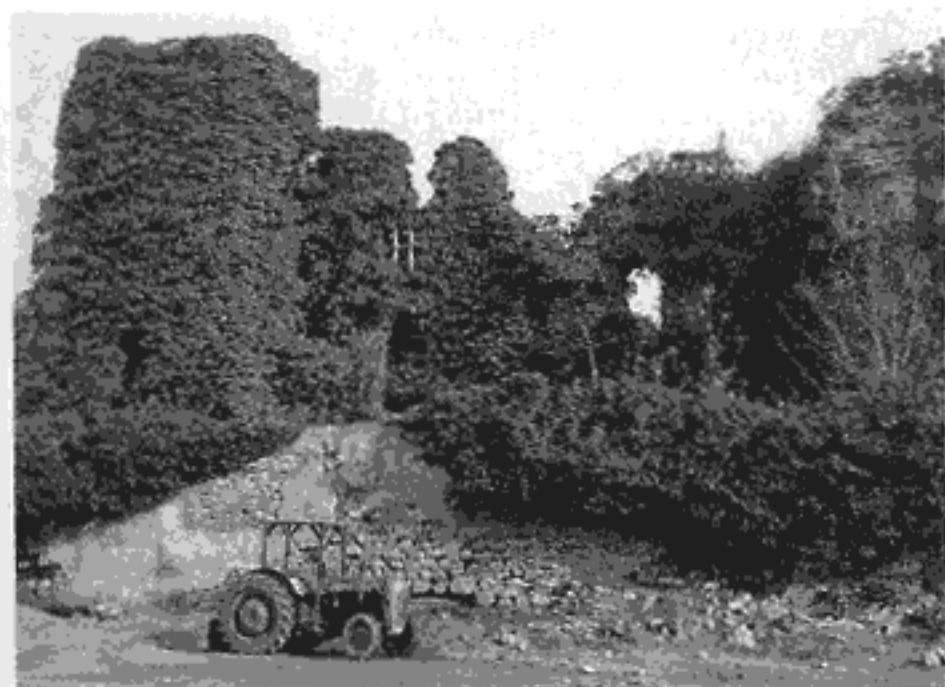


MANORHAMILTON -350 YEARS A GROWING



Hamilton Castle at the turn of this Century.



Sir Frederick Hamilton laid the foundation stone of Castle Hamilton in 1633
Five generations of townspeople have come and gone and those sturdy walls tenaciously hold on!

OLIVER HASLETTE recalls Manorhamilton's past.

In 1983 Manorhamilton celebrated its 350th birthday. There were no bands playing or bonfires on the hillsides, no celebration dinners or after-dinner speeches. Why? Perhaps people had simply forgotten or misread their calendars or perhaps the gloom of present times dampened the enthusiasm for any festivities.

Be that as it may, nevertheless, the bold Sir Frederick Hamilton laid the foundation stone of Castle Hamilton in 1633, and possibly in the Spring-time of that year.

Sir Frederick a Scotch Nobleman, in the plantation of Leitrim under James 1st of England, received a grant of 1333 acres in Baronies of Rosclogher and Dromahair. This was a goodly slice of North Leitrim land, Bonet and all, as we know it today. This grant was made in 1622 and despite the fact that grantees were intended to establish themselves on their new territories within two years, it was to be ten more years before he finally decided to build himself a permanent mansion and live among his subjects.

However, in that time he had shrewdly surveyed his property. By nature he was a greedy, disagreeable and cautious fellow, and the decision of where to build was influenced just as much by equidistancing himself from the neighbouring gentry as by the scenic and tranquil spot he finally selected. Here, two hills swept gently down to a natural ford on the small Owenbeg River. Sharply above the river on the North-West side was a flat elevated field with a thickly wooded area enclosing the sweep of the same river on the North side. Overlooking the field, a prominence gave a clear and unobstructed view of the surrounding countryside. Here he would post his sentries, and to this day it is still called "sentry rock".

The construction work began. Tradesmen of the calibre he required were not to be found among the plentiful but scattered native population. Consequently, craftsmen for all the trades were drawn to North Leitrim from many parts of Ireland, but principally from his native Scotland. We can assume that many of these settled here also, because we find some 100 years later the town and district could boast of 160 families engaged in manufacture and skilled trades.

The scale of the planned works was massive even by today's standards. It is interesting to note that nothing of comparative size was undertaken in Manorhamilton until Our Lady's Hospital was constructed some 320 years later. In planning the building, it had to satisfy two criteria. Firstly, in comfort and style it had to rival the best standards of the time, and secondly in strength and durability it had to withstand the best that an invading force could throw at it.

There is little on record to tell us of the comforts it provided, but local folklore still tells of the lavish banquets held there and also the treachery of disposing of invited but unwanted guests impaling them in the spiked pit beneath the table at which they wined and dined. The victims were later fed to the raving dogs which, chained in the dungeons by day, guarded the Castle by night. Legend has it that for years after the destruction of the Castle, these ghostly dogs could be heard howling at night on the lonely battlements.

As for the strength and durability of the structure, time has honoured Sir. Frederick, the architect and the builders. The outline of the walls stands today as sturdy as ever despite the fact that its useful functional life spanned no more than a mere ten years. It was constantly besieged between 1641 and 1642, and finally fell when Hamilton furtively abandoned it towards the end of 1643. Legend again puts a colourful slant on his departure. It is told that secretly he had dug a tunnel from the Castle to the foothills of nearby Saddle Hill, and using this escape route, fled to Enniskillen where he took refuge with his former enemy Sir. William Cole and from thence back to Scotland. The rage of the insurging rebels, who were confident they had captured Hamilton with his Castle but then discovered he had eluded them, left us with the ruins we have today.



Pictured on "Sentry Rock" Mae and Frank Kelly with their children Francis, Marie, Padraic, Gabriel and their nephew Gary Grochan. "Sentry Rock" is located at the rear of their house, opposite Hamilton Castle.

A descriptive passage, written some 200 years later, has this to say: "The castle, situated on a gentle eminence near the town was by far the largest, strongest and most handsome in the County and is 105 feet in length, 90 feet in breadth and about 40 high, each of the stones being beautifully quoined and corniced with hewn stone; it is surrounded by a strong wall, defended by four bastions, one at each corner and the stone of which it is built has a singularly glittering appearance for the micaceous particles which it contains". (Lewis 1837). Although a further 150 years has ravaged the building since these lines were written, the walls, now almost completely enshrouded in ivy, are still, where visible, "beautifully quoined and corniced with hewn stone", a pleasure to the eye that wishes to see them. A pleasure also the fine details of the small remaining stone windows which will soon be lost forever to the town, due to the accelerated deterioration of the last few years.

Sir Frederick's Castle did not fall in battle because of its structural weakness; every possibility in this regard had been doubly checked with his architect. It fell because of the impossibility of calculating or blueprinting the guiles of the human spirit. Again, we fall to colourful legend and recall the craftiness of the insane Murtach McSharry who scaled the walls and so confused the garrison with his antics, the gates were flung open and the insurging rebels plundered and burnt it to the ground. Four years after his departure, Hamilton died in Scotland. North Leitrim would never be the same again. He had indelibly imprinted his name for generations to come. In 1641, Manorhamilton as a town had already started to grow. There was a

number of little houses clustered on the East side of the river below the castle and two corn mills were in full production. Immediately North of the river, an area known as The Half Moon, on which the house now occupied by Martin & Willie Kelly stands, was an open space where various laundry activities took place, and immediately above that were the castle gardens. The approach route to the main gates was roughly similar to Castle Street today, and on the left hand side, as one approached, a large orchard had been cultivated.



"The Half Moon, on which the house now occupied by Martin and Willie Kelly stands"

One hundred years later, the town had grown considerably. A bridge had been built at the Half Moon and it is interesting to note that the 'The Pound' had been established in the exact location in which it stands today, and the level of the floor of the Pound is still near to the original, giving us some idea of how much steeper the rise to the Castle was initially. Consequently, it would seem that "The Pound" is the only establishment in the town which has retained its location, identity and usage for 300 years. The Main Street had also taken shape and rows of small houses stretched from the bridge to the premises owned today by Johnny Golden on one side and on the other to the present Post Office.

The Church and Churchyard at the Commons was established as the Protestant seat of worship. The Church Lane was then the Barrack Lane which led to the Military Barracks on a high point above the town. This is now the site of the Church of Ireland, built some 40 years later. It celebrated its bi-centenary in 1983.

From here onwards, the town was slow to develop. In the 19th Century, poverty was reflected in the fact that building leases were not easily granted by the Earls of Leitrim and any outward improvements in property were an invitation for additional taxation. Thus, Manorhamilton in 1837 is spoken of as forming one long street consisting of 233 houses mostly thatched". Again in 1844 the Parliamentary Gazer of Ireland after extolling the beauty of its setting says "the town itself has a poor appearance".

Nevertheless, on a town map of 1836, side streets had developed. Houses enclosed both sides of the "Big Brae". The Monkey Row was delineated with houses on one side, leading down to a tannery at the river. Castle Street had rows of houses on both sides and a considerable number of houses at the top of the fairgreen. St. Patrick's Terrace (The Teapot Lane) was exactly as it is today.

Building of any merit which took shape during this period, as might have been expected, had little to do with the ordinary people. Their input came mostly from the Ruling Authority or the Clergy. The present Courthouse with its jail to the rear was built in 1819. The two Methodist Churches still intact, but no longer being used to worship, date back to 1801 in the case of the building on the St. Patrick's Terrace and 1826 for the Church fronting the New Line but which was formerly approached by the little narrow side street which is now the entry to the rear of Mr. Cecil Golden's property. The first Roman Catholic Church followed two years later and is now known



St. Patrick's Terrace was exactly as it is to-day

as St. Clare's Hall, and "the Workhouse was contracted for on May, 9th 1840". The only other important public building at the close of the 19th Century was St. Clare's new Catholic Church which was built in 1882 and was destroyed by storm shortly afterwards. It was finally re-built as we now know it two years later. It celebrates its Centenary this year.

Into the 20th Century then, and Manorhamilton still bears the name of its founder and the Castle, still on the "eminence above the river", dominates the town. Five generations of townspeople have come and gone and those sturdy old walls tenaciously hold on. Are they waiting for a new generation who will be sufficiently interested to restore them?

I only ask the question.