

OVER A CENTURY OF ELECTRIC LIGHT IN MANORHAMILTON

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The story of a private enterprise and later a public limited company which provided Manorhamilton with electric light from the early years of the 20th century until the ESB acquired the scheme in 1946.

The Invention of Electric Light 1879

Experiments aimed at converting electricity to light had been taking place particularly in England and the United States since the 1850s. Then in 1879 Charles Brush developed an electric arc lighting system which he used to light the streets of Cleveland, Ohio. Later the same year Thomas Edison invented the electric light bulb for home lighting. Edison also explored ways to transmit the electricity his light bulb would need, and built the first electric generating plant in New York in 1882. Before long central gen-

Mick Meehan, Electrician

erating stations and distribution systems (wires and poles) began springing up throughout the U S and elsewhere.

Developments in Ireland in the area of electric lighting moved at a much slower pace. Many Irish cities and large towns had only basic gas lamp public lighting by the year 1900. A Borough Councillor complained in 1904 that the gas lighting in the whole town of Sligo was in a wretched state. He described walking through John Street at night like being in a tunnel. Smaller towns had their street lamps lit by lamp oil. Only a few cities and towns had switched to the novel electric light. Carlow and Galway city were first off the mark in the late 1880s and Cork followed suit in 1893. Boyle got electric light in 1901 and Dublin converted from gas lighting to electricity in 1903. There was opposition in many towns to a changeover from gas or lamp oil to electric lighting. Gas company shareholders were sometimes to blame, but high installation costs in setting up an electric light scheme, which would impact on ratepayers, were also a factor. The result was, as another Sligo Councillor observed in 1904, that only some large and progressive small towns were electrically lit at that time.

Manorhamilton Electric Light Scheme, 1904

A photograph of the Market Square in Manorhamilton in 1900 shows a lamp-post opposite the Market House, indicating that the town was then lit by oil lamps. On 8th September 1904 a Mr William Hamilton, electrical engineer, requested permission from Manorhamilton

District Council to install a scheme which would provide public and domestic electric lighting in the town. District Councils had been set up in 1898 at the same time as the County Councils and were responsible for a range of local functions such as housing, public works, health and sanitation and the collection of rates. Hamilton estimated that it would require 200,000 candlepower to light the town, and would charge the District Council £35 for public lighting from dusk to midnight for seven months of the year. The Council was already paying this amount for lamp oil, so there would be no extra charge on the rates. Chairman James Lynott, therefore, gave the District Council's backing for the scheme.

Hamilton immediately began setting up his generating station beside one of the millraces on the Owenmore River near Whittaker's bridge, at the southern entrance to the town. A weir or rampart, built across the river one hundred yards upstream, which directed the water into the narrow millrace controlled by a sluiceway, had in former times provided power for turning the large wheel of a tuckmill. Tuckmills thickened and toughened woven cloth by beating it with hammers attached to the millwheel. This mill which gave its name to the nearby Tuckmillpark townland, dated back to the 17th century and survived until about the 1870s. Hamilton's power station was thus a hydro-electric one. The quick-flowing water of the millrace turned the blades of his turbine. The turbine turned the generator and the generator made the electricity. The fact that the millrace infrastructure was already in



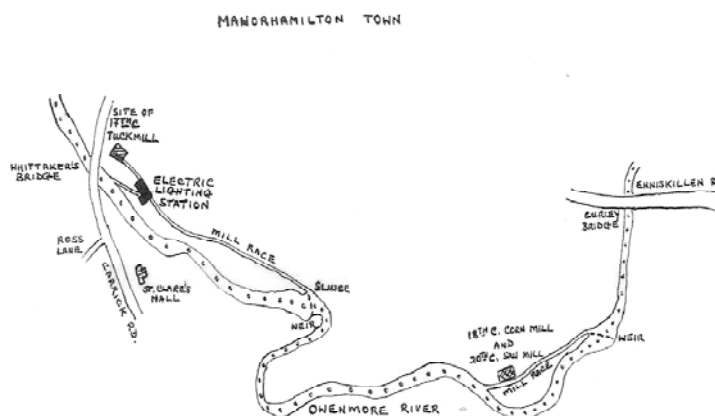
place greatly reduced Hamilton's installation costs and consequently the price at which he could supply electricity to the consumer. He was thus fortunate in having the backing of the former tuckmill owners for his project.

Hamilton then began sinking poles in the streets, putting up wires and connecting up houses. Everything was progressing smoothly until he was informed by the County Surveyor (Engineer) that he required sanction from the County Council to install a system of electric light in the town. This sanction was essential before the Board of Trade would issue a licence to any operator to provide public or private lighting in an area. Undeterred, Hamilton continued installing his scheme, which was then in partial working order, but he did send off a letter of application for the necessary permission to the County Council meeting due to be held in Carrick on 16th November 1904.

A local poet, James McGurrin of Corthoon, commemorated the recent re-lighting of the town in a ballad written in late 1904 entitled 'The New Electric Light'. In it he reflected both the local pride in the scheme and the hope that it would be allowed to continue. The ballad began as follows:

*We have got a new invention,
'tis the latest of the day.
It has come out but lately and
we hope it's here to stay.
When I think about its glories,
it fills me with delight.
Now we can read our stories
with the new electric light.*

At the November meeting of Leitrim County Council there were expressions of surprise and annoyance that Hamilton had gone ahead with his scheme without the Council's permission, and a decision on his application was deferred pending further information.



Sketch of Owenmore river showing location of electric lighting station.

Hamilton and his solicitor, Mr Fox, both attended the next Council meeting one month later. Fox pleaded that Hamilton thought that he only needed the authorisation of Manorhamilton District Council, but was now making a formal application to Leitrim County Council for permission to continue with his scheme. He was also prepared to enter into any agreement which the Council would require. A sub-committee made up of County Councillors and Manorhamilton residents was appointed to meet in Manorhamilton on 30th December 1904 to draw up such an agreement. But it took another meeting three days later, at which more local people were present, before a settlement was reached. Hamilton agreed to give a written assurance that he would indemnify the County Council against any claims arising from the scheme, electrify every house and provide a list of his electricity charges. A full meeting of the County Council ratified the agreement on 5th January 1905 and Hamilton was allowed complete his scheme.

Manorhamilton & District Electric Light Co Ltd 1911

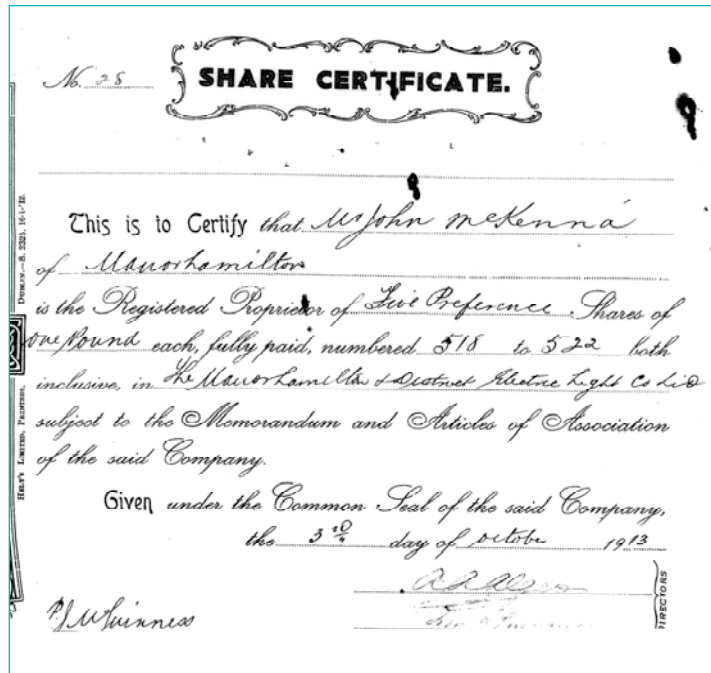
William Hamilton decided to put his electric light business up for sale in 1911. Nine local businessmen—Adam Algeo, George Ballam, James N Dolan,

James Lynott, John McGovern, John McGuinness, John D Rooney, C C Templeman and Denis Walsh—and the local medical doctor, Robert Rutherford, then put up funds to form a new company to buy out Hamilton. Townspeople were later invited to take out shares in Manorhamilton and District Electric Light Co Ltd to raise further capital. One thousand shares, valued at £1 each, were issued.

At the first AGM of the new company on 19th March 1912 the Directors were able to report that 839 shares in the company had been purchased, and the company had acquired the premises, plant and fittings, etc., belonging to Hamilton for £400. P J McGuinness, a son of one of the directors, was then chosen as secretary-manager. A German engineer was appointed in charge of the power station and a young local man, Mick Meehan, was taken on as his apprentice. Some years later the German engineer retired and was replaced by Meehan. Willie Darcy was then employed as Meehan's assistant. For the next twenty-five years both men operated and maintained the power station as well as attending to the commercial and domestic needs of customers—in short the electrical requirements of the entire town.

The company seems to have run into some financial difficulties in 1937 when an appeal for new shareholders got a positive response and a crisis was averted. Electricity was now being produced all the year round. To ensure continuous supply, especially during summer dry spells, diesel was used to assist in power production. Lawrence Keaveney had succeeded P J McGuinness as secretary-manager in the 1920s and he in turn was replaced by Edward Walsh of Lakeview in 1937. Denis Sheehan was appointed to this key position in 1940 and held it for the next six years. The electrician-in-charge, Mick Meehan, resigned in March 1939 and took up a position with the OPW at Finner Camp. Larry McDermott from Castlerea was appointed in his place.

A surviving company cash book dating from the late 1930s reveals that there were then about 150 domestic electricity consumers, apart from the town's public lighting, on the company's books. Bills were issued quarterly, with average charges for a business premises being £4 per quarter and 12s-6d. for a private residence. Some local people still remember the power station or 'electric mill' as it was popularly known. It consisted of a single story building, constructed primarily of corrugated iron and painted a dark navy colour. It had an apex-shaped roof, and there were several little annexes to accommodate various purposes. The building was laid out to suit the type of machinery in use. This consisted of fly-wheels and belts, diesel-driven engines, batteries, generators, etc. The smell of oil and the buzz of machinery created a certain mystique about the place. The mill is also remembered as a popular haunt of local card-players during the long winter nights.



1913 Share Certificate belonging to John McKenna. (Courtesy of Hugh McKenna)

ESB Take-over, 1946

There had been a proliferation of local electricity supply schemes in Ireland in the early 1920s and by the time the ESB was established in 1927 the number had risen to over 300. About half of these were taken over by the ESB within a short space of time, while the others were given permits to carry on business for a number of years until required by the semi-state company to become part of the national electricity grid. The ESB acquired Manorhamilton, Ballybunion, Borris (Co Carlow), Enniskerry and Foynes in 1946 after agreeing a selling price with each enterprise. The Manorhamilton and District Electric Light Company, which then had 234 electricity consumers, was dissolved after those who had taken out shares in the company over the years had been refunded the value of their investment. The town was totally rewired since the local company had operated a direct current (DC) method, suitable for generating and transmitting electricity only to the immediate locality, whereas the ESB used an alternating current (AC) system for long distance transmission. Bill Fleming from Curry, Co Sligo, who is

still hale and hearty, was the ESB's resident linesman, meter-reader and bill payment collector in the town from 1946 until 1957.

The ESB take-over brought to an end a very enterprising project in Manorhamilton. The townspeople who backed William Hamilton's scheme in 1904 demonstrated a progressiveness which ensured that the town was among the earliest in the country to benefit from electric light. Sligo Corporation on the other hand was still only debating the pros and cons of such a scheme the following year. The ten directors who ensured that Hamilton's scheme was taken over by a local public limited company in 1911 also deserve credit. Their initiative and civic spirit defined the way this successful enterprise would be run over the following thirty-five years. It is only fitting, therefore, that all those associated with the project should be remembered with a certain pride.

We would like to thank all those who provided information for this article, especially Jackie McGoldrick, Lena McTernan, Dymphna Sheehan, Murette Golden, Leitrim Co Library and Brendan Delany and Gerry Hampson of the ESB Archives.