

Ballinacurra - Three urban townlands

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the planned town of Newtown Pery began to take shape along the southern bank of the Shannon estuary. Eventually this urban sprawl enveloped surrounding townlands to such an extent that they lost their identities and became part of the new developing city. One such townland is Ballinacurra. The old road to Mungret went through this townland from Mungretgate, and the linear development of George Street (O'Connell Street) and Military Walk (O'Connell Avenue) eventually joined this road to form an extension of the city into County Limerick.

Ballinacurra is in the parish of St. Michael and in the barony of Pubblebrien. The earliest mention of the townland is in the Civil Survey (1654) and its owner was listed as Thomas Arthur, a deceased Irish Papist. The land consisted of one plowland (185 acres), divided into 115 acres arable dry land, 15 acres pasture, 50 acres marshland and 5 acres of shrubby wood. A broken castle and mill were the main buildings of note mentioned in the survey. Bellna Corrie [sic] River drained the bog called Monegeillagh into the River Shannon. Despite variations in the spelling the name Ballinacurra has changed little in 450 years since the Civil Survey, and the general consensus is that the word means The Ford Mouth of the Weir,¹ being a crossing over Ballinacurra River which many pilgrims passed in medieval times on their way to Mungret.²

By 1839, the townland of Ballinacurra had grown to 607 acres and divided into three divisions.³ Each division became a townland in itself, and they took the names of the three men who received the land after the Cromwellian confiscation. The three men, Bowman, Hart and Weston, gave their names to the townlands.⁴ Apart from Weston, the other two names have been forgotten, except for official documents and some historical references.

Ballinacurra (Hart)

The area covered by this townland includes the present-day Greenpark Race Course up to Punch's Cross and a line straight from there to Greenpark.⁵ It contains 197 acres and in 1839 had an area of bog on which fuel was scarce.⁶ Sir Richard Hart, who was Mayor of Limerick in 1806 and who was knighted the following year, was descended from Percival Hart, the original proprietor of these lands who gave his name to the townland.⁷ The main feature of note in Ballinacurra Hart

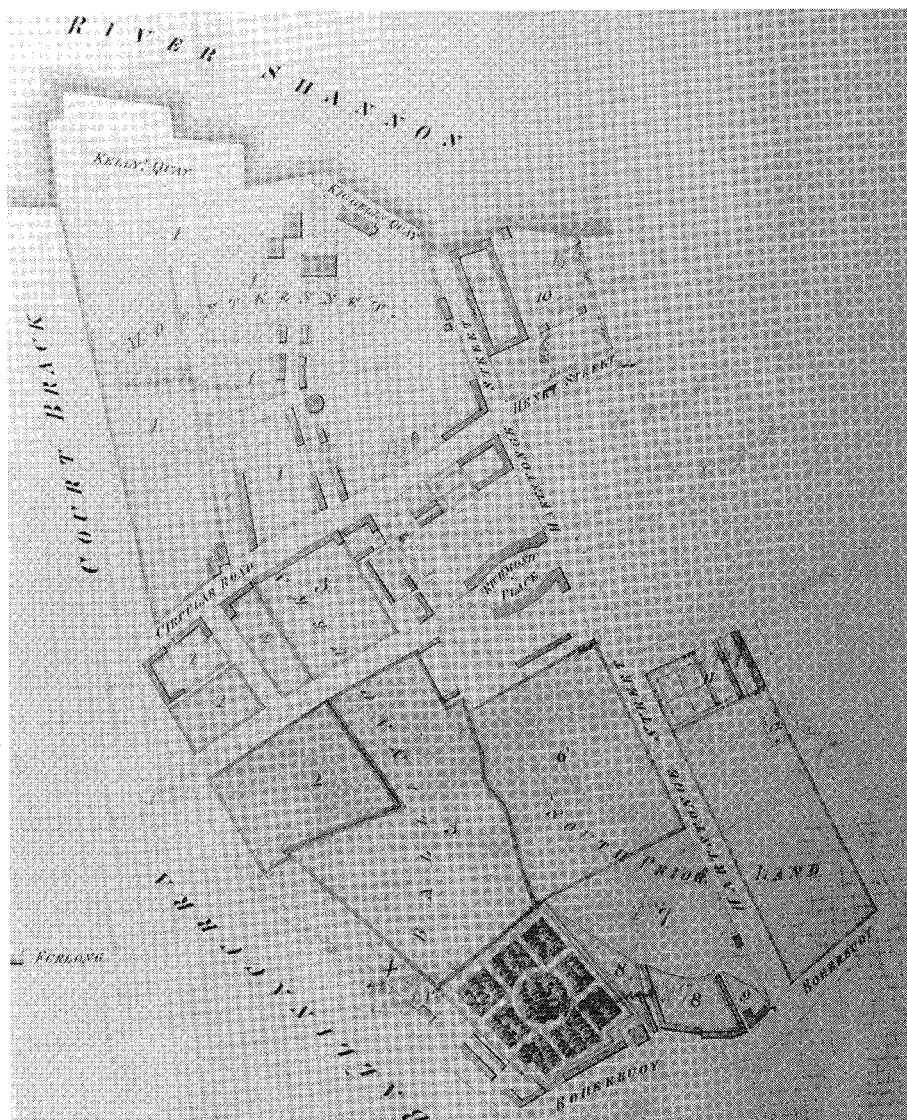
by Tony Brovone

was a windmill built in 1800 to grind wheat, corn etc. It was circular and tapering, 50 ft. high and 20 ft. in diameter. It was sited 4 chains south of Greenpark in the south-east of the townland, and south of the road from Limerick to Croom.⁸ It was owned by Simon Vokes in 1850, and the miller was Robert Wheeler, but any trace of the mill is now long gone.⁹

There was a turnpike on the Limerick to Croom road at Punch's Cross, with a tollhouse sited west of the new entrance to Punch's car park. The tollhouse was rented by Limerick Corporation in 1850 from Patrick O'Shea and the tolls let to John and Thomas Fitzgerald. The income from the

letting of the tolls at that time was £800.¹⁰ In 1857, the taking of tolls on turnpike-roads was discontinued and the resultant loss of revenue led to a deterioration in road conditions. The County Surveyor in 1859 reported "that the state of the road was so very bad that no contractor would tender for the work." The tollhouse and all assets of the Turnpike Trusts were disposed of when an Act of Parliament abolished the turnpikes and the tollhouse, like so many other buildings, has long been destroyed.¹¹

The townland of Ballinacurra (Hart) was owned in 1850 by George Hill, Patrick O'Shea and Thomas and Simon Vokes. The name Hart was still well represented in that year by a Mahony Hart, who was not resident in the townland, but had property sublet.¹² The townland had two main houses:

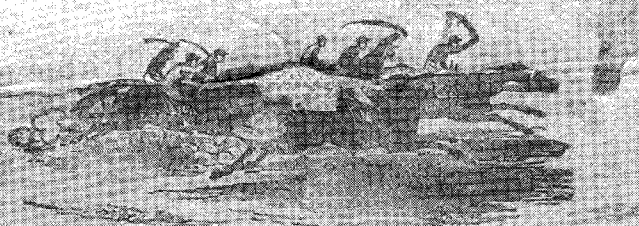


Map of part of Ballinacurra (Bowman) by James and Martin Coffey for the Earl of Limerick, 1823.

Limerick Museum.

OFFICIAL CARD

To be run under the Irish National Hunt Steeplechase Rules.



LIMERICK RACES,
TO COME OFF
ON ST STEPHEN'S DAY,
26th DECEMBER, 1879,
OVER THE BALLINACURRA COURSE.

STEWARDS

R. J. SYNAN, Esq., D.L., M.P.	R. DE ROS-ROSE, Esq., J.P.
W. H. O'SULLIVAN, Esq., M.P.	COL. STYVENSON, 87th Regt.
S. O'SHAUGHNESSY, Esq., M.P.	MAJOR COGHILL, 19th Hussars
D. F. GABBETT, Esq., M.P.	CAPTAIN RUSSELL, R.A.
J. P. WHITE, Esq., J.P., D.L.	T. D. O'BRIEN, Esq.

Treasurer—Mr. BRYAN O'DONNELL, William Street.
Secretary—Mr. DANIEL O'CONNOR, T.C., Upper William Street.
Clerk of Course and Starter—Mr. H. O'S. KEYES, Y.S.
Judge—R. DE ROS-ROSE, Esq., J.P. Clerk of Scales—Mr. THOMAS HOGAN,
R. FOGERTY, Esq., U.E.

It is requested that riders will have their horses at the starting post at the time appointed, as the starter will be punctual.

1 o'Clock The Ballinacurra Plate of 25 sovs.
Out of which second horse gets £5. About two miles over the Steeplechase course. Weight for age, with penalties and allowances. Winner of a flat race, hurdle race, or steeplechase, value £20, to carry 3lb extra; of £30, 5lb extra; and a winner of £40 excluded. 4 years old 11st; 5 years old 11st 11lb; 6 years and aged 12st 3lb. The winner to be sold for £100. If entered to be sold for £80, allowed 5lb; if for £50, 10lb; if for £30, 21lb. 10st is the lowest weight any horse can carry.

- 1—Mr T O'Dea's Puany Roger, 6 years, (£30). Straw jacket, brown cap
- 2—Mr R Pierce's Tom Steel, by Gutler, dam by Arthur 5 years, (£50). White
- 3—Mr J Carmody's Richard, aged, (£30). Blue and white jacket, and yellow cap
- 4—Mr R Creagh's Woodbine, 4 years. Black and white stripes.
- 5—Mr T McKenna's Ruby, 5 years, (£30). Brown jacket and cap

Racecard of Ballinacurra Racecourse, 1879. Limerick Museum.

Greenpark, on the South Circular Road, was four stories high when it was built some time prior to 1800. It was on 37 acres and overlooked what later became a racecourse. In 1839, it was occupied by Captain Griffin.¹³ It was later occupied by the Parker, Westropp and Croker families. In 1879, William Hall, harbour engineer, lived there. Sadly, the house was demolished in 1997.

Ballinacurra House was built by the Massy family in the decade prior to 1850. Its site has a commanding view of the county. In 1850, the house was owned by Patrick O'Shea and occupied by Edmund Parker.¹⁴ In the early part of this century, Siegfried Sassoon left a wonderful insight into life in the house. The year was 1917, during the Great War, and he was invited to high tea after a days hunting by the lady of the house, Mrs McDonnell. The house he described as "a large villa, about a mile from the barracks" where he was stationed as an army officer. He described the meal he received "which made dining in the mess seem almost unthinkable. It had been a banquet. Cold salmon and

snipe and unsurpassable home-made bread and honey had indeed caused us to forget that there was a war on; while Mrs McDonnell herself, in five minutes she made me feel that I'd known her all my life and could rely on her assistance in any emergency. It may have been only her Irish exuberance, but it all seemed so natural and homely in that solid plainly-furnished dining-room where everything was for use and comfort more than for ornament. Mrs McDonnell asked me whether I played golf; but before I could reply the aid called her out of the room to the telephone, which enabled the word "golf" to transport me from Ireland to Scotland."¹⁵ Ballinacurra House was subsequently owned by Shaws, who had a large bacon factory, and today it is used by Thompson Architects.

Ballinacurra (Bowman)

This townland contains 119 acres. It gets its name from Daniel Bowman, who received grants of land in St. Michael's and St. Nicholas' parishes and in the South

Liberties of Limerick. He was made Sheriff in 1684.¹⁶ By 1834, the lands of this townland were owned by the Earl of Limerick and, like the other two Ballinacurra townlands, the land was farmed to produce corn, wheat, flax and potatoes. The farm sizes ranged between 2 1/2 and 8 acres generally.¹⁷ The townland was situated in the centre of the parish and stretched from Lifford Avenue to the Mount Convent and took in streets such as Bowman Street, parts of Edward Street and Henry Street, Military Road (O'Connell Avenue), Collooney Street (Wolfe Tone Street) and Barrack Lane and the Barracks.

In 1850, the townland was owned mainly by Simon Dickson, Martha Sparling and Francis John O'Neill.¹⁸ This townland also had two main houses:

Lifford House was the two-storey residence of the Fisher family. It had its entrance on the main road in Ballinacurra, at Lifford Lodge, which is still standing. The grounds of the house, which has been demolished, stretched back to the South Circular Road. Lifford House is now the site of Lifford Park Estate, where I live.

Benjamin Fisher was a successful linen draper at No. 6, Rutland Street, Limerick. He had a large family, one son and eleven daughters, and he was fond of telling people that he had "eleven daughters and each of them had a brother." His hearers would often express surprise at 24 in one family, but of course the one son was brother to each sister. When the house in Rutland Street became too cramped for such a large family, he went to live in Lifford House. When he retired from business he went to live in Harold's Cross, Dublin.¹⁹ Three of the Fisher daughters never married and one of them befriended the poet Gerald Griffin and became a critic and adviser for many of his works. In 1850, Lifford House was occupied by Francis J. O'Neill and in 1879 it was occupied by Charles McKern, who worked for White's Wine Merchants. Today, the number of roads, avenues and estates bearing the name Lifford is testimony to the impact the house had on the surrounding area.

A contemporary of Benjamin Fisher, Michael Furnell, ran a bank at or near the corner of O'Connell Street and Sarsfield Street. When the bank, trading as "Furnell, Woodmason and Bevan," collapsed in 1806, he advertised his house and lands for sale including 40 acres at Ballinacurra.²⁰

Southville was built by the Brown family of Clonboy, Co. Clare. This family eventually moved to Rathkeale, Co. Limerick, where they built two more houses, Mount Brown and Danesfort. Southville was occupied later by O'Shaughnessys and in 1850, John Spillane had it leased from Anne Lynch.²¹ The house was east of Lifford House with a large wall separating them. Sadly, it too suffered the same fate as its neighbour.

The Society of Friends (Quaker) burial ground is also in Ballinacurra (Bowman), west of Punch's pub, and many of the residents in the surrounding area were of Quaker stock. The Quaker community

settled in Limerick in 1654 and had houses in Creagh Lane and Peter Street. After the development of Newtown Pery, they moved house to Cecil Street. They acquired the cemetery in Ballinacurra through the benevolence of Joseph Massey Harvey, who purchased the land from Margaret Unthank, widow of Thomas Unthank, and he donated it to the Friends Society in 1832. It is reputed that Thomas Unthank planted the yew trees in the cemetery from seeds which he had taken from a tree at the head of Napoleon's grave on St. Helena. Thomas Unthank also gave a number of seeds to Dr. Knox, Protestant Bishop of Limerick. One of these germinated and developed into the splendid yew which was to be seen up to a short time ago in the garden of 104 Henry Street.

The first interment at Ballinacurra was in 1833. This was actually the re-interment of Rebecca Harvey, wife of Joseph Massey Harvey of Summerville House, who died in 1831 and had been buried in the garden of Summerville. Harvey himself died in 1834.

The cemetery in Ballinacurra, like all Quaker burial grounds, is recognisable by the fact that all the headstones are similar in size and shape, emphasising their strong belief that all are equal in the eyes of God. The headstones record who is buried, rather than being a memorial dedicated to the departed person. In recent times the burial ground had gone into disrepair. Limerick Civic Trust cleaned the headstones, repainted their inscriptions and recorded the information thereon. They also landscaped the grounds and, in 1992 constructed, a new entrance gate facing the main road.²²

Ballinacurra Weston

This is the largest townland of the three, measuring 291 acres. It runs east - west at the south end of the parish and it includes part of Edward Street and all of Prospect. It stretches then from Punch's Cross, taking in Quinn's Cottages, over to the railway footbridge at Janesboro, along the railway line to Ballinacurra Creek and back to Punch's Cross. The townland got its name from Nathaniel Westen [sic] son and heir of Captain Richard Westen [sic] who received grants of land in this and other areas in the seventeenth century.²³ By 1850, there was no trace of the name Weston and the townland was owned by the Scully and Goold-Adams families. In that year, Denis O'Connor ran two auxiliary workhouses in Prospect Hill and Edward Street.²⁴ Auxiliary workhouses were usually suitable buildings rented by the Union to relieve overcrowding in the main workhouse. One of these two buildings later became the Limerick Clothing Factory, owned by Sir Peter Tait, where uniforms were made for distribution to armies all over the world. Another unusual feature in 1850 was the total of seven limestone quarries.²⁵ The development of the area with the extension of the city meant that many of these quarries were exhausted and filled in. In more recent times there were three quarries in the



Lifford House in the early 1950s.

Limerick Museum.

same general area. Hall's Quarry was filled in to form the site for the Shannon Foundry building. Gough's Quarry was owned by the Gough family and was at the back of the St. Bernadette's Credit Union office. After heavy rainfall the quarry filled with water and became a dangerous play area. There was at least one drowning there in the 1960s. The Gough family, who were builders, lived in Rosbrien House across from the quarry, behind Greenpark Shopping Centre. It should not be confused with the house of a similar name in Rosbrien parish. Sadly, it too has been demolished in the name of progress. The third quarry was Blake's Quarry, at the back of Weston House and St. Brendan's School. In 1876, Mr. J. Blake had the lease of his farm for sale and included in the sale a valuable limestone quarry let to local builders at £4 10s. per perch.²⁶ Many people will remember it as the site of a handball alley. Another play area was Vize's Field, named after Captain Vize, who owned the land at one time. After passing the A.I.B. bank, on the left leaving Limerick on the main Ballinacurra Road, one can see a tree-lined avenue leading south. This avenue led to a house known as Fort Green on the Bassett Estate. The house, which was built in the second half of the last century, has been demolished. The last family to live there was Johnston.

While Ballinacurra has three official divisions, a fourth unofficial division, Ballinacurra Wilson, was also used. The Wilson family came from Caherconlish, Co. Limerick. In 1806, Richard Wilson had a brickworks near Ballinacurra Turnpike and had 3,000 well-burned hard red bricks for sale.²⁷ In 1841, the former residence of William Wilson near the pike was advertised for sale, including 98 acres in "Ballinacurra Wilson."²⁸ While Ballinacurra had the names of landowners applied to its various divisions, today the only commonly known name is Ballinacurra Weston, or, more often, the abbreviated "Weston." However deplorable the practice of landed proprietors imposing their names on areas, it is far preferable to

the modern trend of using exotic sounding placenames which have no relevance to the areas to which they are applied.

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