

HOW PLASSEY GOT ITS NAME

by Kevin Hannan

Through the years the spell of Plassey gently enveloped much of the adjoining countryside, especially along the Shannon above and below this old favourite waterway. For many out of the city, the townlands of Dromroe, Rivers, Annabeg, Gurrane and Shravokey lost their identities, and when they visited any of these places, they were sure to tell their friends that they were "up Plassey". The magic lingered along the towpath, right into the old jetty at the canal harbour, giving the famous riverside walk a name that is likely to remain for as long as the Shannon continues to flow - "Plassey Bank".

For all "brothers of the angle" it meant everything that was to be enjoyed. The scenery was magnificent and the number and variety of fish in the noble river matched the congenial surroundings. There was no other place like it. On the first visit one only sipped the sparkling champagne - the taste and delightful intoxication came tumbling headlong afterwards. For the schoolboy, freed from the boredom of the classroom, it was an escape into paradise, and even more so for his teenage brothers and sisters, while for those in the twilight years it was a true "friend to life's decline".

But where did the name Plassey come from? For an explanation we must go back more than two centuries to the village of Plassey, not far from the teeming city of Calcutta. Here, on 23rd of June, 1757, Robert Clive (Clive of India) engaged in the final battle in the conquest of India. It was a decisive conflict, for its outcome resulted in the establishment of the Indian Empire. It also left Clive a very wealthy man.

The addition of the great Indian colony was a source of pride and satisfaction to the English rulers, yet there was a marked reluctance to shower the usual rewards on a homecoming hero. In July, 1760 Clive returned to a lukewarm reception in England, for he had fallen foul of a number of directors of the East India Company, whose troops he had led so resolutely and so successfully. Though he was cordially received by George II, and shortly afterwards awarded an honorary degree at Oxford, he was denied the honour he had expected for his loyal services to the Empire, and had to be content with a lesser reward. (An Irish title, unlike an English one, did not entitle the holder to a seat in the House of Lords). And even to qualify for this honour he first had to purchase an estate in Ireland. This he did, but only after travelling inland and crossing old Thomond Bridge and into Co. Clare, where he ran riot in a land purchasing spree.

The eminent antiquarian, T.J. Westropp, in a note published in the Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquarians of Ireland, in 1908, quotes from a rental of the estates purchased by the victor of Plassey. In this document is set out the various properties in Limerick and Clare purchased by Robert Clive. It was an incredibly disjointed estate and ran into several thousand acres, stretching from Bunratty to the Fergus, and including such well known townlands as Rineanna, Tullyglass and Drumgeely. Nearer to Limerick he acquired Cappantymore in the Clare Hills, overlooking the city, and nearer still, lands outside Corbally, in Gortatogher and Rosmadda. For some unaccountable reason he also bought three houses in St. Mary's parish in Limerick. The most interesting item in the rental, however, is the following: "Ballykilty, from Thomas McMahon (now W. Monsell) - Plassey, otherwise Ballykilty."

The Thomas McMahon mentioned here would seem to have been the owner of the Ballykilty estate and manor house at the time it was acquired by Robert Clive. It is likely that Monsell was installed there afterwards but no one has recorded Clive's activities during his short stay

by the Shannon. (It is not stated whether the properties were purchased through an agent). But it is known that Clive was not in the best of health at the time. The object of his wild spending was to secure a suitable holding that would be considered appropriate to his new title. When everything was in order the new landlord became "Baron Clive of Plassey, Co. Clare, Ireland", an impressive enough title for the retired military adventurer.

The title is somewhat confusing, as Plassey House is in Co. Limerick, in the townland of Srelane, but the greater part of his estate was in Co. Clare and may have come into his possession before he ever saw Ballykilty. On the other hand, his new demense was only a hundred and fifty yards across the river from Co. Clare. But it is certain Robert Clive left an enduring Limerick legacy behind him - the name of "Plassey" - and the firm establishment of a demense which has been retained by a succession of residents.

All the beautiful trees that survived into the 1950's, were certainly planted by the Maunsells. The fine grove of beeches and sweet chestnuts that once extended from the waterfall (mill dam) to the Garrison Wall were planted in the 1820's. (The bank on which a number of them were planted was constructed at that time). The giant cypress and the cedars near the house appear to be much older. The great ash tree in the garrison field, which was blown down in 1936, was said to be more than two hundred years old at that time.

The Maunsells also harnessed the might of the river. Taking advantage of the ten-foot drop between Bohogue and Drominveg, Major Hedges Maunsell built a mill at the western boundary of the estate. The flow of the river was arrested about half a mile upstream by a dam which also churned the mighty stream into a thousand dazzling white cascades that lent a delightful touch to a scene already lavishly embellished with nature's finest trappings.

The millrace ran right through the demense. Up to the early years of the Shannon Hydro Electric Works this man-made waterway boasted everything in natural amenities that one could ask for. The rich greenery along the crystal verge was always in the shade of the tallest hawthorns to be found anywhere, and standing back at a respectable distance and in orderly formation were the long lines of mature beeches and elms. Contented anglers spent many pleasant days fishing in the mill stream - it was a wonderful trout fishery in the old days - and carefree picnickers whiled away generations of summers amid the fairy tale surroundings.

After a short time the property was leased to Reuben Harvey, the elder son of a Corkman, Joseph Massey Harvey, who is still commemorated in Harvey's Quay, and in Summerville Avenue, from the house of that name which he built there. Harvey was also the owner of the stores and grannary at Francis Street, and was enterprising enough to install his own communications system between Francis Street and Plassey. He was assisted in this enterprise by a number of carrier pigeons, whose Francis Street terminus was to be seen up to a few years ago, when the buildings were demolished to make way for Sarsfield House.

Harvey was probably the first local employer to be confronted with a strike. This dispute resulted from the workers' demand for payment while travelling from the canal harbour to the mill in one of Harvey's barges. This journey took the best part of an hour, and Harvey was