

## A Holiday Resort before the Famine

By the mid-1830s Kilkee was regarded as one of the most fashionable seaside resorts in Ireland. The majority of the visitors came from Limerick and surrounding areas, though many also arrived from much further afield. For the most part they belonged to the upper middle class, but they also included members of the nobility. In the first week of August 1843, for example, the arrivals included Lady Anna Maria Monsell, Lady Franklin, the Hon. Wyndham Quin etc., while in the same week the Earl and Countess of Dunraven left for home. At the other end of the scale, quite a large number of the poor and destitute also came to the town, seeking health or alms or both. In this chapter we will try to build up a picture of Kilkee, the holiday resort – How did the visitors get to Kilkee? How were they accommodated? How did they spend their time? etc.

### TRANSPORT

Most visitors came to Kilkee by steamer and jaunting car, as the road from Ennis was not very good and, in any case, the road journey would take much longer than the trip down the River Shannon. Steam transport between Limerick and Kilrush was provided by paddle steamers belonging to the City of Dublin Steam Packet Company. In 1834 this service was provided by the *Clarence*, which at the end of that year was replaced by the *Garryowen*. The *Garryowen*, a boat 125 feet long with 90hp engines, was built in Liverpool expressly for use on the Lower Shannon. For the next few years it was to be the chief link between Limerick and Kilrush, being assisted in the summer season by the *Clarence* or the *Kingstown*.

The passengers journeying by the *Garryowen* could while away the journey by listening to Paddy O'Neill as he either sang or played his fiddle or bagpipes. Many of his songs were of his own composition, including one in praise of the boat:

Oh, *Garryowen* is no more a wrack;  
Whoever says she is, is a noted ass;  
She's an iron boat that flies like shot  
Against the strongest storm. [sic]

As early as 1834 dissatisfaction with the service being provided gave rise to efforts to provide an alternative one. However, these did not achieve success until late 1838, when the *Dover Castle* was put on the river in competition to

the *Garryowen*. In 1839-40 the competition between the steamers of the rival companies was intense, and fares dropped to a very low level. By August 1839 the deck fare on the *Dover Castle* was only 6d., while the cabin fare was 1s. The scene at the pier in Kilrush as two of the competing boats prepared to sail for Limerick has been vividly described for us by a traveller at the time:

Nothing could surpass the bustle and confusion when we reached the pier at Kilrush, where the two rival steamers, the *Garryowen* and *Dover Castle* (between which there is at this moment a fierce competition), were drawn up and smoking alongside of each other. Each jaunting car as it descended the hill bearing its freight towards the pier, was eagerly beset by the emissaries of each vessel, and the occupants severely accosted with, 'Are you for the *Garryowen*?', 'Are you for the *Dover*?' the questioner departing in triumph or crestfallen according to the reply given. Our party were for the *Garryowen*, and as it lay the farthest from the quay, we had to cross the *Dover Castle* to reach it. When we had safely overstepped and cleared our way through all obstacles – no easy task – we were able to look about at the scene of confusion on the pier. Jaunting cars were coming full gallop along the quay crowded with eager-looking passengers fearful of being late; men, women and children pushing and jostling each other on the pier, some brought there by business, others attracted by curiosity; goods of every sort piled up ... pigs yelling as only pigs can yell; the creaking crane surging backwards and forwards, with its weighty cargo – a huge barrel, a fat pig slung by the middle, or a bag of oats or potatoes; and loud above all the din, the unearthly bellowings and hissings of the steam engine.

Another group who added to the confusion were the fruit-women who went aboard the vessels with their merchandise, trying to make sales to passengers before their departure.

As well as cutting fares, the owners of the *Dover Castle* also made another innovation, Sunday excursions between Limerick and Kilrush. And, doubtless, many of these day trippers went on to make a brief visit to Kilkee. Such activity on Sunday seemed almost blasphemous to some. After seeing an advertisement a writer to the editor of the *Limerick Chronicle* commented:

It occurs to me, should I listen to the Syren suggestions of the placard, I incur a fearful risk. Providence may see good to blast all my pleasures, by causing the boiler of the steam-vessel, on which I purpose to embark this day for a trip of pleasure, to burst.

Many others would have been deterred by the rowdy conduct on the return trip of those who had spent their day visiting public houses. And quite a

number of them would have been the mid-19th century equivalent to teddy boys, 'grand shop-boys from the city, swaggerin' about Kilrush, lock arms, an' sportin' chains, an' canes, an' bushy hair, an' talkin' inglifed.'

The Sunday excursions were scarcely very successful. However, if the *Dover Castle* could make the trip on the river in a shorter time than the *Garryowen*, then, it was felt, she would gain much of the traffic. In early June 1839 a race was arranged between Kilrush and Limerick, and at 7.50 a.m. on Wednesday 5 June the two boats sailed out of Kilrush together, watched by a huge crowd of people. The *Dover Castle* sailed direct while the *Garryowen* made her usual stops at Tarbert, Foynes and Glin. The result was a tremendous victory for the *Garryowen* – finishing in three hours forty-five minutes, thirty-six minutes in front of her rival – despite stops.

In a further attempt to gain the public's support, the proprietors of the *Dover Castle* announced that it would make the Limerick-Kilrush journey direct on alternate days. But all this was to no avail, and during August the boat was withdrawn from service because of insufficient support. In their public declaration to this effect the owners did not mince their words:

The Directors of the Limerick Steam Co. ... find there is a general feeling (on what principle they know not), to support a strict monopoly, with the consequent attendants, high fares and little civility.

However, the withdrawal proved to be merely a tactical one. Perhaps the company directors hoped that the fares for the *Garryowen* and *Kingstown* would be raised when the opposition ceased. At any rate, after some improvements had been made to its paddles the *Dover Castle* was back in action before mid-September, making the run to Kilrush in three hours, twenty-seven minutes. It was now alleged that the *Dover Castle* was being sailed in a dangerous manner and that, but for the presence of mind of the captains of the *Garryowen* and *Kingstown* steamers, collisions would have taken place. The agents of the *Dover Castle* also made their counter charges. When the *Garryowen* passed the *Dover Castle* near Tarbert, 'the conduct of the Kilrush agent, captain and crew of the *Garryowen* was most indecent and insulting, and firing cannon in triumph.' Despite the improvements the *Garryowen* was still faster than the *Dover Castle*.

During the summer of 1840 the competition continued and fares came tumbling down still further – each side offering the same rates. The cabin fare was still 1s. but the deck fare was a mere 3d. And these wonderfully cheap fares brought a boom to Kilree, with visitors crowding in quite early in the summer. One weekend in August brought such huge crowds that hundreds could find no accommodation. The police barracks was opened to provide shelter for many, while those who had to be turned away managed as best they could under the stars.

In April 1841 the *Dover Castle* finally admitted defeat, and the boat was sold to its rival, the City of Dublin Company. A new steamer to replace the *Kingstown* was also obtained shortly afterwards, the *Enn go Bragh* – a boat of 330 tons, 134 feet in length, 26 in breadth, with engines of 100 horse power. However, only two of the boats were used at any one time – making a sailing each day in opposite directions in summer, sometimes bringing more than two hundred passengers and freight. With the ending of competition, too, fares immediately shot up and in May 1841 they were 2s. 6d. for cabin and 1s. 3d. for deck passengers.

The first part of the journey to Kilree ended at Kilrush or, more precisely, at Cappa, just outside the town. However, in 1838, when the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Normanby, visited Kilree a rather unusual proposal was put to him – that Kilree would be benefited by the building of a canal, a little more than a mile in length, between the town and the Shannon Estuary. If this were done people and goods could be brought directly from Limerick to Kilree when the tide in the river was favourable. Three and a half years later this idea was still being considered and a resolution concerning it was among those adopted at the meeting in January 1842 to which we have referred earlier. But no success was ever achieved.

The final eight miles to Kilree had to be travelled by road – in the 1830s by open jaunting car. Later, however, larger vehicles were put on the road. The jaunting-car rates were 1s. per person or 4s. per car. But when the competing steamers were providing almost free river travel in the summer of 1840, the car drivers shoved up their fares to 6s., 10s., or even 15s. per car, to the loud protests of visitors. The most well known of these car drivers was John McNerney or Shawn Bawn who frequently wrote letters to the newspapers and styled himself as 'Proprietor an' dhriver ov the easiest an' most commodious car, an' the kindest an' most indefatigable horse in all Kilree'.

The competition between the jaunting-car drivers was razor-sharp, and as soon as the steamer berthed at Cappa they jumped aboard in search of passengers. It was probably the same spirit of competition which led to some furious driving on the Kilrush-Kilree road, sometimes with one car forcing another off the road.

In 1840, as we have seen, the car drivers shoved up their prices. However, they may have been trying to make as much as they could before being put out of business, because in May 1840 it was reported that Mr Williams of the City of Dublin Steam Company was contemplating the laying down of a railway between Kilrush and Kilree. The expense was calculated at £400-£500 per mile so that a total of about £3,000 would be quite sufficient.

But a change of mind soon took place. Steam would be too expensive. Instead, a tramway would be laid down, and a horse on this tramway could move at the rate of 12mph carrying four tons weight. In this way the journey could be made in half an hour. This was the plan – but like many other



projects for railways between Kilkee and Kilrush in later years it never got any further.

The year of the 'railway mania' came in 1845, when, as a contemporary later wrote, 'lines both possible and impracticable were projected, in every conceivable quarter throughout both countries.' Not surprisingly, then, the question of a line between Kilkee and Kilrush was seriously discussed once again, and it was hoped also, by building a railway embankment, to reclaim about a thousand acres in Poulmasherry Bay. Passenger traffic, it was estimated, would be 35,000 per annum. Colonel Vandeleur of Kilrush declared his willingness to contribute a generous sum towards the cost, and in mid-August three engineers arrived from Dublin to survey the route from Kilrush to Kilkee. In mid-October the *Limerick Reporter* carried a half-page prospectus for the 'Kilrush, Kilkee, Dublin and Belfast Junction Railway with power to extend the line as far as Ennistymon'. But two months later it announced with regret that the plans of this railway had not yet been lodged with the Board of Trade. The high hopes of summer and early autumn were clearly coming to nought.

### ACCOMMODATION

Most of those who came to Kilkee on their holidays came in family groups and generally stayed for at least a month. Indeed, the town's prosperity relied heavily on those families who came year after year – mostly from Limerick. In early July or August they boarded the steamer in Limerick, bringing their own servants and perhaps a horse and carriage as well. In a sense it was a transplanting of a little Limerick in Kilkee.

As the families stayed in lodges, the demand for hotel accommodation was not very great. Nevertheless, in the mid-'30s there were three hotels in the town, each of which charged 25s. per week. The first of these, originally a low thatched house, had been opened about 1820 by Catty FitzGerald, and for forty years, until her retirement, she continued to cater for her clients simply but effectively. This hotel was situated on Francis Street, and nearby on the same street, was the Conyngham Arms. The third hotel, owned by Mrs Shannon, was originally in the same area, but in the early 1840s she moved to the West End and renamed her hotel the West End Hotel. Mrs Shannon was also proprietress of the local Post and Stamp Office. Early summer 1843 saw the opening of Moore's Hotel (on the site of the present Hydro Hotel) and this was henceforth regarded as the premier hotel in the resort.

As we have seen, it was not in the hotels but in the lodges that most people stayed. In the spring the local people could be seen preparing busily for the approaching season, giving particular attention to outward appearance of their lodges. As a result, whitewash brushes were in great demand at the

time. In the immediate pre-Famine days the number of available lodges was rapidly increasing – with plenty of incentives from those who were anxious to let sites. In 1841 John MacDonnell was offering sites in the West End on leases for ever, and including in the bargain free stone from the neighbouring quarry. In February 1844 twenty lodges were in course of erection and were expected to be completed for the coming season, while, a year later, one hundred men were employed at the quarry raising stones for more new lodges.

August 1845 saw the current Marquis Conyngham pay his first visit to his estates in West Clare, and he was given an enthusiastic reception in Kilkee. A large bonfire was lighted in front of his hotel, and he was greeted by a cheering crowd. Then, in an interview with Fr Comyn, he promised to cherish Kilkee's future interests. This promise seemed to be bearing fruit when, a month later, it was reported that he had requested a plan and estimate for a terrace in front of the bay and was also contemplating the erection of a range of villas on the eastern side of the bay. At this same time Mr Hamilton, agent to John MacDonnell, was employing about a hundred men in constructing a road from the West End quarry to Intrinsic Bay.

The bigger lodges, which were described as fit for noblemen and their families, cost on average £15-£20 per month, though the very best, such as Rockmount House, could command a hundred guineas for the season (about three months).

Average size lodges cost £6-£8 per month and the smaller ones £3-£4. These prices included milk, potatoes and turf. There might also be some fringe attractions as can be seen from the following advertisement:

### SEA BATHING, KILKEE

#### MERTON LODGE

Will be let for two or three months, or for the season. The whole was papered, painted and enlarged last year, and contains two sitting rooms, six best Bed Rooms, three servants' do., Kitchen, Larder, Scullery, etc. A Lock-up Yard encloses a Coach House, Stable and other Offices. The tenant will be supplied with as much turf as he requires, the use of a Bathing Box with Slipper Bath. He can also have a well enclosed Field for a Milch Cow or Horse. The House, which is on the sheltered side of the Bay, stands in the midst of some neatly kept Pleasure Ground.

Such advertisements by individual lodge owners were not uncommon. Occasionally too they banded together to proclaim the attractions of Kilkee,