

CAHERGUILLAMORE AND ROCKBARTON HOUSES

By Brian Gallagher

The Houses of Caherguillamore and Rockbarton are intrinsically linked through the O’Grady family. They were built on adjoining estates.

Caherguillamore House dates from the late seventeenth century. It was approached by two avenues – the ‘front’ avenue leading from the Steeple Road, which connects Holycross with Meanus and the ‘back’ avenue approached from the Rahin-Caherguillamore Road. Both avenues were lined with stately ash, elm and cedar trees.

Rockbarton House was late eighteenth century, the seat of Viscount Guillamore, who had been raised to Peerage in 1831 by the titles of Baron O’Grady of Rockbarton and Viscount Guillamore of Caherguillamore. The house was modified during the nineteenth century and came into the possession of the Baring family. Only a shell of some of the remaining walls of this once stately house now remains.

The adjoining estates of Caherguillamore and Rockbarton, which comprise a unique and exclusive square mile of a long lost ancient Ireland are best viewed from the air. Only aerial photographs of the locality can do justice to the various prehistoric and medieval sites by revealing the shapes and contours of hidden buildings and other foundations. Fort, field, road, houses and hut sites make this area as important archaeologically as nearby Lough Gur. Later in this article, I have included notes on “Medieval Dwellings at Caherguillamore”, taken from the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries*.

By the 1950s, both of these elegant mansions, which once dominated the townlands of Caherguillamore and Rockbarton, had fallen into disrepair and eventually became totally derelict. The stones from what remained of the walls of Caherguillamore House were used in landscaping at Lough Gur in the 1970s. The two “Great Houses”, as all stately homes were referred to in that era, crumbled – their structures obliterated – their history relegated to the annals of time.

Rockbarton and Caherguillamore Houses and the lands within which they were located, feature in the story of life in Ireland and Ireland’s fight for freedom

during the early decades of the twentieth century. The story about the bravery of Irish ‘Volunteers’ and other persons at Caherguillamore House and in its vicinity, in the face of savagery and death meted out by Crown forces in the early hours of December 27th 1920, is told elsewhere in this book.

What follows is the history of Rockbarton and Caherguillamore Houses and the families who owned and lived in them from approximately the late eighteenth century up to the mid-twentieth century.

The text of an article, titled “Rockbarton and Caherguillamore Houses”, written by Mary Sheehan, which is to be found in the superb book, *Our Place Meanus & Our People*, published in 2003, is reproduced hereunder, with kind permission. The story, superbly told by Mary, is captivating and provides great insight into the lives of both the aristocracy and the ordinary Irish people of the times.

Mary Sheehan states that Nigel Baring and his family left Rockbarton House in 1922 and returned to England, a consequence of which was a fall in local employment and a decline in the economic life of the town of Bruff [*and the area in general, probably*]. The census of population taken in 1911 indicated that the Baring household consisted of twenty persons. Baring and his family members accounted for five; the remaining fifteen were employees, two of whom were nurses and thirteen were “servants”, all of which employees were assigned ‘indoor’ responsibilities. Therefore, those living at the great house did not include a further number of persons who must have been employed to look after the Estate, stables and general ‘outdoor’ activities. Of course, the positive impact of this large number of people on the nearby town must have been considerable indeed. Understandably, after Baring left in 1922, the negative impact had to have been severe.

The same census of population indicated that Viscount Guillamore and a number of “servants” were living in Caherguillamore, a further boost for the area at the time.

The aristocracy exodus, locally and nationally, was followed, in due course, by the division of former estate lands by the Land Commission amongst local Irish people, including families from neighbouring counties, thus providing the foundations for a new rural Ireland and the commencement of a new social and economic era. The division of former estate lands required that the avenues leading to Caherguillamore House would have to be widened, so as to serve as a roadway, now known as “The Burma Road”. Controversy arose regarding the road widening as land was lost to the farms adjoining the former avenues.

Rockbarton and Caherguillamore Houses (by Mary Sheehan)

Rockbarton and Caherguillamore Houses were both situated on the same estate and were originally O’Grady houses. Caherguillamore House was the Dower house while Rockbarton was a much larger house. Both houses were occupied by O’Grady and those who married into the O’Grady clan.

Rockbarton House was built at the end of the 18th century when many Irish country houses were erected, while Caherguillamore House would already have been in place by this time. All that remains today of these houses are ruins, the remains of the woodland, the Rockbarton stable yard and workers living quarters and the gate lodge.

The Caherguillamore/Rockbarton Estate was a very impressive place in the 1920s when Nigel Baring left Ireland. At that time, it had a sophisticated underground drainage system and a water supply from a reservoir situated above Rockbarton House. The golden age of these houses was from the late 1700s to early 20th century. In the early 1800s, the First Viscount Guillamore took up residence at Rockbarton and his descendants remained there until 1922.

Caherguillamore [*House*] was situated in a valley and surrounded by rising ground. The house was approached by an avenue of ash and elm, which was almost



Caherguillamore House.

a mile long. This avenue is now known as “Burma Road” and it still retains much of its quaint and ancient atmosphere, although several houses have since been erected there. The parkland contained Cedar of Lebanon trees and was well stocked with deer. The demesne is reputed to have been one of the most interesting in the county for Rathes and other remaining antiquities.

Rockbarton House was also splendidly furnished, having a fine hall with a noble staircase of Portland stone. The house also facilitated large apartments which would have been decorated to the highest standards of the time.

Chief Baron O’Grady – First Viscount Guillamore

In the 1700s, Standish O’Grady married Hanora Hayes, who was co-heir to properties at Caherguillamore and in this way, the Caherguillamore Estate passed into the O’Grady family. Standish O’Grady’s grandson, who was also called Standish was born in 1767. He was to become the Chief Baron and the First

Viscount Guillamore, and Rockbarton House was his place of residence.

Standish was a lawyer and a contemporary of Daniel O'Connell. His promotion in the legal profession was rapid and in 1803, he was appointed as Attorney General for Ireland. Subsequently, he was the leading officer for the Crown during the prosecution for treason of Robert Emmet. The government was highly impressed with his conduct of the case and, as a result, promoted him to Chief Baron of His Majesty's Court of Exchequer. He was again honoured in 1831 when he was raised to the peerage as Viscount Guillamore.

In the legal history of the time, he was viewed as a humourist and as a fairly rough character. It is also recorded that he spoke with a broad County Limerick accent which indicates that his links with his Irish roots may have been stronger than his links with the ascendancy. Locally, his reputation for imposing the death penalty as a punishment for trivial offences grew, and so he became known as the "Bloody Judge". However, his involvement in the trial of Robert Emmett may be the reason for his unpopularity in local folklore. His local reputation as the "Bloody Judge" who showed no mercy to anyone is said by some to be somewhat unfair as, at the time, hanging was the penalty for many offences. In fact, in many of the recorded cases of the time, he was seen to be a fair judge. He was the original judge in the "Case of the Doneraile Conspiracy", which is the subject of Canon Sheehan's book *Glenanaar*.

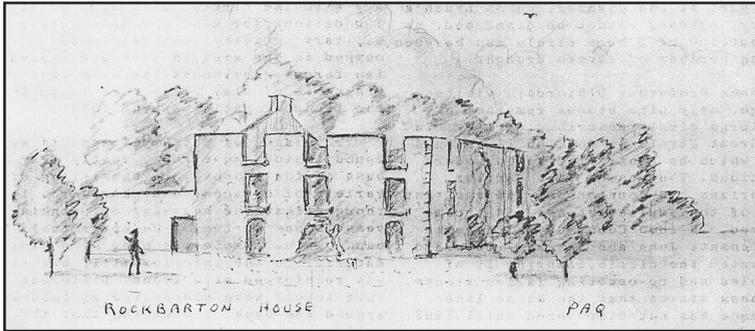
In the early 1800s, there would have been a lot of "Whiteboy" activity around Doneraile and about this time, a local landlord's son was murdered as a result of these activities. In an attempt to solve the case, the authorities of the time offered a reward of Stg £750 for any information given which would lead to convictions. An unsavoury character offered information which implicated some seventeen men from the Doneraile district. One of the accused, O'Leary, was a man over seventy years old. Chief Baron O'Grady, who was the judge at the initial assizes, was suspicious of this informer and did not go along with the Crown, as he recommended to the jury that they should not find anyone guilty on the evidence of an informer. Subsequently, two other judges came into the case, and the prisoners were found guilty and sentenced to death. Later, Daniel O'Connell came out of retirement to appeal the case, and the conspiracy was uncovered.

In local folklore, it is said that Judge O'Grady condemned a priest to death in Clonmel. The condemned priest then cursed O'Grady by saying "May you never die". Later, he [*O'Grady*] suffered from paralysis, and it is said that the skin rotted off his body. During this time, his greatest wish was to die, but it was not until a Father O'Grady from Bruff prayed over him that he died. His body lay in state for a week in the spacious library at Rockbarton House, awaiting the nobility of Ireland to assemble at the funeral. The body was interred in the O'Grady vault at Knockainey Churchyard.

Lt Col Standish O'Grady – Second Viscount Guillamore

The eldest son of the Chief Barron was also known as Standish O'Grady. He commanded the 7th Hussars and fought in the European wars against Napoleon. Upon Napoleon's return from Elba, he [O'Grady] sailed for Brussels with his regiment to assist Wellington. When fighting the French at Genappe, he secured a safe march to Waterloo for the 7th Hussars, where they were destined to defeat Napoleon. This was considered to have been his greatest military achievement and in recognition he was promoted as Aide-de-Camp to the Queen.

Locally, it is known that he had a beautiful white charger which he rode into battle, but that had never before obliged him, by jumping any ditch. However, during a retreat from the French, his white steed took a great leap over a wide ditch, thus saving O'Grady's life. Later, when O'Grady retired from the army, he brought the horse back to Caherguillamore, where it was allotted a rich pasture and is reputed to have been buried at the gates of Caherguillamore House.



Rockbarton House.

During O'Grady's retirement, he married and took up residence at Caherguillamore House. He also became involved in politics and represented Limerick in parliament. He donated the land at Meanus for the building of the church there. On the death of his father in 1840, he succeeded to the title Viscount Guillamore, and he continued to live at Caherguillamore House until his death. As was the case with his father, he was buried in the family vault in Knockainey.

Standish O'Grady – Third Viscount Guillamore

Information on Standish O'Grady, Third Viscount Guillamore, is sparse. It is known that he was buried in Knockainey Churchyard along with his father and grandfather. According to the headstone, he died on April 10th 1860 at the young age of 27. However, it is not known what caused his untimely death. On the death of Standish, the Third Viscount Guillamore, the Guillamore title passed from the Rockbarton/Caherguillamore branch of the O'Grady's to the Rathfreda branch. This was due to the fact that he was predeceased by his only son who died in 1856, aged one and a half.

The final holder of the Guillamore title was Standish Bruce O'Grady, who died in 1955. Therefore, the title which was created in 1831 for the then Chief Barron O'Grady, who was referred to locally as "The Bloody Judge", lasted only a little more than a century.

Second Lord Fermoy

The only surviving child of the Third Viscount Guillamore was Cecilia O'Grady. She married the Second Lord Fermoy in 1877 and brought the properties of Rockbarton and Caherguillamore to the marriage, as both of her parents were dead. Therefore, Lord Fermoy came to Rockbarton in 1877. Lord Fermoy was from County Cork, and the family name was Roche. The Fermoy's seem to have had some financial difficulties, and Lord Fermoy's father required his Carrignavar tenants to increase their rents in the 1850s, to boost the depleted finances of the Roche family.

Their [*Roches*] fortunes collapsed completely in the 1870s. Lord Fermoy's Estate of 19,350 acres was then pushed onto the market by Norwich Union Insurance Company. Obviously, the marriage to Cecilia O'Grady had a lot of financial advantages for the Second Lord Fermoy. Fermoy was also known to be very interested in greyhounds. He enjoyed a gamble and is reputed to have lost a fortune on the Waterloo Cup. He had a dog running in the Cup, which he believed was a 'dead certainty' to win. The dog was interfered with, and Lord Fermoy lost a large sum of money. Lord Fermoy lived at Caherguillamore until his death in 1920. He had one daughter, Ada Sybil, who married Nigel Baring.

Nigel Baring

Nigel Baring was born in Essex (England) in 1870. His father was T C Baring, a member of that banking family. His mother, Susan Mintrum, was an American heiress. Nigel Baring had a life-long passion for horses and hunting. He came to Ireland in 1896 and became a famed Master of the Duhallow Hounds. His fame was mainly linked to the fact that he bred a pack of hounds for the Duhallows, famous for their [*hounds*] ferocity. His own love of the hunt was also famed, as his renowned toast over port was "more blood". He spent 12 years with the Duhallows and was respected both as a Huntsman and as a Master. In the final season of his mastership, he married Sybil Roche and moved to Rockbarton House with his new bride. There he took up mastership of the Limerick Hounds and spent fourteen years with them. His retirement from hunting was made necessary due to a hunting accident.

Nigel Baring was known to be generous in nature. The late Major Ged O'Dwyer recalled in his memoirs that when he followed the hunt as a young boy on his donkey, "Bess", he was looked on with disdain by some of the hunting fraternity, but was

encouraged and befriended by Nigel Baring. It is worth noting that he attributed his love of horses and his success on the international stage, to the encouragement he received from Nigel Baring. It is also recorded by Major O'Dwyer how, in the early 1920s, he was part of an IRA unit that raided Rockbarton House for guns and ammunition. He stated his case to Nigel Baring, and the guns and ammunition were handed over. Nigel Baring, while regarded as a member of the landed gentry, was not interested in politics, and no intimation was ever given by him to the authorities as to the identity of the raiders.

In 1908, Nigel Baring spent Stg £30,000 on Rockbarton House and Estate, which at that time was a large sum of money. The stable yard was upgraded; an underground drainage system was installed, and Italian craftsmen were brought to Rockbarton to decorate the ceilings. A beautiful marble and brass staircase was installed. One can imagine that the estate must have been considered impressive, and it provided employment for a lot of people.

When Nigel Baring and his family left Rockbarton in 1922, this source of employment dried up for many people, and the nearby town of Bruff went into decline. The 1920s were a very dangerous time in Ireland for members of the ascendancy, and in 1922 Nigel Baring's horses were stolen. The thieves removed the horses' shoes and put them on back to front, in order to mislead the police. [*horse shoes then pointed in a direction opposite to which the animals were moving*] This act of hostility was the catalyst which led to his decision to leave Ireland. Nigel Baring was buried in England. His wife Sybil, who died in 1944, was buried in St John's Churchyard in Knockainey.

After 1922, the Caherguillamore/Rockbarton Estate was acquired by the Land Commission and divided up into small holdings, that were distributed amongst various people of the locality and new families came into the area to work these holdings. Several people who worked on the Estate received land and houses. Nigel Baring had houses built for the Estate workers at Meanus, which were known as the "New Houses".

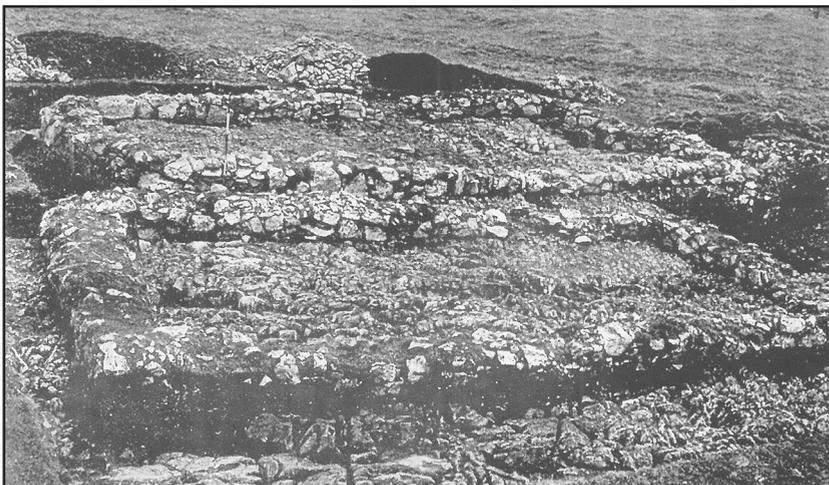
In 1920, Caherguillamore House was the scene of a bloody massacre at the hands of the Black-and-Tans. Caherguillamore House was burnt out [*there are conflicting views on this at the time of publishing this book*] during the 'troubles', and Rockbarton house was sold. It was never again occupied, but the house was stripped down and sold off bit by bit. An auction was eventually held, and the remaining fittings and furnishings were sold off. The staircase and fountain are known to have been sold and installed in a house in London.

While the houses themselves are now but a memory, the folklore about these houses and their impact on the locality remain. The love of horses and horse-related pursuits, which were encouraged by Nigel Baring and the O'Gradys, continue to be a vibrant part of life in County Limerick today.

Medieval Dwellings at Caherguillamore
(From *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries*)

Towns first came into existence in Ireland with the Viking raids of the 9th and 10th centuries, where the Norsemen settled in such places as Dublin, Waterford, Cork and Limerick. The Norman invasion of the 12th and 13th centuries caused the further development of these towns and the establishment of others. The following centuries were marked by the growth of more rural settlements throughout the country. Most of those have disappeared with the passing of time and land reclamation. The remains of one such mediaeval settlement can still be seen in the Lough Gur area in the townland of Caherguillamore. Its survival there is due to a large extent to the fact that the remains are mainly situated in the Caherguillamore deer park, which has been left undisturbed. While excavations were taking place in the Lough Gur area, two eminent archaeologists, Dr Seán Riordan and Mr John Hunt, examined the site at Caherguillamore in 1942. An aerial photograph taken at the time revealed a large number of monuments not easily visible at ground level, and the whole complex may be said to cover an area of 500 acres. Over this area may be seen the remains of ancient field banks, roads, several forts and the stone walls of houses. The field banks reveal a system of square or oblong fields. A number of narrow roads appear on the aerial photograph, and can also be seen at ground level. The remains of a number of ancient houses can be seen, rectangular in shape, some with associated yard or gardens.

Two well-marked house sites were selected for excavation, one measuring 43 feet by 20 feet, the other slightly smaller. The walls were made of stone with wattle lining. The larger house was divided into two apartments. Both houses had doorways and fireplaces.



Aerial view of excavations at Caherguillamore.

The finds in both houses are of great interest in themselves and as a means of determining the date of the houses. A silver penny was found on the floor of one of the houses and dates to the time of Edward I, 1272-1307. Six bronze objects were found, several iron objects – knives, keys, buckle and chisel. Finds also included several stone implements such as whetstones and querns, a few bone objects and a quantity of animal bones. Finally, more than seventy fragments of pottery were found of different household wares.

The finds indicate that the houses excavated were substantial dwellings and well furnished. The general evidence suggests that the houses were occupied from the 14th to 16th century. This makes the excavation one of special importance because it is the only excavation of a mediaeval dwelling site in the country and gives a very good picture of rural life in mediaeval Ireland. One would hope that it would be possible some time to carry out a further examination of the whole area.

References and Notes:

(1) Chapter by Mary Sheehan in “Our Place Meanus & Our People” (2003)–p44-48 (ISBN 0-9546782-0-6)

(2) [http://www.multitext.ucc.ie/d/Daniel O'Connell](http://www.multitext.ucc.ie/d/Daniel_O'Connell) – The ‘Liberator’, lawyer, and politician. Daniel O’Connell was born on 6th August 1775, in Carhan near Cahirciveen, Co Kerry. The O’Connells were a wealthy landed family. From 1805, he championed the movement for Catholic Emancipation, which aimed at repealing the laws that limited the voting rights and educational opportunities of Catholics. He mocked the ‘beggarly Corporation’ of Dublin and was challenged to a duel in 1815 by a member, John Norcot d’Esterre. O’Connell fatally wounded d’Esterre but was extremely remorseful. His wife refused O’Connell’s offer of a pension, but he later arranged for an annuity for her daughter.

(3) en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whiteboys The Whiteboys (Irish: Buachailli Bána) were a secret Irish agrarian organisation in 18th-century Ireland which used violent tactics to defend tenant farmer land rights for subsistence farming. Their name derives from the white smocks the members wore in their nightly raids, but the Whiteboys were usually referred to at the time as Levellers by the authorities, and by themselves as “Queen Sive Oultagh’s children”, “fairies”, or as followers of “Johanna Meskill” or “Sheila Meskill”, all symbolic figures supposed to lead the movement. They sought to address rack-rents, tithes collection, excessive priests’ dues, evictions and other oppressive acts. As a result, they targeted landlords and tithe collectors. Over time, Whiteboyism became a general term for rural violence connected to secret societies. Because of this generalisation, the historical record for the Whiteboys as a specific organisation is unclear.

(4) Genappe is located in Brabant Walloon, 27 km from Brussels

(5) The history of Bruff – Pius Browne

(6) History of Limerick – McGregor & Fitzgerald

(7) Famous Irish Trials – Hedley McKay

(8) History of Limerick and its Antiquities – Lenihan

(9) “Glenanaar” – Canon Sheehan

(10) Vanishing Country Houses of Ireland

(11) Forgotten Dreams – Tom Toomey

(12) Topographical Directory of Ireland – S Lewis

(13) Research on Baring family in Ireland – Ann Ashton, Anne Baring, Gillian Cooke

(14) Memories of Rockbarton recorded by late John Fraher – Alice Fraher

(15) Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries