

Nixon Hall

The Rise and Mysterious Demise of a Late
Georgian Country Mansion in County Fermanagh

by

Marion Maxwell



Cuilcagh to Cleenish: A Great Place

Cuilcagh to Cleenish: A Great Place (C2C) is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council. The partnership involves Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (lead partner), Cleenish Community Association, Killesher Community Development Association and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (through the resources of the Cuilcagh Lakelands UNESCO Global Geopark).

The C2C project area is in west County Fermanagh. It extends from the top of Cuilcagh Mountain on the Fermanagh/Cavan border to the shores of Upper Lough Erne, and includes Marble Arch Caves UNESCO Global Geopark, the National Trust at Florence Court, the Arney River, and the small rural communities of Killesher, Arney and Bellanaleck.

The C2C project provides a unique opportunity to interpret and understand the areas built, natural, cultural, and archaeological history and heritage. Through place-making activities it has developed new heritage trails, cultural and heritage events, and created access to key sites of interest.

About the author

Marion Maxwell is a well-known and respected local historian and researcher whose extensive work over many years has captured the essence of many historical events in West Fermanagh. Her knowledge of this place, coupled with her easy and relaxed communication skills, have ensured that our community has benefited greatly over the years from a rich source of information about our rich history and heritage. A recent example of her work (undertaken with colleagues from the Bellanaleck Local History Group) explored the impact on veterans of the First World War through the memories and testimonies of eleven ex-servicemen who settled on Cleenish Island. The veterans' stories were movingly told through the award-winning *Making It Home* project and documentary film, and subsequent publication as a book of the same name in 2017.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I should like to thank Cuilcagh to Cleenish: *A Great Place*, in particular Barney Devine, for revitalising my interest in Nixon Hall and for providing this opportunity to make the results of my research available to others. I should like to offer my thanks to the descendants of the Nixon family, especially to Jamie Nugent who provided information and material on the family history and whose keen personal interest fuelled my own enthusiasm and to George Montgomery for providing the wonderful portrait of his ancestor, Alexander Nixon Montgomery who was born at Nixon Hall.

My thanks also to the late Hilary Kinehan who was a key link to the past at Nixon Hall, and Geoffrey Doogan and Jim Manley whose help in tracing the footprint of the house and outbuildings was invaluable. Their reminiscences caused much merriment and their appreciation of every field and tree about the place was infectious.

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August 2021



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Painting of Nixon Hall Courtesy of Jamie Nugent.

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1 Introduction

Although I've lived all my life just a few townlands away from the remains of the Late Georgian mansion known as Nixon Hall I came to realise that other than stories of ghosts,



Last remnants of cut stone on the site



The last remaining wall

headless horsemen and secret passageways, there was little known about its history, or the people who lived there. What I uncovered exceeded my expectations, not only about the house and grounds, but also about the stories of its occupants.

Described once as the handsomest house of its size in Ulster, it had become a ruin within a mere fifty years. Interviewed in 1926 on his 108th birthday, James Drumm, Fermanagh's oldest inhabitant at the time, recalled the burning of Nixon Hall in 1844 as one of the vivid memories of his lifetime.

The only visible remains today are parts of the south-facing wall of a stable yard that stood behind the main house, and some loose dressed stones here and there which I found myself scanning for clues they might have held of an earlier life, for it is well known in local lore that much of the stone used to build the house came from the monastic site on Cleenish Island. It is easy to picture the stone being cotted downstream the short distance along the Erne, up through Laragh Lough, and then carted up to the back of the building site.

The following map shows the location of Nixon Hall -by then renamed Fairwood park and the seat of James Denham Esq.- in relation to Bellanaleck and Lough Erne. Nearby Laragh Lough afforded the property access by water directly to Lough Erne via a narrow canal under the Enniskillen to Bellanaleck Road at the High Bridge.



Portion of map based on a survey by G. Montgomery for a navigational chart of Lough Erne and Donegal Bay completed in 1818. From the collection of the Earl of Belmore

It shows a tree-lined avenue to the house which cut off to the right on the road from Enniskillen just short of Bellanaleck. The avenue ran for a short distance parallel with the Arney road, taking a path up the back of Carney Hill, then veering right to join up with the main approach to the house from the Skea Road.

Nixon Hall was a country mansion considered in its day to be the handsomest of its size in Ulster, yet why, after a mere fifty years, had it been abandoned and allowed to fall into ruin? In retrieving the story, I spoke with local people who had lived and worked on the demesne and to Jamie Nugent, a direct descendant of the Nixon family who built the house. Online newspaper archives also contained much valuable information from contemporary reports.

Two contemporary paintings of the house dated 1815 and owned by Timothy F. Nixon, show the front and rear views.



Front view facing south towards Benaughlin and Cuilcagh.



Back view facing north towards Laragh Lough

Another source of valuable information was the writer Robert Harbinson (whose real name was Bobbie Bryans). In 1941, Bryans was taken in as a young evacuee from the Belfast blitz

by James and Lizzie Graham of Granshagh, a townland that lay next to Nixon Hall. 'By then', he wrote, 'the avenue into Nixon Hall was under a century of grass', but the Grahams told him many stories relating to the Big House which are included in his highly evocative book "Song of Erne".

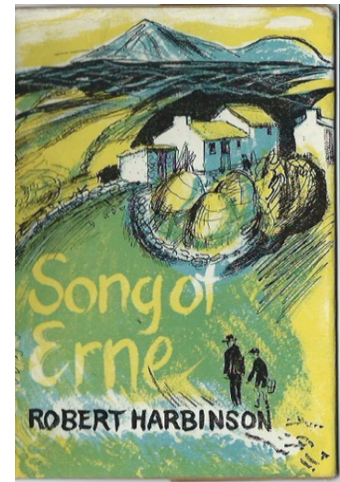
This then, was the path I walked as an aspiring young archaeologist sometime in the mid 50's, my childish imagination fired up with finding treasure at the 'castle'. My kid brother Malcolm was brought along as assistant, armed with a bucket and shovel. How I wish it had been a camera he carried, for at that time there remained a flight of steps leading up to a great door and what I mistakenly took to be a moat surrounding the house - after all a real castle had to have a moat! It was, in fact, a sunken trench, sometimes known as the 'area', that surrounded grand houses and ran under the flight of entrance steps, its purpose being to give light to windows in the basement.

What then was the story behind the rise and fall of this once magnificent house set within its own landscaped demesne? Who were the people who lived in it, and what were the events that led to its demise and ruination within such a short period of time?

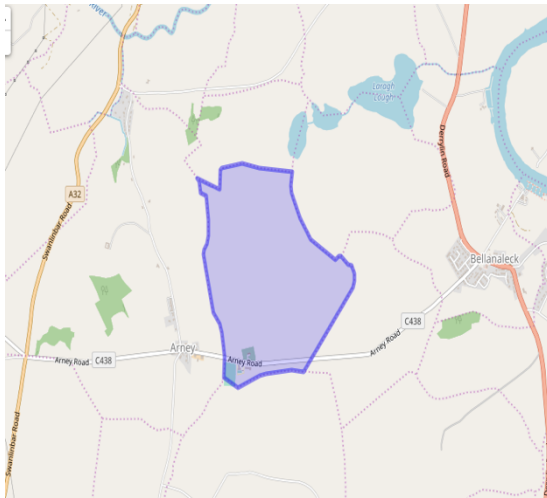
I hope that this recent research and publication will go some way to providing the answers and recording the history of this once great house and the people who lived and worked there.

Marion Maxwell

August 2021.



2 An ancient landscape



Mullymesker townland. www.townlands.ie_Aug 2021

Today, the insignificant remains of Nixon Hall and demesne lie hidden from the passing world in the townlands of Rushin, Granshagh and Mullymesker, just three Irish miles from Enniskillen. It's an undulating landscape enclosed within soft drumlins, and it affords longer views of the slopes of Benaughlin mountain, Cuilcagh and Belmore. Within Mullymesker is Mullanaman or the 'Hill of the Women', where, it is said, the womenfolk gathered in August 1594 to watch from safety the Battle of the Ford of the Biscuits at a shallow crossing point in the Arney River to the south in the townland of Sessiagh.

In his 1719 *History of Fermanagh*, John Dolan described Mullymesker as: *a comely and*

There is a tradition prevalent in this district that Sir Henry Duke the English commander succeeded in crossing the Arney, pushing forward in spite of Maguire's stubborn resistance until his advance was checked by a serious engagement with the Tyrone forces, under the command of Cormac Mac Barron O'Neill, at Nixon Hall in the townland of Mullymesker. It is said that Duke ordered a strategic withdrawal of his troops as a result of this engagement. His retreating troops were then pursued and engaged in action throughout the townlands of Mullymesker and Sessiagh.

Eamon Anderson, Fermanagh Herald August 1942

bounteous hill called Mullamesker, in former times when ye Irish governed, this hill being called Mullaghmeenesquire, it being so fine and rare for horse pasturage, and was set out to be a common for ye town of Iniskillin, excellent good soil for sheep, horses or milches, yielding all kinds of grain, plenteous and rich and withal pleasant and rare to behold.

Mullymesker townland is usually translated from the Irish as meaning 'the hill of conflict'. However, Deaglan O Doibhlin, an expert on the origins of townland names interprets Dolan's version of Mullaghmeenesquire as deriving from Mullach Min Mhig Uidhir, meaning 'Maguire's sweet

height'. Under Maguire rule, the land in Mullymesker was clearly prized for its productiveness. Indeed, just a townland away, a recent community dig at Clontymullan Fort uncovered exciting evidence of a substantial Maguire house on a moated site on the Arney River, thought to have been inhabited between 1440 and 1550 and associated with

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Turlough Maguire, a leading local Gaelic lord and his descendants. It has been described as a high-status house built to impress, a place where visitors would be welcomed, rent collected, and homage paid. Fast forward some two hundred years and, under a different dispensation, something very similar was happening in Mullymesker: the mansion built there by the Nixons was a self-styled country gentleman's residence also designed to send out a message that someone of high status lived there. Taking the long view, both houses form part of the layered and rich social history of the area.

Although there are gaps in our knowledge of the history of Mullymesker in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, it is thought that the family of Captain George Hassard who came to Fermanagh with Sir William Cole in the early 1600s had, in return for their services, been granted land here and elsewhere in Glenawley Barony around 1666, as freeholders in the estate of Sir Michael Cole of Florencecourt.

Certainly, a Jason Hassard was living in Mullymesker in 1676 when he was Fermanagh's High Sheriff and was still living there when he made his will in 1690. He left much of his property to his nephew Jason who was ancestor to the Skea branch of the family and was living there in 1725. George Hassard lived there in 1830 when the present Skea Hall was built. Interestingly, Arney chapel was opened for worship in 1837 and although it is in Mullymesker townland, George Hassard of Skea must have owned that portion of the land because he donated the site for the construction of the Chapel.

The bishop and Clergy and the people seemed truly grateful to George Hassard Esq., of Skea, the landlord of the place, to whose kindness they are indebted for this very handsome site, containing an Irish acre...
Enniskillen Chronicle, Aug. 1837

Mullymesker passed back into Cole ownership before being sold in 1732 to George Nixon, the founder of Nixon Hall. The legal purchase document includes mention of 'two great tates of Mullymisker and Drumrae and quarter tate of Edinmore, tate of Ross and Drumean, Barony of Clynawley.' (A tate was approximately sixty acres)

Taylor and Skinner's map of 1777 is the first map to show both the Nixon House and the nearby Hassard House in the adjoining townland of Skea. They lay on either side of the coach road that ran from Dublin to Enniskillen in the mid 1700s, a journey that took three days and nights at the time. The route took a path over solid clay by Kinawley,



Derrylester, Mullinaveigh, Clontymullan, Arney Bridge, Skea and on via Mullaghy and Rossorry to Enniskillen. It was a busy route. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, travelled that way on horseback in 1773, just three years before this map was made. He was seventy and he recalled in his diary dismounting near Kinawley to pick blackberries to stave off hunger. (On the same journey, he was stoned on the West Bridge going into Enniskillen by hostile members of the Established Church.)

3 Recent reminiscences

The late, much-lamented Hilary Kinehan spent his early life at Nixon Hall where his father worked from 1936 until 1952 as farm manager for Major Billy Nixon of Belcoo. Major Nixon was no direct relation to the Nixon Hall branch and had taken on the farm circa 1920 from a Mr. Strawhorne who lived in the Gortatole area. (The Strawhornes provided the site for the Gaelic pitch in Lower Mullymesker in the early 1900s.) Hilary had very fond memories of Nixon Hall but, sadly, he died before he had been able to give a detailed tour.



Young Hilary Kinehan on cart with milk churns. Courtesy of his nephew Ken Slipp



The Kinehan family lived in this house on the Nixon Hall demesne

Hilary recalled that the land attached to Nixon Hall included three townlands comprising three hundred and forty-five acres. There were three avenues in his time: the main gated entrance was from Skea on the Swanlinbar coach road, another went in from the present Arney to Bellanaleck Road near Arney Chapel and a third, made more recently, went in from the Granshagh

Road. In addition, Hilary noted that there had been an older approach that ran from

Bellanaleck, up the back of Carney Hill, then veered right in the direction of Nixon Hall before joining up, just short of the Big House, with the main avenue in from Skea. He recalls scraping off soil to see the old surface and remembered that there was a stone wall that ran the length of it.

Hilary also recalled being told by Hugh Nolan, a noted local oral historian from Rossdoney, that a boat coming along Lough Erne was able to travel up ‘the canal’ (stream) under what



Historic Environment Map Viewer O.S. map, 1835

is now called the High Bridge on the main Enniskillen to Bellanaleck road near the present-day Moorings, into Laragh Lough, then one larger lake, which was navigable to within a short distance of the house, located bottom left corner of map.

Being aligned, the three loughs are nicknamed the ‘String of Pearls’. It is evident that, through time, reeds have clogged up the shallows to separate them where originally, they had been, effectively, an inlet of Lough Erne. In the days when the lake was the main thoroughfare this direct connection to Lough Erne would have greatly enhanced the appeal and the value of the site at Mullymesker.



*‘String of Pearls’ today with a glimpse of Upper Lough Erne in the distance.
Courtesy of the late Jean Stephens.*

Indeed, when it came up for

sale in the mid 19th century the fact that there was access by water upstream to Belturbet and downstream to Enniskillen and Ballyshannon was mentioned as a major selling point.

Mr Jack Turner bought the Nixon Hall farm from Major Nixon in 1951 and Geoffrey Dougan and Jim Manley, both of whom worked for many years on the Turner farm, have been another invaluable source of information. Substantial remains of the shell of what they called 'the castle' still stood then and they were able to trace its footprint today. They identified the exact spot they still call Castle Hill, now in grass, where a flight of stone steps once led up to the big front door of the house. They confirmed the existence of an open trench or 'area', not visible in the 1815 painting, that ran at basement level round the house and underground beneath the flight of steps up to the front door, affording light to the underground kitchens and accommodation. To the rear, they had found remains of the cobbled surface of the stable yard and in the field below a section of gravel paths of the *parterre* (ornamental garden) which had been revealed when the ground there was being worked. Geoffrey pointed out, too, the line of an underground service tunnel that ran down to the lough below, which was used for discreetly bringing up supplies delivered by boat.

Photographs taken in 2004 by Mel Humphries-Cott, a Nixon descendant, show the remains of a hexagonal brick building, now gone, to the east of the house. A vaulted arch may possibly have led to the service tunnel to the lake.



Three views of remains of the hexagonal brick building.

Listening to them reminisce, it is obvious that the two men had grown to have a real feel for the place, to know every field and to value all the old trees in their variety. Geoffrey still laments the loss of a particularly magnificent chestnut tree *'that just lit up after dark when it was in full bloom.'*

4 The Nixon Family

Adam Nixon, John Nixon and Thomas Nixon were among the twelve approved and registered inhabitants of Enniskillen in the early 1600's. George Nixon of Mullymesker, and founder of the Nixon Hall branch of the family, was the fourth generation of Nixons since then to hold land in the area around Rossorry, Culkey and Granshagh. He was the second son of Thomas Nixon who had been a quartermaster in the army of William of Orange. Two of George's brothers, Adam and Andrew, entered the Church. Obviously, the family had been on the right side of history for the times that were in it, and they quickly rose to become part of the Establishment. Clearly men of ability, some of the Granshagh Nixons had become professionals within a couple of generations, whether in the army or law, or the Church.

Hugh Nolan, Rossdoney's oral historian par excellence put it succinctly.... *"And there was some of these demesnes and they were just owned by men that raised well, be good pull and be industry that had got to be landowners, do ye see."*

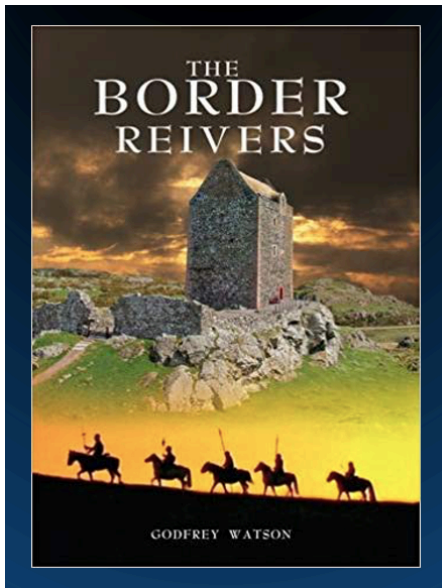
In 1732, George Nixon of Granshagh bought the farm at Mullymesker from John Cole of Florencecourt. He had, in turn, purchased it from the Hassards who had long lived in the vicinity and who had also acquired the nearby lands of Skea. As near neighbours, the Hassards and Nixons became closely related through various marriages.

Along with the Hassards from Lyme Regis, Sir William Cole had brought other families from Dorset and Devon with names such as Coulter, Willis and Walmsley that are still familiar in the area today. The Nixons, by contrast, were from the West and Middle Scottish Marches of the violent frontier between England and Scotland. They were one of many family clans that had been made homeless by the constant English-Scottish wars that raged in contested lands along the border. By the early 1600s these Borderlands had been reduced to a wasteland. 'March law' applied, which was a rough and ready system of justice that gave great latitude to those willing to take matters into their own hands and which led to great instability in the region. Unable to farm in a settled way, inhabitants had to survive



Arms of NIXON, on record in Ulster's Office.
Sable, five bezants, two, two, and one, on a chief engrailed argent, a battleaxe
in fesse of the field. Crest—A game cock pp. charged on the breast
with a bezant.

*Nixon Coat of Arms with battle axe and game
cock. The motto means 'Ever Ready'.*



One of several books which tell the story of the Border Reivers

on their wits and their prowess, taking refuge in heavily fortified tower houses. Known as the Border Reivers they came from all social classes and had to fight to survive. Raiding and plundering cattle was their speciality.

Technically, you could say that the Border clans were Catholic in the sense that the Reformation had passed them by. It was said that the only “preying” they did was on their enemies! One traveller, unable to find a church in Liddesdale, enquired, ‘*Are there no Christians hereabouts?*’ The answer was, ‘*Naw, we’s all Elliots and Armstrongs here.*’



Fig. 5: The Highest Concentrations of Nixon Surnames in England and Scotland

The Nixons were described as ‘a troublesome and fearless breed’. They joined as confederates with the Elliotts and the Croziers, and if they all rode out with the Armstrongs it was enough to make the blood of their enemies run cold. These clansmen were described as the very best and hardiest light horsemen of Western Europe. At their height in the 16th century the Armstrongs could put 3,000 men in the saddle at 48 hours’ notice. Nicknames said it all: *Fingerless Will Nixon, Jock half-lugs Elliott, Nebless Clem Crozier, Willie Kang Irvine*. As for the Armstrongs, it was said the authorities used to drown them to save the rope.

With the crowns of England and Scotland unified in 1603 under James 1st, it became a priority to redd out the Borders of these lawless elements, and these clansmen were perfectly equipped to survive when they were sent as tenants to the most westerly frontier of the Ulster plantation project. Peadar Livingstone in his *History of Fermanagh* writes in a kindly enough way of these refugees:

They have often been adversely described as the scum of both nations, fleeing from justice, or seeking shelter. Unlike their masters they had nothing to fall back on elsewhere and so it was they who did the work and took their chances.

Uniquely in Ulster, Fermanagh is the only Plantation County which still has Maguire, the Gaelic chief's name, as the most numerous. It is also unique in having, at least until recently, three Planter names among the first five most numerous: Maguire, Johnston,



Down Survey map of 'Toniteige' 1656-58 showing a substantial house (under B:2) most likely the Acheson house

Armstrong, McManus, Elliott. (Nixon, 'son of Nick' is ultimately Scandinavian in origin as indeed is another familiar Fermanagh name, McManus.)

George Nixon, who bought Mullymesker in 1732, was married to Catherine, daughter of Alexander Acheson who lived in the townland of Toneyteige, near Bellanaleck. A map dating from the 1650s shows a substantial

house there. Again, Hugh Nolan our Rossdoney historian had remembered hearing of its existence.



Acheson stone tablet, Cleenish parish church, Bellanaleck

Inside the church in Bellanaleck is a stone tablet preserved from an earlier parish church on Cleenish Island. Set into the chancel wall behind the pulpit, it was commissioned by Catherine Nixon's father Alexander Acheson of Toneyteige. It reads:

This monument was erected by Capt. Alexander Achison in memory of himself his wife and children. Here lye of their sons: 2 called William Alexander, George and of their daughters Mary and Jane. (Presumably these children predeceased their parents.)

Of their other surviving children, Catherine Acheson married George Nixon of Mullymesker, Ann married Henry Crawford of Millwood, near Lisbellaw and a brother Alexander married a Richardson of Augher Castle. Incidentally, this Alexander became an alcoholic and took Henry Crawford to court, blaming his brother-in-law for plying him with alcohol and egging him on to drink himself out of his property.

5 The early brick-built house



*Alexander Nixon Montgomery of Bessmount (1761-1837)
younger brother of George Nixon of Nixon Hall. Courtesy of
George Montgomery*

Captain George Nixon J.P., and his wife Catherine (née Acheson) built a house at Mullymesker, which became known in his son's time as Nixon Hall. They had five children. Their eldest son Thomas was tragically killed in a fall from a horse, so when George Nixon died in 1757 their second son Alexander inherited the property. Alexander was a law graduate of Trinity College Dublin and married his cousin Mary Montgomery from Co. Monaghan. It was a prudent match for their son, also Alexander Nixon, who went on to inherit the Montgomery house and property on condition that he took on the Montgomery surname.

Thus, it was that the Nixon Hall estate passed to George and Catherine's grandson George.

A clue to what George and Catherine Nixon's early house in Mullymesker was like comes from a reference by a traveller, Rev. Daniel Beaufort, whose itinerary took him through the area in 1793. We are in for a surprise. Having driven through the grounds of Florencecourt he praised the setting though found the house *'very good but not very great'* - Beaufort then passed between Skea and Mr. Nixon's which he refers to as *'a large brick house well situated but, I hear, ill-contrived.'*

The existence of an earlier house at Nixon Hall that predated the one shown in the 1815 painting is new information. Significant too is that it was brick-built, something that would tie in with the strong tradition of brickmaking in the area. Hilary Kinehan told me that there was still a brick kiln in his day on the land at Nixon Hall and that blue clay from near Laragh Lough would have been used to make the bricks needed for its construction. In Cootehill, Co. Cavan, there is a brick-built house from the same period. Still in existence,



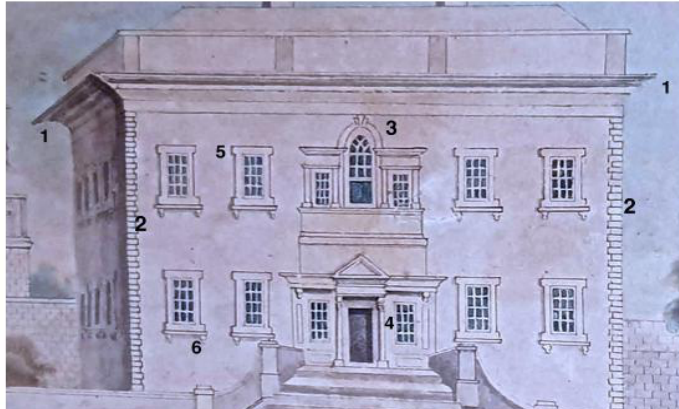
*A brick-built house from the same period: Bellamont House
Cootehill, built in 1730s*

Bellamont House has been described as '*one of the most perfect examples of a Palladian villa*'. Though the early Nixon house was not nearly so grand architecturally, Bellamont shows what could be achieved with brick in that period. Note the feature, common at the time, of an 'area', a trench surrounding the house extending under the front steps to afford light to the basement. Although this is not visible in the 1815 painting of Nixon Hall, it is known that the same feature existed there.

Rev. Beaumont's evidence places the replacement house in Mullymesker after 1793. Since George and Catherine Nixon's son Alexander was dead by 1791 it would mean that the new, grander house must have been built, or at least completed by Alexander's eldest son George. (Alexander had eight sons and five daughters.) That being the case, this George was destined to be the first - and the last - Nixon to live in Nixon Hall. George was married to his cousin Catherine Nixon, daughter of Humphrey of Nixon Lodge, near Belturbet. Like his father, George was a qualified barrister, a path often taken by an aspiring gentleman, as much to help with running his estate as for a career in law. Now for a closer look at the fine replacement house.

6 'A house of some architectural ambition.'

I am indebted to former architect Richard Pierce and to architectural historian Professor Alistair Rowan for the following insights into the building itself. Seeing the Nixon Hall



Nixon Hall: front view



Florencecourt House: front view

painting, Richard was immediately struck by what he described as amazing correspondences between it and the façade of Florencecourt House, just three and a half miles away. Using numbers to draw attention to features common to both, he gave the following analysis of the similarities in proportion and in details:

The cornices (1) around the tops of both buildings are identical in placing, proportion, and detail. There are quoins (2) on both buildings, and there is a Venetian window (3) above the front door of both buildings, of very similar detail. The arrangement of the

front door, its pediment and side lights (4) are virtually identical in both, and the external window architraves are 'lugged' on both buildings (5) which would be very old-fashioned by 1770. Finally, the window cills (6) of both buildings have brackets, which would also have been very old-fashioned by 1770. Therein lies the significance of the dating and the appearance of Nixon Hall for architectural historians: it may hold an important clue to unresolved questions surrounding the design of Florencecourt House, the earlier of the houses, for it has never been established with certainty who the architect of Florencecourt was.

The twin paintings of Nixon Hall dating from 1815 should be seen as examples of *estate portraiture*. This is particularly true of the view of the back of the house from Laragh Lough that shows the sizeable stable yard complete with arches and bell tower used to



Nixon Hall rear view from Laragh Lough 1815

summon the workers and depicting a setting of woodland and mountains beyond. Wealthy owners commissioned travelling artists who specialised in creating paintings that conveyed a narrative about the grandeur of the house, the splendour of its setting (lakes and mountains) the pastoral beauty of the surrounding demesne (trees, grazing cows), and the high status

and leisurely lifestyle of the owners (grand entrance steps, stable yard, fishing boat on the lake). Landowners often went to great lengths to create a water feature, to the extent of diverting a stream or creating an artificial lake. Here, the artist takes advantage of the proximity of a natural feature, Laragh Lough, adopting a long perspective from the far shore that allows the house to be viewed in a setting of lake, trees, and mountains - an



Nixon hall front view 1815

example of using 'borrowed landscape' from beyond the demesne. To this end, in a process that could be described as a forerunner of photoshopping, the artist has played around with perspective, enhancing the picturesque setting at the expense of detailed architectural accuracy.

Based on the 1815 paintings, eminent architectural historian Professor Rowan gave his evaluation of the house and made some deductions about its layout as follows:

Nixon Hall was a handsome building, a house of some architectural ambition, much more restrained than Florencecourt, with a limited use of architectural detail ... but used in a considered way. These are not precise architectural drawings but rather paintings designed to show the house off in its picturesque setting...The drawing is correct in the number of windows etc., but the proportions are probably not reliable. What we are shown is a tall two-story block, four windows wide, sitting high on a basement storey which does not appear to have any windows. The ground falls away steeply from the back

(north-facing) side of the building and the court of offices (courtyard or stable yard with buildings) appears to have been laid out symmetrically and closed by a blind arcaded wall of which we are shown six arches ... We do not see the balancing service wing on the left as it must be behind the group of taller trees. A tall, lop-sided cupola tower is shown in the north-west corner of the service court. The artist has shown a house almost as deep as it is wide, which is a little unusual. A high-hipped roof runs down from what was probably a flat lead platform at the centre of the building.



Snowhill, near Lisbellaw built c. 1760, thirty years before Nixon Hall was built

Professor Rowan suggests that the front of Nixon Hall probably looked very similar to Snowhill House near Lisbellaw, exhibiting the classic arrangement for a medium-sized Irish country house at the time. He further notes: *Nixon Hall was a well-proportioned house with a 'high look' not unlike the arrangement of the front of Knockballymore, not far from Newtownbutler,*

built by the Earl of Erne about 1740 or so. ...a description of its layout might almost describe that of Nixon Hall.'

Using his knowledge and experience, including inferences from the number, and the placing of the chimneys, Professor Rowan envisages the likely layout of Nixon Hall thus:

I would expect that there was a spinal wall running across the middle of the house from one side to the other. The chimneys were set regularly on this spinal wall and the fireplaces in the rooms at the back and at the front of the house would have been placed on this central wall or were led up towards it from the inner side walls of the rooms flanking the sides of the hall. This sort of plan in the eighteenth century made for warm, dry houses. Imagine a rectangular entrance hall with two doors at the back opening into a pair of rooms at the back of the house and each the same size. Good-sized public rooms would also have opened off the hall to the right and left. There would have been dressing rooms off the main bedrooms. In a house of this size there would normally have been two stairs, as at Florencecourt, one for the servants and the children of the house and a grand stair that very probably only led from the front hall to the floor above. The servants slept in attics in the roof space or perhaps in rooms in the basement. The kitchen and basement rooms would have had fireplaces apiece. It is



Knockballymore, lived in for a time by Rev. Alexander Nixon, nephew of George of Nixon Hall

very odd that we are shown no windows in the basement either at the back or the front of the house. Clearly there must have been a basement - just look at the size of the outside steps - as the servants needed light from windows to carry out their various jobs.

(The existence of a basement and an 'area' running round the house to give light was later confirmed by Geoffrey Doogan and Jim Manley, former farm workers at Nixon Hall.)

7 George Nixon of Nixon Hall 1754- 1818

George Nixon of Granshagh bought the Mullymesker estate in 1732, so when his grandson, also George Nixon, inherited the property, the Nixons had already owned it for upwards of sixty years. Although he had done some military service and was a qualified barrister, George Nixon enjoyed the privileged life of a country gentleman. He was appointed High Sheriff for Fermanagh in 1804, and was, like several of his Nixon predecessors, prominent in the Skea Bridge Yeomanry. Despite this, he himself had several dramatic brushes with justice.

In August 1790, the thirty-six-year-old George Nixon stood accused, along with his younger brother Adam who lived in the Graan, of the death of John Crozier who lived at nearby Dunbar House, along the Enniskillen to Belleek Road. It was said to be a row over a woman, possibly a daughter of the then headmaster of Portora. An Erne Chronicle report from the enquiry describes a duel: *'Far from firing at Mr. Crozier by surprise, Mr. Nixon said he had called on him to take care... The two shots had been fired nearly at the same instant; he could not tell who fired first. The transaction had been as fair as possible and Mr. George Nixon after the accident seemed greatly affected and showed great humanity to the deceased.'* After a mere three minutes the jury declared George and Adam Not Guilty. (Their brother Thomas Nixon became the next owner of Dunbar House).

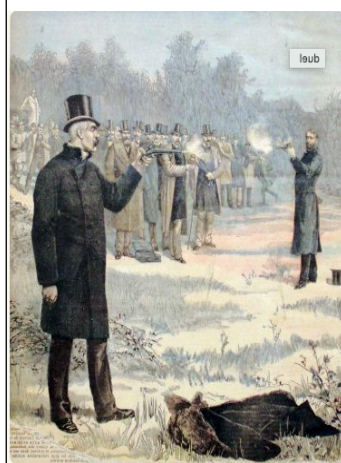
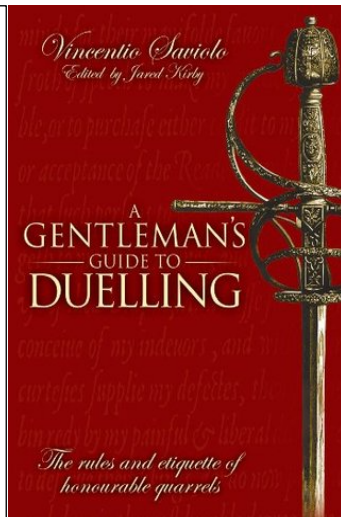
Twelve years later, in December 1802, the Dublin papers carried the report of another duel involving George, now in his late forties.

On Tuesday a duel was fought near the North Wall between George Nixon of Nixon Hall Esq. and D'Arcy Mahon of Cloone Esq. in which (Nixon) received a wound in the breast, which was supposed at first to be mortal, but which is not likely to prove fatal.

D'Arcy Mahon was Inspector General of Stamp Duties, a man from the Inland Revenue and we can only guess at what the perceived grievance was between the two men.

Ireland was the world capital of duelling in the 18th and 19th centuries. Although frowned upon it was perfectly legal and to refuse a challenge was considered cowardly. A code of conduct was drawn not so much to kill your opponent but to gain “satisfaction” and to restore one’s honour by showing a willingness to risk one’s live. Deaths increased considerably when swords were replaced by pistols. Trusted friends known as ‘seconds’ were appointed to negotiate the terms and make arrangements, including how many shots were allowed, the range and what conditions would end the duel.

Prominent people such as Lord Enniskillen and Daniel O’Connell the Liberator were duellists. O’Connell never got over killing his opponent.



In any case, George’s reputation must not have suffered for he was subsequently appointed High Sheriff for Fermanagh.

Nixon Hall was built with ample stabling for horses and hounds, and it was a popular venue for shooting parties that included officers from the Enniskillen Garrison. In September 1805 the following was reported:

A shocking accident happened in the neighbourhood of Enniskillen, on the 27th of last month. As Captain Sir James Rivers, Bart. of the Dragoon Guards, was out on a shooting party at Nixon Hall, in company with Capt. Fawcett and Capt. Platt of the 50th Regiment,

Sir James’s gun unfortunately went off, and killed him almost instantaneously.

In 1807, five years after his own brush with death in Dublin, George Nixon made the decision to leave Nixon Hall. The grand new mansion was scarcely fifteen years old, and he was still a relatively young man at fifty-three. We can only second guess what was going on. Perhaps it may have had something to do with a tragedy in the family for the couple’s baby son and heir Alexander died about this time. Robert Harbinson in *Songs out of Oriel*, a companion work to his *Song of Erne*, hints at bad luck surrounding the place, based on superstition attached to the reusing of stones from a holy place.

“Though the duelling Nixons added more than acres to their Plantation score, no pistol shot could lay the shadows of dark omens haunting the hall built from stone taken from the old church on Cleenish Island.”

Whatever the truth, George Nixon leased the property to Mr. John Fawcett (possibly the Capt. Fawcett who had been present at the shooting accident at Nixon Hall in 1805) who held it for the next seven years. It later emerged that during Fawcett’s tenure the state of

the house was allowed to deteriorate significantly. Perhaps he had not actually gone to live there.

Meanwhile, records tell us that George and Catherine went and lived 'amongst his brothers'. This is puzzling. They were a relatively young couple and furthermore they went on to have two daughters, Mary and Anne, who must have spent their childhood in the various homes of their uncles and aunts. The accommodation was desirable whichever house they chose, for the brothers had made advantageous marriages and were all well-to-do, living in houses that are still well known today: Adam at the Graan for forty two years Clerk of the Peace for the county, Andrew at Silverhill and later Bellanaleck House, Captain and Paymaster of the Fermanagh Militia, Thomas at Dunbar House, married to Jemima, daughter of the Lord Mayor of Dublin George Alcock and also Montgomery Nixon, a medical doctor living at Lakeview House, later to become Gloucester House opposite Portora on the outskirts of Enniskillen. Robert, an unmarried sibling, had become a professional soldier. Wounded at the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815, he was mentioned by Wellington in dispatches and had the Order of St. Vladimir bestowed on him by the Emperor of Russia. Three generations of what Harbinson called 'the fighting Nixons' thus connect the Boyne and Waterloo. When Captain Robert Nixon died in 1826, he left his money to his niece Anne, the Nixon Hall heiress.

George and Catherine and their young daughters appear to have led a somewhat itinerant existence for about eleven years, during which time George continued with his public duties, for example as an officer in the Skea Bridge Yeomanry and, until shortly before he died, as a magistrate in the local court circuit. He died in Thomas's house at Dunbar in 1818 aged sixty-four. Although George's widow Catherine remarried four years later, she is also buried in the Nixon grave, along with two of their three children.

The graves of George Nixon of Nixon Hall and five of his brothers are to be found in Bellanaleck churchyard along with those of several generations of their extended family.

In this, the most impressive group of Nixon graves, the central sarcophagus is that of George Nixon of Nixon Hall. It is topped with a stone ornament reminiscent of a cradle, perhaps to commemorate the death of his baby son Alexander. The inscription reads:

Sacred to the memory of George Nixon Esq. of Nixon Hall who departed this life on 11th October 1818 in the 65th year of his age. Also of his relict Catherine who in 1822 intermarried with Charles Ovenden Esq. and died on 11th Nov. 1853 aged 79 years. The mortal remains of their infant son Alexander Nixon and of their daughter Mary Nixon who departed this life on 19th August 1832 in the

19th year of her age are also deposited. (Mary had died of 'decline', that is tuberculosis, for which there was no cure at the time.)



Graves of three Nixon brothers in Bellanaleck Churchyard

Flanking this sarcophagus and in the surrounding graves lie four of George's brothers, commemorated as follows:

Thomas Nixon Esq, late of Dunbar, 6th son of Alexander Nixon, late of Nixon Hall. He departed this life on 24th October 1814 in the 48th year of his age, leaving a character distinguished for integrity.

Andrew Nixon Esq. of Bellanaleck and former magistrate of Hollybrook Co. Fermanagh who departed this life on 19th August 1831 in the 61st year of his age.

Adam Nixon of the Graan, highly respected Clerk of the Peace for 50 years who died in May 1845, aged 85.

Montgomery Nixon M.D. who departed this life the 11th July 1821 at Lakeview, Co. Fermanagh. This stone was erected in tribute and affection to a kind indulgent father by his dutiful daughter Mary Nixon. Also, to the memory of her beloved brother George Alcock Nixon, midshipman of his majesty's ship Maidstone who is deeply regretted by all who knew him, in the service of his country

fell victim to the climate in Sierra Leone on the 2nd October 1825. This tablet was placed here by his beloved sister Mary Nixon who can never cease to deplore his loss.



Montgomery Nixon's granddaughter Emma Dorothea is also buried in Bellanaleck. A direct descendant of George and Catherine Nixon of Nixon Hall, she was the mother of this man Alured Armstrong of Toneyloman who built the house now lived in by Trevor Nixon. Alured died in Toneyloman on 14th July 1953 aged sixty. Emma Dorothea Nixon was born in Lakeview House, a daughter of Dr. Montgomery Downes Nixon who was buried Bellanaleck in 1866. She married Bellanaleck man William Price who was Master of the Workhouse and when he died shortly afterwards, she married a neighbour Thompson Armstrong of Ross. Two of their sons, Alured Montgomery Thompson Armstrong and his brother Robert (Bob) Nixon Armstrong of Rose Cottage will be well remembered locally.

Although the wider Nixon family flourished, sadly only one of George and Catherine Nixon's children, Anne, survived into adulthood, thus destined to become the Nixon heiress.

8 Nixon Hall reimagined: Denham and Fairwood Park

A new phase in the life of Nixon Hall began in 1814 when George Nixon leased his house and demesne to James Denham Esq. for a rent of £291 and a payment of £2,500. Denham was a well-to-do farmer's son from Seapatrick Parish near Banbridge in Co. Down, a descendent of James Denham who had come from Lanarkshire as an army doctor in 1641. In December 1808, aged 38, he had married Eliza Richardson who was considerably younger and a woman of some social standing, being a daughter of Sir William Richardson, Baronet, of Augher Castle. James was Presbyterian and Eliza was Church of Ireland, so the ceremony took place by special licence not in church but in Augher Castle, with the Bishop of Clogher officiating.

Also known as Spur Castle, the original Plantation castle at Augher had burnt down in 1689 but was restored and then extended in 1832 by Eliza Denham's brother Sir James Richardson-Bunbury. Eliza would have been reared to grandeur. Augher Castle, her childhood home had a picturesque setting on the shore of a lake and



Augher Castle today

sat in the midst of a wooded demesne of over 600 acres. A priority for James would, no doubt, have been to keep his young wife in the style to which she would have been accustomed. When they came to Nixon Hall in 1814 the couple had a four-year-old daughter Anne. Three more children were born in Fairwood Park, William within a year, Elizabeth the following year and Isabella in 1819.

As to what brought the Denhams to Fermanagh, research has uncovered a couple of connections. Firstly, James Denham's older brother Joseph would have been well known in Fermanagh because he had been the presbyterian minister in Enniskillen from 1781 to 1799 before moving to Killeshandra in Co. Cavan. Furthermore, the Denhams would have been known to the Nixons who had built Nixon Hall. Denham's wife Eliza Richardson was related to George Nixon's grandmother Catherine Acheson of Toneyteige, the first Mrs. Nixon of Nixon Hall. And Eliza's older sister Letitia was living near Belleek, having married Robert Johnston of Maghernamena Castle.

The Denhams lost no time in renaming their gentleman's seat 'Fairwood Park', an attempt, suggests Robert Harbinson, to distance themselves from the colourful reputation of the 'fighting Nixons'. It surely also signalled something more. In re-imagining a private space set apart for their own exclusive enjoyment, James and Eliza were making a statement about their status: they were people of sensibility and good taste who had the money and the leisure required to indulge in the then fashionable 'cult of the picturesque'. The paintings of the house featured earlier were dated 1815, nine years after George and Catherine Nixon had moved out and just a year after the Denhams came to live there. Whether they were commissioned by the Nixons or by the Denhams is not known, though the paintings have remained in Nixon ownership.

Even allowing for artistic licence they show the landscape surrounding the house already featuring belts of mature trees which suggests that some credit must go to George and Catherine Nixon for the creation of the demesne and certainly the ideas of landscape designer Capability Brown had already been widely adopted in Ireland by the close of the 18th century.

Fairwood Park is a name that could have been lifted straight out of a Jane Austen fiction. Indeed, her novel *Mansfield Park* was published in 1814, the very year the Denhams took over Nixon Hall. The creation of a 'park' reflected the fashion among the landed classes at that time for carrying out 'improvements'. As the term implies, this involved artfully



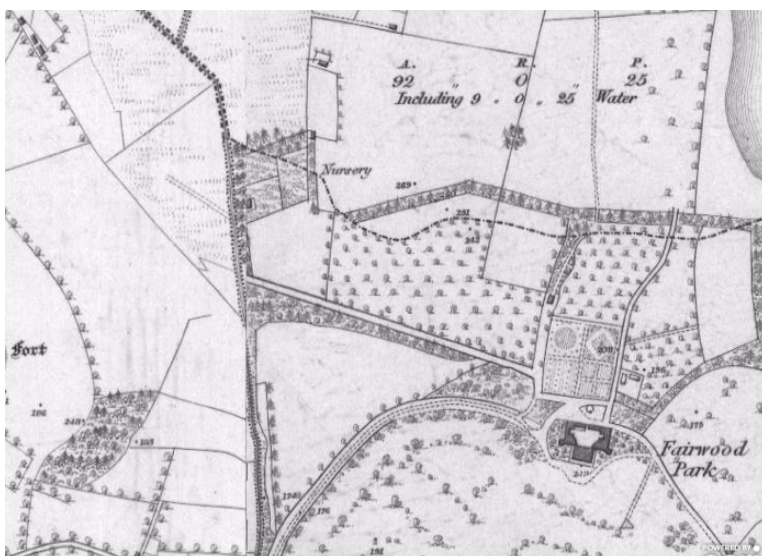
Mansfield Park

Illustration from the novel Mansfield Park showing pillar on the right, denoting a gated entrance to private grounds, a lady resting to take in the view and others following a tree lined walk

improving on nature, making it more pleasing to the eye by creating walks and ornamental gardens and using strategic tree planting to frame scenic views.

During the next twenty or so years, the Denhams put their energies into refining and developing the grounds into a picturesque demesne. In contrast to a landowner's larger estate, which provided an income through rental of holdings, the demesne was the pastoral land surrounding the main house which the owner kept for his own exclusive use and pleasure. Gaelic lords had the same concept: where once was 'Maguire's Sweet Heights', now read 'Fairwood Park'. Not only was the demesne designed to be ornamental, but it also enabled the owners to be

largely self-sufficient. From the pasturage, orchards, gardens, and dairy came food for the kitchen, the menu supplemented by hunting and fishing within the grounds and beyond.



This close-up from the 1835 O.S. map shows landscaping features including plantations, a nursery, the ornamental garden and gravel paths traces of which are still to be found. 10,000 young trees had been planted in 1824

The 1835 Ordnance Survey Memoir, written twenty years after the Denhams came to live there, contains this description of Fairwood Park:

A handsome square building...situated on the top of a general eminence. The demesne is small but neatly laid out, generally in long skirtings of plantations; it has a fine garden and orchard attached...

The report also notes that the out offices were in disrepair, an indication, perhaps, that the Denhams were not so involved in hunting and shooting as the Nixons had been.

Mystery so far surrounds the earlier life of James Denham for he was already forty-four when he came to Nixon Hall. Intriguingly, Robert Harbinson mentions a large trunk in Graham's house at Granshagh which, he had been told, had belonged to James Denham and which he was reputed to have brought down the Yellow River on his travels. Harbinson seems to imply, probably erroneously, that he was medically qualified and also refers to him as 'evangelical' which might suggest that perhaps he had travelled as a missionary doctor in China. Certainly, he came from a strongly Presbyterian clerical family. Harbinson surmised too that, as an educated and religious man, Denham would not have been discouraged, as others might have been, from buying the property because of the superstitions that were said to have hung over Nixon Hall.

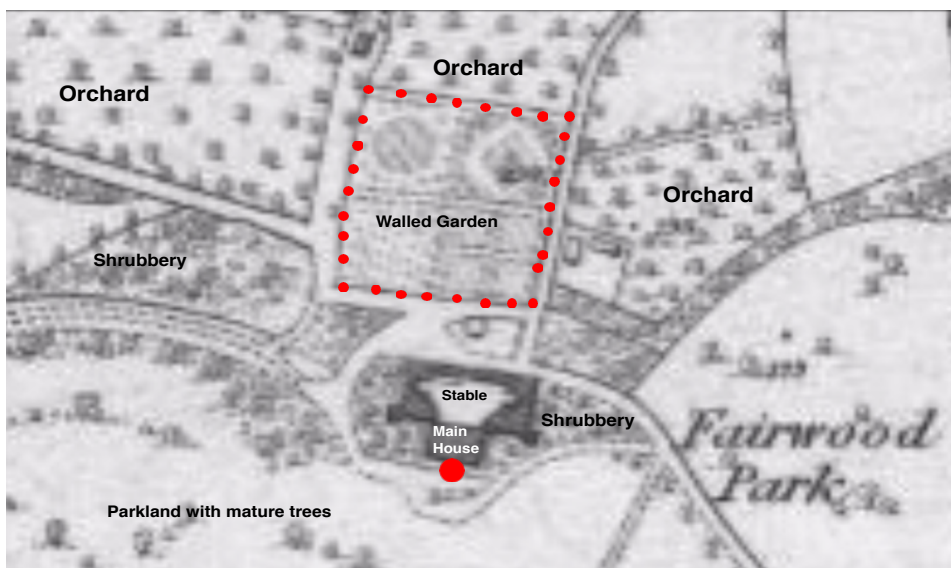
Judging by the local papers, James Denham lived the life of a country squire residing in his 'gentleman's seat' at Fairwood Park and taking on the Establishment roles usually shared out among the 'county set'. Within a year he had been appointed High Sheriff. He became a magistrate, a Justice of the Peace and served for a long term as Deputy Lieutenant for Fermanagh. Evidence of his public offices and duties appears in the local press from time to time: *On the evening of the last fair-day this town J. Denham, Esq. Fairwood Park, returning home, interfered as Magistrate to quell a party of disorderly persons, who were rioting near the West Bridge, when some the ruffians had the audacity to insult, and even menace that gentleman with personal injury, for doing his duty to preserve the peace. Mr. Denham very properly entailed the assistance of the Fermanagh Staff, and subsequently a party of the 83th, which means some the principal rioters were taken prisoners, and the rest dispersed. Enniskillen Chronicle, Dec. 1821*

In 1825, he held the position of Captain in the Kinawley Infantry, while the same 'Magistrate Denham', described by the paper as '*a humane and compassionate man...*' dealt with the case of a man accused of threatening to 'wring the neck off' another man. Also in that year, we find him defending the actions of the Catholic Association in Enniskillen who were organising in support of Catholic Emancipation, arguing '*Destroy the effect by removing the cause of their dissatisfaction. Give them emancipation. Put all upon the same footing and there would be no need for this Association...*' Yet events may have led him to a change of approach, for we read that in 1828 he replaced Alexander Nixon as chairman of the Belnaleck branch of the Brunswick

Constitutional Club, a newly founded pressure group aiming to resist legislation which would allow Catholic representation in Parliament.

Evidently James took an active interest in farming and was a leading member of the Erne Society, forerunner of County Fermanagh Farming Society. In 1825, we read:

Mr. Denham and Mr. King brought in some breeding sows to decide a challenge. They were amazingly fine- but for the fact that Mr Denham's had nearly expired on arrival in the show yard from suffocation and was immediately bled. Another local reference appears in the show results that year: *'Butter the produce of one cow. Premium went to Maurice Owens.'* His direct descendant Maurice still lives in Sessiagh today.



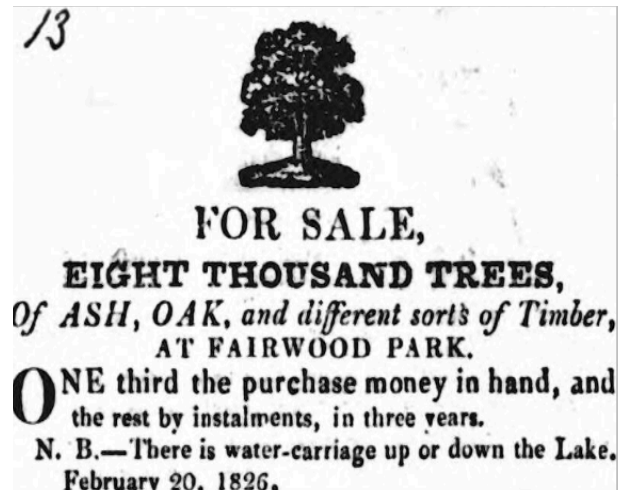
O.S. map 1835, close-up showing orchards, walled garden, and plantations around the house

STRAWBERRIES.—Fine ripe Strawberries have been gathered so early as the 9th instant, in the garden of James Denham, Esq. of Fairwood Park, near this town. A leaf of which was politely presented to us in the beginning of the week.

With hindsight, it is surprising to learn that twice during their tenure the Denhams put *'the beautiful demesne Fairwood Park, about two hundred and thirty acres'* up for sale, once in 1817, within three years of their arrival and again in January 1828. Two years earlier, in 1826, 8,000 trees from the estate had been offered for sale, an indication, perhaps, of dwindling funds. Whether no buyer was forthcoming, or whether their fortunes took a turn for the better or they simply had a change of heart, it is impossible to know. In the event the Denhams stayed put. The eldest daughter Anne was eighteen, William their

No doubt the walled garden would have produced soft fruits and other delicacies for the table as evidenced by this notice which appeared in the Erne Chronicle:

son and heir was thirteen, Elizabeth had just entered her teens and Isabella was nine. There is mention of a schoolroom in the house and it is likely that the girls were home schooled. William had moved on to Portora where he shone academically. We know from church records that a Sunday School was also conducted in the house, presumably for the use of the children of local families as well as their own.



9 Dejeunes, fetes champetre, balls, suppers

As things turned out, Fairwood Park was about to enter the most glamorous, indeed the most dramatic decade of its existence. The Denhams were already well integrated among the local gentry. They will, no doubt, have led a busy social life among their peers and it would have been unthinkable not to return their hospitality. Besides, they still had two marriageable daughters who needed to be given a chance to practice the social graces. So it was that the mid-1830s saw Fairwood Park come into its own as one of the sought-after party venues in the county.

In August each year the social calendar reached its peak around the time of the Lough Erne Regatta, when so many of the county set would be at leisure. Because Enniskillen was a garrison town, the ranks of the local grandees were swelled by officers from the barracks and their wives. Crucially too, the regimental bands were available to provide first class musical entertainment. The local press would typically report that an event had been ‘numerously and fashionably attended.’

For three years in a row, the Denhams played host to the great and the good. In 1833, they entertained, not at Fairwood Park but in the Florencecourt demesne. Might James and Eliza have lacked the confidence yet to play host in their own demesne? Clearly, they were on good terms with the Coles. William Willoughby Cole, a keen fossil collector was thirty-six, unmarried and soon to succeed to the title as 3rd Earl of Enniskillen. Describing



Walking dress: ideal for a promenade in the demesne or a hike up the hill of Mullanaman?

a week of 'fashionable parties' the Enniskillen Chronicle for Thursday 8th August 1833 leads off with a report of a very posh picnic:

This town and neighbourhood has for some time past exhibited a gay and animated appearance. Several fashionable parties on an extensive scale have been given. Yesterday se'nnight Mr. and Mrs. Denham of Fairwood Park gave a splendid dejeuner to the surrounding gentry and the officers of the garrison in the beautiful and romantic demesne of Florencecourt. (Master Denham 'had his leg broken' at the dejeuner.)

On Monday evening Captain and Mrs Catty gave a grand ball and supper at their residence at which between sixty and seventy of the gentry and officers of the garrison were present. On Tuesday, Paul Dane Esq. entertained a numerous and fashionable party at a fete champetre in Castlecoole demesne. The band of the 27th regiment attended and by their delightful music imparted an additional zest to the occasion with every delicacy of the season and wines of the first quality. Dancing commenced on a platform prepared for the occasion and was kept up with spirit till a late hour in the evening.

The officers of the 27th regiment propose to entertain the gentry tomorrow. The dinner is to be given under marquees at the ruins of Portora old castle, followed by dancing in the mess room of the barrack.

Outdoor entertaining was a sophisticated affair, with dancing platforms and marquees widely available for rent. Add picturesque settings, fine food and wines, first class music - and dancing till dawn. When August came round the following year, the Denhams were yet more ambitious.

We are glad to observe that the festivities of the season have commenced with great spirit in this vicinity. Last night Mr. and Mrs. Denham gave a splendid Ball and Supper at Fairwood Park, which was attended by a large number of the surrounding gentry, the officers of the garrison etc. The band of the 52nd Regiment attended on the occasion and by the performance of many fine pieces of music imparted additional eclat and delight to the gay scene.

Erne Chronicle, 13 Aug. 1834

Half the pleasure was in the anticipation. In Jane Austen's time, wrote one observer, 'a ball was the ultimate occasion for a heady kind of courtship - a trying out of partners that is exciting, flirtatious, and downright erotic. Couples perform together, feeling each other's physical proximity (though both men and women wore gloves throughout) while being watched by others.'

Dancing was considered one of the most important accomplishments among the necessary social graces. It embraced not only the steps and figures of the dances but also deportment and etiquette. Manuals on the subject abounded.



The opening position of the quadrille



The intimate hold for the waltz.

The polka, the galop and the mazurka were danced but nothing rivalled the new-found popularity of the quadrille and the waltz. The quadrille was danced in square formation with four couples making a set. It took practice to master the sequences. (Set dancing and square dancing as we know them today evolved from the quadrille.) The waltz originated in Germany and Austria and had arrived in Ireland by 1820, quickly popularised by British military bands. Because it was danced in couples it was considered risqué: rather than dancing at arm's length, the man clasped his partner closely round her waist, an intimacy that was variously described as 'exciting, flirtatious and downright erotic'. 'Woodland Whisper Waltzes', 'The Happy Family Quadrille' and 'The Erne Mazurka' were some of the popular tunes locally.

A strict protocol was observed. A man could only ask a woman to dance if he had been formally introduced to her, while she had to sit demurely awaiting such an invitation. The young ladies were always chaperoned,



The Court Magazine and Belle Assemblée, 1833.

usually by Mama, to make sure that the rules of decency were never overstepped. Out of courtesy to the hosts, every man was expected to get up and dance. Many of the dances were physically demanding and a ball might last for six or eight hours. A manual of the time describes the dress code:

For the ladies, a light-coloured gown with a décolleté revealing the shoulders and arms, very long gloves, and light pumps. Sometimes the exposed neckline and tops of the arms are covered with gauze or tulle...The men should

wear a black suit or tailcoat, white tie, black trousers, and polished shoes. Married women were free to wear flamboyant gowns, hairdos, and accessories. But young ladies being presented to society had to dress and coif modestly.



Evening dress for the mature lady.

Ingoldsby's shop in Enniskillen advertised silk handkerchiefs, French, and English ribbons, five different styles of bonnet as well as London-made stays and perfumery. Tresses of ornamental hair, ringlets, fringes, and chignons were widely used to improve on nature. Starting with layers of undergarments and building up to powder, paint and hair ornamentation, the preparations for a ball or other grand social event took hours.

The complicated process involved in a lady's getting dressed in the 1830s was impossible to do without the help of a maid or a friend. Pictured right, so-called leg 'o mutton sleeves were popular in the early 1830s and had to be stuffed with soft feathers at the very last minute, while on the wearer.



As was often the case in a medium sized country house without a dedicated ballroom, the dancing at Fairwood Park took place in the large rectangular entrance hall, while the reception rooms opening off the hall to the back and the sides were used variously as sitting out areas or for playing whist and of course for an elaborate supper display. As one contemporary source tells us,

'Substantial fare, such as fowls, ham, tongue, etc., is absolutely necessary. Jellies, blanc-mange, trifle, tipsy cake, etc., should be added at discretion. Nothing upon the table

should require carving- the fowls to be cut up beforehand and held together by ribbons. Whatever can be iced should be served in that way.'

Discretely hidden behind screens or in sideboards were the chamber pots, indispensable for the comfort of the guests and needing the constant vigilance and discretion of the servants.

The Front Hall at Fairwood Park would be elaborately decorated with flowers, laurel and other greenery and atmospherically lit with the glow from twin fireplaces and candles

Lower servants were generally not allowed candles in their bedrooms, partly for reasons of fire safety and partly to discourage them from reading. To light their way to bed they therefore had to compete for the stub ends of candles, as butlers and more senior servants often regarded these as a 'perk', to be sold back to local merchants. Tallow was smelly, so beeswax candles were reserved for special occasions. Ingoldsby's store in Enniskillen stocked 'sperm' candles. The most luxurious of all, they were made from whale blubber.

In the less public, more gloomy quarters of the house a constant war would be waged against cold and damp - maids were often sent to sleep in the guestroom beds to air them in advance. In contrast, the reception rooms at Fairwood Park would have been up to date with the latest fashion in interior design, for there were more ways than might be expected to connect with ideas current in the wider world of decor.

everywhere, whether in candlesticks or chandeliers suspended from the ceiling or wall sconces with mirrors behind them. (A house brilliantly lit with candles on a grand occasion was a very conspicuous demonstration of wealth because they required the constant attention of a fleet of servants to trim the wicks.)

Long before Instagram there were influencers, people like Mrs. Delaney below (1700-1788) who lived for a time in Irvinestown as wife of the Church of Ireland rector and was well connected in Dublin high society. She travelled widely, visiting town and country mansions, and picking up ideas to share.



Even if you lived in Mullymesker, inspiration for décor and furnishings came in the form of samples of fabrics and wallpapers in pattern books brought to your home.

The process of making wallpaper was called ‘paper staining’ and paper of the highest quality was made in Dublin in the heyday of its production there from 1800 to 1840. We know there was extensive use of wallpaper in Fairwood Park because its value was later mentioned when damage to the house was being assessed. It is intriguing to think there might have been something as rare and beautiful as the French wallpaper chosen by their neighbours, the Hassards of Skea Hall, when it was built in 1830.



Examples of wallpaper patterns from the Georgian era

In August 1835, the Denhams staged their most ambitious entertainment yet. Using the opportunity to showcase the grounds of their beautiful demesne, it began with a garden party centred on a ‘Cottage’ in the grounds. (There was one for the same purpose at Florencecourt, a cane cottage made from bamboo.)

...a grand fete champetre was hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Denham in the beautiful demesne of Fairwood Park. A splendid picnic was given at the Cottage on the demesne. Everything that taste could invent, or profuseness supply was furnished in abundance. In the evening the company retired to the house where there was a Ball and Supper. The company separated at a late hour, highly delighted with the festivities of the evening.

Among the company were Captain Archdall and family, Charles Fawcett Esq., of Lisbofin and brothers Thomas and George Alcock Nixon whose father had been born in the house. It was to be the last great social event at Fairwood Park, the last time a procession of carriages formed up at the door in the early hours to await the departing guests.

10 Public rejoicing, private grief

The 1830s were eventful years in the private life of the family. The decade began with an auspicious event - a family wedding:

January 1830 Yesterday in Belnaleck church the Rev. Mr. Hales, son to Rev. Dr. Hales of Killasandra, to Anne, eldest daughter of James Denham of Fairwood Park in this county, Esq., and granddaughter of Sir William Richardson. (Sir William was eighty-three and died a few months later.)

In November 1830 came a dramatic storm, reported in the Enniskillen Chronicle thus: *About three o'clock on Saturday morning the wind blew a strong gale from S.W. and continued to increase until between five and six. It raged with such violence that the*

strongest buildings in the town were shaken to the foundation, and it seemed to increase in fury till about eight o'clock. Scarce a human being could venture the streets from the falling of slates, bricks, and stone. The lake boiled as if there had been an earthquake... In Florencecourt demesne upwards of four hundred trees have been blown down or broken, many them of great age and immense growth. James Denham, Esq. and the glebe house of the Rev. Mr. Sweny contiguous, have suffered to a great extent. In the demesne of George Hassard Esq. Skea, nearly three hundred trees have been blown down, or broken across the stem.

LAMENTABLE DEATH OF AND. NIXON, Esq.

It becomes our painful duty to record the demise of Andrew Nixon, Esq., of Hollybrook and Bellanaleck house, which occurred on last Monday night. This venerable and esteemed gentleman had dined at Mr. Denham's, of Fairwood Park, and while returning home his horse started and threw him, by which he received so much injury that death ensued in a few hours. The unfortunate event has been received by all classes with sincere sorrow. His highly respectable family are left to mourn a kind father—an indulgent husband—and an affectionate relative. It has robbed society of a distinguished ornament, who spent his fortune at home, and interested himself in improving agriculture, in promoting amusement, and in dispensing charity to the distressed. In him a numerous tenantry have lost their benefactor and friend, who consoled them in misfortune, and whom they would have followed to the death. He was a steady supporter of the constitution as established in 1688, and throughout a long life, as a Protestant, and Orangeman, he advanced

Enniskillen Chronicle, August 1834

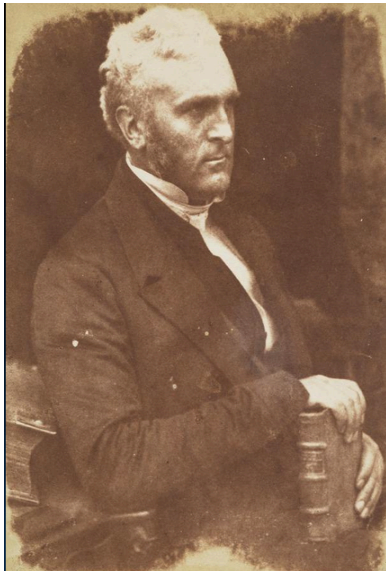
In August 1834, one of the Denham's dinner guests had a fatal accident on his way back to Bellanaleck House, where he had been staying with his son-in-law Alexander Nixon.

Andrew was a brother of George Nixon, the last of the family to live in Nixon Hall. There is a story still remembered locally which might have its origins in this happening. It tells of one of the Nixons who was returning from a party in a neighbouring house when, too drunk to dismount, he made to jump his horse over a gate and was fatally injured.

Another family wedding took place on Christmas Eve 1835, not in Bellanaleck

this time, but in Kill Church, Co. Cavan, when the Denhams' daughter Elizabeth was married to Rev. James Adams of Lislea. Yet, behind the scenes at Fairwood Park, domestic life will surely have been dominated by one thing: the poor health of their son William, slowly dying from consumption. Finally, on Saturday 2nd April 1836, came the crushing blow, the death of James and Eliza's only son and heir, just turned nineteen and described as 'a young man of great promise and engaging manners, deeply lamented by his sorrowing parents and friends.'

In the midst of the family's grief, daughters Anne and Elizabeth returned to Fairwood Park for the birth of their firstborn, both sons. Anne gave birth on April 7th, just week after William's death and Elizabeth's son was born six months later on October 12th.



Early photograph of Rev. Joseph Denham jnr: beneficiary in the will of his uncle James Denham

Within the space of a few years, Jane and Eliza Denham must have experienced an emotional rollercoaster of events: two daughters married, Eliza's father's death, the suffering and slow death of their only son William, then two grandchildren born, both at Fairwood Park, followed closely by the death of James's beloved brother Rev. Joseph Denham in Killeshandra.

Within weeks of his son's death, James Denham redrafted his will. He provided for his wife with an allowance of £300 a year if she outlived him. His property and money he left in trust to his nephew Rev. Joseph Denham, son of his brother Joseph who was destined to become a Moderator of the Presbyterian Church.

Evidently, James had other assets to dispose of too. At the same time, he offered for sale an estate of 800 acres of prime land in Co. Westmeath. Almost immediately his home and demesne went up for sale '*for matters not necessary to be detailed, Mr. Denham became desirous to part with Fairwood Park.*'

It will not have been a decision made on impulse for the young heir had been in decline for several years. Even allowing for a little hyperbole, the advertisement makes

**TO BE SOLD,
OR LET FOR EVER,**

A HOUSE and DEMESNE, reckoned the handsomest of its size in Ulster, within three miles of Enniskillen; water-carriage from the Garden to Ballyshannon, Belturbet, and next year will be to Belfast. The sum required is only the value of the old Timber. There are ten thousand young Trees, planted 12 years ago. There are 695 fine Fruit Trees in full bearing, which will be given gratis. There are 50 Irish Acres of Abbey Land that pays no Tithe or Cess; and the House cost above four thousand pounds sterling, which is also given gratis—no charge whatever.

The Purchaser will then have about 104 Irish Acres for about 32s. 6d. per Acre, of very prime Limestone Land, mostly Meadow, for Ever, which, for particular reasons, will be Sold very reasonable.

Apply to JAMES DENHAM, Esq. Fairwood Park, ENNISKILLEN, free of expense.

impressive reading. It also hints strongly at a bargain due to the circumstances of the sale for the house is thrown in along with the land and the valuable timber. Note the reference to '*water carriage from the garden to Ballyshannon, Belturbet and next year will be to Belfast.*' This is a reference to the Ulster Canal, then under construction. The Abbey Land refers to a part of the demesne

that would have originally belonged to nearby Lisgoole Abbey and thus exempt from tithe.

Then, on 9th October 1836 the final clearance was advertised:

*At FAIRWOOD PARK, near Enniskillen,
SATURDAY 29th Oct. and succeeding days
The Entire HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE, FARMING UTENSILS.*

Losing no time, James accepted an offer for Fairwood Park from Dr. George Stewart Hawthorne of Belfast. It was a fateful decision.

At the beginning of 1837, we read that James Denham contributed £5 towards funds for the relief of the poor in the neighbourhood of Fairwood Park but by this time the couple had taken up residence in Duncarberry Lodge, Tullaghan, outside Bundoran, which they renamed Denham Lodge. (Many will remember it as Duncarberry Lodge Hotel and Restaurant, demolished in recent years.)

In January the following year, during the upheaval of moving, a big society wedding took place in Dublin when their daughter Isabella got married to William Christopher Jones of Lisgoole Abbey Co. Fermanagh, whose family originated in Co. Sligo. He was 23, she just 19. The young couple would have been neighbours while the Denhams were in Fairwood Park, and it is tempting to think that their courtship began at one of the balls there. Not for the first time, a happy event was soon followed by a great sadness. Isabella's twenty-five-year-old sister Elizabeth, wife of Rev. James Adams, fell ill and died in June 1839 while staying in Duncarberry Lodge with her parents. It is likely that she had gone there to avail of the sea air. Her young son had been born less than three years earlier in Fairwood Park. Elizabeth was brought back to Bellanaleck for burial.

11 The Hawthorne family at Fairwood Park

“Doctor Hawthorn, the present proprietor of Fairwood Park, in the neighbourhood of Enniskillen, has arrived at that beautiful residence.” Erne Chronicle Feb. 1837

Dr. Hawthorne, originally from Killinchy in Co. Down, was an eminent physician in the Belfast Hospital. Now age forty-three, he explained that his move to Fermanagh was due to illness in the family. He intended to sign over the property to his son Hans, ‘*a young man of great promise*’, who had been a brilliant student at Belfast Academical Institution.

It transpires, however, that Dr Hawthorn may have had a more pressing reason to get out of Belfast. He had become a highly controversial figure in medical circles because of what he claimed to be his innovative cure for cholera. One of the most feared diseases of the nineteenth century, cholera caused severe diarrhoea and dehydration and was generally

believed to be transmitted and spread by ‘bad air’ from rotting organic matter. It became, in a term well understood today, a global pandemic, spreading across the world from its original occurrence in the Ganges delta in India. Six subsequent cholera pandemics killed millions of people across all continents.

A virulent new strain of the disease had broken out in Belfast and around the province in 1832.

THE CHOLERA. Enniskillen. We have great pleasure in stating that the plague has been staid for the present and the sudden mortality which threatened to depopulate our town, after sweeping off 28 victims has ceased its ravages; yet the panic which the first appearance of the disease excited has not entirely abated and the country people are still timid in entering the town in consequence of which there is little business still doing.
Saunders's Newsletter, 15 Sept. 1832

Conventional treatments were ineffective, but Dr. Hawthorn had built up a lucrative practice based on his claims that he had developed an ‘infallible’ cure for the dreaded disease. His treatment was highly unconventional and involved administering large doses of opioids. By force of his personality, he developed the status of a guru among his followers. In December 1832, the Board of Health, and the inhabitants of Dungannon had ‘*presented the esteemed Dr. with a splendid piece of plate as a mark of their respect and in token of their unfeigned gratitude for his successful treatment of Cholera in that town.*’ Many other testimonials followed and Hawthorne, a brilliant self-publicist, made sure that the public were kept informed of his successes.

In Belfast, meanwhile, twenty-five doctors signed an open letter warning people in stinging terms against Dr. Hawthorn’s ‘infallible’ cure. To be fair, the conventional treatment on offer at the time was as likely to kill as to cure, but Hawthorne had dared to go against the medical orthodoxy. And his personal attack on one colleague had crossed a line.

Not long after the Hawthornes took on the lease of Fairwood Park, there seems to have been a serious fire there, as evidenced by this notice in the press.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT.



Fairwood Park, 28th April, 1838.

MY DEAR SIR.

I AM favoured with yours of yesterday's date, enclosing Bank order for the amount of my claims on the Phoenix Fire Company. You, Sir, and the Company, will please accept of my best thanks for the promptitude with which you settled said claim; and any thing I can do to recommend your Office, shall not be left undone.

Believe me, my dear Sir, yours very truly,

GEORGE S. HAWTHORNE.

To JOHN WM. M'CRACKEN, Esq. (725
Agent to the Phoenix Fire Insurance Company, Belfast.

A successful claim for compensation and a glowing public testimonial to the insurance company does not amount to evidence that the fire had been started deliberately but given the subsequent fate of the house, one must wonder.

Within a couple of years of the Hawthornes' arrival, the house and demesne of Fairwood Park were found to have gone downhill badly. The intentions of the new owners were questioned by

representatives of Anne Nixon, George Nixon's surviving heir who still held the deeds but their focus in the first instance was on James Denham who was required under the terms of his lease to keep the property in good order. In July 1838, an action for damages was taken against James Denham by Miss Nixon, heiress to the estate, for 'dilapidations in the mansion of Nixon Hall' amounting to £2300. It was claimed that the magnificent house which had cost from eleven to twelve thousand to build had fallen into a 'lamentable state of decay' due to the negligence of the defendant. Despite evidence presented to the contrary on behalf of Mr. Denham to the effect that he regularly employed men to carry out maintenance, he was forced to pay the Nixon estate £1750 plus costs for damages and breach of covenant.

This, in turn, led to a claim by the Hawthornes that, by paying out to the Nixons, James Denham had admitted liability for £1750 worth of damage to the property and that he should now pay for repairs to that value. They claimed, furthermore, that they had been deceived as to the state of the property at the time of the sale. The case went to court on 2nd July 1840.

12 George S. Hawthorne v James Denham

For the prosecution, Charles Hassard, who had attended Mr. Denham's parting sale in the house, said that the roof was in poor repair and there were tracks of water on the ceiling. He would describe the place as dangerous to live in.

Hans Hawthorne assured the court that the dilapidations had not occurred while his father was in the house. In his support, architect James Cradden said that in his judgement the deterioration had taken place over the past twenty years.

On behalf of the defendant, George Fawcett stated that he remembered Mr. Denham taking over the property from Mr. Fawcett in 1814 and that he had kept it as a gentleman should and made it better than he got it.

Owen Mylanthy (Melanophy) testified that Mr. Fawcett had let the place get into a bad state but in Mr. Denham's time it was a good deal better. The witness pointed out that, *'being in the habit of seeing a great deal of company, he must of course have kept the house in good order...'* - a reference to the elaborate entertaining which had become associated with life at Fairwood Park while the Denhams lived there.

Christopher Vaughan, a slater who had worked for James Denham for sixteen or seventeen years, recalled that, soon after he came, Mr. Denham had stripped three quarters of the roof and got it redone. He also claimed that Dr. Hawthorne had examined the roof when he came here. The jury returned a verdict in favour of James Denham, with costs.

Three weeks later, Denham took Hawthorne to court to recover compensation for the damages done by Mr. Hawthorne, that is the doctor's son Hans. At issue was whether the current deterioration and damage had taken place in Mr. Denham's time or after the Hawthornes had taken over, more specifically from when Dr. Hawthorne handed over the property to his son Hans in 1837.

The Enniskillen Chronicle of Thursday 23rd July 1840 reported on the proceedings. James Denham testified in person. He stated that *'scarcely was Dr. Hawthorne's son in possession when he began those depredations which have now left the premises an absolute ruin: he commenced cutting down the timber and the apple and other fruit trees. He turned the cattle into the garden... He turned the house into offices, thrashed corn in one room, kept pigs in another... He sold off timbers and a quantity of bog to let for cutting turf and, despite an attempted legal intervention by Anne Nixon, last surviving child of George Nixon and heiress to the property, generally set about converting everything about the place into money.'*

Christopher Vaughan testified that he had worked for Mr. Denham for seventeen years as a slater and said that Mr. Denham *'was every year making very good improvements, the rooms all painted and papered.'* This was backed up by Dr. Frith the family doctor and the architect Mr. Maguire who had inspected it prior to the arrival of the Hawthornes. He had recently examined it again in the light of the current dispute and saw evidence of some repairs, albeit very badly done.

Despite claim and counter claim, further damning evidence was presented by Joseph Robinson who described in graphic terms the scene inside the house under his new employer Hans Hawthorne. Oats were stored in sheafs upstairs. The thrashing was done in the schoolroom, in the grand hall and in the parlour. The grain was kept in the drawing room and there were piles of rotten straw at the hall door. He saw marks of fire in the roof. He and another man had carried out repairs upstairs using mortar made of cow dung, ashes, and yellow clay. He had a trowel; the other man had a part of a sock of a plough. Outside, the walks in the garden were in high grass and one of the outhouses had fallen in. Workman Owen Murphy testified that the Hawthornes had obstructed all attempts by officials to examine the property.

At this point Hans Hawthorne complained that he could not get a fair trial in Fermanagh and appealed for the case to be heard in Dublin, which was granted. Judgement at the Dublin hearing also went against the Hawthornes who were ordered to pay damages to the Nixon estate. The Nixons never received any of the money for head of the family Dr. Hawthorne had disappeared within days. By 1841, he was building up a new practice in Liverpool.

That was not the end of the matter, however, for the legal row festered on. In January 1842 a further case was heard at Enniskillen Quarter Sessions. The Trustees of the Nixon Estate accused brothers Hans and John Hawthorne, assisted by a workman Alexander Little, of pulling down and demolishing the roof of Fairwood Park on the 4th October 1841 and of carrying away three tons of lead thus obtained. The case turned on whether the intention of the Hawthornes was to repair and restore the premises or to remove materials for their own gain. As with the earlier case heard in July 1840, the graphic nature of the evidence presented contains rich, if unwitting, testimony about what the house was like and the names of some of the locals who worked there, people like Thomas O'Hara who had been a tenant since Mr, Denham's time.

James Goan, tenant of Hans Hawthorne, set the scene for what happened at Fairwood Park on 7th October 1841: *Mr. Hawthorne sent for me on 7th and said he wanted me about twelve that night to give him a hand. When I went, I was directed to the lead which was in two lumps; it was let fall from the wall and was put into the house. For about three or four hours we were engaged in beating the lead and rolling it up. Horses and carts came and took it to the lough and put it in cots.*

James Dillon recalled: *I was on the roof of the house from ten till about five in the evening. The lead was put in cots at 5 o'clock in the morning - I know that, for Mr. Nixon's bell usually rang at six and I didn't hear it.'*

Thomas Dane from Drumsroohill was also at Nixon Hall on 7th October: *I saw Mr. John Hawthorne on the roof with some kind of an instrument striking the lead and knocking it off... I was at the west end of the house where there are fewer trees so even though the parapet is about four feet high, I could see the young Mr. Hawthorne sitting on the roof battering it with something.*

David Vaughan, a policeman, testified that he had known Nixon Hall all his life. Arriving there with other police to execute a warrant he found the lead had gone from the roof and there was no sheeting between the lead and the rafters. It was his understanding that this had not been done for an improvement, as was claimed by the defence.

The Defence called up Mr. W. Frith, architect: *I examined Fairwood Park house on behalf of the Hawthornes about eighteen months ago (January 1841). The roof, including the hips were all in such a state that I recommended a new one... The lead was old and badly soldered in futile attempts to repair it. Some of it was patched with tar and paper. The sheeting under it was quite rotten.* He believed it was not Mr. Hawthorne's purpose to completely replace the roof. Part of the lead would be fit to be put on again. It was a well-built house in every respect except the slating which was very bad. Small Irish slates, probably from Strabane, had been used.

The judge advised the court that the question for the jury was whether the defendants had removed the lead roofing for the purpose of improvement, or whether they did it maliciously. The jury returned a verdict of guilty. The Hawthorne brothers Hans and John were sentenced to twelve months in jail and fined £20 each and Little was sentenced to three months.

Sobbing with emotion, Hans Hawthorne proceeded to address the court in defence of his actions and his motives: *He had been actuated by honest and upright intentions... The house was in utter ruin. He could not dare to live in it and knew well that if he had left the lead on it, it would all have been stolen so unprotected was the state of the building... He had only been motivated to act as trustee for others whose honour was at stake... Had he heard the slightest whisper that removing the lead was illegal he would not have allowed a finger to be laid upon it... That his own young brother should be placed in such a position withered his soul...* He reminded the court that Mr. Denham, his predecessor at Fairwood Park, had recovered by an action for damages the price of a

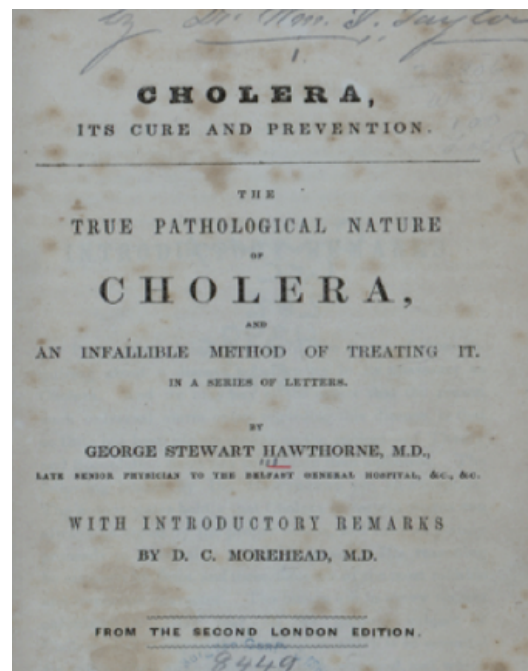
totally new roof, 'which sum he had kept for himself, making the new tenant - his father - pay a large rent for that uninhabitable house.'

Hawthorne's barrister appealed the decision, and the case went to a superior court in Dublin. There, the case for the prosecution was taken apart on several grounds. Two of the defendants were not owners. It had not been proven that the defendants' intention had been to demolish the house entirely. Nor could a charge of taking and selling the lead be sustained under the terms of the statute. Hans Hawthorne was released. Presumably, the conviction of the other two was also lifted.

ix months later 'Hans Hawthorne gent. late of Fairwood Park' appeared at an insolvency hearing in Dublin. He pleaded that he had borrowed money from his father to give to his brother who was going to Liverpool and was discharged. Soon all the Hawthornes were in Liverpool and pursuing professional careers in medicine and law.

A recently published article by Chris Jones of Edgehill University entitled *Dr. George Stuart Hawthorne of Liverpool and his 'infallible' treatment of Asiatic cholera 1848-1849* helps to flesh out the story of the Hawthornes after their flight from Fermanagh to Liverpool.

Dr. Hawthorn was soon seeking maximum publicity in Liverpool and beyond for his 'infallible' cholera treatment, publishing pamphlets that were circulated as far as America. The peak of his fame came in 1848 when there was another serious outbreak of cholera in Liverpool, a city in dread of the disease because of the very poor living conditions experienced by many. He built up a lucrative clientele but as before, attracted controversy for his methods. At one point he was accused of refusing to attend a sick woman (who had pawned her belongings to accumulate fifteen shillings for her treatment) until he had received a further six shillings, his customary fee being one guinea. He was now assisted by his son Hans who seems to have 'digressed' from a career in law. He too attracted criticism for his methods, accused by another medic of prescribing enough of his pills to kill a patient by opium poisoning. In July 1849 Hans was involved in treating a woman



patient who subsequently died. When called to give evidence at the inquest, Hans was asked where he had done his medical training, a question which he declined to answer. As it happened, the Hawthornes' medical reputation was about to be shattered.

In 1854 there was a breakthrough in understanding the causes of cholera. Using detailed statistical analysis based on mapping patterns, the physician John Snow was able to demonstrate a clear link between cholera and contaminated drinking water. Once this was established, the medical world had no more use for Dr. Hawthorne and his 'infallible cure'. He died in anonymity in 1858. His son Hans, meanwhile, graduated in law and built a successful career as a barrister. His brother John Hawthorne qualified as a surgeon. It is astonishing to reflect that just ten years earlier the brothers were up on the roof of Nixon Hall stripping it of lead.

Harbinson seems not to have heard about the short-lived tenancy of the Hawthornes at Nixon Hall for he writes: *The Nixons never returned to the unlucky house built by their ancestors as no other tenant could be found for the supposedly haunted house. After Dr. Denham left it, the place stood empty for years except for gamblers who used the deserted mansion at night. Whether arson or accident, the place was destroyed by fire in 1844.*

George Nixon of the brick mansion in Mullymesker, George Nixon of Nixon Hall and James Denham of Fairwood Park all lost their only son and heir before adulthood. Coincidence to be sure, but it is easy to see how the place became surrounded by superstition.

13 Postscript on the Denhams



Lisgoole Abbey. This house provides us with our last link to the Denhams in Fermanagh and thus to Nixon Hall

James and Eliza Denhams moved to Bundoran after they left Fairwood Park, living in Duncarberry Lodge at Tullaghan for a few years before returning to Fermanagh in 1845 to live in Lisgoole Abbey with their daughter Isabella, her husband Michael Jones and the couple's five-year-old son Obins. Their return must have prompted very mixed memories.

The charred and roofless shell of Fairwood Park, burnt out the previous year, stood a few townlands away. At the bottom of Laragh Lough lay the huge roll of lead from its roof and

who knows what other booty stripped from the house by their unscrupulous successors. Under its roof the Denhams had had the best of times and the worst.

As to the legalities surrounding the property now, Anne, the last surviving daughter and heiress of George of Nixon Hall had married John Netterville Blake of Dowth Hall in County Meath in 1840 but when she died in 1841, possibly in childbirth, her husband became the owner of the Nixon estate. Abandoning his attempts to restore and rent out the land, Netterville Blake sold off any remaining materials from the old house before a fire in 1844, said to have been started accidentally by gamblers or squatters, reduced it to a shell.

More generally, this was a dark time, the beginning of the worst years of the Great Famine. In October 1846 Isabella's husband William Jones suspended the payment of rent from his tenants for the next quarter saying that if he had a shilling no man would starve. The Grahams of Granshagh had remembered their father Christy telling them how he witnessed a famine soup kitchen being set up at the gates of Lisgoole Abbey.

William's ailing mother-in-law Eliza Denham died in December 1847. The death notice read: *Denham (Richardson). On the morning of Sunday, the 27th ult., at Lisgoole Abbey... Eliza, the lady of James Denham, Esq., formerly of Fairwood Park, Co. Fermanagh, and eldest surviving daughter of the late Sir William Richardson, Bart., of Augher Castle in the County of Tyrone. This truly excellent lady had been apparently in the enjoyment of her usual health until almost the very hour of her being summoned hence to be no more seen. On Thursday the 24^{inst.}, she exposed herself, perhaps injudiciously, to the cold, whilst distributing food to the suffering poor of her neighbourhood. Her call was indeed a sudden one and we trust a call to sudden glory...*

Now widowed, James Denham went to live in Prospect House in Enniskillen's Pound Brae. He died three years later, aged 80, at the Dublin home of his nephew, an eminent obstetrician.

Isabella Diana Denham, who had gone as a teenage bride to set up home with Michael Jones in Lisgoole Abbey, was destined to have a sad life. The couple had one child; a son called (William) Obins Jones born in 1839. When she became widowed at forty-two, Isabella was left with sole responsibility for their troubled son. Now in his early twenties, Obins had become incapacitated by the mental illness that would torture him for another seventeen years. Harbinson put it plainly: *Obins went insane. He died a violent end and went to an early grave on 3rd June 1878.*

Harbinson had heard all about it from James and Lizzie Graham at Granshagh for their father Christy had been land steward at Lisgoole Abbey and had acted as nurse to the poor afflicted young man. His wife had also acted as nursemaid to Isabella, who died in her mid-seventies in 1892.

Of Isabella, Harbinson paints a sad picture:

*....Isabella Diana
who inherited the Abbey of Lisgoole
as a widow's portion at forty-two
where days passed Bible-black
into nights of waiting on
the ghosts of yesterday...*

Lizzie and James had kept the 'doleful bell' that would jangle in the night when their mother would have to make her way to the Abbey in the dark to tend to the ailing Isabella. Lizzie had even kept her dentures and moth-eaten knee warmers.

When Isabella Denham Jones died, her will directed that the Lisgoole estate be sold for the benefit of the Protestant Orphan Society, Rossorry Church and other charities. This included building a structure, rather grand for those days, to be called Jones Memorial Bible School. After it was opened, Archdeacon Pratt of Rossorry Parish personally climbed up and chipped off the word 'bible' from the stone inscription on the front wall because he saw it as denoting a narrow evangelical perspective and thus potentially offensive to the broader community and to Roman Catholics in particular.



James Graham by the fireside at Granshagh. Photo courtesy of literary estate of Robin Bryans

In gratitude for nursing her son for so long, Mrs. Jones had helped Christy Graham to buy a small farm at Granshagh. In 1882 he built a house using stone from the ruins of nearby Nixon Hall.

*Christy Graham, land steward of Lisgoole
Saw a phoenix rise from the hall's ashes
For some of those stones twice dressed
By medieval and by Georgian hands became
Granshagh's dwelling where in Robbie's day
The proud sandstone still remained
Dressed upon the undressed kitchen floor*

Harbinson, *Songs Out of Oriel*

James became a second father to the young Belfast evacuee Bobby Bryans (Robert Harbinson) who remembered ceilis in Graham's when Lizzie played the fiddle and the dancers made sparks with their hob nail boots on the old Nixon Hall flags. - 'thrice dressed stones Harbinson calls them: shaped once, long ago on Cleenish, then again at Nixon Hall



Robin Bryans on a visit to Grahams of Granshagh, 1970 Courtesy of the Bryans literary estate.

and yet again in the Graham home at Granshagh. Bryans continued to visit Lizzie and James when they were still alive. When he died in 2005, his ashes were buried, in accordance with his wish, close to their grave in the churchyard in Bellanaleck.

14 Demise of the landed estates in Ireland

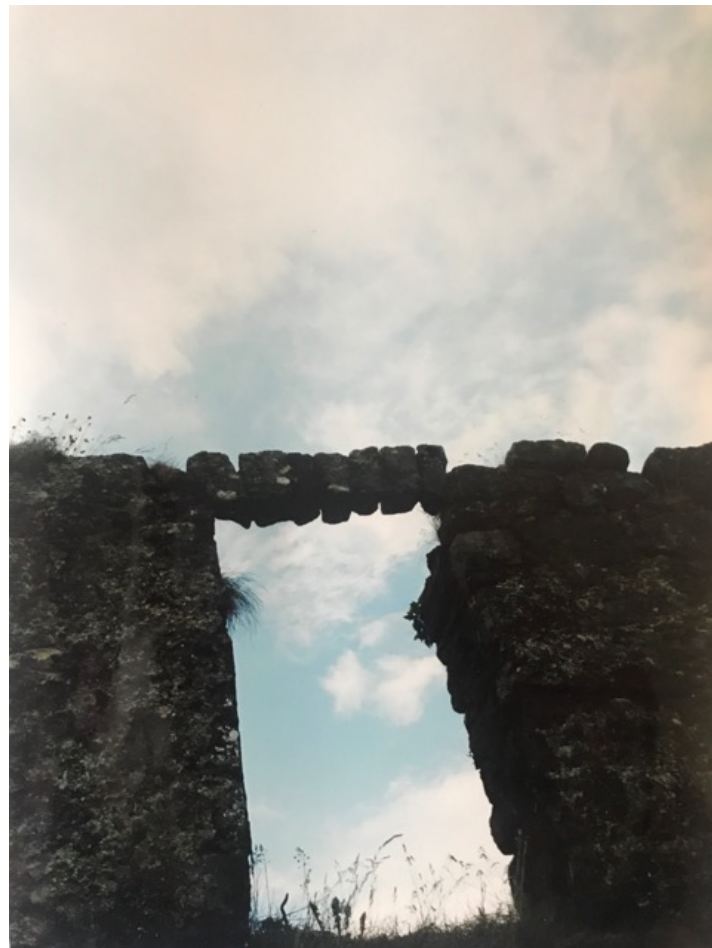
A notice dated May 1854, shows that, under financial pressure from various quarters, John Netterville Blake was forced to put the Nixon Hall Estate up for sale. With a few exceptions, the townlands listed are local: Mullymesker and Drumroe, the Quarter Tate of Edenmore, the Great Tate of Dromean and Ross, Granshagh, Clonbunniagh, Carney Hill and Gortdonaghy.

Two years later, Netterville Blake, Commission Agent, Liverpool, is listed as bankrupt. Evidently the Nixon estate suffered the same fate as many others in the post Famine years when many landowners found themselves unable to meet their mortgage payments through loss of income from impoverished tenants who could not pay or had to leave. Such was the scale of the problem throughout Ireland that an Encumbered Estates Court was set up in 1849 with the power to make it legally easier for landlords or trustees to sell off part, or all, of their estates. Permission to sell could now be granted on application from either the owner or an 'encumbrancer' (somebody who had a claim on it) and, after the sale, to distribute the proceeds among the creditors and grant clear title to new owners.

There followed a series of land acts reducing rents and providing loans to tenants to buy their farms. The Ashbourne Act of 1885 provided funds for loans to tenants wishing to buy land and the Wyndham Land Act of 1903 went further, creating a win-win situation whereby the government made up the difference between the price offered by tenants

and that asked for by landlords. With a further modification in 1909 the landed estates system in Ireland came to an end and most Irish tenant farmers became owner-occupiers of their land.

Wooded demesnes surrounding the Big Houses all over Ireland often remained intact, recognisable, indeed, as a distinct topographical feature of the landscape and in many cases turned now into visitor attractions. As to the houses themselves, looked on unfavourably by some as a symbol of a former dispensation, two hundred and seventy-five were destroyed in the years 1919-1923. Of those that survived many now welcome paying guests, satisfying a contemporary appetite for a taste of gracious living from a past era.



Nixon Hall 2021

A balance between decay and resilience.

Photo courtesy of Mel Humphries-Cott