

Charlestown Cross – Looking in Lockdown

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We live within sight of Sliabh Gullion and the ancient region of Oriel, famed for the great Gaelic poets including Peadar Ó Doirnín and Séamus Dall Mac Cuatha. Our surrounding townlands are dominated by the names of the Filgate, Fortescue and Foster families, who reflect a different historical lineage and culture. Our walks take us from the townland whose name derives from the de Pippard family to that once named for the de Serles, with both placenames evolving over time. Our walks provide a window through the continuum of time and allow us to connect to our place in the present.

The restrictions put in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the springtime of 2020 created an opportunity for our family to explore the five kilometres near our home, as we walked along quiet country roads. We also enjoyed exploring other sources at home that filled in some of the gaps, benefitting greatly from the articles of the *Journal of the County Louth Archaeological and Historical Society* and entries in the National Folklore School's Collection. For this piece, we are indebted to the writing of Ann Flynn, Séamus Roe, Larry Conlon and Séamus Bellew in particular.

One of our roads takes us past the ever-changing fields of crops and livestock to Charlestown Cross. There is reference to the harmonium playing in the church and the melodeon playing and singing of the mumming and wren traditions which inspires our soundtrack, comprised of two of our own compositions, Charlestown Cross and Charlestown Cheer, which are performed on harmonium and accordion respectively.

We have no familial link to the townland of Charlestown, although the Commins' are well established in the surrounding area. Although no relations, there are Kearneys present in the townland of Charlestown and these were previously referred to as 'higglers' as they purchased eggs from local farmers in exchange for other goods with the eggs being exported to England through Dundalk port. The grandfather of Peadar Kearney, composer of the national anthem and other songs, came from Roesybrook and Peter Kearney was known to compose verses to record local happenings.

Charlestown is situated one and a half miles north-west of Ardee and is divided by two roads, one running north from Rahanna Cross to Tallanstown, the second running west from Pepperstown Cross to Cookstown Cross. These roads intersect at Charlestown Cross where the church, school, forge and hedge school were located. Séamus Roe notes that the road from Ardee to Monaghan passed through Charlestown Cross. Today, the hum of cars on the N2 is a distant reminder of contemporary life and, for a few weeks, the volume of this was turned down and the orchestra of birds dominated our walks on these very quiet roads.

Charlestown Church

Charlestown Church of Ireland dominates the horizon from all angles. The church was consecrated on 23 April 1828 with the bell tower and spire added later. The last service in the church was on 1 January 1989 and it is now a private home. While we can admire from the outside, Séamus Bellew has detailed the inscriptions and heraldry from the inside and the monuments and plaques were moved to St Mary's Church in Ardee in 2005.

The old church was built on the site of a chapel dedicated to Saint Michael the Archangel, and Ann Flynn notes a record of a church and chancel being ruinous in 1622, with a later church being condemned in 1822, although used until 1827. There is a holy well, Tobar Mhichil, located on the site although local lore suggests that the well lost its power – a cure for stomach ailments – following a tragic incident in the eighteenth century when a young woman drowned her illegitimate child here.

The imposing new cemetery gateway was erected in 1918 at the behest of Mrs Filgate of Lisrenny.

The inscription on the left of the gate reads

"This plot of ground was granted to the parish of the Union of Charlestown as a burial place for parishioners by Townley Fane Filgate who for many years was treasurer of the parish. Born January 26th 1846. Died September 2nd 1913."

Another inscription over the gate reads

"This gateway has been erected in loving memory of William de Salis Filgate of Lisrenny, who held office as Vicar's Warden of Charlestown church for a period of nearly fifty years. He was Chairman of the Ardee Board of Guardians for more than thirty years, master of the Louth hounds from 1860 to 1916 and held many other responsible positions in the county. He was a true friend to all and was universally respected and beloved by rich and poor alike. Born December 2nd 1834, died June 14th 1916."

On the right hand side of the gate is the following:

"Also in affectionate remembrance of Harriet Penelope Eleanor, their sister and widow of Thomas William Filgate of Tullykeel who all her life was a constant worshipper in Charlestown church and a generous supporter of every charitable object in the surrounding district. Born 17th December 1832. Died 20th July 1917."

School and Education

Ann Flynn notes that Charlestown had a primary school before the National School system was established in 1831 and references the schoolmaster James Cunningham who was present in 1767. As well as the school, which catered for Protestant and Catholic boys and girls, there are references and recollections of a hedge school southwest of the cross.

As musicians, we were interested to learn that "Miss Kerr was appointed schoolmistress on 1 April 1885 at a salary of £20 per annum, to be raised on 1 July to £30, with an additional £5 "for playing the harmonium and singing in Church" (Flynn, 1987).

The school closed in 1938 and is now a family home.

Local Roles

The beautiful stone cottage opposite the cemetery gate is the Sexton's House, which was erected in 1897. An inscription on the gable end of the cottage, over the stables reads "1897

Erected and presented to the people of Charlestown by Malcolm Brown Murray of Rahanna as a residence for the sexton and stabling for the horses of the parishioners".

There was a blacksmith's forge at Charlestown Cross, the ruins of which can still be seen at the north-west side of the cross. According to Ann Flynn, "In the census of 1901 a blacksmith named James O'Hara was recorded as living in Charlestown. He was also the local matchmaker". Later blacksmiths included Patrick McGawley, Mick Crawley and Patsy Gibney before the forge fell into disuse in the 1950s.

Music and Customs

There is reference to music, song and other customs in the area.

Ann Flynn tells us that it "was the custom in the area that marriages took place at 8 a.m. Mass on a Wednesday morning. There would be a barn dance held at the bride's home that night. The barn dance usually continued right through the night and lasted until after breakfast time the following morning".

Mumming was popular in the area in December and participants would go from house to house dressed in ladies' clothes and blackened faces or home-made masks. These groups had their own rhymes

Room, room, gallant boys, give us room to rhyme
And I'll show you some activity coming on to Christmastime.

And characters included Oliver Cromwell and King Billy, with the latter playing the melodeon.

On St Stephen's Day local children dressed up in old clothes and went from house to house hunting the wran singing:

The wran, the wran, the king of all birds,
St Stephen's Day was caught in the furze,

Song and dance were also common occurrences at wakes and harvest nights.

But as night falls, the pheasants sound their last crow and, with the dewey fog, we dream of past, present and future.

References

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