

## **The Folly known as the Turret at Doonass**

A Folly, (from French *folie*, “foolishness”), is generally a non-functional building that was erected to enhance a natural landscape. Follies first gained popularity in England, and they were particularly in vogue during the 18th and early 19th centuries. A folly might be constructed to resemble a medieval tower, a ruined castle overgrown with vines, or a crumbling Classical temple complete with fallen, eroded columns.

Though follies were sometimes used as pavilions, they were typically built for visual effect alone, and, with other deliberately wrought effects—such as simulated grottoes and rocky chasms—they were intended to improve or complete the natural setting

This 18th century folly house found on the Doonass Estate, Clonlara, Co Clare is known as "The Turret". Sir H.D Massey lived in Doonass House and estate, the house a very large 18<sup>th</sup> Century, rendered, hip roofed three bay two story house, with wide eaves and a wide fan lit front door set in a recessed central bay. Extensive court and outer yards and buildings adjoin the west and north-west. The "Turret" is built in front of the house on the banks of the River Shannon, originally a tower ( a six-sided brick building was added later) intended for viewing the rapids at Doonass

### **The Falls of Doonass**



The Rapids of the Shannon ( print by T.Creswick/JJ Hinchiff 1841



Map 1842 showing position of Folly House 'Data from the map gallery database accessed through the Heritage Maps Viewer at [www.heritagemaps.ie](http://www.heritagemaps.ie), 26-1-2021

The Leap of Doonass was where the power of the River Shannon met its narrowest point. Powerful rapids meant most boats had to disembark and the crew had to either carry on by foot to another waiting boat or lift the boat out and carry it with them.

In 1827 the Falls of Doonass was described as follows “*The falls of Doonass and Hermitage, are some of the finest in the United Kingdom — here the whole Shannon is impelled with tremendous force and deafening noise over a succession of craggy limestone-rocks, down a descent of 55.5 feet, in about half a mile,*” ( George McKern 1827)

T O Russell writing in *Beauties and Antiquities of Ireland* (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co Ltd, London, 1897): “*The rapids of Doonass form a scene so incomparably lovely, and so unlike anything to be seen in Great Britain, or to be seen in any other part of Ireland, that it is a wonder they are not better known. They can be reached*

*best from Limerick, being not over three miles from that city. One of the most curious things about those grand and beautiful rapids, is the almost total ignorance which exists about them, not only in Great Britain, but in Ireland itself."*

The Falls of Doonass along with Castleconnel was a famous fishing area and many renowned people fished here for salmon including Lord Randolph Churchill.

All this changed when the Shannon was diverted in the 1920s to supply water to Ardnacrusha power station, resulting in a huge decrease in water volume and the Falls of Doonass became the quiet meandering river that you see today

### **The Folly House known as the Turret**



**The Falls of Doonass(s) by the Rev William Louis Beaufort**

Watercolour by the Rev William Louis Beaufort 1771-1849 depicting the folly house from the Castleconnell side of the Shannon. The Turret at three stories high would have been an impressive landmark.



Photo Peggy Ryan

Today the view from the river shows that nature has taken over and the stone fort is barely visible and much of the Turret hidden by trees.

In 1797 John Harden writing in his book “Visitor’s Impressions” recalls visiting Doonass House and spending time at “the Turret.” He described it as follows: “the turret which is an ornamental object built with brick, three stories high, the rooms lofty and of a hexagon figure. It stands out boldly in the most rapid part of the river... on a huge projecting rock commanding a delightful view”.



Photos Peggy Ryan



Photos Patrick Stritch

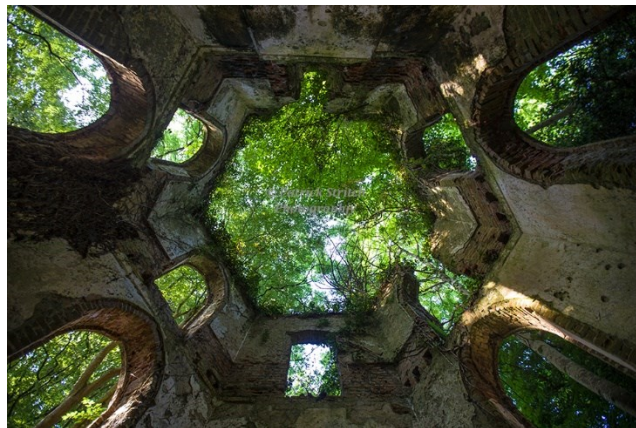


Photo by Patrick Stritch showing the hexagonal brick part of the Turret





Photos by Peggy Ryan showing the insides of the Turret , stairs, floor levels and fireplace

There may have been a much older fort known as "Fort of the Cataract" at this location. Doonass was a fording point of the Shannon and is noted in the Annals of the Four Masters in 1124 as "Eas-Danainne".

The Folly House was constructed on the site of the existing 16th century McNamara castle. Some of the medieval stonework is still visible. There are three rock cut paths at different levels leading down to the waterside. Situated on a promontory of the river Shannon the Turret is surrounded on three sides by water. Many visitors came to visit this unusual structure to observe the falls of Doonass or take leisurely strolls along the different paths. It was also possible to take a ferry boat from here across the river to Castleconnell.



Medieval stone wall Photo Peggy Ryan



Stone steps leading down to the waters edge Photo Peggy Ryan

An illustrious visitor to “the Turret” was the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Duke of Richmond in 1809. On a visit to Limerick to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of King George the third, the Duke and Duchess and a large party set off from Limerick one morning in a large fleet of canoes : “*Groups of beautiful women in elegant dresses, heightened the animation and brilliance of the scene. Bands of musical performers stationed in the islands, the groves and on the banks of the river contributed music, ....and upon a signal given, the numerous and magnificent fleet of canoes drew up to the shore and wafted over to the Elysium of Doonass. There the party were received by Sir Hugh and Lady Massey and conducted by them along the waterfall to the Turret where they graciously and repeatedly expressed their delight and admiration at the magnificence of the scene*” ( Old Limerick Journal 2005) Limerick Cronicle Files 1809

The Folly House is believed locally to have been home to a hellfire club. The members of a hellfire club were known for their amoral behaviour and debauchery involving alcohol and sex. The secrecy surrounding the club members led to speculation that they were Satanists and Devil-worshippers. There is no evidence to support this claim but In 1797 John Harden writing in his book "*Visitor's Impressions*" recalls visiting Doonass House and spending time at "the Turret and describes "just as we arrived they, our Limerick friends, sailed up a very agreeable group & laden with all kinds of good things in the eating & drinking way - the horns from the Tyrone regiment, the fifes & drum from the Limerick Artillery: the weather was delightful & the utmost harmony & cheerfulness prevailed. Would it had rested here, but inebriety followed cheerfulness and mischance had near darkened the whole evening. As we had planned to ride home quietly, so we stole away one by one and left".

## References

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*Castleconnell (part2)* Kevin Hannan

*Beauties and Antiquities of Ireland* (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co Ltd, London, 1897):

*Freddy Bourke local historian.*