

PETERSBURG HOUSE AND ESTATE

INTRODUCTION

One of the more significant factors influencing the development of the Irish Landscape has been the legacy that Landlords have left behind in all parts of Ireland. The Petersburg Estate follows a pattern that can be seen replicated throughout the Irish landscape, the building of the big house and estate farm and creation of a demesne through the planting of trees and the planned layout of gardens, surrounded by a high wall. Ashford Castle and its demesne, another example in the locality, exemplifies the much more elaborate ornamental style that was fashionable for a time. The Petersburg demesne was based on a more naturalised 'parkland' design, which placed an emphasis on the planting of trees and layout to harmonise and enhance the beauty of the natural environment. The new design demanded that flowers, fruit and vegetables be banished to walled gardens away from the house and that formal features, such as parterres, avenues and canals, be swept away and be replaced with an idealised conception of 'natural' landscapes

The Lynch's of Petersburg.

The Lynch family who lived in Petersburg are a branch of the Lynch Family, one of the tribes of Galway. They are related to the Blossie Lynchs of Partry and the Lynch's of Ballycurran near Cross. They were granted lands near Lough Mask which included Ballynonagh Castle under a policy of "Surrender and Re-grant" which forced the Irish to surrender their lands and were granted them back only if they swore their allegiance to the English throne. The Penal laws were imposed by the English to further weaken the control of the Catholic landlords. These laws ensured that the eldest son could only inherit the entire estate if he converted to the Protestant faith. Otherwise the land was divided equally among the male heirs, with the result that Catholic land holdings steadily diminished in size. Maurice Lynch, a son of Sir Henry Lynch (head of this family dynasty) was 'transplanted' to Ballynonagh in 1655 and it is thought they lived in the castle, the ruin of which still survives today. The "big house" was built by Sir Peter Lynch, a great grandson of Maurice, using some of the stone from the castle and dates from around 1715. He named the house and estate after himself and there is no apparent Russian connection! The house itself was relatively modest compared with other landlord houses but contained many fine features such as the circular hallway and very fine plasterwork ceilings. The estate itself comprised over 7000 acres and comprised of the town-land around the house, but the main part of the estate was on the Tourmakeady side of the lake. Charles Lynch mainly developed the estate from 1841 onwards, and many local people can still describe what it looked like. The current entrance is actually the servants' entrance, the main entrance went from the front of the house in a long sweep to bring out to the main road at a place that was called the 'new gate'. The

lands at the front formed one large field known as the 'lawn'. Sunken fences or ha-has permitted uninterrupted views from the house. The walled orchard is another feature of 'parkland' design and the one at Petersburg, which still contains an original fig tree, was sub-divided by box hedge. The garden at the back was known as the 'pleasure grounds' and comprised of wide expanses of turf dotted with clumps of tall trees and paths that enabled the gentry to walk around the grounds. The remains of a circular summerhouse and the outline of a lawn tennis court can still be seen. The estate farm buildings comprised of the haggard (for drying and thrashing corn), sheds, stables, carriage house and grooms quarters. The bell on top of the carriage house was used to call the workers from around the estate for meals or to signal the end of the working day.

Life on the estate

Records show the type of work that would be carried out on any given day and the amounts paid to workers. Unfortunately most of the records were lost which is a pity, as they would form a valuable archive now. Landlords in Ireland generally have a poor reputation, but like many other instances in history when examined in more detail this is not always borne out. For example the population in Ballynonagh, the town land nearest Petersburg House actually increased during the famine period between 1840 and 1850, from 220 to 223 people. This can only be explained by the proximity of the big house, which provided employment and food. The outcry that erupted after the famine as to how badly some landlords had treated their tenants signalled the beginning of the end. The process of land redistribution began with the Encumbered Estate Act of 1849 and was greatly accelerated by a succession of land acts due to tenants agitating for more rights, better conditions and the option to buy their holdings.

Land agitation

Petersburg is only a short distance (as the crow flies) to Lough Mask House, the scene of a lot of trouble during the land war. Captain Boycott who was in charge of the estate was shunned by his tenants who refused to work the land and the term "boycott" was coined, now used throughout the world. The same trouble did not fall on the Lynches although it did appear that they were under threat in this period. During the Parnell Commission, an inquiry into Land League activities held in London in 1888, a witness brought over specially was asked about a meeting in a public house in Clonbur a fortnight before Lord Mountmorres was killed.

Q. Was any other name mentioned at the meeting as well as Lord Mountmorres?

A. Mr Lynch's was.

Q. What was said about Mr Lynch?

R. His name was drawn down..... that he should be done away with but it was disagreed on.

Another witness, Head Constable Matthew Rudden who was stationed in Clonbur in 1879, testified that the district around Clonbur became more disturbed after the establishment of the land league. When asked as to the

nature of this disturbance he spoke of threatening notices and parties threatened for working for a landlord, whom he identified as Mr Lynch. He described shots being fired into a tenant's house who was friendly with Mr Lynch and other tenants complained of having been visited at night and cautioned not to work for Mr. Lynch, '*or to be telling him what was going on in the locality*'. Another witness who was secretary of the land league and a process server, told how he did not end up serving processes (notice to quit or pay

rent) to Lynch's tenants in Tourmakeady. This was because Mr. Lynch reached a settlement that rents would be reduced by 5 shillings in the pound after the tenants had initially refused to pay any rent. The fact that he was prepared to reach a settlement with tenants seems to have stood to him. Other factors also helped the Lynch family and their property survived this period. They were the only Catholic landlords in the area, as it appeared that Peter Lynch who built the house converted back to Catholicism after initially converting to the Protestant faith in order to hold on to lands. In 1847 Charles Lynch built a small oratory to the rear of the house to commemorate his wife Elizabeth's conversion to the Catholic faith and this visible sign would have helped integrate the family with the local population who were mostly Catholic people. Given the date that the oratory was built it obviously provided employment for the local population during the worst of the famine and this further helped their image as benevolent landlords.

The last of the Lynch's

Richard Lynch, who was a Local Government Board Inspector, was the last male heir to the estate. He was married to Helena Nugent of Ballinlough Castle, Co. Westmeath who was a renowned horsewoman. They had one daughter Kathleen (Miss Tatty) who married Denis Daly from Raford Co. Galway in June 1899. Dennis Daly was killed a short time after they married in a riding accident. Kathleen was already pregnant before his death and twins named Denis and Denise were born in March 1900. Denis died tragically a short time after he was born and so Denise was the surviving heir to the estate. She married in 1918 aged 18 to Horace De Vere Cole, famous as part of the Bloomsbury literary set which included Virginia Wolfe among others. They had a daughter Valerie (b. 1919) but their marriage broke up and De Vere Cole's sister, who was married to Neville Chamberlain, adopted their daughter. Valerie spent some of her life at 10 Downing Street and used this as her address, when Chamberlain became Prime-minister of Britain just before World War 2.

Richard Lynch died in 1929 and is buried in the Lynch family vault at Ross Errilly near Headford. Kathleen who had never remarried died in a home in Waterford in 1944 and was buried there. Mrs Lynch died in 1946 and is buried in Rosshill Cemetery. Denise's marriage to De Vere Cole was dissolved in 1928, and she married again to Anthony Drew in Clonbur church in 1948. Neither it would appear had any real income so the Petersburg estate which had fallen into decline from the 1900s, as happened with other large estates in other parts of the country, fell more and more into disrepair. The estate was taken over by the land commission in exchange for land-bonds that were

virtually worthless. Denise still tried to live the high life she had been born into but she had no money to support this sort of lifestyle. She did try one last attempt to reclaim her inheritance in 1953 when she objected to the Land Commission acquiring the last 100 acres of the estate and she also laid a claim to Lynch's castle in Galway city. She stated at the court case that she was going to invest money in the repair of the house and in restoring the estate to a working farm. She did not have the money to invest in the property known as the 'home farm' and the land commission reacquired it. Denise died virtually penniless in England at an unknown date. In 1973 the Land Commission signed over this final part of the estate and all but 30 acres and the old ruin of the house and stables was stripped out to local farmers. Local people lobbied to have this final part of the estate held in trust for some future development that would benefit local people and it was signed over to the County Council. It was transferred to Co. Galway Vocational Education Committee in 1986 for a £1, which was described in June of this year in the national press as the property bargain of the century!

Petersburg House and Outdoor Education Centre 2000.

On the 2nd of June 2000, Petersburg House was officially opened by Mr Eamon O' Cuiv. It was the culmination of 12 years of development by Co. Galway V.E.C. spear headed by Mr Connor Morris C.E.O. This was the third phase of development as the outhouses and stables were developed in phase one and two and officially opened in 1988 and 1994 respectively. The house now stands in stark contrast to the premonition that Richard Lynch foretold. Talking to his workers one day he said '*that all that would remain of the house was the nails in the walls and the crows flying in and out of it*'. He did get the first part of the story right in that the house became a ruin but he did not foresee that one day it would be re-developed as part of an ambitious project to provide an outstanding facility for local people and visitors to the area.

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