

# The Bridgetown Canal's Genesis

Strange as it may seem, three hundred years before it was constructed, Pope Leo X, one of the leading Renaissance popes, was a link in the chain of events that led to the excavation of the canal in Bridgetown.

During the reign of Pope Leo X in the sixteenth century, the Vatican was tasked with raising very large sums of money to finance the ongoing construction of St Peter's Basilica. As a fundraiser with universal appeal, the building works were being financed by selling indulgences. The scheme proved hugely popular in that many people believed that by digging deep in their pockets they could fast-track themselves into heaven.

The money came rolling in but the scheme resulted in a split in the Catholic Church causing those who were outraged at the idea of selling indulgences to break away in protest. The resulting upsurge of protestation led to calls to reform the Church leading to two bottom-up movements sweeping across Europe: the Reformation and the emergence of Protestantism.

Shortly afterwards, in England, King Henry VIII conflicted with Pope Clement VII, successor to Pope Leo X. Henry, a Catholic, sought papal sanction to divorce Catherine of Aragon, the first of his six wives, and to marry Anne Boleyn. The Pope refused. Henry went ahead regardless. The Pope excommunicated him and, in retaliation, Henry broke off ties with the Vatican.

These events and the context of the two popular movements already mentioned, led to the emergence of the Church of England followed closely by the Church of Ireland, an autonomous province under the umbrella of the Anglican Communion. The fledgling Protestant community in Kilmore had no church so, St Patrick's, the Catholic church at Grange, was appropriated for Protestant worship and lands at Grange, Pullingtown, Ballycross, Ballybough, Castletown and Common in Mulrankin that formed part of the very large Tintern Abbey estate managed by the Cistercians were confiscated from the Catholic church by Henry VIII



*The Bridgetown Canal as it flows through Ballycross Apple Farm*

and granted to English Protestant supporters.

Increasing sectarian bitterness between Catholics loyal to the Pope in Rome and Protestants loyal to the Crown in England led to the failed coup d'état that was the 1641 Rebellion when Irish Catholic land-owning gentry attempted to seize power by force. The failed Rebellion was followed by ten years of conflict during the Confederate Wars. The outcome was that Irish clans were severely crushed by Oliver Cromwell and Irish Catholic landowners were punished by having their lands confiscated and granted to English Protestants.

At the time, Patrick FitzNicholl, an Irish Catholic, farmed at Ballyharty, Knocknoran and Ballyburn. His lands were confiscated and were granted to Richard Rowe, an English Protestant. The male line of the Rowe family died after three generations. However, Dorothy Rowe of Ballyharty married William Radford of Brideswell and one of their sons, Ebenezer, changed his name to Rowe on inheriting the Rowe estate.

In 1833, John Rowe, Ebenezer Radford-Rowe's grandson, owned 2,029 acres in Kilmore parish. He built a three storey, five-bay mansion at Ballycross and was the driving force behind the construction of the Bridgetown Canal and the reclamation and intaking of the wetlands at Inish and Ballyteige

Slob. The works were completed in the period 1847-1855. They coincided with An Gorta Mór, the potato famine of 1845-1852 and provided much-needed work in the parish. There were three main requirements in reclaiming 'The Mudlands'.

First, the Bridgetown River, the Castle River in Baldwinstown and the Muchtown River in Rathangan needed to be diverted away from the proposed intake. That was achieved by building the 7.8km-long Bridgetown Canal. The new waterway also captured the Gibberpatrick Stream and the Scar River on its route to the sea south of Duncormick.

The second requirement was to keep the sea from flooding the proposed intake. That was achieved by building an embankment, the Cull Bank. The 400m-long earthen embankment was constructed using soil excavated from the adjoining townland of Cull. The large hole left in the ground is now flooded and is the Cull Pond. The seaward face of the new embankment was armoured with limestone quarried at Seafield, Duncormick.

And finally, the 660ha of intaken land, now the townland of Inish and Ballyteige Slob, needed to be drained. An extensive network of drains was installed and the drainage waters were conducted to the large Ballyteige Channels that disgorged into the Cull reservoir. As the tide ebbed, the reservoir emptied through sluice gates by gravity fall at low water. The Blackstone drainage works were an associated but separate development.

Unfortunately for him, John Rowe's major drainage works were only partially successful. The main problem was that the building of the Cull Bank significantly reduced water exchange in the estuary on spring tides resulting in the estuary silting due to lack of tidal scouring. Consequently, the fall westwards was insufficient to drain the intake.

In the period 1883-1886 a subsequent attempt was made to drain water southwards to Kilmore Quay via 'The Cutting' but that also was only partially successful. It was not until the Board of Works, now the Office of Public Works (OPW), got involved in the late 1950s that the lands intaken by John Rowe during the famine were finally successfully drained by pumping water through the Cull Bank. The OPW

has a statutory obligation to maintain the drainage on an on-going basis.

Much water has been drained from the slob and much water has flowed under the Bridgetown Canal's six bridges since Pope Leo X became a link in the convoluted chain of events that led to the excavation of the waterway. If His Holiness had been better at managing the very controversial issue of selling indulgences, the Reformation may never have happened, the course of history may have been very different and the canal may never have been built.

While various aspects of the drainage works have been described by several different writers in earlier issues of this Journal, much more detail remains to be unearthed and explored about this fascinating aspect of the history of Kilmore Parish.

*This article is a summary of the festival lecture, an illustrated talk of the same title given on 7 July 2017 by Jim Hurley in the Stella Maris Centre for the Kilmore Quay Seafood Festival. The event was chaired by Jim Moore and was attended by about fifty people.*

**by Jim Hurley**

## *Serious Accident*

A young man named Thomas Dunne, in the employment of Mr James M'Grath, publican, Bridgetown, met with a severe accident on Friday last while engaged washing bottles. Dunne put his hand to the bottom of a large tub containing the bottles and his arm came into contact with a broken one which cut him so severely that Dr Hassett found it necessary to put seven stitches in the wound and had him sent to the Co. Infirmiry, where he is, at present, in a very weak state, having lost a large quantity of blood.

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