

Clonbrock : History of a Big House

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The Dillon family of Clonbrock was amongst the first of the Anglo-Norman families to settle in Connaught. The original line was descended from Sir Henry De Leon who arrived in Ireland with the Earl of Moreton (late King John of England) in 1185. A junior branch of the family first established themselves at Clonbrock sometime in the 1580s. The Dillons were Catholics and continued to adhere to that religion until the early 1700s, when Robert Dillon, heir to the estate, was raised as a Protestant because of the threat posed to the integrity of the estate by the Penal Laws. The family subsequently remained members of the Church of Ireland.

Robert Dillon, afterwards 1st Lord Clonbrock, built Clonbrock House near Ahascragh in County Galway, between 1780 and 1788. It was designed by William Leeson and was built to replace the old castle which remained intact until 1807 when it was accidentally burned in a fire that resulted from a fireworks display on the estate to celebrate the birth of the 2nd Lord Clonbrock's son and heir. The following is part of the entry for the house in Mark Bence Jones' *A guide to Irish country houses* (revised ed. London, 1988), written before it was accidentally burned by fire in the 1994:

7 bay entrance front with 3 bay pedimented breakfront; doorway with blocked engaged Tuscan columns and entablature. A single-storey Doric portico by John Hampton was added ca 1824; while in 1855 3rd Baron added a single-storey 2 bay bow-ended wing to the right of the entrance front, which is balanced by a single-storey wing on the left hand side, though the two do not match. Good interior plasterwork of the 1780s, in the manner of Michael Stapleton. Classical medallions and husk ornament also on the walls of the staircase hall, at the inner end of which stood a splendid organ in a mahogany case surmounted by a baron's coronet.... Stone staircase with balustrade of brass uprights. Large drawing room with coved ceiling and modillion cornice in 1855 wing opening with double doors into a smaller drawing room in the main block, to form what is in effect one long room; which, a few years ago, still had a delightful early-Victorian character; with a grey watered silk wallpaper and curtains of cream and faded pink as a background to the glitter of 2 crystal chandeliers and of the many gilt frames of the pictures and of the mirror over the fine statuary marble chimneypiece. When the room was being fitted up, 3rd Baron's son, who at the time was a young diplomat in Vienna, wrote home to give instructions on how the floor was to be laid, so that it might be suitable for dancing the latest waltzes.

The stability on the Clonbrock estate was largely due to the fact that, rather remarkably, it was managed by only two owners from around 1807 to 1917, these being Robert Dillon, the 3rd Baron Clonbrock, and his son and heir Luke Gerald. The Dillons were amongst the most resident of all Irish landlords; in fact the 4th Baron's obituary suggested that he was unknown in London social circles, rather unusual for a landlord of his standing.

While the 3rd Baron originally owned estates in a number of counties, he gradually sold these off in favour of concentrating his estate in east County Galway so that by the late nineteenth century he had around 28,000 acres in the Ballinasloe area. The 3rd Baron has

been described as being one of the more considerate landlords during the Great Famine and his treatment of his tenantry did much to maintain good landlord-tenant relations on the estate right up to the early twentieth century. He was also one of the least encumbered owners so that the estate survived the Famine intact even though arrears on the estate had reached £2,340 at the height of the Famine in 1848 (26.5 percent of the projected rental.) That is not to suggest, however, that there were no Famine evictions. There were. Clonbrock evicted tenants hopelessly in arrears on an individual rather than on a clearance basis and used a system of assisted emigration to get his estate back on a viable footing. The clearance of middlemen, cottiers and labourers during and after the Famine allowed Clonbrock to consolidate his holdings, many of which he merged to form large farms of around 100 acres (which he would not allow to be subdivided thereafter.) By the mid-1850s, he had at least twenty tenants who were paying in excess of £100 rent per annum and between them accounting for around 40 per cent of his total rent roll. Amongst these was Charles Filgate, his agent, who managed his estate on a daily basis, who paid a yearly rental of £320 for two holdings in Doon and Killupaun.

In the post-Famine period, Clonbrock also retained significant tracts of vacated lands so that by the 1850s, he had become a very substantial farmer in his own right and ran a remarkably profitable farming business during the 1850s, 1860s and early 1870s. The hands on approach to estate management adopted by the 3rd and 4th barons ensured that they maintained a tight rein on the financial running of the estate and that it continued to remain relatively free of large-scale encumbrances during the mid to late Victorian periods, something else that was unusual for landlords at that time. Their ability and that of their agent to judge the mood of the tenants – to cajole where necessary or threaten where necessary – meant that even during the temporary economic slump of the early 1860s, the arrears figure on the estate as a percentage of projected rental did not rise above 5.5 per cent. The 3rd Baron seems to have acted wisely in 1861 by making a significant pre-emptive strike when he allowed his smaller tenants a full abatement of either a year's or a half year's rent. His own gross income for 1861 was unaffected: his large tenant farmers and the payment of previous arrears saw to that. Then in the following year most of those who had been granted temporary abatements, doubled up on their rents with the result that Clonbrock received something of a windfall of over £14,000.

Hardly surprisingly, both the 3rd Baron and his successor were regularly praised by their tenantry and the local nationalist press for their paternalism. If tenants' addresses are in any way a reliable indicator of their attitudes towards their landlords, Lord Clonbrock's efforts on his estate during the post-Famine period were appreciated, for in August 1867, on the marriage of his son, Hon. Luke Gerald Dillon, to Augusta Crofton, the Clonbrock tenants proclaimed:

The alliance which you, the son of one of the best landlords in Ireland have contracted with the daughter of a neighbouring nobleman [Lord Crofton], who rivals him in excellence, both resident on their estates, and discharging every duty of their exalted stations in a manner that has ensured to them the love and respect of all.... [Lord Clonbrock's] judicious management of landed property ... has rendered us a happy and prosperous tenantry.

Without going into detail, suffice to say that comments columns in the estate rentals also offer plenty of evidence of this paternalism. So too does the level of rent increases on the estate. Clonbrock did not use the post-Famine economic boom as a pretext to exploit the rent

levels of his estate; rents were increased by only 13 per cent from 1854 to 1869 followed by a further increase of 11 per cent from 1869 to 1880. The aggregated increase falls well short of the 40 per cent increase that historians have argued would have been necessary for landlords such as Clonbrock to receive a proportionate share of the economic boom in line with the increase in agricultural prices of the time.

Clonbrock did borrow money, however, in order to expand his estate. In 1864, he borrowed £9,000 from Lord Ashtown, his neighbour and father-in-law in order to purchase 600 acres which would increase his rental by 5 per cent. For the years 1860 to 1869 inclusively, Lord Clonbrock collected £104,413 in rents, an average of £10,441 per annum, which each year was well above his projected rental of £9,900. In other words arrears continued to be paid off. During the same period, outlay on estate expenditure aggregated £48,741 or 47 per cent of gross income. For each of the ten years, Clonbrock had between 49 and 62 per cent of gross income remitted to his personal bank account in Ballinasloe, receiving in total almost £59,000. This enabled him to embellish the house: in 1855 a single-storey two bay bow-ended wing was added and the interior of the house redecorated.

The Clonbrock estate was only marginally affected by the Land War from 1879 onwards. In 1880, 1881 and 1882, he granted rent reductions of 2.5 per cent, 5.3 per cent and 4.5 per cent respectively. His average annual income for these three years was around £10,300, a decline of only 6 per cent on the 1865-69 average. Clonbrock was particularly fortunate with regard to his large tenants (those paying in excess of £100 per annum), for between the years 1880 and 1889 these were remarkably only £23 in arrears on aggregated rents of almost £50,500. Clonbrock, because of a firm tradition of good landlord-tenant relations on his estate, did not suffer with regard to rent strikes on his estate to the same extent as many of his fellow landowners. Clonbrock suffered only marginally more during the second phase of the land war from the mid-1880s which was orchestrated by the National League and accompanied by the new tactic of the Plan of Campaign. From 1886 to 1887, the Plan of Campaign was adopted on only a small portion of his estate. Clonbrock's rental subsequently declined by 9 per cent in both 1886 and 1887. It may not seem very significant but at a time when the Land Commission courts were beginning to lower rents on the estate under the fair rent fixing terms of the 1881 Land Act, his agent feared for the future. Economic cutbacks became a necessity. In 1886 five servants were made redundant, an event noted in the family diary as 'The first fruits of Parnell and Company'. Indeed, big house expenditure at Clonbrock fell by an average of 30 per cent during the period 1882-89, while money spent on the gardens also fell by around 30 per cent. The consequences of rental decline, therefore, had a disproportionate effect on big house expenditure.

The 3rd Baron Clonbrock died in 1893, to be succeeded by his son, Luke. Unlike most of his fellow landlords, who as a result of sweeping socio-economic and political changes from the early 1880s had come to accept that the sale of their estates was inevitable, the 3rd and 4th barons refused to sell any part of their property under the early land acts. Indeed, Luke Dillon, 4th Baron, was reluctant to sell under the terms of the 1903 Land Act, despite the generous incentive that it offered in the form of a 12 per cent cash bonus to vendors. In a famous letter to the Morning Post in 1903, Clonbrock argued that he had a sentimental attachment to his estate that he was not prepared to relinquish. Let me quote briefly from this letter:

At the end of the scale we may suppose a landowner, who is wearied out by the uncertainty and trouble to which he is exposed, who has no particular

sentiment for his property, perhaps from having purchased it not so long ago, while freedom of contract still existed in Ireland, or perhaps from never having resided on it. At the other end we may take a man who has had but little trouble from the land courts, who has constantly resided on his property, and whose life is therefore identified with it; who is attached to his tenants, as much by strong personal and hereditary ties, and who has always entertained the most friendly relations with them. It is obvious that such a man would require a far higher inducement to sell than the former.

It was, however, this very reluctance to sell that eventually strained the relationship of the 4th baron with his tenants. If he had been reluctant to sell under the 1903 Land Act, they had been just as reluctant to purchase during the 1880s and 1890s simply because the early land acts had provided few incentives for them to do so. However, when the 1903 Land Act guaranteed that purchase annuities repayable to the government would be less than annual rents payable to the landlord, his tenants called upon Lord Clonbrock to sell. When he refused the United Irish League began a concerted campaign of agitation on the estate. From 1903 to 1907, the estate was subjected to extreme agitation. Demands for rent reductions were accompanied by frequent cattle drives as smallholders and the landless demanded the break up of large grazing farms on the estate. By 1907, rental income on the estate had fallen by around 15 per cent as a result of strikes and fair rent fixing, while arrears had risen at an unprecedented rate from £4,362 in 1902 (twice the level they had been even in 1882) to £6,370 in 1907. With expenditure remaining consistent, the estate was now running at a loss. In 1907, Lord Clonbrock, once hailed as the most benevolent landlord in the west by one particular newspaper editor was now being castigated by the same editor as ‘a fossilised bigot’ for refusing to sell his lands.

By 1909, Lord Clonbrock had no alternative but to sell. By 1914, he had sold the majority of his tenanted lands for which he received £250,000, in today’s terms roughly £15 million. As he was largely unencumbered he was able to invest the bulk of this capital. He invested globally in stocks and shares from Argentina to Australia, from Canada to South Africa and from Britain to Russia. Until around 1917, life at Clonbrock continued in relative splendour. Possibly, the family were better off than they had been for generations having shed the myriad of estate expenses that had been part and parcel of the annual running of an estate.

Then in 1917, the 4th Baron, Luke Dillon, died and was succeeded by his only son, Robert (who was to die prematurely and unmarried in 1925 when the title became extinct.) Coinciding with the death of the 4th Baron, the Russian Revolution of 1917 put a major dent in the family investment portfolio. The worldwide depression of the 1920s added further to this. And one can see quite clearly from the estate accounts that the Wall Street Crash of 1929 proved to be the last straw for the family. After 1929, the house was emptied of its servants, and as farming had been severely affected by the developments of the 1920s, there was no more money to spend on its upkeep. From 1930 to the early 1970s the house survived but only just. From the 5th Baron’s premature death in 1925 until the 1960s, it was occupied by Ethel Dillon, his sister. It then passed to her grand-nephew, Sir Luke Dillon Mahon, who sold what remained of the estate in the mid-1970s. Unfortunately, the house was accidentally destroyed by fire in 1994.

In 1976, the National Library of Ireland acquired the estate papers at an auction held in Clonbrock House. The magnificent collection of estate rentals and accounts, agents’ letter books, family scrapbooks, correspondence, leases, valuation books and maps, farm account

books, registers of petitions and a myriad of other documents provide an invaluable insight to the management of a large estate in nineteenth, early twentieth century Ireland.

Furthermore in 1977, the NLI also acquired the Clonbrock photograph collection for the princely sum of £25 and the cost of transportation. The photographs are part of a rather unique collection of over 3,000 glass-plate negatives, sheet-film negatives, lantern slides and some albums which illustrate so many aspects of life on the Clonbrock estate over a seventy year period from c. 1860 to c.1930. The collection mainly contains portraits of three generations of the Dillon family who resided at Clonbrock, but it also contains a wealth of photographs of the family and their friends during festive and sporting occasions, photographs of the house and its demesne, its servants, estate workers and tenants, as well as photographs of local community events and activities involving the family. It is most fortunate that the 4th Baron Clonbrock, Luke Gerald Dillon (1834-1917), and his wife, Augusta (1839-1928), daughter of Lord Crofton of Mote Park in Roscommon, were such enthusiastic photographers. When they first took up their hobby, probably around 1860, amateur photography was becoming fashionable amongst members of the landed class in Ireland. It was a hobby that really only this particular class could afford because of both the expense involved in the purchase of cameras and other equipment and the time that was necessary to devote to it in order to prepare wet-plates, develop negatives and print photographs. By 1869, a studio and darkroom had been built at Clonbrock, although at the time, it was simply referred to as a photograph room. They are an important primary source in their own right and provide the perfect visual companion to the very comprehensive manuscript collection, each complementing the other. As Noel Kissane wrote in his introduction to *Ex Camera*: 'Photographs evoke a sense of the past more potent than actual reportage. Their impact is immediate and crosses the barriers of language, age and educational abilities.'

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