

Thomas Pearson's (1678-1736) Beamore House by John McCullen

Writing in March of 1968, Mary F. McCullen (1883-1970)¹ ‘ I have often told you that about 1713 Mr Pearson from Athboy bought the townland of Beamore. He built a 4-story redbrick mansion, something like Platin Hall, planted chestnuts, beeches and sycamores and evergreen oaks. He also built a circular redbrick ice-house which he covered with a two foot thick blanket of clay and grass. Having done all that, he died, leaving the property to his niece, Hester Coghill, who was the wife of Moore, Earl Of Charleville Forest, near Tullamore.’

Col. Thomas Pearson² was an Alderman of Dublin and an M.P. for Donegal, Killybegs 1710-1714, 1715-1727, Ballyshannon 1727-1736 and was married in 1707 to Jane (Ann?) Connolly, a sister of the ‘Speaker Connolly’, i.e. William Connolly who built Castletown House in Co.Kildare, described as the ‘richest man in Ireland’, which condition is related to his abilities in wheeling and dealing.³

In 1714, the Royal House of Hanover commenced when George 1 became King and at that time the Whig Party gained power. A system of ‘undertaking’ came into being where politicians in Ireland undertook to manage Parliament for the Government in return for patronage, position and power. The Chief of the Undertakers was William Connolly, who had his hands on the finances, for the Government, as the leading Revenue Commissioner. Members of the Connolly wing of the Party, like Pearson, Singleton, Coghill and Trotter worked with Connolly in order to wield power, to their own desires. As long as the Monarch lived, Parliament only met every two years, which made it easier for the small group to control. The two year term is well summed up by Tom Pakenham (later Lord Longford) when he writes; ‘The wisdom of Ireland sleeps on for two years longer’. At one stage the Connolly-Congyham-Pearson group controlled thirteen M.P. positions the Parliament.

William also married wealth in the person of Katherine Conygham, a relation of Lord Mountcharles of Slane. Much of the dealing involved lands confiscated from Jacobite or Catholic families after 1690, and the Battle of the Boyne.⁴ In 1640, the Civil Survey lists John Draycott of Mornington, Irish Papist, as owner of Beamore and Beabeg, being 640 Irish Acres, or 1213 statute acres made up of 807 in Beamore and 406 in Beabeg. Buildings thereon are ‘one stone house and some cabins.’ The Beabeg lands went from Draycott to a strong Protestant family involved in Drogheda Corporate affairs named Leigh, who in turn sold on to a friend of his, Jeremiah Smith⁵, who had possession very early in the 1700’s. Beamore was divided between Thomas Pearson and Oliver Cramer from Kilkenny of ‘Cromwellian Army Stock’ in Mary McCullen’s phrase. The dividing line was the present day avenue to McCullen’s house, with Pearson on the west side and Cramer on the east side.

In the first two decades of the 1700’s⁶, a significant small group had formed in the Irish Parliament, around William Connolly, consisting of Henry Singleton (Drogheda), Thomas Trotter (Duleek), Marmaduke Coghill (Armagh) and Thomas Pearson.⁷ Coghill’s sister was married to Oliver Cramer.

¹ ‘The Letters of Aunt Mary.’ John McCullen, 2013. Published by John McCullen

² ‘The Letters of Katherine Connolly.’ Jennings & Ashford, 2018. Ir. Mark Comm.

³ ‘The Cambridge History of Ireland.’ Jane Ohlmeyer, 2018. Cambridge University Press.

⁴ ‘Civil Survey of Meath (1654-1656).Vol.5. Strington, 1940. Stationary Office.

⁵ ‘Co.Louth Arch & Hist Journal, Vol xxvii.No.3. John McCullen Article 2011. CLAHS.

⁶ ‘The Cambridge History of Ireland.’ Jane Ohlmeyer, 2018. Cambridge University Press.

⁷ ‘Letters of Marmaduke Coghill,(1722-1738).’ D.W.Hayton. 2005.Irish Man.Comm.

Normal practise was to own a town house in Dublin, for when Parliament was in session, and also have a country retreat. Thus, Connolly⁸ embarked on a Castletown (1722), Coghill on Drumcondra House (All Hallows, 1727), Singleton on Laurence Street, Drogheda (Drogheda Grammar School, 1730), Trotter on Duleek House (1729), and Pearson on Beamore. Pearson also had houses at the WheatSheaf at Thomas Street, Usher's Quay and Patrick Street in Dublin.⁹

However, letters from Pearson and his wife are marked 'Beamore' in 1711 and 1713, which suggest that he may have been the first of the Parliamentary Group to embark on a Country Mansion and suitably laid out grounds. D'alton¹⁰ describes the gardens of Beamore as being 'of the Dutch Style and long admired'. He also records the sale of Beamore by Draycott Talbot to Thomas Pearson, in 1723. The letters referred to, in 1711 and 1713, imply that the Pearsons must have been in possession of Beamore for ten years before the purchase. A reference¹¹ in a letter of 1733 from Mary (Conygham) Jones to her sister Jane (Conygham) Bonnell states 'Lady Anne (Wentworth) and Mr. Connolly are at Beamore, but will soon be back, as it's too dull for them'.

Thomas Pearson would have built the House, established the Gardens, three walled enclosures, laid out three avenues, planted trees, erected the Ice-House and adapted the original Cistercian buildings as a Pigeon House / Folly, and levelled other walls in the period up to 1725. Remnants of the mansion are seen in carved granite window cills and red bricks, as well as underground tunnels for sewerage purposes running from the house to the streams, one hundred yards distance, both north and south.

Indications as to Pearson's personality are given in a letter¹² to Jane Bonnell from her cousin Jane Bulkelkey dated February 1718/19?

'Mr Pearson and his wife are gone into the country. They seem well pleased to go home. He is, I think, grown a very thoughtful man, and she is a mighty good wife. They like their own retired way of living much better than the hurry they meet at their brother Connolly's.

Despite Thomas Pearson's eminent position, his personal life had unhappy times¹³ he writes in July 1719 of his wife having a traumatic miscarriage whereas earlier in the same year he is in serious debt due to a 'late affair' with his Father and wider family. At that time he could see only misery and how badly Ireland was treated by the English and wished to quit the Kingdom, but was unable, since all his assets were there. Come 1726, letters show that Mr. & Mrs. Connolly spent Christmas in Beamore, perhaps because of the unfinished state of Castletown House at that time, which took four decades to complete. At the same time, James Coghill is ordering gilt leather furnishings for the house in Drumcondra.¹⁴

Time to enjoy the fine houses is very limited¹⁵, and in October 1729, William Connolly dies and leaves his affairs in the hands of Thomas Pearson and Dr. Trotter to act as executors of his will, after his funeral which is rather lavish and involves 'burial with linen scarves' (3 yards @ 6 shillings per yard), partly as a symbol of support for the Linen Industry. By April of 1732, Thomas is reflecting

⁸ 'A guide to Irish Country Houses.' Mark Bence-Jones. 1988. Constable.

⁹ 'Papers of Smyth of Barbavilla'. List No 120. D.W. Hayton. 2005. Irish Man. Comm.

¹⁰ 'History of Drogheda.' John D'alton. 1844. Published by Author.

¹¹ 'Papers of Smyth of Barbavilla.' List no 120. A.P.W Malcolmson. 2006. N.L.I.

¹² ditto

¹³ ditto

¹⁴ 'Letters of Marmaduke Coghill (1722-1738). D.W. Hayton. 2005. Irish Man. Comm.

¹⁵ 'Papers of Smyth of Barbavilla'. List No 120. D.W. Hayton. 2005. Irish Man. Comm.

to Mrs.Brunnell¹⁶, that ‘some offers had been made but we could not approve them yet I wish my daughter married, and better in England, where she would have more security, whereas young Mr. Connolly the successor to Castletown, needs to be where is money is invested’, and ‘I am not over solicitous about my family remaining here, as I have no son’.

Within the year, his daughter had died, a cause of great sadness to everyone.

As far as is known, Thomas, on completion of his time as an M.P. in 1736, retired with his wife to Beamore and occupied himself with the development of the Estate, expansion of the Linen Industry and working through the affairs of his late brother-in-law, William Connolly. Unfortunately he passed away in that same year¹⁷, having left the Mansion to his niece, Hester Coghill. Amongst the other beneficiaries were his nephew, William Connolly, his sister Keating, Dr.Trotter, Chief Baron, Thomas Marlay, servants Sam Cooper and his wife Dorothy, Revd. Mr.Echlin and Mr.John Shiell, Lands of Calliaghstown, purchased from Lord Anglesea, in Pearson’s possession, are to revert to the Coopers (Sam and Dorothy) on the death of Mrs Pearson. These lands are locally known as Cooperhill and were eventually taken by the Land Commission and divided¹⁸. Sam and Dorothy lived in Beamore, in the next field to Pearson (1686-1761).

Meanwhile, his relation and associate, Marmaduke Coghill became ill and died in March 1739, also leaving his Mansion in Drumcondra, to Hester¹⁹. Jane lived on as Widow Pearson until 1749, but most likely returned to the wider Connolly family in Dublin, and either Hester or herself invited a tenant into the Beamore Mansion, and the immediate fields around it²⁰. He was from Ulster, very likely Donegal, of Scottish origin, named Coulter, and he set up a Linen Industry, with a mill adjacent to the stream, retting ponds, a bleach field and flax growing, with workers imported from Ulster (Kerrs and Maxwells). These people were called ‘the yons’ by locals, and lived in huts erected as lean-to’s in the Orchard Walls.

A Board of Trustees had been set up in 1710 to support the linen and hemp manufacturers, and progressive Landlords assisted in many areas e.g. William Smyth at Collinstown, Westmeath, Foster at Collon, Lord Limerick at Dundalk and it is likely that the Pearson Connolly Family were favourable to Mr.Coulter, who was well situated, since Drogheda area was a hugely important hub of the Linen Trade. Mary McCullen writes of him²¹;

‘Mr.Coulter lacked common honesty so much that when he got tired of living in the big four-storied red bricked house, which Pearson had built, he stripped all the lead off the roof, sold it and went to live in the big house at the Boyne Viaduct – St.James. After his death (1810) when the handloom weaving was declining, the weavers died out by degrees, and families moved elsewhere.’

¹⁶ Ditto

¹⁷ ‘Letters of Marmaduke Coghill (1722-1738). D.W. Hayton. 2005. Irish Man. Comm.

¹⁸ ‘Butterhill and beyond’. Austin Cooper. Year xxxx

¹⁹ ‘Letters of Marmaduke Coghill (1722-1738). D.W. Hayton. 2005. Irish Man. Comm.

²⁰ ‘The Fieldnames of Co.Louth’. Eve Campbell, 2014. Louth Field Names Project Group.

²¹ ‘The Letters of Aunt Mary’. John McCullen, 2013. Published by John McCullen.

The dishonest Mr.Coulter is buried in St.Mary's Graveyard, with eleven of his children and grandchildren, under a monument raised by his son, George, of St.James. He died in 1810, aged 98, and the Linen Mill equipment was sold by auction in 1795, after the business failed²².

Remains of the Retting Ponds, for the flax are still to be seen, and were paved with flagstones, to enable easier work. These stones were removed in 1950's, under a drainage scheme, and buried in the 'Bleach Field.' Taylor & Skinner clearly show the Pearson Big House on their map of 1778 and my great great grandfather, Patrick McCullen (1783-1861) recalled the ruined house when he was alive.

Coopers of Beamore and Platin (Mount Granville) became the Landlords, and the 22 acres around the Pearson House was held by Tenant farmers named Cunningham, who lived in a small two-story farmhouse adjacent to the Orchard Walls. All the Cooper lands were sold in 1895 to Sillery's, Rooneys and Cunninghams, and stones from the Georgian Mansion were sold to neighbouring farmers²³. Carved granite window cills were found in the foundations of a weighbridge on McCullen's farm, dating from early 1900's in construction, and also in another garden house, called 'Sam's House', adjacent to the Mansion. Sam was a Cooper, and had fallen on hard times, so the Protestant community erected a small residence for him, by voluntary effort, in early 1900's.

Pearsons' great adventure is now represented by the Ice-House, the Cistercian Monastic Building adapted as a pigeon house, Walled Gardens, trees and plants (still growing), underground caves, and buried stone walls. One other thing that is constant over the three centuries is the practise of sending a bottle of 'Usquebagh' as a tonic to those recovering from illness²⁴.

²² Journal of Old Drogheda Society, Article by John McCullen, No.6, 1989. Old Drogheda Society.

²³ 'Sale Map of Cooper Lands'. 1895. In possession of Author.

²⁴ 'Papers of Smyth of Barbavillea'.List No 120. D.W. Hayton. 2005. Irish Man. Comm.